



**Peter Weichsel**

# **Bridge's First Hippie**

**Book 1**

**The First 40 Years**



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First  
Hippie**

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# Author's Foreword

For years, many people had been telling me to write a book; I had a story to tell. Being the procrastinator that I was, I always had an excuse to put it off. Then Covid struck, and being semi-isolated, I ran out of excuses, and I finally started writing, and writing. Eventually, I submitted some of my writings to Ray Lee at Master Point Press. He was interested, and all of a sudden I had a publisher.

I had hundreds of issues of *The Bridge World* to refer to, which covered many of the tournaments I competed in. I even bought a bunch of old ones to complete the coverage of my successes and failures throughout the years. I want to thank *The Bridge World* for allowing me to chronicle the path of my history for so many years, and in particular, editor Jeff Rubens and the late Edgar Kaplan for their excellent coverage of all the main events I competed in; and Edgar's tongue-in-cheek humor. I also want to thank Alan Sontag, my partner on and off for two decades, for usage of some hands from his *Power Precision* book. And Bob Jones, for his *San Diego Tribune* article.

I especially want to thank all the clients that helped me further my bridge career. There were very many, and although some were certainly more prominent than others, and they know who they are; I will defer from pointing them out, to avoid, unfortunately, leaving some out.

I've had a number of highly successful partnerships over the years, and I want to thank them for putting up with me over the course of time. Most notably, the aforementioned Alan Sontag, with whom I had my biggest successes, and who was my longest tenured partner. Also, Bobby Levin, with whom I had a more than a dozen years of highly successful partnership. Mike Lawrence and I had a tumultuous, short lived, but incredibly effective partnership in the mid-eighties. I also want to pay tribute to Russ Ekeblad, who passed away a couple of years ago. He and I worked on a complicated, highly effective Strong Club system and formed a strong partnership.

And many thanks to Bob Hamman, often considered the greatest player of the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first. In the twilight of our careers, after competing against one another for many decades, and teaming up to win a Bermuda Bowl, we came together to form a partnership that is still evolving. Being avid theorists, we have come up with numerous great ideas. If only we could remember all of them! And thanks to the team of doctors that kept him alive during his months-long battle with a horrendous case of Covid.

I also want to thank the many teammates I've had over the years. Particularly, my first professional team, The Precision Team and the Rose Meltzer team, on which I had a meteoric rise to the top. And too many others to mention.

Finally, and most importantly, family. My first wife, Nancy ex-Weichsel Blaustein, an excellent bridge player in her own right, accompanied and supported me at many tournaments. My immediate family, parents, and brother John, along with his daughter, my niece Amy, who always were rooting for me throughout the years. Most significantly, Marcia, my wife of thirty-one wonderful years, and her sons, Craig and Reed, who were always there for me through thick and thin.

To all of you, I am humbly, incredibly grateful for all your individual participation in furthering my bridge career. To succeed and make a good living at what you love is a true blessing. I never forget how fortunate I've been to have that happen to me.



*My final homage to the Jewish faith*

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# Prologue

October 7, 1983 — Stockholm, Sweden

We had reached the pinnacle of bridge: the World Teams Championship, known as the Bermuda Bowl since the first such event was held there in 1950. Only two or three teams were involved throughout the fifties; but the event expanded slowly from then on and as of 2022, it involves twenty-four teams. In 1983, the WBF decided to have the longest final ever: 176 boards played over three days, instead of the traditional two-day 128-board final. It was also the largest field up to that point: they had added three teams to get up to ten. Two teams automatically advanced to the semifinals (USA I, winner of the US Trials, and Europe I, winner of the European championship) while the other eight teams played a week-long round robin to determine the other semifinalists.

We had narrowly avoided that treacherous round robin by beating USA II (George Rosenkranz-Eddie Wold, Mike Passell-Jim Jacoby, and Jeff Meckstroth-Eric Rodwell — Meckwell as they were commonly referred to) in the Trials final. That match had come down to one board late in the last segment.



Both vul.	♠ K 9 8 6 5										
	♥ K J 9 8										
	♦ A 8 5 4										
	♣ —										
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♥ Q 7 6 4		♥ 3 2									
♦ K Q		♦ J 10 2									
♣ K Q 10 3 2		♣ 9 8 7 6 5 4									
	♠ A Q J 2										
	♥ A 10 5										
	♦ 9 7 6 3										
	♣ A J										

West	North	East	South
<i>Meckstroth</i>	<i>Weichsel</i>	<i>Rodwell</i>	<i>Sontag</i>
pass	2♣	pass	1NT
pass	3♥ <sup>1</sup>	pass	2♠
pass	3NT <sup>3</sup>	pass	3♠ <sup>2</sup>
pass	4♦	pass	4♣
pass	5♠	pass	4♥
all pass		pass	6♠

1. Spade raise with shortness.
2. Asking about the shortness.
3. Clubs.

Alan Sontag and I had aggressively bid to 6♠, while Passell-Jacoby had rationally stopped in game. Not only did Alan need to guess the ♥Q but he needed someone either to have the ♦KQ doubleton, or to hold ♦Kx and fail to unblock the king when the ♦A was cashed early. Well, as you can see, the diamonds were exactly as he needed to strip the hand and throw West in to give him a ruff-and-sluff so that he could get rid of the last diamond. If he had gone down, we would have lost 13 IMPs instead of winning 13. We ultimately won the match by 24 IMPs to become USA I. Not only did we get our expenses for the trip paid, we also avoided the tedious round robin, from which only the top two teams would move on.

Alan and I were playing for the Aces, originally named the U.S. Aces but commonly known as the Dallas Aces. The other two pairs were Hamman-Wolff, members of the original Aces, and Mike Becker-Ronnie Rubin, New Yorkers like we were. Forming the Aces had been the brainchild of Ira Corn, a prominent Dallas businessman. In 1968, he brought six of the best bridge players in the U.S. to Dallas to try to dethrone the vaunted Italian

'Blue Team' that had dominated international bridge from the late fifties and throughout the decade of the sixties. The Aces quickly became the world's strongest team, winning two Bermuda Bowls and making it to several world championship finals, along with collecting a number of national titles. Ironically, in Stockholm, we were playing against a 1980s version of the Blue Team. This one included Garozzo-Belladonna, considered the best pair in the world for many years. The Aces had undergone numerous personnel changes over their long history, culminating in this final lineup. Ira had died the year before and this was to be the last appearance for the team he had created. We dedicated the event to his memory.

It was a cold rainy day when the final three sessions were played. We typically played a standard rotation of two sessions in, one out, and it had been an insanely close match throughout. Alan and I were out during the first set, expecting to play the final two. The two teams had tied Set Nine, leaving us with an 18-IMP lead, which incredibly was 2 IMPs less than the biggest margin at the end of any single set. In any other year, the match would have been completed the night before and we would have already won the Bermuda Bowl. Now, we would still have to prove ourselves over another forty-eight boards. That was fine with Alan and me; we felt up to the task.

Joe Musumeci had been the coach of the Aces from the beginning and Wolff had insisted that he be our NPC in Stockholm, something that I was immediately about to regret agreeing to. Joe pulled Alan and me aside and said we would be out again for Set Ten. I was furious. Alan and I had arguably been playing as well as, if not better than, the other two pairs; apparently, that was not what Joe thought. I left in a huff. I needed to cool down, literally. I put on all the warm clothes that I had and left to pace the snowy streets of Stockholm. And I started thinking about the twenty years of bridge that had brought me to this point.

# Chapter 1

## Losing My Religion — R.E.M., '91

In 1963, I was attending Queens College in New York when I wandered into the student lounge and saw a bridge game going on. I had learned a little bridge at home from my father and brother, who had some understanding of the game. Fortunately, bridge skill is not genetic, since my mother was clearly the worst bridge player on the planet. I know, most of the bridge greats have made the same claim; but I would pit my mom's lack of skills against any of theirs. We did intermittently try to have a bridge game at home when I was young but it never lasted more than a few minutes, as my mother would do such appalling things that the rest of us would just throw our cards in the air and move on to play chess or skat — or watch TV. Skat is a great three-handed German game, played with a thirty-two-card deck (twos through sixes are removed). It is similar to pinochle in that there is bidding and play; its unique feature is that you can bid for a high or a low hand.

I sat down and watched the college bridge game intently. This went on for some days; I was absorbed. It turned out the foursome were Andy Bernstein, who became a bridge player of great note, Eric Schwartz, whom I subsequently saw at many tournaments, Richie Kuch and a fourth player, who ultimately released his seat to me. That was it: I was hooked. We played almost every day and I forgot about classes, even though I was doing well in most of them, except for German. This was despite my parents having emigrated from Germany and my speaking the language fluently until I started school. My parents didn't want to speak German any longer because of the backlash, even though we were Jewish. I observed my Jewish faith until my bar mitzvah; I then became Jewish in name only, although I remain proud of my Jewish heritage. I've been a practicing Pantheist my entire adult life.

To say that my childhood was bizarre is an understatement. My parents, along with all of their relatives, were escapees from Nazi Germany, thanks to my uncle Lothar, the youngest of the five brothers on my father's side. Their mother was apparently like a machine: every two years, like clockwork, she would produce a son, my father being the oldest. Lothar, or Leo as he wanted to be called in the U.S., left Germany in 1930 to work in the meat business in New York. By 1934, it was becoming apparent to the rest of the world that Hitler was creating a fascist regime and using the Jews as his scapegoats. Sadly, it was not so obvious within the country. Lothar, from afar, sounded the alarm. He wrote to my father to get the hell out of Dodge, saying that no Jews, even doctors working in state hospitals like my father, were safe from

the scourge. Thankfully, my father heeded his advice and warned all the Weichsel-Gans families, ten in all, to leave Germany while it was still possible. All our relatives scattered around the world to escape: many of them came to New York, some went to Israel and one even went to Argentina. Uncle Siggie (Sigmund), the middle brother of the five Weichsels, also came to New York, to start a butcher business with Lothar. Other uncles were Ernst, Ludwig and Werner on my mother's side; my father was Manfred; Mom was Gertrude Amalia; there were a few others. I love all those German names.

They all had families with children. My brother, who was ten years older than me, had been born in Germany the day after Christmas in 1932. My father left Mom and John behind to establish himself in New York as a pediatrician. When he felt secure here, he sent for Mom and John to join him. When my mother had John, she suffered a nervous breakdown, as it was often called then. She was advised not to have any more children, which brings up the philosophical question: what would have happened to me if she hadn't decided almost ten years later that she had to have another child? Would I be somebody else? Would there never have been a Peter Weichsel, by any other name? Fortunately for me, despite my father's professional misgivings, he relented and there I was. However, the doctors who treated Mom in Germany were correct about the effect giving birth again would have on her. My mom became bipolar; or manic-depressive, as they called it back then.

So that's what I was born into. My mother had to deal with bipolarity for years until the advent of lithium, a miracle drug that controlled the manic phase and made life for bipolar people tolerable. My mother was on the top of the curve: that is, she fluctuated from normal to insanely manic. She would get paranoid and do some very crazy things. She spent the next thirty-odd years in and out of sanatoriums, until the FDA approved lithium in the early seventies. Sadly, as any of you who have seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* know all too well, the primary treatment for manic depression back then was electric shock. It would basically wipe out your memory for extended periods of time. My mother would come home in a completely docile, dazed fashion, which was very unlike her. It would take weeks for her to return to normal, whatever that was. So about half of the time, she was fairly normal and attended to household duties, including taking care of me; the other half was brutal.

Pop, as I always referred to him, was the hardest-working man in show business. It was very hard for an immigrant from Germany to fit into the workplace: Americans didn't look too kindly on Germans, even Jewish ones. He was a complete workaholic. He was probably the last doctor to give up making house calls. He would go out in the middle of the night, when asked, to check on a sick baby. We struggled for years as he gradually created a successful practice. Ultimately, he had affiliations with a few hospitals in Queens and Great Neck and was a major member of H.I.P. (the health insurance plan

of New York). Finally, after thirty years or so of unbelievably dedicated work, he was one of the most prominent pediatricians in all of Queens. His patients adored him. He was a brilliant man and an excellent chess player, among other things. He taught me chess at age five and I was a good player by the age of seven or so. I also liked geography. We had a big atlas and I memorized every statistic in it. Again, by age seven, I could tell you the capital of every state or country (until the breakup of Africa, which made it harder); the longest rivers and their lengths; and heights of mountains too. I would classify myself as an over-achiever/under-achiever. That is, the things that truly interested me, I was brilliant at, while things that left me uninterested, I often ignored or failed at. That was my story in high school.

This weird home environment left my early upbringing to my brother John. He took good care of me when Mom was not capable of doing so, while Pop was never home. Unfortunately, that all came to an end in the late summer of 1950 when John went off to the University of Pennsylvania. Unlike me, he was a great student. Upon graduating Penn, he entered the Fels Institute for city management, where he graduated first in his class. He went on to become the longest-tenured city manager in the entire country, until illness finally forced him into retirement. He followed the same path that our father did. My father was an incredible picture of health until he turned 75, when heart problems forced him to retire. Overnight, his tremendous fortitude left him; he aged ten years in a matter of weeks. Both of them would otherwise have worked until they dropped.

How could I belong to this family? Although highly intelligent and a great student until my sophomore year of high school, I totally lost interest in schoolwork and watched as my grades fell. I attribute this in large part to taking SP (Special Progress) that combined the seventh, eighth and ninth grades into two years. I knew that was a big mistake, as I was slow to grow and socially immature. I had planned to dump the test so that I wouldn't be eligible for SP. My father tricked me: he told me to go ahead and do well to see how highly I rated and that he wouldn't make me go through SP. After I did very well, he did make me take it.

This left me well behind my fellow students in everything but academics. Although finally growing to 5'10" in my senior year, I was out of place throughout high school. I was furious with Pop and I guess I took it out on him by basically dropping out: skipping classes, rarely doing homework and spending every free hour in the schoolyard. I was a very good athlete but refrained from joining organized teams. I was a true loner, a renegade, and once John left I had little supervision. The good times were when he came home for the summers. I idolized him; he was like a true father to me.

Despite all of that, I managed to get into Queens College, just biding my time really; but then came bridge. Andy took me to my first duplicate at the Town & Country bridge club in Great Neck. It was a big game and we

managed to finish fourth, which we thought was pretty good. I dropped out of college and started hanging out at the club and played with some of the regulars. Bridge took over my day-to-day activities. I played a lot at T. & C. with different regulars. One in particular was Lenny Lieberman, a big burly guy with acne problems. He was about ten years older than me but we became great friends. We would often go out after the game, whether we played together or not. We would go to the Blue Bay Diner a couple of miles away, which stayed open very late, and spend hours discussing hands or just hanging out. We also would go to Chinatown in downtown Manhattan, a good forty minutes away; that would invariably be an all-night affair, getting home at dawn. We spent so many great nights together. Lenny ultimately moved to Las Vegas and wound up becoming a pit boss. Years after, we reunited and whenever I was in Vegas, which was a good amount, I would see him. Sadly, he died in a car accident in his mid-forties. That was really painful.

Working on my bridge game, I would deal out hands, bid them and then play them out. I could see how the hands were unfolding and what fascinating end positions I might reach. It was so interesting to see that endplays, squeezes, throw-ins, etc. would come up quite frequently. These techniques were fast becoming part of my repertoire. Bidding the hands helped a good amount, improving partnership communication. I attribute my rise in the bridge ranks in large part to this practice. Besides T. & C., I went to the other prominent bridge club in Queens, Barclay's in Astoria, which was home to many of the other good bridge players in the area.

Gladys Collier, a regular at T. & C., took me under her wing and became my patron. She bought me a beautiful new '64 white Ford convertible with a red leather interior and we traveled around playing in all sorts of tournaments. I've always been a car guy and I loved that car: it was hot. That was around the time that the James Bond movies came out and he had that amazing Aston Martin with all sorts of weapons and escape methods. Ever since I saw *Goldfinger*, I wanted an Aston Martin. It took me almost forty years but I finally got the most gorgeous Vantage DB7 in 2003.

However, the Vietnam war was looming and, now that I was out of college, the draft was impending. I joined the Navy Reserve to avoid the inevitable draft. Rather than take on the fight of a conscientious objector, I thought I could survive six months of active duty, most likely in the personnel office of a ship — fool that I was. I had to attend meetings on the weekends as part of my commitment to the Reserve, which I did do occasionally. However, weekends were for bridge tournaments and I managed to become a Life Master in 1964, going from 37 masterpoints to 374. Then, my world collapsed. I got a letter saying I had been activated for missing too many meetings and I had to spend not six months but two years in the Navy. Read the fine print, damn it! I was violently ill.

## Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll... and Bridge

Peter Weichsel has won three world bridge championships, and twenty-five North American titles, and became a member of the Bridge Hall of Fame in 2004. He has been part of great teams (C.C. Wei's Precision Team in the 1970s, and the Aces later on), and has won everything it is possible to win in the game. But that's just his bridge career. This fascinating autobiography tells the story of the man behind those accomplishments. Weichsel has always marched to his own drummer, from his early years as part of a Jewish immigrant family in New York, through his time in the US Navy during the Vietnam war, then experiencing the 60s counter-culture in San Francisco (and bringing that sensibility and dress style to the staid bridge scene), and living through periods as a sports betting baron, a pool shark, and even a mob hit target.

There's great bridge in here, of course – lots of it – and plenty of tips for readers to learn from. This is a man who has spent almost sixty years playing with and against the best in the world, and he pulls no punches when it comes to partners and opponents – or, indeed, his own failings.

Book 1 covers Weichsel's life up to his first Bermuda Bowl win in 1983.

