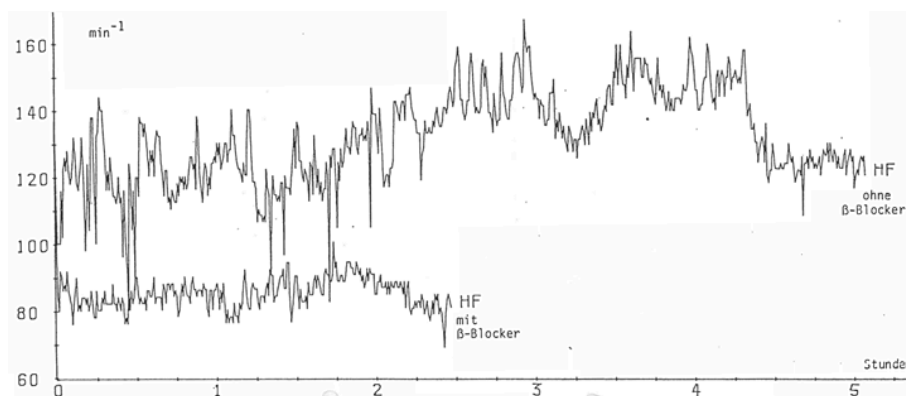


Encounters: Boris Spassky

I first met Boris Spassky in the late 1970s. It was a brief encounter. He was in Hamburg, together with some other famous players, as part of the commercial presentation of a new chess playing computer. The venue was one of the large department stores. I bought a wooden chessboard along to the presentation, and had all the chess players sign on it with a felt pen. The head of the department store saw this and said, "What a fantastic idea! We should do the same." So he took the best chessboard they had in the department, borrowed my felt pen and had the players sign his board. "Now put this in our repair room," he instructed a young trainee, "and look after it very carefully." So the boy took it away.

Later, after the players had left, and we were having dinner, the boy came back to us with the board and said, "Sir, I tried my best, but these stains cannot be completely removed!" He hadn't understood exactly what his boss had wanted, and thought he had been asked to get rid of the felt pen writing on the board! I told this story to Spassky, some months later, and he could not stop chuckling.

In Munich in 1979. Boris was playing in a grandmaster tournament, and my friend Helmut Pflieger, who is a medical doctor and a strong grandmaster, was conducting an experiment to monitor the blood pressure and heart rates of players during a game. Spassky was one of the volunteers, and I assisted in attaching the monitors to his arm each day. We slowly became friends. Incidentally, the results of the experiment were quite dramatic: the pulse rate and blood pressure of these players were unnaturally high during the game, comparably only to situations in which humans are in a state of panic, ready to fight or flee. We were not able to monitor their adrenalin, but I am sure that was peaking as well. Helmut, was also playing in the tournament, performed a supplementary experiment on himself: he took a beta blocker before his games. Here the result:



In this graph you see Helmut's pulse during a normal game (top line), when his heart rate went up to over 160, and in one where he had taken a beta blocker, which reduced his heart rate (bottom line). That game he lost miserably.

I didn't meet Boris Spassky for a number of years after Munich. Then, in 1988, I travelled to the Candidates Tournament in Saint John, Canada. When the plane landed in Toronto they said we had missed the onward flight, and gave me a very nice room, in a very nice hotel. There I went down to dinner, and suddenly Spassky walks up to me and says, "Excuse me, Mr. Frederic, I recognized you on the plane, but I did not want to disturb you. Maybe we could now have dinner together?" I was stunned that one of the greatest chess players in the world would come to me in such a courteous way. We had a sumptuous dinner, with an endless supply of good Canadian wine. We sat there till four in the morning, and Boris told me eighty percent of everything I know about chess history. Okay, maybe I am exaggerating, but he told me so much about the Soviet chess community, his matches, even the paltry sum he was paid for his World Championship title in Moscow. Of course, we spent an hour discussing the match against Fischer in 1972, which I had followed meticulously at the time. Hearing first-hand impressions from Boris was incredibly valuable to me. After that night in the hotel restaurant, every time we met, we always spoke at length, and often had dinner together.

The next major encounter came many years later, when there was a Candidates Tournament in Elista, Russia. Boris was there doing commentary. We usually took lunch and dinner at the same table, and I witnessed something quite extraordinary: many young players crowded around us, listening to Boris. He was an old man, but everyone was interested in talking to him. He was charismatic and charming, full of stories!

One day I said to FIDE President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who was also the president of the country: "I am in Elista, I would like to see the Steppe." No problem – Kirsan said he would arrange it for me. Boris heard us talking and said, "Can I join you?" I said, "Yes, of course, that would be wonderful!"

The next morning, a car arrived, and a guide drove us to – a large monument of a tank. He said it was very famous. I said, "It is very nice, but could we go to the steppe? We want to see animals and stuff." So now he took us to – a racecourse. "Look, there are horses there!"



After a while, we gave up and decided to head back home. We were staying in Chess City, a large complex devoted almost entirely to chess. We were very disappointed, but Boris had a solution. "You know, Frederic, if we go right to the end of the Chess City grounds, the steppe starts there." – "But there's a fence around it," I said. "Yes, but I know where there's a hole in the fence!" he replied. So he took me there, and we crawled through that hole.

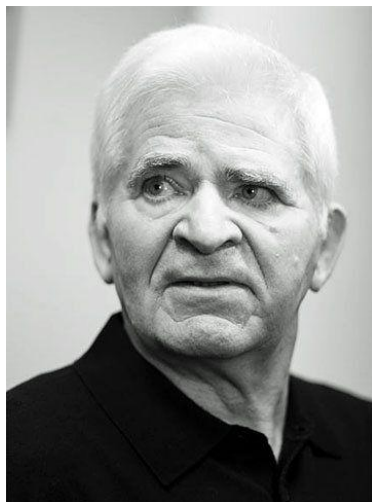
And then we went roaming through the steppe. We walked for many hours, and even got lost. Boris was singing, American songs, like "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning." I asked where he got to know them, and he said, 'Bobby teach me!' He really knew these songs from Bobby Fischer.

Getting lost in the steppe is not an issue when the person you get lost with is none other than the former World Champion Boris Spassky! We had to cross a number of streams before we at last found our way back. We were late for lunch, and when we sat down, the young players came crowding around us. Boris said: "Don't come close. We have been walking for many hours, and we are full of sweat." After lunch he went up to his room and came back, impeccably dressed for the commentary.



I complimented Boris on his elegance, and especially his beautiful white hair. "That is quite expensive, to dye it..." he said. "Your hair is dyed?" I asked. "What is its natural colour?" – "Jet black," he replied. Spassky humour.

The walk through the steppe was a wonderful experience, for me – and also for Boris. How do I know this? Whenever I met him afterwards, and I mentioned the walk, he would hug me! He really enjoyed our outing tremendously.



Boris has now moved back to Moscow, and is becoming very frail. When I see pictures or videos of him, I feel sad. Because the man with whom I roamed the steppe was so vigorous and healthy. Not so long ago, somebody asked him what he did for his chess preparation. He said, "I do not prepare for chess. I am preparing for – death! It is a long and difficult endgame."

I hope Boris will be around for a while and I will see him again.