

LUNCH WITH BOBBY FISCHER

In 1972, in an extraordinary match full of Cold War tension, Bobby Fischer beat the Soviet player Boris Spassky to become World Chess Champion. He then disappeared, to live a life of legendary eccentricity and paranoia. He is now making a comeback. Two weeks ago in Serbia, he granted an audience to EDWARD FOX, speaking to a journalist for the first time in more than 20 years



Bobby Fischer on a video tape made by the millionaire sponsor of his forthcoming rematch against Boris Spassky



Bobby Fischer, the reclusive American chess genius, is at this moment at a luxury island resort on the Montenegro coast of what used to be called Yugoslavia, preparing for his comeback. Most of us, of course, will never need to make a comeback in the course of our lives, but Bobby Fischer is one of those who does. Nor, I would say, would those few of us who felt the need, at a certain point in our lives, to make a comeback, choose to do so in the middle of a civil war. But Bobby Fischer is that kind of guy.

Who is Bobby Fischer, and why is he making a comeback? Bobby Fischer is the greatest chess player who ever lived. A single-minded prodigy, he became the United States champion, in 1957, at the age of 14. In 1972, in a spectacular match in Reykjavik, Iceland, he rose to be world champion, taking the title from Boris Spassky, an urbane Russian who was at the time the most formidable product of the Soviet chess machine. The match gripped the world's attention as much for the exciting quality of the play as for the way it dramatised the Cold War – pitting representatives of the two superpowers against one another in single combat, and America won. In his style of play, Fischer was a maximalist, a killer, and he slew the Goliath of Soviet chess.

The following year, as the time approached to defend his title, he quarrelled with Fide, chess's governing body, over the rules for the match. Fischer insisted that Fide accept 60 pages of detailed conditions before he would agree to play, among them a provision that there be no limit to the number of games played. When Fide rejected Fischer's demands, he quit the competition, forfeiting his title, which passed in 1975 to Anatoly Karpov.

Fischer withdrew completely from professional chess and entered a Garboesque seclusion, freezing in perpetuity the popular image of himself as the intense young man from Brooklyn who had triumphed so spectacularly at Reykjavik, attaining a kind of immortality while still alive, a hostage to his own inflexible pride.

The years passed, and the last extant photographs were growing more and more out of date. No one knew what Bobby Fischer looked like any more. Into the vacuum of his non-presence rushed a fog of rumours and fragmentary information. In the press, for which he became an obsession on a par with the posthumous Elvis Presley, he existed as a vortex of recycled facts and second-hand quotes. Every now and then there would be a "sighting" of a forlorn, bearded figure. In the chess world, there were rumours of comebacks, which never materialised.

Fischer's lost decades were spent wandering as a penniless loner, mostly in and around Pasadena, California. He no longer played chess, for a time he became involved in a bizarre, cult-like church called the Worldwide Church of God (which soaked him of much of his Reykjavik winnings), and – perhaps as a hostile reaction to his own Jewish mother – held paranoid anti-Semitic, anti-Communist views. He was particularly fearful of journalists. To this minimal structure of established fact was added an array of probably fanciful detail. It was said that he had had all the fillings in his teeth removed to prevent the KGB from transmitting harmful messages through them into his brain. True or not (and it is probably not), it added to the legend of Fischer in the Wilderness.

As time wore on, it became clear that Fischer was beginning to play chess again and was establishing carefully guarded contacts with the chess world: mostly long-distance telephone calls in the middle of the night. There were occasional meetings with Spassky. They became friends: according to the chess grapevine, they even went to Disneyland together.

The contacts made during his wilderness years included tentative negotiations with parties willing to stump up millions of dollars for the right to sponsor a Fischer comeback match. In 1974, Ferdinand Marcos promised \$2 million if Fischer chose to manifest himself in the Philippines; the following year the Shah of Iran offered \$5 million. There were offers from Hollywood and Las Vegas. But Bobby was not ready.

Now he is. There is a new-look Bobby Fischer, and he is about to make a comeback. On 1 September, he will repeat Reykjavik in a rematch with Boris Spassky, to be held on an island on the Montenegro coast, standing to earn over 3 million dollars if he wins.

Crucial to Bobby Fischer's decision to return to chess was his invention of a new type of chess clock, for which he received a US patent in 1990. The clock could, if generally adopted, significantly alter the way professional matches are played. The Bobby Fischer Anti-Time-Pressure Digital Chess Clock ensures that games are played at a single sitting, without adjournments, and that players do not run out of time towards the end of a game. By abolishing adjournments, the clock prevents players from falling back on databases and teams of analysts. Fischer's invention allows the kind of drawn-out war of attrition which is Fischer's preferred style of play.

Fischer's re-emergence began around the time of his clock patent. The Belgian telecommunications executive Bessel Kok invited Fischer to stay with him for a few days in 1990, at a gathering that included Spassky, the Netherlands grand master Jan Timman, and, at one point, the pop singer Plastique Bertrand. At that time, Fischer talked obsessively about his clock, although he was not yet ready to be coaxed out of retirement. His behaviour was still odd: on a walk in the woods with Kok and Kok's young son, Fischer took a ball the boy was playing with and threw it into the woods.

This year, the right money and the right conditions for Fischer's return to chess configured themselves, as hazard would have it, in the form of a Serbian millionaire and what I will call the Hungarian Connection. Under these auspices, Fischer has at last been given all the conditions he sought, and was denied, after Reykjavik.

The Serbian millionaire is Jezdimir Vasiljevic. Born near Belgrade, at 18 he was working at a Firestone tyre plant in Australia. In 1989, after spending several years travelling around the world trading in precious metals and stones, he returned to Yugoslavia and started the Jugoskandic

Bank in Belgrade, where he made his fortune rapidly and in a way that is not entirely clear. (Jugoskandic offers an astonishing ten per cent interest per month on US dollar accounts, a currency that is not affected by the hyperinflation now ravaging the Yugoslav dinar.)

Now, at 43, he is one of the richest and most powerful men in Serbia. His interests include the Belgrade television station MV Real Time, the current affairs magazine *BIG* (in which he appears prominently in every issue), the Belgrade Racing Club, and a film production company. By his own account, besides speculating in currency and commodities, he took advantage of liberalised banking laws and the fact that state banks had lost credibility by wiping out \$11 billion in creditors' deposits. He has enough money to be willing to put up the prize money for Fischer's comeback match against his old Reykjavik opponent: \$3.35 million for the winner, and \$1.65 million for the loser.

Chess is a popular sport in Yugoslavia, and Vasiljevic has been a generous patron. He hopes to recoup his investment with the sale of corporate sponsorship, television rights, videotapes, and FISCHER-SPASSKY: THE SEQUEL commemorative souvenirs. Everything is for sale.

Below: the Soviet player Boris Spassky (left) and Bobby Fischer during the world championship which Fischer won in Reykjavik, July 1972



The Hungarian Connection involves Janos Kubat, director of the 1984 Chess Olympiad in Salonika, and editor of the Belgrade-based Hungarian-language newspaper, *Magyarso*. The Fischer comeback is taking place in what was Yugoslavia because Kubat has family connections with Fischer's current girlfriend, 19-year-old Hungarian-American junior chess champion Zita Raiczanyi.

The Fischer Kubat speaks of is nothing like the Fischer of old. "I had heard from friends that Bobby Fischer wanted to return to chess," Kubat said, "if he could find a good sponsor and a good negotiator. We received a quick answer from Fischer's lawyers in Los Angeles. I told them that we had a sponsor [Vasiljevic] and they suggested starting negotiations on 8 July. We signed a contract on 11 July. Bobby Fischer was very easy to talk to and to negotiate with. He was very flexible. We were flexible. All the stories about him being hard to negotiate with and eccentric are not true."

The only tricky part of the negotiations was persuading Fischer to agree to give a 60-minute press conference on 1 September, immediately before the match. Kubat's original suggestion was that Fischer make his comeback in a tournament with Britain's Nigel Short, Jan Timman and the Yugoslav grand master Lyubomir Lyuboyevic. But a match against Boris Spassky, now living in France, still playing chess professionally, though now ranked only 101 in the world, was decided upon for "romantic" reasons. The same referee as in 1972, Lottar Schmidt of Germany, will also participate.

There are other reasons for Fischer's choice of Yugoslavia. Fischer spent over a year there in the late Fifties and early Sixties, and has good memories of the place.

Playing in a civil war is also an advantage: Fischer likes to be politically unpopular. It is rumoured that one of the comeback scenarios Fischer was contemplating was a match (with Spassky) in South Africa during the height of that country's international isolation. Having this match in the middle of a civil war demonstrates that chess can be exciting and dangerous: a new version of the idea that chess is war by other means. (Fischer's contract includes a clause that provides for the relocation of the match to a new site if the sound of gunfire interrupts play.) That he is breaking US law by trading in Serbia-Montenegro in violation of the United Nations' economic blockade (in which sports earnings count as trade) is perhaps part of the fun, though he is unlikely to be prosecuted.

For the Yugoslavs, the match is a spectac-

ular way of defying world opinion. As Jezdimir Vasiljevic put it: "The whole world, although unwillingly, has to publish that Mr Fischer is in Belgrade and that he is going to play a match with Boris Spassky."

Bobby Fischer arrived in Belgrade on 24 July, via Budapest. "We practically had to smuggle him in," Vasiljevic said. The match's organisers were afraid that the Hungarian Chess Federation, which disapproved of the match taking place in Serbia-Montenegro, or the US government, might try to prevent Fischer entering the country. Once in Belgrade, Fischer strode about in a most unreclusive way, dining in restaurants, signing autographs. He exchanged courtesies with the ex-communist mayor of Belgrade, Dr Slobodanka Gruden. He was the guest of honour at a dinner at the Belgrade Diplomatic Club. He appeared on Vasiljevic's Belgrade television station.

In the days that followed, he attended to technical matters concerning the match: what chess pieces to use ("either those used for the Dubrovnik Chess Olympiad... or the pieces he received as a gift in 1984 from Subotica", according to the daily bulletin of Fischer's activities, issued by Jugoskandic). He lifted weights in a hotel gym. He had himself fitted for a new suit. The only trace of his old behaviour was that he would not allow anyone to take his photograph.

The match, which begins on Tuesday, will be played on Fischer's terms: an unlimited number of games will be played, and the first player to win ten games will be declared the winner. The first five wins will be played at the resort of Sveti Stefan, and the remaining games will be played in Belgrade. The Bobby Fischer Anti-Time-Pressure Chess Clock will be used.

Sveti Stefan is located on a section of the Montenegro coast that brochures call the Budva Riviera. The resort, which Vasiljevic has leased, was once an isolated fishing village built on top of a small, rocky island until it was converted into a hotel and connected to the mainland by a causeway. It is as if Fischer had chosen *Fantasy Island* as the setting for his comeback. And just for added spice, the US Sixth Fleet is cruising somewhere up the coast.

During the day, well-off Serbs tan themselves on the beaches, enjoying as far as possible a normal summer holiday. But the numbers are way down this year, there are no foreigners, and there is an unusual interest in the contents of newspapers. In the Serbian heartland, life is not visibly much

affected by the economic blockade, but there are queues of stationary vehicles two kilometres long at some petrol stations and inflation is running at 60 per cent per month. In conversation, people reveal their anxiety about the war. In Budva, the trees are papered over with black-bordered death notices, all dated within the past three months. In conversation, people ask you why the whole world is against them.

I came here to await developments in the Fischer comeback drama. I would talk to Vasiljevic about how he pulled off his coup. If I was lucky I would get a glimpse of Fischer.

Two weeks before the match, Sveti Stefan was slowly filling up with foreign journalists, all bent on the same thing. We warily sized each other up, and gave each other a wide berth, but on an island this small (perhaps 200 metres across) this was hardly possible. The extortionate room service charges clocked up alarmingly. One night, at the terrace restaurant, as the sun set over the Adriatic, a fragment of English drifted across from a nearby table, expressing the thought in every journalist's mind: "...if I can just get to talk to him..."

Fischer, meanwhile, kept his customary nocturnal hours, rising in the early afternoon, consuming an enormous meal (on 10 August, according to Vasiljevic's daily bulletin, Fischer breakfasted on "ham-and-eggs made with five eggs, mineral water, fruit juice and tea") in a separate part of the restaurant, accompanied by a posse of big Serbian bodyguards who kept curious reporters away. Then he would study chess in his room until dawn, either alone or with his second (his pre-match sparring partner), the Filipino grandmaster Eugenio Torre. Fischer had been assigned villa number 118 on the northern tip of the island, while Spassky and his family occupied villa number 93 on the eastern end. While the *bon viveur* Spassky could be seen daily padding about the island in polo shirt and shorts, like any of the other Yugoslav tourists staying there, the monkish Fischer adhered strictly to the ascetic rule of his chess devotions. I went down to villa 118 to have a look and glimpsed him, through the villa's wrought-iron gate with "Private" sign, sitting alone on his patio. Bobby Fischer in the flesh. Alive after all these years.

Two meetings with Vasiljevic failed to materialise. Then one morning before lunch I wandered to the pool-side bar and came upon him drinking plum brandy with a female companion. A short, beefy, longish-haired, square-jawed Serb in sunglasses,

radiating nervous energy, cunning and will power. He invited me to join them.

"I suppose you want me to tell you how I was able to bring Bobby Fischer here," he said.

"Naturally."

"That's the question everyone is asking me. It's a million-dollar secret. What is the circulation of your magazine?"

"Half a million," I said (actually it is nearer 400,000), adding that it was a magazine for the liberal intelligentsia, thinking that might help.

"*Life* magazine is 12 million. So is *People*. I am on the cover of *Life*." (Actually, both have a far lower circulation, and he is on the cover of neither.)

After concluding his millionairish jest, he came down to earth and told me straightforwardly about the Hungarian Connection. "We exploited that," he said.

"I like spectacular gestures," he went on. "It's for the same reason that I bought this island and turned it into an offshore duty-free zone. I paid \$570 million for it. One hundred and twenty acres."

He claims that it is an independent sovereign state. It is interesting how many millionaires dream of having their own private kingdom. But this place is leased, and you can't lease a kingdom. Except on *Fantasy Island*.

Presently we were joined by the youthful Prime Minister of Montenegro, Momir Bulatovic, 32, and he and Vasiljevic went into a deep conclave.

"I told him I have \$35 million I don't

know what to do with," Vasiljevic said after the Prime Minister swept off.

"Don't lend it to him," I suggested.

Unexpectedly, he stood up and said, "Come. I will take you to meet Bobby."

We walked across the top of the island and down a flight of stairs into the hotel restaurant. At a remote table overlooking the bay, Bobby Fischer was having breakfast. The three of us – Vasiljevic, his companion (a reporter for Belgrade television) and myself – joined Fischer at his table.

Meeting him was a shock: it was like seeing someone one thought was long-dead inexplicably alive again. Not only did one have to reconcile memories of 20-year-old photographs with the person sitting across the table, mentally supplying the intervening years, but this absence of a visual record in the years since Reykjavik emphasised how harsh his ageing has been. His years in the wilderness have visibly taken their toll. It is hard to see the young Bobby Fischer under the scrubby beard he now wears (at 49), except in the long jaw that is his face's dominant feature. Physically, he looks like a cross between a Brooklyn rabbi and a major-league baseball player, with a weightlifter's muscular arms. He weighs 120 kilos. A book of chess games lay open in front of him, and a pocket chess set rested on the open page.

"Why are you sitting on your own?" Vasiljevic said, carefully tending his precious new acquisition. "What time did you get up?"

"I got up at, uh, 12.30," said Fischer. He spoke as if he had never left Brooklyn in his life.

Vasiljevic launched into business. It was all good news. "I have just turned down \$7 million from German TV, but I am looking for \$10 million," said Vasiljevic.

Bobby's eyes lit up. "\$10 million is good," he said with a self-absorbed smile.

They discussed huge sums of money, publicity, prominent figures who were expected to be present for the match. The Ambassador from Cyprus is coming, Nigel Short has been invited. Bobby was happy, and at ease. He made jokes.

Vasiljevic risked telling him that I was a writer. Bobby was untroubled by this. This was the new Bobby Fischer.

"You from England?" Bobby asked me. I said I was. He spoke with a kind of blunt, suspicious curiosity, rather than out of an eagerness to make conversation, it seemed.

"You a professional chess player?"

No, I answered, just an enthusiast.

"You write for chess magazines or what?"

"No." I shrank further. We talked about Nigel Short, and this was safer ground.

"Yeah, he's a strong player," Fischer said, with peremptory approval.

He quizzed me about Short's forthcoming bid for the world championship. His attention burned into me like a laser beam. When I couldn't give the location for Short's imminent encounter with Jan Timman, I could tell Fischer had marked me for someone not worth bothering with. The genius of Fischer is clearly focused within a very narrow band. Everything outside that band is a void. He understands nothing except chess. He is completely without charm. At one point Vasiljevic, stroking Fischer's ego, said that the American sprinter and recent Olympic gold-medalist Carl Lewis had expressed an interest in the match. Fischer was only dimly able to remember who he was.

"Oh yeah, he, uh, won at the Olympics in Korea in 1988." Barcelona had apparently passed him by. "He's – *black*." A note of bigotry rose to the surface. For Fischer, Carl Lewis's existence unfortunately belonged to that confusing void outside chess.

Spassky strolled over, to suggest a game of tennis that evening. He speaks with a suave Russo-French accent. He has grown paunchy with age, and has steel-grey hair in a wave across his forehead and ice-blue eyes. Bobby was interested in playing, but with one condition.

"Can we play late – about 10 o'clock?" he said. "That way we can be sure there won't be any photographers around."

Spassky was agreeable. His agreeability has been a vital part of the Bobby Fischer comeback. For Spassky, the match has given his career an unexpected boost. ("Boris is a safe bet for an opponent," observes Nigel Short. "Fischer is not going to get humiliated by Boris. Boris is not a ruthless killer.") From Spassky's point of view, it's not a bad dodge, being paid \$1.65 million to play a game of chess he is likely to lose. Spassky is said to have asked the organisers of the match for life assurance before agreeing to play in Serbia-Montenegro, and was afraid he would be refused entry into the country. He arrived in Belgrade via Sofia rather than via Budapest, which has become the usual means of entry into Serbia since the imposition of the blockade.

The question is whether FISCHER-SPASSKY II will be a unique event or the beginning of a sustained second phase of Fischer's extraordinary career. "It might be a damp squib if the chess is awful," says Short: "A couple of old men belatedly cashing in on their names. But if Fischer wins convincingly, almost anything could happen."

Having finished his breakfast, Bobby excused himself. If he was going to play tennis at ten, he needed to go back to work. ●



BIG Magazine

Jezdimir Vasiljevic, the Serbian millionaire who is sponsoring Fischer's comeback