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University of Texas at Dallas chess team's trip to Cuba is about more than the game

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HAVANA – For Magaly Spector, life itself has often felt like a game of chess.

Born here 57 years ago, the young Spector knew only the fiercest poverty. Her family, she says, was "very, very, very poor," confined to a Cuban ghetto with a common bathroom and a bucket for a shower. She was raised by a single mom, who had a seventh-grade education, and by her illiterate grandmother. Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution did nothing less than change her life. It provided her with an education, leading to a doctorate in physics. "I could not have had the opportunities I have had," she says, "without the revolution."

So each time Spector returns to Havana, the feelings are bittersweet, as they are on a humid Friday in mid-October. Spector is leading a delegation of chess players from the University of Texas at Dallas to the azure seas of her native land.

The six students include international masters and even a grandmaster, but they have nothing on Spector, who at 15 was a Cuban chess champ. On this trip, she's the queen of the board, leading an army of rooks, bishops and knights to the land she left behind.

Since 2008, Spector has served as vice president for diversity and community engagement at UTD, whose reputation for chess is an international success story. Its players have journeyed far and wide, even to China. But Spector alone is the reason they're here.

They, too, are caught up in the drama of her return. She has shared with the team her story, how she left in 1980 for political and economic reasons, surviving ocean swells for 12 hours with 200 passengers on a boat built for 50. Those fleeing included her first husband and their 8-year-old daughter.

By nightfall, with the Caribbean moon behind them, they arrived in Key West, Fla., where a new life – the next phase in her remarkable journey – loomed like the jewel of America itself.

Game of survival

For Spector, chess is a game of survival, a concept she and her travelers know all too well. The UTD team brings to Cuba not a single American-born player. They come instead from Serbia, Lithuania and Poland and share a litany of stories as harrowing as hers.

Coach Rade Milovanovic, 55, survived the ethnic hatreds of his native Bosnia, but not before paying a smuggler to free his two daughters. War held them captive and apart from their parents for two years.

With gunfire crackling in the distance, Milovanovic used chess to barter for a chicken, a sack of potatoes, cooking oil – one of the scarcest and most expensive items during the war. He even used chess to raise the \$800 to free his daughters. He and his family left Bosnia in 1998 to move to Dallas, which he knew only as the place where an assassin had murdered a U.S. president.

Milovanovic is proud of coaching the first U.S. team to play in Cuba since 1966, when the chess Olympiad came to the Hotel Habana Libre, to the same room where UTD will square off against Instituto Superior de Cultura Fisica. The Soviet Union captured the '66 Olympiad in that room, despite the U.S. sporting a ringer named Bobby Fischer.

On the wall outside, grainy black-and-white photographs show a humble Fischer asking for Castro's autograph and Fidel's partner in revolution, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, sitting at a chess board.

Spector sees the match as a mechanism for peace, not unlike the pingpong diplomacy that softened relations between the U.S. and China. Chess, she hopes, will help unite two countries whose diplomatic relations ended bitterly 50 years ago.

"Cuba has a lot to offer," she says. "There's so much culture, so much friendship and so much talent in this country. I really believe the politics shouldn't prevent the people from sharing all of the things that we can share."

U.S.-Cuba relations

On Jan. 1, 1959, Castro and Guevara seized control of Cuba from corrupt dictator Fulgencio Batista, whom they perceived as a pawn of the American government and the American Mafia. They expropriated private land and sent hundreds of corporations racing home.

Almost overnight, Cuba became a Marxist colony of America's enemy, the Soviet Union, to which Cuba would cling, financially and politically, for 30 years.

In October 1962, when Spector was a fifth-grader, cannons and anti-aircraft guns swarmed the Malecón, the seawall separating Cuba from the Gulf of Mexico. A U.S. invasion became a question of when, not if. Having discovered that nuclear warheads aimed at U.S. cities had been deployed by the Soviet Union inside Cuba, President John F. Kennedy ordered a naval blockade of all vessels approaching the island.

No duck-and-cover drill practiced in any Dallas classroom could calm the apocalyptic fear, until 13 days later, when the Soviets backed down and agreed to dismantle the missiles.

For each day since, relations between the U.S. and Cuba have hovered at Cold War tense. Despite trade with other countries, the lingering shock of a U.S.-imposed embargo remains etched on the face of Cuba, in the scars of decrepit buildings, pre-1960 American cars that sputter and cough and a children's hospital that desperately needs American medicine.

UTD administrator James A. Stallings, 62, who oversees the chess program, has flown with the team to Cuba. Stallings is a former child chess champ who graduated from Bryan Adams High School and fought in Vietnam. He, like many at UTD, sees a rapidly evolving global world, in which chess will play a role.

At a school proud of not having a football team, Tim Redman, a professor of arts and humanities, launched the chess program in 1996 as a way of forging the UTD identity. The team won national titles in 1999, 2000 and 2001. In April 2000, UTD won its first President's Cup, known as the Final Four of collegiate chess, defeating the University of California, Stanford University and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. UTD's program has shown itself to be superior to those at Ivy League schools.

Stallings and Milovanovic are bullish on importing international chess masters, who receive full academic scholarships – and who they contend are the best in the world.

"Rade and I can recruit top chess player scholars at UTD," Stallings says, "but we must then challenge them. We do so not merely at the national level but on the global stage where they will compete after they graduate."

On Saturday, the UTD delegation squeezes into an overcrowded van for the nine-mile trip to Finca Vigía, the home of writer Ernest Hemingway, who left Cuba in 1960.

Speeding past the Malecón, amid smells of smoke, fish and sea salt, the van vies for space on the narrowest of lanes with Havana's most popular vehicles, '57 Chevys and Russian-made Ladas. The van careers past Old Habana and Hemingway's favorite haunts, La Bodeguita del Medio and El Floridita, which, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of Cuba's communist revenue stream, have blossomed as tourist destinations.

At Finca Vigía, the players recognize a familiar face from Hurricane Katrina – New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin.

"Emergency preparedness," Nagin gives as the reason he's here. "The Cubans are really, really good at it. Only seven Cubans died during the last three hurricanes."

Nagin poses for pictures and chats with team captain and grandmaster Alejandro Ramirez, 21, from Costa Rica, who's amazed by the mayor's knowledge.

"He asked me about losing weight while playing chess," Ramirez says. "I can't believe he understands that. The truth is, you do lose weight. You're so focused and away from food for so long, that you actually burn calories. He knew that. I haven't met that many people who do."

'Open the mind'

Over a lunch of shrimp-laden paella in Old Habana, Spector shares more of her life story. Revolution gave her an education, she says, but education compelled her to leave. "You cannot disagree in Cuba," she says. "You can, but you pay the consequence. You open the mind, and you see much more than you did before."

The feeling extended to her first marriage, which ended in 1989. The marriage also gave her a second child, a son, who is now 26. Having moved to New Jersey in 1980, she spoke no English and sweated all day in a factory, sorting "little plastic bags." When she told her co-workers she had a master's degree in physics, they laughed. But in 1981, AT&T's Bell Labs hired Spector as a lab technician.

From 1985 to 1986, she obtained a second master's degree, in electrical engineering, and from 1989 to 1993, a doctorate in physics from Lehigh University, while running a household and working at Bell Labs. She eventually remarried.

In 1992, she suffered a tragedy that would shake her to the core. Her 20-year-old daughter, an aspiring model who had moved to Los Angeles, vanished overnight. A year later, police called Spector to tell her that they had found her daughter's remains. She had been kidnapped and murdered. Twelve years passed before police arrested the killer, who had lured his victim to a forest under the pretense of doing a photo shoot. He was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Despite the tragedy, Spector's career continued to flourish. She spent 25 years at Bell Labs, becoming a Bell Labs Fellow and landing eight critical patents that shaped the infrastructure of the Internet. She came to UTD 20 months ago to mentor "women and under-represented minorities."

Spector and her longtime friend Vivian Ramon, 46, who has lived her entire life in Cuba, worked tirelessly to bring the UTD team to Havana. Reed-thin, with a narrow, angular face and deep-set eyes, the young Ramon also emerged as a Cuban chess champ.

"When she was a girl, we brought her to my apartment to train, to discuss chess," Spector says. "Vivian and I orchestrated everything. We made this tournament happen."

What they wanted more than anything, Ramon says, was "to use chess as a vehicle for bringing people from our countries together."

At the Saturday night pre-match dinner at the Caribbean restaurant La Casona de 17, a gentle rain begins to fall. Amid claps of thunder, 24 people share friendly conversation in Spanish and English about their hopes – and then get serious.

Who will start with the far more coveted white pieces, determining which team goes first?

The Cuban coach stands in front of the UTD coach, hiding in one hand a white pawn and in the other a black pawn. Milovanovic picks the white pawn. The UTD delegation tries not to appear jubilant, but at the hotel, they are.

"All things being equal, it gives us a slight edge," Stallings says. "Psychologically, they will be in a difficult situation if we win the first round."

He compares it to a football or basketball team having home-field advantage. "White wins a slight majority of the time," he says, if only for the chance to go first. "So, for a team trying to come back, they can't afford to take draws. Even though we might say we don't care, we would prefer to have white, though the downside is, you can get too cocky."

Facing off

Sunday morning, and the moment has arrived. The Cubans pull a surprise by carting in an enormous portrait of José Raúl Capablanca, the Cuban chess icon who was world champ from 1921 to 1927 and whose likeness will stare at the players throughout the match. Capablanca's wry expression overlooks five tables, each covered with a white tablecloth and containing a green-and-white board and a clock.

On the back row, UTD positions its best player – grandmaster Ramirez. Ramirez will face Fidel Corrales, who, in addition to being a grandmaster, looks like a young Johnny Depp.

At table four, UTD's Jacek Stopa, 22, an international master from Wroclaw, Poland, will face Lelys Martinez. Next to each player are bottled water and a flanlike dessert. The room contains seats for 50 onlookers.

At table three, UTD's Marko Zivanic, 25, from Serbia, will face Isam Ortiz. At table two, UTD's Puchen Wang, 19, who was born in China but who moved to New Zealand when he was a boy, will face Caurilo Gómez. At table one, Salvijus "Sal" Bercys, 20, whose family moved from Lithuania to Brooklyn, N.Y., when he was 13, will face Ermes Espinosa.

One of the team's more colorful players, Bercys, or "Suicidal Sal," as he jokingly calls himself, because of his frantic clock management, explains why chess turns him on.

"The ability to control," he says. "It's like a fantasy game. You can't control life for the most part, but chess you can control. You set up these little ambushes, you win these little battles. Someone misses a move, not a big move, but it gives you a little edge. Your opponent may win a small battle, but in the end, maybe you win. I like it because it is war – a war you can control."

As the players take their seats, the first impression is of strikingly different styles. UTD wears green polo shirts with fancy blue blazers bearing the school insignia. The Cubans wear jeans and gray T-shirts bearing the Cuban flag – shirts Vivian bought the day before.

"This is the first match between Cuba and a U.S. university in Cuba," Spector tells the crowd. "But we hope it's the first of many matches between Cuba and the United States."

She pauses, and with a catch in her voice, continues.

"Above all," she says, "we hope for a new history of better relations between our countries."

The two sides exchange gifts – UTD giving T-shirts to the Cubans, who in turn give the Americans newspapers about chess and books about Castro. At 3:15 sharp, the match begins.

For the most part, only quiet murmuring ensues, with Ramirez and Co. staring intently at the boards. As the match slides past 7 p.m., UTD gets a surprise – one of its best players, Stopa, loses. Four others end in draws. UTD enters Day Two one down and needing a rally.

On the closing day, an even bigger surprise sets in – the vaunted Ramirez loses, as does Stopa ("I played like [expletive]," he says angrily). Suicidal Sal loses. The Cubans are even better than they thought. Sal admits that the Cuban team, like the country it inhabits, is cunningly resourceful, attending a school whose entire focus is chess. Only Wang walks away with a victory.

Corrales, the Johnny Depp look-alike who has beaten UTD's best player, says he longs "for a new relationship with the people of the U.S. We have nothing against each other. We would love to come to the U.S. to play." Spector believes it will actually happen in May.

Hours later, it's time to celebrate the experience, and what better way, she reasons, than to take the team to a lavish, Tropicana-style show at the Hotel Nacionale de Cuba. Over filet mignon and fish, the team revels in the movements of Cuban dancers, who swing from ballet to hip-hop and back.

The team gets a belly laugh when one of its members – the shy, soft-spoken Wang – is coerced onstage. Like Fred Astaire, he glides back and forth with a sultry Cuban woman, the word "Sexy" stitched on her tight-fitting jeans. The audience howls in laughter.

With his teammates laughing the hardest, the cannons and anti-aircraft guns aimed at American planes 47 years ago seem indeed like a distant memory.

The trip was "a victory for freedom, for solidarity, for getting the people of the U.S. and Cuba together," Spector says. "It was a victory over all the barriers keeping us apart."