



Marcel and Kathy Vinokur at a Menlo Park Folk Dancers' party celebrating their 80th birthdays—Photo by Gary Anderson

## Marcel Vinokur – Part One

# THE EARLY YEARS

By Loui Tucker

Marcel has been a part of the Northern California international folk dance movement for over 50 years. Marcel agreed to be interviewed in September of 2009. Although not a word-for-word transcript, this article is based on that interview.

Marcel was born in 1929 in Ostrava, the third largest city in Czechoslovakia. He was the only child of his Czech mother and Ukrainian father. He was given the French name Marcel because his family lived in France in his early years. They were living in Czechoslovakia, however, when Germany occupied the country in 1939, an event Marcel remembers. While almost all his classmates died in concentration camps, Marcel and his parents were lucky enough to be able to emigrate to the United States. They arrived in New York City as refugees when Marcel was 10 years old.

Marcel attended one of the three science high schools for boys, and graduated second in his class. He attended Cornell and was enrolled in Engineering Physics. He lived in the men's dormitories and there were no women in his classes. Most of the other men in this classes were war veterans, older and more mature, and they easily attracted the attention of the girls on campus.

In spring of 1950, one of men in the dormitory, after several attempts, finally talked Marcel into going to the folk dance club which met in an out-of-the-way gym at the edge of campus. Marcel had never heard of folk dancing, and did not know how to dance. He had some musical training and a good sense of rhythm and quickly found that when taught a dance, he could do it. As Marcel put it, "This changed my whole life!" He discovered that "if a shy, socially-challenged young man could learn to dance, he got to dance with a girl!"

The club at Cornell University was attended by 50-60

students, and it seemed natural that it would lean in the direction of an academic approach to teaching and mastering dances. The adviser to the club was Roger Knox, who had an administrative position at Cornell. He and his wife Marjorie had been members of the Berkeley Folk Dancers, and he instilled the principles that they followed in the club. Most importantly, new dances were taught three weeks in a row, and records were kept to be sure they were done sufficiently often afterwards (a practice Marcel follows to this day). Another important practice was that the person charged with running the program had to be sure dances recently taught were reviewed and played. It was not permissible for a leader to simply put on his or her favorite dances.

When a new person attended a few weeks in a row, he or she was given a set of mimeographed dance notations the club members had produced based on existing syllabi, instructions that came with records, and notes written by club members. Marcel obtained such a set, which he still has. That was the first item that went into his treasure trove of dance notations!

Near the end of the spring semester, Michael Herman came to give a workshop, which Marcel attended. Marcel remembers that the Hambo was taught, and when he tried doing it with another beginner, they both landed on the floor!

### International folk dancing in 1950

- Almost exclusively couple dances from Northern and Central Europe, with the exception of a few Serbian kolos.
- The main sources of dances were the ethnic communities in the United States and a few books.
- Squares and contras were an integral part of every folk dance club's repertoire.
- There were essentially no Polish, Israeli, Middle Eastern, Greek, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, French, Scottish Country, English, or Scandinavian (except for the Hambo) dances. There were no Balkan dances except for a few kolos.
- With a few exceptions, almost all the dances that are popular today had not been introduced yet. Dances being done then that are still done today include Korobushka, Alexandrovski, Kohanochka, Russian Two Step, Troika, Meitschi Putz Di, Little Man in a Fix, Totur, Road to the Isles, Miserlou, and Corrido.
- The repertoire of any dance group was rather limited, probably fewer than 100 simple dances. With a little effort, you could learn all the dances in a year or so.
- Mainwoods Dance Camp (run by the Michael and Mary Ann Herman) and Stockton Folk Dance Camp (run by Lawton Harris) were in their infancy.
- Dance music was recorded on 78 rpm records (33 rpm records first came on the market in 1949). The folk dance communities on the West Coast and East Coast did not have identical repertoires and some dances were done differently.

That summer Marcel worked at the Naval Ordnance Lab in Washington, D.C.. The lab operated former German wind tunnels, and his experience there re-enforced his decision to go into Aeronautical Engineering. More importantly, Marcel learned a lot about folk dancing that summer. He attended the

two main dance groups. There was another very small group whose teacher was an older man with very poor eyesight. He owned a large collection of records and various syllabi. Marcel spent much of his weekends at this teacher's apartment copying things by hand (remember, it was 1950 and there were no Xerox machines). When he returned to Cornell in the fall for his senior year, Marcel knew enough to become one of the student teachers at their dance club. Another activity that Marcel discovered at Cornell with fellow dancers was camping, which would play a large role in his activities in California.

From there Marcel went to graduate school in Princeton (another all-male school) to study Aeronautical Engineering. There was an active folk dance group, and most of the male dancers who attended were mathematicians and engineers. It seemed to Marcel that all the mathematicians he knew were dancers. Marcel did some of the teaching.

Princeton is near New York City, where Marcel also danced. One of the women at Michael Herman's class started an Israeli exhibition group which Marcel joined. He would travel to New York City for rehearsals and performances and spend the night at his parents' apartment. While a member of that group, he attended Israeli weekend workshops and learned the latest Israeli dances.

He also attended the Kolo Jamboree (the New York version of the Kolo Festival), the high point of which was dancing to the live music of the Banat Tamburitza orchestra, whose recorded kolos they had danced to all those years. It was there where Marcel got to know Dick Crum.

During his time at Princeton, Marcel learned many new dances and began buying records. He was also introduced to two musical activities – singing madrigals and playing the recorder – activities that he continued when he came to California.

### **Michael Herman**

Marcel credits Michael Herman with the direction and structure of folk dancing on the East Coast. It was Michael Herman who saw the need for music, and he arranged to either acquire recordings or have recordings made and then marketed them under his own Folk Dancer label. He also stressed the need for standardization. He envisioned a world where folk dancing would be portable and consistent so dancers could go to different folk dance events and be confident that they would be able to do the dances.

Though his dissertation was not yet finished, Marcel accepted an offer from the Lockheed Missiles Division in Van Nuys, California. He arrived in California in December 1955. The day he reported for work, he heard talk that Lockheed would be moving to the San Francisco Bay Area. Although Marcel found a couple of dance groups in the Los Angeles area, they required long drives and there were no freeways in those days. He also quickly discovered that some of the dances he knew were done a little differently in California.

Seven months later, in June of 1956, Marcel moved to the San Francisco Bay Area.

**TO BE CONTINUED**