

END GAME

**BOBBY
FISCHER'S**

Remarkable Rise
and Fall—
from America's
Brightest Prodigy
to the Edge
of Madness



FRANK BRADY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



AS SOMEONE WHO knew Bobby Fischer from the time he was quite young, I've been asked hundreds of times, "What was Bobby Fischer *really* like?" This book is an attempt to answer that question. But a warning to those who turn these pages: Paradoxes abound. Bobby was secretive, yet candid; generous, yet parsimonious; naive, yet well informed; cruel, yet kind; religious, yet heretical. His games were filled with charm and beauty and significance. His outrageous pronouncements were filled with cruelty and prejudice and hate. And though for a period of decades he poured most of his energy and passion into a quest for chess excellence, he was not the idiot savant often portrayed by the press.

As Virginia Woolf observed in her one attempt at writing a life story, that of artist Roger Fry: "A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as one thousand." Many lives, and then second and even third acts, constitute the drama of Bobby Fischer, but my attempt here was to delineate just *one* of Fischer's kaleidoscopic personalities—that of a genius, an inwardly tortured warrior—and within that framework to capture his shifting identities and roles. The renowned psychologist Alfred Binet noted that if we could look inside the mind of a chess player we would see there "a whole world of feelings, images, ideas, emotions and passions." And so it was with Bobby: His head was not merely filled with chess bytes, phantom computer connections on a grid of sixty-four squares, but with poetry and song and lyricism.

I ask forgiveness for my occasional speculations in this book, but Fischer's motivations beg to be understood; and when conjecture is used, I inform the reader of my doing so. To vivify Bobby's extraordinary life I sometimes use the techniques of the novelist: elaboration of setting, magnification of detail,



fragments of dialogue, and revelation of interior states. But always my use of those devices is based on my research, recollection, and study of the man. I want readers—whether they play chess or not—to feel as though they're sitting next to Bobby, on *his* side of the chessboard, or in the privacy of his home, experiencing the rush of his triumphs, the pain of his defeats, and the venom of his anger.

I've been following Bobby Fischer's life story from the first time we met—at a chess tournament when he was a child and I was a teen—all the way to his grave in the remote and windswept countryside of Iceland. Over the years we played hundreds of games together, dined in Greenwich Village restaurants, traveled to tournaments, attended dinner parties, and walked the streets of Manhattan for hours on end. He was light-years ahead of me in chess ability, but despite the yawning gap that separated us, we found ways to bond. I knew his family and had many talks about Bobby with his mother.

Though Bobby and I were friends, with a tempestuous relationship that remained on for years and eventually was off, I was also a privileged *official* witness to his greatness. As a director of one of the first rated tournaments he played in as a child, I noted his steadfastness. As an arbiter when he accomplished his historic 11–0 clean sweep at the 1963–64 U.S. Championship tournament, I stood by his board and observed his pride of accomplishment. And as the initial arbiter for Bobby when he was banned from traveling to Cuba for the Havana International Tournament and forced to play remotely by Teletype entry, I spent hours alone with him in a closed room of the Marshall Chess Club, watching how his deep concentration was being compromised by fatigue.

Although *Endgame* includes many incidents to which I was an eyewitness or in which I participated, the book is not in any way my memoir, and I've tried to remain invisible as much as possible. Through original research, analysis of documents and letters heretofore untapped, and hundreds of interviews over the years with people who knew or had a different perspective on Bobby, I've tried to capture the story of how he not only transformed himself, but also how, through a mysterious alchemy, he affected the image and status of chess in the minds of millions. And also how, unexpectedly, he saw his life become intertwined with the Cold War.

Mainly as a result of Bobby's charisma and his widely publicized con-



tretemps, his winning the World Championship created more furor and attention—and more awareness of the game by the general public—than any other chess event in history. Bobby had an uneasy relationship with his extraordinary celebrity and ultimately grew to despise it. It was the public's intrusive gaze that caused him, in later years, to lead a determinedly reclusive, almost hermetic life.

For this book, I obtained access to portions of the KGB and FBI files on Bobby and his mother; the files not only provided me with insights but also with specific information that corrects previously published versions of Bobby's life (including my own).

In the course of researching *Endgame*, I came across an autobiographical essay—never published—that Bobby wrote when he was in his teens, rough-hewn for sure, but introspective nevertheless, which in many ways gave the “story behind the story” of his life at that time, especially how he viewed his ascent and how he was treated by various chess organizations. Information that I found in this essay helped to rectify existing misconceptions. In addition, I obtained access to the personal archives of his chess mentor, Jack Collins, and of Bobby's mother, Regina Fischer. These invaluable troves of letters, photos, and clippings have been an important source for this book. Reading a letter from Bobby to Jack Collins, written decades ago, is almost like bringing Bobby back to life.

Whether one admires or despises Bobby Fischer—and it's quite easy to do both simultaneously, as these pages will show—I hope that his story proves that while he was a deeply troubled soul, he was also a serious and great artist, one who had a passion to *know*.

We may not—and perhaps *should* not—forgive Bobby Fischer's twisted political and antireligious assaults, but we should never forget his sheer brilliance on the chessboard. After reading this biography, I would suggest that the reader look to, and study, his games—the true testament to who he was, and his ultimate legacy.



Loneliness to Passion



I CAN'T BREATHE! I can't breathe!" Bobby Fischer's screams were muffled by the black hood tied tightly around his head. He felt as if he were suffocating, near death. He shook his head furiously to loosen the covering.

Two Japanese security guards were holding him down on the floor of the brightly lit cell, one sitting on his back and pinning his arms to his sides, the other holding his legs—Lilliputians atop the fallen Gulliver. Bobby's lungs were being compressed, and he couldn't get enough air. His right arm felt as if it had been broken from the scuffle that had happened moments before; he was bleeding from the mouth.

So this is how I'll die, he thought. Will anyone ever know the truth about how I was murdered?

He pondered in the darkness, incredulous that a supposedly revoked passport had turned him into a prisoner. The scenario had evolved rapidly. It was July 13, 2004. After spending three months in Japan, he was about to embark for the Philippines. He'd arrived at Tokyo's Narita Airport about two hours before his flight. At the ticket counter, an immigration officer had routinely checked his passport, entering the number: Z7792702. A discreet bell sounded and a red light began to flash slowly. "Please take a seat, Mr. Fischer, until we can check this out."

Bobby was concerned but not yet frightened. He'd been traveling for twelve years between Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Germany, the Philippines, Japan, Austria, and other countries, clearing customs and crossing borders without incident. Extra pages had to be added to his passport because there



was no room left to stamp the dates of his entries and exits, but this task had already been completed at the American embassy in Bern, Switzerland, in November 2003.

His worry was that the U.S. government might finally have caught up with him. He'd violated State Department economic sanctions against Yugoslavia by playing a \$5 million chess match against Boris Spassky in Sveti Stefan, Montenegro, in 1992, and an arrest warrant had been issued at that time. If he went back to the United States, he'd have to stand trial, and the penalty, if he was convicted, would be anywhere from ten years in prison to \$250,000 in fines, or both. A friend had called the State Department in the late 1990s and asked if Bobby could return home. "Of course he can," said the spokesperson, "but as soon as he lands at JFK, we'll nail him." As a man without a country, Bobby eventually chose to settle in Hungary, and he had never heard another word from the American government. With twelve years having passed, he figured that as long as he stayed away from the United States, he'd be safe.

He sat where he was told, but fear began to take hold. Eventually, an immigration official asked Bobby to accompany him downstairs. "But I'll miss my flight." "We *know* that" was the peremptory reply. Escorted by security guards down a long, dark, and narrow hallway, Bobby demanded to know what was going on. "We just want to talk to you," the official said. "Talk about what?" Bobby demanded. "We just talk" was the answer. Bobby stopped and refused to move. A translator was called in to make sure there was no confusion. Bobby spoke to him in English and Spanish. More security guards arrived, until approximately fifteen men surrounded the former chess champion in a grim, silent circle.

Finally, another official appeared and showed Bobby an arrest warrant, stating that he was traveling on an invalid passport and that he was under arrest. Bobby insisted that his passport was perfectly legal and had two and a half years to go before it expired. "You may call a representative of the U.S. embassy to assist you," he was told. Bobby shook his head. "The U.S. embassy is the problem, not the solution," he muttered. His fear was that a State Department representative might show up at the airport with a court order and try to have him extradited back to the United States to stand trial.



He wanted to call one of his Japanese chess friends for help, but Immigration denied him access to a phone.

Bobby turned and started to walk away. He was blocked by a guard. Another guard tried to handcuff him, and he started twisting and turning to thwart the process. Several of the guards began hitting him with batons and pummeling him with their fists. He fought back, kicking and screaming, and he managed to bite one of the guards on the arm. Eventually, he went down. A half dozen guards hoisted him into the air and began carrying him by his arms and legs. Bobby continued squirming to get loose as the guards struggled to take him to an unknown destination. He kicked frantically, almost yanking his hands free. It was then that they put the black hood over his head.

Since Bobby knew that his passport was valid, what was going on? His comments about Jews and the crimes of the United States had stirred things up, but as an American citizen wasn't he protected by the First Amendment? Anyway, how could his opinions have anything to do with his passport?

Maybe it was the taxes. Ever since his unsuccessful 1976 suit against *Life* magazine and one of its writers for violation of a contract, he'd been so disgusted with the jurisprudence system that he refused to pay any taxes.

Gasping for air, Bobby tried to enter a Zen state to clear his mind. He stopped resisting and his body became relaxed. The guards noticed the change. They released his arms and legs, stood up, ceremoniously removed the hood, then left the cell. They'd taken his shoes, his belt, his wallet, and—much to his dismay—the buffalo-leather passport case that he'd bought in Vienna years back. But he was alive . . . at least for the moment.

When he looked up, he saw a nondescript man with a video camera quietly filming him through the bars. After a few minutes the man vanished. Bobby spit out a piece of a tooth that had been chipped, either from one of the punches or when he was thrown to the floor. He put the remnants in his pocket.

Lying on the cold cement floor, he felt his arm throb with pain. What was the next move and who would make it? He drifted off to sleep.



Forty-eight years earlier, August 1956

Visualizing his white pawn two squares in front of his king on an imaginary chessboard, thirteen-year-old Bobby Fischer announced his first move to his opponent, Jack Collins: “Pawn to king four.” Bobby was using a form of chess notation that described the movement of the pieces to various squares. As he spoke, he made a slight, unconscious movement of his head, an almost imperceptible nod, as if pushing the unseen pawn forward.

Collins, a diminutively proportioned man whose stunted legs had left him unable to walk, was propelled in a wheelchair along the crowded New York City street by a black manservant named Odell. The man was so strong that, in the days before handicap ramps, he could lift Collins and the chair all at once—up and down the stairs of homes or restaurants. Odell never talked much, but he was friendly and fiercely loyal to Collins, and from the time he met Bobby he’d felt a deep affection for the young boy.

Walking next to Collins was his slightly younger sister, Ethel, a plump but pretty registered nurse who was almost always by his side. She adored her brother and gave up everything—even marriage—to care for him. Although Jack and Ethel had just met Bobby that summer, they were fast becoming parental substitutes for him.

The Fellini-esque quartet spoke in an arcane language and made references to people with feudal titles who lived centuries ago. As they walked the long Brooklyn block from Lenox Road and Bedford Avenue to sometimes clamorous Flatbush Avenue, they attracted the curiosity of passersby. But they were unembarrassed, involved in a world of their own, one that bridged many continents and thousands of years and was inhabited by kings and courtiers, rajahs and princes. The group’s destination was the Silver Moon Chinese restaurant.

“Pawn to queen bishop four,” responded Collins in a basso profundo that could be heard across the street.

Just as an accomplished musician can read a score and hear the music in his head, a master chess player with a strong memory can read the record of a game and see it in his mind’s eye. Composer Antonio Salieri was moved to tears of joy by reading some of Mozart’s scores before they were performed. In the same way, some chess players can be emotionally stirred by mentally replaying a brilliant game by a great master.



In this case, Fischer was not only visualizing a game without benefit of board, pieces, or printed score; he was creating it, composing it as a motion picture in his mind. As he and Collins strolled down Flatbush Avenue, they were playing what is called “blindfold chess,” a form of the game practiced throughout the ages. There are accounts dating back to A.D. 800 of nomadic Arabs playing a kind of boardless and sightless chess while riding on camels. For many chess players—and especially for those people who don’t know the game—witnessing two players competing without sight of a board can evoke astonishment. The uncanny feats of memory on display can seem almost mystical.

Collins was more than well schooled in strategic theory. He was the co-author of the then latest edition of the modern bible of chess, *Modern Chess Openings*, which contained thousands of variations, positions, analyses, and recommendations. Bobby, who was becoming Collins’s pupil, had been studying past and present chess games for years and had begun to dip into Collins’s library of hundreds of books and periodicals.

It was humid, threatening to drizzle. Earlier in the year Fischer had become the U.S. Junior Champion at a tournament in Philadelphia, and he’d just returned from the U.S. Open Championship in Oklahoma City, the youngest player, at thirteen, ever to compete in the event. Collins was a former New York State Champion, a veteran tournament player, and a renowned teacher of the game. He was forty-four years old.

The odd couple continued to play their invisible game. Bobby mentally controlled the white pieces, Collins the black. As the contest seesawed, each player acted the role of predator and prey.

Bobby had always been short for his age, and still only stood five-four, but he was just beginning to stretch out of his clothes and sprout up. By the time he was eighteen, he’d reach a height of six-two. He had bright hazel eyes and a shiny, toothy smile with a slight gap between his two front teeth. His beaming grin was that of a happy child who wanted to be liked, or at least to be engaging. On this night he wore a polo shirt, brown corduroy slacks—even though it was August—and battered black-and-white, \$5 sneakers. His voice was slightly nasal, perhaps because he needed to have his tonsils and adenoids removed. His hair was a tufted brown crew cut, as if his mother, Regina, or his sister, Joan, had clipped it one day and a comb hadn’t



touched it since. Bobby looked more like a farm boy from Kansas than a kid from the streets of Brooklyn.

He usually stayed a few steps ahead of Collins and the others, wanting to go faster but grudgingly slowing up to announce his moves or to receive his teacher's reply. Bobby's answer to Collins's move was always instantaneous, his response bursting from somewhere deep in his unconscious as he visualized bishops speeding along the diagonals, knights catapulting over pieces and pawns, and rooks seizing crucial squares. Occasionally, he'd split his mental gymnastics, leaving his imaginary board to swing a fantasy baseball bat and knock an invisible ball into the left-field stands of the Ebbets Field in his mind. Even more than a chess champion, young Bobby Fischer wanted to be Duke Snider, the legendary Brooklyn Dodgers baseball player.

It was astonishing that Fischer, at thirteen, could excel at blindfold chess. Many seasoned players fail to master it. The boy didn't *prefer* to play without sight of the board; it was just that he wanted to be involved in the game every spare minute, and the twenty-minute walk to the Silver Moon from the Collins home was just too long to go without a game. He didn't seem to be distracted or annoyed by the honking traffic or the cacophony of music and voices spilling out onto the avenue.

Even at this young age, Bobby had already played thousands of games, many in a form called "speed chess" or "blitz." Instead of the usual one to two hours, speed chess often takes only ten minutes to complete; five minutes or less if the players want to challenge themselves even more. Sometimes the rule is that each move must be completed in no more than a second. In such cases, there's virtually no time to reflect, to engage in that familiar inner dialogue: *If I move my bishop here, and he moves his knight there, then maybe I should move my queen there—no, that won't work! Then he'd take my pawn. So instead I'd better move . . .* Bobby's years of playing intense speed games helped lead to his ability to instantly comprehend the relationships of the pieces on the board.

Walking down that Brooklyn street, Fischer and Collins exchanged knowing glances as they played. It was as if they were engaged in a secret ritual. As they approached the restaurant, each felt an unspoken pressure to finish the contest, but there wasn't enough time. Just as they drew up to the front entrance, when some twenty-five moves had been made, Collins offered Bobby



a draw. It was intended as a gentlemanly gesture, but Bobby looked hurt, almost insulted. To him a tie was equivalent to a loss, and he judged his position to be superior. He wanted to fight. Nevertheless, in deference to his mentor, he grudgingly agreed to a draw. He almost sang out his response: “*Okaaay.*” Then his mind immediately shifted to what awaited: his favorite Chinese meal of Egg Drop Soup, Chicken Chop Suey, pistachio ice cream, and inevitably, a large glass of milk.



Regina Wender Fischer, Bobby’s mother, was born in Switzerland and moved with her family to the United States when she was just two years old. In her late teens—already graduated from college—she traveled to Germany to visit her brother, who was stationed there as a sailor in the U.S. Navy. In Berlin she was hired by the American geneticist Hermann J. Muller (who later won a Nobel Prize in physiology), to act as his secretary and governess for his child. Muller and Regina had met when she took courses at the University of Berlin, and they respected each other: She admired his brilliance and humanism, and he valued her because she knew German, could take shorthand, and was a speed typist. Also, she was bright enough to understand and accurately type his complex chemical and genetic ruminations. Muller encouraged her to study medicine and to follow him to Russia when he received research appointments both in Leningrad and Moscow—she ultimately remained in touch with him for more than fifty years. She became a student at the First Moscow Medical Institute from 1933 to 1938.

There was another person, an associate of Muller’s, who also made the journey to Russia. A biophysicist, the associate was then known as Hans Gerhardt Fischer, but he’d changed his name from Leibscher to make it sound less Jewish as anti-Semitism took hold in Germany. Fischer secured a position at the Moscow Brain Institute, and in November 1933 he and Regina, who was then twenty, fell in love and were married in Moscow. A few years after the marriage their daughter Joan was born. With anti-Semitism flourishing in the USSR under Joseph Stalin, the young couple realized they and their infant were in danger. Although Regina had spent six years studying to be a physician, she left before completing her degree, took the baby to Paris, and settled there, working as a teacher of English.



She and Hans Gerhardt had separated before they left Moscow, although they were still legally husband and wife. As it became probable that Germany would soon invade France, Regina, who held American citizenship, arranged to take Joan to the United States, but Hans Gerhardt, who'd moved to Paris to be near his daughter, was a German and therefore wasn't permitted entry into the United States. Facing an uncertain fate, he left Europe and eventually settled in Chile. Regina divorced him for nonsupport in 1945, when she was living in Moscow, Idaho. The coincidence of a marriage and then a divorce both occurring in cities named Moscow was ironic enough to make headlines in local newspapers.

Regina Fischer had no long-term residence during the early 1940s. Rather, she carted Joan from place to place as the United States struggled with the end of the Depression and the country's entry into the Second World War. She and her daughter lived barely above the poverty level. In June 1942, Regina became pregnant with her second child—Bobby—and she sent the five-year-old Joan to St. Louis to stay with Regina's father, Jacob Wender, during her pregnancy. When Bobby was born at the Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago on March 9, 1943, Regina was homeless. She named her newborn Robert James Fischer, and Hans Gerhardt Fischer was listed as the father on the birth certificate, despite the fact that he'd never entered the United States. After spending about a week in the hospital, Regina and her baby moved into the Sarah Hackett Memorial House, a hospice for single mothers who lacked funds to provide for the welfare of themselves or their infants. Once there, Regina called her father and told him to bring Joan back to Chicago to join them, but the hospice refused to provide housing for the older child. When Regina refused to move, she was arrested by an officer of the Chicago Police Department for disturbing the peace, and she, Bobby, and Joan were forced to move out. She waived a jury trial, was ordered to have a psychiatric examination, and was found not guilty by a judge. The psychiatrist's bizarre report stated that Regina had a "stilted (paranoid) personality, querulous, but not psychotic." She immediately landed a job as a typist for the Montgomery Ward company and moved to an inexpensive one-room flat on the South Side of Chicago—2840 South Lake Park Avenue, Bobby Fischer's address during the first weeks of his life.

As Regina struggled to raise her children as a single parent, she begged for



money from Jewish welfare agencies and other social institutions, from her father, Jacob Wender, and from anyone else whom she felt she could approach. Money was forthcoming, but it was never enough and it came too slowly. Always struggling financially and without support from a husband, Regina, during the war years, went wherever she could find work. One of Bobby's first memories, when he was just a toddler, was of living in a trailer "out west." "Out west" could have meant California, Idaho, Oregon, Illinois, or Arizona. The family lived in all of those places before moving to New York. Regina's flexibility and desperation led her to a surprising gamut of jobs. She was a welder, schoolteacher, riveter, farm worker, toxicologist's assistant, and stenographer, all throughout the early and mid-1940s.



Six-year-old Bobby studied the maze. His effort lasted only a few seconds. He lifted his stubby number-2 yellow pencil and began to trace the route to a damsel imprisoned in a castle cell in the puzzle's center. To rescue her, the knight, armed with a lance, would have to determine the proper starting point to get to the damsel, and then move her from her prison to the concluding space without crossing a line. At first, Bobby entered the maze at the top right corner. Working his way hurriedly through the alleys, circles, roundabouts, and barriers, he found himself trapped in a dead end, deadlocked and defeated.

He quickly erased his work, put down his pencil, and studied the problem before him, deciding that if he began the journey at a different corner of the puzzle, he might find access to the damsel's cell. He let his eyes examine each of the remaining starting-point possibilities—top left, bottom left, and bottom right—and then, in a form of backward reasoning, tracked the path from the princess to the knight. After several minutes, he saw that there was one path and one path only that led to the maiden—starting at bottom left. Now understanding the maze's algorithm, he took up his pencil again, cut through the Gordian knot, and completed the task.

His next task, to get to the treasure left by a gold miner in a more intricate and difficult maze, at first defeated him when he tried to solve it prematurely, without sufficient study. He flung his pencil down in frustration and grabbed a brown crayon, but this time he paused. Soon the answer became clear, and



he felt silly that he hadn't seen the solution immediately. "Look, Joanie!" he said proudly to his eleven-year-old sister. She nodded in approval.

Parcheesi was a game that held Bobby's interest for a while. He liked moving his tiger and elephant pawns through his opponent's blockades, but he became furious if, owing to a toss of the dice, he was captured and sent back to "Start." Other board games, such as Trouble and Sorry, were also problematic: If a touch of bad luck stymied his plans, he became angry and would abandon the game. Ultimately, he rejected all games of chance.

To keep rambunctious Bobby occupied—in today's parlance he might be referred to as hyperactive—Regina bought books such as *50 Peppy Picture Puzzles for Girls and Boys*, and *Pencil Puzzles: Sharpen Your Pencil, Sharpen Your Wits*, which contained mazes, picture puzzles, and word games. Bobby would always go first to the mazes. Later, he became enamored of Japanese interlocking puzzles and dimensional wooden puzzles shaped in the form of an automobile or an animal. He would disassemble the fifteen or so pieces and spread them at random on the table or floor, then see how fast he could reassemble them. Speed of accomplishment was as important to him as solving the puzzles' mystery.



In early 1949 Regina Fischer took the least expensive housing she could find when she moved the family—Bobby, Joan, and herself—to East 13th Street in Manhattan, facing the kitchen back entrance of the famed Luchow's restaurant, where many of the best chess players would occasionally dine. The Fischers could never afford to eat there. The apartment's entrance was marred by a rusty fire escape running up the front, and there was only one small bedroom—but the rent was \$45 a month.

Located downstairs on the same street was what is known in New York City as a "candy store." The small shop sold newspapers, magazines, toys, games, ice cream, sundries, and of course, candy. In March of 1949, on a rainy day when Bobby had just turned six, his sister, Joan, looking for yet another game to amuse or occupy her restless little brother, bought a plastic chess set for \$1 at the candy store. The hollow pieces were barely taller than an inch, and the set came with a folding cardboard chessboard that had red and black squares. Neither Joan nor Bobby had ever seen a chess set before,



but they followed instructions printed on the inside of the top of the box, with Joan acting as instructor even as she figured out the rules for herself. After describing which piece was which by name, the rules went on to explain the intricacies of how each piece moved: “The Queen moves as many squares in any direction as is possible, the Knight moves in an L shape and can jump over other pieces or pawns,” etc. Only a few other rudimentary hints were offered, such as that white should move first, and the object of the game was to checkmate, but not actually capture, the king.

“Nobody we knew ever played chess and we never saw anyone playing it,” Fischer would later write. It’s impossible to say with certainty whether Bobby actually won the first game he played, but it’s likely he did, given his propensity for solving puzzles quickly and the fact that his first opponent was his sister, who didn’t particularly take to chess. “At first it was just another game,” remembered Bobby, “just a little more complicated.” Joan, tied to her homework—she was an honor student—quickly became uninterested in chess and didn’t have time for it, so Bobby taught his mother the moves. Bobby said later: “She was too busy to take the game seriously. For example, she’d try to peel potatoes or sew up a hole while she was playing, which, of course, annoyed me very much. After I’d beat her, I’d turn the board around and go on playing her side until I beat her a second time. Both of us got tired of this, and I was looking for someone to play chess with all the time.”

That six-year-old Bobby was beating thirty-six-year-old Regina and eleven-year-old Joan, as brilliant as both were, is significant in understanding his rapidly evolving mastery of chess, and himself. It gave the boy confidence and built his self-esteem. The problem was that neither mother nor sister ever really wanted to play. “My mother has an anti-talent for chess,” Bobby once told an interviewer. “She’s hopeless.”

Since Bobby couldn’t find a worthy opponent, or *any* opponent for that matter, he made himself his principal adversary. Setting up the men on his tiny board, he’d play game after game alone, first assuming the white side and then spinning the board around, with some pieces often tumbling onto the floor. He’d scramble after them, place them quickly back on their squares, and then play the black side. Trying to outwit himself required an unusual turn of mind. Black, for example, knew what white was going to do, and vice versa, because black *was* Fischer and so was white. So the only way the game



made any sense to Bobby was to study the board anew after every single move, pretending he was playing a real opponent. He tried to forget what he'd just planned to do when he was playing the other side. Instead, he sought to discover any trap or pitfall lurking in his "opponent's" position and respond accordingly. To some, such a regimen might seem simplistic or maddening, even schizophrenic. However, it did give Bobby a sense of the board, the movement and role of the pieces, and the choreography of how a game of chess could develop. "Eventually I would checkmate the other guy," he chuckled when he described the experience years later.



In the fall of 1950, Regina moved the family out of Manhattan and across the bridge to Brooklyn, where she rented an inexpensive apartment near the intersection of Union and Franklin streets. It was only temporary: She was trying to get closer to a better neighborhood. Robbed of her medical degree in Russia because of the war, she was now determined to acquire a nursing diploma. As soon as she enrolled in the Prospect Heights School for Nursing, the peripatetic Fischer family, citizens of nowhere, moved once again—its tenth transit in six years—to a \$52-a-month two-bedroom flat at 560 Lincoln Place in Brooklyn. Never shy about asking for what she or her children needed, Regina recruited neighbors to help her transport, box by box, the family's sparse belongings across Eastern Parkway a few blocks, to what she expected would be a somewhat more lasting home. Though the small apartment was a third-floor walkup, its proximity to the nursing school enabled Regina to look after her children while attending classes. Bobby and Joan each had a room to themselves, and Regina slept in the living room on what was called a daybed. This apartment was also in a better neighborhood. Flatbush was middle-class Jewish, beginning to be populated by other ethnic minorities, and in closer walking distance to lush Prospect Park and the Botanical Gardens, as well as one of the city's finest libraries, at Grand Army Plaza.

Bobby, then seven years old, hated his new environs. When cold or rainy weather forced him inside, he could find no place to play in the building, and even on nicer days Regina showed a reluctance to let her son play in the streets unsupervised. Occasionally, Bobby and another boy who lived in the



building would rush up and down the stairwells and landings, playing tag, but they were chastised so often by the landlord that an embargo on any kind of noisy physical activity was handed down in writing by the building's management. Bobby loved to climb onto his bed and then jump off to see how far away he could land. Farther and farther he'd soar, making note of his progress. The tenants downstairs complained of the banging noise coming through the ceiling, and bed-to-floor leaping was declared off-limits as well. When Bobby got older and started doing calisthenics, management objected to that, too. Years later Bobby commented, "If anyone asked me what I owe my [interest in] chessplaying to, I could say it was the landlord."

Bobby grudgingly tolerated being in the care of Joan, five years his senior, whenever his mother was at school or work. Regina was constantly active, working as a stenographer on those days that she had no nursing classes. During the times she had no work, she collected an unemployment check of \$22 a week. She was intensely involved in political activities as well, but she always saw to it that when Bobby was little there was food to eat and that someone—Joan, a neighbor, a friend—watched over her son.

Regina knew that Bobby was intellectually gifted, but at first she didn't consider him a "prodigy." Certainly, he could figure out some things faster than she could. He quickly saw patterns and analogies that helped him jump to reasoned conclusions, such as figuring out that if a bank was closed on one street because of a holiday, then a bank on another street would likely be closed too.

The problem with Bobby was a social one: From a very early age he followed his own rhythms, which were often antithetical to how other children developed. An intense stubbornness seemed to be his distinguishing feature. He was capable of ranting if he didn't get his way—about foods he did or didn't like, or when to go to bed (he liked to stay up late), or when to go out or stay home. At first Regina could handle him, but by the time Bobby reached six, he was dictating policy about his own regimen. Bobby wanted to do what *he* wanted to do—and to choose when, where, and how to do it.

"When he was seven," Joan said in an interview, "Bobby could discuss concepts like infinity, or do all kinds of trick math problems, but ask him to multiply two plus two and he would probably get it wrong." Although this was likely an exaggeration, it's clear that Bobby hated memorizing things



that failed to engage his interest, and multiplication tables fell into that category. The story that he could understand number theory and the complexity of prime numbers and their infinite results but not perform simple multiplication is analogous to the myth of Einstein not being able to do his own income tax.

Regina visited guidance centers and agencies for gifted children, sometimes alone and sometimes with Bobby in tow, to determine whether they could offer tips for getting her son through school and helping him connect with other children. Of primary importance to her was education. She felt that Joan was being intellectually stimulated at home, but that the creative ferment she always attempted to foster was having little effect on Bobby. He took no interest in the stacks of books that Regina, an avid reader, always had in the house. She was a college graduate, almost a medical doctor but without the degree, a former teacher and a perpetual student, and her home was a gathering place for the intelligentsia she'd meet at school or through her political groups. At night and on weekends, there were often lively discussions around her kitchen table, sometimes with friends—mostly Jewish intellectuals. The subjects often revolved around politics, ideas, and cultural issues. Arguments raged over Palestine and Israel and the possibility that Eisenhower might run for president. When within a month two great educators, Maria Montessori and John Dewey, died, the talk was of writing and advanced reading skills and whether they were good for the very young. Bobby and Joan were present, but though Bobby may have absorbed some of what was said, he never participated. Years later, he blurted out that he'd "hated" all of that kind of talk.



From the time he was six until he was about twelve, Bobby spent almost every summer at camp somewhere in the tri-state area around New York City. That first or second summer, at a camp in Patchogue, Long Island, he found a book of annotated chess games. When he was pushed to remember the book's title some fifteen years later, Bobby said that it *might* have been *Tarrasch's Best Games of Chess*. He then named Siegbert Tarrasch, a German player, as "one of the ten greatest masters of all time." Whatever the book was, Bobby figured out how to follow the games, which were presented



move by move using descriptive chess notations (e.g., P-K4 for “Pawn to King Four”).

The rest of camp was occasionally fun. Bobby rode a horse named Chub, played with a black-and-white calf, engaged in an occasional softball game, and made a boat in the arts-and-crafts class—but he still couldn’t relate to the other children. After a full month away, using one of the pre-addressed and stamped postcards given to him by Regina, he issued a plaintive appeal in large block letters: MOMMY I WANT TO COME HOME.

Soon after, Bobby forgot about chess for a while. Other games and puzzles entered the household, and the chess set, with some pawns missing, was stored in a closet. After about a year, however, chess reentered his mind. In the winter of 1950, when he was seven years old, he asked Regina if she’d buy him another, larger chess set for Christmas. She bought him a smallish, unweighted wooden set that was housed in a sliding, unvarnished wooden box. Although Bobby immediately opened his gift, he didn’t touch it for about a month. He had no one to play with.

He was often alone. When he came home from school, it was usually to an empty apartment. His mother was at work during the days and sometimes in the evenings, and his sister was generally busy in school until later in the afternoon. Though Regina was concerned about her son, the simple truth was that Bobby was a latchkey child who craved but was not given the maternal presence that might have helped him develop a sense of security. Moreover, Regina’s financial circumstances had caused the family to move so frequently that Bobby never gained a sense of “neighborhood.” And it didn’t help that there was no father present.

Regina tried giving her son the approval that every child needs, and the wings to find himself, by encouraging him to engage in sports, take part in family excursions, and do better in school. But as time went on, Bobby just kept journeying more and more into himself, once again reading chess books and playing over games from the past. The possibilities of chess somehow made his essential loneliness and insecurity less painful.

Regina believed that she could learn and excel at anything, except perhaps chess, and that her children also had the capacity to master anything. The social workers that she confided in invariably suggested that she enroll Bobby in a small private school where he could receive closer attention and where



he could develop at his own pace. Money was always an issue for her though, and she couldn't afford to enroll him in a school that demanded tuition. She received no child payment or alimony from Hans Gerhardt Fischer, but she did receive occasional checks for \$20—not totally insignificant in those years—that arrived sporadically but often weekly, sent by Paul Nemenyi—like Gerhardt Fischer, a physicist. Nemenyi was a friend whom Regina had first met when she was a student at the University of Colorado in Denver and then later reconnected with in Chicago. He may have been Bobby's biological father. The patrimony has never been proven one way or the other. Regina not only denied that Nemenyi was Bobby's father, but once stated for the record to a social worker that she'd traveled to Mexico in June 1942 to meet her ex-husband Hans Gerhardt, and that Bobby was conceived during that rendezvous. However, a distant relative of Bobby's suggested that the reason Regina listed Hans Gerhardt as the father on Bobby's birth certificate was that she didn't want Bobby to be known as a bastard. "It *does* appear that Paul Nemenyi was the real father," the relative said. It's also possible that Regina didn't know who Bobby's father was if she was having an affair with Nemenyi around the time the Mexican assignation with Gerhardt Fischer occurred.



In an attempt to find other boys who might want to play with Bobby, Regina wrote to the chess editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* to see if he knew of any seven-year-old players. She referred to her son as "my little chess miracle." The editor, Hermann Helms, a great old chess master, replied that she should bring Bobby to the Grand Army Plaza library on a particular Thursday evening in January 1951, so that the boy could play in a simultaneous exhibition to be given by several chess masters.

Normally, a simultaneous exhibition is given by *one* master who walks from board to board, competing against multiple players. The boards are arranged in the shape of a square or horseshoe. When the master reaches each of the boards, the player makes his move and the master responds before quickly moving to the next board.

Bobby, accompanied by his mother, entered the high-ceilinged rotunda of the Grand Army Plaza library and was momentarily surprised by what he



saw. Circling the room were locked glass cases displaying unusual and historic chess sets, loaned to the library from private collectors for the occasion. The cases also contained a variety of popular chess books and some incunabula printed in German. There was a ceramic set of chessmen inspired by Tenniel's illustrations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; two sets from displaced persons' camps, one carved by hand and another made of woven straw; each set had taken more than five hundred hours of work to produce; and a set from Guatemala that was reminiscent of pre-Spanish New World architecture. This was all quite fascinating for the general spectator, but Bobby Fischer hadn't come to look at chess sets. "They did not interest me too much," he remembered. He'd come to play.

On that evening masters were performing in rotation, one playing for about an hour, followed by another who'd take his place. When Bobby sat down to play with his own new wooden set, the master who came to his board was Max Pavey, a thirty-two-year-old radiologist who'd been champion of both Scotland and New York State and who was playing at the top of his form. Pavey was the first master Bobby ever played. It's also likely this was his first serious game of chess against a player with tutored expertise. What was occurring at that moment was analogous to a seven-year-old playing a few games of tennis with his peers, then taking to the court against a still-active John McEnroe.

A crowd of spectators gathered around the board as the diminutive Bobby faced the self-assured, tweed-jacketed Max Pavey. The boy was so serious about what he was doing that the game attracted more and more onlookers. He knelt on his chair to get a more panoramic view of the pieces.

Bobby remembered his experience in solving puzzles. He must not move too quickly; he knew that the solution was there waiting to be found, if only he had time, time, more time. Pavey, who excelled at playing rapidly—he'd recently captured the title of U.S. Speed Chess Champion—seemed to zoom around the room hardly studying the other boards as he made his moves, returning to Bobby's game in such a short time that the child couldn't calculate as deeply or as carefully as he wanted. That night there were only eight players, making it more difficult for each to contend with the master than if there'd been scores of players, who would have slowed Pavey's progress.

The master was much too strong. In about fifteen minutes, puffing on his



pipe, Pavey captured Bobby's queen, thereby ending the game. He graciously offered his hand to the boy and with a gentle smile said, "Good game." Bobby stared at the board for a moment. "He crushed me," he said to no one in particular. Then he burst into tears.

Despite his phenomenal memory, Bobby as an adult could never remember the moves of that game with Pavey. A friend's offhand mention that Bobby probably had every expectation of winning his first game against a chess master elicited a strident rebuke: "Of course not!" He did say that Pavey probably had "gone easy" on him and that he was amazed that he'd even lasted a quarter of an hour against him. That he was passionate enough to cry demonstrated his growing intensity concerning the game. Even at seven he didn't consider himself an amateur. He later admitted that the game had a great effect in motivating him.

One spectator at the exhibition that evening was Carmine Nigro, a short, bald man in his early forties; Bobby described him as "cheery."

Nigro studied the Pavey-Fischer game intently. He liked the moves that Bobby was making. They weren't scintillating, but they were sensible ones, especially for a beginner. With the utmost concentration, Bobby seemed to block out everything and everyone around him. When the game concluded, Nigro approached Regina and Bobby and introduced himself as the newly elected president of the Brooklyn Chess Club. He invited Bobby to come to the club on any Tuesday or Friday night. No, there would be no membership dues for the boy, Nigro assured Regina. She took him to the club, which was located in the old Brooklyn Academy of Music, the very next evening.

