

MEET "MR. FOLK DANCING" . . . VYTAUTAS FINADAR BELIAJUS
(Part II) By . . Liesl Barnett

Then TB struck, and Vyts was, for the first time in his active life, inactive. It was at this time that he started to publish "Viltis" as a letter to his many friends in the service. The diagnosis of Vyts' condition was "terminal" and he was not expected to live. Somehow Vyts managed to survive, but he had lost his voice entirely. For three long years he could not even speak in an audible whisper. His doctors wanted to slit his throat and insert a voice box into the cut, but Vyts refused. In 1945 he returned to Chicago, but without a voice; there was nothing he could do. His friend, Charlotte Chen, suggested that Vyts take over a teaching job at the International House, and he complied. Charlotte stood beside him, as he whispered instructions into her ear, and she conveyed them to the dancers. It was an odd way of teaching, but impressed by Vyts courage and spirit, the dancers kept coming, and gradually his voice started to return. Vyts preferred to trust in God, rather than the panel of specialists who had wanted to insert the voice box into his throat. He was up to his old tricks, traveling all over the country, teaching wherever he went, including the College of Jewish Studies. Wherever Vyts went to teach, he also went to learn — more dances, songs, folklore.

In 1949 Vyts was invited to teach at Stockton. On his way there he made teaching stops in Idaho and Washington State, teaching dances new to these areas. For two years Vyts taught in Stockton. Then, while on a tour in Wilmington, Delaware, TB struck for the second time. This time, the disease nearly did kill him. He was moved to a hospital in Denver, weighing less than 90 pounds, not even conscious that the last rites of the Church were being administered to him by a priest. A Denver friend was alerted to make the funeral arrangements, but again Vyts cheated death. TLC (Hospital term for "Tender, Loving Care"), prayer and his unshakable faith in his Maker helped him to survive this severe illness. His closest friends and associates, however, were advised that recovery, and, indeed, survival, were out of the question. Even if survival should prove possible, Vyts would be a permanent hospital case, an invalid for life. Vyts' friends were crushed by the news, and at a loss as to how to best break this to him. But once again the prophecies were gloomier than reality and once again Vyts recovered. After a 22-month's stay in the Denver sanatorium Vyts moved to San Diego. Once more he was active in folk dancing and became one of the guiding spirits of the successful "Down-Under" Statewide Festival, which he co-chairmanned with Vivian Woll. In Southern California's ideal climate his health continued to improve and his voice gradually returned.

In 1959 Vyts went on a tour and stopped in Denver for his annual check-up. It was then that he was told that he had cancer of the lung, was to cancel any and all engagements and immediately enter the hospital. Vyts realized that with cancer there is no fooling around, and agreed to the counsel of his doctors. He cancelled his engagements and moved his

belongings to the garages of Denver friends. Then he entered a hospital to undergo a delicate operation. Madelynne Greene, who needs no introduction to folk dancers anywhere, flew to Denver to bolster Vyts' spirits and courage. For this, he says, he is certainly in her debt. Again God and providence were kind to Vyts. The condition turned out to be non-malignant, although he did lose part of his lung. Throughout his trying times, dancers, Californians, in particular, rallied to Vyts' side and aid. He gratefully remembers the help, encouragements and prayers that were with him when they were so sorely needed.

Many dances that are to be found on our festival and club programs were introduced by this quiet and unassuming man. He has shared his vast knowledge of customs, costumes, songs and folklore with interested people everywhere for many years, and we hope that he will continue to do so for many more.

Vyts is the author of three books on folk dancing. "Dance and Be Merry", Volumes 1 and 2, 1940, 1941. And "The Dances of Lietuva", in 1951. The dances Vyts introduced to the Federation are legion; his choreographies, however, were mainly for stage use. Vyts says: "The dances I taught were as I learned them. If I learned them wrong, I taught them wrong". Extremely particular about



authenticity when teaching to ethnic groups, Vyts is completely unconcerned in this respect where purely social folk dance groups are concerned. For them he feels it is more important that a dance be enjoyed and enjoyable, rather than that it is authentic in every detail. According to Vyts fun elements should be the primary factor in teaching to recreational groups.

In view of all the activities on Vyts' calendar, it seemed a little foolish to ask him what his hobbies are. But ask him, I did. And, characteristically this was the answer: Religions and customs of all people and a sincere effort to understand them; to aid in striving towards a universal brotherhood of all men. To Vyts, this is somehow related to folk dancing and folk dancing is a valuable tool in this striving for world-wide understanding.

Another hobby, and, as he says, an expensive one, is again related to folk dancing. It is the publishing of *Viltis* (the Lithuanian word for Hope) and while at times the task is thankless and seems devoid of Hope, he loves it just the same.

This world-wide brotherhood is a subject Vyts takes very seriously — he tries to be a Moselem among Moslems, a Jew among Jews, a Roman among Romans. A 5000-year-old statement of utmost tolerance, uttered by a Hindu,

VYTAUTAS FINADAR BELIAJUS “Mr. Folk Dancing”

who has long lapsed into anonymity, is his guiding principle: “Different people call God different names and go on different paths, according to the the different ways of their understanding and illumination, but all the paths lead to the one God”. One of his idealistic dreams would be the formation of a truly International Folk Dance Club. The membership would boast such names as Kruschov, Castro, Mao Tse Tung, Chiang Kai Chek, Nehru, Kennedy, Adenauer and others. They would participate in the dancing, working off their aggressions on prysiadkas and leaps, etc., leaving them mentally and emotionally stimulated, yet physically too exhausted for political and warlike plottings and mayhem. U.N. – take note!!!

There is a great deal more to the life and activities of the man from Lithuania. He has done much and continues to do all in his power to further folk dancing. His life and exploits could easily fill a book. Vytautas Finadar Belliajus, the man who made folk dancing his way of life, is our foremost contender for the title “*Mr. Folk Dancing*”, and I, for one, feel privileged to know him.

