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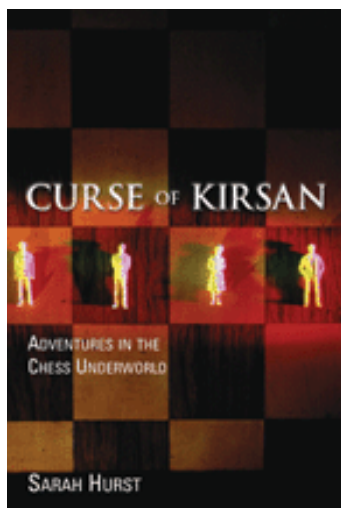
## A Man with a Noble Cause

### The Mission: Help Chess, Women and Children

COLUMNISTS

## *Susan Polgar on Chess*

Susan Polgar



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This month's article is a little different. I decided to treat you with something very unique, special, and inspirational. I decided to interview one of my best friends, for almost two decades, who also happens to be my business manager and trainer as well. His name is Paul Truong. He is the brains behind many current incredible projects to help chess. His mission is to bring chess to the level of popularity of golf, tennis and other sports. He has spent his own time and money to fulfill this mission. Often, people asked me why does he do this? I think you will know why after reading this touching interview.

This was a very emotional interview because it touched upon many painful topics for Paul, some things he tries not to talk about. But somehow, we got through the interview.

**Susan Polgar:** Why are you so passionate about changing the face of chess in America?

**Paul Truong:** Well, it is a very good question and one I don't think I have ever talked about before. It started from circumstances I had to deal with throughout the early part of my life. Growing up in Saigon, Vietnam, I became a chess icon at a very young age. I won the first National Junior (under 21) Championship when I was only 5 years old, unexpectedly. All of a sudden, I became a sensation, a child prodigy. I defended this title for the next three years. At the age of 8½, I stunned the country by winning my first national championship and defended it successfully for four consecutive years. My celebrity status skyrocketed. I was invited by the late President Marcos of the Philippines to attend the Fischer vs. Karpov match in Manila in 1975 (which of course never took place). I also qualified for the World Junior (under 21) Championship in Manila that same year. At that time, I thought I had a chance to showcase my talent on a world stage. Then, my life came crumbling down. The communists from North Vietnam took over my country on April 30, 1975. I was no longer allowed to travel. I was no longer allowed to play chess freely.

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Since my father was working for the US Embassy prior to the fall of South Vietnam, my family was singled out. They considered us traitors. For the next four years, my father had to constantly be in hiding. Otherwise, he would have been executed. The new government no longer allowed me to train in chess. The only thing they allowed me to do was to defend my National Championship, which I did successfully until April 30, 1979, the fourth anniversary of the fall of Saigon. On that day, my father and I escaped by boat through an underground network, leaving my mother and young brother behind. They would never survive this dangerous escape. Our hope was to be able to get out first and bring them out later through

another channel. To make the long story short, we faced death many times. How we survived was a miracle in itself.

**SP:** So what exactly happened?

**PT:** We had a lot of problems the first time we tried to escape. The wooden boat was only about 150 feet long and there were more than 600 people inside. We were sitting like sardines in a can, even worse. There was no ventilation, no food, no water and not even a bathroom. The engine could not hold up and exploded. We were stranded in the ocean without food and water for a while. After we were lucky enough to be rescued, our boat was towed back to Vietnam and we were all thrown in jail. Luckily, the authorities did not know who my father was. After bribing the local officials, we were released and we escaped again.

This time, the engine was bigger. But we had different problems. We were attacked by pirates from Thailand. They took the valuables from people on the boat. They raped our women and young girls. They even took some to their boat when they were done. We never saw these young girls again. We had to go through this five different times with five different pirate ships.

**SP:** So how did you get to safety?

**PT:** During the fifth attack, the pirates could not find any valuables because the previous four groups took everything. They were angry so they sunk our boat. We were in the middle of nowhere in shark infested waters. Many people could not swim and drowned. Other died of exhaustion. And some died from you know...

**SP:** You mean from shark attacks?

**PT:** Unfortunately, yes. My father and I were lucky enough to live through this. An American oil tanker happened to go by, saw us and rescued us. We then were brought to Malaysia.

**SP:** So you were safe after this?

**PT:** No. After being in a small enclosed abandoned soccer field with no roof over our head, little food and unbearable living conditions for 30 days, we were thrown out of Malaysia because the locals could no longer to help us. They put us on a boat taken from previous refugees, threw in another 350+ refugees from different boats (now we had about 700 people total), gave us 20 gallons of fuel and 20 gallons of water (no food), then towed us out to international waters. Could you imagine, 20 gallons of fuel? Where do you go with 20 gallons? And 20 gallons of water for 700 people? How long can anyone last under 120-degree heat directly under the tropical sun with no food or water?

Not only that, while the towed us out, they purposely tried to sink us. They towed us in a zigzag formation to tear apart the front of the boat. They did but we were lucky that the boat did not break in half. After they got us to the point where they thought we could never survive, they left us to die. Again, we had to drift to nowhere for weeks without food, water or fuel. Many people died of hunger and thirst. Dead bodies were everywhere. There was nothing you could do. All you could do was pray.

**SP:** How did you manage to survive?

**PT:** I guess my father and I survived because of our inner strength. We said to ourselves, we have to live. We have to make it because if we don't, my younger brother and mother would die eventually die in Vietnam. They had no way of taking care of themselves. The communists did not treat them well after learning of the escape of my father and me. They punished them. They took away everything they owned. So we had to be strong and make it. We had no choice.... [Paused, tears welling up]

I am sorry. This is a very emotional topic for me. It brings back a part of me that caused me great pain.

**SP:** That is OK. I know you for 17-18 years now. I know you usually don't want to talk about it. But I think this is really important for chess fans around the country and around the world to know why you are so passionate about helping chess. I think it is very inspirational. Please go on. How did you survive?

**PT:** We were drifting nowhere for a long time. All of sudden, after weeks of nothing but ocean, we finally saw land at the end of the horizon.

**SP:** So that was it?

**PT:** Not exactly! We could not get there because we had no fuel. And it was too long of a distance to swim. No one would make it. But luckily, I don't know how, but the current apparently pushed us slowly closer. Then out of nowhere, Indonesian navy ships came in front of us to stop us from entering. My father was brought to the commanding ship. They told my father to turn our boat around. My father explained to them we could not. We had no fuel, no food, no

water and many of our people had died. They said they had order not to let us in. If we do, they have no choice but to shoot us down. My father told them in that case then please just save all of us from a slow and eventual death by shooting all of us now. We would not make it anyway. Upon returning to our boat, my father ordered everyone to throw overboard all the dead bodies that relatives were still trying to hold on to for a proper burial. This was our only hope to show them how bad the situation was. When the captain of the commanding ship saw how many bodies were there, I think he changed his mind. An hour later, an official helicopter circled around us and they officially requested to have us brought to safety. In my heart, I know that the captain had radioed for help. But he would never admit it.

**SP:** So this was the end of the journey?

**PT:** Kind of! After we were brought to this wild and deserted island, we were safe. But we still had no food. I had to hunt and fish with my bare hands, and find fruits from the jungle. We had to do whatever we could to survive. This was a real survival experience, not the game you see on TV. Many more people died as a result of malnutrition. We stayed here for about 5-6 months I think. Then finally, we came to New Jersey on December 1, 1979. I spoke no English. I was frail. I was very rusty in chess. It was a disaster.

**SP:** So did you start to play a lot chess in here in America? And did anyone know what you had to endure?

**PT:** I played in any tournament that I can afford to enter. I had no money. I was going to high school full time (without even knowing the language) and I worked seven part-time jobs at night and weekends to raise money to send back to Vietnam to help my mother, my brother and over 60 other relatives. Most people did not know this. Some knew, but very little. I did not want anyone to feel sorry for me. I wanted to earn everything by merit. I became a master again in 1980. I was right around 15. I won many tournaments, but I could not afford to enter many big tournaments, so mostly regional ones.

**SP:** So when did you leave chess?

**PT:** At the age of 17, I had to make a very hard decision. Do I want to continue to play chess and be a professional, and to fulfill my dream of being a grandmaster and even world champion? Or do I just give it up and go to college and have a normal career? I chose to leave the game. How could I be a world-class player if I did not even have the opportunity to train or play?

So I went to college. And during college, I did the same thing. I had 7 part-time jobs while taking over 21 credits per semester. I also took winter courses, summer courses. I needed to graduate as quickly as possible.

**SP:** So what happened after college?

**PT:** I began working professionally. I worked very hard. I put in 16-18 hour

days, seven days a week. I became very successful. I did that every day for 15 years. Then in 2001, on 9/11, you remember we had a business meeting right around the World Trade Center area that morning. I guess someone up there did not want us to go. That was when I felt that it was my calling to do something I always wanted to do, and that is to get back in the chess field. That was always my true love.

**SP:** Is this why making a difference for chess is so important to you?

**PT:** Yes. Absolutely. I lost my chance to become a very special player in chess when I was younger because of the political situation in my country. I wanted to become the first grandmaster from Asia. But I did not have this chance. Then when I was in America, I could not pursue chess fully because I could not afford it. That is why it is my mission to change this. I want to be able to give every child an opportunity to play this game. I want every child who wants to pursue his or her dream will have the proper guidance and assistance. I know that I may not reach every child. But I will give it 150% everyday to fulfill this mission. I want to bring respectability to chess. I want to bring chess to the same level as golf or tennis. Why not? Who says we can't do it? If I can survive everything I went through in life, why can't I do this? I don't know failure. I don't accept failures. I don't understand the word 'impossible'. I did not risk my life, give up everything to come here to just be another person. I want to make a difference. I want to give back for the blessing I had.

**SP:** Is this where you get your passion?

**PT:** Yes! Whatever I do, I give 150% of myself. Everything I do, I do with a passion. Everything I say, I say it with a passion. This is me. Even now when I am retired from business, I still put in 20-22 hour days, for chess, for free. I hope my passion will rub off on other people. I hope that when more people see why I am doing this, they will join and lend a hand. There are 35-40 million people who play this game according to the numbers I read. Why can't chess be bigger and more popular? I will not take no for an answer. I am confident. Let me rephrase that. I am absolutely positive that we will succeed if everyone works together.

**SP:** How do you plan to reach out to every child around the country? That is quite a job and quite a goal.

**PT:** You are right. It is not possible for you or I to go to every school or city in America. But thank God we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with internet technology. We can reach out and help every child this way. Recently, I contacted Mr. Niro and a few people I know who are in the internet chess industry. They agreed to help me achieve this goal. As you already know, we have to start with the kids and we need the support from parents and coaches. So starting next month, and by the way, before I go into this, I want to thank you for doing this with me. You are a true ambassador for this game and you are truly a role model to children and women. You are really an inspiration to me as well. Thank you for working with me in these very worthwhile projects.

As I was saying, starting in September, we are (you and I) going to have a monthly Q&A session with all parents and coaches who need or want advice on how to help their children, their schools, their communities, etc. Parents and coaches can send us questions and they will get a chance to get the answers they need on the Internet. It will be done live and FREE for everyone. On top of that, we are also conducting special training for youth and scholastic players. All children will benefit tremendously from your experience and wisdom. I am thankful to have the cooperation and assistance from USCF, the Chess Hall of Fame Live and your Susan Polgar Foundation. We hope this will help hundreds of thousands (maybe even millions) of children out there. Everyone is welcome and it is free. All they have to do is find out the details from your website [www.susanpolgar.com](http://www.susanpolgar.com) or [www.chesshall.org](http://www.chesshall.org). The info will be available soon. I am really excited about this.

**SP:** How did this idea come about?

**PT:** When you and I attended all these different national scholastic events, so many parents and coaches came up to us to ask for advice. That was when I started thinking, how can we help more parents and coaches? Then the idea of doing through the Internet came to my mind. This way, we can reach out to everyone 24/7.

**SP:** I can understand your passion for youth and scholastic chess. Where did the passion for women's chess come from?

**PT:** I think the answer is obvious. A - My best friend for almost two decades is the greatest women's world champion ever. B - Being part of a minority group, I want to help the underdog. Just like you, I believe that many young girls can benefit from chess. It can help them raise self-esteem and confidence. With your experience, we can really make a difference. That is why a program like the US Women's Olympiad program is so important to me. It can change chess, as we know it, forever.



I am so thankful for people like you, Garry Kasparov, Michael Khodarkovsky, Frank Niro, the USCF and the EB board, the Chess Trust, etc. for lending a hand, believing in this. I think by now, everyone realize that we do not do this for money since there is no money (chuckle). In fact, it is costing us a lot of money (smile). But it is worth it. It is truly worth it.

**SP:** Paul, I really appreciate you doing this. I know that for 20 something years in America, you tried not to talk about your traumatic life experience. I realize that it is very emotional and difficult for you. But I think your story can inspire a lot of people. One last question?

**PT:** Sure.

**SP:** Have you thought about putting your inspirational life story into a book, maybe even a movie? I know that there are a lot more incredible details (including an episode where you had a gun pointed right at your head and you refused to back down to the Communists, you would rather die for what you believe in) that you did not want to go into. Your story can rank up there with the Anne Frank story and many other WW/Holocaust stories.

**PT:** I would like to but I don't know how to go about and do that. Maybe someone can help me. But if and when it happens, I would like to use the money from book sales or movie deal to help chess. I will only do it for a meaning, not just to make money for myself. I have done that for 15 years already. I don't need it. But I will do it to help women and children. I will only re-live this painful part of my life if it can benefit millions of children and women.

**SP:** Once again, thank you Paul for sharing part of your life with us. As one of your best friend for almost 20 years, all I can say is that you are such an inspiration for many, including me. I have no doubt as well that you, me, us, we will succeed in making a difference in chess.

The following is a quote from Garry Kasparov about the US Women's Olympiad Program, where Paul is the Captain, Business Manager and even helping out with the training duties.

World Champion Garry Kasparov:

*"Having decided to be a part of this project, we aren't going to do this half-way. We, at the KCF, view this project as a long-term program, which includes not only support of the U.S. Women's Team, but also a creation of the program for gifted children. It is our intention to create a full scale training system, which would allow us to select and nurture young talents in America.*

*If you take the responsibility to prepare the team for the Olympiad, it means that you're responsible for making decisions on behalf of the team. I know from my own experience how difficult it is to create a competitive squad where everyone has the same view and driven by the ultimate goal - to do everything is needed for the TEAM to succeed.*

*"What I've seen in this team is quite unique in today's world of chess" - it goes to your (Paul) part of the team's chemistry and respect in the team's members' relations.*

*Before our session I asked Michael what is the Team's ultimate goal? He answered: "We will shoot for the gold". Frankly, I took this statement with some sort of skepticism. But after the session, I*

*must admit you do have "The Team." which is capable to win the Olympiad Gold."*

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Paul Truong assisted Susan Polgar in the preparation of this column. Susan Polgar is available for chess instruction. For more information, visit the Polgar Chess Center, 97-09 64th Road, Rego Park, NY 11374 (Tel: 718-897-4600) or email: [PolgarChessInc@aol.com](mailto:PolgarChessInc@aol.com)

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