

MEET "MR. FOLK DANCING" . . . VYTAUTAS FINADAR BELIAJUS

By . . . Liesl Barnett



VYTS BELIAJUS – IN A BURMESE DANCE

The small gentleman with the big name really needs no introduction to most folk dancers in the United States and Canada – after all, who does not know Vyts? And there are uncounted numbers of people who, though they are not personally acquainted with him, have benefited by Vyts' talents and his research.

Vyts was born in Pakumprys, Lithuania, a small farming community, where people lived in log cabins with thatched roofs and dirt floors. They

raised their own food, spun flax into linen for their clothing, and used the oil with which to fry food. There was little money, and there were no luxuries. They wore wooden shoes, known as klumps, and their spoons and forks also were of wood. The dishes were made of clay from their own land. Schools, churches and movie theaters were in the nearest town – 8 kilometers away – Prieanai. Thus people in Pakumprys generally also furnished their own entertainment, consisting of "talkas". Talkas are the Lithuanian equivalent of the American quilting bee. Women get together to join in the cabbage shredding, quartering potatoes for planting, pulling, tedding and breaking flax by hand, rye gleaning, and other chores. These chores, which required many long days of activity, were happy occasions. What kept the labors with such primitive tools from becoming tedious and boring was the Lithuanians' love for song. For while there was some exchanging of gossip and news, it was the singing which made these talkas memorable occasions and lightened the burden.

Vyts' mother, who had an almost unlimited repertoire of songs in many languages (such as Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, German and Tartar), was usually the leader of the talkas. She would sing the first word or words of a song and the others would join in. Vyts says that it is a mystery to him to this day how his mother always seemed to know the latest songs, almost before they had "come off the presses". He claims that she sang a popular song of the era, "Kur Bėga Šešupė" as soon as Mairionis had composed it. Thus, it would seem that singing was second nature not only to Lithuanians in general, but to the Beliajus clan in particular.

Traditions, bound up in religion, were of the utmost importance in the life of the village. Dancing was not as popular as singing, for it interfered with the work. But when joyous occasions permitted interruption of labors, such as weddings, baptisms, name days and May festivals (geguzines), there was dancing as well as singing. When Vyts was three or four years old he danced his first Suktinis at his mother's second wedding. As he was small his partner, an adult, lifted him off the floor and spun him round and round. "It was such fun", says Vyts in reflection.

When Vyts began to attend school in Prieanai there were many chances for dancing. This was done mostly to the accompaniment of their own voices and the dances were mainly the popular dances of that day. (Vyts never really mentioned his age, so use your own conjectures, readers, as when "that day" was. However, some of the popular dances were what we now call folk dances. Pas d'Esplan, Krakowiak, Alexandrovski, Korobuska, etc. They were predominantly of Russian origin, but there were also several simple German dances, which were much in favor with young people. Vyts was between 7 and 9 years old when he did these dances.

The matriarch of Vyts' family, his 85 year-old grandmother, decided

that she wanted to see some of the 11 children she had raised before her death. They were living in Chicago and Denver, only Vyts' mother, of those who were living, had remained in Lithuania. The old lady had not seen some of her children in over 35 years; others had left home some 50 years ago. The family, while sympathetic to her wish to see her children once more, did not feel that anyone 85 years old should undertake such a long trip alone. Vyts, 11 at that time, was chosen to accompany his grandmother as interpreter or what-have-you. She knew no language other than Lithuanian; could neither read nor write, and the young Vyts was to assist her in all these areas. However, it seems grandmother ended up by looking after Vyts, for his curiosity caused him forever to wander off, and, in looking back, Vyts is still wondering how he ever got back home, as he never knew the names or addresses of the hotels where they were staying.

Vyts remained in Chicago where there was a large concentration of Lithuanians. There were many choirs and there was much social dancing, and among some of the church groups, the old Lithuanian dances were in favor, but there were no folk dance groups as we know them now. During his early days in the windy city, Vyts happened to read Jules Verne's "Trip Around the World in 80 Days" and credits this work with awakening in him an interest in the arts and peoples of the Orient. As soon as he learned to speak some English, Vyts made friends with some Arabs and Hindus, spending week ends among them and learning their dances. Most folk dancers are unaware that Vyts is quite an authority on Hindu dances and customs. During the anniversary of the birth of Sri Ramakrishna, founder of the Vendanta, he was asked to arrange a one hour program of Hindu dances. Accepting, Vyts trained a group of dancers, choreographing a program, telling a story through Hindu dances. The Chicago Press was lavish with its praise for the young immigrant from Lithuania, bestowing a supreme compliment on him, likening him to Uday Shan Kar, a comparison Vyts still treasures. It is not a daily occurrence to compare a non-Hindu with the foremost exponent of Hindu dancing.

The Lithuanian families in Chicago wanted their children to learn some Old Country dances, but the only instructor was a Russian, who taught Ukrainian and Russian dances to Lithuanian tunes, and the mothers objected to the "Russianization" of their youngsters. In 1928 Vyts appeared on the scene, dancing at an anniversary concert of "Naujienos", the Lithuanian daily newspaper. He had trained his partner, Irene Juozaitis, and together they danced Oriental and Lithuanian dances. These were the first Lithuanian dances some of the audiences had seen since coming to America and after the program they approached Vyts with requests to teach these dances to their children. So, early in 1929 Vyts opened his first dance studio in what was then the Lithuanian section of Chicago. Soon he was choreographing dances for the stage presentations of various Lithuanian

groups and choirs, especially one known as "Pirmyn". They were ambitious in their programming, choosing plays by the great classic writers, operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan and once even presenting "Carmen". In 1933, when Chicago was host city to the World's Fair, Vyts was appointed to train a group to present a program for Lithuanian Day. It was an appointment he enjoyed tremendously and the teenagers he had trained were the hit of the Fair. The dancers, too, had enjoyed their "work" and they decided to form a permanent Lithuanian folk dance club. Thus, in Chicago, in 1933, was born the Lithuanian Youth Society, the first Lithuanian folk dance group in the World. Not even Lithuania had such a group, as yet! This new group was soon in great demand for appearances at Fairs, ethnic festivities and celebrations of all kinds. The happy people, who so obviously loved what they were doing, the colorful yet simple costumes and the distinctive style of the songs and dances they performed, made them the favorites of any program on which they were scheduled. A most interested spectator at one of their appearances was Dorothea Nelson, a member of the Chicago Park District Recreational Activities Council. She approached Vyts with an offer to teach folk dancing as part of the park programs. Vyts, thinking this was a new kind of flattery, said, "sure" to humor the lady, not expecting to hear anything further about this matter. However, three days later, to Vyts' complete amazement, a letter arrived, repeating the offer, and inviting him to the Park Board office to discuss the position!

While dancing at the World's Fair Vyts became acquainted with young people from other nationality groups and became fascinated and enchanted with the dances of other nations. He visited their groups - Czechs, Danes, Mexicans, Swedes, Yugoslavs and others - and began to attend the classes conducted by Paul and Gretel Dunsing, who have since become favorites of many folk dance camps. Vyts also at this time became associated with Vasil Avramenko (mentioned in November 1962: Meet the Evanchuks) and his Ukrainian dancers, and several Zionist Youth groups. Thus, when he was called to the Park office he was already prepared with some diversified material, though he felt, not nearly enough. The Park Board, as Vyts puts it, "subdivided" him among the many ethnic groups and locations.

In 1939 Chicago presented the first large-scale, international folk dance festival at the tremendous Soldier's Field, home of many huge sports events. Vyts Beliajus's contributions were as usual his Lithuanians, a Polish group and the first Jewish group (they were not yet "Israelis"). Also at this time Vyts ventured into the publishing field, by publishing a magazine called "Folk Lore" for the Park District. He opened the first folk dance house, called "Folk Dancers' Nook", where a different nationality was featured each weekend, national food specialties were served and the dances and songs of these nationalities were featured on the programs. The Nook received considerable mentioning in the press, and was

successful in the beginning. Unfortunately, for the venture, the neighborhood changed and people refused to come to it. Thus, reluctantly, Vyts closed the Nook. He soon bounced back and organized the first Kolo group. His young Lithuanian dancers and his Kolo group were the first dancers to appear with the Duquesne "Tammies". When Matt Gouze first organized his Tamburitza group they were - around 1938 - a strictly instrumental body. When they attended one of Sarah Gertrude Knott's National Folk Festivals in Washington, D.C., she wanted dancers as well as musicians. The Tammies had no dancers, so Vyts and his young dancers, who by then had become quite familiar with Kolos, appeared on stage with the orchestra, dancing Seljancica, Zikino, Malo and other Kolos in their Lithuanian costumes.

While directing one of the finest Polish dance groups in Chicago, Vyts came to the attention of the University of Chicago. Some board members had attended one of the programs at the Settlement House of Northwestern University, where Vyts and his Polish dancers were presenting a program of Polish songs, dances and customs. This led to his engagement, in 1937, as folk dance teacher at the International House of the University of Chicago. This became the first place in the U.S.A. where people got together for international folk dancing on a purely recreational basis, much as we do it now all over the country. Here Vyts began to introduce the first Kolos and Greek dances, which were to become favorites with most folk dancers before long. He organized the first presentations of huge St. John's Day festivals in Lithuanian style, an event attended and enjoyed by many thousands of dancers and spectators. For the Park District, Vyts organized virtually hundreds of local park festivals.

Due to his appearance at the National Folk Festivals presented by Sarah Gertrude Knott, in Chicago, in 1936, and subsequently, in 1937, in Washington, D. C., Vyts was in great demand by the Physical Education Departments of several universities; the YMCA-YWCA, directed by Frances Helen Mains and Sandy Beach Hunt, who also "adopted" Vyts. He says: "Although I never attended any University, I have to my credit hundreds of teaching sessions at several of them. I never attended them - I only went through them and taught in them".

No man can go through a life that is but an extended pastoral idyll. So into Vyt's life the rain clouds began to appear. They came first in the form of Pearl Harbor. All the young men from his LYS and most of the youths from his Polish group were soon gone. Vyts, too, left Chicago, for Fairhope, Alabama, and the School of Organic Education, all the dances were of British tradition and origin. Here Vyts introduced the international flavor and soon the first large International Folk Dance Festival was held in the Deep South, in Fairhope, in 1943.

(Concluded in the December 1963 issue)