

Gudmundur Thorarinsson

The Match of All Time

**The inside story of the legendary 1972 Fischer-Spassky
Chess World Championship in Reykjavik**

New In Chess 2022

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Foreword

It was sometime in May 1969 that the telephone rang. At the other end a journalist asked: 'What are your plans for the Icelandic Chess Federation over the next few years?' I answered: 'I have no plans at all as I have nothing to do with the Icelandic Chess Federation.' This was followed by silence, but then the journalist asked again: 'But you were elected president of the Icelandic Chess Federation at the annual general meeting last weekend, weren't you?' I started to laugh and told him: 'I think you have got the wrong person. I was not at this meeting, and I do not have the faintest idea what happened there. I'm sure you want to talk to someone else.' The journalist did not give in: 'I think we should try to find out what really happened there', he said.

I phoned my brother Johann Thorir Jonsson, owner, publisher and editor of the Icelandic chess magazine *Skák*. He hesitated for a minute and then he told me of the surprising turn of events at the Chess Federation meeting. A heated dispute had broken out, and Gudmundur Arason had walked out, resigning as president of the Icelandic Chess Federation, leaving the meeting in total chaos. Then Johann Thorir took the floor, suggesting that I, Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson, should be elected the new president of the Icelandic Chess Federation. He was asked if the 'candidate' had agreed to this and Johann had said yes.

I must admit that I was really angered by his bold move and asked him why on earth he would come up with such an idea: 'You know that I'm very busy as an engineer, and I'm building a house for my family, so I cannot possibly do this.' Johann Thorir put it bluntly: 'You now have two options. Either you can make a public statement about me lying at the Icelandic Chess Federation's meeting and say that you will not accept the post as president. The meeting will then lose its validation and we'll have to arrange a new meeting and face difficult consequences. Committee members come from all over Iceland, and it is complicated and time-consuming to schedule a new meeting. The other option is that you accept it, you will be president for two or three years, and then you quit.'

I was not very satisfied with the situation. Pondering my options for a while, I came to the conclusion that I could not be responsible for embarrassing my brother, with all the unforeseeable consequences that implied. At twenty, I was the oldest of 20 siblings but I only shared both biological parents with my brother Johann Thorir. His last name was Jonsson because

at the age of two Johann was adopted by another family, and he took his new father's name – just one tiny example of our exceptionally complex family tree. So I 'bit the sour apple' as we say in Icelandic, and became president of the Icelandic Chess Federation.

Johann Thorir, the author's brother, watching a game between Fridrik Olafsson and Knut Helmers. (Photo: Sigurjon Johannsson)



I had been a board member of the Icelandic Chess Federation a while back and enjoyed playing chess, though I was not above average. In 1964 I played in the student Olympiad in Krakow, Poland, and performed surprisingly well. And I had some connections to the chess community in Iceland, since my brother was the publisher/owner/editor of the Icelandic chess magazine, and Iceland's only grandmaster, Fridrik Olafsson, is a cousin of mine.

Over the next few years, I tried my best as the new president of the Icelandic Chess Federation, and I felt lucky to have excellent people on board. In 1971, the international Chess Federation FIDE, decided to begin a bidding process among member federations for the World Chess Championship match of 1972. A lot of people contacted me and urged me to seize the opportunity

to let the Icelandic Chess Federation send in an offer to stage the match. I assumed it would not only require a lot of work but would eventually be a waste of time.

Here we were, an island country in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean with a population of less than 300 thousand people. How could we conjure up enough prize money to compete with other nations? Besides, we had no satellite link to provide regular news of such an event, the global satellite operations being less advanced than they are today. Many people kept pushing me, and finally I decided to bring up the matter at a board meeting of the Icelandic Chess Federation. I did so mainly to relieve myself of the pressure of so many individuals who would time after time raise the subject. But quite frankly I did not see any point in doing this.



The Board of the Icelandic Chess Federation in 1972. Back row: (l. to r.) Hilmar Viggoson (Treasurer), Thrainn Gudmundsson (Secretary), Gudlaugur Gudmundsson . Front row: Asgeir Fridjonsson (vice-President), Gudmundur G. Thorarinsson (President), and Gudjon Stefansson (Managing Director).

The Icelandic Chess Federation decided to send in an offer. I contacted Freysteinn Thorbergsson, former Icelandic and Nordic champion, and Gudmundur Einarsson, an engineer, and asked them to draft an application using the template that FIDE had sent to each federation. This they

gladly agreed to do. In addition to his accomplishments on the chessboard as Icelandic and Nordic champion, Freysteinn had organized chess tournaments in Iceland and was very enthusiastic about chess matters here. Gudmundur was a respected businessman and a well-known negotiator. Freysteinn had taken the prospects of Iceland staging the match very much to heart. To hire him as the manager of the match was a real possibility and I actually made such a proposition at a board meeting of the Icelandic Chess Federation, but we did not reach an agreement on the matter. Freysteinn's and Gudmundur's suggestions were reviewed by board members of the Icelandic Chess Federation and coordinated with our own.

As an example of how little interest I had in the matter, believing our work on the bid to be a total waste of time, I failed to mail the bid to the offices of FIDE on time. I called Freysteinn and asked him to go to Amsterdam to deliver our bid in person at the FIDE headquarters where the bids would be opened. This he did very competently. As it turned out, Iceland had the third highest bid. Altogether, fifteen bids had been sent in, with the prize money ranging from USD 40,000 to USD 152,000. The Icelandic offer was USD 125,000. I was relieved, and I think that was also the case for every member of the Icelandic Chess Federation. I thought that we had come out of it well. We had done what was expected of us, and now the matter was closed.

It is impossible to escape your destiny

Nevertheless, a weird and complex sequence of events would lead to the decision to stage the match in Iceland. Financially, the Icelandic Chess Federation was a weak organization. I had never intended to become the president, and all the board members had their own full-time jobs carrying considerable responsibility. Now we were suddenly presented with the greatest event in chess history. Consider this: the post of becoming the Icelandic Chess Federation's president had been imposed on me to begin with. I had managed to send in an offer to stage the match, and now was I entangled in this fateful event. We decided to give it our best shot, but no one could envision all the difficulties and complexities that were to follow.

1 Prologue

Why write another book about the World Chess Championship match in 1972? Approximately 140 books have been published about the match already, plus films, TV and radio programs, newspapers and magazine articles. To add another book to this list seemed too much to me. But many people have been encouraging me to write about the match, people working for radio and television, chess players and friends. Many have simply said: 'We still do not have a book written by someone who was working behind the scenes, where the bombs were falling.'



The President at work in the Federation's office in Reykjavik. (Photo: Icelandic Chess Federation)

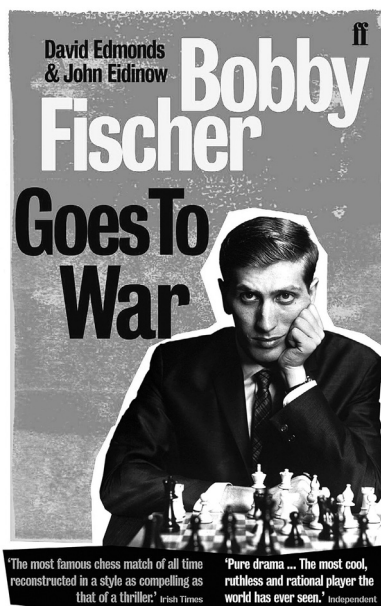
One thing is certain: a long time ago this match acquired a life of its own. Nowadays people tend to look at the course of events from a different perspective. Looking at the match from afar enables the observer to put the whole saga into another context, broadening the horizon, so to speak. It may be true that the viewpoint and experiences of those of us who were on the frontline during the planning and execution of the event have not been widely documented. Those who wrote about the match in the following months, or even years after it happened, did so mostly by annotating the

games, explaining the battle from the perspective of the chess players or the audience.

The organization faced numerous problems, but fortunately the Icelandic Chess Federation had many qualified people as board members: vice president Asgeir Fridjonsson, a lawyer and Reykjavik Deputy Police Commissioner; treasurer Hilmar Viggoson, branch manager of the National Bank of Iceland; secretary Thrainn Gudmundsson, headmaster of a Reykjavik elementary school; Gudlaugur Gudmundsson, a writer and store owner; and manager Gudjon Stefansson, an engineer. Chief adviser of the match committee was Fridrik Olafsson, a lawyer and chess grandmaster. They were all busy working elsewhere, but during the match they worked tirelessly in many capacities on behalf of the Icelandic Chess Federation on a voluntary basis.

My story barely mentions the press secretary of the Icelandic Chess Federation or the federation's fine staff, working at the office or in the stores at the match venue in Laugardalsholl, selling memorabilia, receiving foreign guests, giving interviews to foreign media, etc. They did all this. The Icelandic Chess Federation handed out around 400 press accreditations.

One of a long list of books that have been written about the Fischer-Spassky match in 1972: David Edmonds & John Eidinow, *Bobby Fischer Goes To War*



In the end the organization made a profit. But at the onset the chess federation was poorly funded. In so many instances we had to go the extra mile and assemble a delegation to meet people, as there was so much going on that demanded swift decisions. As it turned out, despite having many good advisers, as president of the Icelandic Chess Federation I found myself

increasingly alone. Many of those I worked with have passed away, and it seems that I am one of the very few left who was a witness to all the almost unbelievable happenings that took place in connection with the match. I have been hesitant to write too much about the subject, the outside factors, misunderstandings, and coincidences that decided the outcome. Sometimes, in desperation, I resorted to measures that saved the situation, and now, after all these years, I still wonder how we succeeded. But I have been encouraged to tell the story as I see it.



Halldor Petursson drew a series of famous caricatures inspired by the match that were published and sold in various sizes.

Many key 'players' are no longer with us: Dr. Max Euwe, Harry Golombek, Bobby Fischer, Lothar Schmid, Gudmundur Arnlaugsson, Ed Edmondson, Asgeir Fridjonsson, Thrainn Gudmundsson, Gudlaugur Gudmundsson, Freysteinn Johannsson, Freysteinn Thorbergsson, Johann Thorir Jonsson, Baldur Möller, Ingi R. Johannsson, Ingvar Asmundsson and Efim Geller.

Many of the people who closely followed every move are also gone: Bent Larsen, Miguel Najdorf, Jens Enevoldsen, William Lombardy, Jack Collins, Jon Thorsteinsson and Haukur Angantýsson. The list could go on and on, and include many members of the international and local media. This list of names is a reminder that eventually everyone involved will be gone, which will make it even harder to discuss this extraordinary event.

What if?

Almost half a century after the conclusion of the match, an interesting question arises. At a certain stage of the negotiations, FIDE decided that the match would be split between Belgrade and Reykjavik. In the ensuing complex negotiations, the Yugoslav organizer backed out. The CEO of the Export and Creditbank of Belgrade had become increasingly wary of the financial consequences. When the negotiations started and it was obvious that almost every detail would be disputed, and that there was no solution in sight, he wanted some sort of a guarantee. The financial world can be like that. The unsuspecting Icelanders kept on going, confident they could solve matters. It could hardly be a major problem to stage a chess match.

What would have happened if we had also given up? Would the match never have taken place? Would Fischer never have become World Champion? The history of chess might have taken a totally different turn. Looking back, this scenario seems highly likely. Is it possible that the optimistic Icelanders were agents of fate for chess history?



In their second World Championship match in 1969, Boris Spassky defeated Tigran Petrosian to win the highest title.

As mentioned before, many books have been written about the match. Many believe that with the publication of *Fischer vs. Spassky* by Freysteinn Johannsson and Fridrik Olafsson and then *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* by David Edmonds and John Eidinow, the story of the match had been told, and there was little to add. But still there must be a space for one more book, written from the viewpoint of those who were active on the front line, so to speak. Almost 50 years have gone by now, and it should be kept in mind that memory can falter when one is trying to recall past events. A quote from *Grettir's Saga*, one of the Icelandic sagas, springs to mind: 'A tale is half told if one man tells it'.

History will not repeat itself

There is a saying that history will always repeat itself. That is not always true. The World Championship match between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer will never be repeated, and no chess match ever will be anything like it. I am absolutely sure that the extraordinary events linked to the match, its planning, organization and the competition itself, will not happen again. Perhaps we have in this match the exception that proves the rule.

The world in which we live will never again have the same potential, never again be constructed politically or economically as it was back then. No two players, such vastly different characters, will again take the stage and create an atmosphere of intense battle, making it an international affair. And I believe that never again will there be a chess match capable of creating such interest in the game. Even a fiction writer would have been hard-pressed to come up with a story like the one that unfolded in Reykjavik in 1972.

The battle was given the name: The Match of the Century. I believe this is an understatement. Its rightful name should be: The Match of All Time. Never again will there be a chess event able to capture the attention of millions of people all around the world, people who do not care about chess at all. Never again will there be an event that can evoke so much interest in the noble game of chess.

I want to make a controversial statement here: in fact, it was not possible to stage an event like this match. It was not possible to stage this event and make the match a reality. But Icelanders did it anyway, with the help of a series of coincidences, misunderstandings and luck. There is an old proverb that says luck follows those who are ready. How can we define what is possible? If mathematical probability is taken into account, and the odds of something to happen are a million to one, we would surely conclude that the task before us is impossible to solve. We would agree that in order to succeed, far too many positive factors are required. And luck too.

The Yugoslavs gave up when things got stormy and the difficulties seemed without end, and the president of FIDE, Dr. Max Euwe, tried in vain to find a partner ready to replace them and organize the first part of the match.

It took a long series of coincidences and events, which according to mathematical probability could not happen at the same time and in the same place, before the match could become a reality.

Hence this odd statement: it was not possible to organize this match, nor was it possible to rescue it... but still it was done!

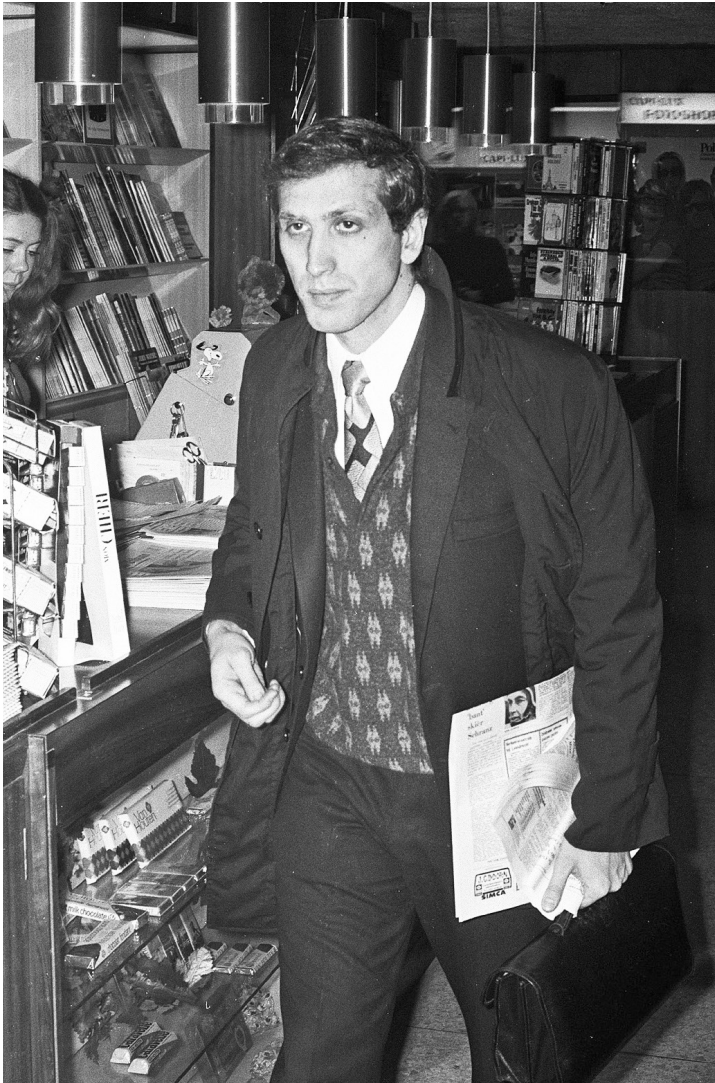
A different perspective

It is a known fact that people can experience the same event totally differently. You might take a trip to the woods with your friends, some of them experts in a specific field. The arborist might try to identify plants or even moss growing on the various trees in the wood. The animal expert would start looking for wildlife there, insects, butterflies, etc. The carpenter might wonder if the timber could help him make a flagpole, a single mast for a ship, a wooden floor or a boardwalk. Young people in love might see the wood in a romantic light, the bushes could be the ideal hideout for a rendezvous. The more impressionable of us might notice that the wood is suddenly inhabited by fairies and their queen Titania, as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Everyone would describe the wood in very different ways. Recollections of the World Championship should perhaps be viewed with this in mind.

As time goes by, I have come to realize that a few incidents have become ever more important as we reflect on them from a different viewpoint. Different people do not experience the events they witnessed in the same way, inhabiting perhaps a different world.

When I am discussing this strange event with journalists, filmmakers and writers, everything becomes clearer to me. The things connected with the match that I am asked most about now are not the same things that kept us occupied at the time. The organizers, the international chess federation FIDE, the players Spassky and Fischer, the arbiters, not to mention the public who were following the match, all had their own perspective and contributed a different understanding of events. The match will of course in due time be evaluated, connecting the dots so to speak, and find its place in the annals of modern history.

Immanuel Kant wrote about what he called 'das Ding an sich', or 'the thing-in-itself'. He discussed the difference between how we may experience even common occurrences and how they really are. In one of Shakespeare's many masterpieces we find the line: 'Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own'.



At the end of January 1972, Bobby Fischer visited Amsterdam, where the FIDE office was located. (Photo: Bert Verhoeff, Dutch National Archive)

So, the questions remain: What really happened? Why did it happen? In 1972 the Cold War was raging. The two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, were engaged in what was called an overwhelming and extremely dangerous escalation of weapons of mass destruction. It was a widely held view that nuclear weapons were the only hope left for mankind, a necessary evil to avoid a major conflict between East and West. Nuclear deterrence was the key concept to describe the standstill, and both superpowers danced to the same music. The Soviet Union and the USA had split the world into allies and enemies, hostile or friendly territories based on ideology, communism vs. capitalism. Each dis-

agreement between the superpowers was of grave concern to the whole world. There did not seem to be any way to bridge the gap.

The Soviet Union had for a long time been driven by an ambition to excel in chess, the game of logic and deep thought, to dominate the international arena and by doing so demonstrate the superiority of communism over capitalism and the free market. Why chess was chosen is a matter for speculation, but it has been pointed out that both Marx and Lenin were keen on chess.

Chess became the Soviet national sport. The year 1948 marks the beginning of the Soviet hegemony in the international arena. In 1972, not a single non-Soviet chess player had played in a World Championship match or tournament since 1948. Every World Champion since 1927, for the last 45 years, had been born in the Soviet Union/Russia, with the exception of Max Euwe who reigned for two years, 1935-1937, after defeating Alekhine. It seemed a distant dream that anyone outside the USSR would be able to dethrone a Soviet player in a match for the World Championship. The Soviet school of chess was world-famous, training the best young players in a systematic fashion. The results had indeed been impressive, total world domination. The Soviet Union was the homeland of chess.

In contrast, chess had never been very popular in the US, never been on any kind of list of priorities with the government. Americans had many strong grandmasters, but still the game did not have the status of a national pastime or sport. Bobby Fischer received a lot a media coverage though, not least because of his astounding performance in the US championship of 1957/58, when he became US Champion at the age of 14.

Given the circumstances, one can easily understand why people became fascinated with the match in 1972. Interest in the game increased to an extent never before witnessed. It seemed that people saw the battle as that of one man against the system, Fischer vs. the unbeatable forces of the Soviet Union. Added to this, the contestants were as disparate as could be imagined. One was the offspring of a powerful and highly organized system, the other the son of a poor single mother, enjoying no obvious outside assistance.

Their common ground was the game of chess. These extraordinary achievers were both intelligent, disciplined in their art, unusually confident and both driven by a strange demonic power, their love of chess. Both were greatly accomplished at the game. Speculation reached absurd levels, and bizarre ideas and theories were advanced. Some even went so far as to say it was a battle between good and evil, darkness and light.