

All Rise

A PROFILE OF THE HONORABLE GEORGE N. LEIGHTON

By Dr. Tim Redman | Photos by Betsy Dynako



I TRAVELED TO CHICAGO IN APRIL TO present the winner of the Kasparov Chess Foundation's National Girls Championship with a \$105,000 scholarship to attend The University of Texas at Dallas and to interview George Leighton for this profile. I invited him to help me present the award but he demurred. "Tim," he said, "in our days at the Chicago Chess Club if someone mentioned a \$105,000 scholarship for girls' chess, they would have undergone a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation." I tried to work him into the award ceremony for the champion, Alexandra V. Botez, anyway.

Addressing several hundred students, parents, and coaches, I said: "I spent a pleasant Friday afternoon with an old friend, George Leighton. George is an avid chess player. He is also the first black person appointed to the federal bench in Illinois, as judge of the United States District Court." Many in the audience nodded. We have made a great deal of progress towards racial equality in this country, a fact easily confirmed by simply looking around the room.

I continued: "I invited George Leighton to participate in today's award ceremony, but he had to work over the weekend at his law office on a pressing case." Many more in the audience nodded. These days, we all have to work long hours just to stay on top of things. These chess parents, who sacrifice so their children can play chess understood perfectly.

"George Leighton is 98 years old." At this point there was an audible gasp from those present. "Chess keeps you sharp," I finished.

Chess Life caught up with George at his office at the prestigious law firm of Neal and Leroy on LaSalle Street, Chicago's equiv-

alent of Wall Street, where he is "Of Counsel." George has kept up with his chess. He had the recent issue of the magazine and asked questions about Hikaru Nakamura.

George Neves Leitao was born on October 22, 1912 in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was the son of two Portuguese nationals, natives of the Cape Verde Islands, a 14-island archipelago off the coast of Africa that was a Portuguese colony for more than 400 years. His name was Anglicized to Leighton. Raised in New Bedford and on Cape Cod, he finished sixth grade but then dropped out because he had to work in cranberry bogs managed by his father to help support the family.

Mary A. Hayden, who ran a local boys' club, taught him the rudiments of chess. "It was the greatest gift I have ever been given," George told me. He has since memorialized her help by making significant financial contributions to chess in her honor. He also later became active in supporting the Chicago Boys' Clubs to help repay what he had received from her. As a youth, after work, George read extensively, attended night school, and studied in Works Projects Administration classes in 1934-35. The Cape Verdean community in New Bedford, under the leadership of the attorney Alfred J. Gomes, created a competitive scholarship, \$200 for initial college tuition to the top two essayists. George was one of the winners.

Without a high-school diploma, George Leighton was admitted to Washington, D.C.'s famous Howard University as an unclassified student. To make money to support his education, George worked for a time peeling potatoes in a District of Columbia restaurant. On St. Patrick's Day in 1936, early in the morning, he reached into the bag for the next potato and could-

n't peel it. It was a rock the size of a potato. George kept it and it has served as his talisman ever since, to remind him of how hard he had to work to succeed. Enclosed in Plexiglas, it is still on his desk. After four straight years on the dean's honor roll at Howard, he was awarded a degree *magna cum laude*. He received a scholarship to attend Harvard Law School and, after war service, graduated in 1946. George passed the bar in Massachusetts and, after arriving in Chicago, in Illinois.

Merely listing George's professional accomplishments and accolades would take several pages. He helped found one of the largest predominantly black law firms in the United States: Moore, Ming, and Leighton. He is a life member of the NAACP. He argued a number of constitutionally important cases advancing the cause of civil rights in this country in the '50s and '60s. He was elected judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County in 1964, assigned as judge of the Illinois Appellate Court in 1969, and elected to that office in 1970. President Gerald Ford nominated him as judge of the United States District Court and he was confirmed by the United States Senate in 1976. He was for many years a professor at John Marshall Law School and has been awarded five honorary doctorates. In 2005, the United States Post Office in New Bedford was named in his honor. Most recently, on May 6, 2011, he was given the prestigious Cardinal Bernadin Award from the Chicago Legal Clinic for "action on behalf of social justice, advocacy for the less advantaged, and passionate promotion of the ideal that we are our brother's keepers."

I wrote to Harold J. Winston, former USCF president, current chair of the U.S.

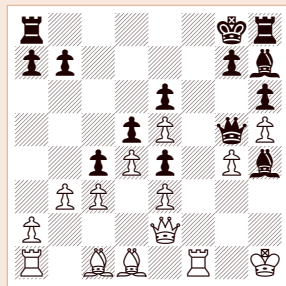
Here Comes the Judge

FIDE Master **Leonid Kaushansky** arrived in Chicago in the early 1980s from the Soviet Union and started winning left and right. And then he was paired with Judge Leighton in the first round of the Greater Chicago Open, on March 27, 1982.

Queen's Pawn Opening: Unusual lines (D00)

*George N. Leighton
Leonid Kaushansky*

1. d4 d5 2. e3 Nf6 3. Bd3 c5 4. c3 Nc6 5. f4 Bg4 6. Nf3 c4 7. Bc2 Ne4 8. 0-0 f5 9. Qe1 e6 10. Ne5 Nxe5 11. fxe5 Be7? 12. Ba4+ Kf8 13. Nd2 Bh4 14. g3 Bg5 15. Kg2 Kg8 16. Nxe4 fxe4 17. Bd1 Bf5? 18. h4 Be7 19. h5! h6 20. g4 Bh4 21. Qe2 Qg5 22. Kh1 Bh7 23. b3!



After 23. b3

23. ... cxb3 24. axb3 g6 25. Ba3 Kg7 26. Rf6 Rae8 27. Qb5! Rhf8 28. Bxf8+ Rxf8 29. Qd7+, Black resigned.



A 'potato' that couldn't be peeled.



Judge Leighton playing the author.

Chess Trust, and a prominent Chicago public defender, for his comments about George. Harold summarized it nicely: "I have attended several legal get-togethers in the last three years at which Judge Leighton was honored. He is greatly respected by all in the criminal defense community because he was a pioneer fighter for the rights of defendants to fair trials as well as being an excellent and fair judge.

I first got to know George Leighton during the mid-sixties at the Chicago Chess Club, the city's only seven-day-a-week club, founded in 1870. Its quarters were in a fading commercial building at 64 East Van Buren Street in Chicago's Loop (downtown). The club included many eminent Chicagoans and a few characters. Besides George, the former category included Wiley Clements, an insurance executive; Norbert Leopoldi, an importer; Norman Perrin, a professor of theology at the University of Chicago; Phil LeCornu, a businessman who later left his estate to the U.S. Chess Federation; Dr. Eugene

Martinovsky, a psychiatrist and chess master; along with a goodly number of other masters. The characters included Danny Fischeimer, who divided his time between Chicago, where he was a slum landlord, and Las Vegas, where he gambled, and Walter Grombacher, a hypochondriac who would insist on describing his symptoms to Dr. Martinovsky and who boasted that he had been the only Jewish member of the Hitler Youth.

George and I shared some laughs recalling some of these folks. He was genuinely fond of Richard Verber, who was Chicago Chess Club president for many years. Richard, a Falstaffian man, was one of the nation's top players (he turned down an invitation to the U.S. Closed Championship one year) and a top organizer. Richard organized the record-breaking U.S. Open in August 1973 and put on what was the nation's first "chessathon," though we didn't have a name for it at the time.

A lifelong Democrat and a supporter of

Mayor Richard J. Daley and John F. Kennedy (and later Barack Obama), George had the clout to secure the Chicago Civic Center Plaza in the Loop (now Daley Plaza) to hold an all-day chess simultaneous, where the city's best players, including George, played all comers over the course of a work day, 2,900 in all. Due to various circumstances, the Chicago Chess Club moved to another Loop location, then to the Near North Side, and then to the basement of the Gas Light Tavern on North Halsted Street. At that point, George stopped attending. I asked him why and he told me that as a judge, he could not be seen in a tavern, even if he was just passing through to get to the chess club.

I was a student in Rome in 1970-71 and I heard that George and his wife, Virginia (he called her "Ma"), were going to come as tourists. I arranged with Italian friends to take them on a "Rome by Night" car tour of all the lighted monuments in the city. I was surprised that George understood our Italian, due, he explained,

to the fact that his parents were Portuguese nationals. Following his parents, George is a devout Roman Catholic. He has two daughters, five grandchildren, and, three great-grandchildren.

At one point, George's passion for chess exposed him to risk. Like all serious Chicago chess players, in summer he would play at the chess pavilion at North Avenue Beach. While he was presiding over a trial of FALN (Puerto Rican) terrorists, a group of FBI agents visited George in his chambers during a trial recess. They told him that they had credible evidence that the FALN was going to assassinate him at North Avenue Beach that weekend while he was playing chess. He stayed away but then upset all sides of the criminal case by giving the older indicted members long prison terms but granting probation to the youngest, an exception which anticipated by many decades what we now know about brain development in males through their mid-twenties.

My next contact with George was when

he phoned my university office offering to help Bobby Fischer with his legal problems (Fischer had just been detained in Japan). Knowing now what I do about George's legendary legal defense skills, I have no doubt that he could have helped exonerate Fischer. But the difficulty of contacting Fischer was followed by what seemed to be a fair resolution and they caused me to let the matter drop. And then, two months ago, I read about George in *The New York Times*. The columnist ran into him shortly after Illinois halted the death penalty. Asked for his reaction, George replied "It's civilization." George had defended many indigent prisoners on death row.

On Friday, April 8, Betsy and I met at his law office for the beginning of the interview and photos. We then re-joined to the Neal and Leroy conference room for a game of speed chess and further photos. I was overconfident about our game. Years ago, I had finally learned how to meet George's inevitable Stonewall (d2-d4, c2-c3, e2-e3, f2-

f4) with a response challenging command of the black squares (... g7-g6, ... Bf8-g7, ... d7-d6, ... e7-e5). But George changed openings to the more conventional d4 and c4. Unprepared, seeing his mounting attack, and knowing we were both hungry, I offered and he accepted a draw. George has kept up his chess using his Mephisto computer.

He took me to Chicago's famous Italian Village in the Loop. Despite the fact that it was after 3 pm and a sign in the entry way directed all diners arriving after 2:30 pm to the second-floor restaurant, he strode confidently into the fancier first-floor restaurant and we were seated immediately. He is known there. We both had pasta and a drink and continued our reminiscences. George had to leave but I lingered and got into conversation with our waiter. "Il signore ha un grande cuore," he said, "un grande cuore." The gentleman has a big heart, a big heart. ■

Learn more in a five-minute video: search "George N. Leighton" on YouTube.