



Al and his late wife, Pat, in 2010. *Photo by L. Tucker.*

Endearing Memories of Al Lisin

by David Heald

In the mid-90s, I had come to the Bay Area for work and of course after arriving, I searched for folk dancing, first attending Suzanne Rocca Butler's group in Palo Alto. It was that night that I first met Al Lisin and his wife, Pat. We struck up an immediate friendship that lasted many years. Wednesday nights were always a treat, enjoying dancing with Suzanne's group, but especially being able to spend more time with the Lisins. My life was very nomadic at the time, only being in the Bay Area on weekdays while traveling back to Solvang in Southern California on Friday nights trying to keep our local folk dancing group alive.

It wasn't long after meeting Al and Pat that they invited me to join them at the Palomanians on Tuesday nights, which opened up a whole new circle of friends, and our friendship continued to grow. On the infrequent weekends I stayed in the Bay Area, we shared time together with hikes at the Rancho San Antonio Preserve. It was there that we discovered we had much more in common beyond folk dancing. Of particular note, Pat and I especially had a passionate love of native California plants. We both knew the scientific names of most of the plants at the Preserve.

Al was actively involved with leading volunteers doing trail maintenance in the Santa Cruz Mountains. His photos showed how arduous and challenging that work was, often having to remove extremely large trees that had fallen across trails during winter storms. His trail work beckoned

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to me though, because of a demanding work schedule, I was never able to join them, but I was always wistful that I could.

Soon they asked me to come stay with them. That was so unexpected and surprising, and I worried about imposing on them. They were persistent, however, and their interest in having me stay with them was so incredibly endearing. I need not have worried. With my nomadic life-style, they would have weekends to themselves, and during the week, since work demanded such long hours, I would leave work quite late, going directly to dance with them on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. Al and I developed a special kinship for many Balkan dances, frequently trading off leading, spurring each other's memories when there were infrequent lapses, and reconstructing dances jointly that we might not have done for quite some time.

Al and Pat had been going to the Saratoga group on Thursday nights and they encouraged me to join them there. That added another evening to the weekday dancing, so now we shared three nights a week dancing together. Through initial contact with them, I developed a wealth of friendships that has meant so much to me.

Even though I was staying with them, we actually spent more time together at the folk dancing groups than at their home. There were many times, however, when I actually was there for dinner and was treated to delicious meals that frequently included their garden-fresh vegetables and strawberries. Gardening turned out to be another unexpected, shared interest.

A particularly moving memory was hearing about Al's family's harrowing escape from Russia during the Communist Revolution. They made the strenuous and extremely risky trek across Siberia, with gruesome warnings of those who had earlier attempted the same escape unsuccessfully. The courage and fortitude that must have taken was unimaginable! Nevertheless, they reached the border with China, and were smuggled across. They resided for some time in China while arrangements were made to cross the Pacific to San Francisco.

Another intriguing part of Al's family history were some impressive photos of his father's

ambitious project of constructing quite large golden, turnip-shaped domes for their Russian Orthodox Church, a remarkable undertaking.

One of my very compelling memories of time with Al and Pat was returning from Solvang Sunday nights (usually quite late) and finding them engaged in an intensely competitive word game of Boggle, a word-finding game in which players find as many words as they can from a random assortment of 25 letters in 3 minutes. Anyone who has played the game knows that creativity, quick thinking, and an exceptional vocabulary are the qualities that win the game. In the later years of my time with them, it was sadly apparent that Pat's mental capabilities were deteriorating, which was so distressing to see. In spite of that, in those last years, she was extremely focused and competitive with Al, winning about half of the games! It was particularly sobering for me, because, when they invited me to join them, I could only get a score about a third of theirs! I was so impressed that she could match Al, and was able to do so much better than I could. At the end of the game, we would go over the words, and, yep, all those words were there.

By far, my most valued memory of Al and Pat is the shared passion we had for folk dancing and the resulting camaraderie with them. Most precious, was arriving in the Bay Area as a stranger, then rapidly developing such a tremendous number of amazing, dear friends, all because of the initial friendship with Al and Pat. Such a lasting treasure will stay with me for the rest of my life!



The author, David Health. *Photo by L. Tucker.*