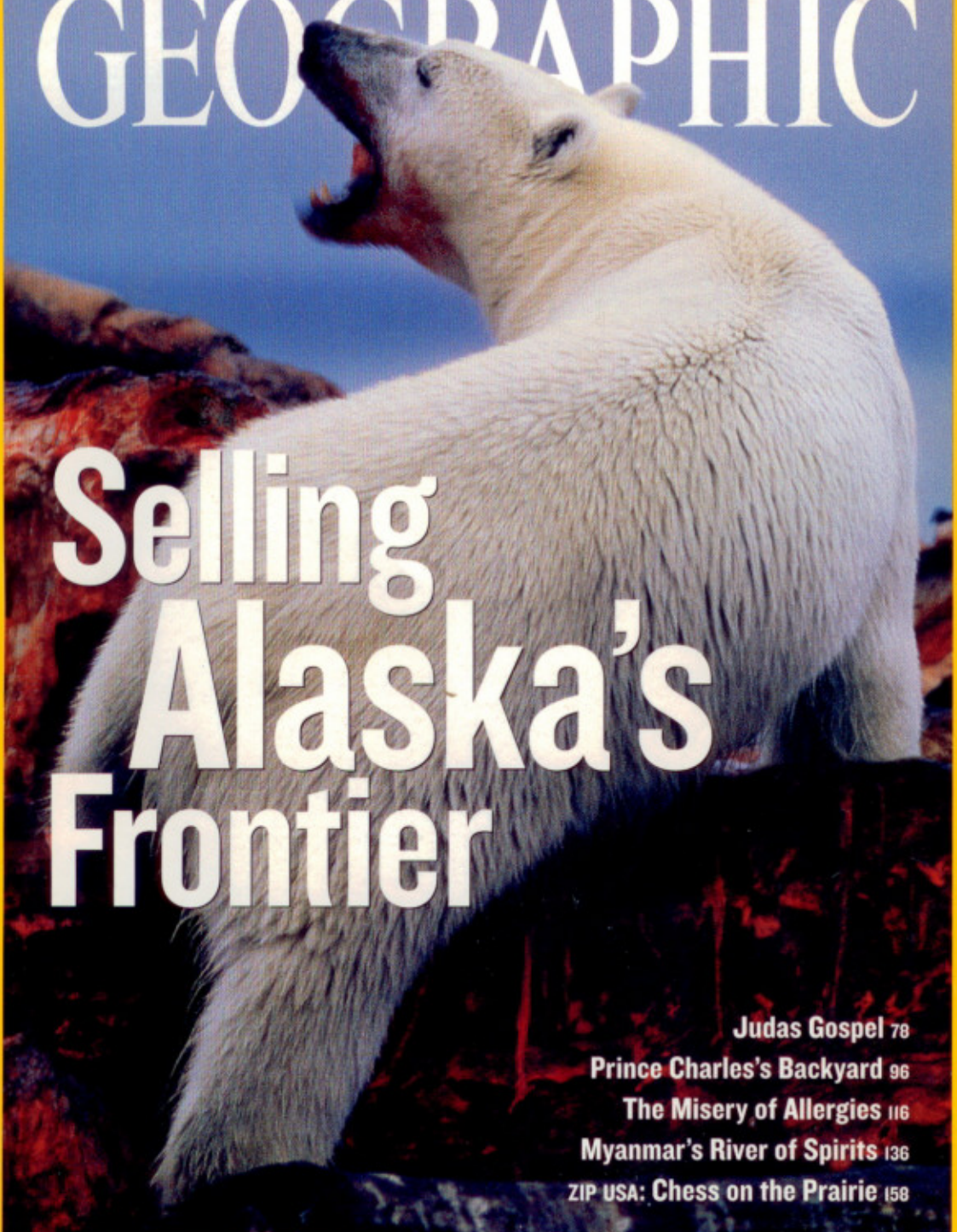


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A polar bear is shown in profile, roaring with its mouth wide open, revealing its teeth. It is standing on a dark, rocky shore. The background is a clear blue sky. The bear's fur is white and appears slightly matted. The overall scene is dramatic and powerful.

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ZIP USA | LINDSBORG, KS 67456

Checkmate on the Prairie

A Kansas town that has long played up its Swedish heritage is playing a new game.



Chess has become a spectator sport on Lindsborg's Main Street (left), where kids gathered to cheer for Russian champion Anatoly Karpov at a recent match. For 11-year-old state champ Charles Kinzel (above, at left), chess is a family affair.

BY CHRIS CARROLL

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC WRITER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR JOSÉ COBO

Not so long ago, only a Swedish heritage festival on a sunny day could have generated this much excitement among the residents of Lindsborg, Kansas. This after all is "Little Sweden, U.S.A.," a town where it's normal for children, even teenagers, to maintain their own folk costumes. But in recent years Lindsborg has witnessed a minor revolution in self-identity, and one man is largely responsible. Mikhail Korenman has made this town crazy for the game of chess. Just look at the festivities the burly Russian immigrant has lined up for the coming weekend: A chess parade down Main Street; a match between two world champions; and a



Isaiah Jesch, 15, a star of the Karpov chess school, practices at home amid the spoils of competition. Called "The Suit" for his playing garb, he earned his biggest trophy (below) last year.

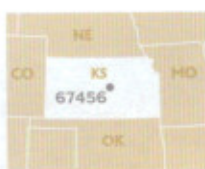
speech on world peace by Mikhail Gorbachev! All this with hardly an umlaut in sight. "This is the biggest thing in town since the King of Sweden visited here in '76," says Ken Sjogren, a longtime resident who co-founded Hemslojd, a leading Scandinavian craft shop.

The hub of the activity is the Anatoly Karpov International School of Chess, named for the Russian player who succeeded American Bobby Fischer as world champion in 1975. Don't expect

to see the great player himself manning the phones inside the cramped teaching space on Lindsborg's well-scrubbed Main Street. With a handset clamped to each ear, Korenman, 43, is juggling the last-minute details for the weekend activities. When the phones go quiet, he plops down on a worn sofa in a corner of the chess classroom and lets out an exaggerated sigh, but he's smiling. This is home: He and his wife recently moved into the upstairs apartment. He has quit his job as assistant chemistry professor at nearby Bethany College to devote himself full-time to the game he loves—and to teaching students, who affectionately call him Misha.

"I couldn't have guessed when I moved to Lindsborg I'd someday see Gorbachev walking down the street," he says. "Voronezh, my hometown in Russia, has almost a million people, so it was like coming to a different universe." Any worries that Lindsborg, a city of 3,300 people, wouldn't offer him enough stimulation vanished when Korenman—an expert player who had competed in tournaments back home—learned





about the local chess club. He began networking with Russian expatriate players at tournaments around the country, inviting them to play in his picturesque

little Kansas town. He persuaded the local Rotary Club to stage a small tournament, and in 2002 Karpov came to train for a match against rival Garry Kasparov, who'd won the world champion title from him in 1985.

Karpov beat Kasparov for the first time in years—and when he returned a few months later to lucky Lindsborg, Korenman sprang the question: Would he lend his name to a chess school in the town? “There’s something he likes about Lindsborg,” Korenman says. “He’s from a small city himself.” Soon after, Korenman says, several past presidents of the U.S. Chess Federation wanted to name another school after Karpov. “I already have one in America, in Lindsborg,” he said, “and it’s enough.” Though at least 20 schools bear Karpov’s name worldwide, Lindsborg has the only one in the U.S.

Korenman may have put chess on the map, but there’s one thing he hasn’t been able to do: Turn his students into Russians. Something about American culture, he says, prevents promising young players from training for the next step in ability. The recipe for creating well-rounded children is not, perhaps, best for making great chess players. Back in Voronezh, his eight-year-old nephew attends chess school five days a week, has lessons from a private coach, and plays in a tournament each weekend. That kind of focus seems unimaginable for most American kids—and their parents.

Several blocks north of the chess school, along tree-shaded streets of well-maintained homes, at the house of the two young brothers Korenman identifies as the most talented players in town, their mother wants to make something perfectly clear: “My sons aren’t chess freaks,” Carolyn Masterson says. “They’re talented at it, but it’s not their entire lives.”

There’s little doubt about that. It’s two nights before a youth chess tournament that will coincide with Gorbachev’s visit, and instead of practicing his rook and pawn endings or

the Sicilian Defense, Aaron Masterson, 16, is sprawled on his basement floor, blasting aliens to pieces on his laptop. His brother, Paul, 13, plans to practice some, but Aaron has five hours of rehearsal tomorrow for *Fiddler on the Roof*. Afterward, he’s off to a French horn lesson. His schedule is a rickety Rube Goldberg contraption, balancing Boy Scouts, church activities, and year-round sports.

These days Aaron is more enthusiastic about basketball than chess, though he admits he’s only average at hoops. “The difference between team sports and chess is the approval you get,” he says. There are no high fives in chess, no celebratory bear hugs from teammates, no flirtatious glances from girls in the hallway. “I have to make choices about what I want to excel in,” he says. “Chess is the one thing I have less time for.”

This does not make his Russian chess coach happy. “Everyone has a limit in chess, and he has not reached it yet,” Korenman says. “I completely recognize they have a million things to



Russian-born Mikhail Korenman, the school’s founder, teaches strategy. “Chess is competition, sport, and education at once,” he says.



Children meet to practice in Lindsborg's Swensson Park. Says Steve Kinzel, father of a young state chess champ, "Chess helps kids academically by strengthening their problem-solving skills."

do," he says of his students. "I just wish they'd spend more time on chess. But I can't tell them how to arrange their lives."

Korenman brightens when talk turns to another of his students—Isaiah Jesch, 15, who lives two hours away. Isaiah, still in eighth grade, recently won his division at the SuperNationals. He has taken to wearing suits to every competition as a sign of total dedication—proper respect for the game, Korenman notes approvingly.

At the tournament on Saturday, Isaiah plays Aaron Masterson in the final match. The two are friendly rivals who've played a number of times with mixed results. Wearing basketball shorts, a T-shirt, and a Texas Longhorns cap, Aaron needles Isaiah about his attire.

"Kids call him 'The Suit,'" he says, smirking. "I've had people tell me they're intimidated by it," Isaiah says.

Aaron snorts derisively.

"Well, maybe to an opponent I haven't played before," Isaiah allows, with a slight frown.

The judge gives the signal, and 200 students

ages 5 to 18 make opening moves. When it's over, Isaiah, dressed for success, has defeated Aaron, who is dressed for basketball. But neither ends up winning the tournament.

Discussing the match, Korenman flashes an ironic smile-frown—raised eyebrows, laughing eyes, down-turned mouth. There's a long way to go if America is ever to produce another Bobby Fischer who can dominate the world's toughest Russian players, he says.

Still, the Karpov School he started in Lindsborg is a step in the right direction. "We need more people to see chess as a tough, competitive sport," he says. He points to the recent poker craze as an example: Like chess, it's a chair-bound battle of wits, but somehow kids today view it as cool, maybe even a tad dangerous. "One thing that's key," Korenman muses, "we need to get chess on TV." □

★ **Chess for Youth** Learn how a young Bobby Fischer became the first American world champion and find links to chess websites at nqm.com/0605.