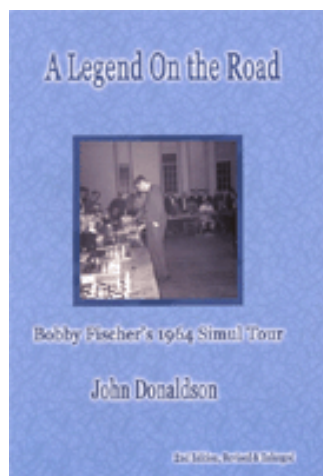




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



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At the Kibbutz with Bobby

I consider it my luck that I met Bobby Fischer when he was probably more relaxed than at any other event of his chess career. It was in 1968 at the tournament in Netanya, a coastal town in Israel. For me the tournament was strong enough, but for Bobby it was far below his standards, without any other top player being present. Eventually he was to win it with 11½ points out of 13 games, 3½ points ahead of Abe Yanofsky and Moshe Czerniak, who shared second place.

For Bobby it was the first tournament since he had withdrawn from the Interzonal in Sousse the previous year. At home there was the U.S. Championship, in which he didn't take part because of a conflict about the duration of the event. For him Netanya was a chess vacation.

I had seen Fischer earlier at the Olympiad in Havana in 1966 and there I had also caught a glimpse of his notorious difficult behavior. He was analysing together with Larry Evans, who was supposed to be a friend. Suddenly Bobby stood up and walked off, saying "I won't give you free notes for your magazine."

*Fischer with Castro in Havana*

In Netanya he was accompanied by a small rotund man, about 60 years old. He was an official of the USCF who had attended a Zionist conference in Jerusalem and had been brought to Netanya to keep the fickle genius in reins. This proved unnecessary, for in Netanya Bobby was kindness itself.

Before the tournament he had made demands about space and quiet. These demands were not fulfilled. There was always a lot of noise from the spectators, with loud applause at crucial moments. Bobby just shrugged and said that in Yugoslavia it was much worse. I think he liked the exuberance of the public during Yugoslav tournaments.

He was in a good mood and once I saw him playing a game against a restaurant waiter who had begged for this honor that would make his life shine.

As far as he needed company, Bobby chose me, which was natural as we were about the same age. As I said already, he was in a gentle mood and never touchy, not even when I said that I thought that in the past his behavior had been paranoid. He just laughed and said that I didn't have the problems that he had. "If only your problems were mine I would be infinitely happy," I thought naïvely. He even had some kind words for the Soviet grandmasters: "They are really strong players, not bad at all. They only look like that because of me."

Because we both were used to go to sleep late, we took some walks through the town late at night. Street workers still at their job were always greeting him: "Hi Bobby!" I left it to him to choose the subjects of our discussions and usually it was not chess.

He spoke a lot about crime in the U.S., lawlessness and riots in the streets. He read the crime magazines, with true stories about violence and murder. "They all made a mistake," he said about the victims. In his apartment in Brooklyn he had two alarm systems installed, one for the door and one for the window. I found that excessive then, but in retrospect it just seems a sensible precaution.

We talked about American politics, as there would be a presidential election that year. Who would he vote for? For nobody, he said. They were all crooks. Among this bunch he thought that George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, was probably the most honest. My own favorite was Senator Eugene McCarthy, a Democratic candidate who wanted to end the war in Vietnam.

Bobby found McCarthy ridiculous and he said it was unthinkable that a man like him would ever be president of the U.S. Right he was.

His political views were radical already, but the opposite way of what they would become later. He said that the U.S. should put an ultimatum to North Vietnam and threaten to throw an atom bomb on Hanoi, where the North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh was living himself, as now Ho just didn't care how many peasants were dying.

But what if they refused to bow to this ultimatum, I asked. "They won't, but if so, we'll have to do it," he said, obviously deploring this sad turn of events.

I had read that Bobby's interests were limited to chess, but this was certainly not true. He knew a lot about American underground literature and even more about American popular music. Almost all the songs of Aretha Franklin he knew by heart and during one of our walks he gave an amusing imitation of the Four Tops, a popular Motown group at the time.

He was an avid magazine reader, mentioning *Mad*, *Newsweek*, *Playboy* and *Time*, and was especially interested in the evangelist Billy Graham and the World Wide Church of God, a sect that many years later would lay its hand on a large part of Bobby's money. I asked him if he belonged to a religious group, but this he denied. "I won't play on Friday, but that's just God's law."



Reshevsky-Fischer, Santa Monica 1966

At one point we were talking about Reuben Fine and the (spurious) anecdote he relates about Steinitz claiming to be able to give pawn and move odds to God. I have written about this conversation in the past, but only in Dutch, but still it has found its way into American chess writing and sometimes the story has been given a twist that made Bobby look silly or even blasphemous.

“I think I would be able to make a draw with God with white,” he said. “I play the Ruy Lopez and this will be so balanced that I won’t lose. Maybe if He’ll play the Sicilian it would be difficult... but no, I’ll play Bc4 and I’m better, so what can He do? Unless He would use tricks, like clouding your mind...”

Obviously all this was said in jest and God was used as a metaphor for perfect play. Nevertheless, to say that as white you wouldn’t lose against perfect play is quite a strong statement too.

Despite his pugnacious views about the Vietnam War, Bobby was quite critical of American life. He found that in Israel and in Europe everyone was interested in chess, while the U.S. was only interested in money. He thought the country had become a jungle. A kibbutz, like in Israel, based on cooperation, would be considered a joke in the U.S, he thought. “The country is going to hell, with crime and pornography everywhere. The only good thing is the money. For the time being I’ll stay in Europe. I think I belong to the world.”

I asked if, belonging to the world, he would come to my home town Amsterdam. “Probably not,” he said. “It’s just a heap of old rubbish. No quality stuff. And it’s too small for me. Rotterdam is a bit better, more modern, isn’t it?” It is indeed more modern, because a big part of the city center was devastated by German bombings in 1940.

At the end of the tournament the two of us were invited by one of the participants, Yaacov Bernstein, to spend a few days on the kibbutz where he lived. Considering Bobby’s later views the idea of his spending time on a kibbutz may seem strange, and in fact during the tournament I had asked him about his views on Jewry.

I had heard from a Dutchman involved with the Candidates tournament on Curaçao in

1962 that Bobby had made strong anti-Semitic statements. If this were true, what was he doing in Israel now? Bobby said that indeed he had been anti-Semitic and that this had been stupid. "Besides, I'm half-Jewish myself, so how can I be anti-Semitic?" As we know, this insight was subsequently lost.

At the kibbutz we played some blitz. In our tournament game I had collapsed as soon as Bobby had uncorked an opening novelty. Playing blitz I hoped for... well, not really revenge, but maybe one draw out of a series of games, was that too much? But no way. After a while he wanted to give me knight odds. I protested, but I had to oblige. That game he won also, and then he refused to go on. "No challenge," he said.

"Fischer is Fischer, but a knight is a knight," said Mikhail Tal when Bobby had claimed that he could give knight odds to any woman player. But for me, a knight was not enough.

Afterwards we were looking at the games from the recent Candidates matches, Tal-Gligoric and Kortchnoi-Reshevsky. About the latter match I could contribute some insights, as it had been played in Amsterdam and Dutch masters had been analysing the games. Our days at Bernstein's kibbutz were pleasant and I'll always remember the sight of Bobby embracing a horse and whispering sweet little words into its ears.

The next and last time I met him was at the Olympiad in Siegen in 1970. We nodded briefly and said hello. Much later, during the nineties, I was in Budapest to attend a Dutch-Hungarian wedding. Knowing that Bobby was living there, I fantasized that I would meet him by chance on the streets and that I would invite him to join the fun of the wedding party. It was a Jewish wedding, but Bobby wouldn't mind, as in Budapest he had been spending time with the Polgars and with Lilienthal, keeping up the pretense that they weren't really Jews, but only thought they were.

A nice fantasy, but had we really met, he would have fled instantly, as I had become a journalist.

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