

Bobby Fischer  
The Final Years

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Garðar Sverrisson

# Bobby Fischer The Final Years

*A Personal Memoir*

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translated from the Icelandic



Ugly

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## OUT OF THE NIGHT

A freshly shaven and cheerful Bobby greeted me in his old suite at Hótel Loftleiðir. As soon as I entered the room we couldn't suppress our laughter at these transformed circumstances, almost as if we had just gotten away with a major prank. Barely two weeks before we had been forced to converse through a glass pane in Japan, where he — the detainee — was most eager to tell me all about the Rocky Mountain water that could improve my health and to give me information he'd had specially printed for me on the subject. During his incarceration he followed the example of King Harald Fairhair and cut neither hair nor beard until he had won a full victory. His mistake was not to give up his grooming as soon as he was arrested and capture the full length of his imprisonment.

“But you look much better like this.”

Miyoko agreed emphatically, laughed, and smiled her beautiful smile from her seat in the dark brown leather sofa beneath the living-room window.

“Shame I didn’t make it to twelve months,” said Bobby and stroked his chin.

“Oh?”

“Then I could have said they had held me for a whole year.”

I entreated him never to repeat this in public.

“I’ll try,” he replied. “But I can’t promise.”

By now more than three months had passed since Bobby and I became good acquaintances. Early in December of 2004, he had been advised to consult with me about matters pertaining to communication with the Icelandic government and media. From then on he began to call me regularly, at least once a week, and I thus became the primary intermediary for him, Miyoko, and John Bosnitch in the struggle to bring him to Iceland. As time went on, though, we wound up spending most of our time chatting about everything but the fight for his freedom from imprisonment — an imprisonment based on an illegal revocation of his passport.

In our first phone conversations, Bobby wanted to know which Icelandic newspapers and broadcast media were most trustworthy, as he’d had bad experiences with prerecorded interviews and wanted to avoid them as much as possible. A few weeks after his first phone calls, it had come to light that the Icelandic authorities did not mean to take any action beyond the declaration from December 15, 2004, saying that Bobby was permitted to reside in



the country. They were not even prepared to issue him an alien passport. Given these circumstances, I strongly encouraged Bobby to write a new letter, this time to the parliament, Alþingi, which held the highest authority in the land when it came to granting citizenship. Citizenship would be much more significant than any declaration from a cabinet minister. It was also possible that an application for citizenship might put pressure on the Minister of Foreign Affairs to at least issue an alien passport.

In the wake of the declaration on December 15 that granted Bobby residency, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs had succumbed to pressure from the United States government to do nothing further, knowing that without an alien passport, there was no hope of Bobby's being able to travel from Japan to Iceland. Though the US government was able to intimidate representatives of state power in this way, I believed it to be utterly impossible that a majority of the Icelandic parliament would reject an application for citizenship. As usual, however, Bobby had to think things carefully through. He was disappointed to have to write a special letter in supplication to parliament instead of being able to trust the Foreign Ministry to translate words into action. Over the phone, he read me a draft of the letter, which strayed somewhat from the core points I had encouraged him to keep to. When he had the final version faxed to me, it still contained criticism of both the US and Japanese

governments, neither of which he felt it possible to omit.

Despite the support of a vast parliamentary majority, the Foreign Minister's party brethren were able to delay the processing of Bobby's citizenship application for weeks. Meanwhile, we received news that the US was hard at work preparing a new set of charges against Bobby in order to justify extradition from Japan, and April 5 was floated as the final deadline in the matter. By mid-March the whole affair had become so embarrassing for the Icelandic government officials vis-à-vis their own public that they couldn't maintain their delaying tactics any longer. Rather than sharpen their weapons in public, they made a last-minute decision to give their faction in parliament a green light to support Bobby's application for citizenship.

Out of consideration for the United States, Bobby was granted Icelandic citizenship nominally for humanitarian reasons, though it was plainly evident that he was a prisoner of conscience seeking political asylum. The suggestion had been made earlier to the group of us working on Bobby's liberation that we seek support from Amnesty International. When I mentioned this suggestion to Bobby he dismissed any such attempt as a waste of time. For that, he said, Amnesty was far too politically correct and influenced by powerful groups he had criticized, for instance, Jews. Amnesty International would never help a man with opinions such as his own, a

## BALKAN

As with the United States, Bobby told me, he had at one time respected the United Nations and pinned certain hopes on them. The key to these hopes lay in his near limitless admiration for Dag Hammarskjöld, whom he practically counted among the gods and could quote fluently. Though Hammarskjöld remained the same saint to his mind, the United Nations were a different story. Bobby said his respect for them had been finally destroyed when they allowed themselves to be used by the Western powers to dismember Yugoslavia. This was first and foremost the work of a US government that knew perfectly well that this act of sabotage would cause massive bloodshed, but simply didn't care. Everyone had known this. Even Kissinger had said what madness this was, especially with regard to Bosnia, as had many others who were familiar with the area — men like the former Cold War hero Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

“There’s no point in pretending in retrospect that voices of disapproval came only from me and some other eccentrics. All this was perfectly clear to those who decided to light the fire and force the country into civil war.”

And Bobby went on:

“Those who believe that the US government was after me for all these years simply for playing chess in Yugoslavia are at best garden-variety idiots who have been brainwashed with one-sided propaganda.” Bobby said he was always gaining more and more insight into what George Orwell had meant when he said: “He who controls the present controls the past.”

On one of our phone calls from Japan, Bobby told me that as soon as the US government began to accuse him of breaching economic sanctions against Yugoslavia, it simultaneously started issuing exemptions for American chess reporters so they could go straight to the scene of the crime and amuse the world with news of his encounter with Spassky. Once it was clear that they would play, the message from Washington had been nothing less than “the show must go on.” And the show really went on when the United States got in the game themselves, not to play chess but to shovel arms into the bloody killing fields of the war itself — an action that President Clinton was later to brag about in his autobiography.

The fact that the chess match was still today considered a greater crime than the US government's supplying of arms, Bobby said, should be enough to prove to any man that the case against him was contrived under false pretenses. If he had never been critical of the Jewish community and opposed how they worked behind the scenes, this would never have gone so far. But in the same month as President Bush ordered Bobby's arrest, he issued his closest allies an advance pardon for illegal arms sales to Iran and financing of terrorist groups in Nicaragua in the so-called Iran-Contra affair. Western media were so complicit with American justice that they didn't even raise the question of why playing chess was an offense punishable with arrest and imprisonment, while a presidential pardon was used to cover up powerful officials' gravest breaches of the law of the land.

I remember messages that were relayed to Bobby during the effort to solve the detention issue in Japan, advising him that if he stopped speaking out against Jews it might ease the path to a solution. When I first heard this, from either Miyoko or John Bosnitch, I thought this must be the desperate suggestion of well-wishers rather than something of material importance. And though he paid more attention to my advice than most others', I knew him well enough by then to know that he would under no circumstances have

considered bartering his opinions in that way. I never thought we would see direct confirmation of any link between Bobby's opinions and the case against him. But that very confirmation did materialize at about the time he arrived in Iceland. Then an American diplomat inadvertently admitted that his remarks about Jews had made a difference in his case.

A case that originally was said to be about a chess match in Yugoslavia had now for nearly a year revolved around a passport that US authorities claimed to have revoked, but could not prove had been invalidated in a legal manner. And here was open confirmation of a direct connection between this and Bobby's opinions. I was quite shocked to hear this public admission. Bobby was mostly surprised at my shock. To him this was no news at all. He had always said that I would have to come to accept that the case was not about chess but about his opinions of Jews and the US government. And he was the only one who seemed to think this causation too natural to be even worth remarking on. This was simply the vengeful nature of Washington. In this context he mentioned that they had been so interested in his arrest that he had hardly touched down in Iceland before the Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem had begun encouraging the Icelandic government to revoke the newly granted citizenship, delivering a formal request on Easter Sunday 2005.

Though Bobby's unexpected and abrupt arrest had attracted attention from around the world, he was surprised to observe how little interest there seemed to be in its legitimacy and legality. On the other hand, the discussion had immediately begun to revolve around his opinions and how they had angered influential persons in the US. His and others' attempts to draw attention to the complete lack of evidence that his passport had been legally revoked aroused no interest, as it was clear to everyone that the case was about political correctness, not a passport. As with his twelve years in exile, he himself was now to be held responsible for having been trapped and arrested under trumped-up charges.

It hurt Bobby the most to be kept abroad when his mother passed away, as he was unable to even attend the funeral of this woman whom he loved above all else on this Earth. This would have been a heavy burden for anyone to bear, but the suffering was all the more acute for a solitary man like Bobby. After his arrest in Japan, I had mentioned this in public as an example of the far-reaching vengefulness of the US government. For this remark he thanked me specially, in a low voice and with a distant gaze in his eyes. At that moment I realized that all other adversities were nothing compared to this wound. And this wound would not heal. Never.

Shortly after his mother's death, his sister Joan

## AMONG MASTERS

Y ou must be the smartest man in this goddamn country,” said Bobby as we put the finishing touches on a letter to UBS in my study. I had hardly processed these words of praise when he felt compelled to add, “Next to me, of course.”

Then he laughed and we started looking at old chess games online. I was no computer guru, but he was downright terrible and hardly dared to touch a single key for fear of making some mistake. Nevertheless, he was constantly advising me on how to procure information and telling me what the most efficient spot to click the mouse was at any given time. I let him talk, but kept right on clicking where I thought it best to click. If I made a mistake, I didn’t have to wait long to hear, “I told you, Garðar. You should have listened to me.”

“Listened to you,” I replied, irritated. “This computer would have been ruined long ago.”



Bobby was silent for a while.

We were looking for information about Alekhine when I ran into a Gordian knot of trouble, having repeatedly ignored his suggestions about how best to look. Then he turned to me with an expression of sincere sympathy.

“You are the most stubborn man I have ever met.”

“That may be,” I admitted. “But I have met one who is a little bit more stubborn even than me.”

“That’s not right! I’m not as god-damn stubborn as you. I’m just forceful.”

“Who was saying you were stubborn? I only said I knew someone who’s a bit more stubborn than me.”

Now Bobby laughed, and so did I. Then I went on looking for the Alekhine games Bobby wanted to show me, in preparation for Miyoko’s impending arrival with a Russian documentary on the master. When we’d had our fill of the chess games, we found a fragment, a few minutes long, from a British radio interview with Alekhine. We were both surprised at how high and even shrill his voice was. Each of us had assumed that this risk-taking attacker, who moreover had a reputation for a hot temper and drunkenness, must have had a deeper and more masculine voice. But there we were disappointed. Then we amused ourselves with our own disappointment that Alekhine’s voice should not have been deeper than the recording suggested.

Such was Bobby's admiration for the chess geniuses of earlier times that there was no way to tell that one of their own ranks, perhaps even the greatest among them, was speaking. Sometimes he spoke of them as a connoisseur would of painters, each of which paints in his own style. To him, it was a considerable oversimplification to speak of one as better than another in an absolute sense. But when I brought up differences in their success he chastised me, saying that was an imperfect way of comparing players' strength. If I wanted to get a sense of chess players' true skill, I had to examine carefully their each and every game and study the paths they had taken to victory. Some of them won far too many games with attacks that could not stand up to close inspection, even if they had been enough to derail the opponent. Success through this kind of chess playing was not, to his mind, equal to success in games that were more solid, played with greater refinement and precision and better able to withstand scrutiny.

Among players of the former breed, he named Kasparov. Though a strong player, Kasparov had won too many games with attacks that broke down under close analysis. Still, he was a better chess player than politician, as his recent romps with Yeltsin's oligarchs amply demonstrated. I don't know whether it was with a mind towards proving this to me that Bobby bought us each a copy of Kasparov's book *How Life Imitates*

*Chess*. I greatly enjoyed that book, though I found that the author fell somewhat short of proving what he set out to demonstrate. I can't remember what Bobby thought of the book, so that can hardly have been very decisive.

At the time, Bobby's harsh arrest had attracted worldwide attention. Among other things, it prompted Kasparov, a spokesman for freedom of speech, to write an article for *The Wall Street Journal*. Like many others, I of course expected that at such a critical hour he would criticize Bobby's imprisonment, which could easily have led to extradition to the United States. But he did nothing of the sort. Rather than criticizing Bobby's imprisonment, Kasparov used these critical circumstances to publicize his upcoming book about the imprisoned master who had spoken ill of Jews. Of the actual imprisonment of his predecessor, he had only this to say:

Despite the ugliness of his decline, Bobby Fischer deserves to be remembered for the great things he did for chess and for his immortal games. I would prefer to focus on not letting his personal tragedy become a tragedy for chess.

When Bobby later showed me this fourth volume of Kasparov's history of chess, which is devoted to Bobby, the only thing he wondered about was how on Earth they had dug up the horrible picture of him that

graced the book's front cover. From the tired gaze and gaping mouth of its subject, one would likely draw the conclusion that he was dead drunk. And though this was supposedly the profile of a young man, Bobby pointed out that he looked like he had not only lost all his teeth, but also gone partly gray-haired. But they were so attached to this picture that they didn't even seem to care that its quality was so poor, it looked like it had been torn out of an old newspaper and enlarged. Under normal circumstances, photographs like this would not even be considered usable, let alone suitable for book covers.

Though Kasparov's book, which is actually the collaborative work of many authors, discussed Bobby in personal and sometimes misleading and hurtful terms, he simply shook his head and sighed. More important to him was that the chess commentary should be interesting. He evidently thought so, because when he had studied the portions he wanted to, he gave the book to me. The same thing happened with Andrew Soltis' *Bobby Fischer Rediscovered*, which I had purchased in London. If I was otherwise occupied, he would pick it up and page through. His only criticism of that book was that he had never forfeited a certain game that the author claimed he had forfeited. And when we came across Eric Schiller's *Learn from Bobby Fischer's Greatest Games* he was most disappointed to

find repeated there an utterly false story claiming that Reuben Fine had showed him a potentially game-saving improvement for Max Euwe after a game the latter lost against Bobby. This was pure fantasy, as was the persistent story that Jack Collins had been his teacher.

“You are far too occupied with measurable success,” Bobby would sometimes tell me when we were discussing chess. “We don’t necessarily learn most from those who have made it the furthest themselves, for instance, those who have become World Champions. Besides, their own explanations are often so reflexive that you often learn more about their games from what others have to say about them. Even Capablanca talks like a fool about some of his own games.”

Though Bobby considered Capablanca to be the strongest of the old masters, he spoke of them all with the respect a grateful student reserves for old mentors. At one point he told me he had once been on a pilgrimage to New Orleans to see the places where Paul Morphy had lived and seen a chess board and various other items from his possession. That had been an unforgettable experience for him.

Our conversations had rekindled in me my interest in chess. For a long time I had planned to go carefully through some of the chess books I had acquired through the years, and now I asked Bobby to go through them and tell me which of them he thought were most worthwhile.

## MOVING

**O**n a sunny and beautiful July day, Bobby finally moved to the apartment he had bought in our building more than a year earlier. When we were transporting his things, he avoided carrying anything but the very lightest things and stood idly by for long stretches of time, which was unlike him.

“What’s wrong, Bobby?” I asked.

“I’m resting up,” he answered apologetically. “I’m just resting up.”

In the past weeks, he had eaten almost exclusively at the Chinese restaurant *Asía*, which was located far closer to his apartment than the restaurants he usually frequented. At first I thought he had just been in the process of discovering a good restaurant, as he praised the food to the skies and liked the staff. But when he had started taking a taxi down to *Landsbankinn* for his banking business, a distance he could usually cover within ten minutes on foot, it became inescapably

clear to me that something was amiss with his health.

After he moved to Espigerði, Bobby wanted me to help him choose one of the new-fangled air cleaners that were just entering the market — machines that were considered especially well suited for capturing airborne particulates. Irrespective of his present weakness, we thought it clear enough that he was one of the many who was highly sensitive to particulates, and perhaps pollen as well. The machine was purchased, and the air in Bobby's apartment was now as good as it could possibly be. For some time he seemed satisfied with the air quality, and his mind was entirely focused on regaining physical strength. In addition to a healthy diet, he was convinced that hot baths were good for him. Ever since the match in Yugoslavia, which he said had come down on his health, he had benefitted from hot baths, both in Hungary and Japan. Here in Iceland he had often gone alone all the way to the Blue Lagoon on the Reykjanes peninsula, and now wanted to make this a regular occurrence.

But despite hot baths and a healthy diet, Bobby's health did not improve. He seemed more fatigued, if anything. By late August he had started talking again about the air quality in the apartment.

“Whether this air is considered acceptable or not, I at least need to get to a place with better and fresher air.”

When it came to this problem, I was as helpless as

he was. The same was true of Kristín and Miyoko, the latter of whom thankfully visited Iceland with increasing frequency now. The next time she came, early in September, I booked for them a small cottage beneath the little mountain Pétursey on the south coast of Iceland. There they were caught in a bellowing storm, with rain and winds pounding down in full seasonal force. But despite belligerent weather on the open Atlantic, Bobby felt no better.

After mid-September, when Miyoko had returned to Japan, Bobby had the idea of checking whether he might feel better if he spent a few days in Hótel Loftleiðir, where he had first stayed after he arrived in Iceland two and a half years ago. There he had felt good and liked the air, and saw no reason why that should have changed at all.

Bobby hadn't spent more than a night or two at Hótel Loftleiðir when he started complaining about the air quality and asked me to help him get a different room. Though he was wont to ask me to represent him in various ways, this was a request that he would easily have made himself under normal circumstances. But these days he had a growing tendency to be either irritated or strangely timid.

The new room proved no better. The air he found heavy and the mattress uncomfortable. Among his physical discomforts, new and frequent additions included back



pain and nearly unbearable itching. He also seemed to be constantly thirsty, which I thought might be attributable to his eating less than he used to. He had urinated frequently ever since he arrived, but now did so even more often. Yet I didn't think there was any reason to relate that to anything but his age and the concomitant growth of his prostate.

Most difficult to deal with I found Bobby's insistence that I keep his discomforts entirely secret. Nobody must know that he felt unwell, and it had long since become clear to me that I would never persuade him to visit a doctor. The only thing I could do was browse the net in the hope that something would match his symptoms — the hope that his symptoms would match some known health problem and that said health problem could be treated by means that pertained to lifestyle and other things we could plot and plan about without medical interference. I looked up all diseases I could think of, both physical and mental, from cancer to severe depression, but found nothing that seemed to match Bobby's condition.

Finally I found a disease where all of Bobby's main problems fell into place — everything except the backache, which could easily be caused by something other than illness. About diabetes I read that its primary symptoms were weakness, frequent urination, weight loss, itchy skin, excessive thirst, irritability, and fatigue.

## SOLSTICE

On Christmas morning, there was a stillness in the city. It had snowed heavily, and in the distance an occasional car could be heard passing by. Though it was late morning by now, darkness still reigned. I had just woken up and was still in bed when I saw on my cell phone that Bobby had tried to reach me. It was unlike him to call at this time, so something must be wrong.

He lay in the dark bedroom and told me in a weak voice that he had barely been able to get any sleep due to pain. He had vomited more in the night than he had been recently, and it now didn't matter in what position he tried to lie, the pain was always just as bad.

"I don't know why this is happening to me," he said, anguished.

I switched on the lamp on his nightstand and sat by the edge of the bed. As soon as I sat down, he reached for my hand and gripped it tightly. We didn't have to waste many words expressing that we seemed to be back in the

same position as in late summer. Nor did we have to talk long before I had obtained his permission to call a doctor.

Within moments, Eiríkur had arrived. It had clearly not surprised him that we should need his help. The condition he was faced with did not seem to surprise him either. When he had sat with us for some time and it was clear that Bobby would by no means consent to return to the hospital, he arranged for a hospital bed and adhesive patches with strong painkillers to be delivered. The patches came in various doses, and we applied them to Bobby's chest in accordance with instructions we received and his wishes at any given time. We only had to be careful not to increase the dose too rapidly.

As soon as the painkillers kicked in, a heavy burden seemed to be lifted off Bobby. Though he grew calm, he was pensive about the use of the word "hospice" in relation to the delivery of the painkillers. He now looked at me with a still gaze and asked whether I thought all this meant he was considered terminally ill.

I said we shouldn't read more into it than necessary. Our healthcare system presupposed that seriously ill people like him stayed in hospitals under the supervision of doctors. Since he didn't want to be hospitalized, there were few other options than to accept these patches from those who administered hospice care to patients who stayed at home.

"But do I look like I'm dying?"

“No, Bobby. You do not look like you’re dying,” I tried to convince us both. At this time, between Christmas and New Year’s, I neither believed nor wished to believe anything but that Bobby would survive this. So sincere was he in his hope of recovery that I felt it was essential for both of us that I share it with him — the hope that had already carried him this far. Again and again he asked me how I thought he looked and what I thought his prospects were. Again and again I had to tell him that I thought there was too much life in his eyes for him not to make it.

To counter Bobby’s long-term malnourishment, we had tried many options, particularly liquids and mashed foods. It now occurred to us to try purchasing goat’s milk, which a health food store in town offered to order for us. Bobby also wanted to try the hot baths that had helped him so much with his back pain ever since the Yugoslavia match, everywhere from Gellért in Budapest to the Blue Lagoon in Iceland. I drew a bath, and heard Bobby sigh with the same pleasure every time he got in. When he had bathed, I had my hands full supporting him back to bed, where he wanted to keep holding my hand while we talked. Yet again he wanted to tell me about his mother and how painful it had been for him to have not received even a single picture of her when her estate was divided. This was so agonizing to listen to that I contacted his former brother-in-law, Russell Targ, and explained to him what