

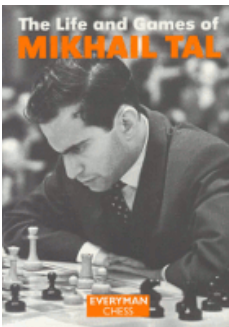


COLUMNISTS

From the Archives

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From the Archives...

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Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe.com](#) home page whenever there has been a "new" item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

Perspectives by Burt Hochberg

An Imperfect Visionary

Visionaries are by definition impractical. But an impractical visionary with a lot of money can make a difference in pursuit of his dream. I would like now to remember a man whose long-range vision was not achieved because it - or he - was too impractical and because technology was not ready for it. In the process of trying to achieve it, however, he made a real contribution to the game he loved.

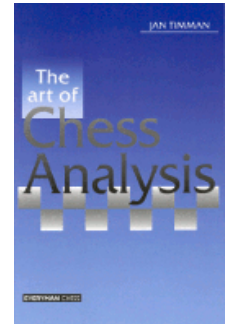
Sidney Fried, whose R.H.M. Press produced some of the best modern literature on chess, grew up poor in New York. In his youth, he said, he was a Communist. He abhorred paying taxes. Once he achieved financial success (first by investing in warrants and options, then by writing books and two weekly newsletters on the subject), he made certain that everything of real value that he possessed was legally owned by his company, not by him personally. During the years I knew him well (roughly 1972-84), he had an elegant four-story townhouse on New York City's east side, a handsome yacht, and a house in Rancho Mirage, California, just a knight's move from Frank Sinatra's estate. The house had formerly belonged to Zeppo Marx and his wife, Barbara, who later became Sinatra's fourth wife. His success in avoiding taxes while he was alive, however, resulted in a tremendous problem for his two sons after he died in 1991 at the age of 72. Though he left a significant legacy in his work for chess, he did not, incredibly, leave a will.

Sidney took very good care of his health. A man of relatively small physical stature, he was always trim and fit. His diet consisted mainly of fish, he did not smoke, and he played tennis whenever he had the chance. He wore his longish hair combed straight back and he was always dressed neatly and simply. His only affectation was a little pencil mustache that rode interestingly up and down on his lip whenever he produced one of his characteristic crooked half-smiles.

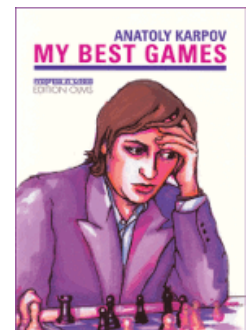
He was in love with chess, but it was an unsatisfying, one-way relationship, like an adolescent sexual longing. Chess is not an easy lay, and Sidney was not strong enough to overcome its resistance. Chess "annihilates a man," wrote H.G. Wells. "You have, let us say, a promising politician, a rising artist that you wish to destroy. Dagger or bomb are archaic, clumsy, and unreliable - but teach him, inoculate him with chess." Had Sidney Fried not been financially secure, chess might have ruined him.

The middlegame and endgame held little interest for him. The great unsolved mystery of chess, as he saw it, was the opening. Because Sidney hated the

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idea of memorizing openings, he wanted to find a universal, one-size-fits-all "system" that would always yield an acceptable position almost without regard for the opponent's moves. The only mystery, as I saw it, was why Sidney persisted in playing his inferior fianchetto hybrid in game after game, invariably getting a severely cramped position after half a dozen moves, to his perplexed annoyance. Sidney was anything but stupid, but he was definitely obstinate. He seemed to think that if he played his "system" often enough, it would one day realize that he did not intend to give up and would lie down and behave.

I met Sidney in 1972. I was the executive director of the Manhattan Chess Club; he was a member. When I resigned that year after a disagreement with the club's board of directors, Sidney invited me to dinner, along with Lubosh Kavalek. The recent Fischer-Spassky match had led to a worldwide chess boom, which Sidney felt was the perfect opportunity to launch the great plan that had been percolating in his mind. Now that I was free of my duties at the club (though I was still the editor of *Chess Life & Review* [now *Chess Life*]), Sidney wanted me to help develop a chess publishing program under the umbrella of his financial publishing company.

His plan had two prongs: I, from my home in New York, would develop various book projects and oversee the whole enterprise, while Lubosh, from his home in Reston, Virginia, would work on Sidney's special dream, *The Survey of Current Chess Openings*.

The basic idea of *The Survey* was simple. The entire universe of openings would be mapped out in a grand outline and each opening divided into its constituent variations. Starting with the most current or significant variations and becoming more inclusive over time, 100 recent games in each variation would be analyzed by an assigned grandmaster and published as hole-punched pages for insertion in a looseleaf binder to be provided. As warranted by tournament practice, the sections would be updated with additional pages, forming an ever-expanding database.

Sidney, Lubosh, and I had many meetings, separately and together. I once spent an entire day at Lubosh's home as we tried to figure out how to coordinate the work of the many grandmasters who would be invited to participate, and how to organize our own work flow. Lubosh, with his profound knowledge of the openings and his friendship with so many grandmasters, would decide which grandmasters were to be assigned to which variations and would make sure the work got done on time. He would check incoming manuscripts for technical content and then send them to me for editing and production.

Meanwhile, I would be working on separate book projects, traveling to important chess events - such as the San Antonio tournament in 1972, the Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and Petrópolis Interzonals in 1973, the Nice Olympiad in 1974, and the Statham tournaments in Lone Pine, California - to talk to the world's leading grandmasters about book ideas. (Incidentally, my traveling to these events enabled me to report on them for *Chess Life & Review* at no cost to the U.S. Chess Federation, since Sidney paid all the bills.)

Some of the books R.H.M. published during that period were *How to Open a Chess Game*, by Evans, Gligoric, Larsen, Portisch, Petrosian, Hort, and Keres (the creation of this book is worth an article all to itself); *Understanding the French Defense*, by Gligoric and Uhlmann; *My Best Games*, by Karpov; *The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*, by Tal; *The Najdorf Variation*, by Geller, Gligoric, Kavalek, and Spassky; *The Gruenfeld Defense*, by Botvinnik and Estrin; *The Modern Defense*, by Hort and Mednis; *The Art of Chess Analysis*, by Timman; *The Best Move*, by Hort and Jansa; and others. I produced or edited many of them; a few were translations of foreign originals; others, especially the later ones, were produced in England by David Levy and Kevin O'Connell.

Any publisher would be proud of a list like that, and Sidney was indeed proud of it. But he was obsessed with the Survey. Although its early sales and subscriptions were not particularly encouraging, Sidney spent lavishly on it.

He simply refused to consider the possibility that his instincts might have misled him.

I believe his instincts were correct. What sank the Survey in the early 1980s was not public indifference (it was far too soon to gauge that) but two other factors. One was a really bad recommendation he had recently made in his financial newsletter. Some investors lost money, subscriptions fell off dramatically, and he suddenly had to reign in his propensity for spending money on his hobbies. R.H.M.'s chess program was one of the casualties. It was simply costing too much.

But the Survey would have been done in anyway by computer technology. We couldn't have predicted in the late 1970s, when the first Survey sections were beginning to come out, that within a few years home-computer databases would be commonplace. Compared to a computer database, a paper-based openings database like the R.H.M. Survey would have seemed as clumsy as the engine crank was after the electrical ignition was invented.

Sidney's dream was only partially realized, but its attempt had valuable consequences. Of course there is the library of chess titles. All have been out of print for years (though I believe the Tal and Timman books have been republished in new editions in England, and there are rumors that others are in the works), but thousands of players and students have benefitted from them and many grandmasters were very well paid to write them. And I have no doubt that Lubosh Kavalek's legendary database, which has been a significant factor in several world championship matches, can trace its roots to the work he did for R.H.M.

Although at the end of his life Sidney Fried was disappointed that he had not achieved all that he had wanted, he achieved a great deal more than most visionaries. He made a difference.

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This article first appeared at ChessCafe.com in May 1998.

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