

# Queen's Gambit in Baguio, 1978

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Binge-watching “The Queen’s Gambit” on Netflix was a reminder of the Cold War and how it played on a chessboard.

When Bobby Fischer challenged Boris Spassky in Iceland in the summer of 1972, the game transcended the chess board and blew up into a duel between the US and Russia. Fischer trumped Spassky, ending two decades of Soviet domination in international chess. Chess became so popular worldwide that it momentarily eclipsed baseball in the US and basketball in the Philippines.

In Grade 4, I couldn’t join the school Chess Club since everyone was in line. That left me with the next best option, Game of the Generals or “Salpakan,” a Filipino board game invented by a certain Sofronio H.

Pasola Jr. in 1970. Despite the Philippines having a grandmaster in Eugene Torre, chess fever died a natural death in the country after we hosted the 1978 World Chess Championship in Baguio. In all, 32 games were played from July 18 to Oct. 18, so long that Filipinos lost interest.

All this must be put in the context of martial law, when Marcos courted favorable press coverage by hosting high-profile international events like the 1974 Miss Universe Pageant and the 1975 Ali-Frazier fight that has gone down in history as “The Thrilla in Manila.” What most people don’t know is that the Philippines actually won the bid to host the 1975 World Chess Championship in Manila. The amount of \$5 million was allegedly placed on the table, an unconscionable amount for a Third World country under a dictatorship. Fortunately, the match did not materialize. After his 1972

victory, Bobby Fischer became a recluse. He retired as undefeated world chess champion by refusing to defend his title against Russian challenger Anatoly Karpov, who won the world title by default.

In 1978, Karpov's world title was challenged by Viktor Korchnoi, a Russian who defected to the West in 1976. On June 11, 1978, The New York Times reported on four bids for the World Championship: Tilburg, Netherlands, bid \$610,000; Baguio, Philippines, bid \$527,000; Graz, Austria, and Hamburg, West Germany, each bidding \$500,000. When asked for their preferences, Karpov, through the Soviet Chess Federation, picked Hamburg, Baguio, and Graz; Korchnoi, meanwhile, went for Graz, Baguio, Tilburg, and Hamburg, in that order.

Despite having bidded lower than the Netherlands, Baguio was selected probably through the influence of Florencio Campomanes, then Philippine delegate to FIDE, the Fédération Internationale des Échecs (World Chess Federation), who would later rise to FIDE president from 1982 to 1995, FIDE chairman from 1995 to 1996, and honorary president from 1996 to his death in 2010.

It is not well known that the present Baguio Convention Center, inaugurated by President Marcos in 1978, with his daughter Irene cutting the ceremonial ribbon, was purposely built for the Karpov-Korchnoi match. It could accommodate up to a thousand people, and was equipped with the latest in lighting and acoustics. It had to be air-conditioned despite being in Baguio, and to test it, the Associated Press reported, "Once, hundreds of schoolchildren were crowded into the auditorium and told to breathe heavily just to simulate the presence of a large audience."

Before the match, representatives of the contenders did a site inspection so detailed that clocks, chairs, and tables were scrutinized. None of the chess boards provided by the organizers met their exacting standards, and the chess pieces were deemed too light for professional play. A set that met specifications was found in Manila and loaned from a prominent businessman.

Then there was the problem with flags usually on the table identifying the nationalities of the competitors. Karpov was to play under the Soviet flag, but Korchnoi, who was stateless, opted to play under the Swiss flag. Soviets objected on the grounds that while Korchnoi lived in Switzerland, he was not a Swiss citizen, neither natural or naturalized. When it was proposed that Korchnoi play under a white flag marked “Stateless,” he countered that he would play under a flag with a hammer and sickle with the words “I Escaped.” So it was decided that no flags would be on the table but onstage. In the background would be the flags of the Philippines (host), Russia, and FIDE.

Overshadowing the game were issues about a chair, mirrored eyeglasses, yogurt, hypnosis, bad vibes, and the Ananda Marga.