

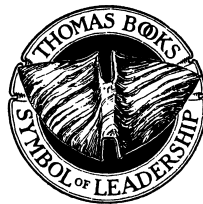
**A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY OF
BOBBY FISCHER**

A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY OF BOBBY FISCHER

Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological
Decline of a World Chess Champion

By

JOSEPH G. PONTEROTTO, PH.D.



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In Memory of:

Robert (Bobby) James Fischer (1943–2008)

Dr. Regina (Wender) (Fischer) Pustan (1913–1997)

Joan (Fischer) Targ (1937–1998) and Dr. Elisabeth Targ (1961–2002)

*A family of national and international
historical significance in the twentieth century.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Genesis of My Book on Bobby Fischer

I started playing chess in 1972 at the age of 14. Like thousands of American teenagers at the time, the impetus to play chess was an American hero: Bobby Fischer. In the streets of the Bronx where I grew up in the 1960s, the activities year-round were street sports (we had no parks or fields nearby): Stickball and softball in the spring and summer days, and ringalevio (a chase and catch game) at night; touch football, basketball, and roller hockey in the fall and winter; then back to stickball and softball as the spring weather arrived. No one, that I recall, played chess. On a rainy summer day, we might have played monopoly, stratego, battleship, or cards, but the game of chess never entered our discussions. That is, not until the summer of 1972.

Bobby Fischer playing against Boris Spassky was not a game to us, but a war; a war between a lonely, self-assured, cocky, confident, school-disliking (like us) American kid from Brooklyn (although we did not think that highly of Brooklyn in my section of the Bronx) battling all of Russia (I do not think we used the term Soviet Union back then). We were all very competitive, and this chess match, in a place we had never heard of, Reykjavik, Iceland, forced us to learn to play chess so we could follow what was going on in that faraway place we could hardly find on our globe. Thank God for Shelby Lyman and PBS. For the first time in our young lives, my friends and I were actually watching public television, to our parents' astonishment.

After the world championship match in 1972 most of my friends drifted away from chess, especially since Bobby stopped playing competitively—there was no longer our chess hero to follow. I continued playing, however, joining the chess club at Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx and playing whenever I could throughout high school and college. Whenever I really wanted to play and there were no same-age peers around, there was always my younger brother John, who though 7 years younger was always brilliant and he picked up the game fairly quickly to the point of providing me good competition. However, he did refuse to read my library chess books I offered him; I could never understand why. John was usually open to a

game if I bribed him with a post-game car ride for pizza, carvel ice cream, or Dunkin donuts. Thank you, John!

By my college years in the late 1970s at Iona College in New Rochelle, New York, I was playing chess only infrequently, and by then we had lost total touch with the career and life of Bobby Fischer (this was before the Internet). Chess was never far from my mind though, and whenever I had to present a topic orally in class, I managed to link the class topic (whatever it may have been) to one of my three passions, chess and Bobby Fischer, soccer and Pele, or the red wines of Italy and Northern California (yes, I did manage to graduate). It was also during college where as a psychology major I wrote my first paper on “The Psychology of Chess” for an abnormal psychology class taught by Dr. Paul Greene, a gifted psychologist, teacher, and clinical supervisor. I got an “A” on the paper, which was a bit surprising as I was considered a poor writer. I found out later that Dr. Greene was a chess fan himself and quite a good player. I think that probably helped my grade a bit.

As I got on with my career first as Ph.D. student in Counseling Psychology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and then as a tenure-track academic researcher at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and then Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus, NY, I lost touch with chess. Then in 1992, when Fischer reemerged from his professional and social isolation (in what Brady [2011] and many others have deemed his “wilderness years”) for a rematch with Boris Spassky, I got reconnected with the Fischer story. Now, with the internet, it was easy to follow any news on Fischer whether he was in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Japan, the Philippines, Iceland, or elsewhere.

In January of 2008, the week Bobby Fischer passed away, I began writing about his story, not his chess story, but his inner psychology story. This book is the culmination of that research and reflection.

Initially, my intention was to write a scholarly psychological assessment article for a scientific journal, a type of writing and research I was much more familiar with. However, as my work continued and as respected colleagues read early drafts of my psychological assessment of Fischer, a common reaction was that I “should consider writing a book on this topic and reach beyond the scientific community.” I thought about this suggestion for a while and realized that if I were to write a book-length psychobiography of Fischer, I would need access to Fischer “intimates,” those who knew him very well, as well as access to a full archival base of documents not only on Bobby Fischer, but also on select family members.

With these considerations in mind I set out to have personal contact with three key resources, or Fischer insiders: Dr. Frank Brady, his internationally

renowned biographer and former friend (Brady, 1965, 1973, 2011); Russell Targ, Bobby's brother-in-law who was married to Bobby's sister Joan, and who knew Bobby most of his life; and the journalist team of Clea Benson and Peter Nicholas, who were the visionary and groundbreaking investigative journalists who first uncovered, through the Freedom of Information Act, the 900+ page FBI file on Regina Fischer, Bobby's mother. When all three of these resources graciously agreed to talk with me at length, on multiple occasions, I knew that I had a story to tell. I would use my quantitative and qualitative research skills as a multicultural psychologist to delve deeply into Bobby Fischer's life story, and hopefully provide the most comprehensive, in-depth, and balanced psychological profile heretofore published on the country's first official world chess champion.

PREFACE

This book focuses on the inner psychological life of Bobby Fischer in the hopes of gaining a better understanding and deeper insight into his behavior. Among the topics explored are Bobby Fischer's family history, early childhood, development as a chess genius, possible mental illness, and his eerie comparison to the legendary American chess champion, Paul Morphy, who lived and played a century earlier. I also speculate as to how Bobby Fischer's life may have turned out had he received counseling and psychological treatment starting in childhood.

The current text is not meant to be a general biography, as Bobby Fischer has already been the subject of a number of such books. Dr. Frank Brady's *Profile of a Prodigy* (1973) and *Endgame* (2011) top the lists of the most widely acclaimed and read biographies on Fischer, and there are a number of other biographies or detailed accounts of his 1972 world championship victory. This book is a psychobiography that answers many of the psychological questions left unexplored in biographies or documentaries on Bobby Fischer.

The audience for this book includes mental health professionals of varied specialty areas, particularly those interested in working with gifted and talented youth and adolescents, those interested in biographies of puzzling and complex subjects, and individuals interested in chess and chess history. Though a couple of chapters are particularly targeted for mental health professionals, most of the book is written for the layperson without advanced psychological training. The book is organized along ten chapters, and includes various appendices for readers interested in more detail on certain subjects.

Chapter One orients the reader to the nature of psychobiography, to the particular ethical challenges involved in providing a psychological assessment of a recently deceased public figure, and to the particular research methods employed by the author. In Chapter Two, the familiar story of Bobby Fischer's rise to chess supremacy and his decline into possible mental illness is recounted. Bobby's place and ranking among all world chess champions is considered, and a very brief review on the history of chess is provided.

Chapter Three begins the psychological study of Bobby Fischer, starting with a review of his early childhood and living environment. The seeds of Bobby's extraordinary chess ability—visual memory, concentration and focus, spatial relations, original and creative thinking—as well as his psychological problems—awkward social skills, marked distrust, problems academically—become evident in this time period.

A core component in understanding Bobby Fischer is to know his parents, as unraveling the mystery of Bobby Fischer begins with unraveling the perplexity of his ancestry. Who was Regina Wender Fischer? Who was his father? What kind of relationship did Bobby have with his parents, and what was the impact of these relationships on his psychological development? Chapter Four is devoted to understanding Regina Fischer in all her complexity—loving, but overwhelmed single mother, a social justice and peace activist, and a multilingual scholar who would earn, in time, both M.D. and Ph.D. degrees. Critical to understanding Regina Fischer's life is consideration of the context of the Cold War period and the fact that she was under FBI investigation as a possible Soviet spy. This chapter integrates a 994-page FBI file on Regina (Wender) Fischer, which the author acquired through the Freedom of Information Act.

Gerhardt (Liebscher) Fischer, born in 1908 in Berlin, Germany, is listed on Bobby Fischer's 1943 birth certificate as the father. The majority of Bobby Fischer researchers, however, including this author, is fairly convinced that Dr. Paul Felix Nemenyi, a Hungarian-born American scientist, was Bobby Fischer's biological father. Chapter Five systematically examines the evidence regarding Bobby's paternity. The lack of a stable, reliable father-son relationship for a psychologically vulnerable young Bobby Fischer would have a lasting impact on his personality development and mental health over time.

In Chapter Six, the psychological development of Bobby Fischer is examined more closely. Building off of the previous three chapters, this chapter explores possible rationales for Bobby Fischer's intense feelings of anger and mistrust, and hypothesizes why a primary outlet of his anger was towards Jews. This chapter sets the stage for a more systematic and detailed assessment of Bobby's mental state.

A formal post-mortem psychological assessment, a "psychological autopsy," is the focus of Chapter Seven. The rationale for such an assessment in terms of informing the mental health field is highlighted. Perhaps the most technical and clinically detailed section in the book, this chapter reviews available observational evidence on different mental disorders that have been associated with Bobby Fischer in previous literature. Ultimately, the chapter presents a differential diagnosis of Bobby Fischer and hypothesizes what mental illness he may have had.

Readers knowledgeable of chess history specifically, or American history of the mid-nineteenth century, generally, will know the name of Paul Morphy. An international chess phenomenon born in New Orleans, Morphy captivated America and the world with his chess feats and victories in the late 1850s. In fact, the excitement and uproar created by Morphy resembles that resulting from Bobby's 1972 world championship victory over a century later. Though there have been many great American chess champions in the last two centuries, none have had the impact, nor held the legendary status, of Morphy and Fischer. Sadly, Morphy, like Fischer, appeared to succumb to increasing states of paranoia and mental illness. This chapter compares the lives and psychologies of these two great American chess champions.

Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer were not the only chess grandmasters to be associated with mental illness. What is it about chess genius and mental illness? Are the two linked in some way? Chapter Nine reviews the history of mental illness among great chess players and integrates the empirical research on any possible linkage between states of originality/creativity (common to elite chess skill) and mental illness.

Finally, Chapter Ten outlines possible psychological supports and treatments that may have helped Bobby Fischer (and family members) at various points in his development. This chapter explores the following questions: If Bobby would have received psychological counseling beginning in early childhood, would his life had turned out differently? Could psychological treatment have distracted Bobby from his passion and obsession for chess, thus hindering his opportunity to reach the world title? Or could psychological treatment have equipped him with the psychological resources and coping skills that would have facilitated not only his reaching the world chess championship, but also a more balanced and stable personal, family, and professional life? The chapter also includes suggestions for early school and family intervention and psychoeducation regarding the needs and challenges of the gifted and talented. I invite the reader on this journey of exploration and insight into the psychological character of Bobby Fischer.

J.G.P.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PRIMARY SOURCES OF SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

A *Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer* represents my thirteenth authored or edited book, yet by far my most challenging effort, and the one where I was most dependent on the assistance, generosity, wisdom, and experiences of others to bring my vision of Bobby Fischer's psychological history to life. The first person I thank and acknowledge is Russell Targ, Bobby Fischer's brother-in-law. Mr. Targ met Bobby when he was, in his own words, "courting his sister, Joan" (Targ, 2008, p. 237). Bobby was 14 years old at the time. I venture that there is no person alive who knew Bobby better than Russell Targ. Mr. Targ is a world-renowned researcher on distance healing and the author of at least eight books, including his riveting and revealing autobiography titled, *Do You See what I see? Memoirs of a Blind Biker: Lasers and Love, ESP and the CIA, and the Meaning of Life* (Targ, 2008). Mr. Targ, who is now 78 years old, continues to conduct research and travels to train others in distance healing practices. During the time we were in some regular contact, Mr. Targ was first off to Paris, France to accept a Life Achievement Award from the International Association of Parapsychology, and then off to New Zealand to conduct distance healing research.

I had the honor of three long phone interviews with Mr. Targ as well as numerous back-and-forth e-mails to clarify questions as well as to get his reaction to my earlier (Ponterotto, 2011) writing on his brother-in-law Bobby. Furthermore, Mr. Targ read and commented on earlier versions of Chapters Four and Five of this book focusing on profiles of Bobby's mother Regina Fischer, and his likely biological father Paul Nemenyi. Mr. Targ also granted me permission to use photos from his family archive. Without Russell Targ's support for this project (not that he agrees with all of my conclusions) and his insights on the Fischer family, this book may not have been possible.

The second person who encouraged and empowered me to keep studying and working on the life of Bobby Fischer was the esteemed and internationally renowned biographer, Dr. Frank Brady, of nearby (to me at Ford-

ham University) St. John's University in Queens, New York. When I first contacted Dr. Brady in the summer of 2010, he was finishing up, unbeknownst to me, work on his latest biography of Fischer titled *Endgame: Bobby Fischer's Remarkable Rise and Fall—from America's Brightest Prodigy to the Edge of Madness* (Brady, 2011). As busy as Dr. Brady was with proofing galley pages, securing photo permissions, planning the release of his book, all the while being a full-time professor preparing for fall classes and finishing up summer administrative work (he had just stepped down from serving as Chair of the Mass Communications Department at St. John's University), he made time to meet with me multiple times in person, and helped me repeatedly through e-mail correspondence. In addition to his three biographies of Bobby Fischer, Dr. Brady has published highly successful and acclaimed biographies of Orson Wells, Aristotle Onassis, Hugh Hefner, and Barbara Streisand. Though I am not a biographer by training, I believe it fair to credit Dr. Frank Brady as one of the most important and impactful biographers of the last half-century.

While I consider Mr. Russell Targ my Fischer family member mentor, I consider Dr. Brady my mentor in the field of biography. At one lecture Dr. Brady gave at the Marshall Chess Club (where he is current President) in New York City after the release of *Endgame* in February, 2011, he advised those in the audience interested in biography to "read everything there is on your subject, interview everyone you can who knew him or her; even if you do not use all the information, at least you are coming from a place of knowledge and competence." Though my own biographical research experience pales in comparison to Dr. Brady's, I have tried my best to live up to his advice.

A third trove of information and insights on Bobby Fischer and his life was provided to me by Dr. Anthony Saidy, a medical doctor, an International Chess Master, and a one-time close friend of Bobby Fischer. Dr. Saidy is a leading chess author, and two of his books, *The March of Chess Ideas* (Saidy, 1994) and *The World of Chess* (Saidy & Lessing, 1974), can be considered classics in the field. Dr. Saidy was the Canadian Open Chess Co-Champion in 1960, the American Open Chess Championship in 1967 and Co-Champion in 1992, the U.S. Speed Champion in 1956, and he placed fourth in the 1974 U.S. Chess Championship (behind Walter Browne, Pal Benko, and Larry Evans). At his peak playing strength around 1964, Dr. Saidy's ELO rating was 2532.

In any in-depth review of Bobby Fischer's chess career and personal life, Dr. Saidy figures prominently. For example, in Brad Darrach's (2009) controversial book, *Bobby Fischer vs. the Rest of the World*, Dr. Saidy is portrayed as the key person in helping Bobby actually get to Reykjavik, Iceland for the 1972 World Chess Championship match. Dr. Saidy shared with me that

Darrach's portrayal of him and the circumstances leading up to Bobby's trip to Iceland was 80 percent accurate (and 20% fabricated). It is fair to say, that without Dr. Saidy's friendship, patience, ingenuity, and support, Bobby Fischer would have never made the trip to Reykjavik for his 1972 match against Boris Spassky. Dr. Saidy is featured in two documentaries on Bobby, "Anything to Win: The Genius and Madness of Bobby Fischer" (2004) and the more recently released "Bobby Fischer Against the World" (2011). In these documentaries, Dr. Saidy's passion for the game of chess, and his admiration for and appreciation of Bobby's accomplishments on the chessboard, are touchingly evident.

Dr. Saidy read my 2011 *Miller-McCune Magazine* article on Bobby Fischer (Ponterotto, 2011) and offered insights, reflections, and memories on his time with Bobby that substantially extended the personal depth of my understanding of Bobby and his family. Furthermore, Dr. Saidy read, commented on, and in fact helped copy-edit (he is a gifted editor as well as author) this entire book. He also provided me with valuable leads for areas to pursue in my study of Bobby Fischer, his mother Regina and grandmother Natalie Wender, and the political context of the times. I feel deeply indebted to Dr. Saidy for his careful reading of this entire book, for his professional guidance and insights, and for his humor, good nature, and personal support.

My fourth source of support, and perhaps the greatest in terms of the sheer volume of information and the amount of time they provided me, was the journalism team of Clea Benson and Peter Nicholas. While working for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in the early 2000s, Nicholas and Benson discovered and secured, through the Freedom of Information Act, a 900-page FBI dossier on Regina Fischer. They subsequently requested and received the FBI files of Regina's husband (married from 1933 until her 1945 divorce), Hans Gerhardt Fischer. As I read more of this team's work, as well as began to understand more fully the thoroughness and completeness of their inquiry methods (extensive interviews conducted internationally, archival document discovery across multiple languages, rigorous convergent validity methods in assessing data accuracy), it began to dawn on me that their investigative work was raising the status of research on Bobby Fischer and his family to a new plateau of scholarly sophistication. Benson and Nicholas's decade-long research program (along with Dr. Brady's almost 50 years of research on Bobby) has provided a springboard for more recent researchers, including myself, Edmonds and Eidinow (2004), among others to further extend the research on Bobby Fischer, one of the most interesting and enigmatic celebrities and intellectuals of the last half-century. By the empirical research standards of any scientific profession, the work and contributions of Benson and Nicholas have been groundbreaking.

As I was somewhat new to biographical methods at the start of this Fischer project, I was also new to the field of journalism, and had much to learn. Benson and Nicholas, particularly Clea Benson who organizes, logs, and maintains the team's Fischer archives, taught me much of what I now know of investigative journalism.

A fifth primary source of information on Bobby Fischer and his family was Dr. Robert Lipton, who now serves as an Associate Professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine at the University of Michigan. Dr. Lipton had kindly e-mailed me to offer family insights after reading my article on Bobby Fischer that appeared in *Miller-McCune Magazine* (Ponterotto, 2011). Dr. Lipton met and dated Elisabeth Targ, Bobby Fischer's niece, while Elisabeth was completing her psychiatry residency at the University of California at Los Angeles in the late 1980s. Dr. Lipton got to know the Fischer family well, particularly Elisabeth's mom [who was Bobby's older sister], Joan Fischer Targ; in fact he remarked to me that Joan "was effectively my surrogate mother" (R. Lipton, personal communication, January 28, 2011). Dr. Lipton and Elisabeth eventually separated as boyfriend-girlfriend, but the two remained close friends until Elisabeth's untimely death in 2002 at the age of 40 (see Targ, 2008). Given Elisabeth was living in Santa Monica while she was at UCLA, and Bobby was living in the area as well, some of the responsibility in caring for and helping Bobby and at times his mother Regina, fell on Elisabeth and Robert.

Dr. Lipton's insights are particularly insightful for four reasons. First, he was very close to Elisabeth and her family, particularly Joan Fischer. Second, he helped Bobby during his "wilderness years" where we have little validated information about Bobby's life. Third, both he and Elisabeth were in the mental health research field—Elisabeth an M.D. Psychiatrist, and Robert a Ph.D. in Psychiatric Epidemiology (with a minor in psychocultural anthropology)—and thus their clinical insights, which Dr. Lipton shared with me, have important value in our understanding of the psychological life of Bobby Fischer. Fourth, Robert spent time with Regina Fischer in her later years and his observations of Regina and her life with her children/grandchildren is particularly important because much of the literature on Regina Fischer stems from earlier stages in her life (e.g., as in the FBI reports which spanned 1942 to 1973, and memories of the chess community in the 1950s and 1960s). Dr. Lipton was also kind enough to read and comment on Chapter Four of this book, "Mother Love: Understanding Regina Fischer's Relationship with son Bobby."

Additional Sources of Consultation and Support

Without the support and encouragement of Russell Targ and Dr. Frank Brady, likely the two persons alive who knew Bobby Fischer best, I don't know if I would have felt that I even had the right to pen a psychological life story of Mr. Fischer. And without the support and mentoring of journalists Clea Benson and Peter Nicholas, the assistance of Fischer family friend, Dr. Robert Lipton, and the insights of Fischer close friend Dr. Anthony Saidy, this book would not be the integrative vision and window into Bobby Fischer's life that I think it has become. However, there were many other colleagues, professionals, and Fischer associates who provided me with valuable assistance over the last four years as I researched and wrote this book.

First, I thank my wife and colleague, Dr. Ingrid Grieger, a master clinician and clinical supervisor, who not only read earlier versions of this work, but also helped me understand and process early childhood aspects of Bobby Fischer's life that would relate to his long-term psychological development. Interestingly, Ingrid and family moved to the Eastern Parkway section of Brooklyn, around the block from Bobby Fischer's family (who were at 560 Lincoln Place) in 1954, and Ingrid remembers seeing Bobby in the neighborhood. Dr. Grieger's expertise in understanding Jewish immigrants, particularly those associated with the Holocaust, was very valuable to my understanding of the Fischer family sociocultural-religious context in the 1940s and 1950s.

Other colleagues who are experienced psychologists (some are also chess players) that read and commented on early versions of this work include Dr. Paul Greene (whom I mention in the book Preface) of Iona College, Drs. Amelio D'Onofrio and Daniel Ruckdeschel of Fordham University, and Dr. Rahul Chauhan, in private practice in New York City. All experienced clinicians, representing diverse psychotherapeutic orientations—humanistic, existential, family systems, cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, and multicultural—these scholars helped me understand more fully, and interpret more clearly, the complexity of Bobby Fischer's psychological life. Furthermore, these psychologists consulted with me on the ethical appropriateness of my psychological assessment and profile of Bobby Fischer and his mother Regina Fischer.

Other mental health, medical, or legal experts who consulted with me on the ethical issues involved in this psychobiography were Drs. Doyle McCarthy and Akane Zusho of Fordham University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), Drs. Stephen Behnke and Lindsay Childress-Beatty of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Celia Fisher of Fordham University's Center for Ethics Education, Dr. Marcus Zachary at Saint Francis hospital in San

Francisco, and Joel Silverman, Esq., in New York City. I say more about my ethics consultation with these professionals in Chapter One.

A chess insider who was very helpful to my research was Paul M. Albert, Jr. Mr. Albert is a serious player and lover of chess, a successful investment banker, investor, and corporate director and the former well-known sponsor of the “Albert Brilliancy Prizes” from 1983 to 2003 awarded to the competitors in the U.S. Chess Championship who played the most brilliant and innovative games at the tournament. Mr. Albert was also a trustee of the American Chess Foundation from 1970s until 2003 (see Albert, 2004) and provided me with a penetrating window into chess life and politics during that era. Mr. Albert also met Bobby Fischer on several occasions and handled the demonstration board for a few games at the Marshall Chess Club in 1965 when Bobby was playing via teletype (he could not receive State Department permission to travel to Cuba) in the Capablanca Memorial Tournament held in Havana (Albert, 2009). Given the esteem and respect in which Mr. Albert is held in the U.S. chess world, his kind introductions allowed me access to other chess notables in Bobby Fischer’s era. Particularly, through Mr. Albert’s introduction I met and spent time with Grandmaster William Lombardy, who of course figured so prominently in Bobby Fischer’s rise to the World Chess title. I thank Paul Albert for his generous time, insight, memories and guidance.

A helpful source of information on the life and personality of Bobby Fischer was Shernaz Kennedy, an International Woman’s Master who was a friend and confidant of Bobby’s for roughly two decades, from 1981 through 2001. Shernaz and Bobby maintained a close relationship through regular mail correspondence and phone calls. Furthermore, Shernaz visited Bobby for four days in Los Angeles in 1986. Bobby appeared to trust Shernaz and he shared with her his thoughts and feelings on many personal, family, and professional topics. Shernaz, in turn, was and is very loyal to Bobby and I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to communicate with Shernaz through long phone conversations and multiple e-mails. I also thank Grandmaster William Lombardy for the enlightening dinner and lunch conversations we had regarding his life and his relationship with Bobby Fischer.

I am indebted to Dr. Thomas Aiello, professor of history at Valdosta State University, and one of the country’s leading experts on the life and times of chess legend Paul Morphy. Professor Aiello reviewed an earlier version of Chapter Eight on the parallel lives of Bobby Fischer and Paul Morphy and made valuable suggestions that helped me to enhance the clarity and accuracy of the chapter. Dr. Aiello’s knowledge of Paul Morphy, of Morphy’s chief biographer, David Lawson, and of life in the South (particularly New Orleans) in the mid-nineteenth century is astonishing. An eminent

author and editor, Dr. Aiello's recent books include *Dan Burley's Jive* (2009), *The Kings of Casino Park: Race and Race Baseball in the Lost Season of 1932* (2011), and *Bayou Classic: The Grambling-Southern Football Rivalry* (2011). Thank you Dr. Aiello for your thoughtful review and comments.

I also want to acknowledge and thank Dr. William Todd Schultz of Pacific University in Oregon, one of our nation's eminent psychobiographers. Prior to beginning my research on Bobby Fischer I did not know Dr. Schultz personally, but nonetheless when I contacted him he graciously offered me his advice and recommendations, and led me to definitive sources and exemplar models of psychobiography. Dr. Schultz, in his own work, highlights that good psychobiography is not "pathography," that is, the reduction of a complex personality to static psychopathological categories or symptoms. He emphasized that it is critical for the psychobiographer to capture the essence of the subject's thoughts and feelings that underlie the behavior we witness. Dr. Schultz read an earlier brief manuscript on Bobby Fischer and provided me with valuable assistance and constructive criticism. Dr. Schultz's (2011) newest psychobiography was recently released by Oxford University Press: *Tiny Terror: Why Truman Capote (Almost) Wrote Answered Prayers*.

Other individuals who contributed to this book in some way included Dr. Diane Ponterotto, a feminist-oriented psycholinguist at the University of Rome (Italy) who helped me monitor any potential bias as a man writing about the women in Bobby Fischer's life, particularly his mother, Regina Fischer, and his sister Joan Fischer. Dr. Richard Ross, of New York City, a close acquaintance of the chess legend and psychoanalyst Dr. Reuben Fine in his later years, provided me with valuable insights into the personality and character of this historic figure in chess history. Salvatore Franco of Minneapolis, Minnesota expended strong effort in helping me try to locate a former Fischer acquaintance. Albert Audette, a retired Air Force colonel, and now head of Audette & Associates, LLC, helped me understand the relationship between the FBI and the military in the 1960s. Dalia Wissgott-Moneta, a social worker in Frankfurt, Germany, and Professors Susan Ray and Suzanne Hafner of Fordham University, assisted me with translation of German documents. A few of our Fordham University Ph.D. students were helpful in terms of discussions we had related to the Bobby Fischer story, particularly Alex Fietzer, Esther Fingerhut, and Jason Reynolds.

I acknowledge the generosity of Einar Einarsson and Svala Soley, friends of Bobby Fischer's in Iceland who granted me permission to reproduce their "last" photo and pencil drawing of Bobby Fischer. Thanks as well to Dr. Alfredo Pasin of Monza, Italy, for allowing me to reproduce his poem "Il Giocatore Bobby" ("Bobby the Chess Player") in its entirety in this volume.

Finally, I acknowledge the assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who honored my Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for all documents pertaining to Bobby Fischer's mother, Regina (Wender) Fischer (Pustan). Knowing the length of Regina's file and the many requests the FBI Records Management Division likely receives on a weekly basis, I anticipated a long, drawn-out process in securing all relevant files. However, FBI staff responded immediately to my requests and was very helpful. I am particularly indebted to David M. Hardy, Section Chief, and David P. Sobonya, Public Information Officer and Legal Administrative Specialist, of the Record/Information Dissemination Section of the FBI. Furthermore, I acknowledge the assistance of Linda Wilkins, Public Affairs Specialist, and Susan McKee, Unit Chief, Investigative Publicity and Public Affairs Unit, Office of Public Affairs, for their assistance in helping me secure FBI permission to reproduce the photo of a young Regina Wender that appeared in the FBI documents.

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Author's Note</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
 Chapter One. BRIEF NOTES ON PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, AND RESEARCH METHODS	3
On the Nature of Psychobiography	3
On the Place of Psychological Theory in Psychobiography	5
Ethical Considerations	6
Research Methods	9
 Chapter Two. DRAMATIC RISE AND MYSTERIOUS FALL OF BOBBY FISCHER	11
Bobby's Rise to the World Title	11
Brief Note on the Origins of Chess and its Champions	16
Genius Blossoms: How did Bobby Fischer Get so Good?	17
Bobby Fischer's Place Among the World Champions of Chess	20
 Chapter Three. IN THE BEGINNING: THE EARLY LIFE OF BOBBY FISCHER	25
Bobby's Birth and Family Tree	25
Bobby's Early Life: Seeds of Psychological Challenge	26

Chapter Four.	MOTHER LOVE: UNDERSTANDING REGINA FISCHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SON BOBBY	33
	Regina Fischer: Queen Mother	34
	Regina Fischer as Peace Activist, Mother, and Subject of FBI Surveillance	35
	FBI Investigation Begins	36
	Ambivalence in the Mother-Son Relationship— Regina Fischer Moves Out	39
	Limitations of FBI Perspective and a More Balanced Profile of Regina Fischer	42
	Cold War Context of FBI Investigation	42
	A More Balanced Perspective on Regina Fischer	43
	Understanding the Psychology of Regina Fischer	45
	Regina Fischer's Early Childhood and Adolescence	45
	Regina Meets Gerhardt Fischer	47
	Regina as a Single Mother	48
	Summary	51
Chapter Five.	WHO IS MY FATHER? THE MYSTERY OF BOBBY FISCHER'S PATERNITY	53
	Who was Hans Gerhardt Fischer?	54
	The Identity of Bobby's Biological Father	56
	Evidence for Paul Felix Nemenyi being Bobby Fischer's Biological Father	56
	Did Bobby Know the Identity of his Biological Father?	63
Chapter Six.	THE MIND AND INNER LIFE OF BOBBY FISCHER	65
	Bobby's Psychological Profile	65
	Bobby Fischer's Psychological Deterioration	70
Chapter Seven.	A PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY OF BOBBY FISCHER	85

Why Conduct a Psychological Autopsy of Bobby Fischer?	85
On the Nature of a Psychological Autopsy	86
Diagnosing Bobby Fischer	87
A Comprehensive Mental Health Assessment of Bobby Fischer	88
Bobby's Biological Parents and Grandparents . . .	89
Bobby's Half-Siblings	90
Starting Out: Bobby's Genetic Predisposition . . .	93
Differential Diagnosis of Bobby's Mental Status	93
 Chapter Eight. THE PARALLEL LIVES AND MENTAL ILLNESSES OF PAUL MORPHY AND BOBBY FISCHER	103
Rocking the Chess World	104
The Life of Paul Morphy	105
Family Origins and Early History	106
An Intellectual and Artistic Prodigy	108
Life in College and Law School	111
Embarking on his Brief Chess Career	112
The Civil War and Life as an Attorney in New Orleans	114
Psychological Decline and Death	116
Evidence of Paul Morphy's Psychological Illness	117
What Happened to Paul Morphy? A Psychological Autopsy	121
Beyond a Clinical Diagnosis	123
A Note on Paul Morphy's Sexuality	127
Similarities and Differences in the Lives and Mental Illness of Morphy and Fischer	128
 Chapter Nine. ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENIUS AND MADNESS—ARE CHESS MASTERS MORE VULNERABLE TO MENTAL ILLNESS?	133
Mental Illness Among Chess Legends of the Past . . .	135
A Neurological Link between Creativity and Mental Illness	137

	Are Elite Chess Players More Prone to Mental Illness?	139
	Are Certain Career Paths More Hazardous to One's Mental Health?	141
	Well, What Are We to Make of this Data?	142
Chapter Ten.	IF ONLY? PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT OF BOBBY FISCHER AND FAMILY	145
	Bobby Fischer's Final Hours	146
	Psychological Counseling and the Fischer Family	147
	Psychological Support for Regina and Joan Fischer	148
	Psychological Intervention for Bobby Fischer	149
	What Can be Learned from the Bobby Fischer Story?	151
	<i>Epilogue</i>	153
	<i>Notes</i>	157
	<i>Appendix A—Select Chess Achievements of Bobby Fischer</i>	163
	<i>Appendix B—Select Personal Challenges and Events in Bobby Fischer's Life</i> . . .	164
	<i>Appendix C—Regina Fischer Timeline</i>	166
	<i>Appendix D—Paul Morphy Timeline</i>	169
	<i>References</i>	173
	<i>Name Index</i>	183
	<i>Subject Index</i>	189
	<i>About the Author</i>	191

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Figures</i>	
Figure 3.1 Robert (Bobby) James Fischer Family Genogram	27
Figure 7.1 Differential Diagnosis Flow Chart	100
Figure 8.1 Paul Morphy’s Family Tree	107
<i>Tables</i>	
Table 2.1 Official World Chess Champions (Men) and Their Chessmetrics Average Peak Ratings	22
Table 8.1 Similarities in the Lives of Bobby Fischer and Paul Morphy	129
Table 8.2 Differences in the Lives of Bobby Fischer and Paul Morphy	131
<i>Plates</i>	
Plate 1. Regina Fischer as a young woman #1	75
Plate 2. Regina Fischer as a young woman #2	76
Plate 3. Regina and Hans Gerhardt Fischer	77
Plate 4. Regina Fischer with daughter Joan	78
Plate 5. Paul Felix Nemenyi, young adulthood	79
Plate 6. Paul Felix Nemenyi, middle adulthood	80
Plate 7. Bobby Fischer with mentor Jack Collins	81
Plate 8. Bobby Fischer with sister Joan Fischer	82
Plate 9. Bobby Fischer, last known portrait	83
Plate 10. Bobby Fischer, lead pencil drawing of last known portrait	84

PRAISE FOR

*A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer:
Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological Decline
of a World Chess Champion*

“The era of the amateur psychologizing about Bobby Fischer is coming to a close. Now we heed a professional. Dr. Joseph Ponterotto has applied the scientific principles of his discipline to a personality that so long perplexed the world. The controversies will not end, but any further hypotheses will need to take Ponterotto’s work as a starting point.”

—Anthony Saidy, MD., Intl. Chess Master

“Dr. Ponterotto’s pioneering research on Bobby Fischer clears up many of the myths and misperceptions that have long surrounded one of the world’s most enigmatic personalities. This book is a unique blend of psychology and reporting that will fascinate anyone who has ever wondered what explains such self-destructive brilliance.”

—Clea Benson and Peter Nicholas, Investigative Journalists

“Brilliant, agonized; original, immature; astute, emotionally volatile; virtuosic, enigmatic—so goes the narrative of the life and adventures of Bobby Fischer, a man who captivated the world with both his genius and with his tormented soul. In *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer*, Joseph Ponterotto elegantly unpacks the many contradictions that at once propelled Fischer onto the world stage and, at the same time, led to his eventual liminalization. Ponterotto traces Fischer’s socioemotional development from early life skillfully integrating the many influences that helped shape the person he became as an adult. His treatment of the tumultuous dynamics of Fischer’s relationship with his mother and the psychological implications of the mystery of his paternity not only makes for fascinating reading but poignantly sheds light on what Fischer’s

hidden suffering was all about. While Ponterotto explores Fischer's life with the eye of a scientist, he writes with the pen of one who appreciates the complexity of human experience and who faithfully and compassionately strives to follow the truth wherever it may lead. I recommend this eminently readable work not only to Bobby Fischer fans but to all those fascinated by the paradoxes and pain that often lie behind genius."

—Amelio A. D'Onofrio, Ph.D.

Founding Director and Clinical Professor

Psychological Services Institute, Fordham University

"The link between genius and mental illness is often observed but rarely resolved. Chess genius Bobby Fischer's oddities give way to accomplished academician and chess lover Joseph Ponterotto's systematic application of contemporary psychology. Dr. Ponterotto shows us greater meaning in the tragic life of one of the superstars of modern chess. Had proper help been available to a young Bobby Fischer, what elegance of chess mastery might the world have experienced? What discoveries do we lose today when families and children don't get the best support and fall into the abyss of mental illness? Dr. Ponterotto has uncovered the moves and mistakes in one troubled genius to show us how we can help people play the game of life so that there are more winners, and amazingly, fewer losers."

—Paul Greene, Ph.D.

Professor of Psychology, Iona College, New Rochelle, NY

Private Practice, New York City and New Rochelle, NY

"In reading this psychobiography of Bobby Fischer, I felt as if I was invited along on an intriguing journey to explore both his genius at the board, and his inexplicable behavior off the board. I have come to understand the complex intermix of factors—historical, cultural, political, genetic, personal, and family—that contributed to Mr. Fischer's development in both healthy and unhealthy ways. Professor Ponterotto anchors his discussion and conclusions in serious scholarship while writing about Bobby Fischer and his family in an accessible and respectful manner. I highly recommend taking this journey into the mind of perhaps history's greatest chess legend."

—Rahul Chauhan, Ph.D.

Psychologist and Multicultural Specialist

Private Practice, New York City

"I was quickly captivated by Dr. Ponterotto's clear, conversational style of

writing which made chess and Bobby Fischer both accessible and interesting to me. I learned about the genre of psychobiography and the goals of a psychological autopsy. As a psychologist (and ethics educator) I was gratified that Ponterotto was deliberate and transparent in his consideration of the ethical issues and limitations involved with this undertaking, and I appreciated that he frequently reminded the reader about the speculative nature of the diagnostic conclusions he was drawing. Mental health professionals will appreciate the story of Fischer's inner life that Ponterotto weaves. It is an intriguing journey to attempt to put together the puzzle (with missing pieces) of Fischer's life, from a psychological perspective. Figuring out "how someone got this way" is at the heart of the diagnostic and assessment process and is difficult enough when the subject is a living active participant. The painstaking research, the multiple interviews, the triangulation of sources, making explicit his thought processes all serve to increase the reader's confidence in Ponterotto's conclusions. (The level of detail in Chapters 4 and 5 on Fischer's mother and likely paternity are good examples of this rigorous research.) It is apparent in Chapters 7 and 9 that Ponterotto is a conscientious scientist and insightful practitioner who applied his ample skills as both a psychological researcher and psychotherapist to unravel the mystery of Bobby Fischer. Ponterotto has made a significant contribution to the scholarship on Bobby Fischer by adding psychology's voice to the speculations about the mental health of this troubled champion.

—Suzette L. Speight, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology

University of Akron, Akron, Ohio

"Through his in-depth study of Bobby Fischer, Dr. Ponterotto provides a riveting case study that can serve as an educative tool for school-based mental health professionals and administrators. Bobby Fischer was a genius, but also deeply troubled; and as highlighted in this psychobiography, early intervention by school counselors and school psychologists may have helped young Bobby both develop his cognitive and intellectual gifts while at the same time promoting his broader academic and social skills development. This book was a fascinating read, and so relevant to the work I do in schools and in private practice. I recommend it highly."

—Ernest A. Collabollotta, Psy.D.

School Psychologist, Scarsdale Public Schools,

and Private Practice, White Plains, NY

"Ponterotto has given us a unique gift: something fundamentally NEW about

Bobby Fischer. His psychobiography doesn't walk the boards paced by countless others before him, seeking to score academic points by picking the nits of place, time, and motive. It isn't a work of sympathy or damnation. Instead, *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer* provides a considered psychological portrait of an American enigma and a necessary companion to previous traditional biographies."

—Thomas Aiello, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of History

Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA

Editor, David Lawson's *Paul Morphy: The Pride and Sorrow of Chess*

"*A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer* provides a fascinating layer of information to help interpret the complex and, in some ways, tragic life of Bobby and his family."

—Robert Lipton, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Emergency Medicine

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

**A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY OF
BOBBY FISCHER**

Chapter One

BRIEF NOTES ON PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, AND RESEARCH METHODS

All I want to do, ever, is play chess.
(Bobby Fischer, quoted in Rothstein, 2008, p. B1)

I wish I could fly, so that I could play chess with God.
(Nine-year-old chess player Adam Weser,
cited in Hoffman, 2007, p. 63)

ON THE NATURE OF PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY

Though much has been written about Bobby Fischer, first as a visionary chess genius, and second, as a troubled man who lost his way and became obsessed with Anti-Semitic and Anti-American viewpoints, little is known of the inner workings of his mind that led to the “Mystery of Bobby Fischer.” This book attempts to unveil that mystery using the research tools of psychobiography. Put simply, psychobiography is the psychological study of an individual person (Schultz, 2005b). The specialty and research methods of psychobiography are well established in the broader field of psychology and there are numerous models and guides to conducting and reporting exemplar psychobiographical studies (e.g., see Elms, 1994; Runyan, 1982; Schultz, 2005a).

More than a biographical sketch of “who” a person was and “what” the person accomplished in their particular field, psychobiography con-

cerns itself with the “why” of a person’s behavior. What was the inner life, the psychology that drove the person to his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions? What were the underlying mechanisms that made the person tick? In this book, I provide one window into the life of Bobby Fischer by using my lens as an academic researcher and practicing psychologist to explore the inner psychology of this legendary and enigmatic icon.

An individual’s behavior should be considered within the context of their time—the political and historical period of their lives, their genetic predispositions, the family’s immigration and migration history, religious and cultural experiences and influences, socioeconomic conditions, academic experiences, the specific characteristics of the career in which they engage, and their significant friendships and relationships at critical points in development. A comprehensive psychobiography should address all of these facets of an individual life.

In his edited *Handbook of Psychobiography*, Schultz (2005b) outlined the characteristics of quality psychobiographies. First, they are persuasive in that the reader follows the researcher’s logic and methods, understands the conclusions made, and finds the interpretations and explanations offered to be credible and accurate given the data reviewed. Second, the “story” is logically laid out, with conclusions and interpretations following the presentation and evaluation of the evidence. Third, comprehensive treatment of the person and the context of the person’s life enhances the credibility of the psychobiography. There may be multiple interpretations of a single event, and they all should be explored and then examined in relation to other events to identify common threads of behavior or thought.

A fourth characteristic of good psychobiography emphasized by Schultz (2005b) is what he called “convergence of data” (p. 7). Multiple sources of information relating to the same event enhance the accuracy of interpretation. For example, Regina Fischer, Bobby’s mother, figured very prominently in his life. One source of information on Regina Fischer is a 994-page FBI dossier on her. If one were to base her or his opinion only on this source, a narrow (and more negative) picture of Regina and her parenting skills would emerge. However, if one were to “triangulate” the FBI data with perceptions of Regina held by her family (e.g., her son Bobby, her daughter Joan, and her son-in-law Russell Targ), and her friends, a more balanced, and likely accu-

rate picture on Regina Fischer and the nature of her relationship to son Bobby would emerge.

Schultz's (2005b) fifth characteristic of good psychobiography is elucidation and sudden coherence. With careful interpretation based on multiple data sources, what may have been previously confusing or incoherent now makes sense when contextualized within a deeper understanding of the subject. With regard to Bobby Fischer, one might ask what led to his obsessive hatred of two particular segments of the population: first, Jews, and second, the United States government? A coherent and comprehensive psychobiography ultimately arrives at a reasonable answer to this question.

A sixth aspect of a quality psychobiography is that the argument presented throughout is logical and sound, and free from researcher self-contradictions. Seventh, interpretations within psychobiography should be consistent with broader knowledge of human development, cultural expectations, and the specific career in question. Finally, sound psychobiography withstands the test of time and remains a viable explanation for an individual's actions even as other interpretations are introduced (Runyan, 2005; Schultz, 2005b).

In this psychobiography of Bobby Fischer I have strived to meet the first seven criteria for strong biographical research and reporting outlined by Schultz (2005b). The final criteria, credibility of my explanations over time, will be judged in the years to come. I leave it to my readers to weigh the value, validity, and impact of this psychobiography on Bobby Fischer.

ON THE PLACE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY IN PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY

Psychobiographies can be anchored in a single theory, in multiple theories, or in no theory in particular. For example, both Dr. Ernest Jones's (1951) analysis of Paul Morphy and Reuben Fine's (2008) analysis of Bobby Fischer is exclusively anchored in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. By contrast, Todd Schultz's (2011) recent psychobiography of Truman Capote is anchored in attachment theory and script theory. My view is that to view a historic figure within the lens of one theoretical model is potentially very limiting. Jones's psychoanalytic treatment of Morphy was harshly criticized (e.g., Lawson, 2010; Philip-