

“A NICE GAME AND A BEAUTIFUL GAME”

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHESS CHAMPION JUDIT POLGÁR

Judit Polgár is a Hungarian chess grand master, and is considered to be the strongest female chess player of all time. A child prodigy, she began competing in tournaments when she was only six years old. At age nine, she finished first in the New York Open. She was awarded the title of international master (IM) when she was twelve (Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov both earned their IM designations at age fourteen). At thirteen, she was considered among the top one hundred players in the world, and at fifteen she was designated a grand master, the highest title a chess player can earn. She called her win against Kasparov “one of the most remarkable moments of my career,” particularly in light of his statement that Polgár is, “after all, a woman. It all comes down to the imperfections of the female psyche. No woman can sustain a prolonged battle.” Her two elder sisters—one an IM and the other a grand master—were also trained by their parents in chess from an early age. Today, married with two children, she continues to play chess competitively, and is focused on her campaign of getting chess into the Hungarian elementary-school curriculum. Now thirty-seven, she has written several books about her life and the game. She lives in Budapest. —Sheila Heti

JUDIT POLGÁR: I was not the person who decided I would play chess. It was decided by my parents. My two older sisters played already, so I did, too. When I was five years old I began. I always wanted to do the same things my sisters were doing. And my parents are excellent educators—they knew exactly how to trick me to make me love the game. I played a few games every day, and this was gradually increased because I was so happy with it. I gained self-confidence and started winning a few games against my sisters. By the time I was eight, nine years old—in 1986—I played in my first international tournament, and by the time I was twelve or thirteen, I was certain I wanted to be a professional chess player.

We played pretty much every opportunity we had. We were playing a lot of tournaments in Hungary. And

many times people who played chess would travel to Hungary, and then we would invite them to stay in our apartment for a week or so and they would be playing chess with us. We also had trainers, so we were playing seven or eight hours each day. We were doing sports and

going out a bit, but chess was very much the focus already by that time. We didn’t go to school. My parents had both given up their jobs. Before that, they were working at different times, or on different shifts, to get enough money to buy books and to pay for our trainers. They wanted to give as much as possible to me and my sisters. Once we were earning money through chess events, it was possible for them to give up their jobs permanently.

Chess allowed me to travel from a very young age. Generally, we traveled to Bulgaria and other socialist countries surrounding Hungary. I was recently thinking, How is it possible in my family that we were practically competing with each other, head-to-head? The only reason I could figure out was that we were not jealous of each other, because we had so many difficulties with the Hungarian Chess Federation and the government. So I am thankful to my enemies. It made us really a much stronger family and we rooted for each other more than we otherwise would have. Whenever any one of us reached success, it was kind of a success for everyone as well. The success belonged to everyone.

I think I achieved the results and achievements I did because I was raised in a way where my parents always believed in me and told me so. They believed that women were able to reach the same results [as men]. Many times we are blocking ourselves because it is believed by individuals, even outside the chess world, that it is much harder for women, it’s more difficult, and it’s not an environment they want to be in. There’s many more boys than girls in chess, and later, when you become a teenager, many girls who play seriously drop out. Of course, society is not very accepting if a girl wants to be a professional chess player. What’s most important is how much and from what attitude the family

is supporting you.

Hungary is different from fifty years ago. You don't still have a chess set in every household. Politicians are not very supportive of chess at the moment. But I have managed to bring chess into the schools. The education starts in grade one. We use the coordinates, the chess pieces, and the rules of chess to teach other things, like mathematics. It's not only the quantity of the pieces but the quality we are teaching—how every piece has its own quality. And we have chess money, we have chess die; there, each child has their own chess set they made themselves.

In the Soviet Union and other ex-communist countries, it was very normal if you were a chess player. It's something that if you did, your parents would be proud of you—you're clever, you're doing something serious, you should go on and do the best you can. You don't have real professional chess players in the States, because chess is not considered a serious profession there. I experience this all the time when I visit. They ask me, "Wow, you play chess—how can you live?" There are many young players in the States who are pretty talented. They are OK, but the culture is not accepting them like if they would become doctors or engineers or whatever. In the States, probably the parents say, "Yeah, it's

great that you play chess, but you have to go to university, you have to have a profession." It very much depends on the attitude of your parents and teachers—what you're going to be and what you're going to have as a profession.

Bobby Fischer moved to Hungary partly because of us. We met in him '92 or '93, near the Hungarian border. I met him with my parents and [my sister] Susan, and then he decided to move to Hungary. He would come over, visiting us in the summer house and the apartment, and he was saying, "You're Jews; you're different." From our point of view, it was quite strange, but on the other hand he was Fischer so we saw him as Fischer the chess player, and he had a kind of good sense of humor, he was laughing a lot, and somehow we did not take what he said about Jews seriously, because it was clear that that for some reason he had a kind of awkward point of view on this matter, so somehow we ignored it—that's just how it was.

I was always happy to play a nice game and a beautiful game. Especially in my youngest years, the beauty of chess had priority for me over winning a game. But I had to learn that in this sport, achievement is much more important than the beauty of chess. ★

