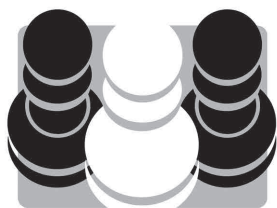


I was a Victim of Bobby Fischer

By

Mark Taimanov



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Publisher's Foreword

I was a Victim of Bobby Fischer sounds like the sort of 'jazzed-up' title a Western publisher might choose instead of the sober title the Russian author preferred. But that's not the case here – *I was a Victim of Bobby Fischer* is a direct translation of the Russian title Mark Taimanov wanted. The author is sadly no longer with us, having died at the age of 90 in 2016, but his wishes were clearly expressed to us by his Russian publisher and his widow: his title was to be used, his text was to be faithfully translated – a task Douglas Griffin performed admirably – and no computer corrections added in his main text. If we wanted to add text, we could do so at the beginning of the book and the end, but his story should flow as he intended in the heart of the book. We were happy to follow the author's instructions.

So who was Mark Taimanov? I suspect younger readers might know him only for the Sicilian variation named in his honour, or for losing 6–0 to Bobby Fischer. In the pages that follow we shall learn all about that match, its origins and its aftermath, including severe personal consequences for Taimanov.

But there was so much more to Taimanov – he was one of the greatest chess players of the 20th century. Twice he tied for the Soviet Championship, once winning the play-off against Spassky and Averbakh, once being edged out by Botvinnik. Taimanov won Olympiad team Gold, while his record in European Team Championships was extraordinary – in four such events, he achieved a clean sweep of four team Golds and four individual Golds. He still played strongly at an advanced age, winning the World Senior Championship twice.

Strict judges might place Taimanov just below the great World Champions of the 20th century, but he should be pushed no lower.

Chess was just one of three outstanding careers that Taimanov enjoyed, with music and writing the other two. He was renowned as a world-class concert pianist. And typically of Taimanov, his career was long – at the age of just eleven he starred in a Soviet film, though curiously playing a violin rather than on his favoured piano.

As publishers, we rarely mention an author's personal life, but Taimanov also lived his life to the fullest in this area. He married four times, including becoming a father to twins at the age of 78.

Towards the end of the book, after the author has had his say, we added some sections that we hope the reader will appreciate. The translator Douglas Griffin, with much-appreciated help from individuals we mention on page 2, did valuable archaeological work, unearthing and translating interesting material, including other annotated games involving Taimanov.

And then GM Jacob Aagaard discusses *12 Interesting Positions* from the book with three young American friends – Sam Shankland, Jeffery Xiong and Awonder Liang. It's *not* a computer-check of the book – which Taimanov would have disliked – but instead four modern grandmasters revealing what they can see in the positions Taimanov played and analysed. Our thanks to the young Americans.

We hope you will enjoy this work by Mark Evgenievich Taimanov. Since the author is largely writing about a match he lost, you might guess that this book would be full of regrets. At the risk of giving away a spoiler, I will say that this is far from true, and Taimanov's book is infused with his love of the beauty of chess.

John Shaw
Glasgow, April 2021

Preface (1992)

“Chess was for him a miraculous world, to which he dedicated his entire life. Some called him a genius and the greatest champion of all time; others an egocentric, unpredictable loner...”

The great American chessplayer Robert James Fischer is not yet fifty. For many of his peers and colleagues this is a time of maturity, success and creative achievements.

Recall that at this time of their lives the World Champions of the past, Wilhelm Steinitz, Emanuel Lasker, Alexander Alekhine and Mikhail Botvinnik firmly held the king's sceptre in their hands. And there is no doubt that the 11th World Champion R. Fischer, who abandoned the throne undefeated, could, with his talent, devotion to chess, and sense of purpose, have still today played an important role in the battle for the highest chess title. But, alas, one usually speaks of him only in the past tense. For twenty years now Fischer has not taken part in any competitions – by a strange whim of his extraordinary world view he voluntarily abandoned the chess world, dooming himself to lonely seclusion...

But it is impossible to forget Fischer – he is a living legend with a mysterious, tragic fate, and his name will continue to excite general interest.

...It occurs as if spontaneously, without any visible reasons, but every time in meetings with chess lovers – be it at lectures, interviews, simultaneous displays – regardless of the topic of the speech and the make-up of the audience, one question invariably arises and immediately intrigues the auditorium: “What is Fischer doing now?”

Seemingly, during the past years when the attention of the chess world has been firmly focused on the raging rivalry of the ‘two great Ks’ – Garry Kasparov and Anatoly Karpov – the name of the strange chess recluse could have imperceptibly sunk into oblivion all by itself, gone once and for all. But on the contrary, at this very moment, in the context of global discussions on the fate of the chess crown, the figure of Robert Fischer has come to be of particular interest and attractiveness as the only worthy counter-balance to the duet dominating on the Olympus.

It is amusing that diplomatic chess lovers are usually afraid to address questions to me about Robert Fischer, and they simply excuse themselves for involuntary lack of tact, clearly considering that a single reminder of that terrible name could traumatize the ageing grandmaster; that a hint of that past fiasco could reopen old wounds... While appreciating this sensitivity, I will take this opportunity to nonetheless reject this idea completely. I admit that although the memory of the world championship quarter-final match in 1971 against Fischer brought me the greatest disappointment, and moreover, also had far-reaching, distressing consequences for me (of which we will later speak), I recall this duel as one of the brightest and most significant events of my life. I got to be one of the last (followed by B. Larsen, T. Petrosian and B. Spassky) to play a match with an outstanding grandmaster occupying an honourable place in the history of chess,

and to experience enormous creative happiness, since it was generally recognized that, despite the sensationally catastrophic result, the games themselves were exceptionally full of content and fight.

This dramatic duel has, alas, not left its due mark in chess literature. At first, it was overshadowed by the events leading to the historic change of champions, then by the withdrawal of Fischer from chess life, and then by countless events that have taken place in quickly-passing time. For the new generation that has entered the broad chess arena, my match with Fischer, as well as the great grandmaster himself, has remained blurred by the unstoppable stream of topical information flooding from periodical publications. But it is a sin to forget the milestones of history. Especially the creativity of the leading lights. And therefore I consider it my duty to share on the pages of a book my recollections of a great chessplayer and exceptional personality, against whom fate pitted me in his very best years. I enter upon this mission with a sense of admiration for the talent of Robert Fischer and I bow before his dedication to chess art.



Taimanov, Tal, Petrosian and Korchnoi – Tbilisi 1958

Chapter 7

The Start

GAME 1

Already the first effort showed that both players were in uncompromising mood and did not want to spend valuable time (10 games were allotted to the match) on a traditional starting warm-up. Fischer was always characterized by such a fighting spirit, and I too, I confess, did not experience any particular timidity. And not only by reason of my innate optimism, but also on the basis of the two games that I had previously played against Fischer, in which I had collected only a half-point, but in which during the course of the struggle, as the reader already knows, I had felt completely confident.

The tone of the opening encounter was defined by the opening choice. The double-edged King's Indian Defence was the theoretical 'gun' that was destined to be 'fired' already in the first act. The King's Indian had served Fischer truly and faithfully for many years, and he was very consistent in his attachment to certain openings. On my part, I too was thirsty for a principled discussion along these lines, since I had previously played one of the most topical systems (indeed, it bears my name) very readily, and for the match I had prepared a series of new continuations. Thus, the first game.

Mark Taimanov – Robert James Fischer

Candidates quarter-final (1), Vancouver 1971

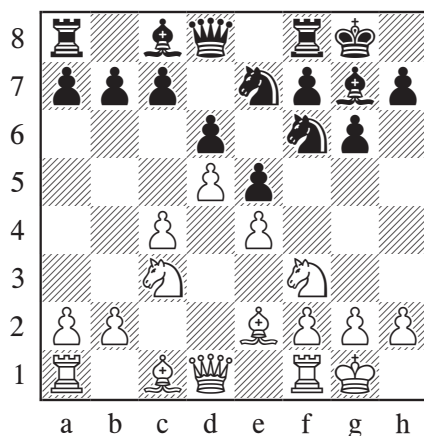
King's Indian Defence

1.d4 ♘f6

This move was made 10 minutes after the start of the game. And not because Fischer had thought over it for so long – he was simply... late. Incidentally, this was generally typical of Bobby. Perhaps, this was a way of asserting himself? Or of unnerving the opponent?

2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♗g7 4.e4 d6 5.♗f3 0–0 6.♗e2 e5 7.0–0 ♘c6 8.d5 ♗e7

Probably neither opponent doubted that this position, which opens up broad space for creative fantasy, would arise in our match. Each had his view on it, had deep feelings for it and had no objective basis for avoiding this deeply-studied system. But who would be the first to present a prepared surprise?



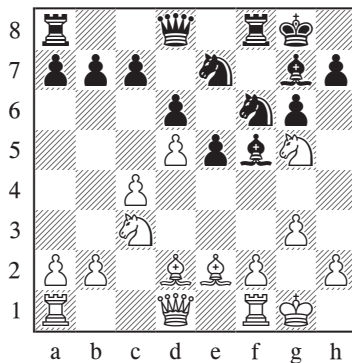
9.♔d2

Fischer could also have expected here 9.b4, 9.♘e1 and 9.♘d2, which had all been encountered many times in my games. The quiet developing move with the bishop has the aim of rapidly mobilizing the queenside forces.

9...♘e8

Judging by how quickly and clearly Fischer reacted to my choice of variation, he was prepared for the discussion.

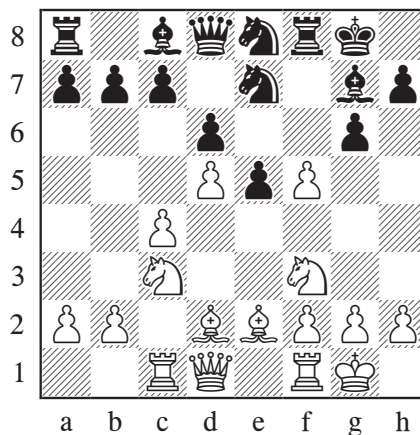
Less convincing is 9...♘h5 in view of: 10.g3 f5 11.exf5 ♔xf5 12.♘g5 ♘f6



13.g4 ♔d7 14.♘ge4 ♘xe4 15.♘xe4 With a positional advantage for White.¹⁸

10.♞c1

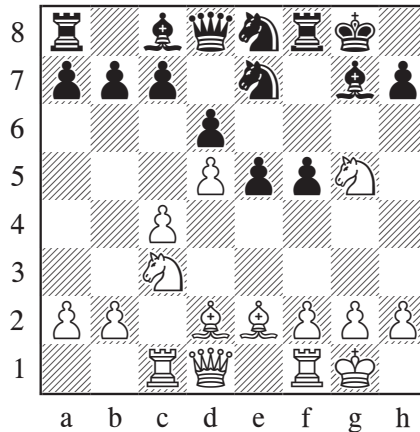
10.b4 is often tried here, but I rejected it, since it was unnecessary for the set-up that I had prepared for the match.

10...f5 11.exf5

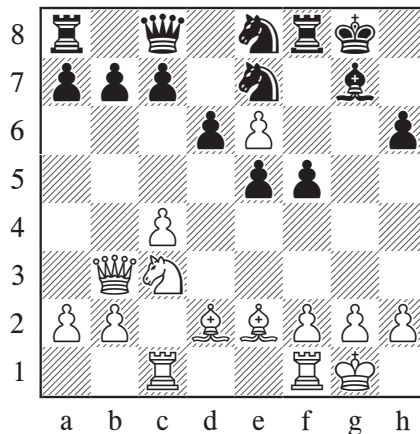
The opening of the game in the centre comes into White's intended program, but the exchange is better carried out a move later, playing first 11. ♖b3, which was tested in the 3rd game and led to a successful opening outcome.

11...gxf5 12. ♘g5

This thrust determines White's strategic idea. With the transfer of the knight to e6 he strives, even at the cost of a pawn sacrifice, to seize space in the centre and to develop piece pressure along the opened files and diagonals.



12...h6 13. ♘e6 ♙xe6 14.dxe6 ♖c8 15. ♖b3



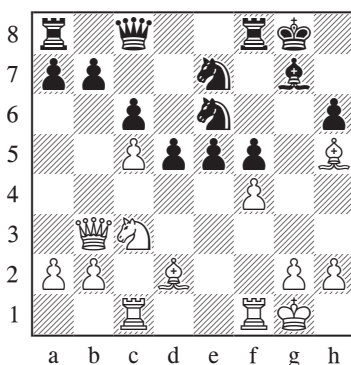
15...c6!?

First and foremost, the d5-square should be defended.

Definite difficulties arise for Black in the case of 15...b6 16. ♘d5 ♖xe6 17. ♘xe7† ♖xe7 18.c5† ♖h8 19.cxd6 ♘xd6 20. ♖c6, as was shown by a later game of mine against M. Tseitlin (1972).

16.♙h5 ♖xe6

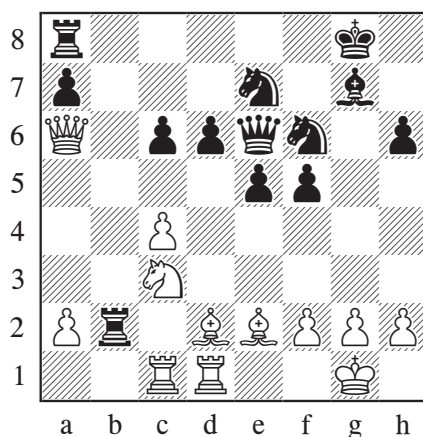
Fischer was a stickler for logical, clear solutions. He rejected the alternative 16...♘c7 without any particular hesitation. And indeed, in this case after: 17.f4!? (also possible is 17.♙f7†) 17...♘xe6 (or 17...e4 18.♙f7† ♖h7 19.♘xe4! fxe4 20.f5 ♖xf7 21.exf7 ♘xf5 22.♖h3) 18.c5 d5



19.fxe5 ♘xc5 (if 19...♖c7, then 20.♘e2!?) 20.♖b4 b6 21.♘a4 ♖e6 (21...♘xa4?! 22.♖xe7) 22.♘xc5 bxc5 23.♖xc5 An obvious initiative is on White's side.

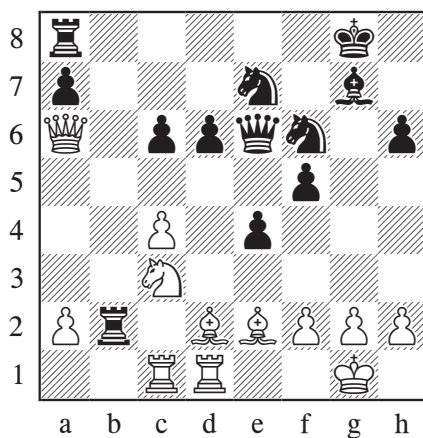
17.♖xb7 ♘f6 18.♙e2 ♖fb8 19.♖a6 ♖xb2 20.♖fd1

The time has come to summarize the results of the exciting opening battle. Perhaps, each of the sides could be satisfied with it – Black has an extra pawn, White has active piece play. Such a conflict usually preordains a sharp and uncompromising nature of the subsequent events.

**20...e4**

A committal decision. Its negative points are obvious, since the weakness of the dark squares in the centre becomes prominent. But, as is well known, Fischer did not tolerate passive positions and went in for concessions (the cost of which he understood perfectly) for the sake of counterplay, associated here with the seizing of space in the centre and the eventual enlivening of his king's bishop.

At any rate, defence with 20...♘d7 21.♖a3 ♖b7 22.♙e3 ♘c8 was not to his taste on account of the possible blow 23.c5! and on 23...d5 (if 23...dxc5, then 24.♘a4) then 24.♘xd5.



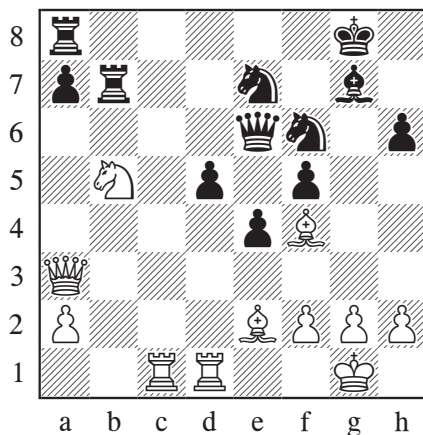
21. ♖a3!?

Fischer's idea would be revealed in the variation: 21. ♙f4 ♜e8 22. ♙h5 (otherwise 22... ♙xc3) 22... ♙e5! 23. ♙xe8?! ♙xf4!

21... ♞b7 22. ♙f4 d5 23. cxd5 cxd5

Note that the capture 23... ♜xd5, which was recommended at the time by some commentators, had its shortcomings in view of 24. ♙c4 followed by 25. ♜e2, which noticeably dynamizes White's game.

24. ♜b5!



24... ♜g6!?

An eye for an eye! Fischer never missed a possibility for counterplay! Thus, here for the sake of the initiative he is ready to part with an exchange after 25. ♜c7 ♞f7 26. ♜xa8 ♜xf4, while on the 'natural' manoeuvre 25. ♞g3 he had prepared a tactical 'trick' – 25... ♜h5! 26. ♙xh5 ♜xf4 27. ♞xf4 ♞xb5 28. ♞c7 ♞e5!, permitting him to 'come out of the water dry'.

But, all the same, problems still remain for Black.