

ELSA BACHER

By Laila Messer

"What makes you so dedicated to the folk dance clubs you lead?" I asked Elsa Bacher. That was the first question I asked as we sat down for an interview.

"I learned from Frank," was her simple answer. Elsa and her husband, Frank, were members of *Santa Rosa Folk Dancers*, *Petaluma/Novato Folk Dancers* and San Francisco's *Changs International Folk Dancers*. My husband and I met them at *Changs* in 1994. Their dedication to folk dancing was obvious. They brought the music and necessary equipment to the Club. In those days, the equipment consisted of a cassette player, the cassette tapes, speakers and a record player.

Why, I wondered aloud, would they bring a record player when the music was on tape? Elsa explained, "Frank's goal always was to please as many dancers as possible. He knew not all the dances were on tape. He wanted to be ready should someone request an 'oldie' so we brought along certain 45s, LPs, even some old 78s."

The drive from their home in Fulton to *Changs* was a distance of 68 miles. To ensure they would be able to have the equipment set up by 8 P.M., they would leave mid-afternoon. If traffic was light and the parking easy, there would be hours to spare before they could get into the building to set up.

"We did a lot of fun things in that spare time," Elsa said. "We went for walks in Golden Gate Park, we explored the neighborhood, we took naps, we had our supper. It was all most pleasant."

Frank had started folk dancing in Sonoma in 1947. Three years later he was commuting to San Francisco to dance at *Changs* often picking up fellow dancers along his route. Sometime in the 1960's he began bringing the music to the Club, which he did for more than thirty years.

Elsa started folk dancing in 1970 in Santa Rosa. She attended several Federation Teacher Training seminars in the mid-70's and began teaching in Santa Rosa. Her first summer at *Stockton Folk Dance Camp* was in 1978. It was there she and Frank met. They soon realized they were meant for each other. They married in 1982. Together they attended Camp every summer. Together they made the weekly round-trip of 136 miles.

Elsa realized Frank's dedication to *Changs* included more than just bringing the music. She saw him serve as a club board member and also on the *Folk Dance Federation* board. Elsa was not interested in attending meetings but went because Frank did.

"I was just an observer," she explained. "However, I did learn how the club and the Federation were run and how these organizations promoted folk dancing."

Despite her modesty, Elsa has contributed substantially. She has served on Institute, Research, and Insurance committees. Together they began serving as Insurance Chairpersons in 1991. Elsa continues still.

What Elsa really loves is learning dances, especially from the teachers at *Stockton Folk Dance Camp*. She admires teachers who present the steps in easy-to-grasp sections and also transmit the cultural feel of the dance. When *Changs* teacher, Ruth Ruling, fell ill, Elsa took over the class.

There are many teachers and devoted dancers who serve

their clubs in myriad ways. Frank and Elsa's devotion seems unusual. Elsa took exception claiming she and Frank were not unique, and, with great respect, started naming everyone she admires who teaches or serves a club. I interrupted to insist that, nevertheless, she and Frank were unique. Not only did they travel farther than most to dance, they also provided the music for clubs and for many Federation festivals.

As Frank's helper, Elsa became aware of just how much there was to do. They had to get the equipment to the location, set it up and have the program ready. Then, at the end of the festival, it all had to be taken down, packed up and stowed away until needed for the next event.

After dutifully making the trips to club and Federation functions for twenty-four years, their joint dedication ended with Frank's death in March 2007. Now Elsa continues the dedication and devotion she learned from Frank as she leads the *Petaluma/Novato* and *Santa Rosa Folk Dancers*.

When I learned Elsa does not get paid for her work at either club, I marveled once more at her dedication. "Oh, but I am so generously compensated," she said. "And how could I dance if I didn't have them."

The members of her two clubs show their appreciation by organizing a party where they contribute whatever amount of money they want into a "pot" for her. They also show their appreciation in other ways. They come regularly, they are eager to participate, they are happy dancing, they smile a lot. When I asked if they'd like to provide comments for this article, they were pleased to respond.

"She is able to share so much with so many."

"For parties, she puts together really fun programs."

"When you come to class, you know she is interested in you, not just your dancing feet."

"She makes us feel we get just what we need in class."

"She is sooo patient."

One new member said, "Things Elsa says stay in my mind, things like: To dance is to move; to move is to dance. Listen to the music. Face me, you don't have to look at me but face me. Keep dancing."

It is to these people to whom Elsa transmits the joy of dancing. It is these people who keep dancing alive. It is these people who again realize the best things in life are not things.

For that, we dancers thank Elsa.

So you think you know Marcel Vinokur?

By Loui Tucker

Saying that Marcel Vinokur teaches international folk dance classes is like saying Beethoven wrote music. It's like saying Rosa Parks rode buses. If the San Francisco Bay Area international folk dance community were a loaf of bread, Marcel would be a substantial portion of the yeast that has made it grow.

If all goes well, there will be an in-depth interview of Marcel in next month's *Let Dance!* magazine. This is more of a teaser article to tell you some details about Marcel that you might not know and explain why he is considered by those who have known him to be something of a folk dance giant.

For starters, Marcel has been teaching in the Palo Alto-Menlo Park area for over 50 years. Even that statement minimizes his accomplishments. In terms of sheer longevity, there are few others who have taught for as many years, but for most of those 50 years Marcel taught three classes a week. For one period of time he taught five nights a week! He was not part of a dance collective or cooperative. He didn't share teaching duties with another teacher or teachers. He taught all those dance classes himself.

On top of that, Marcel has been running a monthly folk dance party. That's 12 times a year, without fail, for over 40 years! And it's not just any old dance party – it's dancing in two adjacent rooms, with Marcel running two turntables or cassette decks or mini-disc players simultaneously to provide beginning-intermediate dances in one room and advanced dances in the other. [Dancers can frequently be seen scurrying from one room where a dance has finished to catch the last 30 seconds of the dance being played in the other room.]

But wait - that's not all. His annual New Year's Eve Dance Party gives several generations of dancers the opportunity to renew acquaintances, reconnect, and dance together. It has been compared to a family reunion, a class reunion, a pilgrimage, and a clan gathering. It's the same two rooms of dancing as the monthly parties, but add into the mix that some dancers have made this their New Year's Eve tradition every year for 30+ years.

To really do justice to the scope of Marcel's involvement, you'd have to also mention the annual Yosemite trip that he still organizes that combines folk dancing with camping, and the many years he hosted a several-times-a-year weekend dance workshop in the hills above Saratoga.

At his recent 80th birthday celebration (a folk dance party, of course) it was mentioned that many of our local dance teachers are products of Marcel's dance classes. John Nicoara, Alan Rothchild, Todd Wagner, Martin Frost, and I (to name just a few) all attended Marcel's classes and dance parties in the 1970s and 1980s and we all became teachers. Many dance teachers produce dancers. Marcel's reach extended into another generation by fostering the teachers who have produced still more dancers.

John Nicoara commented that when Kathy Kerr, another teacher, was approached about teaching a dance class through the YWCA on Stanford campus, she declined but said, "Ask John. He mentioned that someday he'd like to teach a class

like Marcel." Eleven months after first attending Marcel's class, John bought a new record player and a dozen records and began teaching - and continued to teach for 17 years. John also credits Marcel with bringing him his wife, Jan. They met at a Saturday night party in July of 1973.

Alan Rothchild remembers "seeing Marcel at workshops learning dances and then, off on the side, he would be meticulously taking notes on the dance. Perhaps that is the way he kept all the dances in his head. It is like a steel trap. I was always amazed at the way he would remember everything." Marcel's pre-Saturday party potlucks were another way Marcel brought dancers together. Alan Rothchild said that "Getting people together at the potlucks before a Saturday night dance party was special too. I didn't attend that many, but when I did, I got a chance to meet people as opposed to just dancing with them in the same room."

When interviewed for this article, Todd Wagner made the observation that "while a lot of teachers simply demonstrate the dances and ask you to imitate them, Marcel is THE master at breaking down the steps ('This dance is counted slow-quick-quick, it has five figures, the first figure starts with a hop on the right foot,' etc). While our goal is to eventually do a dance freely (without moving our lips when we count), some of us really need this level of detail while learning. Marcel also teaches every dance at least three weeks in a row and makes sure it gets done frequently in later weeks and at parties."

Todd went on to note that "The main thing I learned from Marcel is to do your homework. If someone asks about the transition from one figure to another or what to do on the second measure of figure three, you should know the answer. I always break down the steps the way Marcel does and make sure every dance gets taught multiple times and done frequently."

When I started teaching dance classes in the early 1980s, I modeled my classes and teaching style after Marcel's. He used a quarter system with a party at the end of each quarter, and that's what I did. I taught dances three weeks in a row because that was what Marcel did. He taught Balkan-Israeli - me too. I chose a night of the week that would not conflict with Marcel's classes and told my students that when they wanted to add another night of dancing to their schedule, they should go to his classes. I attended Marcel's monthly parties and encouraged my students to attend them. I made notes of what dances Marcel was teaching and playing so I could put them on my list of dances to teach.

Marcel's memory and knowledge of folk dances is legendary. There was a joke going around that if you woke Marcel at 2:00 AM out of a sound sleep and asked him something like, "At Kolo Festival in 1990, there was a Bulgarian dance taught on Friday afternoon by Jaap Leegwater. It was a *râčnica* and I can't remember the name. Do you remember the name?" – Marcel would remember the name, and he would remember the dance. His personal collection of dance notations, syllabi, and music is extraordinary.



Club & Council Clips

Sacramento International Folk Dance and Arts Council—

We are dashing around putting the final touches on Camellia Festival, March 12-14. Whatever you do, don't miss the Saturday night party with Chubritza! This is a rare opportunity to dance your feet off to the greatest party band ever! The question is, how many instruments will they bring with them? No one has ever been able to do an accurate count of them all, but let's just say they are a versatile band! Talented. Well dressed. And FUN! Be there! For details on the 3-day festival, go to folkdancesac.org.

Our annual Scholarship Ball, held in Placerville for the first time, was a huge success. The reason was the Wolterbeekers! I refer to their young dancers as well as Al and Teddy Wolterbeek, themselves. The kids did a super performance of a Russian and a Ukrainian dance with a very clever one minute costume change between dances. The applause was thunderous! They also staged an amazing bake sale with all kinds of yummys to benefit their own Stockton Folk Dance Camp scholarship fund. As usual, they were a wonderful addition on the dance floor. We are all in awe of Al and Teddy and all they do for folk dancing. So we have chosen them as this year's inductees to our newly formed Sacramento Council Honor Roll. They will be honored at the Camellia Festival Concert on Sunday and given space in our perpetual scrap book, to be passed down from year to year. Last year, our first honorees were Irene Oxford and Oscar Faoro. We hope you will be there for that, too. It is a wonderful show of 13 dance groups from the Sacramento area and with Koraci headlining the show with a fabulous Croatian number.

On a more sober note, Camtia has very sadly decided to retire from performing. We will be doing a Farewell performance at the Bock Bierfest, April 3, about 7:00 PM, at the Turn Verein, 3349 J Street, Sacramento. We just celebrated our 50th anniversary of continuous dancing and performing with a wonderful reunion party. But knees and feet are not what they once were. It is, unfortunately, a common story. But we are more than just a dance club and will continue being a family and having fun together.

—Barbara Malakoff

BERKELEY FOLK DANCERS.

Our new set of intermediate class instructors and their class are planning the **March Fun Night**. Scheduled on March 19 at Live Oak Park Social Hall on Shattuck and Berryman, Berkeley, from 7:45 to 10:30 PM, the Fun Night is not to be missed. Join the festivity for \$5 for members and \$7 for non-members. Much dancing and some edibles will whisk the grey away as we "**Swing into Spring**." Contact Bill Lidicker 510-528-9168 or Marija Hillis 510-549-0337 for further information.

—Naomi Lidicker

BALKAN DANCERS OF MARIN. It's March and the long awaited Balkan *Plus* party is coming March 27. Directions and the dance program are in this issue of *Let's Dance* magazine. We have once again programmed for the folkdancers who love the classic folk dances and we have again left request slots. A wonderful group of friendly dancers make this a special event. There are excellent snacks, a superb wood floor in a lovely hall and a decent sound system. Come and join the fun.

Memories of Carlos

Carlos Ruling

Our beloved fellow folk dancer, Carlos Ruling, passed away on Friday, November 13 as a result of injuries suffered in a fall. Carlos was a long-time member and, occasionally, the president of Chang's Folk Dancers of San Francisco. He served as President of the Folk Dance Federation of California and unofficial auxiliary member of the Stockton Folk Dance Committee through his late wife, Ruth Ruling. His career with the San Francisco Unified School District as both a teacher and administrator spanned 30 years. Carlos retired in 1980, which offered him the time and opportunity to serve as treasurer of the Norwegian Club, among the many other responsibilities he assumed.



Photo by Suzanne Rocca-Butler

Carlos had a great sense of fun and humor. A favorite story shared recently was his recounting of one particularly memorable **Bay to Breakers** run. He and a fellow member of the Norwegian Club found a wheel chair on the premises and decided to participate in the annual run by taking turns being pushed along the course route, one of them wearing the typical Norwegian hat with the horns. The other runners happily parted for them to pass through. Apparently that run was the most unforgettable of the more than 14 runs in which he took part.

As a Navy man, Carlos served in the South Pacific during WWII. To this day a photo of Ruth's handsome, smiling fiancé in uniform stands proudly in their home. One cannot think of Carlos without also remembering his beloved wife, Ruth. They were the consummate team in a partnership bonded by deep love. Carlos was Ruth's constant ally and support. One could see the deep affection they shared even when she would chide him when he teased her, or roll her eyes when he enthusiastically added kicks when dancing *La Bastingue*. Although her passing in 2007 left a huge hole, Carlos cheerfully moved forward in his spirited way, never complaining, never dour.

Carlos was kind, joyful, and always shared his appreciation of life with those around him. Nothing could make one feel more special than his welcome greeting of, "As I live and breathe and hope to shout!"

His daughter, Kathleen Moore, son, Karl Ruling, and grandchildren, Dennis Robinson, Karen Ruling, and Margaret Ruling survive Carlos. Should you wish to honor Ruth and Carlos' memory and dedication to folk dance, the family requests that donations to the Stockton Folk Dance Camp Scholarship Fund would be their preference. You may send them to Bruce Mitchell, Director, Stockton Folk Dance Camp, 2429 Willow Creek Court, Cool, CA 95614.

A celebration of Carlos' life was held Sunday, January 3, 2010 at the Norwegian Club of San Francisco, 1900 Fell St, San Francisco.