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News and Updates

“The Jewish mind, the Jewish game and the Jewish Olympics”: The history of chess competitions in Maccabiah

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By **Dr. Shlomo Kandelshein**

Background

The Maccabiah Games, held every four years in Israel since 1932, with the participation of many Jewish athletes from around the world, feature chess as one of their many sports.

The idea of the Maccabiah is to hold a “Jewish Olympics” in Israel: an Olympics in which Jewish athletes participate as representatives of the diaspora. The aim of the event is to strengthen the connection between these international Jewish sportspeople and the State of Israel, with the hope that some athletes will immigrate to the country.

The game of chess has long been considered “the Jewish game”, able to clearly express the power of the “Jewish mind”. Most of the world champions in chess have been Jews, for example. Moreover, the game also perfectly embodies the ideals of the Maccabiah, and contributes greatly to making the event what it is.

In this article, we present the history of chess events in the Maccabiah, starting with the second Maccabiah in 1935, held in Eretz Israel, when chess was first officially included in the Games.

1935 – The second Maccabiah

In 1935, the “Eretz Israel Chess Federation” (later the Israeli Chess Federation) was established, a historic event for the beginning of organised chess in the country. In the same year, the association organised an international chess competition in Israel for the first time, held in Tel Aviv as part of the Maccabiah Games.

The winner was the master Moshe Blas (1896-1971), who scored 7.5 points out of 9, ahead of the late Yosef Porat (Freder) and David Enoch, with 7 points each.



(<http://www.maccabiahchess.co.il/wp-content/uploads/1-תמונה-2-כתבה-MOSHE-BLASS.png>)

Moshe Blass was one of the leaders in Polish chess, having been the Warsaw champion several times and a member of the Polish national team at the 1928 Hague Chess Olympiads.

In 1931, Blass immigrated to Israel. Several years later, in both 1935 and 1937, he won the Tel Aviv Championships, and participated in the Israeli Championships three times (gaining 2nd place in 1936, 4th place in 1945, and not placing but participating in 1959).

Writing on the winner of the Maccabiah competition, Mendel Marmoresh, one of the founders of chess in Israel, noted: "This week the Maccabiah international competition ended with the brilliant victory of the famous player from Warsaw, Moshe Blass.

Among the other participants in the international competition at the Maccabiah were the international masters Moshe Czerniak, Josef Dobkin, and Victor Winz, as well as the masters Glass and Vitom from the "Hakoac" (The power) club Vienna and the Zilberschutz brothers from Luxembourg".

The historic competition in the Maccabiah led to another landmark event in the life of chess in the land of Israel: the chess team of Eretz Israel participating in the Warsaw Olympics for the first time, in 1935. Indeed, the players making up this first Olympic team were selected on the basis of their achievements in the Maccabiah competition: Porat, Enoch, Dobkin, Vinz and Czerniak (in alphabetical order). However, the British forbid Moshe Blass, the winner of the competition, from travelling to Warsaw because they considered him to be an illegal immigrant.

Writing on the topic, Moshe Czerniak commented that: "Following the appearance of the pioneering idea of the Maccabiah competitions, and with the rise in enthusiasm, a bold idea takes shape: a sensuous jump right into the lion's den – the Olympic Games, which are about to open in Warsaw in the coming month.

Blass, who is still considered by the authorities to be an illegal immigrant, was absent from the delegation, despite his results in the Maccabiah" (Moshe Czerniak, "Israel at the Chess Olympics", Rotem Publishing, 1979).

A year later, in 1936, the first Israeli championship was held, and won by Moshe Czerniak.

The chess competition in the second Maccabiah was a first step, but, from then onwards, no chess tournaments were held in the Maccabiah for 42 years. They were renewed at the 10th Maccabiah in 1977 by Almog Burstein, who was the chairman of the chess committee and the director of the competitions at the Maccabiahs of 1977, 1981 and 1985.

Since 1989, Moshe Slav (also later the chairman of the Israeli Chess Federation) has been the chairman of the Chess Committee and the director of competitions at the Maccabiahs of 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and now 2022.

1977 – The 10th Maccabiah

64 players participated in the chess tournaments, which were held at Bnei Brit hall in Tel Aviv.

The competitions included a team tournament with 10 teams, each participating on 4 boards. Israel won with 31 points, ahead of England with 29.5, and Israel B and the Netherlands with 22 each.

An international youth tournament was also held, with 12 players participating, in which Michael Road (USA) and Mordechai Shrentzel (Israel) were the joint winners with 9 points each.

1981 – The 11th Maccabiah

The format of the competitions was the same as the previous Maccabiahs, and they were held at the Avia Hotel in Yehud.

In the team tournament, 4 teams participated in a double round. Israel won with 19.5 points, ahead of Venezuela with 14, Argentina with 10, and South Africa with 4.5.

Ofer Bruk was the victor of the Maccabiah youth championship and Israel Gelfer (later chairman of the Israeli Chess Federation and vice president of the FIDE) won the blitz championship.

1985 – The 12th Maccabiah

36 players participated in the tournament, which was held at the Sinai Hotel in Tel Aviv, in 9 Swiss rounds.

The winner was Master Moshe Cnaan, who finished ahead of the youth champion Ronen Lev, after a tiebreaker in which both players each scored 7.5 points out of 9, ahead of Eduardo Borsinik (Argentina), Julio Bulbuchan (Venezuela), and Stephen Pearson, all with 6 points each.

1989 – The 13th Maccabiah

60 players participated in the event, which was once again held at the Sinai Hotel in Tel Aviv and played in 9 Swiss rounds. The winner of the year's youth category was Ilan Manor, later a grandmaster and member of the Israeli national team, scoring 7.5 points out of 9, ahead of Ronen Lev and Sergio Marklock (Argentina), with 6.5 each.

Peter Skelly (Hungary) won the blitz championship.

1993 – The 14th Maccabiah

The chess competition was played in an invitational format this time (a closed tournament) in the 7th category of the FIDE. The winner was 17-year-old Michael Oratovsky, a former student at the Kasparov Chess School, who had immigrated to Israel two years earlier (and is now a grandmaster).

Oratovsky scored 6.5 points out of 9 and finished ahead of Ilan Manor with 6.5 (higher tiebreaker) and Yaakov Stisis with 6.

Among the participants was also the famous Russian grandmaster Yuri Averbach, author of various notable chess books and an international arbiter.

1997 – The 15th Maccabiah

136 chess players from 17 countries came to the chess games to participate in four international competitions, held in Jerusalem and Zichron Yaacov.

The Maccabiah Games were overshadowed by the great tragedy of the collapse of the Maccabiah Bridge. This disaster did not leave the chess community untouched, with two chess players from Australia injured in the tragic event.

The winner of the competition, Alexander Khalifman, was one of the top chess players in the world at the time (Russian Champion 1996, World Champion according to FIDE 1999-2000), and scored 6 points out of 9, ahead of Alex Caspi with 6, Daniel Friedman (Latvia) with 5.5, and Boris Kantsler and Emil Sutovsky with 5 each.

Among the participants was also the grandmaster Leonid Yudasin, who participated in the World Championship Candidates.

In the closed competition for young masters, Ofer Bruk won with 5.5 points out of 9, ahead of Netanel Ribshtein 5.5 (with a lower tie-break score), Michael Roiz, Maxim Milavsky and Eduard Grinshpun, all with 5 each.

In the international open competition (52 players), Tapper (Slovakia) and Grunberg (Romania) won with 6.5 points each out of 8.

In the youth category, Ruben Felgaer (Argentina) and Evgeny Postny shared first place with 6.5 each out of 8, ahead of Igor Bitensky with 6 points.

2001 – The 16th Maccabiah

72 players participated in four different tournaments in Netanya.

In the main competition (10), the grandmaster Evgeny Alekseev (Russia) and Konstantin Lerner shared a joint victory with 6.5 points out of 9, ahead of Michael Roiz and Vitali Golod, each with 6.

In the secondary competition (10) Roman Bar won with 6.5 points out of 9, ahead of Michael Schur (Azerbaijan) Uriel Zak and Sergey Erenburg, with 6 each.

Arie Axelrod and Avraham Gutzeit were the joint winners of the Open Championship (38) with 5.5 points out of 7 each, and in the youth competition (14) Yehuda Gamri won with 6 points out of 7.

2005 – The 17th Maccabiah

80 players participated in the Maccabiah competitions in Jerusalem, which also included a super tournament with 6 world leading players.

In the super tournament (6), Yevgeny Najer (Russia) and Ilia Smirin shared a joint victory with 3.5 points out of 5 each.

In the GM category (10), Grandmaster Yaakov Zilberman won with 8 points out of 9, ahead of Shay Porat 7, Ranko Szuhaneck (Romania) 6.5, Mihail Grunberg (Romania) 6.

In the international master tournament (10), Alex Caspi finished first with 6.5 points out of 9, ahead of Alexander Alexikov (Ukraine) with 6, Sofiko Kvirikashvili (Georgia) with 5.5, and Philip Zisman with 5.

In the open tournament (54), Ilya Rocko (Latvia) was the victor with 7.5 points out of 9, ahead of Yosef Rozensky, Gennady Gelman, Julius Telsin and Vitaly Neimer with 6.5 points each.

2009 – The 18th Maccabiah

The Maccabiah Games were held in Netanya and included a super tournament with the participation of 13 grandmasters, who competed at rapid and blitz speeds. Closed competitions were held in these Games as well.

In the rapid tournament, Evgeny Najer (Russia) won with 9.5 points out of 12, ahead of Ian Nepomniachtchi (Russia) with 8.5 and Alexander Belyavsky (Slovenia) with 7. In the grandmaster category competition (10), Andre Diamant (Brazil) won with 6 points out of 9, placing ahead of Tamir Nabaty (currently grandmaster and Israeli champion) and Ido Porat with 5.5 points each.

In the international master category A (10) competition, Boris Kantsler won with 6.5 points out of 9, ahead of Degtyarv and Alina Kashlinskaya 5.5 with each, Avigdor Bikhovsky 5.

David Kudischewitsch, Michael Zaslavsky, Peter Gokhbat and Alex Caspi shared a joint victory, with 6 points each, in the competition for the category of international masters B (10).

In the youth competition (16), Anna Gvanceladze emerged victorious with 6.5 points out of 7 ahead of Eyal Tal and Alexei Savchenko with 5 each. The fact that the 2009 Maccabiah competitions included simultaneous games, held by Boris Gelfand in Jerusalem and Judit Polgar at the Air Force Base, gave them a special touch.

2013 – The 19th Maccabiah

171 players participated in the international Maccabiah competitions in Jerusalem and the youth competition in Netanya, which included four closed competitions, an open tournament, and a youth tournament (in Netanya).

In the grandmaster tournament A (10) , Semen Dvoiryts won with 6 points out of 9, ahead of Danny Raznikov and Alex Finkel with 5.5 each, and Victor Mikhalevsky with 5.

In the second grandmaster (10) tournament, Boris Avrukh was the victor with 6 points out of 9, ahead of Vitali Golod, Avital Boruchovsky and Maxim Novik with 5.5 each.

In the international masters tournament A (10), Marsel Efroimsky won with 6.5 points out of 9, ahead of Ofir Aharon and Gabriel Flum with 6.5 each.

In the tournament for international masters B (10), Alex Caspi won with 6 points, ahead of Omer Reshef and Shachar Gindi with 5.5 each.

In the open competition (107), Ariel Erenberg was the winner with 7.5 points out of 9, ahead of Davy D'Israel with 7.5, and Igor Petrovsky, Arkady Slonimansky and Matan Poleg with 7 each.

In the youth competition (24), Mark Kvetny won with 6.5 points out of 7 ahead of Leonid Salin 5.5, Axel Zuchowski and Moshe Friedland with 5 each.

2017 – The 20th Maccabiah

The 20th Maccabiah included 7 chess events: 4 closed international tournaments, an open tournament, a blitz tournament in Jerusalem, and a youth category in Haifa. This edition broke the record for participants set in previous Maccabiahs, with 195 players participating. It was also the strongest Maccabiah in terms of the strength of the tournaments.

In the grandmaster category A (10), GM Georg Meyer (Germany) won with 7.5 points out of 9, ahead of GM Alexander Moisenko (Ukraine) 6.5, GM Eduardas Rosentalis (Lithuania) 5.5, and IM Gabriel Flum and GM Iliia Smirin with 5.5 each.

In the second GM (10) tournament, GM Tal Baron finished first with 7 points out of 9, ahead of Anna Ushenina (Ukraine) with 6, Alon Mindlin with 5.5, and Anthony Bellaiche (France) and Victor Mikhalevsky with 5 each.

In the international master tournament A (10), Michael Pasman took first place with 7 points out of 9, ahead of Shaked Tifferet 6, Gleb Kagansky 5.5, and Nimrod Weinberg with 5.

In the international masters B (10), Roman Bar was the winner with 7 points out of 9, ahead of Alex Caspi and David Kudischewich with 6.5 each, and Dan Poleg and Arie Axelrod with 5.5 each.

In the open tournament (98), Moshe Gal won with 8 points out of 9, ahead of Yoav Milkow, Adi Fedrovsky, David Wade and Svetlana Bogdova, all with 7 each.

In the youth section (20), Joseph Zeltson finished first with 6.5 points out of 7, ahead of Paul Ezra Chambers with 6, and Daniel Svchenko, Eitan Genger and Simona Nyberg with 4.5 each.

In the blitz tournament (37), grandmaster Alex Moiseenko won with 9 points out of 11, ahead of Georg Meyer with 8, and Svetlana Bogdova with 7.5.

Two additional parallel events were held as part of the 20th Maccabiah in Jerusalem:

Nathan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, played a simultaneous game against 20 players. He won against 17 of his opponents and drew with 3.

Dr. Shlomo Kandelshein also gave a guest lecture to the participants on the subject of the connection between skills and attributes and the achievements of a chess player.

A retrospective view with future insights

The architects of the Maccabiah project, with its focus on recognising “Jewish muscles”, saw the games as, amongst other things, a way to respond to feelings of humiliation and anti-Semitism that European Jews had experienced.

It is particularly symbolic that the first chess competition in the Maccabiah was held in 1935, when a black cloud loomed over European Jewry. Today, in 2022, with the celebration of the 21st Maccabiah Games, a similarly dark cloud looms over both Jewish people in general and the Jewish diaspora in particular, in the shape of waves of anti-Semitism in Europe and around the world.

It seems that the moral voice of Eli Wiesel (Jewish journalist, writer and philosopher, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize), who has always been at the forefront of the war against anti-Semitism, is gaining momentum. His words are, undoubtedly, important to reflect on:

“I once thought that anti-Semitism was over, but today it is clear to me that it probably will not end. It may weaken, but it will continue to exist, because in different countries there is no shame in being anti-Semitic.”

There is no doubt that the idea of the integration of the “Jewish mind” and the “Jewish game” helps sustain and reinforce the Jewish Olympics- the Maccabiah Games.

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