

OUTSIDE EVENTS SHAPE A FOLK DANCE CAREER

By Loui Tucker

This is a continuation of the interview that began in the November 2009 issue of Let's Dance! magazine. As before, this is not a word-for-word transcript, but is based on the interview and written materials provided by Marcel.]

At the end of 1970, Marcel was teaching one class on Wednesdays at the Menlo Park Recreation Center, plus one class at U.C. Santa Cruz on Fridays. In addition to his job at Lockheed Marcel also taught a graduate class one morning a week at Santa Clara University.

Layoffs at Lockheed: The first outside event that pushed Marcel into teaching folk dance was being laid off from Lockheed in February 1971. With a family to support, Marcel had to find another source of income. Kathy had taught school before she stopped to raise a family, but there were no openings for teachers at that time. Fortunately, there was a great demand for folk dance classes.

The Wednesday class in Menlo Park had lots of experienced dancers, and it was difficult to get beginners to attend, so Marcel started a beginning-intermediate class on Tuesdays at the Recreation Center that summer, and converted the Wednesday class to an advanced class. Also in the summer of 1971, Marcel started teaching a class for Foothill College on Mondays. Dances being taught in those years included Gerakina, Setnja, Sweet Girl, Laz Bar, Machar, Hora Pe Gheata, and Horehronsky Cardas.

Attendance in these classes increased rapidly. At its peak registration was 80 in the beginning class, 80 in the intermediate, 60 in the advanced class, and 140 at Foothill. Marcel also briefly had classes at the College of San Mateo 1972-73, and West Valley College in 1974.

Burgess Gymnasium Goes Up in Flames. The other event that impacted Marcel and the folk dance scene occurred on July 22, 1971, when Burgess Gymnasium burned down. Marcel had a party scheduled there on July 24 and expected a large crowd (typically 60-80 dancers). He asked for and was granted permission to use the Recreation Center. To accommodate the expected crowd, Marcel planned to use both rooms, using two speakers connected to one record player. That afternoon it occurred to him that he could play a different dance in each room if he used two record players. This could also solve the problem of how to accommodate dancers of various abilities and interests at one party.

A unique dance event was born that night, and has continued as a monthly event ever since, attracting dancers from all over the San Francisco Bay Area. The lobby between the two rooms was available for people to socialize. Kathy baked cakes and served refreshments. Later Kathy and Marcel organized potluck dinners at various people's homes before each party, which provided an opportunity for new and old dancers to get to know each other.

Marcel's very popular New Year's Eve parties had already started the previous year at a different location, and moved to Recreation Center in 1971. They became a fixture on the Bay Area folk dance scene. Again, Kathy made a vari-

ety of dishes, along with a special punch. With the help of others, the dance rooms and lobby were decorated. These New Years Eve parties became a sort of reunion event for many who gather each year to catch up with dancing friends.

Stockton Folk Dance Camp and Other Seminars and Workshops. Before 1971, with the exception of two years that he attended Mendocino Folklore Camp, Marcel learned all his dances at the annual Kolo Festival, occasional seminars at Stanford and various workshops throughout the Bay Area (some of which he sponsored). Since Marcel was now teaching many classes, he needed to expand his learning opportunities.

Marcel obtained a scholarship to attend the second week in Stockton in 1971. Atanas Kolarovski was one of the teachers, but he arrived with a brand new LP of dances, but no dance notations. Marcel, assisted by Ruth Miller, had the job of writing up Atanas' dances as he taught them that week. Those dances notations were later included with the LP. Marcel continued to attend Stockton until 1981 and many of his dancers also started to attend. In fact, one year Marcel and his dancers constituted the largest contingent at Stockton Folk Dance Camp. Marcel stopped attending Stockton primarily because his children were grown and he and Kathy wanted to take extended vacations in Europe each summer.

Beginning in 1972 Marcel convinced U.C.-Santa Cruz to send him to the Aman Institute in Los Angeles. For the next four years, after each institute, Marcel taught the Aman dances at two successive weekends in Menlo Park, as a sort of Aman Institute North.

Another important out-of-town venue was the North-South Teachers Seminar, started by Dean Linscott in 1972 in Carmel Valley. The purpose of this seminar was to bring together folk dance teachers from northern and southern California where two master teachers (one for couple dances and one for line dances) would teach dances they had previously introduced and provide an opportunity to polish them and to learn teaching techniques. This seminar eventually moved to Monte Toyon in Aptos. After Dean Linscott gave up running it, a committee consisting of both northern and southern California teachers has continued to run it, though the format has changed over time. With the exception of a couple of years, Marcel has attended all of them.

Marcel, Stan and Ruth. Another attempt to bring together dancers from northern and southern California was the San Luis Obispo Israeli Institute, and Marcel played an important role in its inception. This institute brought together Stan Isaacs, Ruth Browns and Marcel. These three local dance teachers followed similar folk dance paths, starting on the East Coast with an interest in both Balkan and Israeli dancing and moving to the Bay Area, where the three of them played important roles, and intersected often (See sidebars).

In the spring of 1973, Ruth Browns called a meeting to discuss the Israeli dance situation in California. There were many new Israeli dances that had come out, but some of them were done differently in northern and southern California. Ruth wanted to have an Israeli dance camp where teachers and dancers from all over California could learn the dances directly from the choreographers or other reputable teachers. Ruth knew Stan planned to visit California that summer, and could be the first teacher.

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

Marcel and Kathy had a close friend who was then teaching at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. During visits there, Marcel got to know the person who led the small folk dance group there. Marcel was therefore able to arrange for the San Luis Obispo Folk Dancers to sponsor the Israeli Institute. On short notice, Ruth contacted some of the southern California Israeli teachers, and the first Israeli Institute was born.

Dancing on The Deck. Another important dance event started by Marcel (in which Shirley Eastman played an important role) was the dance weekends at Bill Robson's Japanese garden. Shirley, having become very interested in Greek dancing, started a women's Greek exhibition group. In 1972 she attended a Greek workshop held in Half Moon Bay at a facility with a small wooden deck. One person who also attended that day was Bill Robson, a materials engineer at Ampex, who owned a Japanese garden in Saratoga. He observed, "I can do better than this!"

Bill, himself a casual folk dancer, decided to build a larger wooden deck overlooking his Japanese garden. Shirley invited Marcel and Kathy to attend the first weekend dance workshop and, as a result, Bill met Marcel and invited him to teach subsequent dance workshops there. Beginning in 1972 the workshops were only held during the summer, but participants voted to continue it year round, once a month. This was made possible because Marcel changed his Santa Cruz class from Friday to Thursday. Those dance weekends, at the Bill Robson's Japanese garden, involving 25-35 dancers, continued until 1983.

Marcel taught all day Saturday and Sunday morning from a list of request teaching. Bill served breakfast on Sunday and cooked steaks for dinner on Saturday. Kathy spent all Friday evening preparing salads, desserts, appetizers, and everything else. Participants brought sleeping bags and slept in their favorite places in the garden. After dinner on Saturday there was a dance party and then most people retired to a large hot tub that Bill had built.

Two members of Marcel's class who owned property in the Santa Cruz Mountains also decided to build wooden decks and sponsor weekend "folk-dance-cum-camping" events. The first was Hiram Pierce, who named his place Planina; those weekend dance events ran from 1972 until 1992. They were generally held on holiday weekends, and consisted of some teaching by local teachers. Marcel loaned his record collection in the beginning and did some of the teaching. One year, though, the guest teacher was Vyts Beliajus, one of the founders of the folk dance movement!

The other "dancing on the deck" takes place on property owned by Cliff Jenkins, also in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Cliff started holding weekend dance camp-outs in 1981 (once a year, until 1985 when it became twice a year), and they are still taking place, allowing dancers to camp and enjoy dancing, singing, and live music for all ages on a large outdoor deck. For about a dozen years this camp alternated with Planina in having events on Memorial and Labor Day weekends so the dancing community was not divided.

Adding Scottish Dances to the Mix. Before 1971, Marcel taught two Scottish dances: Rest and Be Thankful and Mairi's Wedding. Marcel would tell you himself that he wasn't exactly a Scottish dance aficionado. What got him hooked was when he learned Polharrow Burn and started teaching it in

February 1971. It went over surprisingly well with his largely Balkan-oriented class.

Dance is movement in time and space. Balkan dances emphasize the "time" aspect. Since his work is of a mathematical nature, and geometry plays a big role in his research, Marcel was intrigued by the interesting geometric patterns found in Scottish dances. Folk dancers who attended his classes in those days enjoyed both types of dances. (In checking his data, Marcel found he taught both Ludo Kopano and Polharrow Burn on the same evening!)

Once Marcel started attending Stockton, he learned many more Scottish dances from Stewart Smith. Since they take a long time to teach in a regular class, and he was learning so many, Marcel started to have a Scottish workshop every quarter on an afternoon of the monthly party. He taught four dances each time, and there would be as many as six sets at some workshops. Later, when he increased the Scottish workshops to once a month, he taught only 3 (only three!?) dances per workshop.

Still later, in 1989, the Scottish workshops were converted to "Advanced Dances" workshops. This hiatus from Scottish dances lasted until 1996, when Marcel resumed teaching Scottish dances in his weekly classes where he maintains 14 Scottish dances in his repertoire.

The Decline in Popularity. In the mid-1980s, the decline in interest in folk dancing finally affected Marcel's classes, but by that time Marcel had a larger contract from NASA Ames, and Kathy was finally able to obtain a teaching job in San Carlos, so Marcel did not have to rely on folk dancing for all his income. In the spring of 1985 Marcel gave up the Wednesday advanced class because of diminishing attendance.

The Monday Foothill class had moved several times to increasingly smaller venues, from a gym, to a dance studio, to the Jewish Community Center in south Palo Alto, to a multi-purpose room under sponsorship of the Los Altos Recreation Dept. In 2004, Marcel decided to close that class and combine it with his Tuesday Menlo Park class.

Marcel made the switch from LPs to mini-discs in the early 1990s through the efforts of Andy Kacsmar, also a long-time dance student. Over the course of many months, Andy moved the music on Marcel's entire record collection to this smaller, lighter, more transportable format. Andy has also been responsible for acquiring and maintaining the amplifiers, mixers and speakers, and he assists Marcel at the monthly parties. There is even some talk of switching Marcel to a computer.

By this time, the absence of Marcel's many classes was made up for by the existence of other classes taught by his former students. For example, Suzanne Rocca Butler became a prominent folk dance teacher in the area. She also served on the Stockton Folk Dance Camp Committee and taught a class there in line dance techniques. After taking over the Palo Alto Folk dancers, she started her own class on Wednesdays, which is currently meeting in Atherton.

Loui Tucker started her class in Saratoga in 1980, and in some sense has been a replacement for Marcel's Foothill and Santa Cruz classes. Loui also has class specializing in the dances of Israel on Mondays in Sunnyvale.

The Thursday "Mostly Balkan" class, currently taught by Todd Wagner and Suzanne, serves as a replacement for his

advanced class. Most of the older dances that they do are dances that Marcel first introduced.

Todd Wagner teaches the only Hungarian class in the Bay area on Wednesday in Menlo Park. Other former dance students who became teachers but who no longer have their own class include John Nicoara who taught for many years in the Peninsula, Martin Frost who taught at Mostly Balkan, and Debbie Wenokur who taught an Israeli class. Outside of the Peninsula there are Alan Rothchild in Santa Cruz, Bill Croft in Albuquerque, Eddie Cordray in Ohio.

Everything that Marcel and Kathy have done in folk dancing has been motivated by their desire to build a single dance community, something more important than the dances themselves. For the two of them, it is all about being part of a community that brings people together.

There is the argument that, by doing only one type of dance (e.g. Balkan, Hungarian, Israeli, Scottish), one can become more proficient in that genre. The hidden, double-edged sword is that specializing in one type of dance provides a sense of community for members of that community, but it also isolates them from each other.

On the other hand, variety is said to be the spice of life, and many dancers enjoy having the variety provided in Marcel's classes. He said he has been tempted at times to restrict the kinds of dances that he teaches in order to gain more participation, but decided that would undermine the reason why he teaches folk dancing.

These interviews with Marcel have shown that he has played a key role in and has had a profoundly important influence on our local international folk dance community. Even if you have never taken one of his classes or attended one of his parties, the next time you see Marcel at a dance event, take a moment to express your appreciation for all he has done and continues to do to make this form of dance a part of our lives.

THE THREE "DANCE"-ATEERS! Marcel, Stan, and Ruth

Marcel, Stan, and Ruth all started dancing on the East Coast and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 50s-early 60s. They each became important in the folk dance community as they interacted, share students, and shaped the folk dance scene.

Stan Isaacs grew up in Washington, D.C. and attended Antioch College in Ohio. He became a principal teacher of their folk dance group in 1958. He graduated in 1962, worked in Washington, and led a group there. Since his parents lived in NYC, he danced there frequently, and gave some dance workshops.

In 1964 he moved to San Francisco, partly to establish residency so he could attend graduate school at UC Berkeley, but decided he liked programming so much he gave up the idea of school. He taught at the Kolo Festival that year and taught a class in San Francisco. Stan got a job in a computer company in Palo Alto, and moved there in 1965. That year Stan took over Ruth Browns' class, and moved it to a church in south Palo Alto. It became a magnet for teenagers while Marcel's class was more structured and geared toward experienced adult dancers. Marcel remembers that parents would drop their teenagers at Stan's class, go to a movie, and pick them up a few hours later.

In 1971 Stan was also laid off from his job, and decided to take a job in Israel, where he learned all the latest Israeli dances. It was on a visit to California in the summer of 1973 that he became the first teacher at the San Luis Obispo Israeli Institute. He returned to Palo Alto in 1974, and taught a variety of folk dance classes, including for Foothill and West Valley (as Marcel had done). Around 1978 he along with others started a class called Panachoreon in Palo Alto on Monday. He eventually became interested in Vintage dancing and converted the Monday class to that type of dance.

Ruth Browns grew up in Canada, where she became very interested in Israeli dancing. She came to NYC in 1953, and started doing international folk dancing with Michael Herman in 1954. In 1956 she co-founded an international folk dance class called the Folkliners. She also danced with Fred Berk for a year.

Ruth came to California in 1958 to attend Stockton Folk Dance Camp, and moved here to California shortly after that because the San Francisco Bay area had become known as a hotbed for folk dancing. In 1960 she took over Rikudom (Israeli dance) when Grace West moved to Mendocino. Under her leadership, Rikudom became a large, successful class. It sponsored an exhibition group made up of its core members. She also taught at Berkeley Hillel, and taught at Stockton Folk Dance Camp for two successive years.

When Marcel dropped his Palo Alto class in 1961, several dancers asked Ruth to come to Palo Alto. She started a class at a dance studio in South Palo Alto that featured Balkan and Israeli dances.

In 1970 Ruth decided to emigrate to Israel, and gave up teaching Rikudom. After a year, she decided that Israel was not for her, and returned to the Bay Area, teaching a variety of Israeli classes. In 1973 she started the Israeli Institute at San Luis Obispo. In 1974 she married Dick Gundelfinger, who was one of her students. Dick had a business in Marin County, so they eventually moved there. Even though Dick died in 1989, Ruth continues to live in Marin, teaching Israeli dance at several places.