

Vlastimil Hort

My Chess Stories

NAVA

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Toadstools

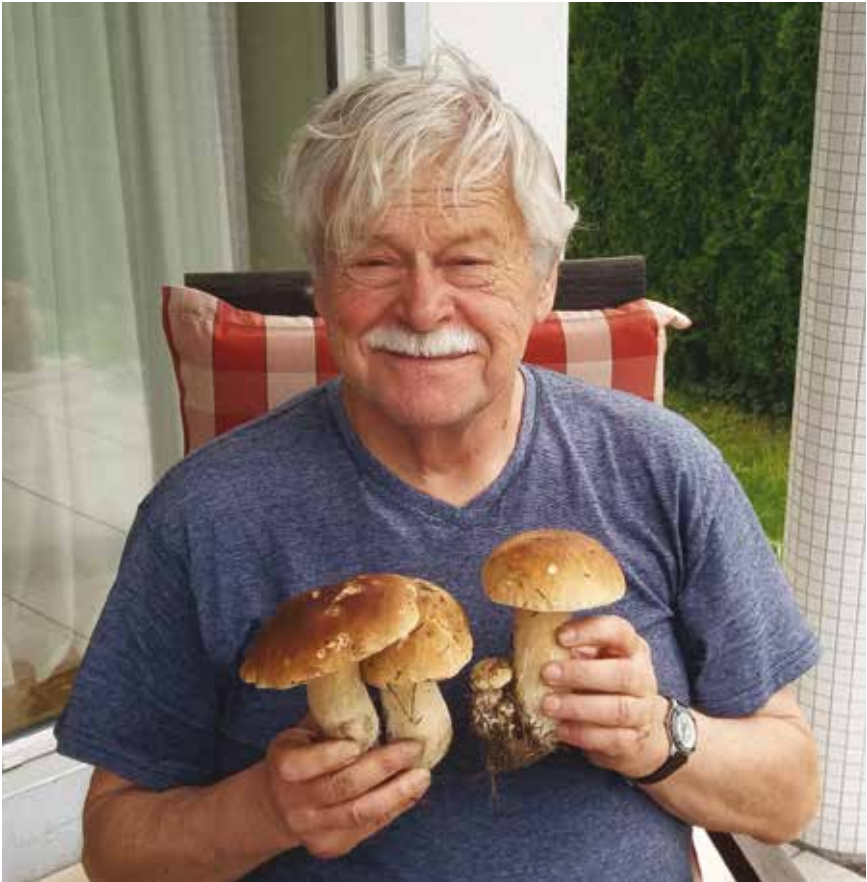
The deep forests of Slavonia are a mushroom-collector's paradise. I learned collecting mushrooms as a seven-year-old from my father. After the war mushrooms were an essential food-stock for survival in my home town. Necessity turned into a passion in later times. The forest is my home.

The chef of the Hotel Kunjevci was pleased with my findings and added deliciously prepared porcini mushrooms to my menu. The mushroom saison was in full swing, just as the tournament in Vinkovci 1967. Around noon was my time to go to the mushrooms. On one of these occasions I met Bobby Fischer at the exit door. »Yes, I'm going to collect mushrooms. Will you join me?« He turned on his heels and was back in a few minutes. I checked his equipment—good shoes, a jackknife and a large basket. Everything was in order.

If he had ever been to a forest, I asked myself. He pounced on everything that had a leg and some colour. I was relieved he didn't know anything about my adventure the day before. Encountering a raging wild sow and her five newborns had been a threatening experience even for me. Our baskets were quickly filled and we found our way back to the hotel.

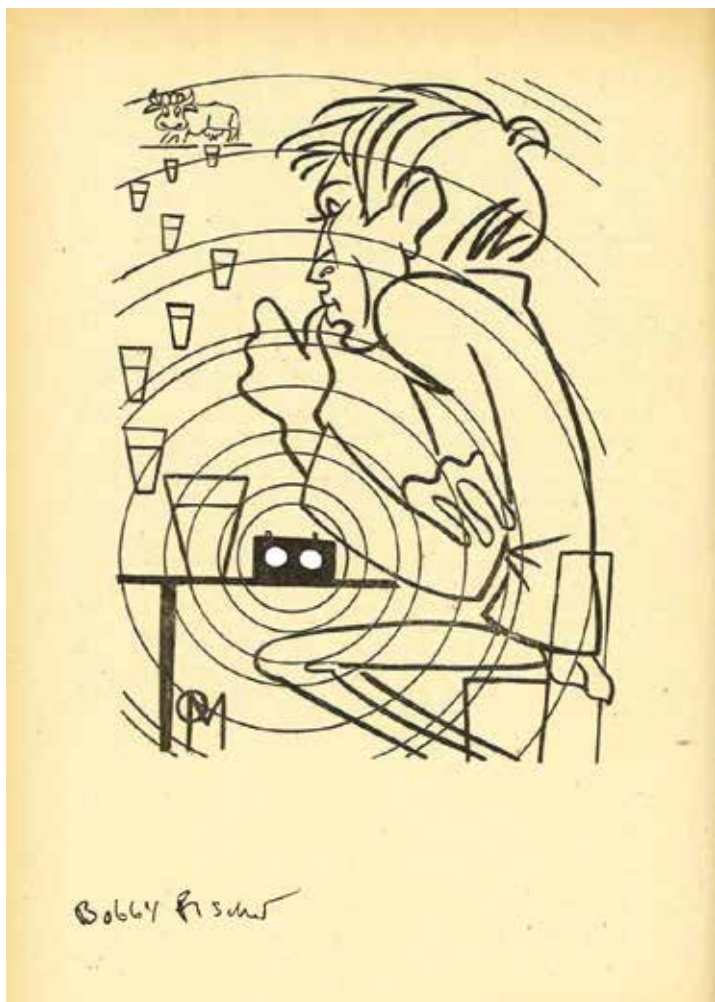
Robert Fischer was completely elevated by our little stint and his yield. I inspected his basket: »Oh dear, just a few grams of these and you would never win the tournament, dear Bobby.« He didn't want to believe me and was quite angry that I chucked away all his mushrooms into the next bin. His face looked like the hat of a toadstool, the white dots were missing, however. »If you're lucky, an immediate gastric cleansing might help«, was how I ended my mycological lecture.

»I had so many mushrooms in the last few days«, I told the chef afterwards. »Today I will only have the pancakes. Robert Fischer will get the mushrooms. Please: Prepare the mushrooms so that he'll win the tournament«, I joked. During our conversation Bobby didn't leave my side. Suddenly he understood the Serbo-Croatian language. For him it was enough. »No, no, Vlasty, you will eat them first and I will wait for one hour.«



Has survived every culinary encounter with mushrooms: Vlastimil Hort; photograph: private collection.

I automatically thought of the Roman empress Agrippina, Nero's mother, who had poisoned many inconvenient people in her surrounding with dishes containing mushrooms. I felt flattered, for I was appointed the food taster of Robert James Fischer!



Bobby Fischer; cartoon: Otakar Mašek

Visiting the Tals in Troisdorf

Ex world champion Mikhail Tal—a lucky devil? At any rate, not all of his chess colleagues were as fortunate as he was. After the Perestroika every public contribution came under scrutiny. The Russian professionals know what I'm talking about. Every chess grant and support was cut and the chess-VIPs suddenly couldn't expect any benefits any more.

Suetin, Bagirov, Gipslis, Nei and all the others somehow had to find a way to feather their own nest. Prize-money in the west had always been attractive. Like bees they swarmed out to earn the odd nickel in western tournaments. After they had spent the night in the train, their bags filled with canned food, they often only looked for a quiet place to sleep in the stations. They didn't want to spare the money to pay for some nights in hotels. Like modern nomads they tramped from open to open hoping to snatch a piece of the prize-cake. It was struggle for sheer survival.

I rang the bell at a well-known door at a bungalow in Troisdorf. »Please come forward, Vlastimil« I was greeted warmly and Tal's wife Engelina led me to a comfy living room. »Mischa will be with you in a minute.«

Shortly afterwards he appeared, the ingenious world champion, as always with a cigarette sticking out of the corner of his mouth. When we shook hands I noticed the tremor. We all knew. Mischa needed his alcohol level. Before he could start the day, he needed a mug of strong coffee. Nobody mentioned that half of it consisted of Johnnie Walker.

»Mischa, please eat something. I have prepared a slice of bread with caviar.« But no, Mischa wanted to get to the chessboard.

Even though I tried hard, I didn't get the solution. I still don't know to this day who composed this study. However, I don't believe it's a Soviet-

Russian composition. Compared to music, it resembles the sophisticated fingering of the virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini. Maybe some reader will know something about the composer of this study.²



White to move is winning

I could find the solution only up to the mating net; the rest of the moves—only bishop moves!—are from hell's kitchen!

That's how far I had gotten. Mischa was laughing up his sleeves: »The white bishop is the terminator!«

Against Ba4–d1 there is no defence—the fifth black knight doesn't exist!

Afterwards I also drank a big sip of Johnnie Walker and let the good Russian caviar melt on my tongue. Thanks to the chess enthusiast and friendly widower Eimert, Tal had found a home in Troisdorf in his last years. His talented sixteen-year-old daughter was able to study at the Cologne Conservatory, partly because »Uncle Wilfried« from SG Porz opened his

² Translator's note: According to the English Wikipedia (viz. Plaskett's Puzzle), the study was created by the Dutch chess composer Gijs van Breukelen in the 1970s. It circulated, but was published in *Schakend Nederland* only in 1997.

purse. Grusinian cognac or Johnnie Walker? Tal knew, of course, that he was seriously ill. Did he really not care about anything?

In any case, for me there were only three brilliant world champions: Tal, Fischer and Kasparov. I was lucky to have lived to see them all.



Mikhail Tal, Illustration: Otakar Mašek