

## Bobby Fischer: A great future behind him?

The other day at a barbecue a group of us were musing about how persons and places suddenly burst on the world scene and then drop completely from public consciousness. "What were the two Chinese islands Kennedy and Nixon so vehemently debated whether we should fight to hold?" Quemoy and Matsui, and who ever thinks about them, and will the Falklands be remembered? Forgotten people ranged from Neil Armstrong to George Romney. "How about Bobby Fischer?" "What a disappointment! Can you imagine? Maybe the best ever, reaching the top of the world after a grueling climb - and immediately he forfeits, at his prime, refusing to play. What makes someone do that?"

I've often wondered, too, and I couldn't help recounting a couple of days I had spent with Fischer while he was on an incredible streak, rocketing to stardom. Against the world's top competition, Fischer had just scored back to back 6-0, 6-0 shutouts in the quarter and semi-final champion challenge rounds. No grandmaster had ever done it to another even once in official play.

On the last stage of that exhausting process known as "overnight success", unshaven and in pajamas when he opened his hotel room door to me at noon, Fischer was the hot national personality of the moment.

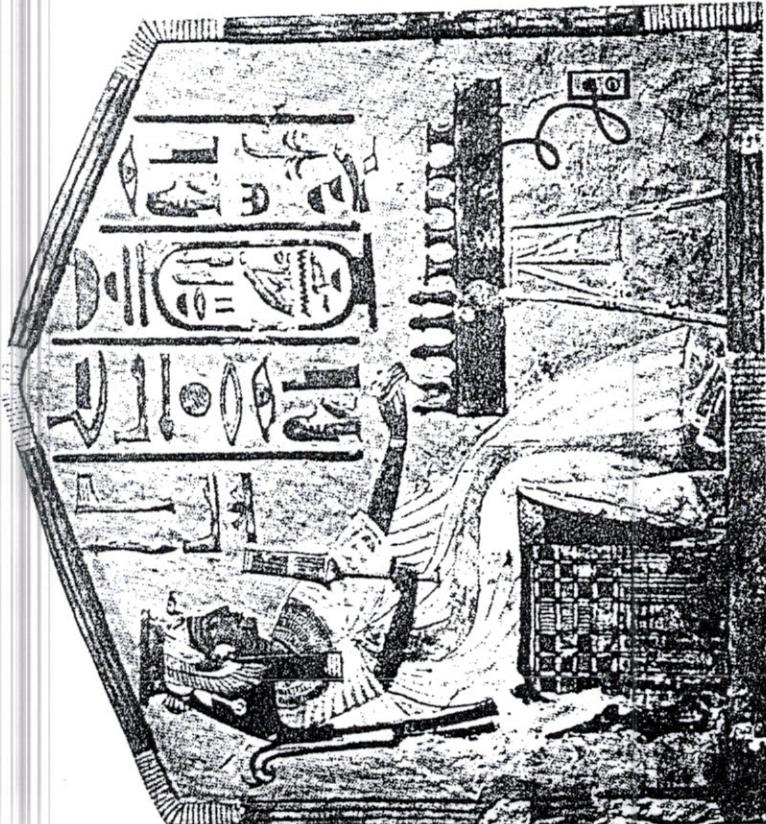
"Why chess, Bobby?" I asked the rugged, manly eight time U.S. Chess champion who at 29 looked like a college halfback but was perpetually

remembered and known as "the child chess champion." "When I was six," he said, "I asked my mother, 'what is the hardest game in the world?' She said 'Chess...'"

As a child he used to walk from his Brooklyn home to the chess clubs in Manhattan. In jest I suggested walking in the Olympics; Bobby was immediately and seriously interested, pressing for more details: How long did they walk in the Olympics? How old are they? When do they reach their prime? What are winning times? Fischer, big boned and husky, emphasized the importance of his own physical exercise, tennis, swimming, and especially walking: "Exercise is really important. Your body has to be in top condition. Your chess deteriorates when your body does. You can't separate body from mind." He paused. "Most people don't understand about chess — they think you just sit there, but it requires a lot of energy. Most important, your body can't get in the way."

I asked him to elaborate; he declined. I pressed: "Do you ever start thinking of other things during a game? Does your mind wander?"

"I've asked a lot of players that question," Fischer replied, "and many of them have that problem. Their minds start to wander. They start thinking about their problems. But that never happens to me." Sheepish yet smug, he smiled. "Maybe it's because I have no problems?"



There were reports that in a foreign tournament Fischer had met a heart-throb and his tournament performance suddenly suffered, but Bobby only discussed women impersonally to note that as a group they failed to concentrate, resulting in few truly outstanding women players. "They're interested in other things. They can't keep their minds on the game. Besides, they're too emotional." But he did reemphasize the mind/body connection. Lack of physical exercise had almost cost him his shutout. "I was in real good shape in the Larsen match. (The qualifying match by which Fischer reached the finals for the right to challenge Spassky, then Champion.) I played tennis before each game except for the last one. That was my worst game. He could have had a draw if he wanted it."

But getting a draw from Fischer was less difficult for some grandmasters than drawing him out in conversation. In brief interviews and television appearances, Bobby often appeared arrogant and curt, his laconic replies mistaken for superciliousness. To Dick Cavett's question, "you really think you're the best in the world?" Fischer's instant "right" was followed by an awkward pause. Only reluctantly and without great facility did he verbalize. But when drawn out, Fischer's arrogance is more a strange blend of shyness and self-confidence: "I am the best player in the world," he said while shaving. "The Russians have known that for years. But they're afraid of me. And so they say all sorts of scornful things about me..."

The Russians dominated Bobby's thinking. Occasionally he was respectful as when he conceded that "most of the Russians are in pretty good shape. They're a little heavy though, except Spassky; he's in great physical condition, real great." But mostly he hated them as a group. He was driven to beat them, and he would talk about the Russians at every invitation.

The prospect of a USSR vs. USA head to head intense and sustained confrontation for the world's top chess spot offered potentially exploitable appeal to the media, some of whom were eager to promote Fischer as the Russian-hating American future world king. Some brief interviews made Fischer's unrelenting

conditions. He had pressed for a quieter room during a match against Petrosian — who was partly deaf and declined to switch sites — whereupon Fischer withdrew; the only other time he quit was when glaring light was too bright for one who lived in an overcast hotel room.

He'd asked for a room change at the hotel too, but was effectively put off by a manager who politely discouraged him with a "Sorry sir, we're all full." Bobby bitterly complained to me that he could not concentrate at night because he heard the television from an adjoining room; a perfectly reasonable complaint when issue from a genius preparing for the world's chess championship challenge. I assured him he was entitled to a quiet room, and insisted I'd get it.

Reluctantly but grateful, he agreed. I asked to speak to the manager. Bobby was visibly uncomfortable: "Don't tell him who I am," he said. I semi-adhered to his request: "This man is preparing for the world chess championship and needs a quiet room." Luckily, the manager's son loved chess, and he instantly recognized Fischer.

We were given a key to another room to inspect at the end of a freshly repainted abandoned wing. Fischer blanched at the odor. "You don't think it's dangerous, do you?" he asked several times. I assured him they had removed lead and other noxious ingredients from paint; he trusted my assurance and became obviously at ease.

Inspecting the room, he put his ear to the wall and listened for any sounds, especially traffic noise. Bobby hated traffic noise. This room faced the courtyard; it was very quiet. But still Fischer was not satisfied: "I hear a hum." I was a bit skeptical, confident in my hearing, until I too began to hear it faintly, after many seconds of concentration.

Now Fischer's bad boy past and his hostility to the media made more sense: When he had withdrawn after being refused a quiet enough room, the press had been harsh with him for demanding conditions to his liking and refusing to play without them. Bobby walked out of his new room, this time tolerating the most muffled tremor. On our way out he made certain to take one of his chess magazines which he signed with an encouraging message and left for the manager's son.

Fischer seemed honest and forthright, perhaps ever. Yes he had walked out of a tournament because he did not like the

eager to pay debts, and even scores. For example, he discovered a Holiday Inn room key in his jacket pocket from Denver and immediately mailed it back. On the way to lunch he retrieved a fallen candy bar and overtook the owner walking in the opposite direction.

Lunch with Fischer was unforgettable. As a cub reporter on an expense account, I eagerly anticipated a lavish meal. But Fischer rejected *seriatim* many of New York's finest. "Let's go someplace more informal!" He instantly agreed to Chinese food; he had a favorite restaurant, "not that far away." Fischer disliked taxis (as I later discovered, riding in one with him, his eyes riveted on traffic, uncomfortable with every short stop and swerve: "...You can get killed in one of these things," he repeatedly complained) but since this restaurant was "close," although it was 90° and humid, we began to walk up Manhattan through the 50's, 60's 70's.... Determined, silent, I matched Fischer stride for stride, block after block, but as we entered Harlem, I wondered when our journey would end. Finally, about 5 miles after we began, we reached our goal, somewhere around 145th Street. It was a least distinguished dive. We walked up a narrow flight of steps to a tattered room with one lazy fan blade assigned to cool it, sprinkled with flies who had hoped on for the joyride. Fischer ordered a whole spicy fish as our entire meal.

Over lunch, Fischer elaborated his claims of a Soviet conspiracy. What had been quoted out of context in the press slowly began to emerge as the coherent, justified objections of an individual fighting a system which had, over the years, discriminated against him. International chess, he explained, is controlled by FIDE, a "so-called Democratic" organization which established the rules, rankings and sponsored tournaments. Because the Soviets dominate chess with their sheer preponderance of grandmasters, and because the Soviets control Eastern Europe, Communist representatives vote as a block. The Russians badly want to keep the world championship. There are many ways to do this. First and foremost, they allow only one challenge every three years, after a grueling elimination, which favors a nation with a group of top players. The most consistent and hearty player often ends up

challenging for the title, the eliminations having claimed a more talented but fragile player.

"The Russians have stacked the system for years. They twist the rules to suit themselves. When I play Spassky (for the Championship) the rules now say that I need twelve and a half points to win and he merely needs twelve. See what the Russians say about that after I win it."

But there was one more round to go before Spassky. Having won the quarters and semis 6-0, 6-0, in the final eliminations, Fischer faced Petrosian, a "fine position player," an ex-world's champion, and the fastest draw in the East. This was another way the tournament system was stacked against him: those detested draws which counted one half point to each player. Fischer insisted that draws should not count. This was not a trivial complaint: as in small particle physics, and in polling, so in chess, you often affect the activity by the way you measure its outcome.

If a chess match is played and the winner is the first to get 5 points and if the player loses the first game, then all his opponent need do is to play conservatively, solidly, and unimaginatively and draw the next eight games. In effect, counting draws one half point punishes a single mistake. It forced Fischer to play a tight-fisted game. Many times he'd been afraid to embark on a speculative attack, requiring brilliance and daring, because the consequent weakening of his pawn structure would spell defeat should his attack fail. Facing a future string of draws, he could not afford to chance a single loss, and thus failed to produce a singular win, or at least an exciting climax.

Draws breed draws. Fischer reiterated that only wins should count. Again and again he answered Chess' basic question: White to move and ? with "Chess is a draw with best play." The excitement of a game is the resolution of a struggle: "The way to win chess games is by creating imbalance."

Draws not only cramped Fischer's style and aborted brilliant games, they retarded the progress of Chess. As a continuously vital game Chess is constantly threatened by two types of opponents. Its most devoted and ardent advocates seek to dissolve the complex object of their rapture. Great players and

programmers threaten to "solve it," find its algorithm, reduce it to a puzzle. A puzzle muses but once, in the comprehension of its pattern. Playing at a puzzle is only fun for the uninitiated or those who like to toy with the helpless, tickled by transcending another's ignorance. Tic tac toe, checkers, and other games have suffered that fate.

Solution, then, challenges chess constantly with extinction. Yet its sheer complexity — the estimated number of possible positions varied — one was 10/43rd, greater than the number of molecules in the universe — has thus far produced countless theories, schools, and strategies, but no solution.

Not only do those most involved with Chess constantly seek its destruction, but it is also threatened by a massive failure to comprehend its levels of subtlety and beauty. It will also die if it is thus abandoned. But between those two menaces Chess was delicately positioned, very much alive and on the brink of American pop culture, almost completely because of Bobby Fischer.

Fischer was more interested in his potential influence as world champion than his fame. He had just retired from competitive chess for eighteen months during which he "thought about a lot of things" and was ready to challenge not only the World Champion but the entire system which produced him. "When I am World's Champion things will be different. I'll allow challenges at least once a year, and hopefully twice a year or more." He said this with intense conviction and I fully believed him. "No more round robin tournaments, where you beat all the weaker players and draw the stronger ones. Just head to head matches. That's how you find out who's the best."

He delighted in pointing out how

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Soviets subsidize their players...and when you play in these countries which host the tournaments often all the referees are from communist countries." I was surprised a referee makes any difference. "Sure they do; let's say the conditions are bad, or you're late or something; they can decide on the spot that you forfeit." Asked about the personalities of the Russian players, Fischer retorted. "You really can't get to know them well. They all stay together. They only talk small talk to us." "But isn't the chess community like the scientific community? Doesn't everyone want to contribute knowledge to the game? To find its truth? Aren't there open discussions about relative merits of new lines, etc?" Fischer laughed: "They want to win. That's all." Fischer too wanted to win, and that's all. He made no bones about it.

What if he were to lose? Fischer refused seriously to consider the possibility. Yet even at this point, so close to the championship, the detested system which had made it so difficult for him thus far, was having its effect. The rules provided that 40 moves be made by each player in 2½ hours. The game, if still not complete, was adjourned. Before it reconvened, each player studied the position for possible lines of advantage and prepared his strategy. In the hours between adjourning and reconvening, Seconds may examine the position. The Soviets always brought a huge contingent of Grandmasters to provide analyses to the player and this could be a huge advantage. Western players often could not afford expenses of grandmaster "seconds" and few were available anyway. For awhile, Fischer's "second" was a representative for the U.S. chess Federation and not an analyst. In essence he was doing it himself, taking on the Soviets alone. Yet Fischer rejected a description of himself as an Ayn Randian hero standing astride his circumstances: "You can't do it alone. I've had a lot of help. Nigro helped me. (Carmine Nigro, a chess idol and teacher from his youth.) My mother helped me. She believed in me when I was real young. That's very important."

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Fischer was sensitive to accusations that he was too narrow. His interests include politics — he read U.S. News and World Report and the New York Times — but he would make no political observa-

tions: "You can't win. Somebody's going to be unhappy with whatever you say. Did we see the world the same way he saw a chessboard, with moves and variations? He smiled: "Sort of." As usual he declined to elaborate but did admit that his chess ability helped him in other contexts: "I'm good at sizing up situations."

Although he would not answer questions directly about his political convictions, his likes and dislikes — other than his love for tennis and swimming, and a newly acquired enjoyment of bowling — his enjoyment of pop music, especially Motown, was obvious. The lyrics to one contemporary song in particular struck him as poignant, and in a rare initiation of conversation he pointed them out: "Smiling faces, going places, tell lies."

Walking after lunch we were approached by a man who asked for a quarter. "What for?" I asked. "A jug of wine to get drunk. What else?" Bobby was tickled by the directness of his answer: "Can you beat that? He actually told you."

Fischer not only detested phonies, especially interviewers, but hated the interviews themselves, which he often cut short: "I get bored with all these interviews. I get bored hearing myself saying the same things over again." Yet during this period he had departed from his practice of a decade and had suddenly become a media personality. Why? "For years the only ones who were talking were the Russians and they were telling lies but everyone believed them. So now I realize that the only way to make people understand is by making public my complaints.

We agreed to test his new bowling prowess, and Fischer led us to lanes atop the Port Authority bus terminal. He bowled at a furious clip, pausing not an instant, and during my shots either hunted for a better feeling ball or paced. A half hour later, at the end of three games, Fischer had eleven bowling balls lined on the ball rest, and complained about the conditions of the alleys as I barely beat him, each of us averaging about 150. He was visibly upset at losing: "I bowled much better than this at Denver." Strange person, Fischer: Soft muted light in his room, liking spicy food. Gracious winner; terrible loser. Enjoying fame, yet intensely private.

He would not talk about his friends or family. He denied his media image as a loner: "I have friends, but my friends don't talk about me." Fischer was determined to keep his personal life from the public eye at least until it was worth it. "They don't pay me enough to spill my guts," he said with a half smile.

Next to the Russians, money was a chief complaint. He had earned \$8,000 in his first year as U.S. champion. On the brink of stardom, he was aware he'd earn more, but "I don't get enough. It's ridiculous how in golf you can earn \$50,000 for four days work. When I play Spassky, I'll have to work for two months for less than that."

Things would change for Fischer, but only if he won. "I've got to win. The U.S. title means nothing. You've got to be world's champion. In America, you're nothing if you don't win." He said this with determination, and anticipation at finally achieving the title he coveted so long. At age 11 he had started thinking about being great, and since 14, when he won the U.S. championship, he had focused on the world's championship. He confessed that coming out of retirement to begin this latest cycle he had self-doubt: "I was rusty, I wasn't in shape, I wasn't that confident." But having just won back to back shutouts, and at the top of his game, he was now supremely confident that the world title would be his to win and keep "a long time."

And then what? "I sort of see my life as happening in two stages. The first is chess competition; then business.

"I'm in a really good position. I don't owe anybody anything. I haven't signed any contracts, and I don't have a manager. No one's going to own part of me." Bobby was very free, more so, I sensed, than he would wish. He liked to travel, but also wanted to settle down someday, marry, have children. To an obvious next question — would he want his child to be a chess champion — Fischer replied, "Not really. I'd teach him the rules." He was very optimistic about the younger generation and had recently written an article for "Boy's Life" whose reception pleased him. He recognized that the U.S. was moving towards a culture of greater leisure, and felt that youth might move back to the game. Fischer eagerly looked forward to a future with chess studios across the

country and yet in a conversation that soon followed, declared the imminent death of the game. In any event, he wrote off American elders: "People don't want to think much — especially the older generation."

How did Fischer regard his thinking contemporaries, other leading chess players? "There are too many grandmasters. Every country wants its own grandmaster. Maybe there are ten people today who should have the title of grandmaster. It's meaningless now, much too easy to get. I didn't deserve the title when I got it, though I've since proved that I do." Yet he treated the best of the bunch with respect: "The field is stronger than ever before. I'm not a lot better than they are. Just a little, but that's enough."

Asked to compare himself to other all-time great players, he tersely answered that he was the best. Although that was his image, the answer conflicted with the respect he'd shown his lesser contemporaries. When pressed specifically to expand on his ability compared with Paul Morphy or Wilhelm Steinitz, two of his most respected predecessors, he explained "I'm not saying I have more raw talent than they do; it's just that so much more is known about the game now."

Chess has been progressing at a furious pace. Until the first decades of the twentieth century the dominant theory had been to occupy the center; the struggle was direct. Then Aron Nimzowitch, Richard Reti, and others challenged that paradigm. The "hypermodern" school advocated allowing the opponent to occupy the center and commit to a structure while the player established potential lines of assault. Once the opponent's structure was hardened, it could be attacked obliquely, and then the center could be occupied. Until recently the creativity in chess, the combination — a long-term material sacrifice for an immediately exploitable positional advantage — took place almost exclusively during the middle game. With a recent avalanche of detailed analyses of chess games, attention had again shifted to the openings which were themselves taking on a middle game character. Here lay Fischer's immediate preoccupation, but he rejected adherence to any one school: "I try to take the best from everything. Anyway, I don't think much about the

philosophical issues of chess; I just try to win." Similarly, he denied any concern with the chess aesthetic. Creating beauty was not his goal. "I just try to win," he repeated.

But wasn't Fischer developing his own system, even if unconsciously? Almost ruefully he denied it: "There's no more room for new systems. Anytime you try to invent something you find it's got a name already."

Pressed further, Fischer made this startling admission: he thought chess was on the brink of death. "Capablanca thought so, and he was wrong. But I don't see anywhere much to develop ... a few more lines and variations, maybe, but most of the creative work has already been done. The computers may kill chess, if those jerks who are programming the mistakes into them would allow grandmasters to program them."

There had been a lively debate about computers' ability to play perfect chess both among the academic and chess community. On one side was former world's champion Botvinnic, a computer engineer who insisted that a computer could be designed soon to play grandmaster chess, and on the other was former world's champion Max Euwe, a Dutch mathematician who insisted that no machine could be programmed to handle the ideas.

Time seemed to side with the computer advocates, because although the number of permutations was astronomical, miniaturization and other technological advances could overcome the problem. (Even Botvinnic had conceded that given then current technology a computer would have had to be larger than the University of Moscow.)

Recently, Fischer had offered to play the machines in a Chicago computer chess tournament. He was denied permission, he said, because he was too strong. Although the most advanced machine — the MIT computer — was below grandmaster, Fischer believed that someday the computer would solve the game.

And yet, although sounding the death knell of this ancient and revered game,

Bobby was optimistic about the future of human play: "Just because cars can do it in less than a minute doesn't mean we

stop running the mile."

This observation, which I accepted at the time, while pitiful, seems flawed on reflection. It was consistent with Fischer's insistence that chess was a sport. When asked what he would have done if he hadn't been a chess player, he had replied "I don't know, probably an athlete of some sort. Chess is a sport; people and newspapers should treat it as one."

Yet it seems to me that although physical conditioning may be important for best play, chess is not ultimately a sport. It is, rather a game, whose best play requires the body not to get in the way of the mind which becomes free to choose a move whose perfect execution, once chosen, is automatic. A sport, on the other hand, requires a physical execution, a performance which is often indeterminate. "Many a slip twixt the cup and the lip" is true in basketball and golf, but not in chess. True sport has two components: the game in the sport and the performance of the sport. In short, in a sport, but not in chess, seeing the right move and executing it are two separate challenges.

Therefore, it seems to me that if chess is solved by a computer, it is destroyed. Fischer's racing car analogy would be more apt if steering and endurance, imperfections in human reaction, were somehow eliminated. Presently, before the machine has solved chess, the indeterminacy, the life of this grand human endeavor, is not in the execution of the moves but in the evolution of the plan.

Fischer's racing car analogy, by which he expressed belief in the permanent grandeur of imperfect human intellectual effort, even after the game became a science. "Any sport is part science," And Fischer, more than some other grandmasters, took a very scientific approach to chess. Those who take a psychological approach will make theoretically bad moves when they feel the result will adequately annoy, puzzle, fool, or unnerve their opponents. Emanuel Lasker, an all time chess great, although not one of Fischer's favorites, was reputed to have

played his opponents' personalities. But not Fischer: "I play my own game. I won't play a bad move because I think my opponent doesn't like it."

Furthermore, he did not become emotionally involved in the contest: "It's not good for your game to hate the person while you're playing him." Instead Fischer focuses upon the possibilities inherent in the position. This was Fischer's brand of chess — scientific, objective, and most easily rendered obsolete by machine generated perfect play.

Did Fischer have any weaknesses? Many chess devotees, including grandmasters I interviewed, replied almost as one: "none whatsoever." Bobby was more modest: "I have weak points, but if I revealed them it might help the Russians." Pressed further, he admitted his weaknesses were only relative, and that he was a well balanced player. He did feel himself strongest in the openings, and capable of calculating *ad hoc* any endgame position.

It was generally felt that all possible theoretical work had been done on the endgame and that advantage lay in speed and accuracy of calculation at which Fischer was unequalled. The source of his genius was not clear. Some said it was his ability to perform the thousands of minute calculations necessary. Detractors attribute this ability to a discipline stemming from a deep but narrow vision — tunnel vision. Others said it was his genius of extracting life and tension from apparently sterile, fixed positions. Fischer denied he had a photographic memory, "but I never forget a face."

Nor apparently did he forget a game. I had memorized some of his games which I found most appealing. I set up key positions and asked Fischer to recount as he had thought on those occasions. He instantly issued a stream of consciousness. It was thrilling to hear, and amazing how he could fully remember past positions at request. He even pointed out inferior moves he'd made. But while he narrated his thoughts, something was missing. What were his visions? I wanted him to abstract from it all: "What do you see?" Over and again I asked him this, and he brushed it off. "I'm telling you," or "I don't know." Finally, as we were walking

back to his hotel room, out of the blue he turned to me and unsolicited asked: "You want to know what I see? I don't know ... like motion ... pieces in motion..."

I pressed him: what did that mean?

After much prodding he revealed that when he looked at a position he saw simultaneously radiating from the present configuration, all the ways all the pieces could move. It was to him, as William James has characterized experience itself, a blooming buzzing confusion. Amidst the radiating beehive of all potential moving lines of force, one strong pattern, one scene momentarily appeared. The challenge then was to figure out a route by which this position could be reached, and to check for hidden perils along the way.

In short, where some of us see stasis: pieces in position, occupying squares — Fischer saw moving flitting potential.

For me, this was the highlight of our time together. Preparing to say goodbye, I asked him what he would like to be remembered as. Fischer answered emphatically without hesitation: "The man who broke the myth of the Soviet Superman." And what had he given to Chess? He paused, shrugged, and with all due gentleness said, "a lot of good games. That's about all."

## EPILOGUE

It has been more than ten years since Bobby Fischer won the world's championship from Boris Spassky at their dramatic confrontation in Iceland. Since then Fischer has not met his great expectations. He has not pushed human comprehension ever closer to solving a mystery of its own creation. Three years after winning the championship, he forfeited his title, refusing to play. Thus he had not only not fulfilled his promise, but for me personally it was sorely disappointing as he had broken his promises, making a mockery of our time together during which he had declared "I'd like to play at least 150 games a year" as world champion, to take on all comers, and break open the closed system he hated and yet surmounted.

And so, struck by the paradox of this genius who is at once shy and brash, trusting and suspicious, directing conversation away from himself to me, yet egotistical, sleeping 9-10 hours a day, yet athletic and energetic, I too wonder why.

And as a lover of the game I can only fantasize that somehow this account reaches Fischer, and spurs him out of retirement, to beat the Russians and reach his full greatness.

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