

Queen of the Chess Devotees

This is the sixth of nine profiles on Times Women of the Year for 1966.

BY LYNN LILLISTON
Times Staff Writer

Times Woman of the Year Jacqueline Piatigorsky is not the best person to ask about her own numerous talents.

But her husband, the famed cellist, is not so hesitant to sing her praises. Talking modestly about her work, Mrs. Piatigorsky sat in the drawing room of her Brentwood home, and when she heard her husband come down the stairway she whistled their signal, the first notes of the Dvorak concerto for the cello.

Gregor Piatigorsky ambled in and paid his wife an impromptu but eloquent tribute, beginning, "Ahhh, Jacqueline."

"You see, she has never stopped in this last 30 years intriguing me as much or more than when we first met," he said. "There's always something new, always something surprising in a creative sense. She paints, of course, but she's creative even musically. If you listen to her she'll say that she never was anything. The most embarrassing thing on earth is to say anything complimentary in her presence. She never seems to take it well."

Incognito

"Years ago I lacked a contemporary piece for my recitals, so I complained to her that I needed something romantic in character and written well for the cello. I returned from a trip and very shyly she showed me a manuscript. I played it and I really loved the piece that she composed for me. I wanted to list her name on the program but she protested so enormously that it was listed under a nom de plume. I played it in France, England and New York and people were always asking, 'Who is that composer with the French name?' And I could not tell them it was my wife. Even today the name would be recognized if I told you."

"She's also a marvelous accompanist on the piano, does it all from



MRS. GREGOR PIATIGORSKY ... "a professional approach" to all she does.
Times photo by Nelson Tiffany

memory. And she wouldn't tell you that in France they call her the longest woman in golf—she hits the longest ball.

"She keeps the family in suspense, you know. When the children were little, they would say, 'Tell us, Father, can't you do anything but play

the cello? You don't even drive a car. Look at Mother. She can pilot a plane and drive a car. She taught us swimming and tennis. She can repair a watch, she paints, she is the best handyman in the house, she plays chess.'

"That's how I finally decided to take driving lessons," Piatigorsky

said, "so I could do one more thing than just play the cello."

"Her many gifts," he reflected. "One thing I can tell you is that she has a professional approach to whatever she is doing. Once she does something it has the professional quality, including cooking."

"Oh, now," interrupted Mrs. Piatigorsky. "I really don't. Once in a while it's fun to make something tasty."

Her husband's ultimate compliment was yet to come.

"If someone were to ask me what would be the worst thing that could happen, I would say without hesitation, 'To disappoint my wife.' It makes me never stop trying to be right, it keeps me perhaps progressing."

The enduring romance of the Piatigorskys began in Paris in the 30s, when the young musician met the slim dark-eyed daughter of the House of Rothschild, the international banking family. The young-married Piatigorskys moved to Elizabethtown, N.Y., where their two children grew up, and settled in Los Angeles in 1949.

For her part, what is it like to be the wife of a man called great and a genius? Is it difficult?

Chess Master

"Yes and no," Mrs. Piatigorsky said. "A person is not difficult just because he has talent. What is difficult is the profession, so much travel, playing in a different place every day. It's especially difficult when the children are small; one doesn't want to abandon them. When he did get home, he was pretty tired. It was never what one would call a normal life, but there was a lot of adventure, a lot of excitement."

It was during the years in Elizabethtown when Piatigorsky was away so much that his wife developed her talents, many of them solitary, such as painting, learning the bassoon and playing chess by mail.

Now high ranked in U.S. women's chess, Mrs. Piatigorsky first learned the game during a long recuperation from a childhood illness. Lacking chess-playing cronies in Elizabethtown, she took up the patience-trying postal chess, in which each move is mailed to the opponent on a postcard. Then he sends his move back. One game may take a year.

In Los Angeles she found live opponents at last, came close to winning the U.S. women's championship and founded the Piatigorsky Foundation to promote the game.

Last July, Mrs. Piatigorsky brought new and world prestige to U.S. chess as sponsor of the Piatigorsky Tournament held in Santa Monica. She brought together 10 of the best players in what has been called "the most brilliant gathering of grand masters in U.S. chess history" and "the strongest collection of

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chess players ever convened."

Calm and professional, Mrs. Piatigorsky saw the tournament through from start to finish, even to the point of vacuuming the hotel's ballroom carpeting herself when she discovered it had been overlooked. She also financed the tournament, putting up \$20,000 in prize money and reaching into her ever-present handbag to dole out another estimated \$40,000 for players' expenses and to pay the bills.

Mrs. Piatigorsky was a little taken aback that the competition for the Piatigorsky Cup ended up with 10 players instead of eight.

"It's difficult with the Russians," she said. "First the two Russian players said they couldn't come so I got two other players. Then the Russians said they could come after all."

She was pleased with the outcome — Russian Boris Spassky was the eventual winner, but American Bobby Fischer was second.

"The United States really needed this tournament," Mrs. Piatigorsky said. "Fischer almost made it, and it certainly increased U.S. prestige in world chess. I'm still receiving requests for bulletins from absolutely everywhere, even as far away as Peru."

She plans to sponsor the tournament every three years. In the meantime the foundation has created the Student Chess Club of Los Angeles, which is run by the youngsters themselves. They meet for play every Saturday morning.

The Piatigorskys live simply in a walled garden in Brentwood, enjoying their house with its Monets, Renoirs and Modiglianis, its sculptures and collections of chess pieces from all over the world.

Despite their own achievements, their greatest pride is in their children, Jephtha—Mrs. Daniel Drachman of Boston, the mother of three little boys—and Joram, who is working on his Ph.D. in biology at Caltech.