

CHESS

On the 23 pairs of chromosomes that make up the human genome, you will find 30,000 to 50,000 genes. My uncles, both doctors, say one of these is the chess gene. They claim that it has existed in my family for generations. At first, I thought the gene was recessive, or travelled like haemophilia - men get it, women carry it. I now believe that I inherited this gene as well.

I had a transcendent chess experience in the 1990s. I was playing my husband, a fine and very competitive amateur player. Within six moves, I knew exactly how the game would unfold. I was totally focussed. The spirits of my father and grandfather moved through me. I captured my husband's pieces and trapped his king. I felt unbeatable and omnipotent. The game was mine and always would be. I haven't won since.

In my earlier days, I left no room in my life for chess. I did not nurture my game the way my brothers did: reading books, learning gambits, and practising. Instead of stimulating my chess gene, I filled my childhood with the strivings and preoccupations of girls.

Since childhood, whenever my romantic partners wanted to play chess, I thought they were avoiding sex, choosing a more distant form of closeness. In the intimate conversation of chess, their feminine side, represented by their powerful queens, attempted to conquer my somewhat impotent king. The animus and anima circled each other never making blissful contact. Longing for love, my queen protected her man to the death. Over and over, my kings fell.



In the summer of 1923, my grandfather, Marcus Halpern, and his father-in-law, Jehiel Perelman, played chess in the sunshine on a small rough table. The family had rented a dacha, a little summer house, ten miles from Warsaw. In those days, my grandfather still had a job with the White Star Line helping Jews arrange their passage to North America. This was just before the US restricted Jewish immigration, before Marcus lost his job and the family fell into hard times.

Marcus, a socialist and revolutionary, had been exiled to Siberia by the Tsarists after the first Russian Revolution in 1905. He escaped over land to Murmansk, and eventually found his way to Finland, England, and Africa - learning every language on the way. He was in England in 1910 for the coronation of George V and, by 1916, he was playing chess with Trotsky in Zurich. As a Menshevik, Marcus managed to get himself on a Bolshevik death list. By 1919, it seemed wise to return to Warsaw and marry Chaya Perelman. Marcus was almost 40. Chaya had

waited many years for this genius to return and marry her. They lived with Chaya's family in Warsaw where she taught Hebrew in Janusz Korczak's famous orphanage. Their first child, Sophie, was born in 1920 and Yisroel, three years later.

Marcus and Jehiel, Chaya's father and a dealer in rare Jewish books, were sitting outside playing chess with an elegant chess set that belonged to Jehiel. The book dealer was a refined, sensitive man. Marcus was explosive and unpredictable. These two did not really like each other, but they shared a love of chess and books. Jehiel was holding baby Yisroel on his knee with his left hand, while he moved the chess pieces with his right hand. Suddenly Marcus, with a satisfied grin, said, "Check - and mate."

"What? Impossible!" In shock, Jehiel stood up, dropping the baby on the ground. In retaliation for the tears of his son, Marcus grabbed as many chess pieces as he could and threw them into the open latrine. Sophie, a child of three, ran to the latrine to help Jehiel as he pulled the pieces out of the muck and tenderly wiped them. In spite of this trauma, Yisroel grew up to become my uncle, George Halpern.



Marcus Halpern had been known as the Ilye Funtvardegass, the genius of Twarda Street. His knowledge of Jewish tradition, and even superstition, was so great that he could find an appropriate quotation for every event. Sometimes when Chaya objected to his chess playing, he quoted the Magen Avram, his illustrious ancestor of the 17th century: "Chess is a proper pastime for the Jew as long as it is not played for money. On this principle, chess may be played on the Sabbath."

Chaya quoted right back from Moses Mendelssohn: "For a game, chess is too serious, and for a serious occupation, it is too much of a game."



Marcus, Chaya, and their children lived with Chaya's father, her brother, and her sisters and their husbands in the Perelman house in Warsaw. So much chess was played that when Sophie looked at the parquet floor in their kitchen, she imagined the large squares were part of a giant chessboard, and all the people in the flat were pieces being moved by their invisible God.



By 1926, Marcus and Chaya had Sophie, Yisroel, and a new baby, Abelah.

With the help of cousins in New York and Montreal, they were able to immigrate to Canada. They moved to 5955 St. Urbain Street in Montreal where my mother was born. Yisroel began to be called George after George V, the king of Canada. They were poor, but survived the Depression assisted by the Baron de Hirsch Fund, a Jewish welfare agency.

During the 1930s, Marcus spent many hours at the En Passant Chess Club. He came home late, his hair and clothes reeking of cigarette smoke. He sometimes brought home a five-cent loaf of yesterday's bread to appease Chaya. Upon losing to Marcus at the club, his opponents, Weiner, Lipton, and Physicky, might head to the St. Urbain flat to squeeze out a win playing against Chaya. They usually left with their tails between their legs.

To control Marcus's long hours at the chess club, Chaya often made him take Abe, George, or my mother with him. The chess club was in the back room of a small grocery store on St. Viateur Street. My mother went eagerly because Marcus bought her a drink at the soda fountain. The children eventually became so bored and noisy that Marcus had to take them home. During one chess club outing, Abe saw Mr. Physicky take out his fountain pen and wipe blue ink on his face and hair to distract his opponent from a winning move.



Abe seems to have been very impressed by Mr. Physicky's chess strategies. He learned to make coughing, retching, and sneezing sounds to distract and irritate his opponents. Once, after making a losing move, but before the opponent realized his advantage, Abe "accidentally" tipped the table. In 1941, using these tactics, he managed to win the chess championship at Baron Byng High School. "Trickery is par for the course for all of today's grandmasters," insisted Abe. To illustrate, he cited a 1927 game in Argentina in which the world champion, Capablanca, pulled a knife on his opponent.



Marcus was fluent in 14 languages, including Russian, German, and Polish. During World War Two, he found a job with the government of Canada as a translator and the family moved to Ottawa. After the war, Marcus and Chaya moved to Toronto to join my mother, Mary, who was studying at the University of Toronto. They rented a house at 66 Lippincott Street, just south of College. Soon George and Abe returned from service overseas and became medical students at the University. Because of my grandfather's socialist leanings, they called their home "the commune." The chess competition was fierce. One of Marcus's chess

cronies was Peter Avery, 1943 chess champion of the province of Ontario.

In the Kensington Market neighbourhood where the family lived, Marcus met immigrants like him: Russians, Jews, Poles, grandmasters in their homelands. He brought them to the commune for tea and chess. In the middle of a game, Marcus often told Mary, "Wake me up when he moves." He then went to the next room for a nap. After 5 or 10 minutes, the opponent moved.

"Pa, your move," my mother called.

Marcus shuffled to the table and, barely looking at the board, made his next move; then, promptly returned to his nap.

Was he sleeping, or was he visualizing the chessboard and every possible move and countermove? These instant moves rattled the opponent and broke his confidence. Upon winning, Marcus called the opponent a donkey (in Polish) and kicked him out.



By 1948, Chaya had died and Sid Blum, an injured American war vet, joined the Lippincott Street commune to be with Mary, his beloved. Sid was the son of one of Marcus's younger sisters, and thus came from the same gene pool as Marcus. Sid had spent much of 1945 and 1946 in a hospital bed recovering from his war injuries and improving his chess game. When he moved in with his cousins and uncle, there was no escaping the intense competition. In a ranking of family members, Marcus was first; Sid, second; and my mother's brothers, George and Abe, in constant battle for third. This environment honed Sid for the 1949 chess tournament at the University of Toronto's Hart House.

All the competitors had been eliminated and it was down to the final game between my father and a psychology student. Sid was losing. His opponent would checkmate him in four moves and he could not stop the assault.

Sid stared at the board for a very long time. The psychology student also stared at the board thinking, "My win is certain. He might as well concede." Eventually, the psychology student looked up from the board to see why Sid was taking so long. Sid had been waiting for that moment. As soon as his opponent looked up, victory filled Sid's eyes, as if he had just seen an amazing new strategy that would win him the game. He put his queen on a square that made it vulnerable to capture. Seconds later, Sid gasped and slapped his own cheek in despair, as though suddenly seeing his great blunder. When the opponent gleefully went to capture the queen, touching the knight that was positioned to do so, he saw the trap that would allow my father to mate him once the knight was moved. Since he had touched the knight, tournament rules demanded that he now had to move it.

As the trophy was handed to my father, the psychology student realized

that Sid's gasp of despair had been a desperate piece of acting. The Hart House trophy sat front and centre on our mantle throughout my childhood.



Marcus died on his 75th birthday in 1958. By then, Sid and Mary had married and started their family. Like Marcus, Sid also loved books and chess. Bookshelves rose from floor to ceiling and leaned against every available wall in our homes in Toronto, Montreal, and Hamilton. As important as books were in my family, we were taught to play chess before we could read. When I was 5, my brother 6½, and my sister 8, my father played us simultaneously, on three separate boards. At first we played with only the king, queen, and rooks. Gradually other pieces were added. We learned how to mate with just a queen and a king, or with a king and two rooks. When we were old enough to play with all of our pieces, my father spotted us a queen, or both rooks, so we might have an advantage. Even with the advantage, I never won.



Having chess sets around proved handy to a girl who was not nurturing her chess gene. By 1965, I was 13 and had boyfriends to neck with in the back room of our home. A chess game was always set up nearby. If people approached the doors to this room, we could quickly disentangle and make it appear that we were in the middle of a chess game.



I was in Grade 8, when Sid, not yet 40, developed cancer and was recovering from surgery. I entered a chess tournament for middle school students in the city. My father helped by donating chess sets and driving a team from my school to Norwood School where the tournament was held. At least 20 tables were set up in the school gym. I played four games and lost every one. The photographer for the city newspaper took a picture of my serious face staring at the chess game I was losing. My picture dominated the article in the paper. The winner of the tournament was barely mentioned. Forty years later, my mother told me that, because of the large picture, she always believed that I had won. To what did I owe this publicity? I was the only girl in the "annual schoolboy's chess tournament."



In 1968, my 12-year-old brother, Jack, entered the Junior Section of the Hamilton City Chess Tournament. It was held at the YMCA where the chess club met every Friday night at 8:00 p.m. Of all of us, Jack truly had the chess gene which my father recognized and nurtured. When Jack was younger and my father healthier, they sometimes walked to the YMCA to play chess after Shabbat dinner.

This tournament was played with chess clocks. After a move the player hit the clock, stopping his clock and starting the opponent's. Both sides had 30 minutes. If one player ran out of time, he lost the game; but his opponent must be the one to announce the win.

Jack had advanced to the final round. All the other sections of the tournament had finished by then and many other players wandered over to watch this game. Jack and his 12-year-old opponent Frank Ficco made their moves in a heartbeat, hitting their chess clocks triumphantly - but Jack had paused in a few places and his clock was running out. In fact, it would run out before the end of the game.

My father's acting triumph almost 20 years earlier was on his mind. Jack stepped up his intensity, forcing his opponent to concentrate even harder on the board in front of him. He continued to hit his clock with increasing fierceness and played on for six moves past the end of his time. He declared "Check - and mate." His opponent, demoralized, lay his king down on the board. At this point, one of the older guys leaned over and told poor Frank to look at the clock. Frank complained bitterly to the judges, but it was too late. Jack was declared the winner. That night he took his trophy to the hospital where my father lay, his cancer spreading, inoperable.



In his hospital room, when possible, my father entertained his guests. The Orthodox rabbi came to discuss philosophy with my atheist father, sometimes bumping into the Reform rabbi. People from his work place, the Hamilton Social Planning Council, came seeking advice. The dean of the new School of Social Work at McMaster came to discuss university issues. My older brother, Len, a musician, visited late at night after his gigs. One night my father suggested playing chess. In the middle of the game, a complicated series of trades left Len with a pawn advantage. He protected his small lead, advanced his pawn, and turned it into a queen. A few moves later and the win was certain. He beat his father for the first time in his life. He left the hospital walking on air. If he could beat his father in chess, he could do anything.

Twenty years later, Len was teaching his three-year-old daughter to count.

He knew the steps of her number learning and what the next lesson would be. An awareness seized him. His father taught him chess. He knew the steps of his chess learning and what every new lesson would be. Len thought, "Even in his weakened state, even on pain killers, he knew chess beyond anything I knew when I was 17." Len's chess was plodding and competent, not inspired and visionary.

Len realized that in the hospital that night, a few months before his father died, Sid Blum had lost in order to give him a gift of confidence which would carry him through the many fatherless years ahead.



I put aside my plodding, competent chess for other distractions that would light my way through my fatherless years; yet I am still drawn to chess pieces and chess players. In their presence, I become a child receiving a few moments of my father's attention, learning to mate with a king and two rooks.

Chess may be about aggression and war on a 64-square world, but those 64 squares hold the stories of my family. Our stories illustrate the family traits that our genes enable and only through stories can we outlive death.

This story was put together from the chess memories of my parents, uncles, and brothers. The parts of this story that take place in Poland were originally written by Sophie Katz and adapted here with permission. The story is dedicated to my aunt, Sophie Katz, of blessed memory.