The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/2z8hPCQ

William Lombardy, Chess Grandmaster Turned Priest, Dies at 79

By Dylan Loeb McClain

Oct. 14, 2017

William J. Lombardy, who was one of the most talented and promising chess players of his generation, winning titles and accolades while he was still a teenager, but who all but gave up the game at the height of his career to become a priest, died on Friday in Martinez, Calif. He was 79.

His son, Raymond, confirmed the death. He added that the sheriff's department in Contra Costa told him that Mr. Lombardy, who was born in the Bronx and had long lived in New York City, died of natural causes, probably heart disease, while staying with a friend in Martinez.

Mr. Lombardy was the first American to win the World Junior Chess Championship — doing so with a perfect score, a feat that has never been duplicated — and he led the United States to victory over the Soviet Union in the 1960 World Student Team Championship, beating Boris Spassky, the future world champion. He was later named a grandmaster, the World Chess Federation's highest title.

"His abilities were native, with a natural talent," Anthony Saidy, an international master who played with Mr. Lombardy on the 1960 team that won the Student Chess Olympiad, told The New York Times in 2016. "He always seemed to drag his matches out so long, getting out of jams until his opponent couldn't."

But he came of age in the shadow of Bobby Fischer, the phenomenon out of Brooklyn six years his junior. Virtually all the sponsorship money and support available for American players went to Mr. Fischer.

Raymond Lombardy said his father had felt that if Mr. Fischer had not come along, he might have become world champion himself. But Mr. Lombardy was not resentful of Mr. Fischer, with whom Mr. Lombardy had an almost brotherly relationship, the son said. "He was not jealous," he said.

Mr. Fischer was not the only impediment to an even more successful chess career for Mr. Lombardy, however. Brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, he had a competing interest — his church.

William James Joseph Lombardy was born on Dec. 4, 1937. Though he would be known as Bill in both his personal and professional life, he disliked the name, his son said. His father, Raymond, of Italian heritage, was a supervisor for the Savarin restaurant chain, and his mother, Stella, with Polish roots, was a beautician.

Mr. Lombardy, left, at a news conference at the world championship in 1972, with Paul Marshall, center, a lawyer for Bobby Fischer, and Fred Cramer, Mr. Fischer's representative. Associated Press

Though both his parents worked, the family struggled to pay the rent living in a less-than-adequate apartment in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx. Bill Lombardy, while attending St. Athanasius School in the Bronx, slept in a room that had little insulation.

"I think we could have stored meat in there — like a refrigerator," he was quoted as saying in the 1974 book "My Seven Chess Prodigies," by the renowned American chess coach John W. Collins, who taught Mr. Lombardy informally for many years. (Mr. Fischer was another of his students.)

from Sam Sifton and NYT Cooking.

No one in the Lombardy family played chess, but when Bill was 9, a 10-year-old neighbor, who played the game but who always lost, decided to teach him. The neighbor wanted a sparring partner whom he could beat. In a couple of years, Bill was already showing unusual talent and playing regularly, often in city parks.

He went on to attend La Salle Academy, a Roman Catholic school in Lower Manhattan, for two years and to graduate from Morris High School in the Bronx. He then attended City College for three years and later enrolled at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers with the intention of becoming a Catholic priest. He was ordained in 1967 by Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman of New York and remained in the priesthood until the late 1970s.

Most great players start out as tacticians, always looking to attack, before they evolve into strategists, plotting a long-range path to victory from the very first move. Mr. Lombardy was a strategic player, and a good one, from the beginning.

By 14 he was a master, and in 1954 he won the New York State Championship, becoming, at 16, the youngest champion in the state's history until then.

Two years later he tied for first in the Canadian Open, and in 1957, in Toronto, he won the World Junior Chess Championship with a perfect score of 11 wins, no draws and no losses. "Clearly, he towered over the field," Mr. Collins wrote.

In 1960, Mr. Lombardy was the top board for the United States team that competed in the World Student Team Championship in Leningrad — now St. Petersburg — in Russia. It was there that he beat Mr. Spassky while winning a total of 11 games, drawing two and losing none as he led the United States to victory over the heavily favored Soviet team.

It was the only time the United States ever finished ahead of the Soviet Union in any team competition, and it caused a crisis in Soviet chess circles.

Mr. Lombardy, pointing, observed chess matches in 2016 at a cafe in Stuyvesant Town, the apartment complex in Manhattan in which he lived at the time. John Taggart for The New York Times

Later that year, Mr. Lombardy played in the Chess Olympiad in Leipzig, Germany, and again had an outstanding result, including a draw with Mikhail Botvinnik, the former world champion, who had lost his title several months earlier. (He regained it the following year.)

Mr. Lombardy was named a grandmaster after the Olympiad.

At the 1960-61 United States championship, he finished second to Mr. Fischer, qualifying him for the 1962 Interzonal in Stockholm, the next step on the road to the world championship. But instead of entering the tournament, Mr. Lombardy, by then enrolled at St. Joseph's Seminary, decided to pursue ordination.

Mr. Lombardy, in an autobiographical essay on his website, said that in the late 1960s he worked in St. Mary's parish in the Bronx, in a rectory next to his parents' apartment. He also worked under Theodore Edgar McCarrick, who went on to become a Cardinal and the Archbishop of Washington from 2001 to 2006.

Mr. Lombardy continued to compete, though intermittently. He won or tied for first in the 1963, 1965 and 1975 United States Open Championships, and he played on United States national teams in the 1968, 1970, 1974 and 1976 Chess Olympiads, winning an individual gold medal and three individual silver medals, all as a reserve. But for all intents and purposes, the serious part of his chess career was over.

In 1972, when Mr. Fischer qualified to play a match for the world championship in Reykjavik, Iceland, against Mr. Spassky, the reigning champion, he asked Mr. Lombardy to assist him by analyzing adjourned games. In the Fischer-Spassky event, which became known as the Match of the Century, 14 of the 21 games were adjourned. Mr. Fischer won and was crowned world champion.

Mr. Lombardy eventually left the priesthood, his son said, because he had lost faith in the Catholic Church, which he believed was too concerned with amassing wealth. Soon after, while competing in a tournament in the Netherlands, he met and married a Dutch woman, Louise van Valen, who moved to Manhattan to live with Mr. Lombardy in his two-bedroom apartment at the Stuyvesant Town complex. Mr. Lombardy had moved there in 1977 to help care for his friend and coach Mr. Collins, who died in 2001.

The couple's son, Raymond, was born in 1984. The marriage ended in divorce in 1992 after Mr. Lombardy's wife had returned to the Netherlands with their son. Besides the son, Mr. Lombardy is survived by two younger sisters, Natalie Pekala and Vickie Lombardy. A younger brother, Michael, died this year.

Raymond Lombardy said that, as far as he was aware, his father made his living through chess after leaving the priesthood — mostly through giving lessons. He had been staying with friends since he had fallen on hard times and been evicted from his apartment at Stuyvesant Town for being behind in his rent — an episode that was the subject of an article in The Times in 2016.

Though he was a good student in school, Mr. Lombardy did not like to study chess from books; he preferred to hone his skills through practice. "There is nothing like plenty of experience," he told Mr. Collins, "doing it on the board, getting your head knocked about a bit, and learning from every win, draw and loss."