



International master Eric Rosen

PAWN AGAIN

As World Chess Day advances, **Beatrice Sayers** enjoys encounters with players of all levels

Beth Harmon (Anya Taylor-Joy) checkmates DL Townes (Jewish actor Jacob Fortune-Lloyd) in *The Queen's Gambit*

The FourCorner chess community in Clerkenwell

The people of the book have an undoubted affinity with the royal game: of the first 13 undisputed world champions, from Wilhelm Steinitz in 1886 to Garry Kasparov in 1985, more than half were Jewish. And it's likely *The Queen's Gambit* influenced us no less than it did the rest of the UK, where chess clubs reported a surge in attendance as the country emerged from the pandemic, some of them new players taking inspiration from the 2020 Netflix mini-series.

With 20 July established by the International Chess Federation and by the United Nations as World Chess Day, it's time to celebrate and explore this connection.

Chess was popular among Jews as long ago as the 12th century, according to Israel Abrahams' book *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*. The game could certainly be played on Shabbat: Maimonides specifically allowed it, on the proviso that no money changed hands.

Five centuries later, there were Jewish objections to playing the game on the basis that it was a waste of time, and that "study of the law would be a more efficient mental tonic".

However, the leading player of the 19th century, the American lawyer Paul Morphy (not Jewish), proved these pursuits aren't mutually exclusive.

Alongside Morphy's name in *The Queen's Gambit* are references to many Jewish grandmasters of the 20th century, including Miguel Najdorf, Mikhail Botvinnik and Reuben Fine.

One Jewish player who wasn't mentioned was Bobby Fischer. The American, who became a recluse for 20 years after winning the world championship in 1972, uttered over many years a series of shockingly antisemitic comments, idolising Hitler and denying the Holocaust.

Fischer also dismissed female players' abilities. *The Queen's Gambit* appears to have turned the tables on him: many see him as the inspiration for the protagonist, Beth Harmon – though this is something Walter Tevis, author of the book on which the film is based, has denied.

Top-level female Jewish players include the three Polgár sisters from Hungary: Susan is the first woman to have earned the grandmaster title, and her younger sister, Judit, is considered the strongest female player in history.

Eric Rosen, the 28-year-old international master from Illinois – "barmitzvahed", as he

puts it – rejects the idea that Jews in general seem to be good at chess.

He says: "I think part of the reason a significant percentage of the greatest chess players in recent history have Jewish backgrounds may be that Jewish culture values hard work and education. These qualities are particularly important to attain success in chess."

Back at amateur level, the growth in online chess during Covid lockdowns led later to a rise in outdoor 'over the board' communities. But what sort of Jews are keen on the game played with two bishops, and with a king whose head is topped by a Christian cross? "Although it's often seen as a remote activity for introverts, I've made many friends and acquaintances through the game," says Josh Avigdor, a 20-year-old student at Durham University. "I prefer playing over the board than online as it's more social."

Josh first got into chess in the sixth form. "I learnt mostly through friends showing me tactics and openings and I also watched a lot of lessons on YouTube."

Lihu, 16, born in the UK to Israeli parents, has been playing for 18 months and finds it addictive. "I would play a few hours a day

during online schooling," he confesses. More recently he has begun playing at FourCorner, an over-the-board community in London that meets twice a week.

Daniel Adani, a 35-year-old Tel Aviv lawyer, has been a chess enthusiast since he was 14 and an uncle taught him the rules. "I play mostly socially with people or online. Every time we go camping with friends we bring a board."

What do these enthusiasts enjoy about chess? "That every game is a different world," says Daniel. "It's never the same."

"I really enjoy the complexities of it," says Lihu. "I also like how there are no age boundaries. A six-year-old could be at the same level as a 50-year-old... it makes it a comfortable environment for all."

The challenge is what attracts Josh: "I like having something difficult to really concentrate on and chess is exactly that."

In the early 1900s in Russia there was a revealing joke in circulation: one Jew is a banker, two Jews are a chess match and three Jews are an orchestra. However we feel about that particular saying, Jews are still enjoying the game as much as ever.