

*Judit Polgar Teaches Chess 1*

# How I Beat Fischer's Record

by

# Judit Polgar

with invaluable help from Mihail Marin



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# Preface

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I started flirting with the idea of publishing a collection of my best games a long time ago.

For years, I was aware that the moment when I could fulfil my dream was far away. As a professional player, I spent most of my time and energy playing in tournaments and training, so each time the idea of my book popped up, I had to say to myself “Later, later...”

By coincidence, several publishers approached me during this period. And although I was not prepared to embark on any definite project yet, I could feel that the whole idea was, little by little, starting to take shape.

## The critical moment

The 2009 World Cup proved to be a decisive moment in the birth of my book. In the third round I played Boris Gelfand, a very strong opponent who eventually went on to win the event. I lost the first match game with Black, and during my preparations for the second one, I found myself with no clue about how to break down his favourite Petroff Defence.

I decided to improvise with the Bishop’s Opening, and in the early middlegame started a sacrificial attack in the best spirit of the King’s Gambit, my favourite opening as a kid. This turned out to be Gelfand’s only defeat in a classical game in the whole tournament. I eventually lost the play-off, but this did not spoil the magic: it felt like for a moment the Judit from 1988, who many (including myself) had forgotten, had come back to deliver her trademark brilliancies.

With this nostalgic feeling, I decided that the time had finally come to write my book, in which the little girl from the past would play an important role. On the way back home, while waiting to embark at Moscow airport, I made it “official” by sharing my thoughts with my husband Gusztav. He was delighted with the idea and I appreciate very much his enthusiasm, support and encouragement ever since.

## Preliminary details

There were a few technical details to be worked out before starting to work. Most of my best games have been published worldwide, in countless magazines and even in a few books about my chess career written by other authors. Therefore, I aimed for a different approach than *just* “Judit’s selected games”.

After much hesitation, I chose to structure the material as a manual rather than an autobiography. This way, it would be instructive for young players or amateurs aspiring to progress, but also offer a guideline to their parents or trainers. True, there would be a wealth of autobiographical stories, but they would pop up without respecting a chronological order.

Without any false modesty, I can say that I played entertainingly and quite well from an early age, and it soon became clear that one book would not be enough to cover my whole career.

To make this rather unusual project come true, I needed a publisher who would allow me the freedom of action I needed. I decided to work with Quality Chess after I met their Creative Director, Jacob Aagaard.

I was captivated by Jacob's enthusiasm, optimism and his acceptance of making the book the way I wanted it. We soon reached an agreement and he offered his invaluable feedback during the complex writing process.

Since I had no experience as a book writer, I also needed the help of a close collaborator.

Even before the project had taken shape, I had shared my ideas with my old friend Bob (Mihail Marin). I have known Bob since 1990, when he stayed with my family in Budapest on several occasions. We were playing chess, training and having lots of fun. Many years later we worked together regularly and he even accompanied me as a second to a few tournaments, including the World Championship in San Luis 2005.

I knew that Bob has lots of knowledge and broad experience in many areas of chess. He is a successful author who has written many good books. But even more importantly, I appreciate his love and enthusiasm for chess.

Bob gladly joined my project and now that this book is finished, I can say that he has been a great adviser and helper throughout. In addition, working as a pair proved joyful and entertaining.



*Novi Sad 1990: (l. to r.) My Mother, Pal Benko, Susan, Marin, Hazai, Mel, Morvay & Sofia*

## Sources of information

Many of the games in this volume have not been published before. Some of them were played against my coaches or sparring partners for training purposes. I have input them all from my dusty archive of scoresheets.

From my early years as a chess player, my coaches taught me to regularly write down the time taken both by my opponent and myself. This was meant to provide the coaches with information about my way of thinking, my possible superficiality at critical moments or, on the contrary, my hesitations.

This information also proved useful for this book. In my comments, I have frequently referred to the situation on the clock, in order to draw interesting conclusions of a psychological nature. And, as a curiosity, I would add that I have not given up the habit of writing down the time even today...

The old scoresheets helped me to spot a few input mistakes in the official databases.

I also drew a wealth of information from my old opening notes and game annotations. Luckily, my whole archive has survived several changes of apartments over the years!

It was refreshing to learn that some of my original analysis stands up to severe computer scrutiny even today.

## The structure

This first volume covers the period from my early years until 1991, when at the age of 15 years, 4 months and 28 days, I broke Fischer's record by roughly one month and became the youngest ever grandmaster.

The chapters are arranged according to their complexity, starting with the simpler ones. The aim is to increase the educational value of the book, but it also evokes the rapid progress I made at that young age.

The first five chapters focus on simple tactical elements, and the next three on notions of positional play. Chapters 9 to 12 highlight the subtleties of the transition phases, from the opening to the middlegame, and from the middlegame to the endgame.

The first twelve chapters have mainly game fragments. Things become more complex in Chapters 13 and 14 which feature complete games (with just one exception). In Chapter 15 (the final one) we take a step further by examining the multifaceted universe of a chess tournament.

## A nostalgic journey to the past

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work on this book was the possibility of revisiting the past. Looking at my old games brought back unique memories, but I was also surprised by my strength as a player at that young age. I gained the distinct feeling that to me playing chess used to be as natural as breathing.

Every now and then I could not stop smiling when noting my ingenuity in certain situations. Now, I could surely teach that young girl a thing or two!

Although I have changed a lot as a person since then, I am glad that I did not lose any of my love for chess or my pleasure in playing beautiful games.

Many times people have asked me about the reasons for my early successes.

Talent and ambition must have played a significant part, but my family environment was the most important factor. Both my parents were teachers by profession and by inclination. My sisters and I are grateful to them not only because they dedicated their lives to our success, but even more so because they raised us with a positive set of values.

I was fortunate to be the youngest of three sisters, so my parents already had a lot of experience when they started bringing me up as a chess player.

Moreover, growing up around my elder sisters Susan and Sofia was very stimulating and they offered their help whenever I needed it. No words are rich enough to describe my feelings towards Susan and Sofia. And I am happy that after all these years we are still very close friends, despite the huge geographical distances between us.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to:

All my trainers, coaches and sparring partners.

The organizers, sponsors, opponents and arbiters, without whom chess life could not exist.

My enemies, who stimulated me to improve myself.

Last but not least, thanks to my chess fans. I hope you will enjoy this book.

Judit Polgar

Budapest, July 2012



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# Chapter 1

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## Tricks



*Showing my game against Chilingirova  
(see page 19)*

When an adult loses to a very young player, the most common excuse he comes up with is “He (or she) tricked me!” The usual meaning of this cliché is that the baby opponent somehow undeservedly managed to change the logical course of the game in a radical way. In order to understand this association of ideas, we should try to give a proper definition of a “trick” in a chess game.

**I see the trick as a basically simple (maximum two or three moves), but very well masked, tactical operation. It requires imagination, alertness, lack of preconceptions, and the ability to intuitively perceive the intimate dynamic nuances of the position. These qualities allow spotting, foreseeing or aiming to deliver a trick.**

Most of these qualities are characteristic of the very young. For a kid, there is nothing more rewarding than tricking the opponent! As the years pass, one tends to rely mainly on knowledge and experience, losing part of the aforementioned qualities.

My favourite way of highlighting the artistic impression created by tricks on the chess board and their unexpected character is by comparing them with a magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat. Again, this is a field that captivates kids. Adults may smile while watching a magician's show, but they will not believe in the “miracles” even if they cannot explain them by logical means.

I was labelled as a tricky player early on and have been regarded as tricky throughout my whole career. It was said that I was able to pull out tricks from nowhere. While admitting that this is one important thread of my play, I hope this book will show that my general style as a girl was more rounded.

I must confess that whenever I examine a position, my train of thought tends to go in a tactical direction. Many times I have planned tricks well in advance, but I tried to look as innocent as possible, in order to avoid giving a hint to my opponent.

It is interesting to mention that the highest authorities have different opinions about this latter aspect. I felt deeply honoured when Vassily Smyslov called me “Tal in a skirt”, comparing me with arguably the most brilliant World Champion ever. I was less pleased when Korchnoi described me as a “coffee house player”!

Handling tricks is a useful weapon, but does not exclude strategic vision or basic chess knowledge. On the contrary, it can be an excellent complement to them! Besides, tricks continued to occur frequently in my games despite my opponents being more and more aware of the danger with the passing years.

## How to become tricky

Under the guidance of my father I spent many hours each day solving studies, problems and tactical positions. My father considered solving to be very important because it requires concentration and accurate calculation, precisely what you need most during a practical game. We had many books which my father had collected over the years. On many occasions I studied together with Sofia and later on I had the opportunity to go into Susan's workroom too! (Susan is seven years older and had done some serious training already). In our apartment there was a wall with 30 small chess boards with the positions meant to be our homework.



Another common method of preparing was playing blitz games and different kind of rapid games. My father was always looking for opportunities for us to practise and so he invited many different sparring partners to come to our place. This intense practice developed our skills of rapid orientation in unknown positions and a feel for tactical nuances, which we could describe as intuition. It also helped us to memorize the opening moves better and to become acquainted with typical middlegame and endgame positions. Another positive effect was that I felt less pressure or tension during tournaments.

Of course, there also was a lot of bluffing in our countless blitz games, but even in a scientific game like chess learning how to take one's chances is important. While the usefulness of training games at different time controls is relevant to most of the themes covered in the forthcoming chapters, blitz games are most closely related to the trick sections.

Blindfold games also played an important part and I remember there were times when I played against Sofia (or other opponents) at least ten times a day! After a while, analyzing and exchanging ideas with other players without needing a chess board became natural. There is a lot of fun involved in this kind of activity, as you can speak about a certain game or position with the same ease with which you comment on a movie you have watched the night before. Also, you can read chess magazines and books while travelling or before going to sleep.

I would like to add that opening preparation was not at all important at that time. This may be a reason why, even today, my strongest area remains the middlegame. The only chapter in this book tangentially related with the opening is that dedicated to a lead in development, but even there we will mainly focus on decisions taken over the board and not on applying concrete knowledge.

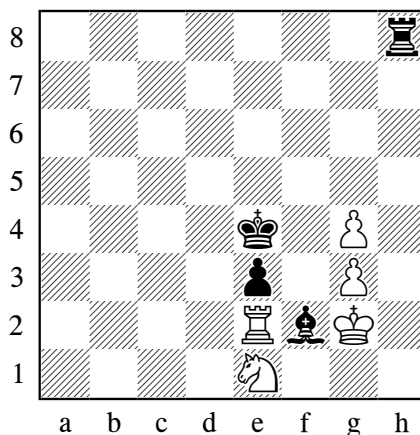
The present chapter will examine some typical situations in which tricks may pop up. Later, we will divide them into subchapters, according to their aim.

Players are especially vulnerable to falling for tricks when they relax prematurely or find themselves in time trouble. The next example illustrates both aspects perfectly. It was a blitz game (implying that we both were in time trouble from the very first move) and features a strongly simplified and apparently dull position.

### **Jozsef Palkovi – Judit Polgar**

Training game, Budapest (blitz) 1989

Jozsef came to our apartment for many years. He was a professional player for a long time, but nowadays he works mainly as a kid's coach. We used to tease each other during the blitz games, comment on certain good or bad moves, or make fun of each other.



White is under some pressure, but due to the reduced amount of material left on the board he should manage to draw. When playing his next move, Jozsef asked: “What are we playing for here?”

**1. ♖xf2?**

Indeed, this looks like the simplest solution. After 1...exf2, White would have little trouble holding a draw, but Jozsef's mistake was taking for granted that I have to take the rook. His unawareness of the danger can be explained by the fact that in the initial position I had no tactical threat. His last move made the trick possible, though.

**1... ♖h2†!**

Oops! After 2. ♔xh2 exf2 the pawn promotes. The unfortunate position of the knight is the decisive factor, as White cannot prevent ...f1=♚ and ...fxe1=♚ at the same time.

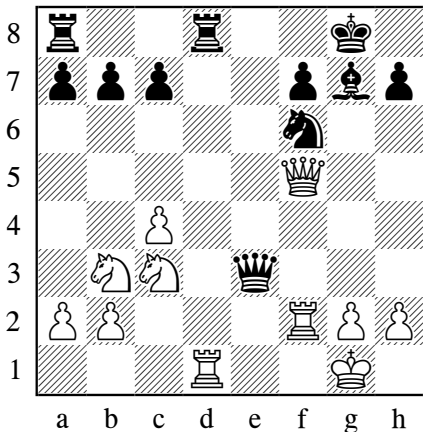
I always enjoy when I can do something unusual which turns out to be good!

**0-1**

I will now show a typical case of objective details, related strictly to the position, which allowed me to carry out a simple but quite nice tactical operation.

**Dr N.N. – Judit Polgar**

Budapest 1984



It may seem that White has some attacking chances in view of the weakened black kingside, but his poor coordination is the deciding feature. The f2-rook is pinned, which creates

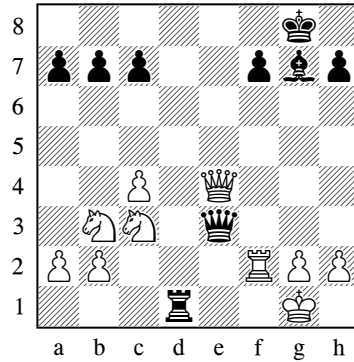
back rank problems, while his b3-knight does not take part in the fight. These factors gave me the possibility to get an advantage with a slightly paradoxical move.

**19... ♘e4!**

Attacking the pinned rook and the overloaded c3-knight, which is tasked with keeping the back rank defended. My opponent did not suspect that I might even consider allowing his next move.

**20. ♚xf7†**

The back rank problems are illustrated by: 20. ♖xd8† ♖xd8 21. ♚xe4 ♖d1†



White loses his queen.

**20... ♔h8**

The check has not improved White's position at all, as my king is safe in the corner.

**21. ♘d5**

What else? 21. ♘e4 leads to mate in one after 21... ♖xd1.

**21... ♚xf2† 22. ♚xf2 ♘xf2 23. ♔xf2 c6**

I eventually converted my material advantage.

**...0-1**

This was a rather simple example. It should not take too much effort to notice the lack of harmony reigning in White's camp and