

# Searching For Fischer's Legacy

Bobby Fischer would have turned 75 this month. Ten years removed from the death of the most controversial person in US Chess history, we take a sober look at his legacy.

Text by **MENACHEM WECKER**

**I**N GAME THEORY, CHESS IS CONSIDERED TO HAVE “perfect information,” which means that luck doesn’t affect outcome. It’s therefore ironic or providential that a series of coincidences surround the man invariably hailed as one of history’s best players. In 2008, Bobby Fischer died at age 64—the number of chessboard squares. The day he died, January 17, is the birthday of Icelandic politician Davíð Oddsson, who helped secure Fischer’s release from a Japanese prison. Oddsson grew up in Selfoss, the town where Fischer is buried, some 30 miles southeast of Reykjavik. And the single mom who raised Fischer, who was the most important “piece” in his life, was named Regina, Latin for queen.

Another fluke surfaces in the painted “Sermon on the Mount” above the altar at the Selfoss Catholic church Laugardælakirkja. Haloed, goateed, and clad in biblical garb, Jesus preaches to a dozen bystanders. The clichéd picture wouldn’t make the cut for a museum storage room, but it’s curious for a figure kneeling on the right, hand clutched to his heart. The white-bearded man, with his modern-looking cap, unruly hair, and piercing gaze, evokes the last known photograph of Fischer, buried

mere steps and five rows of pews away in the church graveyard.

Robert J. Fischer, who died an Icelandic citizen 10 years ago last January, could be the kneeling figure’s doppelgänger. In a 2005 photograph that Einar Einarsson snapped, the chess genius wears a dark cap and denim shirt; behind him, a framed picture suggests a cross between a Scrabble board and a Native American quilt. Fischer rarely agreed to be photographed but made an exception at the restaurant 3 Frakkar (“Three Coats”) when an old chef he knew from 1972 requested a memento.

Einarsson, a bank executive who, with two others, flew to Japan to intercede on behalf of the jailed Fischer and helped secure his citizenship and extradition to Iceland, first photographed the two men before moving the camera slightly to the left and snapping Fischer alone. “The result was a revealing portrait of a man in pain: psychic and perhaps physical,” writes biographer Frank Brady in the 2012 book *Endgame: Bobby Fischer’s Remarkable Rise and Fall—from America’s Brightest Prodigy to the Edge of Madness*.

Taken together, the kneeling figure and its poetic twin, the Fischer who emerges in Einarsson’s picture—the weight of the world on his

shoulders Atlas-like—raise a slew of difficult questions about the legacy of an elusive man. Fischer beat the Russians at their own game and put America on the map eight years before the “Miracle on Ice.” But the same man who secured the world championship in 1972 in the “Match of the Century” also told a radio interviewer that he hoped the United States would be wiped off the map as the dust had barely begun settling after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. And the boy who was born Jewish in Chicago, who ended up being buried on church grounds perhaps under Catholic rite, nearly rivaled Hitler himself in the ugliness and paranoia of his statements about Jews. Ever thorough, Fischer wrote to *Encyclopedia Judaica* demanding he be removed from its listing.

Standing before Fischer's tombstone, moved by the minimalism of the stark, bone-white marble set against the lush grass in an otherwise doldrums Icelandic palette, my mind wandered to the opening lines of the 1993 film *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. The narrator deadpans about the entire world wondering if Fischer would show up in Reykjavik. Of course, he did, and complained about nearly everything under the seemingly never-setting Icelandic sun. Whatever his motivations and

soundness of mind, he propelled himself, and the home country he hadn't yet renounced so uncouthly, into history. “Then Bobby Fischer made the most original move of all; he disappeared,” the film adds, anticipating Keyser Söze's penchant two years later.

The ominous line resonated as I surveyed the grave. Fischer was easy to track when he was already six feet under, but teasing out his reputation and his legacy as the 10-year anniversary of his death approached—and recently passed—still required a good deal of searching.

### ICELAND'S “FRIEND”

When Fischer arrived in Iceland with his newly-minted passport in 2005, it was the return of a prodigal son who had propelled Iceland into the international spotlight. “Bobby Fischer is fondly remembered here as an ‘Íslandsvinur,’ a friend of Iceland, which is a term we use for foreigners that connect well to the country,” says Ívar Pálsson, a shrimp exporter and Reykjavik native who was 14 when he attended the Fischer-Boris Spassky match.

“We all remember Fischer's eccentricities, which were widely published,



*Laugardæll Church in Laugardæll, Iceland.  
Photo by Nachama Soloveichik.*

but everybody knew he was a genius, so that was fine!" he says. The Cold War was a foreboding presence at the time, and Fischer's match against the Russian grandmaster Boris Spassky embodied the tension. "Icelanders were happy that Fischer won, especially since it was reported that the Russians were using all kinds of devious methods to distract him," Pálsson remembers.

"In Iceland, people tend to forgive geniuses their eccentric behavior," agrees Gudmundur Thórarinnsson, President of the Icelandic Chess Federation, which organized the 1972 match. "People looked at him as one man competing against the famous Soviet chess school."

In 1972, Icelanders saw in Fischer a David taking on the Soviet Goliath. Per 1 Samuel 17, Goliath arrived ready for battle with a massive ensemble: helmet, armor, and spear. He had a shield bearer. David, meanwhile, was too small for armor, so he met Goliath alone, humble slingshot in hand. Spassky's Reykjavik entourage included a masseuse, personal trainer, private chef, and a team of grandmasters to help him analyze games and prepare. At most, Fischer sometimes brought a second with him and he rarely actually relied on that assistance. Thirty-three years later, Icelanders again saw an underdog in Fischer, this time aged and humbled, under assault from the U.S. government. Fischer had been a fugitive since breaking an embargo and playing Spassky in 1992 in war-torn Yugoslavia.

"He was the oppressed one, and we agreed to give him cover, also as gratitude for promoting Iceland when nobody knew about it," Pálsson says. He notes that many Icelanders see it as a source of pride that Icelandic ambassador Thor Thors helped lead the United Nations in its recognition of Israel, and Iceland was the first country to recognize the Palestinian state. It's hard to imagine more compelling credentials for dark horse cheerleading.

Icelanders deplored the hateful things that Fischer had said publicly about the United States and about Jews, explains Brady, but they felt a sense of obligation to help the man who had honored their country in 1972 and was now in trouble. "To not help him, they believed, would be a greater moral offense and act of ingratitude than even his verbal attacks of hostility and hatred," he writes in *Endgame*.

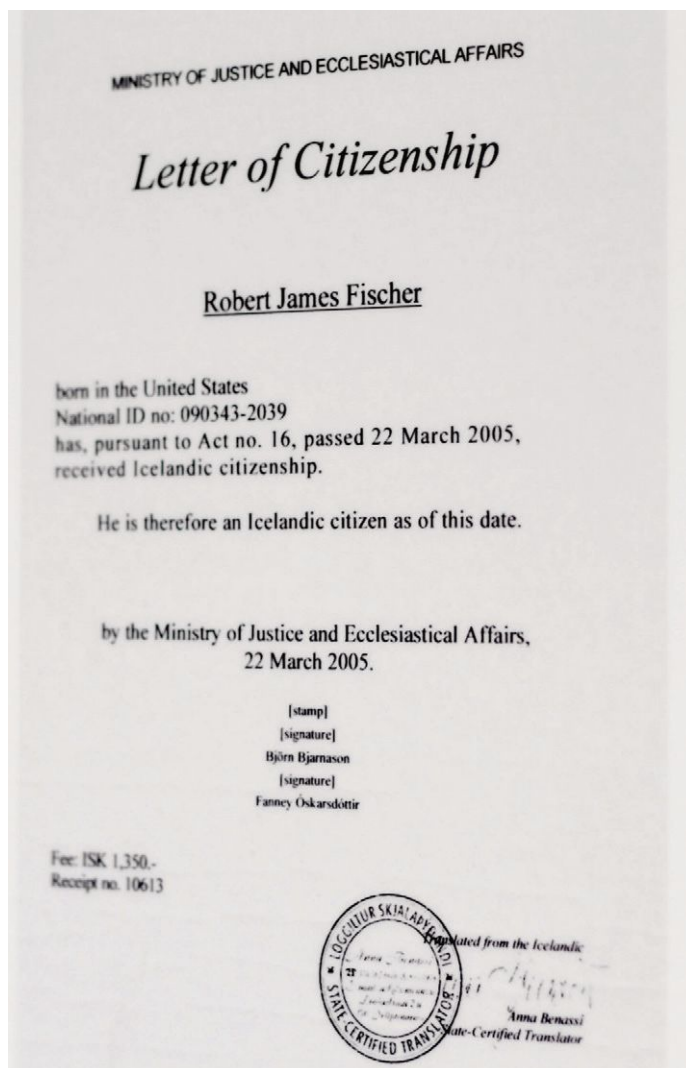
Just over a mile from the Selfoss gravesite, the Bobby Fischer Center, a museum and space for playing chess, contains a few hundred facsimiles of memorabilia, as well as some real items, including the chair Fischer used to sit on at the Reykjavik used book store Bragi's, also known as Fornbókabúð Braga or Bókin. (Among the literature he read there were anti-Semitic conspiracies and neo-Nazi books.)

"He didn't like authorities in general, and I think he connected Judaism to the government in the United States," says Aldís Sigfúsdóttir, part of the museum's executive board. "I think he made a connection."

The event organizer Thórarinnsson says many saw Fischer's comments as "serious wounds in his soul." In his conversations with Fischer, Thórarinnsson got the sense that Fischer felt that the many Jewish people who tried to help him as a child had ulterior motives of self-promotion. "He denied being a Jew and said that being a Jew is a religion not a nationality," he says. "Traveling alone, lonely in many countries, hunting him for moving wooden pieces from black squares to white squares, breaking directives that were long outdated in a country that did not exist any more—his inappropriate comments have to be looked at in this light." Historians of the future, he adds, will judge the United States harshly for its treatment of the troubled genius.

Like Pálsson and Thórarinnsson, Sigfúsdóttir is quick to forgive Fischer's "sin" of playing chess in Yugoslavia. "What did Bobby Fischer do? He moved chess pieces from one square to another," she says. "Maybe he thought it's not their business to tell him if he could play or not."

Even after Iceland had extended citizenship to Fischer and issued him a passport, the United States still tried to pressure the country to extradite Fischer to America. "It's pretty bold. It's a small country saying



A POSTED FACSIMILE OF BOBBY FISCHER'S ICELANDIC CITIZENSHIP PAPERS AT THE BOBBY FISCHER CENTER IN SELFLOSS, ICELAND. PHOTO BY NACHAMA SOLOVEICHIK.

that to a big country," Sigfúsdóttir says. The big country decided soon thereafter to shutter its Naval Air Station Keflavik, which it had operated since World War II, she says. (According to recent news reports, the U.S. will re-invest more than \$14 million in the base.)

To the end, Fischer, still renowned for his endgame technique, was thinking about his final move, which he decided wouldn't be a Reykjavik burial. "He said, 'So many tourists will come to my gravesite. I want to be buried in a small, peaceful, quiet place, because then I know that just my real admirers will visit my gravesite,'" Sigfúsdóttir says, laughing.

### CHESS IN THE AGE OF #METOO

When Sharon Ellen Burtman, a woman international master and the 1995 U.S. women's co-champion, imagines a world without Fischer, she doesn't think she'd be a chess player today if not for Fischer. Who knows if her junior high would have offered chess as an extracurricular, or where she would have learned to move the pieces, or if there would have been local tournaments. All those were likely fueled by the "chess frenzy" that he created in the U.S., she says.

A Massachusetts native, Burtman can't resist a comparison of Fischer's

work ethic with that of New England's football team and legendary coach Bill Belichick. "It's kind of like the way the Patriots train," she says. "They know every game is going to be a tough game, and they don't take anyone for granted. If they win, it's not a surprise; they had to work for it. Fischer was along the same lines."

When she considers the possibility of separating the chess player from the man or woman, Burtman thinks of learning that Arnold Schwarzenegger, the actor she had so loved in such films as *The Terminator* and *Conan the Barbarian*, had cheated on then-wife Maria Shriver. She hedged her decision: she'd see the early films, but not the ones Schwarzenegger starred in post-infidelity. But she and her husband, who grew up watching *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* and *The Cosby Show* and who had met and secured autographs from Bill Cosby, had a tougher time with him and others who have physically harmed people. "I'm still grappling with that one," she says.

Donari Braxton, a filmmaker who is reportedly a master, is able to separate the man from the chess player. "As a black Jew, I learned pretty quickly in life that compartmentalizing heroic actors from their often less-than-heroic personas is a bit of a sine qua non, at least if you want to enjoy things like art, chess, and history," he says.

Overlooking—or at least looking beyond the tortured Fischer and his mean-spirited words to eye the games he created—is easy for Braxton. "Those games kind of populate your mind like old paintings on the walls of your childhood home, because you grew up with them," he says. The question of whether Fischer ought to inspire young people today is the same as whether composers like the anti-Semitic Richard Wagner or writers like the racist Joseph Conrad can also inspire emerging artists. "One takes what one can from those who create," Braxton says.

That Fischer didn't appear to make anti-Semitic statements before he won the 1972 Reykjavik match makes it easier to enjoy his chess creations, say Burtman and Brady.

Sitting behind a chess set in the great hall of New York's Marshall Chess Club as two grandmasters, Irina Krush and Giorgi Kacheishvili, taught students on either side of the club, Brady pointed out where Fischer played the "Game of the Century" on October 17, 1956. In 1965, when Fischer played via teletype from the club because his visa to Cuba was blocked, Brady was the referee. And he remembers coming out of the office to inform club members when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. "Everyone continued to play," he says.

Having known Fischer from when the latter was a child, and having been a friend of Regina's, Brady felt betrayed when Fischer's anti-Semitic rants emerged. Brady never heard Fischer say anything anti-Semitic prior to the 1972 match. It's possible Fischer knew that Brady's wife is Jewish, but Brady doesn't recall telling him.

Brady too raises the question of listening to Wagner's music. "Do you respect Bobby Fischer's chess even though he was a self-hating Jew?" he asks. "I went through tremendous problems with this, personally, in my relationship with him." Brady decided that he could listen to Wagner and respect Fischer's chess. "I was very disappointed," he says. "I considered him a friend."

At the club, the corner immediately to the right when visitors enter the main room is a kind of shrine to Fischer. A cartoon from the cover of *Chess Life*, which Brady founded, hangs beside a poster from the Iceland championship match. A lone black-and-white photo of Fischer, his left hand to his temple as he looks down upon a position, hangs

above a light. The Marshall Chess Club ran a large tournament honoring the 45th anniversary of Fischer's championship win last October, but Brady knows that some of the club's roughly 500 members, and others in the chess world at large, want nothing to do with Fischer. Some wouldn't go to a tournament honoring Fischer, and some would like the club to remove the photograph by LIFE photographer Carl Mydans. "I understand that point of view," Brady says.

In a speech that Brady gave at the club when Fischer—unbeknownst to Brady—was on his deathbed, Brady appealed to his longtime friend. "I ended it by saying, 'The chess world misses you. The chess world wants you. The chess world respects you. I respect you. Come on back to the United States. You're not going to go to jail. You're going to get out. Pay your back taxes and come back and re-enter the world of chess, and start playing again.' That sort of sums out how I feel," Brady says. "It's like what do you do with a family member who turns out to be a thief?"

### WAS FISCHER MENTALLY ILL?

When the Illinois Chess Association promoted its March 10, 2018 Bobby Fischer Memorial (held the day after Fischer's birthday, which this writer happens to share), the association invited competitors to "celebrate the 75th birthday of America's greatest player!" and to "forgive those things beyond his control." The framing of that promotion of the tournament, held at the University of Illinois at Chicago, raises the question of whether Fischer's controversial remarks really were beyond his control.

Brady is unconvinced, as much as he wishes he could believe that Fischer was mentally ill. "I don't think Bobby was insane. I think he was outré. I detested his politics. I detested his anti-Semitism," Brady says. "He didn't have visions. He didn't have hallucinations. He never hurt anyone or himself physically."

Fischer was more paranoid than most, Brady allows, but that didn't make him necessarily mentally ill. "This makes it worse, as far as I'm concerned," Brady says. "If you could say he was mentally

ill, you might be able to forgive the poor guy. He's nuts. He didn't know what he was saying. I can't say that. I think he turned mean."

So why did Fischer denounce the United States, and what drew him to read—and callously recommend subsequently that Jewish friends read—the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and other anti-Semitic literature? How could he deny the Holocaust when talking to chess friends who had fled the Nazis and to others who had lost family members in concentration camps? Regina wrote to her son in blunt terms of Nazi atrocities, and his sister Joan and her husband, Russell Targ, both Jewish, had to ask him to leave so he wouldn't spew anti-Semitic vitriol around their three children.

In an October 2006 email exchange, Fischer's former trainer Harry Sneider, whom he met at the Worldwide Church of God, recalled meeting the grandmaster at the church's Ambassador College in 1972. (Fischer later had a bad breakup with the evangelical church, which he accused of cheating him.) When Fischer came to the college's fitness center to work out, he saw Sneider, a physical education faculty member. "He took one look at my arms, my blonde hair, blue eyes, and asked me if I was Latvian!" Sneider, who died in 2014, wrote me in 2006. "This was a shock to me because he could predict where I was from."

Fischer's anti-Semitism saddened and perplexed his friend of nearly 35 years. "I'm totally devastated in Bobby's decline to his hatred for the

*[Fischer] was the oppressed one, and we agreed to give him cover, also as gratitude for promoting Iceland when nobody knew about it.*



FISCHER'S USUAL CHAIR AT BRAGI'S SECOND HAND BOOK SHOP IN REYKJAVIK, AT THE BOBBY FISCHER CENTER IN SELFOSS, ICELAND. PHOTO BY NACHAMA SOLOVEICHIK.

Jews," Sneider wrote. "I'm not sure when it started, if it is a psychological, emotional problem which can stem from imbalances in the brain chemistry or what have you." He and Fischer had studied Bible together, and Fischer kept Yom Kippur and other Jewish holidays, tithed, and attended Sabbath services with Sneider. "You tell me what happened. It's anyone's guess," Sneider wrote. "Maybe a psychiatrist can tell us both."

Joseph Ponterotto, author of the 2012 book *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer: Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological Decline of a World Chess Champion*, is a psychologist and professor at Fordham University's graduate school of education. The book, which Ponterotto began a week after Fischer died, is a "psychological autopsy," he writes.

Various people have diagnosed Fischer with Asperger's, paranoid schizophrenia, paranoid personality disorder, and delusional disorder. Ponterotto thinks that Fischer likely suffered from mental illness at

certain times in his life, but he cautions that Fischer wasn't a patient of his. Given that distance, the psychologist believes that chess filled a special need for Fischer, who was socially awkward and unpopular in school, and who had only a few close friends. "Chess was his companion, his refuge, a place where he felt safe and protected from the frenetic life that characterized his home," he writes.

Ponterotto's psychological autopsy also extends to Regina, who was an impressive multilingual woman who had earned a doctorate and a medical degree, but who struggled to find work when near-continuous FBI investigations hindered her opportunities. "As Bobby was an underdog to the mighty Soviet chess machine in the 1960s, so too was he, unfortunately, an underdog in his chances for a stable, balanced, and happy life," Ponterotto writes of the boy who lived in 10 homes in the first six years of his life. That Fischer couldn't attend his mother's or sister's funerals when the two died within a year of each other didn't help his psychological state.

When Grandmaster Robert Byrne suggested that Fischer, then 19 years old, see a psychiatrist, Fischer responded haughtily. "A psychiatrist ought to pay him for the privilege of working on his brain," Ponterotto writes. But amid Fischer's paranoia—that Russians would booby-trap planes or that fillings in his teeth could register radio signals—he was right about one thing. "The Russians were cheating," Ponterotto writes. Indeed, analyses have validated Fischer's charge that the Soviet grandmasters were colluding by drawing early—thus the "grandmaster draw"—to save their strength and concentration for matches against him.

Ponterotto records one possibility for why Fischer turned on Jews: the young Fischer's feeling of abandonment when his single mom would host Jewish intellectuals to talk politics. Uninterested in the conversation, Fischer may have felt symbolically abandoned. "In some illogical way to us, but logical to Bobby, he associates his deep feelings of hurt, betrayal, and abandonment with some notion of 'Jewishness,'" Ponterotto writes. He concludes that Fischer likely had "some genetic vulnerability to develop a mental illness, and that this predisposition, in concert with early life trauma and the burden of relentless media pressure, coalesced into serious mental health concerns that called for early and ongoing psychological intervention."

In an interview, Ponterotto resisted comparing Fischer's situation to today's celebrities, who have abused their power to take advantage of the less powerful. "Fischer, to my knowledge, never took advantage of others," he says. And "psychological challenges and a difficult history of trauma," including multiple arrests and jailings, fugitive status, and a complex family history "led to vulnerability and impacted his rational logic in time," he says.

"Can you be an anti-Semite without being mentally ill?" asks Burtman, who also believes that Fischer was mentally ill. Having devoted her life to being a role model in chess, having someone in the industry "go off the deep end" doesn't help the cause, she says. As the 10th anniversary of Fischer's death falls during a public reckoning for many celebrities, Burtman thinks the passage of time allows for greater clarity.

"You have time to work with all of these complex emotions and sort them out, and you have time to make those personal decisions," she says. "Does it make it easier? No. It's still very tragic and brings me sadness to discuss it. But I'm able to move on and talk about his game." ♦