

9. Arthur Drucker Reminisces about the Piatigorsky Foundation

Recorded: September 13, 2013

Arthur Drucker was the perfect right hand man for Jacqueline Piatigorsky when she founded the Piatigorsky Foundation to promote chess. A school teacher in a tough inner city school in Los Angeles, as well as an expert-rated player, and finalist in the 1956 U.S. Olympic weightlifting trials, Drucker was a man of many talents who worked well with Jacqueline. He helped her realize many of her ideas, including bringing chess to underserved youth and people with physical disabilities. Drucker reflects upon Jacqueline Piatigorsky and the pioneering activities of the Piatigorsky Foundation.

John Donaldson: When was the first time that you met Mrs. Piatigorsky?

Arthur Drucker: I would say in about '63, at the Steiner Chess Club on Cashio.

JD: And, at that time, were you involved with her activities, or did that come later?

AD: That came - when I first met her I was not involved with her activities. I was a junior high school teacher in South Central Los Angeles at an all-black school.

JD: So if I understand it then, you really started working for her in 1966 about the time of the—

AD: Right after the Piatigorsky Cup, yes.

JD: Were you at that Piatigorsky Cup tournament?

AD: I was at every round, helping out with everything, etc. I didn't do wall-boy stuff, that was [what] the juniors did, but I helped out in many ways at the Second Cup.

JD: Did you have any interaction with any of the players?

AD: Not much, no.

JD: Do you remember like funny incidents, anything of that nature?

AD: Yes, a very funny incident was [Wolfgang] Unzicker- someone approached him while he was at a urinal and asked about his position, and he, with his German accent says, "Now you ask me about my position?"

JD: That's funny. Nowadays, we would be concerned about using electronic devices in the men's room. But ... at the urinal, that is a pretty funny thing.

AD: Right, there was no such thing. And another thing is people would hide a book somewhere, you know. There was no electronic way to cheat.

JD: Right, it was a different time. Now, by chance, were you at the reception that they had at the Piatigorskys where all the players went to her home?

AD: No, I wasn't. I don't remember being there. I might have been there. Now that I think about it, I might have been there, but I don't remember anything about it.

JD: Do you remember anything about Bobby, concerning the tournament?

AD: No, I really don't. Bobby gave an exhibition at the Student Club once, and we had a player named Bruce Antman, and he just liked the name.

JD: Right, Bruce Antman. I remember reading about that talk Bobby gave at the [Steiner Chess Club] for the best junior players, in which he discussed openings there with them. Do you remember anything about the people that were there by any chance? So Antman was definitely there, for one.

AD: Antman was there, [James] Tarjan, I think Andy Sacks, Peter Rhee, Roger Neustaedter, Rick Melniker, all the regulars from the Student Club, you know.

JD: And did you - I remember reading an account of Fischer's stay at the Piatigorsky Cup in '66 and he really liked the Miramar Hotel. I mean he really liked it, so much that he stayed a couple weeks after the tournament on the Piatigorskys' tab and they almost had to force him out of the hotel. Do you recall?

AD: I heard that. I don't know anything about it, I heard that. But I didn't know anything about it.

JD: Now, after the Piatigorsky Cup had finished, and you started working for Mrs. P., you were essentially sort of like her right hand man, is that correct?

AD: That's correct. Here are the things I did. I ran the Student Club every Saturday and then on Sunday I would come into the office at her home. I had my own office there and I would take care of whatever had to be done. We'd have a discussion about what's going on, if there was anything scholastically that had to be done, she'd tell me about it, or I would tell her about it. We'd discuss it. I ran the high school championship every year. I ran the junior high school championship every year, always saw the thing. At that time we weren't running an elementary school championship. I know now it's popular.

JD: What sort of attendance did you get for the final tournament for those events, you know, the championships?

AD: You might get fifty people in the high school championship, or maybe a little more. You might get that.

JD: I remember reading some account from your notes that you got like a couple hundred people for some of the finals.

AD: Yes, we did. We had this tournament that was L.A. City School tournament, where we'd have a high school section and a junior high school and an elementary school section all at the same day. They were held at Grant - Birmingham High School. Those were held at Birmingham High School. Before that we had some tournaments at L.A. High. We had the Tournament of Champions at L.A. High, we had the U.S. California Junior Championship at Los Angeles High School.

JD: Right, it was quite impressive. I mean, nowadays of course, scholastic chess is booming, but you know, going back close to fifty years, those numbers were huge. In addition to her scholastic programs, that Mrs. Piatigorsky organized, she also was sponsoring a lot of different programs and I noticed one of the things that she really was pretty much the founder of was the U.S. Junior Closed. Do you remember anything about what caused her to jump in on that?

AD: I think they might have asked her to come in on that. I started doing that right after she started doing that. You know what I'm saying? I started working for her right after it started. It was a strong tournament, every year it was a strong tournament. So many of the people became Grandmasters, Ken Rogoff, Sal Matera, Jim Tarjan, on, and on, and on.

JD: Yes, yes. And then besides the U.S. Junior Closed, she was also sponsoring - I mean, with other contributors - to the U.S. Championship, to the U.S. Women's Championship, student teams that would play in the Student Olympiads, representatives that would play in the World Junior, you know, it seemed like there was no end to what she was willing to support.

AD: She was, right, she was giving an awful lot of support to chess.

JD: And my understanding is that her support was not confined to just formal tournaments, but that she would also answer individual requests. Is that true? People would write to you and say, "I need money to go to - my high school wants to go to the High School National Championship, and we need help-"

AD: Yeah, there was some of that. It wasn't that extensive, I don't think. Yes, she supported a lot of chess, you know. I don't know what to say. For me, money was always an object, but for her, of course, money was no object. We didn't grow up like she did.

JD: Right. When you would meet with her on Sundays, it sounds like she wasn't only providing financial support; she was really interested in the different programs that she was supporting.

AD: Mhm, she was.

JD: And everything I've heard about her involvement with the Piatigorsky Cups suggests that she was very much a perfectionist. Would you describe her as such?

AD: Yes, she definitely was. She was trying, I mean - if you're working in stone, it's a sculpture. You have to be a perfectionist because you can't make mistakes. Once you cut something away, it's gone.

JD: So in some ways, that was the perfect segue for her from chess to sculpting.

AD: Yes, she absolutely loved sculpting. She sculpted until she died.

JD: Now, do you know about her relationship with Sammy Reshevsky? In her records that we found, she had corresponded with him extensively and she would send him her game scores for him to analyze. Do you know what, anything about that?

AD: That was before we, that was when she was more serious in chess.

JD: I'm trying to think of that time period, but you're probably right. Do you remember anything about the organization of the tournament in 1968 that was involving [Vlastimil] Hort, [Leonid] Stein, and [Samuel] Reshevsky?

AD: Stein... Hmm... Yeah, I remember it was at the Steiner Club. There was another tournament, it was at '68. I'm thinking about this. There was a tournament being held in Eagle Rock or something like that.

JD: That was in '74, that was a different tournament.

AD: Right, right, right, okay.

JD: Now, Mrs. Piatigorsky around the period around 1966, would you see her around the Steiner Club regularly, or did she only go in on the rare occasion?

AD: A few times a month.

JD: Gotcha, gotcha.

AD: She wasn't there all the time when I was there. I was a regular member of the Steiner Club and I was there nearly every night.