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## Enigma of Missing Chess Genius

# Bobby Fischer—Will He Ever Make a Move Again?

By BELLA STUMBO, *Times Staff Writer*

It is the sort of yarn, complete with lurid rumors and wild clues, to rival the tale of Howard Hughes. Turning his back on fame and a multimillion-dollar fortune, former world chess champion Bobby Fischer dropped out of sight nearly 10 years ago. Reporters, attorneys, bill collectors, fans and other assorted sleuths have been on his trail ever since. In vain. Fischer left almost no trace.

But, in chess circles, the legend of Bobby Fischer, generally considered the greatest chess mind of all time, remains passionately alive.

Wherever two or more serious chess players are gathered, the latest Fischer gossip will be routinely exchanged, his greatest moves reverently replayed—and, inevitably, the wistful, wishful question will arise: Will Fischer, who became the first (and only) American to win the world champi-

onship, in 1972, ever play chess in public again?

Generally speaking, nobody thinks so. On the other hand, now that hundreds of dedicated chess players and reporters from throughout the world are converging on Pasadena for this weekend's scheduled U.S. Open Tournament and the world championship semifinals, a few dreamers admit to visions of Bobby Fischer walking through the door.

Pasadena, after all, is known as Fischer's general hideout—even skeptics vividly remember the chess player in another Pasadena tournament a few years ago who swore that, while the games were under way, Fischer was sitting in a coffee shop next door, disguised in a trench coat, dark glasses, beard and slouch hat. When the dumbfounded fan approached, Fischer reportedly

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# FISCHER: Chess World Waits for His Next Move

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got up and ran.

It is not improbable. Stranger stories about Fischer have been told. According to former friends and others in a position to know, his current life style is unorthodox, not to say bizarre.

He uses an alias, he doesn't drive, he has no phone, almost no money and only one remaining friend, a Pasadena matron, who allegedly censors his mail, pays his rent and is the only person who always knows where he lives. He reportedly has spent the last decade living in the basement of her comfortable hillside home, in assorted cheap Pasadena apartments and, occasionally, in fleabag hotels in downtown Los Angeles.

Secretive to the point of paranoia, Fischer, a bachelor, does not date for fear of treachery, and he has angrily cut off his handful of former chess friends, one by one, because, they say, they made the mistake of discussing him, however superficially, with the press. Fischer reportedly still suspects that he may be under Soviet surveillance and possibly the object of a KGB assassination attempt. It is a concern that he has nursed ever since his triumph over Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union in 1972.

Fischer has never been fond of reporters. Even before he went into total hiding, he routinely cursed, threatened and sometimes threw rocks at them. Once Fischer was forced to settle out of court with a Pasadena journalist who claimed she was assaulted by Fischer after he broke into her apartment.

## Unorthodox Pattern

According to Cerritos Junior High School history teacher Ron Gross, 47, the last of Fischer's old friends to see him (on a fishing trip to Mexico more than a year ago this summer), Fischer's day is (or was) most recently divided among three obsessions: physical fitness, chess and a political philosophy which holds that the world is run by a secret world government controlled by Jews and centered in Moscow.

He goes to bed at dawn, sleeps until noon, then works out, either in a gym or in his apartment, according to Gross. His apartment is littered with chess books, bags of fresh oranges, vitamin jars and a wide array of Indian herbal medicines. Fischer carries a stash of these health aides (and sometimes a juice squeezer too) with him wherever he goes. He distrusts doctors and, consequently, refuses to have three large, hairy moles on his face removed.

He then spends the rest of the day alone, playing chess with himself, browsing through old bookstores for conspiracy novels and chess books—and researching his political theories in public libraries. Fischer's political theories now apparently fascinate him even more than chess. According to published reports, he has been spotted, in his trench coat disguise, skulking through a public parking lot in Pasadena at night, distributing leaflets he wrote, warning against the "Hidden Hand of a Satanic Secret World Government."

"Bobby's so right-wing he's fascist," Gross said. Fischer's political Bible is an anti-Semitic tome called "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," he has a prized selection of Hitler pictures, regularly refers to Jews as "kikes" and "Jew-bastards," and has an only slightly higher opinion of blacks, according to Gross.

## Sense of Humor Cited

But Fischer, whose mother is Jewish, accepts Jews on an individual basis, adds Gross, Jewish himself. "Bobby says we're all victims of the conspiracy." Seemingly torn between embarrassment and pride, Gross said he chauffeured Fischer to Nazi-oriented bookstores.

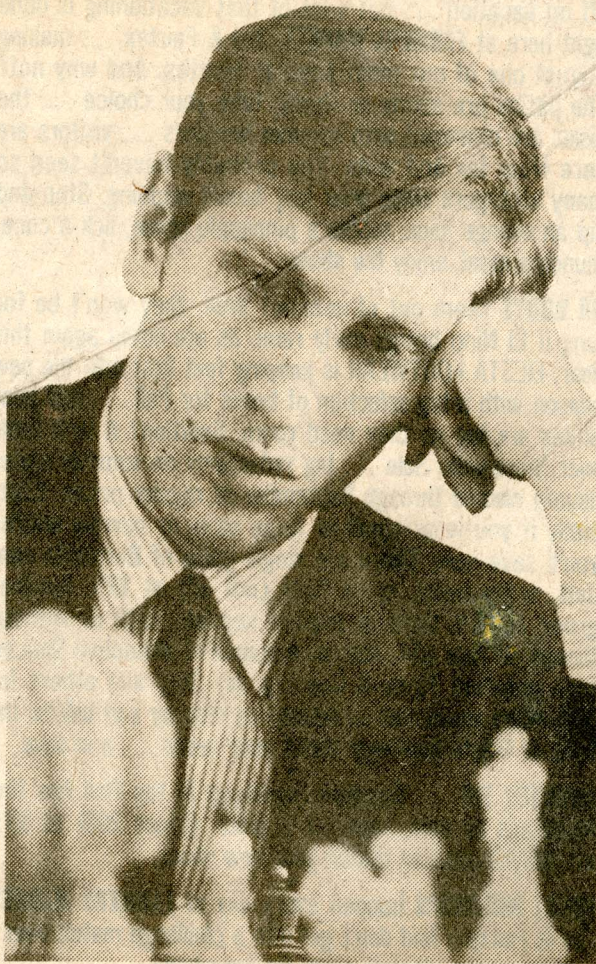
Gross also took Fischer on an all-expense-paid fishing trip to Mexico last year. When he later discussed it with a chess journalist, he promptly joined the list of Fischer's ex-friends. "He was convinced I got paid for the interview. I think that's what made him angrier than anything else," Gross said. He has not heard from Fischer since.

He doesn't seem to care. "I like Bobby, he's got a good sense of humor, he can be a lot of fun when he's not raving about his political theories. But that's his favorite subject. And he's loud when you disagree with him, he's embarrassing in restaurants."

Ruth Harring and her husband, Peter Biyiasas, both chess personalities from San Jose, also tired of entertaining Fischer when he visited their home for several days about 18 months ago. Rarities among Fischer's former friends, they did not wait to be dropped—they asked him to leave. The chess community is still buzzing over it.

Fischer was dominating too much of their time while she and her husband tried to attend school and hold down jobs, Harring said. But, she wanted to make it clear—she likes Fischer and thinks his image as an eccentric is exaggerated.

"I don't think he's any stranger than my own husband. Chess personalities in general are introverted,



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Chess genius Fischer pondering a move . . .

they don't deal with social relationships well. But there's nothing *wrong* with him, he's certainly not crazy," Harring said. "He goes to movies and bars, he likes music. When he was here, he played chess with us (Fischer always won), he even played chess with a neighbor's little girl one afternoon. And he seemed to be having fun."

Harring does not think Fischer is as financially strapped as people think, either. When he visited her home, she said, "He seemed to have plenty of money for movies and restaurants. Maybe he invested some of the money he won or he still gets some royalties from his books."

Despite his obsession with anonymity, Harring said, Fischer once seemed openly flattered when a stranger recognized him in public. "With Fischer, it's hard sometimes to say if he's serious or just putting you on," she said. "But, still, my general feeling is that what he would *really* like is to get married and have a family, just be a normal, ordinary human being."

## Blames It on Friends

Harring allowed that Fischer does express some "pretty wild views." But, she added, sounding disgusted, "I think some of his old friends have encouraged him, just goaded him on. I can't tell whether he really believes all that stuff or, as I said, is just using it for shock effect, putting people on."

Either way, as both Harring and Gross agree, Fischer, when last seen, was teaching himself to type because, he told them, he plans to write two books: one on chess, but, first, a full-length volume he sees as infinitely more important, sharing his political views.

Since then, Fischer the would-be author has been warming up. In his first word to the world in years, he has written a 14-page booklet entitled, "I Was Tortured in the Pasadena Jailhouse!" At least, the booklet says in a loosely scrawled signature at the end that it was written, published and copyrighted by one "Robert D. James (professionally known as Robert J. Fischer or Bobby Fischer, The World Chess Champion)."

Festively packed in a bright red and white candy-striped cover (perhaps intended to represent cell bars), the booklet purports to be a factual account of Fischer's two-day experience with police when he was mistakenly identified as an escaping bank robber and arrested on a Pasadena street corner in May, 1981. The language is simple but Fischer's message is dramatically grim, containing such passages as these:

*Of course my suffering in this (cell) was completely horrendous and unbearable, being still stripped stark naked as I was. My body and flesh are still in pain and agony from this gruesome and cruel experience as I write these lines about 8 to 10 days later. I was left in there to freeze to death or die from exposure.*

Fischer also complains that he didn't get enough to

eat and that his cell was in an intolerable location above city traffic.

*At about noontime the room became extremely noisy from the street traffic, Fischer writes, and by any standards, the decibel level was such as could easily cause permanent hearing damage. . . . And of course . . . the smog level was even worse than normal.*

The Pasadena Police Department is not impressed with Fischer's first apparently serious literary effort. Although police spokesmen do say it is not department policy to starve, torture or cause prisoners to walk around naked in their jail, the city attorney has advised against any comment. But, said Sgt. Tom Oldfield, it is public record that Fischer was originally charged with obstructing an officer and was arrested because he persistently refused to state his name, occupation or address. (As Fischer partially explains in his booklet, he didn't *know* his address.) He was finally released, police say, as a John Doe—but not until he was also charged with destroying a jailhouse mattress and fined \$40.

Meantime, Fischer's booklet, being distributed for \$1 per copy by his Pasadena woman friend, is a best-seller in the chess world. Local clubs are doing a brisk business selling it to fans starved for any word from the great Bobby Fischer, and the U.S. Chess Federation in New York has been buying copies in lots, then giving them away to members.

## Born in Chicago

Fischer is now 40 years old, wherever he is. And, although a few former acquaintances may insist that Fischer is perfectly sane and probably even happy with his current, isolated life style, most people only remember the career that was thrown away, the lost genius and former American hero, temperamental and always outrageously arrogant, dazzling the world in his days of glory.

And glorified days they were, almost from the time Robert James Fischer was born in Chicago on March 9, 1943, second child of a German father, a doctor, who left home when the boy was 2, and a Jewish, politically active, leftist mother who then moved her family to Brooklyn and, in middle age, went back to school to become a physician herself. Fischer's father has not been heard from since, his mother now lives in England and his older sister, Joan, who resides in Northern California, does not discuss her brother.

It was she, however, who dictated the course of Fischer's life when she gave him his first chess set for his 6th birthday. By the time Fischer was 12, he was spending most of his time at the Brooklyn and Manhattan chess clubs and being called a chess genius. At 14, he quit high school and won the U.S. chess championship, a title he held for the next decade.

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. . . and seeming to rue another in 1972.



# FISCHER: A Cold Trail Littered With Rumors

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excluding one year when he was apparently too bored to compete.

At 15, he became the youngest international grandmaster on record. Within the next decade, he established himself as perhaps the greatest chess mind of all time.

And, in 1972, to the surprise of no one, he defeated Russian champion Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland, to become the first American world chess champion.

It was the most-publicized, politically charged match in chess history. Partly because Fischer broke the traditional Soviet hold on world championship chess—and partly because Bobby Fischer behaved like Bobby Fischer.

Always unpredictable, stubborn and volatile, Fischer literally outdid himself in Iceland. As the world looked on with amusement, indignation and increasing interest, he complained unrelentingly about everything from television cameras, the size of chess boards, Soviet tactics and tournament rules to the paltry size of the winner's purse—which was increased at the 11th hour by a wealthy British chess patron to \$156,000, then unprecedented in chess.

Fischer was not appeased. He continued to sulk in his hotel room, refusing to play until every last one of his demands was met. Friends pleaded with him. Match officials wrung their hands. The Soviets

fumed. Henry Kissinger, then President Richard M. Nixon's national security adviser, called Fischer to convey the U.S. government's high hopes and best wishes.

(Lina Grumette, one of Fischer's former friends and president of a Los Angeles chess club, was in Fischer's room when Kissinger called. "Bobby wasn't the least bit impressed. He was just annoyed that the phone rang while he was trying to rest.")

Before the match, the Soviets, generally considered masters at psychological warfare over the chess board, were howling that Fischer's tantrums were wrecking Spassky's peace of mind.

Americans loved it. During the two-month match, Fischer became an overnight folk hero, symbol of rugged American individualism pitted against the mighty Soviet chess machine. People who didn't know the difference between a pawn and a queen avidly followed the daily match results until Fischer scored his final, slashing win. Nationally, sales of chess sets soared.

When Fischer returned from Iceland, commercial offers worth nearly \$10 million reportedly awaited his consideration. So many members of the world's rich, powerful and royal elite lined up to woo him, so the story goes, that he once refused to be personally photographed with Monaco's Prince Rainier at a star-studded gala on the French

Riviera for fear of appearing to play favorites. The chess world, historical orphan of the sports world, handmaiden even to bridge, basked happily in its newfound limelight.

The glow, of course, barely lasted. Returning from Iceland, Fischer hardly toyed with his newfound celebrity and he refused to play professional or tournament chess again. Instead, he vanished into the close, protective fold of Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God in Pasadena where he promptly tithed \$61,000 of his prize money while he awaited, along with the rest of the faithful, for Christ to return in 1975 as Armstrong had predicted.

## Time to Defend Title

If Christ was not on schedule, the 1975 world chess championship match was. It was time for Fischer, already a near-total recluse, to come out of hiding and defend his title against another Soviet, Anatoly Karpov. Fischer refused.

Deadlocked in yet another quarrel with the World Chess Federation (FIDE) over tournament rules, Fischer furiously (and, some say, spitefully) chose to forfeit his title to Karpov, rather than give in. Not incidentally, he also passed up a whopping winner's purse of nearly \$3 million that President Ferdinand Marcos had mustered in order to lure the world match to the Philippines. (Marcos subsequently in-

vested his money in the Ali-Frazier fight.)

Fischer then withdrew for good. But he did not return to church. When Christ didn't return, Fischer was incensed that Armstrong did not at least apologize. He did not like the sex and financial scandals that had begun to swirl around Armstrong and his son either. In a published interview with a group of church dissidents in 1976, he accused the church of not only stealing his money but his mind too.

"Our mind is all we've got. Not that it won't lead us astray sometimes, but we still have to analyze things out within ourselves," Fischer concluded. It was his last voluntary utterance to anyone even remotely connected with the press. (Later, Fischer even denied that, filing a \$3.2-million lawsuit against the publication. It went the way of Fischer's almost habitual lawsuits against the press, unsettled, in part, because he usually argued with his attorneys and fired them before his case got off the ground.)

To this day, Fischer reportedly harbors a resentment and distrust toward both the Worldwide Church of God and the World Chess Federation that bears no parallel, not even to the secret world government controlled by Jews that he apparently so fears.

Said his former friend Gross: "Of course Bobby blew it, professionally, with the Karpov match, let's face

it—but I don't think *he'll* ever face it. He told me he has no regrets, and that he will never play in tournament chess again. If he ever does make a comeback, I think it will be in privately sponsored matches."

## Speculates About Fear

Echoing the thoughts of many others who once knew Fischer, Gross also guesses that, principles and stubbornness aside, Fischer is probably also privately afraid to play professional chess anymore.

"What if he loses? Now, he knows his place in history will always be No. 1. He'll always be the world champion. My guess is he's afraid of tarnishing his reputation. Anyway, I don't think Bobby will ever play *anywhere* unless every single one of his demands is met—whatever they are. If you know Bobby, you know he'd starve to death before he would give in and admit he's wrong."

Apparently so.

According to Lina Grumette, who regularly passes on business propositions to Fischer through his Pasadena intermediary, his "demands" are becoming more unreasonable every year. In the first place, Grumette said, Fischer suspects that any deal is somehow going to financially benefit the sponsor more than him, a prospect that his ego evidently will not abide.

And Fischer's ego is obviously as healthy as ever. "I can tell you this, he's passed up hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars in offers," Grumette said. "He never thinks he's getting paid enough for risking his reputation. So he always

changes his mind at the last minute and makes ridiculous demands for more money. Once, for instance around six years ago, we had a deal arranged with Ceasars Palace in Las Vegas (an exhibition match) and he was going to get \$250,000 *just* in an appearance fee. He's always liked Las Vegas and Ceasars Palace in particular, so I thought, 'Great! *This* time we've got him, it's all set. But, at the last minute, he called up and said he wouldn't do it unless he got \$1 million! It annoyed the *hell* out of me."

Now, Grumette said, she seldom even forwards an offer to Fischer—who insists that all mail to him be formally addressed to "Bobby Fischer, World Chess Champion," Grumette said.

## Heavier Demands

"Besides that," she added with a wry smile, "he's now also apparently demanding \$1,000 just to *open* a letter."

For a man who turned his back on millions, Fischer's apparent greed is inexplicable to everyone who has come in contact with him in the last decade.

"It is a pity, what has happened to Fischer, that he is so afraid to come out," said Soviet defector Viktor Korchnoi, 52, a semifinalist in the world chess championship. "I saw him, maybe six years ago, and we talked. It was very pleasant—but he would not play chess with me," Korchnoi said, shaking his head. "He is still the very best brain in chess, he can beat *anybody*, I think.

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