

I N M E M O R I A M

Abe Ravinsky

(May 11, 1927 to January 4, 2012)

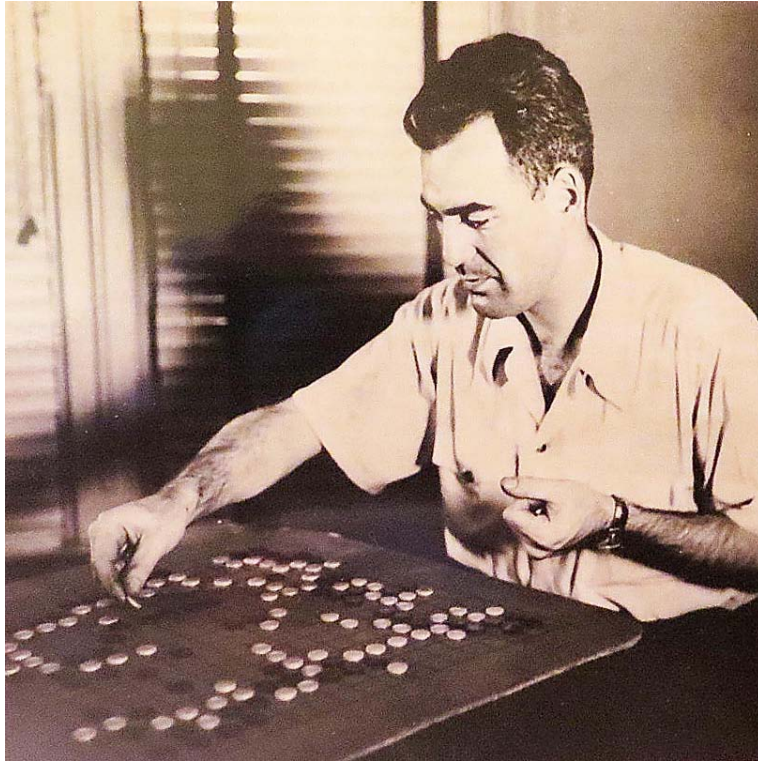


Fig. 1. Abe Ravinsky, photograph taken in July, 1953.

by Steven J. C. Mays

I first saw Abe Ravinsky on February 23, 1985, at the 5th *Tournoi d'hiver*, which was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Montreal. I was tournament director. Accompanied by his wife, Gina, whom he had met and married in the early 1960s, Abe had come to the tournament not to play go but rather to see his many go-playing friends. In fact, Abe never played in a *Tournoi d'hiver*, nor did he ever play in the other major tournament held in Quebec, the Quebec Open. What's more, Abe had stopped attending the Montreal Go Club since at least 1980, which is the time at which I began to attend the club on a regular basis.

As you can guess from what I've said so far, when I first saw Abe at the 5th *Tournoi d'hiver*, I had no idea who he was. The only thing I noticed was that he attracted a lot of attention. Many of the go players in attendance at the tournament had almost formed a line to take turns to greet him and shake his hand.

The next time I saw Abe was about four months later, in June 1985. I had started to work at the Montreal Jewish General Hospital on a project to implement Bill 65 (an Act Respecting Access to

Documents Held by Public Bodies and the Protection of Personal Information). I was having lunch in the hospital's cafeteria when I spotted Abe several tables away. Abe was an employee of the hospital since the late 50s and he worked in the Cardiology department as a technician. I immediately went over to his table, introduced myself, and reminded him that we had met at the *Tournoi d'hiver* a few months earlier (actually, I'm not sure he needed to be reminded). This was the beginning of a long and cherished friendship with Abe Ravinsky.

During the year that I worked at the Jewish General, Abe and I often had lunch together in the hospital's cafeteria; and after work, we occasionally played a game or two of go at his place, which was conveniently located near the hospital.

After my work at the hospital was over, Abe and I continued to see each other on a regular basis to play go, but these games were always played at his place. I often tried to persuade him to visit the go club, but nothing ever came of these efforts. Abe was well into his 50s at that time, and I guess the thought of travelling downtown, where the club was located, after a full day's work at the hospital was just too much for him to contemplate.

It was during this period that Abe started to tell me stories about the early days of go in Montreal. These stories related to events that occurred in the late 40s as well as those that occurred in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Actually, the word *story* might not be entirely appropriate. Perhaps the right word to use, or the word that would come the closest to describing the nature of Abe's stories, would probably be the word *anecdote*.

One such anecdote, for example, concerns the way in which Abe obtained a copy of the book *The A B C of Go* (published in Yokohama, 1910) by Walter de Havilland. (This anecdote was not related in my article *A History of Go in Montreal*, of which more will be said later.) You will recall that in the 1950s, go books in English, or in any other non-Asian language for that matter, were exceedingly rare, if not entirely non-existent. Abe remembered the astonishment he felt as well as the excitement when one day he came across an advertisement in a magazine on this book, *The A B C of Go* (unfortunately, Abe could not remember the name of the magazine in which the advertisement appeared). In any event, he gladly sent away for a copy of the book, which he received a few weeks later in the return mail. In the package, the author had written a short letter to Abe telling him that he may not be familiar with who he (the author) is but that Abe would probably be more familiar with the identity of his two grown-up daughters: Joan Fontaine and Olivia the Havilland. That's right, his two daughters were none other than two of Hollywood's leading ladies of the silver screen (both of whom, by the way, were born in Tokyo, a fact that is not well known by many). Sadly, Abe lost the letter de Havilland had sent him with the book. (Incidentally, Walter de Havilland had family connections with the better known Geoffrey de Havilland of British aircraft-building fame.)

(You may obtain more information on this rare book and its author by visiting my personal Web site (<http://pages.videotron.com/steven/abcofgo.htm>). This link will open the Web page where you can read a book review of *The A B C of Go* as well as a brief biographical outline of the life of Walter de Havilland. You may obtain a copy of this Web page in a PDF format at the Web site of the *Association québécoise des joueurs de go* (AQJG) or at the Web site of the *Canadian Go Association* (CGA). Because both the AQJG and the CGA have been known to re-organize their Web sites from time to time, clicking on either one of these two links will open the home page of the association that is connected to the link you selected. Once at the home page, you will need to look around for the precise location where the association you selected might keep its publications. No doubt, looking for a heading containing the word *Publication* or the word *Document* or *Documentation* would be a good start.)

To resume my narrative, it was also during this period, the period in which I was finding out about the early days of go in Montreal, that Abe provided me with a few photographs of the principle go personalities who figured prominently in Abe's anecdotes. (A copy of these photographs have been made and have been archived with the AQJG.)

In one of these photographs (see Fig. 2), we can form a good idea of the primitive conditions under which go was played in Montreal in those early years, conditions that would not have been that much different from those that were experienced elsewhere in the West during that same period. Notice the homemade quality of the go-ban (observe the rough edges), and notice also that Abe is not playing with stones but with buttons. That's right, buttons! These buttons were obtained from a local button manufacturer. They would have been withdrawn from the production process immediately after they had been cut off from the long plastic rods that they would have been part of, and just before they would have been drilled for holes (observe the sharp, angular edges of each individual stone).



Fig. 2, Detail of the photograph in Fig. 1.

These stories, or anecdotes, that Abe related, inspired me to write an article entitled *A History of Go in Montreal*, which I completed in November 1988 and which I then submitted to *Ranka Yearbook* for publication. (The article appeared in the 1989 edition of the yearbook, pp. 76-83). I felt that I was well placed to make sure that the history of the early beginnings of go in Montreal and the efforts made by pioneers like Abe would not be lost. You will find more information on the contribution made by Abe to the development of go in Montreal in this article. (You can find the PDF version of this article at the Web site of the AQJG or the CGA).

In addition to the anecdotes and the photographs, I also benefitted in other ways from my friendship with Abe. One of these ways was the gift he made me of the set of glass stones that once belonged to Marc Francoeur, another one of those early go players. (Parenthetically, I can claim the good fortune of having played with Marc at the Montreal Go Club in 1980 and 1981 when the club was located at the *CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal*. All together, we played four games on four separate occasions. He won the last three of those games even though he gave me a handicap of 6 and 7 stones in those games. I was a beginner at that time, about 14-kyu. Sadly, Marc passed away shortly afterward, dying prematurely in 1982.)

Finally, the last way in which I benefitted from my friendship with Abe was through the gift he made me of the old go books he still had in his possession, books that have long been out of print but which have long been recognized as some of the great books on go that had ever been published in English. These books include *The A B C of Go* mentioned above (granted, this book is not one of the

great books on go, but the next two certainly are), the original edition of Kensaku Segoe's *Go Proverbs Illustrated* (1960), the edition that is cloth-bound, and finally, the book *The Vital Points of Go* by Kaku Takagawa, the flexicoil edition of 1958.

It was Abe's style to develop close personal relationships with his go friends. I believe he valued, even prized, the socializing aspects that could be developed through a game such as go. The example of Marc Francoeur, whom I mentioned above, is a good example. Marc and Abe often socialized together, along with their wives. By the way, Marc, who was a doctor in biochemistry at the *Hôtel-Dieu* Hospital, met Abe in the early- or mid-50s when Marc was a Ph.D. student at McGill University where Abe was working as a technician in one of the university's laboratories. At first, the two friends used to play chess. But not long after the beginning of their friendship, Abe taught Marc how to play go. We can only presume that Marc was completely won over to the game because I got to play with him some thirty-odd years later.

Some of the other players that Abe would call and invite to his place to play go included Willie Kralka, who has since passed away, maybe about seven or eight years ago (Willie was a player of my generation, so his death was also premature), and Brian Caulfield, who left Montreal in the mid-1990s to teach English in the Orient. There were also the Labelle brothers, André and Denis, both professors of mathematics. Denis Labelle even invited to Abe to his wedding, which took place in 1972. And there was also Khalid Benabdallah, another professor of mathematics. Of course, I mustn't forget to include myself in this group of visitors to Abe's place. André and Khalid, by the way, are still active players at the Montreal Go Club.

I believe that Abe viewed the go players of Montreal as belonging to a social community that shared more than simply a common interest; in other words, these players were more than merely a collection of strangers who met at a club. I say this because when I went to Abe's place to play go, I always sensed that there was more involved in these get-togethers than simply an opportunity for two people to play go. Abe was always keen on engaging his guests in conversation. Typically, after a couple of games, Abe would suggest a break. Refreshments would be served (Abe knew that I liked Pepsi, so he always made sure to have some extra cans of my favorite soda on hand in the fridge). Then, in a quiet and unsuspecting way, Abe would bring up a topic that had obtained some degree of public interest in the media, or he might engage his guest in conversation on an issue that Abe knew his guest had some degree of expertise or knowledge. If his efforts at sustaining a topic of conversation were successful, then the conversation would take on a life of its own. The conversation would follow a course of development that would make the topics that came under discussion as unpredictable in their variety as they would be far-reaching in their scope. I am not saying that Abe was consciously masterminding a process, not at all. Rather, Abe was simply using conversation as a means of broadening the relationship with the person whom he had invited to his place to play go.

As a go player, Abe was not particularly strong, he was about 3-kyu. He tended to play fast and to play by instinct. He was not prone by nature to spend much time analyzing delicate board situations, not even when these delicate board situations reached levels of critical importance. In other words, Abe was not the type of player who would agonize over a move. All in all, I sensed that for Abe go-playing had become a pastime, an occasion to socialize rather than an occasion to learn and improve. Abe was, at that time, what I have since become myself (although I still agonize over some moves). All together, we played a total of 320 games in 66 sessions, which turns out to be an average of 4.8 games per session. I often gave him handicaps (going as high as 8 stones), in fact, 266 (83.1%) of all our games were with handicaps. Finally, I won 186 (58.1%) of our games.

You are probably asking yourself the question, "Where does he get all this information on the 320 games he played with Abe, as well as the four games he played with Marc Francoeur?" Well, the

answer is simple: I keep a record of all the games that I play. If you are interested in obtaining more information on the records I keep on my games of go, then visit my personal Web site (<http://pages.videotron.com/steven/>).

The last time I played with Abe was on December 26, 1996. I am very sure that I saw Abe at least one more time shortly after that date, but because we didn't play any games on that occasion, I'm unable provide a date for that visit. For reasons unknown and without any prior intent, we simply drifted apart after that unknown date, the one on which I saw Abe for the last time.

Abe is survived by his wife Gina. The couple never had any children.

I was sad to hear of his passing, and I will miss him. I wish I had made more of an effort to keep in touch with him while he was still with us.

(Montreal, October, 2013)