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COLUMNISTS

## *Susan Polgar on Chess*

Susan Polgar

**ChessCafe.com** is please to welcome grandmaster Susan Polgar as its newest regular columnist. Susan's accomplishments in the chess world have already assured her place in chess history.



The oldest of the famous Polgar sisters, she left her mark early and often, winning the under-16 girls' world championship at age 12 and becoming the first woman to earn the full (men's) GM title. At the age of 15 she was the number-one ranked woman in the world. Successes in the Olympiads have included three gold medals, two silver and one bronze. Her titles and victories have been many, but perhaps none more prestigious than becoming Women's World Champion.

We hope you enjoy *Susan Polgar on Chess*...

## An Historic Moment in Women's Chess: Thessalonica Olympiad 1988

I remember when I started playing chess as a little girl (at the age of 4), I was the subject of ridicule by boys and grown men: how could a tiny little girl play chess and even beat some of them?! Later, when I started to have more and more victories, people and the press were amazed that this was possible. In addition, for a long time a lot of chess players were very skeptical about my chess playing ability. Many doubted that any woman was capable of becoming a serious player. When I was an expert (around 2100), many thought I would never become a master. When I became a master at the age of 13, many told me that a woman could never reach IM or GM level.

The level of women's chess was much lower in the 1970's and even in the early 1980's. With very few exceptions, such as Gaprindashvili and Chiburdanidze, who were just under 2400, the women were much lower rated. Therefore, in order for my sisters and me to advance beyond that level, we had no choice but to play mostly against men, in open tournaments. We were continually criticized for this decision. Many people accused us of being afraid to play against women. Some claimed the reason that we did not play against women was that we were afraid to lose rating points. A number of women even said publicly that we would not have done well against them because playing against women is different psychologically than playing against men.

The first time in our professional chess career that we played in a serious women's event was the 1988 Thessalonica Chess Olympiad in Greece. I led the Hungarian national team; the rest of the team was comprised of my two sisters Judit and Sophia along with Ildiko Madl. I should also add that despite the fact that the ratings of my sisters and I were much higher than other Hungarian women players, there was a great deal of resistance from the Hungarian chess authorities to place us on the Olympiad team. Fortunately, they made the right – and fair – decision. Because of the controversy, we were under a lot of pressure to prove that we had indeed been the best choice to represent Hungary. It is also worth mentioning that the average age of this Hungarian national team was under 16!! I was the “veteran” at age 19, followed by Judit at age 12, Ildiko at 18 and Sophia at 14.

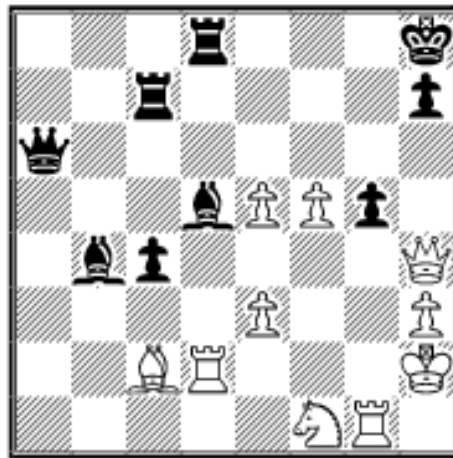
Since this was our first Olympiad, we were quite impressed and amazed by the size and atmosphere of this incredible global event. There were so many chess players from so many different countries. It was a nice feeling to meet and play only a few boards away from many of the elite players in the world.

I played board 1 in all 14 rounds, scoring 10½ out of 14. Judit, on board 2, had only one day of rest and scored an amazing 12½ out of 13 (a 2694 performance, the best of the Olympiad!). Judit was one of the key players on our team and she instantly became a world class superstar. Sophia and Ildiko alternated on board 3, scoring some important victories that contributed to the overall chase for the gold.

The tournament did not go smoothly for us. We had a tragic situation that arose after just a few rounds. Ildiko's fiancée, IM Bela Perenyi, was on the road from Hungary to Thessalonica to visit her. Unfortunately, a horrible automobile accident took his

life en route. This news was not only tragic for Ildiko, but for the rest of the team as well. All of our performances could have been affected by this tragedy. Bela Perenyi was a very well liked and respected player by everyone and we all felt that we had lost a friend and we would miss him forever. Luckily Ildiko remained a tough fighter and her performance didn't seem to be significantly affected. In fact, she later scored an important win against the Soviets.

As expected in a Swiss system event, we were paired against relatively easier opponents in the first three rounds: Australia, France and Greece. In round 4, we faced China. I played against Liu She Lan, who was a world champion candidate (among the top 8 in the World) in 1981. Our game ended with the following cute combination:



*Polgar, Z – Liu, S*  
Thessalonica Olympiad 1988

**38. Rxd5! Rxd5 39. Qxg5**

This is a rare scenario in a chess game. I have "multiple choices" of mates depending on my opponent's answer. The immediate threat is: 40. Qg8 mate. If Black tries to guard it with the Queen (39...Qa8 or 39...Qc8) there comes 40.

Qf6+ Rg7 41. Qxg7 mate. If she tries to defend with the Rook, 39...Rc8, then 40. Qg7 is mate. Black resigned

Judit also won a nice game versus the future World Champion Xie Jun.

### *Xie Jun - Polgar, J* Thessalonica Olympiad 1988

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nc6 5. Nc3 Qc7 6. Be2 a6 7. 0-0 Nf6 8. Kh1 Nxd4 9. Qxd4 Bc5 10. Qd3 h5 11. f4 Ng4 12. Qg3 b5 13. Bxg4 hxg4 14. Qxg4 Bb7 15. Qe2 b4 16. Nd1 Ke7 17. Be3 Bxe3 18. Qxe3 Rh4 19. h3 Rah8 20. Kg1 g5 21. fxg5 Bxe4 22. Qf2 f5 23. gxf6+ Kf7 24. Qe3 Bxg2 25. Qg5 R4h7 26. Kxg2 Rg8 27. Qxg8+ Kxg8 28. Ne3 Qc6+ 29. Kg3 Qd6+ 30. Rf4 Rxh3+ 31. Kxh3 Qxf4 32. Ng4 e5 33. Rg1 Kf7 34. Rg2 Qf3+ 35. Kh2 d6 36. Rg3 Qf4 37. c3 bxc3 38. bxc3 Qd2+ 39. Kh3 Qxa2 40. Rf3 Qd2 41. Kh4 e4 42. Re3 Qg2 43. Kg5 Ke6 44. c4 a5 45. Kf4 Qf1+ 46. Kxe4 Qxc4+ 47. Kf3+ Kf5 48. Re5+

**Kg6 49. Re7 Qd3+ 50. Kf4 Qf5+ 51. Kg3 Kh5 52. Rg7 a4 53. Rg8 Qd3+ 0-1**

The next round, we had the “match of the Olympiad” against the Soviets. The huge tournament hall was filled with more than a thousand people. Everyone eagerly waited. You could almost cut the tension with a knife.

My game against the legendary Chiburdanidze was not very eventful and ended in a draw after 37 moves. Judit seemed to be doing very well. She developed a strong attack against Levitina’s Sicilian Dragon. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> move, Levitina was forced to give up an exchange. We were all very optimistic. In the meantime, Ildiko had a great attacking game versus Litinskaya in a Benoni and won in 31 moves with Black. Judit tried very hard for 80 moves. Unfortunately, she missed some opportunities and wasn’t able to convert her material advantage to a win. This was Judit’s only draw in the Olympiad. But we still won this crucial encounter. That gave all of us great hope of winning the gold.

We played Cuba in Round 6. Then we started to play against the eastern European teams in the following order: Yugoslavia, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. At that time, these teams were all considered medal contenders, or at least favored to finish in the top 5 or 6 places. My favorite game from the entire Olympiad was versus Richtova (Czechoslovakia) in round 8.

#### ***Richtova - Polgar, Z Thessalonica Olympiad, 1988***

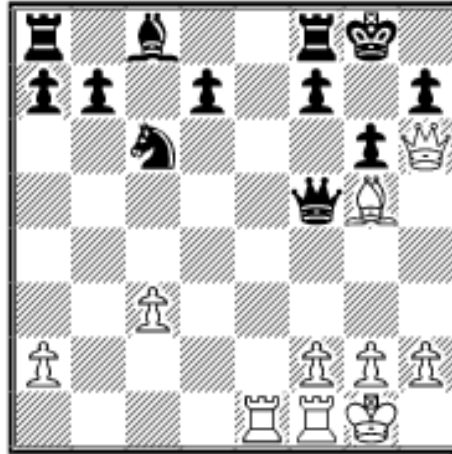
**1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 e5 6. Ndb5 d6 7. Be3 a6 8. Na3 Rb8 9. Nd5 Nxd5 10. exd5 Ne7 11. Bc4 Ng6 12. 0-0 Be7 13. Qd2 0-0 14. Be2 f5 15. f3 f4 16. Ba7 Ra8 17. Bf2 Bh4 18. Nc4 b5 19. Bb6 Qf6 20. Na5 Bg3 21. Bd3 Qh4 22. h3 Qg5 23. Nc6 Nh4 24. Kh1 Nxe2 25. Qxe2 Qh4 26. Kg1 Bxe2 27. Qh1 Rf6 28. Bd8 Rxd8 29. Nxd8 Rh6 30. Ne6 Qe7 0-1**

Judit had a very nice miniature versus the Bulgarian Angelova, which won the Olympiad brilliancy prize.

#### ***Polgar, J - Angelova-Chilingirova, P Thessalonica Olympiad, 1988***

**1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 g6 4. 0-0 Bg7 5. c3 e5 6. d4 exd4 7. cxd4 Nxd4 8. Nxd4 cxd4 9. e5 Ne7 10. Bg5 0-0 11. Qxd4 Nc6**

**12. Qh4 Qb6 13. Nc3 Bxe5 14. Rae1 Bxc3 15. bxc3 Qxb5 16. Qh6 Qf5**



**17. Qxf8+ 1-0**

In rounds 12 and 13 we were paired against England and the United States respectively.

A few rounds before the end of the Olympiad, “the talk of the town” was that Akhmilovskaya (from the Soviet team) had eloped and gotten married to the

American team captain John Donaldson. Apparently they had! So the Soviets had no reserve player for their last few games.

Nevertheless, before the last round, the Soviets managed to catch up with us. In the final round, the Soviets had to play against the not very highly rated Dutch team. On the other hand, we had to play the Swedish team, led by their superstar Pia Cramling. Most of the pressure was on me as I squared off to face Cramling on board 1.

Before the start of the last round, everyone expected the Soviets to win 3-0 easily against the Dutch and the Hungarians to win just as easily on boards 2 and 3. So everything was supposed to come down to my game against Pia. But chess is also a game of psychology and who is able perform better under pressure.

I had a very exciting game versus Pia. I obtained a nice advantage out of the opening and increased it to a winning position. However, just before reaching the first time control, I stumbled and managed to turn a winning game into a losing one by the time the game was adjourned. In the meantime, fortunately for us, the Soviets had a hard time dealing with the tension and had already been held to two draws! In the meantime, Judit won her game while Madl drew. Had I lost my game, we would have finished tied for first with the Soviets and the gold medal would have been decided by tie breaks since the Soviets also had drawn their third game. After the recess, Pia and I resumed our game and thanks to some inaccurate endgame play, I managed to save the game and drew. So Hungary won the gold by a half-point ahead of the previously invincible Soviets.

There were many historic events that took place in this Olympiad. This was the first time ever that a non-Soviet team had won. It was also unique to have a national team consisting of three sisters. And it was unheard of to have a teenage team winning the gold and thus ending the Soviet domination.

All in all, it was a great experience for my sisters and me. It also put to rest the notion that the Polgar sisters could not compete against other women. Even though it was not our biggest achievement professionally, this single event changed our lives forever. It meant a lot to our country. We went from being the main controversy of the game, because of our approach to chess, to being loved, admired and adored by thousands in Hungary and around the world. A lot of credit should go to our parents for their love, support and sacrifice to build Olympic Champions.

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