



**Address by  
the President of Iceland,  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,  
at the conference:  
THE MATCH OF THE CENTURY  
10th August 2002**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few weeks ago, the guests at a reception in New York were talking out on the balcony when all of a sudden the conversation turned to Iceland. “Ah yes, Reykjavík!” said a middle-aged businessman, turning to me: “Reykjavík! That’s where Fischer and Spassky played, with the whole of America watching. The match in Reykjavík was the biggest event in the news when I was young.”

For a good while the talk was of this event, and its importance was clear to everyone. Most of us recalled personal memories from those days, and one elderly guest, a man well known in business and musical circles, described how his friend, Henry Kissinger, had been involved in the events surrounding the championship.

That night in the warm evening air of New York, the 1972 World Chess Championship in Reykjavík came vividly to life in the minds of the guests, and it was obvious that they looked back on it as one of the most memorable events of the last century.

I doubt if it is possible to name many events which 30 years later come back so vividly and awaken personal memories so that the experience suddenly unites a group of people who had met by chance at a party. Each and every one of us had our memories of Fischer and Spassky, and those memories were so dear that we experienced in them a common bond of friendship.

The championship in Reykjavík was not only important in the history of Iceland and of chess. It was, without a doubt, one of those events that gave the twentieth century a special colour and became symbolic of a new era, crystallising complex forces into a single emblem.

It is difficult for us, so long afterwards to imagine how profound the chill was at the height of the Cold War, and how many forms the rivalry between the great powers took in those days. It was not confined to the fields of military build-up and the arms race, or to political dominance and economic control; it spilled over into culture and the arts, into sport and anything that could arouse public interest. The struggle for global supremacy cut like a knife through thick and thin, and most areas of life were divided into pigeon-hole definitions and opposing groupings. And in addition there loomed the menace of atomic weapons and the threat of total destruction that could be unleashed if the limits were overstepped.

It was in this minefield that two young men and a chessboard in the Laugardalshöll stadium in Reykjavík suddenly became the focus of the tensions that had ensnared the whole world.

The mental stamina and the skills of the young players were seen as symbols of the forces at the command of the great nuclear powers; it seemed that the USA and the Soviet Union had come face to face across the chessboard in Iceland and that their differences were to be played out in our country.

It must have required almost superhuman strength from Spassky and Fischer to bear the burden that was placed on their shoulders, knowing that the honour of the superpowers was at stake. They were not just two young men with extraordinary talent; they became representatives of the forces in the great struggle that had set its stamp on the whole world.

The preparations for the match, with the opening postponed again and again, raised the tension still further, and so great was the excitement and anticipation during the times when Spassky was waiting for his opponent on the stage in Reykjavík that we can still hear the pins drop in our minds.

Reykjavík was certainly a bold choice as a venue for the World Chess Championship: never before had our small nation hosted such an international gathering. The Fischer-Spassky match was the first event to bring Iceland into the world news, and it was vital that everything should go smoothly. Later came the summit meetings between presidents Nixon and Pompidou, Reagan and Gorbatsjov, and recently the historical treaty between NATO and Russia.

But the chess match was the very first of this kind, and the Icelandic organisers had no previous models or experience to go by. Many people made vital contributions, and the result of their combined efforts brought considerable credit to Iceland.

I should like here to single out two Icelandic names for special mention because they shouldered particular responsibilities and the way they played their parts was crucial in the overall success.

The first is Guðmundur Arnlaugsson, a highly respected figure in the Icelandic chess world, who together with Lothar Schmid was the judge of the championship. His integrity, personality and sound common sense proved invaluable when the pressure was on. The second is Guðmundur G. Þórarinnsson, who like the competitors themselves was young in years, but showed determination, ambition and firmness, and played a vital role as chairman of the Icelandic Chess Federation in making the bold idea of holding the championship in Iceland a reality.

I would like to honour the memory of Guðmundur Arnlaugsson with respect and gratitude, and to offer Guðmundur G. Þórarinnsson congratulations on his skilful and successful leadership at a crucial time in the history of chess and the role he played in ensuring Iceland a place in world history.

It is a particular honour and pleasure to have Boris Spassky here with us on this special occasion, and I should like to thank him for the loyalty and friendship he has always shown towards Iceland.

He has for decades had thousands of admirers in our country, and young chess players today still take him as their model.

It is easier for us now than it was at the time to appreciate how magnanimously Boris Spassky behaved under the stress of the competition and how colossal a burden he had to bear. Besides his genius at the chessboard, he demonstrated personal qualities that can perhaps be best summed up in words used about the heroes of the Icelandic sagas : “Hann var og er drengur góður.” – He was, and is, a man of honour.

Bobby Fischer is unfortunately not with us today, but our thoughts go out to him, and we sincerely hope that in the future he will be able to enjoy the same freedom as the rest of us; nothing short of this is fitting for one of the most brilliant men the United States has produced. I treasure the memory of a telephone conversation I had with him about two years ago.

All of a sudden, without warning, he phoned me at my office. Some time before I had mentioned the Fischer-Spassky match in an interview with an American radio station, and Fischer had heard this on his computer in Japan. We had quite a long talk about all sorts of things, the match in 1972 and our mutual friend Sæmundur Pálsson, my neighbour in

Seltjarnarnes who was his bodyguard and companion during those historic days thirty years ago.

While Bobby Fischer achieved the formal victory they were really both the winners of this unique championship, and that is how it has been remembered all over the world. For us and everyone else who remembers those days, it will always be named after both contestants: “the Fischer-Spassky match in Reykjavík.”

I also want to thank Lothar Schmid for being with us today and for his crucial role in guiding the turbulent events around the championship to a successful conclusion. Your name will invariably be linked to one of the most important and fascinating events in the history of Iceland and of chess in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hereafter, for as long as chess is played, which it will surely be as long as there are human beings to play it, experts and amateurs will continue to examine the games that were played here in Reykjavík thirty years ago. Thus, Iceland will always be associated with one of the most famous events in the history of chess. This is an honour of which we have always been proud, just as we were grateful for the opportunity to host the championship.

But for us the match had another, even more important dimension. Just over a quarter of a century after the foundation of our republic, this small island nation in the north showed that it was capable of hosting an event of international significance, and that it deserved the trust that had been placed in it.

Thus, the match made an important contribution to our sense of independence, demonstrating that even though it was a small country with limited economic resources, Iceland could play a part in international events that attracted world attention.

It was, and still is, of great value for Iceland to play such a part, and I would like to thank all those who were responsible for making the championship such a success. You boosted Iceland’s confidence; and this was no small thing at a time when we were in a bitter struggle over the right to control the fishing grounds so as to secure the economic basis for the fishing villages and towns around our coast. The chess championship took place at a crucial time in Iceland’s struggle for economic independence and gave us optimism and strength at the moment when we needed it most.

While the Fischer-Spassky chess match will always occupy a special position in Iceland's history, we also know that it is remembered in a positive light by millions of people all over the world.

I began by mentioning a discussion in New York two weeks ago, and there are many such stories that I could relate. For example, I remember a taxi-driver who drove me from the airport in Washington on my visit there about twenty years ago; he beamed as soon as I mentioned Reykjavík and talked solidly of nothing but Spassky and Fischer, Spassky and Fischer, all the way to my hotel near the Congress building. And the Indian official who was far more interested in talking to me about Fischer and Spassky than the international issues on the agenda of our meeting in the sweltering heat of New Delhi.

Most of us have many such stories that show how the match between Fischer and Spassky became part of the living experience of people all over the world, one of those events that unite us and make the world a village; at the same time extending our horizons.

Naturally, Fischer and Spassky were the heroes of the day, and their names will always rightly be famous. But they gave the rest of us a share in a marvellous adventure, and it is fitting on this anniversary occasion that we should thank them for that splendid gift.