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## Bobby Fischer's Chess Genius, Madness, Shown in Sundance Movie

By Rick Warren - Jan 24, 2011

While flying to Utah for the 2008 [Sundance Film Festival](#), documentary filmmaker Liz Garbus read the [New York Times](#) obituary on chess legend Bobby Fischer.

“I immediately decided to make a movie about him,” Garbus recalled. “I love chess and he was such a fascinating person.”

Three years later, Garbus's “[Bobby Fischer Against the World](#)” is making its world premiere at Sundance in Park City.

The captivating film, which will air on [HBO](#) in July, follows Fischer from his lonely childhood in Brooklyn, New York, to his death from [kidney failure](#) in Iceland at the age of 64.

It covers Fischer's meteoric rise to become the youngest chess grandmaster, his historic 1972 victory over Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland, his indictment for defying a United Nations embargo to play a 1992 rematch in [Yugoslavia](#), and his descent into madness.

Garbus tells the story through archival footage, photographs, letters and interviews with chess champions and Fischer's friends, including talk-show host Dick Cavett and photographer Harry Benson.

Garbus, a 40-year-old [New Yorker](#) whose husband Dan Cogan is a producer with three films at Sundance, spoke with me on a deck outside a Park City art gallery that was showing intimate photos Benson took of Fischer in the early 1970s.

### Soviet Machine

Warner: What made the 1972 match against Spassky such a cultural phenomenon? It was such a big deal that it was televised by PBS and ABC's “Wide World of Sports.”

Garbus: The [Cold War](#) played a significant role. The [Soviet Union](#) dominated chess and used it to

demonstrate its intellectual superiority over the West. Then here comes this Brooklyn boy who taught himself chess in his apartment to take on the Soviet machine.

Warner: Give me an idea of how much attention it got?

Garbus: It was the highest-rated PBS show ever and “Wide World of Sports” interrupted prime-time programs with updates. They did a survey of bars in New York City, and more people were following the chess match than the New York Mets.

Warner: Fischer grew up not knowing his biological father and was left alone at 16 when his mother moved out of their apartment. How much did that scar him?

Garbus: Bobby obviously didn't have a great home life, but I also think he had a disposition for a personality disorder. He became obsessed with chess, and nothing else really mattered to him.

## **Mental Illness**

Warner: Three years after winning the world championship against Spassky, he forfeited it by refusing to defend his title and retired from competitive chess. Is that when he started to decline mentally?

Garbus: Bobby was singularly focused on chess, and when that was gone, his life didn't make much sense to him anymore. He had no support system -- no close friends, relatives or loves -- and he drifted into mental illness.

Warner: When Fischer was a fugitive living overseas, he made a lot of anti-Semitic and anti-American statements, including praise of the 9/11 terrorists. Was that him speaking or his mental illness?

Garbus: I don't believe Bobby hated Jewish people. He was Jewish himself. He was suffering from paranoid psychosis.

Warner: Your original editor, Karen Schmeer, was killed a year ago when she was hit by a car speeding from a drugstore robbery.

Garbus: I was here at Sundance and Karen was in New York editing the film. In the last note she sent me, she said she had a dream that she was hanging out at Sundance with Bobby Fischer. I just wish she was here to see how it turned out.

(Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)