

15. Grandmaster Lajos Portisch Recalls the 1963 Piatigorsky Cup

Recorded: September 11, 2013

In this selection from a phone interview between Grandmaster Lajos Portisch and IM John Donaldson, Portisch recounts his happy memories of the 1966 Piatigorsky Cup, in which he participated. Portisch was a perennial candidate for the World Championship for over 20 years from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. The first player to defeat Samuel Reshevsky in a match, Portisch is probably best remembered for leading Hungary to first place in the 1978 Chess Olympiad—the only time the Soviet Union failed to take first place when they competed between 1952 and 1990.

Lajos Portisch: The first impression about Los Angeles and Santa Monica was that nobody walked down the street. You know, in Europe, there's a lot of walking. I always used to walk a lot when I was playing chess because physically, I factored myself fit, but I was the only person walking on the streets. There were plenty of cars around. I had never seen so many cars in Europe, of course, but in America... So I decided to buy a Ford Mustang after the tournament. I don't know if this car still exists or not, but a Ford Mustang was a very good American car and nice looking car at that moment. Well, I was hoping of course to maybe win the prize, but I didn't know of course the exact price of the Ford yet. We had discussed a problem - Mr. [Tigran] Petrosian, warned me, actually. He convinced me that probably I shall have some problems with the Ford in Europe, especially Hungary, with service. So I gave up the idea, and when I came back to Europe I bought my first Volkswagen Beetle. Also another funny story, you are from St. Louis, am I correct or not?

John Donaldson: Yes I am in St. Louis, yes.

LP: So you have a beautiful tournament that is in action now, yes?

JD: Yes. Today [Magnus] Carlsen and [Hikaru] Nakamura.

LP: Yes I know, unfortunately I cannot be there, even if it's only for nostalgia. So anyway, I read on the internet that the organizers offered to the players a very beautiful chess set. Is that correct?

JD: I believe it is, yes.

LP: Have you seen the chess set?

JD: Yes. It is a DGT set like they are using in the competitions now, but the difference is that, as you will know from your own experience when you played in tournaments before the electronic sets, the pieces were more properly weighted. Now with these DGT sets, the problem was how to have a nice wood set that is properly weighted that you can play with that can also—

LP: Oh, I understand. It's a wooden chess set.

JD: But the difference is that this one is heavily weighted because of—

LP: Yes, I know, because of the TV broadcast. Yes, I understand. This reminds me that we also had a problem with the chess sets in the Piatigorsky tournament. Actually, there was only one person who was not satisfied with the chess set that we got. It was Bobby Fischer. In the second half of this tournament, he had a special demand that he wanted to play [with] a specific chess set, but the pieces had these colors. Actually, the red color was there, either for white or for black. I don't know for which side it was the red color. And I don't remember what the other color was. I am not sure, but I think it was yellow. Anyway, I made a mistake because before our second game of the double-round event I said, "No, I am not going to play with those terribly-colored pieces." I insisted on the normal Staunton chess set. Bobby had to accept this, but then he had vengeance because he beat me terribly. I made a big mistake, so I should have accepted his favorite red chess set.

Okay, this is one more story - my favorite games, this is number three. I had a few interesting and good games then, especially my game against [Tigran] Petrosian. It was a really good game, and I played very well. I beat the champion - even Bobby came to me and congratulated me after Petrosian gave it up. So it was really a good game. But what is more interesting my first game with Bobby Fischer. I made a draw, a difficult draw.

Now if you don't mind, I have the book in my hands here. So you also asked how I estimated the book. I think it's a wonderful book actually. It's really a good book. I also annotated a few games. Well, the only problem could be that nowadays this English notation could be disturbing for young players because they are probably not used to reading the old English notation. You know what I mean, P-K4 and so on, not the algebraic notation. I was used to that because I had gone through [Reuben] Fine's endgame book with the English notation, so I'm able to read it.

Now, I want to read you what I wrote here during this complicated game. Unfortunately, I did not know that the whole line had been published in the May 1966 issue of *Chess Review*. I mean, the line that Bobby had adopted. I saw that Fischer had to sacrifice the exchange, but I did not realize that it was satisfactory for him. So it was a fighting game and I nearly lost it and after the 50th move. I have it here in the annotations. I write, "Fischer could now have forced the game as follows and so on."

This was also an interesting game of mine and also the last game against [Bent] Larsen. Also, I have to quote my notations. "As I had won a pawn, the rest should be only a matter of time. But the game decided third place in the tournament, and the tension was too great and I was too nervous. This can be the only explanation for my spoiling the game. On the other hand, it would tend to prove my theory that good and bad luck will approximately equalize each other. I had luck in my previous games and was due for bad luck." Well actually, when I had discussed my theory that good and bad luck should approximately equalize each other in the long run, [Samuel] Reshevsky couldn't agree with me. But later we had a long conversation, [and agreed] maybe in the long run but not in the short run.

So now we have to speak of the Piatigorskys. They were very nice persons. I have found the book he [Gregor] had given to me with his music notes in the first and second page, let me see. You know, of course, even in that time I already knew he was a great figure cellist. What he writes here to me, let me just see...

“For Lajos Portisch with Admiration and Friendship. Gregor Piatigorsky Los Angeles August, 1966.” And here there are some music notes, actually this is a C scale, well in English I think they say C measure because, I don’t know, are you familiar with music expressions?

JD: Yes, your interpretation is correct.

LP: Yes, yes, yes. C measure scale going down. But I must say that at that time, I was not brave enough to sing in their presence. And he didn’t play chess with us but he had very beautiful collections of chess sets. He had a very large room full with his collections. So this is what I remember as I can say. So maybe this where you can ask something.

JD: I’ve got a couple of questions for you. Do you remember when they arranged to have a photograph taken of all the participants in the tournament? I’ve seen a couple different pictures and the one, of course, we have on display in the exhibition that’s going along with the tournament is a correct one and all the players look very responsible and you know...

LP: Well let me see, all the player photographs are here in the book and also here on the first page there are Spassky, Mr. Piatigorsky, then Mrs. Piatigorsky, and Bobby Fischer. This is on the first page. This is correct. Do you have this?

JD: I do have it. The thing is that I’m not sure in the first book in 1963 they published a picture with all the participants.

LP: In ‘63, I think I had the book, but I can’t talk about it because I was not there.

JD: Understood. But in ‘66 when they took the group photo of you. I saw one version where Donner was making a very strange face and he looked like he might have been enjoying himself a lot. Maybe he...

LP: Well let me see. His photo is in the book?

JD: No, I don’t think it’s in the book. I think that they did not put the group photo in that particular tournament book, so I was just curious if you remembered the circumstances when—

LP: No, I unfortunately I don’t remember. I have the photograph with Donner and my game and we are probably just talking. He has his cigarette in his mouth, and I have very short hair here. Do you have the book actually?

JD: I know it in my mind. It's downstairs, but I know the pictures from this book very well now.

LP: I think that all the photos that are in this book are correct.

JD: I agree totally. There was one, see, when Mrs. Piatigorsky died last year.

LP: Yes, I know. It was sad news. I congratulated her actually on her ninety-ninth birthday. A gentleman had called me [to see] if I could send her some greetings, and I did. And I even wrote to her that I hoped I would be able to sing for her for the next birthday. Perhaps you might know that I am a singer also, but at that time I was not so experienced, so I was not brave enough. So I am sorry I cannot say anything else about the photos.

JD: Okay, that's fine. Now, as far as the atmosphere in the tournament, of course, Spassky was leading almost from the beginning, and he led more or less the whole tournament, but by the sixteenth round, Bobby had caught up to him, and they faced each other in the seventeenth round. And you'll remember Bobby was white on the Marshall Gambit, and Spassky defended very well, and the game ended a draw. Do you remember what the atmosphere was like in the tournament then?

LP: Well, I think it was a normal atmosphere. I remember there was a very nice swimming pool in the hotel I went down to. I was eager to swim almost every day in those days. So [Miguel] Najdorf rented a car, and he gave a lift to [Boris] Ivkov and this was the reason why Ivkov played so poorly in the tournament, because was really a terrible driver.

JD: I see.

LP: I sat in his car only once, one morning. But when he stopped at the traffic light, he [braked suddenly and] almost fell out of the car through the doors. His question was this: "Oh, how is the old Najdorf driving?" and his [Najdorf's] answer was, "Oh, perfect. Oh, Grandmaster, perfect." But of course, we looked at each other and say, "Perfect." But anyway, I had this driving lesson, I would say only once, but Ivkov with Najdorf, they were together very often. Now one more interesting story of course, after the tournament we had to go to the tax office.

JD: Tax office? Interesting.

LP: Interesting because again, it's Najdorf. He was very smart in some ways, you know. We were all together there, so we went to the lawyer, whoever he was, and we had to declare how much we won. But Najdorf started to talk, "Well, I have so many expenses, my daughter's in Argentina, I have to call them twice at least a day," and so on and so on. And of course, the officer, he was already angry, and he says, "Okay, okay, that's enough." And now [Jan Hein] Donner was not so smart, but he realized he had to pay more than Najdorf. And then he said, "Look, I was the last in the tournament, and now I have to pay more tax than Najdorf ahead of me" This now, this just reminds me, this is a funny story. You have to be very smart when you go to the tax office, of course.

JD: That's true, yes. I'm wondering. This was your first time to the United States if I'm not mistaken.

LP: Yes, this was my first trip to the United States actually. This is why I was surprised when I saw nobody walking in the streets. Yeah, yeah. I took a flight actually, Scandinavian Airlines from Copenhagen straight to Los Angeles. Of course, I wasn't used to American custom regulations. So [during the stopover] in Copenhagen I bought maybe some fruit, and probably I ate on the airplane. Somehow one piece of banana stayed in my handbag, so of course when I arrived to the airport in Los Angeles, all the luggage had to be checked by an officer with a not so nice look on his face. He threw out my banana without saying a word. I said, "Is this [the] American [way of] handling of foreigners - not so polite?" Throwing my last fruit to the basket without saying a word. Of course, he had to do it. I understand.

JD: Right. Now, what were the relations like between the players in the tournament? You mentioned for example like Ivkov and Najdorf were together, but I'm curious how the relations between Fischer and Spassky - did Bobby spend a lot of time with any of the other players?

LP: I don't think so. I don't remember if we were together. We were of course in the Piatigorskys' house, but I don't remember who was there. I don't remember if Bobby was there or not. Actually, I think they liked each other, so I would say we all were friends really, no matter how old you were or how young you were because that was the big difference with the older ones like Reshevsky and Najdorf. It was interesting how friendly we would be to each other. For example, you might remember that I won match against Sammy Reshevsky in 1964.

JD: I remember. It was the first match he ever lost.

LP: Yeah, he lost, and then he didn't talk to me for two years. And then suddenly in Santa Monica he started to communicate with me. He even invited me for a cup of coffee, which was offered to me by his wife. And then he explained to me the funny situation. He said, "Look, dear Lajos, you probably don't know how much I have to suffer here." I didn't dare to say Sammy because he was much older than me. I said, "Why?" Then he explained it to me. He said, "Because I have to eat kosher food." In Los Angeles and Santa Monica there are a lot of kosher restaurants and rabbis who eat kosher food. Then Reshevsky said, "No, rabbis' food is not enough kosher for me". He explained that he lost a lot of weight, although his wife was together with him, but his wife had to cook for themselves. So he explained it as [the reason] why he maybe didn't have such a good result. Because this is not published anywhere, but this very true. So at least I got a nice coffee and a cookie in the room, or maybe they were not even staying in the hotel. Maybe they were staying in an apartment somewhere because I don't remember if this was in the hotel apartment, or they were just staying in a private apartment, I'm not sure. Because his wife was there, that's for sure, I remember.

JD: She was probably the only wife that was at the tournament.

LP: Probably.

JD: She was probably the only wife, Mrs. Reshevsky.

LP: Well let me see. I was married at that time but my wife did not come.

JD: Oh, Petrosian's wife was there.

LP: That's true, that's true. Yes.

JD: But it sounds like it was a very wonderful atmosphere. I mean, the tournament location was only a block from the ocean and you had a nice swimming pool. The hotel was nice good enough.

LP: Everything was nice and perfect.

JD: The games were really of a high quality, for the most part. I mean, a lot of interesting and fighting games in the tournament.

LP: This was a really a fantastic tournament I would say.

JD: It's hard to find... Of course there were Candidates Tournaments in the 1950s, but in the 1960s when they switched to match play then there really weren't... [In] this tournament there were three world champions, you have yourself—

LP: This was at least as strong as a Candidates Tournament in those years.

JD: It was a very special tournament because even the players [like] Ivkov had been a candidate in '65...

LP: Ivkov was the best Yugoslav player at that time. He was in a better form than [Svetozar] Gligoric, who later, of course, took over his first place in Yugoslav. I would say the only [player] weaker than the others was this Mr. [Jan Hein] Donner. Maybe one more Russian [would have strengthened the tournament.] The places for the Russians were limited. There were only two Russians, [Tigran] Petrosian and [Boris] Spassky.

JD: Right, right. But even Donner was dangerous.

LP: I can say only one more interesting story. I can say this very clearly. Because when I got the invitation at that time, you know how the situation was in Hungary at that time. So we always had to get permission from the Hungarian Sports Office to go to America. Then the secretary, or the president, or the vice president... actually he was the vice president of the Sport Office. I got the call that he wanted to meet me in his office, and I had a feeling this wouldn't be a friendly

talk. Anyway, I went to his office and he said, "Lajos Portisch, you are not supposed to go to the United States."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because the Americans are bombing Vietnam."

I said to him whoever he was, I don't remember the name, "Look I don't think that if I don't go to the United States that the Americans would stop bombing Vietnam."

But really, if this would be the prize I could abstain from the tournament, but I told him that, I'm sure the Russians will be there, so I told him that, "Know for sure that I will be there because I don't accept your order so I will do my best so I will be there." So I then took some steps around him and got the permission so I went. I also called Petrosian because he had just had a [World Championship] match with Spassky. When I called Tigran and I asked what his reaction was or what they were going to do. He said, "Now Lajos let me finish my match with Spassky and then I will see what to do." Well he didn't answer me, but I heard from different sources that the Russians will be there so then I got the permission. I must say that it was not so easy of a situation in that time fifty years ago because the United States of America really had the war on Vietnam, that's history.

JD: Yes it is.

LP: That's history, but that was the reaction of the Hungarian sports authorities, also maybe of this vice president.

JD: Yes. Well thank you so much. I'm just trying to think. You have given me so much useful information that I know people are going to enjoy a lot. I mean a lot of interesting insights on the tournament. I replayed all your games from the event, I played the round three game over with Petrosian this morning, I played through it before in the tournament book. It was a really nice game, a very logical game. It was very well-played. Later in the end of the tournament you were in very good form and you went a couple of games in a row and you were very close to...

LP: Actually what I said in the annotation of my games with [Bent] Larsen, in a few games I had luck and in the other games had bad luck. I was lucky, for example, against Ivkov in my second game, which after I won, good luck and bad luck in the long run was my theory at that time. Now I am more pessimistic about this saying, but I am practically out of chess so this is not so important any longer.