

An ‘Obsessive’ Move to Oblivion-Chess Master Bobby Fischer’s ‘Compulsive’ Self-Driven Decline.

“I love the dark of the night. It helps me concentrate” said chess champion Bobby Fischer. The night with its dark silence inherently contained the essence of what he craved: for Bobby everything was about sharpening his focus to search out the next brilliant move. When on his game, he could achieve an uncanny power of concentration that he viscerally felt gave him almost a superman prowess in playing a challenging board game. If quiet was his talisman than noise—unwanted, intrusive sounds—were his kryptonite. If he could block out everything around him, he could play not only his best, but perhaps better than anyone had played chess, ever! His memory was prolific and when analyzing possible moves or dissecting a notable match, he often proselytizing to others in a manner that demonstrated an astounding insight---- where multiple outcomes would leap from his fertile mind outlining innovative gambits. He studied the game incessantly since childhood and had filed away in his sharp mind a library of knowledge about how the past greats had approached chess and succeeded in besting opponents.

Chess players, the grandmasters, despite myths about their ability to see and plan their attack or defense any moves ahead do not possess magical powers. Knowing many variations and tried-but-true strategies they can recognize what is coming by their study of such chess paradigms. Knowledge of past successful tactics is the foundation of their attack, and often it may come down to whether your opponent recognizes what you are doing, knows a defense or counterattack to foil it, or simply makes a blundering mistake. One chess piece, even a pawn can be a material advantage with gravitas over an opponent, enough to force his or her resignation or reluctantly settle for a tying draw. Memory is another potential *charlatan* in that what one sees in amazing displays of recapturing what transpired long ago is not perhaps a sign of genius as one might expect; an obscure endgame from twenty years ago employed opportunistically at just the right moment may not be what it seems for one who is obsessed in constantly reviewing such tactics in his mind. It may have happened two decades ago and is long forgotten by all except for a grandmaster like Bobby Fischer who rewinds and replays such strategies almost incessantly in his active mind.

Memory and retention, especially rote memorization is enhanced by quiet, just ask a librarian. Bobby Fischer suffered from *hyperacusis*—an acute and persistent sensitivity to noise and even far-off distant sounds. And to someone like Bobby intrusive sounds and their ability to disrupt his ‘gold-standard’ of focus were like the intrinsic value of the various chess pieces. Some were pawns that he could dismiss or tolerate but others in this hierarchy of auditory threats were powerful evil queens whose threat were nearly omnipotent. Under stressful conditions as in a competitive chess match know one knew ‘just what sounds’ could shatter the ‘zone of hyperfocus concentration’ that he required to compete at his best. Some ‘white noises’ he could just blend into the background like highway traffic on a nearby expressway but some especially those generated by others out of other people’s neglect, irresponsibility, ignorance and zero thoughtfulness were much more troublesome. In his high anxiety state, such noises in Bobby’s mind also fueled his paranoia about the ill-intent of those who did not wish him to win or succeed. It sabotaged his extreme desire for perfectionism in excelling in a boardgame that enveloped his whole identity and his success at it brought him fame, respect, and admiration.

The 1970s was the era of cigarette advertisements being banned from the airwaves, President Nixon’s groundbreaking trip to Red China, and the World Chess Championship in early 1972 played in Reykjavik Iceland when the American upstart Bobby Fischer challenged Boris Spassky, an icon of the Soviet Chess machine. The state sponsored chess program that had produced chess champions that had demonstrated their superiority in chess by holding the World Championship title for 34 years; the title was a holy grail that the Soviets had no intention of releasing without a dirty fight. They maneuvered for very advantage they could for they felt that the chess title was a badge showcasing the superiority of their entire Soviet system. That the precocious Brooklynite was a lone American genius in chess rankled them because the Soviets had spared no energy in their plodding industry devoted to churn out a plethora of world-class championship caliber players. As the first game progressed, most analysts predicted that it would end in a draw. Inexplicably, on the 29th move with the material positions of the two opposing players equal Fischer blundered sacrificing his bishop for two pawns in what appeared to all as an amateurish move. Next Fischer complained about the ‘whirling noise’ that came from one of the backstage cameras whose lens protruded through a banner of the Icelandic Chess Federation promoting the event. Despite Fischer’s protest, no change to the camera positioning or its operation were made. On the 45th move, Spassky had a bishop and three pawns against Fischer’s five pawns, and he decided to use his time allotment to adjourn the day’s game. Following protocol, Spassky sealed his move in a brown

envelope and handed it over to the Icelandic chess officials. This allowed for overnight analysis by both players but when play resumed and the sealed move by Spassky was posted, Bobby appeared fatigued and apprehensive as if a night spent in fretful deliberation only had made his situation more dire. Fischer's first move was made in seconds and a quick succession of moves were exchanged but the Soviet grandmaster's positioning only grew stronger. Fischer with his timing clock running left his seat to run backstage and vehemently complained about the noise emanating from the same camera as yesterday. The Icelandic officials after consulting with the television producers agreed to dismantle the offending camera. When Fischer returned to his seat on the stage 35 minutes of his allotted time had elapsed and when it soon became clear that Spassky was on the verge of queening a pawn by making it to the opponent's back file Bobby stopped his clock and resigned before attempting his fifty-sixth move. His mood was dark but after quickly leaving the stage he rationalized that the distraction of the camera noise was to blame for his loss. The next morning, on July 13th, through his American delegation, Bobby announced that he would not play on the mainstage unless all the cameras were removed. He further insisted that only he could determine what disturbed him but negated any efforts to inspect the facility to check on the new arrangements made to improve the situation before resumption of the match. He forfeited the second game due to failing to show up at the stipulated time and an angry spectator from the audience shouted out what many of the disappointed spectators felt: "Send him [Fischer] back to the United States!" Despite interest by US President Nixon and a second call to Bobby by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to Bobby imploring him to continue, Fischer had already booked a flight to abruptly return to New York City on the scheduled day of the third game. Spassky agreed to move the site to a backstage 'ping pong room' and Bobby despite being assured that he would have complete privacy did not consent also until just one hour and a half before he would have been disqualified with Spassky proclaimed world champion. Fischer arrived eight minutes tardy, but the men shook hands and Spassky playing white made his opening move. Bobby responded with his responding move, then eyeing a television camera lens staring at them started to yell. "I am leaving!" Spassky announced stating that he was returning to the table on the main stage to resume the play there and the officials pleaded with Bobby to accept the presence of 'the noiseless camera' that was a closed-circuit way for the game to be projected to the audience watching the screen on the mainstage. No copy would be kept, and Bobby somehow accepted this rather dubious explanation, resuming official match play. They ended up playing arguably a great game surpassed only by the beautifully executed sixth game of the match; and, after 45 moves Bobby's positioning was so strong at adjournment that the next day when play was resumed, he agreed to return to the mainstage to finish the game. Fischer arriving 15 minutes late surprisingly found Spassky already gone, with Spassky immediately resigning after seeing Bobby's unsealed move, both players avoided meeting at all for the Soviet entourage was en-route back to their hotel. The sixth game was pivotal and featured Fischer's bold offensive which forced Spassky's capitulation and is aptly described as comparable to the artistic precision of Mozart or Beethoven in composing the musical score of their greatest symphonies. In victory and defeat both players exhibited skill, acumen, and mastery. After twenty games, the score stood **11 1/2 to 8 1/2** in Fischer's favor and Bobby needed just two draws or one victory to wrest the championship from Spassky with four games remaining. The Soviets now desperate or crumbling under the pressure of a looming defeat grasped at straws when their delegation accused the Americans of 'influencing the play of Spassky by chemical or electronic means. An investigation was launched by the Reykjavik police that involved analyzing air samples on the stage, scraping exposed surfaces for tell-tale, trace amounts of foreign chemicals and even resorted to x-raying Spassky's chair. The Russians insisted that the light fixture be inspected for hidden 'bugs' but as the policeman unscrewed the glass globe all he found were two petrified, dead houseflies! As the 21st game commenced on August 31, 1972, reached adjournment later that day it looked promising for Fischer that he would soon reach the winning number of 12 1/2 points. The next day, recognizing that his fate had been sealed at the end of the previous day, at 12:50 PM Spassky officially resigned by phone call protocol and Fischer won the match capturing the coveted world championship. It was a match that would not be forgotten because both players were at their prime. In chess, the level of your competitor's play matters because it brings out the best of one's own game tactics and play. Outfielder Willie Mays' back to the diamond 'circus' catch in 1954 at the Polo Grounds in New York only materialized because left-handed batter Vic Wertz struck a 420-foot towering drive to centerfield.

By the late 1970s, Bobby Fischer had not played a single public match of chess since his victory in Iceland. Like the Renaissance artist Michelangelo, Bobby Fischer suffered from obsessive compulsive disorder [OCD]. It was the inspirational dynamo behind his success as well as the cause of his destructive 'end game.' He suffered from it severely as well as depression and signs of Tourette Syndrome--all lay along the similar spectrum of anxiety disorders as OCD, and it is often difficult when one disorder is dominant over the others. The OCD disorder explains Bobby's symptomology and mental condition quite thoroughly and expediently; OCD with its intense anxiety was arguably the root of causation for Bobby's hateful delusions and paranoia spewed toward others especially the Jews. Ironically, the antisemitic tropes and hateful propaganda that he espoused in public and at the most inappropriate times is disheartening because Bobby like his extended family were Eastern European Jews. He seemed to have no control cursed like the profanity-riddled utterings of a Tourette sufferer in venting his anger and hatred toward Jews. He glommed onto widely held, hateful delusions scapegoating Jews that historically circulated through the dark recesses

of men's minds, and this is a significant distinction about his paranoia. He did not conjure up psychotic imaginations about 'his dog controlling his mind and commanding him to murder people like the New York killer 'Son of Sam'. No, his delusions were extensions of what many with unkind minds believe or propagate. Of course, taken to an extreme it in itself exposes the high degree of his neuroticism and his dysfunctional mind. Bobby's thinking devolved into spurious logic to undermine and attack whole classes of people that he felt had injured him. OCD often is an unreasonable extension of what may be in some situations a desired outcome and it is fueled not by illogical thoughts but by irrational fears, anxieties and feelings that overwhelm the sufferer. "I feel this way, so it must be true." The homemaker who wants a clean house cannot stop her compulsive scrubbing, the banker who wants to make sure the vaults locked just cannot stop checking the lock, the hypochondriac who is afraid of germs who just cannot halt washing her hands. The house is clean, the safe or door is shut and bolted, and my washed hands are scoured spotless—"I know it, I see it, but I do not feel it. It feels like I just must repeat my action and this to my own amazement profoundly increases my anxiety and the need to compulsively repeat my action." Bobby did have enemies especially in the competitive world of international chess. The Soviets especially in their will to dominate the professional chess world cheated and colluded among themselves to maintain their chess hegemony but Bobby's paranoia was gross distortions of possible threats or skullduggery. One can be perceptibly on the right track and still *crazy*. He became over time convinced that the Soviet KGB wanted to assassinate him for his winning the world championship from Boris Spassky in 1972 as revenge for their embarrassing defeat on the world stage. He feared a KGB plot to kill him, he simply did not want contact from anyone he did not already know. He feared that the postage might contain poison or an explosive, and at restaurants he carried with him antidotes that he felt would neutralize poisons that the Soviets might slip into his meal or drink. Bobby was quoted as saying that he had his dental fillings removed in fear that the Soviets were relaying harmful radio waves through his metal fillings; authors defend him saying that he was misquoted but Bobby was afraid that silver and mercury leaching out causing harm to his body and that were causing irritation to his gums. His missing fillings, chipped teeth, pulled crowns and dental implants added to his vagrant look; with his now disheveled dress, ungroomed hair and beard and out-of-shape paunch made him almost indistinguishable from the down-and-out Los Angeles homeless. By the summer of 1992, after refusing to competitively play because the 'Russians were cheats' and that he was simply 'waiting for the right offer'--- impoverished, he was living in a small room barely 35 square feet including a bed and toilet. Even paranoids have enemies, and we cannot discount possible espionage intrigue as the more recently reported Havana Syndrome, but it is the irrational lengths he went to lessen his fears of these perhaps plausible threats that reveals his OCD mindset. Bobby saw repairmen working on rooftops as 'Israeli Intelligence.' At best, his hypochondria was just another arrow in his quiver of OCD malingering traits.

His long-awaited rematch with Spassky in early September 1992 violated US law and United Nations sanctions placed on war-ravaged Yugoslavia because of atrocities by Serbia and Montenegro on the Muslim minorities. Violations of Executive Order 12810 issued in June 1992 prohibited any business contract or commercial project in the isolated Yugoslavian territories and threatened civil penalties up to \$10,000 per violation and imprisonment up to 10 years. Bobby, who had not filed his US taxes in 15 years dismissed the importance of U.S. Treasury's Cease & Desist Order. Twenty years of inactivity did not prevent Bobby Fischer from again defeating a declining Boris Spassky in 30 games and Fischer was now \$3.5 million wealthier. Unfortunately, much of that prizemoney could be confiscated for payment of the U.S. fines and penalties imposed due to his sanction violation and IRS tax evasion. It was not at all a memorable match but what could one expect after his long lay-off from competition.

By the autumn of 2007, he had soured on the benevolent Icelandic people who had offered him a safe refuge after his legal problems with the United States government. Like the Jews, the Soviets, the United States, his disillusionment with Icelanders became fixed because just his struggles to live day to day among them had like previously experienced many times before no matter the setting sparked his anxiety and illness. In his youth, he knew the Jews. He was one of them and he knew their foibles and flaws because their perceived shortcomings and faults had caused him emotional pain. He came to identify with those that vilified them and came to believe in the superiority of the Aryan race because it reaffirmed his negative experience of growing up immersed in such a community. The Aryan hatred of the inferior Jews was affirmation of his personal difficulties he experienced while growing up due to being inflicted with severe anxiety, but he would have experienced such dysfunction in any community even among the Teutonic elite. Every community becomes villainized because his experience of daily life inevitable becomes wrought with personal turmoil. His inner suffering catapulted his negatives feelings onto others through distorted projections and triggered the fear that fueled his gullibility in his wholesale support of the vilest racial stereotypes. One psychiatrist, Dr. Magnus Skulasson—who knew Bobby well toward the end of his life, insisted that the term *psychotic* did not apply to Bobby. Indeed, removed from triggering stresses, Fischer behaved friendly, charming and was in touch with reality if one did not trespass unto sensitive areas or forbidden subjects. In medical plain speak, he was neurotic but not psychotic. No matter how bizarre his antics he never truly lost touch with reality. Not an easy distinction to recognize considering Bobby's illogical behavior especially when away in foreign cultures in fearful exile. Once when at the movie theatre in Tokyo at a

showing of the American Film *Pearl Harbor* Bobby clapped loudly cheering the Japanese Zero airplanes sinking the *USS Arizona*--he later said it shocked him that no one else there joined into what was an embarrassment to the Japanese audience.

Perhaps the most egregious public broadcast came on September 11, 2001. Exiled in Tokyo, *Radio Baguio* of the Philippines telephoned him to comment on the horrendous World Trade Center and Pentagon terrorist attacks.

Fischer: Yes, well, this is wonderful news. It's time for the U.S. to get their heads kicked in. It's time to finish off the U.S. once and for all.

Interviewer: You are happy at what happened?

Fischer: Yes, I applaud the act...Fuck the U.S.—I want to see the [United States] wiped out.

Bobby search for peace and inspiration to cope with his difficult life included embracing and discarding various religions; as a child, there was Judaism that left him alienated, then Christian Fundamentalism which he devotedly followed until his rift with church leaders, and then transcendental meditation with the cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, atheism, and near the end of his life he studied Roman Catholicism. The latter's emphasis on charity, humility, and forgiveness of sins by confession did not gybe with Bobby's most fervent antisemitism: "Unfortunately we're not strong enough just to wipe out all the Jews at this time. So, I believe we should engage in vigilante killing of Jews. What I want to do is to arouse people against the Jews to the point of violence. Because the Jews are criminal people. They deserve to have their heads cracked open." Sadly, Adolph Hitler could not be more succinct in espousing hatred. Bobby Fischer was a portrait of sadness, regret of what might have been, and was engulfed in a quagmire of perhaps physical and certain traumatic psychic pain. He felt that he himself was 'persecuted by the Jews' and frequently blathered out in public forums that 'the Holocaust never happened.' As Adolf Hitler authored in his manifesto *Mein Kampf*, Bobby would parrot: "The Jews are not the victims, they are the victimizers!" Previously when he was lonely, he would visit his sister and her family in Palo Alto, California. Joan and her husband who conducted research at Stanford University as well as their three children were Jewish but after enduring Bobby's rants against the Jews repeatedly, they asked him to leave. His inability to be a consider the sensitivity of others was profound and led to the alienation of family and friends. He just could not stop or refrain the impulse to spew forth his hateful rhetoric.

Bobby Fischer might have been the greatest chess player who ever lived but his formidable brilliance came at a steep cost. He became a pitiful figure dying ignobly at age 64 years of renal failure after he had adamantly refused dialysis even though he was warned of the dire consequences. He was an uncooperative patient who made life difficult for the doctors and nurses trying to care for him. He refused a fixed urinary catheter and pain medications and insisted on dictating what he would eat, and who he would see at his deathbed as well as those he wanted backlisted. The ward nurses surreptitiously applied morphine patches to his body at sites out of Bobby's sight to ease his pain. Terminally ill he was nonetheless returned to his apartment in December 2007 and cared for by the family of his close friend, Icelandic Gardar Sverrisson, who lived two floors below him. His wife had nursing skills and did what she could to provide Bobby with hospice care. On January 17th, 2008--- after being re-hospitalized he died peacefully. There are 64 squares on a chessboard, one for each year of Fischer's life, but because of his mental illness he was far less successful in living each of those precious years than he was in mastering the destiny of his chess pieces among those light-and-dark checkered squares. Unlike chess, life was a game he never could conquer. His illuminating brilliance contrasted with his jet-black darkness--- both propelled by his untreated OCD. May he be forgiven. Rest In *Quiet* Peace, Mr. Bobby Fischer.

By R. Anthony Saritelli

August 31, 2022---Fifty years after Fischer's last winning move that would force the capitulation of Boris Spassky and gaining the world chess championship in Iceland.

Dedicated to all OCD sufferers and the people who ease their anxiety.

References:

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