***A Memorable Life: A Glimpse into***

***the Complex Mind of Bobby Fischer***

**Interviews**

Figures from the world of chess share memories of their interactions with Bobby Fischer in these text interviews, which supplement the information in this exhibition. We hope you enjoy reading these recollections and learning more about Fischer’s legacy.

International Master John Donaldson, a chess historian, interviews the participants in this project. John has served as the Director of the Mechanics' Institute Chess Club of San Francisco since 1998 and worked for Yasser Seirawan's magazine, *Inside Chess* from 1988 to 2000. He has had held the title of International Master since 1983 and has two norms for the Grandmaster title, but is proudest of captaining the U.S. national team on 15 occasions winning two gold, three silver and four bronze medals. Donaldson has authored over thirty books on the game including a two-volume work on Akiva Rubinstein with International Master Nikolay Minev. **1. United States Chess Federation Master Lael Kaplan**

United States Chess Federation Master Lael Kaplan played chess in Hungary in 1993-1994, where Bobby Fischer was then living. He also spent time with his good friend Grandmaster Alex Sherzer who was studying medicine. The two met with Fischer many times over several months. Here Lael recalls some of the highlights of their experiences together.

Lael Kaplan: I arrived in Budapest in 1993 (that was my first tournament there), but didn't meet Bobby until 1994. I don't really have much, mostly general memories of Bobby sitting around the table analyzing with others. Two personal memories that come to mind:

I asked him about a game with Laszlo Szabo in *My 60 Memorable Games,* where Szabo is losing the white side of a Kings Indian. Instead of resigning though, Szabo slowly shoves the pieces to the center of the board in disgust. Bobby gave me a personal reenactment of the facial gestures, double-arm shove, etc.!

Bobby looked at one on my personal games where I was on the black side of a Kings Indian. He noted that if the pieces were slightly different, I could play X, Y, Z. This was because of an actual game he played, which I looked up later and confirmed. My memory is a bit fuzzy here, but the game was in Yugoslavia in the late 1950s (1958?) where the black knight penetrated the white queenside and somehow won a pawn (b pawn?).

**2. National Master David Presser**

National Master David Presser of Cleveland is a former Ohio state champion. In this interview, he shares his memories of attending the 1972 Fischer-Spassky World Chess Championship match in Reykjavik, Iceland.

John Donaldson: Was the 1972 World Championship match the first time you saw Bobby Fischer?

David Presser: No, I first saw Bobby in 1957 at the United States Open Chess Championship in Cleveland. He was playing against William Addison in the 11th round. Being new to chess, having only learned to play earlier in the year, the only thing I remember about the game is that Addison played the Caro-Kann. What I do recall is Bobby was dressed like a teenager in jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes. His posture at the board was also that of a typical youngster, with one foot tucked underneath his body.

JD: How did you get to Reykjavik?

DP: I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan at the time, so the first part of the trip was getting from Ann Arbor to Detroit and then flying to New York. There I caught Icelandic Airlines to Keflavik. Icelandic was a favorite of students and hippies at the time as its fares were half that of other airlines, plus it offered a free stop-over in Iceland for those going to Europe, which fit my needs perfectly.

JD: What were your first impressions when you arrived in Iceland?

DP: I arrived a few days before the start of the match. My first impression taking the bus from Keflavik (where the airport was located) to Reykjavik, was the complete absence of trees. My first evening I couldn’t believe how it stayed light for almost 24 hours a day—at midnight it was still possible to read a newspaper outdoors.

The hospitality of the Icelandic people is something I also vividly remember. The first few days in Reykjavik I stayed at a hotel, but then an Icelandic friend offered to put me up for my entire stay. Other Americans that came for the match told me they experienced similar generosity.

JD: What are your first memories of the match?

DP: Coming a few days before the scheduled start of the match, I experienced firsthand the tremendous uncertainty about whether it would be held. Was Bobby going to play? Was Boris going home? Until Fischer made his first move we didn’t know what would happen.

JD: What was it like watching the games?

DP: It wasn’t cheap. Tickets for individual games were $5--about $28 today adjusted for inflation.

The playing hall was vast. The first six rows were empty in deference to Fischer’s sensitivity to noise. The rest of the theatre was arranged in a semi-circle with 40 or 50 seats per row. The hall was never full in any of the nine games I attended.

While I would watch the start of the games, soon after I would go backstage to an area that was far enough away that it didn’t distract the players. The seats in the auditorium were separated by a partition, with doors, from the area behind the partition. This backstage area was the place to be. The game could be followed on many small TV screens that projected the moves and Grandmasters Bent Larsen and Svetozar Gligoric provided analysis. It wasn’t formal on a demonstration board or anything like that, but totally impromptu using a chess set that was lying around. Everyone was welcome to make suggestions.

JD: Do you have any anecdotes about the match you would like to share?

DP: Every day I would take a bus to the match. Once I arrived a bit early and saw a car come up right to the front door of the playing hall. William Lombardy, who was sitting next to the driver, immediately got out and soon after Bobby Fischer emerged from the back. What was interesting was that Lombardy was visible as the car approached, but Bobby was not. It appeared that he was lying down and did not want to be recognized.

Not long after one of Boris Spassky’s seconds, Efim Geller, got off a bus similar to the one I had arrived on. That was a surprise to me, a great player like Geller taking a bus! It must have been convenient for him.

During the first game right after **29. b5** an amateur player asked the Grandmasters analyzing backstage why couldn’t Fischer capture on h2. As they were patiently explaining that it would get trapped **… 29. …Bxh2** appeared on the screen!

I remember game four had a heightened tension to it that games five to nine lacked. Bobby had just beaten Boris for the first time in his career in a game played off stage in a private room. Spassky made it clear that he wouldn’t play there again – that it was non-negotiable. Fischer played his favorite Bc4 against the Classical Sicilian and Spassky was so well-prepared in the opening that Bobby did not repeat it the rest of the match. Boris got very strong counterplay with **…Qg5** and **…h5** with a dangerous kingside attack, and might have won the game if he hadn’t allowed White to trade the queens with **Qc3**.

My last memories of the match are from Atlantic City. The 1972 U.S. Open Chess Championship was held there in August, while Fischer and Spassky were still battling it out. The rounds in Atlantic City were held every evening at 7 p.m. Days when a game in Reykjavik was played you could find Bent Larsen analyzing it in the afternoon, with various experts and masters watching and suggesting ideas. I was surprised to hear Larsen state more than once that he didn’t know what was going on!

**3. National Master Gilbert Ramirez**

National Master Gilbert Ramirez is one of the greatest chess talents to emerge from San Francisco. California Open and Closed State Champion in 1957 at the age of 17, he also finished second to Bobby Fischer in the United States Junior Open held the same year. Ramirez tied for first in the 1959 United States Junior Open in Omaha in 1959 and then joined the U.S. Air Force. While stationed in Europe in the early 1960s he had several excellent results playing in Spain.

John Donaldson: When did you first meet Bobby?

Gilbert Ramirez: The summer of 1957 when he and I were playing in the United States Junior Open in San Francisco. We were the top two rated players and finished that way. Our draw in round five was the only half point Bobby gave up.

JD: Do you have any memories of the tournament?

GR: Alongside the main event, there was a blitz tournament where I again finished second to Bobby. My prize was two dinner tickets, and I invited my girlfriend Elena. We were joined by Bobby and, while waiting to be seated, played a blindfold game, which I won. Bobby was quite upset and instantly demanded another game where he got his revenge.

JD: When the tournament ended did you have any further contact with Bobby?

GR: Yes, he spent some time in San Francisco after the event and stayed with my family. I remember Bobby enjoyed watching the cartoon series *Crusader Rabbit,* which was popular at the time. We visited the Mechanics’ Institute Chess Club several times, playing move on move chess both individually and in tandem.

Bobby traveled down to Los Angeles, where he spent several weeks, before returning to San Francisco for the ride to the United States Open in Cleveland.

JD: Can you tell us about this road trip?

GR: Yes, it was quite an adventure. Bobby and I traveled with John Rinaldo, William Rebold, and William Addison. The latter two, who were a little older than the rest of us, were our drivers. Guthrie McClain, the San Francisco master who helped organize the United States Junior Open, kindly loaned us his Buick, and we were off heading East on what is today Interstate 80.

We were traveling in late July through the desert without air conditioning for four days, never stopping to sleep. This led to a regrettable incident. At one point Bobby got angry and attacked John Rinaldo, who had been calling him Crusader Rabbit for some time. Bobby was still small then, but had large feet for his size. I tried to break it up, which Bobby misinterpreted as taking John’s side, and he bit me in the arm, which caused me to hit him.

The excitement wasn’t confined to this fight. The car broke down twice, first in Winnemucca and then Joliet. The second time we left the car for Mr. McClain to pick up and bought bus tickets to Cleveland with our remaining money.

Bobby and I quickly made up and roomed together for part of the United States Open, where he tied for first.

JD: Did you ever see him again after the 1957 United States Open?

GR: I almost got to play Bobby at the end of 1959 in the United States Championship. Robin Ault and I tied for first in the 1959 United States Junior Open in Omaha, but he had the better tiebreak and earned the automatic qualifying spot for the Championship.

Soon after this I joined the United States Air Force and played with success in local and international tournaments while based in Spain. The last time I saw Bobby was on my return stateside in New York in late 1964 or very early 1965. We had a very nice chat around 1:00 am.

**4. International Master Bernard Zuckerman**

International Master Bernard Zuckerman, nicknamed “Zuck the Book” for his outstanding knowledge of opening theory, was one of the few players that Bobby Fischer regularly consulted for advice. Zuckerman served as Grandmaster Robert Byrne’s second when the latter qualified for the Candidates Matches at the 1973 Leningrad Interzonal. A seven-time participant in United States Chess Championships, Zuckerman also represented his country in three World Student Team Championships.

John Donaldson: Can you tell us how you started to play?

Bernard Zuckerman: Bobby and I were born the same month of the same year (March 1943) although he was a little older being born on the 9th and myself the 31st. Although we were the same age we did not start to play at the same time. Bobby began when he was 6 but I didn’t until I was 15. By then he was already U.S. Chess Champion.

JD: Did you go to Erasmus High School like Bobby and Raymond Weinstein and frequent the Hawthorne Chess Club?

BZ: No, I grew up in a different part of Brooklyn and went to Thomas Jefferson High School. I never went to the Hawthorne Chess Club on Lenox Avenue in Brooklyn. By the time I started playing, it had either ended or was about to. I did visit Jack Collins at his new home in Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan. Speaking of Collins, Bobby never referred to him as his coach although he sometimes talked of Carmine Nigro as his teacher.

JD: Where did you first start playing and what sort of progress did you make you make beginning at the late age of 15?

BZ: I first started playing at the Marshall Chess but before joining thought it a good idea to read a few books first. These included [José Raúl] Capablanca’s *Primer of Chess*, [Mikhail] Botvinnik’s *One Hundred Selected Games*, and a few [Fred] Reinfeld books. Even then I understood the latter were not for stronger players.

Despite the late start my progress was pretty fast. My first U.S.C.F. rating, which was published in February 1959, was 1850. By the end of 1965, I was playing in the U.S. Chess Championship, where I scored 6.5 from 11, tying for fourth place.

JD: What do you consider your most memorable games?

BZ: [August] Rankis (Marshall Chess Club Championship, New York, 1961), [Martin] Harrow (Manhattan Chess Club Championship, New York, 1963), [Uwe] Kuttner (World Student Team Championship, Krakow, 1964) and [Yuri] Razuvaev (Akiba Rubinstein Memorial, Polanica Zdroj, 1972).

JD: When did you first meet Bobby? Did you ever visit the family home at 560 Lincoln Place in Brooklyn?

BZ: I’m not certain of the very first time, but I certainly got to know him in 1958 and visited his home many times over the years up until March 1968, when Bobby moved to Los Angeles. That date is fixed in my mind because he had to sell his chess library and chess table when he went to California. I bought his chess table and a lamp. Bobby had bought the table after the Zurich tournament in 1959 and it took six months to arrive in New York from Switzerland. It wasn’t cheap at $150 when a Drueke table was selling for $50 at the time. When I got the table it was not in the best shape. Bobby was rough on things. There were a lot of stains on the table, but my father, who was a craftsman, was able to refinish it.

I remember Bobby picking up my copy of *Zurich 1959*, a very nice tournament book, and within seconds handling it so roughly that a page dropped out of the book. By the way, the table I picked was not the only nice one Bobby had when I knew him. He received a beautiful one after the Havana Olympiad along with all the other first boards. Burt Hochberg, the editor of *Chess Life*, bought it for $500 from Bobby.

JD: Did you have anything to do with *My 60 Memorable Games*?

BZ: No, but afterwards Bobby may have wished that he had hired me as a proofreader when I showed him some elementary mistakes. To give just a few examples I pointed out to him when I stayed with him between the National Open and Lone Pine in 1973:

A. Game 2

Sicilian Defense

Bobby Fischer – Bent Larsen

Interzonal Tournament, Portoroz, 1958

Fischer’s note after **31. Qd6+** reads:

*A mistake!* ***31. Qh6+!*** *forces mate in three.*

BZ: Actually it is mate in two. Bobby missed a faster mate in another Dragon game in *My 60 Memorable Games* (game 13, Fischer-Gligoric, Candidates Tournament 1959).

B. Game 17

Sicilian Defense

Bobby Fischer – Mikhail Tal

Bled-Zagreb-Belgrade, Candidates Tournament 1959

The score that is given is only 51 moves ending with **50. ...Ba1 51. a4 b2!** In fact the game actually went **50. ...Kc7 51. Rb5 Ba1 52. a4 b2!** While Bobby said he told always the truth in his annotations, he was definitely setting a trap after **10. ...g6?**

Fischer writes:

*Correct is* ***10. ...Bb7.***

BZ: Fischer knew in the early 1960s that **11. f5 e5 12. Ne6!** was strong for White. We spent some time looking at **10. ...Nf6 11. f5 e5** when I came up with **12. Bg5**, which is a strong piece sacrifice.

C. Game 32

Sicilian Defense

Bobby Fischer – Mikhail Tal

Bled, 1961

Fischer writes after **14. fxg7**:

*[Paul] Keres thought* ***14. Ne4 Bf8 15. Qd4*** *was stronger. But I wanted the pawn. With only two draws against Tal, out of six games at bat, I was in no mood to speculate!*

BZ: They [Fischer and Tal] had actually played seven games (Interzonal Tournament, Portoroz, 1958, four times in the Candidates Tournament, Bled-Zagreb-Belgrade, 1959; Zurich, 1959 and Olympiad, Leipzig, 1960), with the score four wins over Tal and three draws.

D. Game 42

Sicilian Defense

Wolfgang Unzicker – Bobby Fischer

Olympiad, Varna, 1962

The introduction to this game reads:

*Disastrously pursuing a line with which Tal had just barely survived against Fischer, Unzicker blunders further through apparent unfamiliarity with [Efim] Geller’s improvement* ***(15. Kh1!)*** *that had previously defeated Fischer at Cura*ç*ao.*

BZ: The game with Geller actually ended in a draw.

E. Game 56

Bobby Fischer – Svetozar Gligoric

Oly,piad, Havana, 1966

The introduction to this game reads:

*Fischer’s surprising* ***4. Bxc6****, a revival of Emanuel Lasker’s Exchange Variation*—*the one he used at St. Petersburg in 1914 to defeat Alekhine and Capablanca...*

BZ: Lasker won against Alekhine as Black.

After **5. 0-0!** Fischer writes:

*The text was favored by Emanuel Lasker, [Ossip] Bernstein and the Dutch master [Johan Teunis] Barendregt. I had been pondering it for a long time before considering to put it in my arsenal. It is true Lasker used the Exchange variation of the Ruy Lopez many times, but while he played* ***5. d4****,* ***5. Nc3*** *and* ***5. d3****, he never tried* ***5. 0-0****.*

F. Game 54

Sicilian Defense

Bobby Fischer – Miguel Najdorf

Second Piatigorsky Cup, Santa Monica, 1966

After **26. c5!** Fischer writes:

*More than a glancing blow. Black can know nothing about the imminent destruction of his compact mass of center Pawns.*

BZ: Substitute the word do for now.

JD: Is there anything more you can tell us about *My 60 Memorable Games*? In particular, about the game Bobby Fischer – Arthur Bisguier, New York State Open Championship, 1963 (game 45), which **put 9. Nh3!?** back on the map.

BZ: Look at the note after White’s ninth move.

Bobby writes:

*To my knowledge, this is the first time that this move has been employed in Grandmaster chess for over seventy years. It is one of [William] Steinitz’s many unique opening contributions. The famous cable match game in 1891 between Steinitz and [Mikhail] Tchigorin, which ended in a victory for Black, apparently caused the chess world to shy away from this variation.*

BZ: The key word is Grandmaster as I had played the **9. Nh3** twice before Bobby’s game with [Arthur] Bisguier (and another he played with [Dejan] Radoicic from the same event.) We analyzed the variation together. Here is one of my wins with it:

Two Knights C59

Bernard Zuckerman - Bentayer

World Student Team Championship (Budva) 1963

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1. e4 e5** | **13. Kh1 Be6** | **25. Bf6 Rc8** | **37. h3 Rh7** |
| **2. Nf3 Nc6** | **14. Ng1 Rd8** | **26. Rae1 Kd7** | **38. Bh4 a5** |
| **3. Bc4 Nf6** | **15. Qe1 g4** | **27. Bd1 Nd8** | **39. a4 Rg7** |
| **4. Ng5 d5** | **16. f4 exf4** | **28. Ne2 Ne6** | **40. hxg4 hxg4** |
| **5. exd5 Na5** | **17. Bxf4 Nd5** | **29. Nc3 Bxg2+** | **41. Nf6 Bg5** |
| **6. Bb5+ c6** | **18. Be5 Rg8** | **30. Kxg2 Nf4+** | **42. Bxg5 Rxg5** |
| **7. dxc6 bxc6** | **19. Na4 Qb4** | **31. Rxf4 Bxf4** | **43. Nxg4 Kd5** |
| **8. Be2 h6** | **20. Qxb4 Bxb4** | **32. Re7+ Kc6** | **44. c3 Ke6** |
| **9. Nh3 Bc5** | **21. Bd4 Nb7** | **33. Rxf7 Rcf8** | **45. Kf3 Rh5** |
| **10. d3 Qb6** | **22. a3 Bd6** | **34. Rxf8 Rxf8** | **46. Ke3 Rh3+** |
| **11. 0–0 g5** | **23. Nc3 c5** | **35. Ne4 h5** | **47. Kd2 Rh7** |
| **12. Nc3 Be7** | **24. Nxd5 Bxd5** | **36. b3 Rf7** | **48. Ne3**  |
|  |  |  |  **1–0** |

JD: What role do you think Larry Evans played in *My 60 Memorable Games*?

BZ: Evans, of course, did the introductions to the games, but I believe his contribution was greater than that. The notes and variations were Bobby’s, but Evans was his translator who made the book read so well. Bobby didn’t have a great education. His spelling was poor, and I’m not sure if he ever knew what an adverb was. I remember Fischer once wrote about Geller "Sometimes he plays real well, sometimes he is unrealizable.” This was in response to the following game:

Nimzo Indian E27

David Bronstein – Efim Geller

Soviet Championship, Moscow, 1961

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1. d4 Nf6** | **6. f3 d5** | **11. Bd3 Bxd3** | **16. g4 h6** |
| **2. c4 e6** | **7. cxd5 exd5** | **12. Qxd3 Re8** | **17. h4 cxd4** |
| **3. Nc3 Bb4** | **8. e3 Bf5**  | **13. 0–0 Rc8** | **18. g5 dxe3** |
| **4. a3 Bxc3+** | **9. Ne2 Nbd7** | **14. Rb1 Qa5** | **19. gxf6 Rxc3** |
| **5. bxc3 0–0** | **10. Nf4 c5** | **15. Rxb7 Nb6** | **20. Qg6!**  |
|  |  |  |  **1–0** |

BZ: Bobby never really learned cursive, mostly printing with a very distinctive slant to the left.

JD: What can you tell us about Raymond Weinstein, who played with such great success in 1960 tying for third in the U.S. Chess Championship and was a member of the U.S. teams that won gold in the Student Team and silver in the Olympiad?

BZ: As I said earlier, I did not go to high school with Ray. He was two years older than Bobby, so he would have been at Erasmus High School at the same as Fischer, but I can’t say anything about this. Weinstein was certainly a promising player, but I remember Bobby did not like the way he played saying, "He plays to win a pawn.” They met four times—all with Bobby as White. The first game Ray was easily winning, until he cracked, playing **28. ...e5**.

French C19

Robert Fischer – Raymond Weinstein

U.S. Championship, New York (1) 1960

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1. e4 e6** | **8. Nf3 Qa5**  | **15. g4 Nfe7**  | **22. Rb5 Qa6** |
| **2. d4 d5** | **9. Qd2 Bd7** | **16. Bf1 Bd7** | **23. Reb1 b6** |
| **3. Nc3 Bb4** | **10. Bd3 c4** | **17. Bh3 h6** | **24. Qc1 Qxa4** |
| **4. e5 Ne7** | **11. Be2 0–0–0** | **18. Bd6 Rdf8** | **25. R5b2 Qa3** |
| **5. a3 Bxc3+** | **12. Ba3 f6** | **19. Rab1 Rf7** | **26. Qe3 Kb7** |
| **6. bxc3 c5** | **13. 0–0 Nf5** | **20. exf6 gxf6** | **27. Nh4 Nxh4** |
| **7. a4 Nbc6** | **14. Rfe1 Be8** | **21. Bg3 Ng6** | **28. Bxh4 e5??**  |

Bobby is totally busted after **28. ...Ka8**, when he is a pawn down, and Black has a clear positional advantage.

|  |
| --- |
| **29. dxe5 fxe5** |
| **30. Rxb6+ Ka8** |
| **31. R6b5 Be6** |
| **32. Bg3 e4** |
| **33. Qxh6**  |
| **1–0** |

I played alongside Raymond Weinstein in the World Student Team Championship at Krakow, Poland, in 1964, and he was already showing signs of serious mental illness. This appears to have been Ray’s last serious tournament, and he played well below his normal level. I remember that after he lost a completely won game against [Wlodzimierz] Schmidt of Poland early in the Finals, he begged the team captain William Lombardy not to have to play anymore the rest of the tournament. Within a year he killed an elderly fellow resident of a halfway house and was sent to the Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center at Ward's Island in New York where he resides to this day.

JD: Do you have any stories about the 1962 Curaçao Candidates Tournament?

BZ: I wasn’t there, but of course what is best remembered is Bobby’s claim that the Soviet players made pre-arranged draws. What is a bit strange is that after losing to [Pal] Benko in the second round of Curaçao, Bobby complained, “You ruined my chances," implying that Benko was not supposed to beat him. Later, in round 22, Bobby won against Benko in a position in which he could have resigned for many moves. Not a dumped game of course, and explained by Benko’s chronic time pressure, but the Soviets could have said it looked suspicious.

The Soviets did make noise when Bobby beat James Sherwin in the 1958 Interzonal, winning

a completely drawn rook and pawn ending when the defender failed to use the frontal defense in a Rook and Pawn versus Rook ending. I remember Ljubomir Ljubojevic also failed to defend this ending against Jaan Ehlvest (Rotterdam, 1989).

JD: Do you know why Fischer wasn’t drafted?

BZ: No I don’t, but it could be for a lot of reasons. I remember reading that Bruce Lee was rejected because one of his legs was an inch shorter than the other.

JD: Did Bobby ever comment on your play and offer you advice on how to get better?

BZ: I still remember Bobby telling [Oscar] Panno, who was spectating at one of the Mar del Plata tournaments in 1959 or 1960, that I was the most improved player in the United States at the time. That felt good. Fischer once told me that I was too self-critical of my play and should be more optimistic.[[1]](#endnote-1)

JD: When was the last time you saw Bobby?

BZ: The 1978 U.S. Championship that was held at Ambassador College in Pasadena. After that I

became fed up with his growing anti-Semitism.

1. *Interviewer’s note*—*This is amazingly similar to the advice that Bobby would offer Woman International Master Ruth Haring roughly twenty years later, when she and her husband hosted Fischer. Ruth, then rated around 2150 U.S.C.F., remembers coming home one day from work and being mortified as she saw Bobby playing through one of her games. He had found a box full of her game scores and spent the better part of the day going through it. His advice was that she was too self-critical of her play and should be more optimistic.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-1)