

SHLYAKHTENKO DEEPLY ANALYZES FOUR **SO GAMES** | CHESS & ESPIONAGE | DUBOV'S BRILLIANCY

CHESS LIFE

**GM
WESLEY
SO**

*wins
2020
Skilling
Open*

Also in this issue:

*Coverage of the
2020 Online
Olympiad
for People with
Disabilities*



US CHESS

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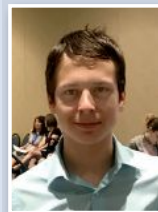
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FEBRUARY



GM Alex Yermolinsky

(Cover Story) is a native of St. Petersburg, Russia, and was one of the top players in the U.S. during the 1990s. Winner of numerous Open tournaments, he became a successful writer and lecturer during his stint as GM-in-Residence at the Mechanics' Institute Chess Club in San Francisco, California. Since 2007 Yermolinsky has lived in South Dakota and works as analyst and commentator for various internet chess sources.



FM Robert Shlyakhtenko

(So Annotations) is ranked as one of the top 100 players in the U.S. In 2019, he became the youngest-ever Southern California state champion, was co-champion of the Barber K-8 Tournament of Champions, and won the Southern California Open. His previous article for Chess Life Online won a 2020 Chess Journalists of America award for "Best Instruction."



Lior Lapid

(Online Olympiad for People with Disabilities) is a national master, a former U.S. national scholastic champion (K-9 and K-12), and a three-time Colorado closed state champion. He was a guest speaker at the Second Koltanowski International Conference on Chess and Education and has recently served as captain and coach for Team USA in the 2020 FIDE Online Olympiad for People with Disabilities and for Team Americas in the 2019 FIDE Confederation Cup for the Disabled.



Dora Martinez

(Online Olympiad for People with Disabilities) is a documentary photographer and filmmaker currently based in New York. Her work has been featured in numerous publications and has been exhibited in New York City. She is the founder of Lens Ethics and the creator and founder of "Documentary Work in Challenging Landscapes" — a workshop and mentorship program for youth in post-conflict and at-risk communities around the globe.



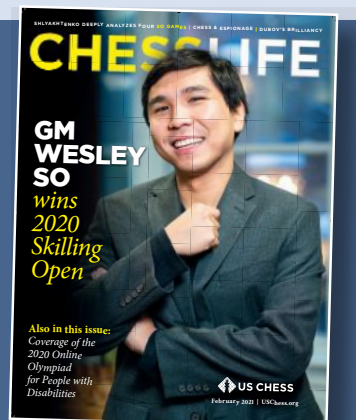
Menachem Wecker

(Chess and espionage) is a Washington, D.C. reporter who has interviewed Mel Brooks about herring and has covered everything from the origins of museum taxidermies to who writes trivia night questions, and the history of the Rumpelstiltskin story to Zoroastrian dating. He is a member of the governing board at the National Press Club.

ON THE COVER

GM Wesley So flashes his winning smile. Fresh off capturing the U.S. Championship in October, So won the Skilling Open the following month, defeating GM Magnus Carlsen in a two-game blitz overtime playoff.

PHOTO BY LENNART OOTES



Chess Life

FEBRUARY

COLUMNS

- 10 **CHESS TO ENJOY** / ENTERTAINMENT
Protection Racket
BY GM ANDY SOITIS
- 12 **EVENTS** / IN THE NEWS
BY JOHNNI HARTMANN
- 42 **BOOKS AND BEYOND** /
SHOULD I BUY IT?
A World Champion Takes Flight
BY IM JOHNN WATSON
- 44 **SOLITAIRE CHESS** / INSTRUCTION
Ugly Can Be Beautiful
BY BRUCE PANDOLFINI
- 46 **PUZZLES** / MAKE YOUR MOVE!
BY FM CARSTEN HANSEN

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 **FEBRUARY PREVIEW** / THE MONTH
AHEAD AT CLO
- 5 **COUNTERPLAY** / READERS RESPOND
- 6 **FIRST MOVES** / CHESS NEWS FROM
AROUND THE U.S.
- 7 **FACES ACROSS THE BOARD** /
BY AL LAWRENCE
- 8 **US CHESS AFFAIRS** / NEWS FOR OUR
MEMBERS
- 9 **IN MEMORIAM** / REMEMBERING OUR
MEMBERS
- 47 **TOURNAMENT LIFE** / FEBRUARY
- 50 **CLASSIFIEDS** / FEBRUARY
- 50 **SOLUTIONS** / FEBRUARY
- 52 **MY BEST MOVE** / PERSONALITIES
THIS MONTH: TIM MIRABILE

PHOTO: LENNART OOTES



**COVER
STORY 32**

Wesley So wins the 2020 Skilling Open

BY GM ALEX YERMOLINSKY

So sets pace in new online champions tour from PlayMagnus.

16 **HISTORY** / CHESS AND ESPIONAGE Chesspionage

BY MENACHEM WECKER

Chess is a conspicuous fixture in espionage history.

20 **EVENTS** / ONLINE OLYMPIAD The 2020 Online Olympiad for People with Disabilities

STORY BY LIOR LAPID | INTERVIEWS BY DORA MARTINEZ

Team USA surges to a strong tenth place finish.

26 **ANALYSIS** / WESLEY SO Under the Microscope

BY FM ROBERT SHLYAKHTENKO

Four recent Wesley So games, deeply analyzed

Chesspionage

Chess is a conspicuous fixture in espionage history.

By **MENACHEM WECKER**



In 1962, a game of broken telephone between two Washington chess partners likely prevented nuclear war amid the Cuban Missile Crisis. When National Press Club bartender Johnny Prokoff misheard reporters discussing a potential U.S. invasion of Cuba, he told chess partner Anatoly Gorsky an attack was imminent. A KGB officer working under the Russian news agency TASS cover, Gorsky ran the shoddy “intelligence” up the Soviet chain. Nikita Khrushchev quickly opted to

respect the U.S. blockade; eavesdropping bungled, yet crisis averted.

The story and that of Soviet spy Valentin Ivanov, who cruised through the Press Club’s 1958 chess championship before throwing the final three games likely to avoid calling undue attention to himself, appear in Steven Usdin’s 2018 book *Bureau of Spies: The Secret Connections Between Espionage and Journalism in Washington*. “Ivanov played chess with William Hamilton Martin and Bernon F.

Mitchell, two NSA (National Security Agency) cryptologists whom he recruited,” Usdin, senior editor at BioCentury Publications, told *Chess Life*.

Usdin doesn’t think highly-unpredictable intelligence work resembles comparatively sure-fire chess, but his book details several overlaps. “Chess served as an excellent opportunity to meet and spend time with potential recruits,” he said. “A game of chess is also a good way to bolster a potential recruit’s

ego. I can imagine Soviet officers calibrating their play to make potential recruits feel that they are talented and smart.”

On a recent visit to the International Spy Museum in Washington’s L’Enfant Plaza neighborhood, I noticed several chess-related artifacts. They turned out to be a microcosm of a broader story of spies pitting their minds against one another over chess boards as they passed time on and between surveillance assignments.

Secretly-outfitted chess sets hid maps, compasses, currency, and sensitive documents, and covert agents met and recruited moles at chess tournaments. Even the 1963 James Bond film *From Russia with Love* opens with Vladek Sheybal playing Czech grandmaster and SPECTRE agent “Kronsteen,” in a scene that stages the final moves of Boris Spassky’s victory over David Bronstein in the 1960 Leningrad championship. (See the June 2020 issue of *Chess Life* for Bruce Pandolfini’s take on the “Kronsteen” game. ~ed.)

I searched for “chess” in declassified Freedom of Information Act files on the Central Intelligence Agency website, yielding 3,738 results. At first I was floored, but concern about magazine feature word counts gave way to surprise when about 99 percent had nothing to do with black-and-white pieces. “CHESS” turned out to be a former CIA password for imagery obtained from Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance planes.

“Suggest CHESS be used as the codeword for photography by any air breathing vehicle over denied areas,” wrote an official — name redacted — in a Nov. 25, 1969 memorandum. A May 1, 1963 note, “Downgrading of Talent Acquired Photography of Haiti and Dominican Republic,” added that officials would aim, when releasing imagery from top secret to secret designations, “to negate any possible compromise of codeword CHESS.”

This was ironic. Among the Spy Museum collection was a copy of Fred Reinfeld’s *Attack and Counterattack in Chess*, which Francis Gary Powers used in Soviet jail. Powers (1929-77), whose CIA spy plane — you guessed it, the Lockheed U-2 associated with the CIA “CHESS” codeword — was shot down May 1, 1960, spent a year, nine months, and 10 days in Vladimir Central Prison.

His Latvian cellmate Zigurds Krūmiņš, who apparently informed on him to Soviet authorities, taught him basket-weaving and chess. Two of the few personal items Powers carried upon his 1962 release in the prisoner exchange on Berlin’s Glienicke

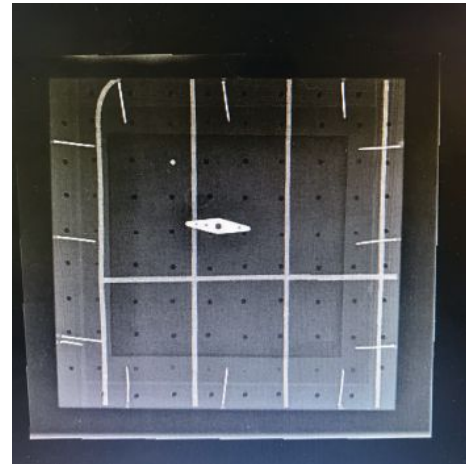
Bridge dramatized in Steven Spielberg’s 2015 film *Bridge of Spies* were his chess set and the Reinfeld book. (“Library of Gary Powers” is embossed on the inside title page of the book at the Spy Museum, said Alexis Albion, curator of special exhibits.)

Over coffee recently at the Press Club’s Reliable Source bar, Francis Gary Powers Jr. said his father, who continued to play chess after his release, taught him to play at 10 or 11. (Powers was 12 when his dad died in a crash piloting a helicopter.) Though his mother encouraged it, his father wouldn’t let him win, and Powers, historian and founder and chairman emeritus of the Vint Hill, Virginia-based Cold War Museum, remembers winning by “dumb luck” after a few days.

The set his father brought back from Russia was about six by three inches, encased in leather with red and white pieces, Powers recalled. Sadly, someone — he suspects a friend — stole it along with silver and coins when Powers was 15 or 16. A random thief wouldn’t have coveted the little set, Powers thinks, but he suspects a kid who played with it and liked it. “That always pissed me off,” he said.

Powers’ father remained friends with former cellmate Krūmiņš, whom he came to believe was snitching on him when he realized the Latvian spoke five or six languages and could beat him at chess blindfolded. “Dad’s beginning to think, ‘Oh crap. This guy is so smart he remembers everything,’” Powers said.

Florian Schimikowski, head of collection at Berlin’s Deutsches Spionagemuseum (Spy Museum), believes chess playing and intelligence gathering involve similar muscles.



Facing page: A chess set used by the M19 (a division of the British military that assisted captured Allied soldiers) to conceal items such as maps, currency, and other escape aids. Source: *The 1942 M19 manual Per Ardua Libertas*. This page, top: The x-ray image of Phil Froom’s Jaques of London secret set, on display at the International Spy Museum. When he saw the image, Froom recognized the propeller shape as a “swinger” escape compass; center: A close up of a map hidden in Froom’s Jaques of London secret set; bottom: Items uncovered in Froom’s set included three rare mulberry paper M19 escape maps, a Third Reich 50 and a 20 Reichsmark banknote, and the swinger compass.

“Chess trains the ability to see two or three or even more moves ahead — a skill that proves useful in a variety of spy operations,” he told *Chess Life*.

“In many operations, you have to act like in a chess game: observe and analyze the moves of your enemy, move your own game pieces (agents) in the right manner, sometimes sacrifice pieces in order to achieve the big goal,

Master Conel Hugh O’Donel (or C.H.O’D) Alexander and Philip Stuart Milner-Barry, a former British Chess Federation president, according to Schimikowski. And Alan Turing, one of the leading code-breakers, was a noted chess player and co-creator of the first computer chess program.

“Chess players were chosen for this task because they have great pattern recognition

Spy Museum. “For our visitors, it is more interesting to see how the thinking of chess players can influence espionage work, especially in cryptography,” said Schimikowski. “The chess game is one of the many fascinating exhibits, which show how creative intelligence services are in the process of converting and using everyday objects for their purposes.”

In Washington, the museum’s special



Above: An East German chess set from 1961, courtesy of the Mr. & Mrs. H. Keith Melton Collection at the International Spy Museum.
Below: A Russian civil war chess set, courtesy of the Francis Lara Collection at the International Spy Museum.

War Games!

This Russian Civil War chess set pits the Bolshevik leaders and secret police against the anti-communist White Army.

The Bolshevik chess pieces feature, among others, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Josef Stalin, and intelligence chief Felix Dzerzhinsky. The White Army pieces portray Cossacks and former soldiers of the Russian Imperial Army.

Chess set, USSR, ca. 1945
On loan from The Francis Lara Collection



and lure your enemy into traps,” he added.

Retired U.S. counterintelligence officer Stuart Arthur Herrington, who worked in Berlin, was known for his particularly-effective interrogation techniques. He built relationships and gained trust rather than pressuring and torturing, according to Schimikowski. Others did the same, such as the secret World War II U.S. military facility P.O. Box 1142 in Fort Hunt, Virginia.

“It is said that they mainly used cigarettes and chess to build up trust and then collect information from interrogated persons,” Schimikowski said.

Chess players’ analytical thinking is also transferable to intelligence agencies, as when the code-breaking operation at England’s Bletchley Park recruited chess players to break the Nazi Enigma code. Bletchley included famous chess players, including International

skills,” Schimikowski said. “Strong chess players have thousands of figure patterns stored in their memories, which help them to predict the moves of their opponents. These skills can also be used to find patterns in encrypted texts.”

JM “Bill” Steadman, curator of the Military Intelligence Museum in England, is unaware of studies linking chess and intelligence work. But he told *Chess Life* it’s well known that both require brain power and the ability to recognize complex patterns and data sets.

“The codebreakers at Bletchley Park were just one group of people with such attributes, and chess would no doubt have been part of many of their lives both as a pastime as well as a tool to hone the mind,” Steadman said.

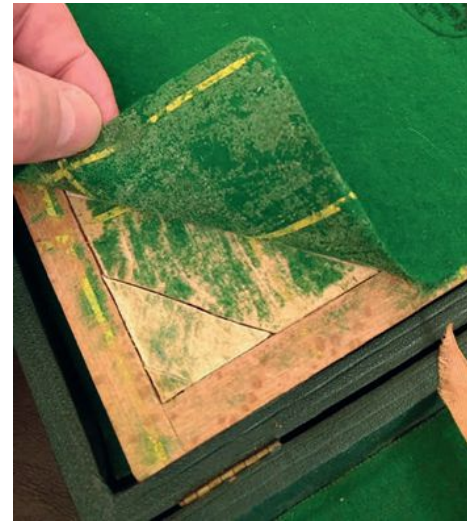
At Berlin’s Spy Museum, the lone chess-related object is a replica of a travel chessboard with a secret interior compartment for microfilm, which is on view at Washington’s

exhibits curator Albion gave some thought to the connection between chess and intelligence work. “Analytical thinking, strategic thinking — that has a lot to do with chess,” she said.

Albion shared a story about the 1961 East German chess set with a hidden lock and interior compartments to hold a tiny URANUS 2 microdot camera and film. “You were looking for normal everyday-looking objects that wouldn’t be suspicious, basically, if you were passing on something to an agent,” she said.

When a straight pin or an unfolded paperclip is inserted in the center, a locking mechanism releases, and a back compartment opens up revealing two small sections inside. Albion hasn’t handled the object, but she was in the room when the collections manager opened it. “She was fiddling with a paperclip,” Albion remembered. It took a few tries.

“She knew what she was supposed to do, but



Left: The book Francis Gary Powers used to learn chess in Soviet prison, among other belongings he brought back with him, on view at the International Spy Museum in Washington; Above: The back of the Jaques of London secret set, also at the International Spy Museum. It took a craftsman almost a hour to carefully peel back the green baize cloth to uncover the hidden secret compartment.

to find where the catch is.' As soon as you find the catch, bam, it came out," Albion said. "It's always exciting."

UK collector, historian, and former British military intelligence officer Phil Froom has a similar experience. Researching his 2015 book *Evasion and Escape Devices Produced by MI9, MIS-X, and SOE in World War II*, Froom gained access to an M19 Per Ardua Libertas book, where he learned of the World War II British intelligence arm's use of chess sets to conceal escape aids for captured spies.

The set from Froom's collection belonged to the father, who was MI9, of an "old gentleman" Froom met researching his book. On one visit, the man pulled a travel chess set out of a box and told Froom he wasn't sure why his dad, who didn't play chess, kept it. "This immediately piqued my interest, as I knew MI9 had used chess sets to conceal escape items, but I had never seen one," Froom told *Chess Life*.

The maker's name stamped on the back, Jaques of London, matched secret sets made for MI9, so Froom informed the man he might have a "loaded" set. He agreed to sell it for "a significant sum of money" if loaded, and "a figure lacking a number of zeroes if it was not." Froom took it to a local veterinarian practice, which he asked to x-ray "weird items" for him. "They were now somewhat used to the crazy old guy calling them up with another wild goose chase," he said.

When the x-ray image popped up on the screen, the vets were disappointed to see just nails and strange lines. But Froom saw a small, propeller-shape. "I think they were expecting

a Walther PPK (pistol) of Bond fame," Froom said. "My heart missed a beat, as I immediately recognized the object as a 'swinger' escape compass." He figured a Jaques of London chess set with a compass likely contained more escape items, so he called the owner, who haggled further. "He won and I became much poorer," Froom said. (He didn't disclose the price.)

Loaded set in hand, Froom contacted the still-operating game maker and asked if someone could help disassemble what the company had made some 70 years prior. Soon Froom and four directors met in a company boardroom, and a nervous-looking craftsman gingerly broke into the set. It took nearly an hour to remove the green baize cloth backing before even accessing the board, when his sharp scoring tool kept hitting wood. Froom suggested cutting further into the board.

Finally, a small cavity in the center emerged, yielding a black waterproof pouch. Everyone was excited — he remembered cries of "Well then! Open it!" — and Froom broke the seal, opened the septuagenarian pouch, and produced three very rare mulberry paper MI9 escape maps, a Third Reich 50 and a 20 Reichsmark banknote, and the compass. "Huge relief from the poor craftsman, who had fulfilled his task without ruining anything, and amazement from the board members and of course me," Froom said.

He held onto the set for a while but decided it would be better in a museum display than a drawer in his den. He held onto the pouch and its contents, but sent the set to the International Spy Museum. What better place could there be for a spy tool like this set to hide out than in

plain sight on public display in a museum.

One of the most culturally-telling chess objects at the museum is a handmade set from 1945, portraying the Russian civil war and pitting the anti-Communist White Army against the Bolshevik Red Army. The detail is impressive. Bolshevik king Vladimir Lenin has a ticker-tape machine, a technology he really used to get rapid information. Other pieces include Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the father of Soviet intelligence (the Cheka), and White Army king Pyotr Wrangel, wearing a white Cossack hat.

A sister set in the museum's collection, also circa 1945, pits the Soviets against the Nazis, with Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler as kings, respectively. The Nazi knights are paratroopers, and the pawns are SS officers.

When Albion thinks about who paid for the sets, particularly the first one which I saw on view at the museum, she figures it would have been dangerous to own such a thing, in which the White Army could ever win.

"This is really a very risky chess set. Think about it. It would have been really quite dangerous to have had this," she said. "The implication is it would have to have been somebody who had the [guts] to put it on display. It's a beautiful piece. It's beautifully done. Beautiful, deep detail, so we think it was meant to be displayed in somebody's office." Not only did chess sets sometimes have hidden compartments within, but their external appearance too could carry thinly-veiled and barely-coded messages about how important and powerful their owners were. ♠