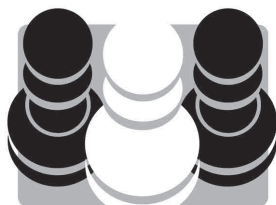


The Road to Reykjavik

By

Tibor Karolyi



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Preface

This is the first volume in a two-part work on the legendary accomplishments of Robert James (Bobby) Fischer, marking the 50th anniversary since the American grandmaster won the right to challenge for the World Championship crown. The second volume will focus on the match itself, and will similarly be published on or close to the 50th anniversary of the event itself.

Bobby Fischer attracted more media attention than any other chess player. His 1972 World Championship final match against Boris Spassky became a page in the book of the Cold War and he affected chess more powerfully than anyone else, virtually on his own changing the game once and forever: he stopped the 24-year domination of the Soviets; he attracted the biggest ever prizemoney in the history of chess, and his records can be endlessly enumerated. The first Soviet champions played for little money, while all champions after Fischer became millionaires. He achieved the strongest domination of any player by winning twenty games in a row against world-class opposition, a record which most probably will never be matched.

It was not only his amazing results that had such an effect; his personality also contributed a lot. Fischer brought a new level to the board; he was more versatile than the World Champions before him. Let me tell two small stories, both of which happened decades after he conquered the chess throne, and which describe how well-known he had become outside of the world of chess.

In the late nineties Hungarian IM Janos Rigo drove Fischer to Germany via Austria and at the border control the official asked for their passports. Rigo asked the controller whether he knew who was in the back seat of the car, and after a quick glance the man replied: “The world chess champion.”

In 2016 or 2017 I heard two Hungarians (non-chess-players) talking, one of whom told a joke which went something like this:

Two prisoners walking in a Soviet labour camp in Siberia in 1972. One says to the other, with news arriving here so slowly, “I would like to know so much how the Spassky – Fischer match ended.” The other replied, “I blundered a piece in the last game.”

No other chess champion has ever received such recognition outside of our world, and no one is likely to get it in the future.

Tibor Karolyi
Budapest 2021

Chapter 8

1970 – Part 5

Palma de Mallorca Interzonal

Before the Interzonal, the USCF executive director, Ed Edmondson, negotiated with Fischer and did his best to make him challenge for the world title. Donaldson published a letter by Edmondson to Fischer, in which Edmondson promised at least \$19,000 for the cycle, consisting of: \$4,000 for the Interzonal; \$3,000 for the quarter-final; \$3,000 for the semi-final; \$4,000 for the final of the Candidates matches; and \$5,000 for the World Championship final. The letter added that the sum “more than likely” could be raised considerably. Edmondson also emphasized his moral backing and his trust that Bobby would be capable of becoming the World Champion. It was a very well written letter; and as history proves, it had the desired effect.

I asked two legendary American players, James Sherwin and Anthony Saidy, to share their memories regarding Ed Edmondson, a man who did a lot for not only Fischer and for American chess, but for chess in general.

I start with what James Sherwin wrote:

“I don’t think Ed was much of a chess player. He served for a long time as Director of the US Chess Federation, but I don’t know the years. I seem to recall that eventually he retired and passed away not long thereafter. I knew Edmondson at something of a distance. The American Chess Foundation, of which I was President for many years, dealt with him as the Director of the US Chess Federation and I met him many times. He was friendly and fair-minded. I’m not sure whether he liked Bobby personally, but he was someone who believed in doing his duty and since Bobby was a shining star, Ed thought that his duty was to back Bobby up to the extent that he could. He also did his best to smooth over any disputes or difficulties that Bobby was having with FIDE.”

Here are my questions to Anthony Saidy and his answers regarding Edmondson.

Did you know Ed Edmondson well?

Somewhat.

I guess readers would be happy if you shared your memories regarding him.

He helped me a lot.

What was his level at chess?

Class A.

Did he help Bobby because he liked him, or just admired him, or did he help him because he was in the federation?

He was an air force officer and diplomatic patriot; he knew US chess would get a big boost.

Why didn't he help Fischer in Reykjavik?

Bobby had turned against him, as he did everyone after a time.

What happened to him after his relationship with Bobby?

He died at the age of 62 in Hawaii.

Let us recall that Fischer declined to participate in the US Championship in 1969, and therefore did not qualify for the Interzonal. Soltis writes, and it is mentioned widely, that Benko gave his spot to Fischer for \$2,000. However, when the Hungarian author Farkashazy wrote his book on Fischer, he asked the Hungarian-born grandmaster about the sum, and Benko said he received no money. He just told the USCF that Fischer should not retire, but should instead play. I contacted Pal's widow about this contradiction, and she explained exactly what happened. Benko travelled to Palma de Mallorca to play in case Fischer did not show up, but Pal no longer had any great ambitions and knew a 23-round event would be daunting. If Fischer did play, Pal would be the second of the American players, Reshevsky, Addison and Fischer. She remembers that Lombardy was also Fischer's second in the event (other sources say Larry Evans was Fischer's second). So Benko got \$2,000 as a second, which was his normal fee for such a service.

None of the Americans who qualified by playing in the national championship minded that Fischer would play in the Interzonal, though according to Soltis, "He was making last-minute demands and threatening not to play until just before he left for the Balearic island."

According to Brady, neither Fischer nor Matulovic showed up at the drawing of lots, but they both checked into the hotel. Csom writes in detail about this drawing of lots at the Palma de Mallorca Interzonal, the Hungarian grandmaster revealing it to be one of the weirdest ever in the history of chess. First, after some minor protests, the players agreed to a modified playing schedule in accordance with the religious convictions of Fischer and Reshevsky. After that, the organizers wanted to start the draw; but the Soviet players, led by Taimanov, protested, saying that the law regarding 'guided' drawing of lots to take account of the players' nationalities was abolished at the 1969 FIDE Congress. Everybody was shocked: nobody, including the organizers, was aware of the change.

After a long break, the organizers decided to go ahead with a simple drawing of lots. It produced three pairings involving players from the same country in the final two rounds (including a Smyslov – Taimanov game). Thus, the organizers simply decided to swap Rounds 22 and 23 with Rounds 4 and 5!

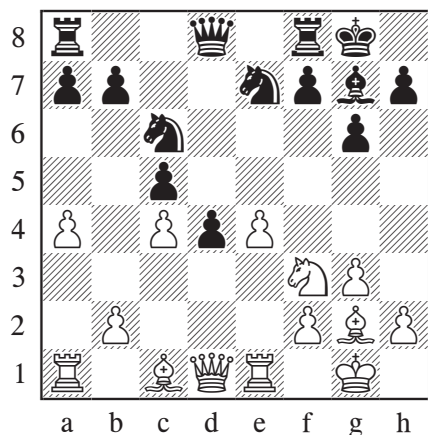
Why do I tell this story? Csom says nothing about Fischer – who had more power to say something than anyone else, but said nothing – regarding the drawing of lots. I think this indicates that Fischer was determined and wanted to play the cycle all the way.

Fischer's first opponent was Robert Hübner.

Robert J. Fischer – Robert Hübner

Palma de Mallorca 1970

1.e4 c6 2.d3 d5 3.♘d2 g6 4.♘gf3 ♙g7 5.g3
e5 6.♙g2 ♗e7 7.0–0 0–0 8.♞e1 d4 9.a4
c5 10.♗c4 ♗bc6 11.c3 ♙e6 12.cxd4 ♙xc4
13.dxc4 exd4



14.e5

Fischer opens the diagonal for the g2-bishop.

14...♞d7 15.h4

Now he gets ready to build his play on the kingside.

15...d3?!

Hübner is not intimidated. Such a pawn can become very strong, but might just as easily fall.

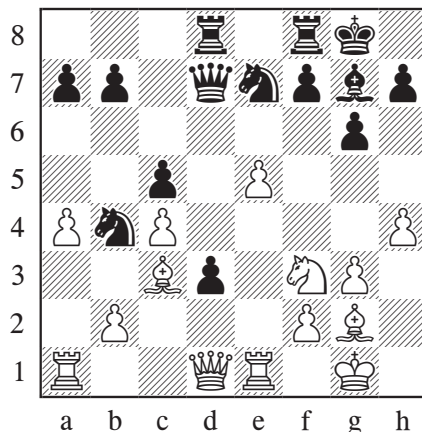
In the event of 15...♞ae8 16.♙f4 h6 17.♞d2
♗h7 18.♞ad1 the position is balanced.

16.♙d2 ♞ad8 17.♙c3

The bishop defends the e5-pawn and has an effect on the b4-square.

17...♗b4?!

17...♗f5 was better. Play could continue
18.b3 ♞fe8 19.♞a2 and after 19...♞c7 or
19...♗fd4 the position would be balanced.



18.♗d4!?

Fischer prepares to advance the e-pawn in a flashy way, but this move is not the best.

Instead, with 18.♗g5! the knight supports the pawn push under better conditions: 18...♞c7 (18...♗ec6 is met by 19.e6; or if 18...♞c8 then 19.♞b1 can be played) 19.e6 f5 20.♗f7 White stands better.

18...♞fe8?

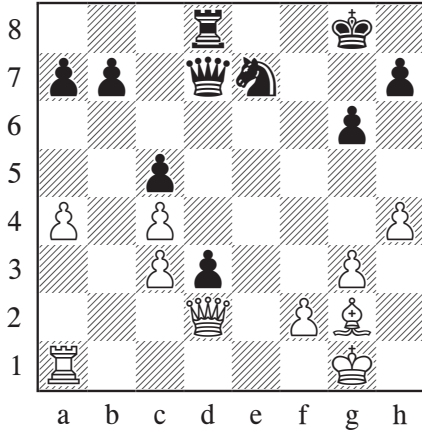
The young German player goes wrong, probably misjudging the ensuing position.

The correct response was: 18...♗ec6! 19.♗xc6 (after 19.e6? ♞e7! the difference between White's two knight moves can be seen, as now this queen move is possible) 19...bxc6 20.♞e4 f5 With an equal game.

19.e6!

Fischer opens the position in his favour. For a while, both sides play the best moves.

19...fxe6 20.♗xe6 ♙xc3 21.bxc3 ♗c2
22.♗xd8 ♞xd8 23.♞d2 ♗xa1 24.♞xa1



The dust settles and Fischer's plan has prevailed: the d3-pawn will fall and the bishop is stronger than the knight. Perhaps Hübner did not realize in advance that while White can improve his position, Black cannot.

24...♔g7 25.♞e1!

25.h5 would be premature because of 25...gxh5!, so instead Fischer brings the rook into play.

25...♘g8

After 25...b6 26.h5 ♖d6 27.h6† ♔g8 28.♙e4 White would win.

26.♙d5

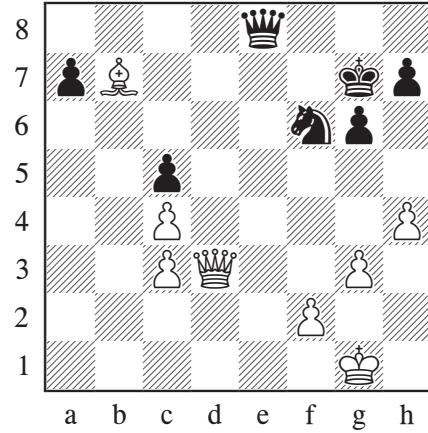
Fischer intends to take on d3 quickly, although 26.a5 is also possible.

26...♞xa4 27.♞xd3 ♞e8

Hübner settles for a pawn-down endgame.

The alternative 27...♞d7 28.♞e3 b6 29.h5 ♞d6 would also be ugly.

28.♞xe8 ♞xe8 29.♙xb7 ♘f6



30.♞d6!

The knight has chances of matching the bishop, but White's queen is clearly superior to Black's.

30...♞d7 31.♞a6

This is always a question: whether or not to place the queen on the edge of the board? In this instance, the queen stands well.

31...♞f7!

Hübner also finds a strong post for his queen, eyeing the pawns on c4 and f2.

32.♞xa7??

Bobby blunders badly, which costs him a piece.

He should have continued:

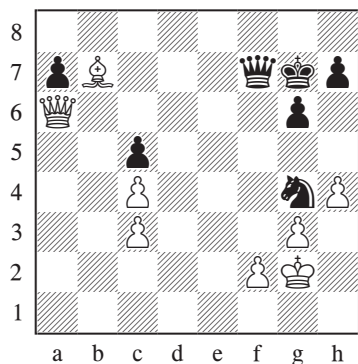
32.♔g2!

32.♙f3! should be good enough as well.

32...♘g4

If 32...♞e7 then 33.♞xa7 wins.

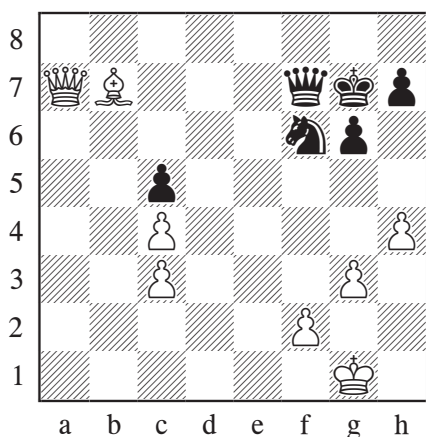
Also after 32...h6 33.♙f3 ♞e7 34.♞c6 Black's prospects are bleak. For example, the plan of ♔f1 followed by ♙d1 and ♙c2 looks strong. Perhaps a computer might somehow hold this, but for a human it would be virtually impossible.



33. ♕f3 ♖f6

After 33... ♗e5 34. ♕d5 ♖e7 35. ♖c8 White, one way or another, would win.

34. ♖d6 ♖xc4 35. ♖e7† ♖f7 36. ♖xc5
White is winning.



32... ♗e4!

Hübner exploits the fact that Fischer's most unfortunate move left both the queen and the bishop paralysed.

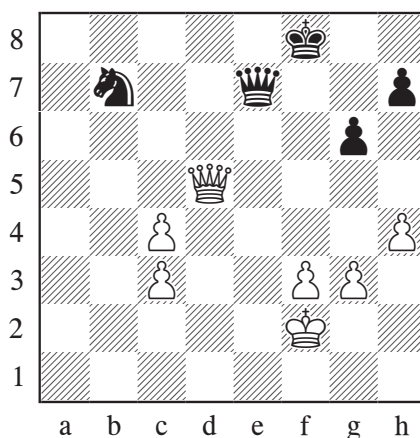
33. f3!

It is sheer good luck for Bobby that this move is sufficient to salvage half a point.

33... ♗d6 34. ♖xc5

Fischer gets a third pawn for the knight. The black king is somewhat open and there are few pawns left on the board, which is why White can hold.

34... ♗xb7 35. ♖d4† ♔g8 36. ♔f2 ♖e7
37. ♖d5† ♔f8



38. h5!

Exchanging pawns helps to bring the draw closer.

38... gxf5 39. ♖xf5 ♗c5 40. ♖d5 ♔g7
Hübner settles for a perpetual check.

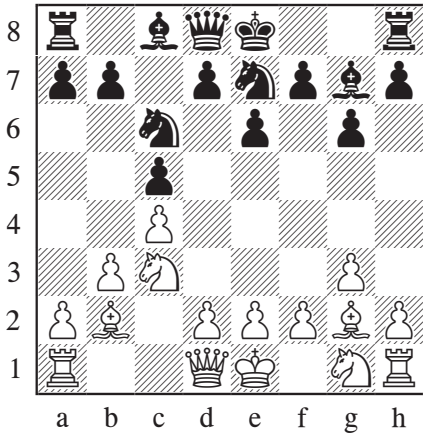
41. ♖d4† ♔f7 42. ♖d5† ♔g7 43. ♖d4† ♔f7
44. ♖d5†
½-½

This draw must have been a painful experience for Bobby. Let's see how he got himself together for the next round, where he was to face a giant of chess, former World Champion Vasily Smyslov.

Vasily Smyslov – Robert J. Fischer

Palma de Mallorca 1970

1.c4 g6 2.♘c3 ♙g7 3.g3 c5 4.♙g2 ♘c6 5.b3 e6 6.♙b2 ♘ge7



7.♘a4!?

Though the 49-year-old Smyslov could no longer realistically hope to become World Champion, he was still a strong competitor, and may have wanted to help his countrymen by holding Bobby to a draw. However, playing such an innocent line is not a good choice.

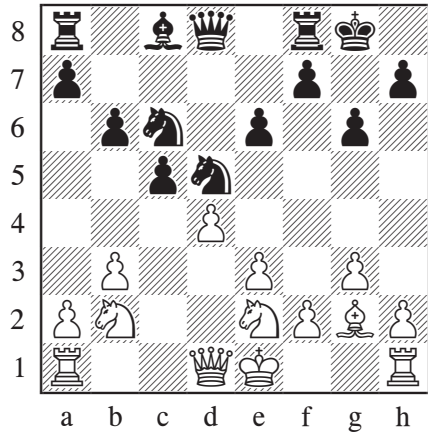
7...♙xb2 8.♘xb2 0–0 9.e3 d5 10.cxd5!?

One gets the feeling that the pressure got to the champion. The pawn exchange brings the black knight to a better place and opens the way for the queen to take up a good square on f6.

Instead, 10.♘e2 d4 11.0–0 looks equal, while after 10.♘f3 ♘f5 Smyslov lost a fantastic game to Tal in 1964. That was also a tense game, as Tal was going to play in the Tel Aviv Olympiad and Smyslov was his replacement, so Tal was really ambitious in that game.

10...♘xd5 11.♘e2 b6 12.d4?

White should have settled for 12.0–0, and after something like 12...♙a6 13.♘c4 ♗f6 14.d3 ♖fd8 15.a3 ♞ac8 16.♗d2 Black is only slightly better.



12...♙a6!

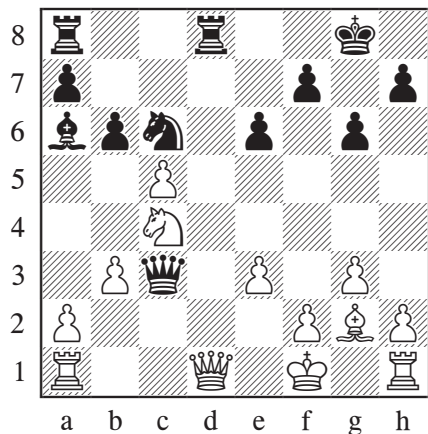
After this active move White already faces significant problems.

13.dxc5 ♗f6 14.♘c4 ♘c3!?

Smyslov has played the opening so poorly that Black has more than one way to develop the initiative. Fischer opts to take away White's right to castle.

14...♖fd8!?: 15.0–0 ♞ac8 16.♗e1 bxc5 is also rather unpleasant for White.

15.♘xc3 ♗xc3† 16.♙f1 ♖fd8

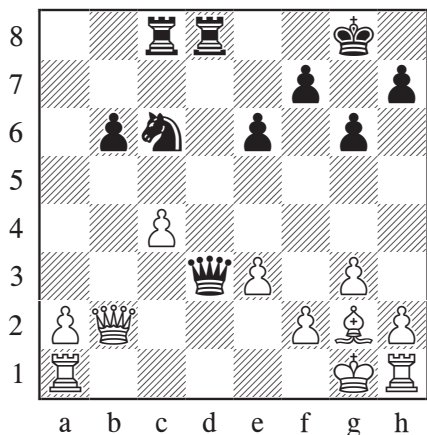


17. ♖c1 ♙xc4† 18. bxc4 ♚d3† 19. ♔g1 ♜ac8
20. cxb6

Fischer is clearly ahead in development and Smyslov has a passive rook in the corner. At least he will have a pawn for the difficult position.

20...axb6 21. ♖b2

21.h3 ♘e5 22. ♔h2 ♚f5 would also be problematic for White.



21...♗a5

Also after 21... ♖f5 22. ♖xb6 ♜d2 23. ♞f1 ♘e5 24.h3 ♞xc4 25. ♞h2 White would struggle.

22.h4

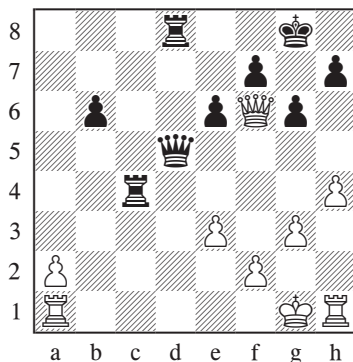
It is tempting to take Black's last remaining pawn on the queenside with 22. ♖xb6. However, as Kasparov pointed out, Black's pressure on the second rank would be too strong to bear. After 22... ♘xc4, for example if 23. ♖b3 ♚d2 24.h3 ♘e5 25. ♞f1 ♜c2 Black would most likely be winning.

22. ♔f1

Some commentators recommended this move, but it looks bad as well.

22... ♘xc4 23. ♖f6 ♚d5 24. ♔xc4 ♜xc4 25.h4

Black's most precise continuation is:



25...♞d6!

25...♞dc8?! 26. ♔h2 leaves Black without a convincing follow-up.

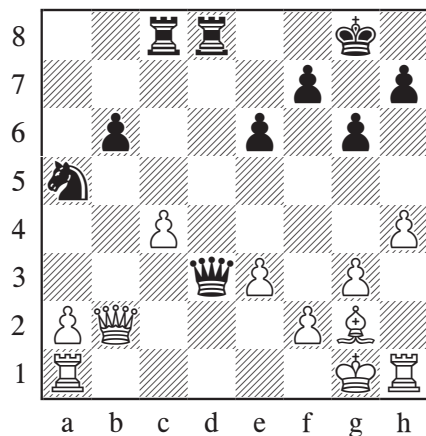
25...♞c2 is tempting but not totally clear. Play continues 26.e4 ♚d4 27. ♖xd4 ♜xd4 28. ♔g2 and now after 28...♞dd2 29. ♞hf1, or 28...♞xe4 29. ♞hc1, White has chances to hold.

26.h5

If 26. ♔h2 then 26...e5 27. ♖e7 ♜c2 puts White under great pressure.

26...♞dc6 27. ♞e1 ♜c1 28. ♔h2 ♞xe1 29. ♞xe1 ♖xh5† 30. ♔g2 ♚c5

Black should win.



22... ♘xc4

Keeping the b6-pawn is an accomplishment.

23. ♖f6 ♗f5

Exchanging queens keeps up the pressure; with fewer pieces on the board, the problem of the misplaced rook on h1 becomes magnified.

23...h5?! would be too slow because of 24. ♔h2.

24. ♗xf5 gxf5 25. h5

Kasparov prefers 25. ♔h2 ♖d2 26. ♖hf1, but after 26... ♖a3! 27. ♔g1 b5 White would struggle.

25... ♖d2 26. ♖c1?

Smyslov commits a losing error. This move leads to the exchange of the queen's rook, and without that defender White's position becomes untenable.

He should have activated his worst piece with: 26. ♖h4! ♕e5

26... ♖c5 can be met by 27. ♖d4.

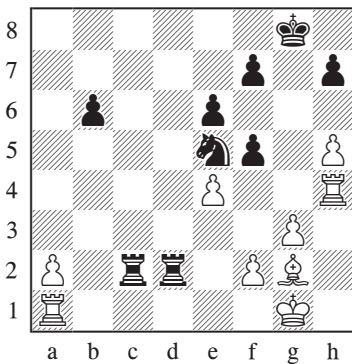
27. e4

27. ♖d4 ♖b2 28. e4 also offers some drawing hopes.

27... ♖cc2

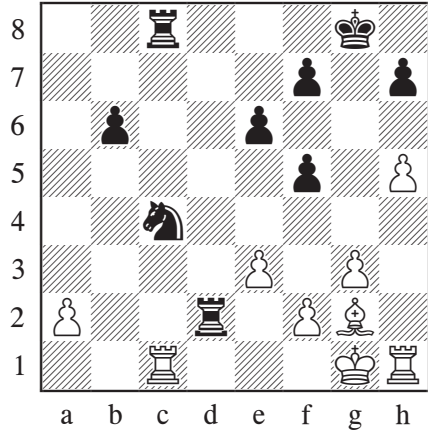
On 27... fxe4 28. ♖xe4 ♖c5 29. a4 White holds.

27... f4 28. gxf4 ♕d3 29. ♖g4† leads to the same result.



28. exf5! ♖xf2 29. ♕e4 ♖xa2 30. ♖xa2 ♖xa2
31. fxe6 fxe6 32. h6

White should draw.



26... ♖c5!

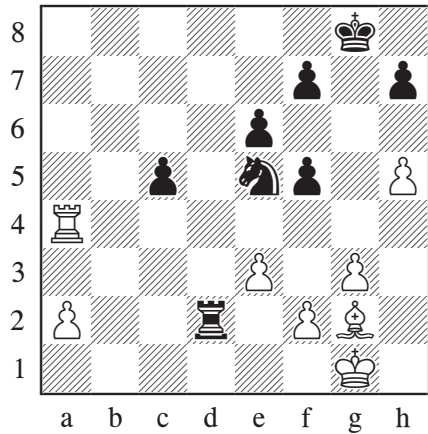
Bobby brings the rook to a defended square and soon forces a dangerous passed pawn.

27. ♖h4 ♕e5! 28. ♖xc5

If 28. ♖b1 then 28... ♖cc2 would be played.

After 28. ♖f1 ♖xa2 29. ♖b4 b5 Black should win with the extra pawn.

28... bxc5 29. ♖a4

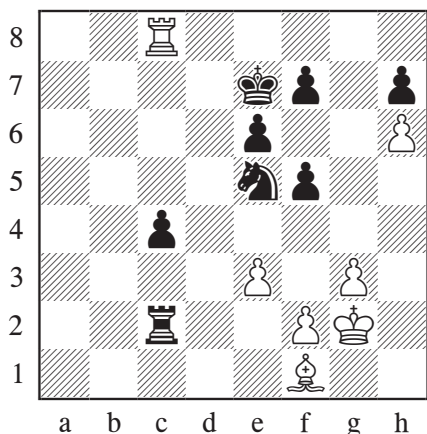


29... c4

The passed pawn is too strong for White to handle.

30. h6 ♔f8 31. ♖a8† ♔e7 32. ♖c8 ♖xa2
33. ♕f1 ♖c2 34. ♔g2

Passive defence would not help. For instance, 34.♖c7† ♕f6 35.♞c8 ♖f3† 36.♔g2 ♖e1† 37.♔g1 c3 and Black wins.



34...♖g4

Pushing the c-pawn now or on the next move would win as well, but Fischer's simple move makes certain of victory.

35.♔g1 ♞xf2

Fischer gives up the passer to obtain a two-pawn advantage. The rest is easy.

36.♙xc4 ♞f3 37.♔g2 ♞xe3 38.♞h8 ♖xh6

Smyslov could have resigned, but chooses to play on for a few more moves.

39.♞xh7 ♖g4 40.♙b5 ♞b3 41.♙c6 ♞b2†
42.♔g1 ♖e5 43.♙a8 ♞b8 44.♙h1

0-1

This game was the very last between these two champions, their head-to-head score being three wins, two draws and one loss from Fischer's point of view. Fischer undoubtedly played a fine game, but the former World Champion was unrecognizable. Perhaps

Fischer's aura of invincibility affected Smyslov, but perhaps even more relevant was that the strong Soviet propaganda made it harder for their own players to face Fischer. In the future it would have a similar effect on Soviet players against Korchnoi after he defected. For example, Polugaevsky, Petrosian, Spassky and Karpov (specifically in Baguio) all heavily underperformed in matches against Korchnoi.

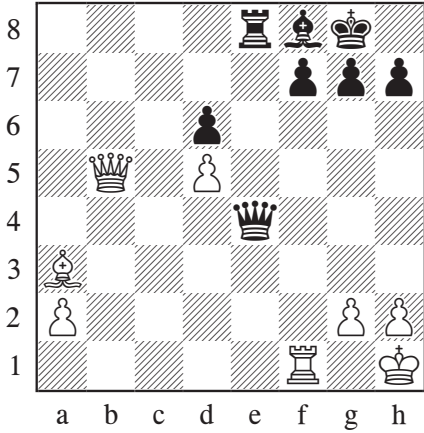
In Round 3 Fischer was White against Addison. According to Brady: "Addison's third Centre Counter Defence brought a wide smile to Fischer's face." Bobby followed Benko's play against Addison from earlier the same year, but then sacrificed the c2-pawn in a different way. Addison grabbed the pawn but then made one mistake and was demolished, resigning after Fischer's 24th move.

Fischer did not slow down, winning against Filip in Round 4, followed by an impressive technical win with Black against Hort. In Round 6, Reshevsky as White took on doubled and isolated c-pawns in the English Opening. Fischer gained an advantage, but allowed his fellow American to fight back...

Samuel Reshevsky – Robert J. Fischer

Palma de Mallorca 1970

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.♖f3 cxd4 4.♖xd4 e6
5.♖c3 ♙b4 6.e3 ♖e4 7.♞c2 ♖xc3 8.bxc3
♙e7 9.♙e2 0-0 10.0-0 a6 11.f4 d6 12.f5
exf5 13.♖xf5 ♙xf5 14.♞xf5 ♖d7 15.♙f3
♞c7 16.♞b1 ♞ab8 17.♙d5 ♖f6 18.♙a3 ♞fe8
19.♞d3 ♖xd5 20.cxd5 b5 21.e4 ♙f8 22.♞b4
♞e5 23.c4 ♞be8 24.cxb5 axb5 25.♔h1 ♞e7
26.♞xb5 ♞xe4 27.♞xe4 ♞xe4



28. ♖d7!

Reshevsky correctly attacks the f7- and d6-pawns.

28... ♜f4!

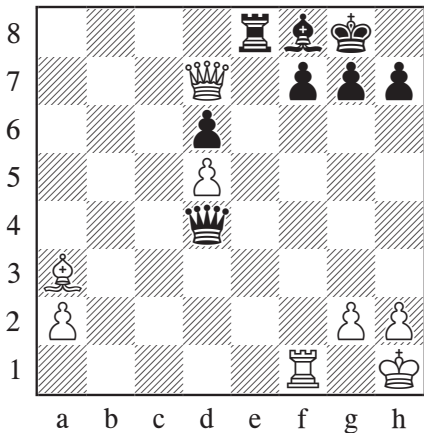
Fischer defends both pawns with this sweet move, and keeps the game going.

29. ♔g1??

Reshevsky, who was known to suffer from heavy time trouble, commits a losing error.

After 29. ♜b5 ♜e3 30. h3 ♜a8 31. ♕c1 ♜e4 32. a3 White would only be slightly worse.

29... ♜d4†! 30. ♔h1



30... ♜f2!

0-1

Fischer's lovely tactical shot exploits White's weak back rank; it wins on the spot, as 31. ♜b5 ♜e1 forces a checkmate.

This was Fischer's fifth win in a row, his flying start of 5½/6 giving him a full-point lead. It was also the last ever game between two of the greatest American players. Their final head-to-head score from Fischer's point of view was nine wins, seven draws and four losses. Interestingly, Fischer scored three wins as Black, while Reshevsky had none. Bobby ran an article in the chess magazine *Chessworld* entitled: "Ten Greatest Masters in History". He included Reshevsky, and wrote of Sammy: "For a period of ten years – between 1946 and 1956 – Reshevsky was probably the best player in the world. I feel sure that had he played a match with Botvinnik during that time, he would have won and would have been the World Champion."