



A MASTER IN DISGUISE

Story by Robert L. Smith

Photographs by John Kuntz

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Alex Kitsis is among the best in the world at a game that few Americans will ever learn to play. He's hoping to change that.

Aleksandr "Alex" Kitsis became a chess master at age 16, when he won the state championship in Moldova, a republic in the former Soviet Union, where chess is cool and so are chess players. His efforts to import that spirit began gingerly in June. He posted a flier in the window of Yeleseyevsky Deli in Mayfield Heights. "Chess classes by Alex Kitsis," it read. "Chess master of 20 years."

The phone did not ring off the hood, but it rang. And every Tuesday night, five or six students – the youngest five, the oldest a retiree – sit down at the Cleveland Hebrew School in Beachwood to learn chess with one of the world's best.

The 43-year-old Kitsis was one of the three or four chess masters who came to Cleveland in the 1990's during a wave of immigration by Russian Jews. An engineer in the former Soviet Union, he earned a master's degree in business administration from John Carroll University and worked as an engineer here, too. When he recently lost his job, he decided to do what he really wanted to do. He began his quiet crusade for chess.

"Twenty years ago, I'm told, Cleveland was one of America's chess centers," Kitsis says in a voice that asks, "What went wrong?"

He's a compact man and neatly so. His short red hair is brushed stiffly to one side. His pen is clipped tight into his shirt pocket. The only time his eyes sparkle behind wide square glasses is when he talks of chess, but that is often.

Kitsis wants to see young people play chess, but mostly he wants to see young people learn chess. He wants to see chess become part of school curriculums.

“It will teach us how to think,” he insists. “It will teach us how to deal with life. When you play chess, you exercise logic, decision-making. You learn how to win and lose.”

Since posting the flier, he has phoned school administrators, met with planners of suburban recreation programs and addressed parent committees at private schools.

Spurred by Kitsis, Orange expanded its after-school chess program for grades one through five. Classes started September 18. Mayfield and the South Euclid-Lyndhurst districts are considering his proposal. Another student joined his Tuesday night class.

Slow progress, Kitsis concedes. But chess, he adds, teaches patience, too.



Kitsis' weekly class at the Cleveland Hebrew School in Beachwood drawn both young and old. Mohan Nair and Mark Kligman play in the foreground as Kitsis' 11-year-old daughter, Polina (right), battles Rachel Nacey.



Eleven-year-old Mohan Nair (leaning back at left) waits for Polina Kitsis to make her move in the chess drill known as Two Bishops.



Alex Kitsis (left) explains a strategy called the Budapest Gambit to Rich Stoddard.

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– Alex Kitsis