

Memorium

Marcel Vinokur
November 14, 2014

From John Nicoara

Czechoslovakian-born Marcel Vinokur, who came to America at the age of 13, has long been known as one of the West Coast's foremost authorities on Balkan-Israeli dancing. For Marcel, it all began in the 1950s when he was studying engineering physics at Cornell University. It was there that a dormitory friend managed to talk him into attending a folk dance class session. As Marcel later recalled, "I was hooked the very first time." It was a revelation to discover the magic of line dancing – that it encourages dancers to perform together as a unit.

After receiving his Ph.D. in aeronautical engineering from Princeton, Marcel came to Palo Alto to work as a research scientist at Lockheed. While in graduate school at Princeton, Marcel had found the time to teach a folk dance class. And so, soon after coming to California, he began teaching at the Palo Alto Recreation Center and quickly grew his class to over 40 regular dancers. It was at this time that he began to concentrate on the combination known as Balkan-Israeli – a term that he coined.

Recalling that his college dance group had held special get-togethers – hikes, camping, and such, Marcel and his wife Kathy in the late 1960s began annual May folkdance campouts in Yosemite, often attracting 80 or more dancers for hiking in small groups and a massive folk dance potluck and party in Yosemite afterward. Neither rain nor snow ever deterred Marcel and his dedicated dancer campers.

About this same time, the late 1960s, Marcel moved his class to the Menlo Park Recreation Center just as the interest in folk dancing was about to explode. There were festivals and workshops introducing exciting new dances, and the popularity of folk music brought new young dancers into the folk dance scene. Marcel expanded his Menlo Park classes, having a double class – beginning and intermediate – on Tuesdays, and an advanced class on Wednesdays. With the interest in folk dancing at fever pitch, Marcel expanded once again, this time adding a Monday class at Foothill College in Los Altos, a Thursday class at the College of San Mateo, and a Friday class at UC Santa Cruz. It didn't end even there. Soon he was conducting weekend folk dancing retreats at a Japanese teagarden facility in Saratoga where dedicated dancers could concentrate on mastering the most complex of Balkan dances. All of this continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

From the very beginning Marcel regularly attended a multitude of folk dance festivals and workshops, constantly adding to and expanding his repertoire. These included AMAN in Los Angeles in the 1970s, the annual May Berkeley Folk Dance Festival in the 1970s and 1980s, the June Israeli Folk Dance Institute in San Luis Obispo in the 1970s and early 1980s, the July Folk Dance Camp in Stockton, the November Kolo Festival in San Francisco, and numerous workshops sponsored by local dance clubs.

Beginning in the 1990s Marcel noted that interest in folk dancing had leveled off. Fewer new young dancers were coming into the classes; many had married, started families, and stopped coming on a regular basis; and several of the festivals – AMAN, Berkeley, San Luis Obispo – had come to an end.

Even so, Marcel persevered, still teaching his Tuesday class well into the Millennium and continuing with his monthly parties at the Menlo Park Recreation Center where many of those who had been his students over these past 50 years would drop in to renew acquaintances and join in their favorite dances. New Year's Eve, in particular, continued to draw a wonderful mix of old and new dancers, all of whom were delighted to greet old friends and revel in the fact that – like Brigadoon – it was all just as they had remembered it.

For his nearly 50 years of dedicated teaching, Marcel, once called The Pied Piper of Menlo Park, will always be remembered as the Bay Area's revered master of Balkan-Israeli folk dancing.

Dancers Remember

I share in your sorrow. Kathy called me today with the news and I am in shock. Thank you for spreading the sad news. I plan to attend the memorial. —Denise Heenan

I am heartbroken. One of the prominent teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area, Marcel Vinokur, died this morning, November 14, 2014, in his sleep.

His son Robert is with Kathy and they will be making arrangements for a memorial service and probably some sort of dance celebration of Marcel's life. I will update when I have more information.

Should you wish to send a condolence card or similar tribute, the Vinokur residence is 919 Channing Avenue, Palo Alto, 94301.

—Loui Tucker

I saw him every year at Stockton Folk Dance Camp and at Kolo Festival with his syllabus and pen in hand. I admired him for being so precise. He paid me a compliment a few years ago by asking ME for some clarification in some dance notes!

—Barbara Bevan

Marcel led many of us to pass along this gift of Folk Dance. He helped show me that you can love Israeli and Balkan dance as well. We will miss him greatly.

—Alan Rothchild

Marcel, being a mathematician, once pointed out that a line dance is like a circle dance of infinite radius.

—Todd Wagner

It is truly sad when my beloved friend and teacher, the King of Announcements, is no longer alive and teaching in our midst; Marcel was a great one, and many of us owe our somewhat dubious careers in the folk dance world to his tutelage and creative spirit. Oh, Marcel, wherever you are now, I'm certain you are exchanging dance moves and appropriate music with whatever gods of dance there be.

—Cliff Jenkins



Mark your
CELEBRATION
MARCEL VINOKUR
Sunday, January 19, 2015
6:00 - 10:00
Lucie Stern Ballroom, 1000
Palo Alto, CA



When Tony and I started dancing with Marcel in the late 1960s he had the reputation of being an almost mystical place, where the most dramatic dances were taught and the best dancers turned up. Marcel could tell you everything about every dance – how to do it, who introduced it, where it came from, and what the name meant. It was an education that has brought us pleasure for many years.

—Tony and Judy Kramer

When I started folk dancing with the Sierra Singles in the 1990s, people told me that if I wanted to learn the dances really well, I should take Marcel's class. I'm sorry to say I didn't do that, but over the years I've enjoyed many parties and events that Marcel and Kathy organized, and I deeply appreciate the way they brought our community together.

—Betsy Moore

Marcel was not only our primary folk dance teacher but also became a close friend and supporter of our activities over the past 47 years. We miss him.

—Arden and Hiram Pierce

Marcel was the major influence in my dance career, both in Menlo Park and at the Japanese garden in Saratoga. He also launched my career in show business at Stockton Folk Dance Camp in the 70s as we performed PDQ Bach's "My bonny lass, she smelleth."

—Jim Emdy

Marcel was a perfectionist about dance details. When we would encounter different "village" versions of a dance, we could consult Marcel because we could rely on his in-depth knowledge to be definitive. We will miss Marcel, whose expertise on dances we trusted and respected.

—Lucy Chang

I gave Marcel a ride to the North/South Teachers' seminar a few years ago. On the way, Marcel was telling me the whole history of North/South as he knew it. I attempted to ask a question (attempted is the key word here) but Marcel said "Kaela, I was getting to that" in a very agitated tone of voice. So typical Marcel! He really was one of a kind.

—Kaela Fine

Saying that Marcel Vinokur taught 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.... Many dance teachers produce dancers. Marcel's reach extended into another generation by fostering the teachers who have produced still more dancers.

—Loui Tucker

What Marcel Knew

B Bonnie LeMat

Marcel Vinokur changed my life. He was my friend and my first folk dance teacher. In the summer of 1974, a friend suggested that we walk from our homes in Menlo Park to the nearby community center to check out a folk dance class. I had never seen or heard of folk dancing. I was captivated by the music, the dance movements, and the smiles on the faces of the dancers. I became hooked. I started dancing at Marcel's Tuesday and Monday classes, going to his workshops, his Saturday and NYE's parties and then to various other dance groups and dance camps. I met people from all over the world and made lifelong friends. Over the years I came to know Marcel through our many conversations at festivals, potlucks, weekend events, camps, carpools to workshops, and while carrying his cases of records up the hill at a local college. I picked his brain. He was an information-junkie, a detail man, a fact-finder and a community builder. We talked about our families, friends and science careers. His knowledge and memory astounded me. He was interested in others and inquisitive about diverse subjects. He could tell you where hundreds of folk dance friends worked, volunteered, studied, traveled, or were born and raised. He could tell me if I knew (or had learned) such-and-such a dance. He was wrong only once that I recall...at a party at a North/South teachers seminar, I jumped up to do the Scottish dance Bratach Bana, and he told me I didn't know it. He didn't know that I had learned the dance elsewhere. That evening I had fun chiding him for missing that detail.

The real story, however, is that Marcel was well aware of the true essence and significance of folk dance. More than the steps and beyond the details and intricacies of the dances, rhythms and music, Marcel knew that folk dancing was the door to cultural awareness, socialization, and a rich, joyful life. He knew it was all about connections, community and friendships.

He knew the reason we were smiling.

We got the sad news yesterday about Marcel's passing. It's hard to believe. He was such a giant, so influential, in the Bay Area folk dance scene--a standard-bearer. He marked many of us. I imagine you all took time out at the Officers' Ball yesterday to announce it and for 1st reminiscences. It must be a terrible shock for Kathy. Our dancing hearts, brains & feet are with her & the community. —Carol Toffaleti and Bill Croft

I too am stunned and deeply saddened by this news. The folk-dance community is huge, and a lot of people come and go from your circle of friends, but Marcel was one of those people that everyone stayed in contact with forever. This is a great loss to our community.

Marcel's advanced class probably had the largest repertoire anywhere. We had over half a dozen Bulgarian Kopanicas alone. He was famous for his copious notes taken at camps and workshops (too bad nobody else could read his handwriting).

—Todd Wagner

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VINOKUR
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 305 Middlefield Road
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Memoriam

Marcel Vinokur

Born February 16, 1929, Ostrava, Czechoslovakia. Died November 14, 2014, Palo Alto, California.

Marcel Vinokur was a compassionate man, and an avowed Humanist who expanded upon his orthodox Jewish heritage and upbringing in favor of a secular philosophy that espoused optimism in humankind to make this world a better place. He was born to a Polish mother and Ukrainian/Russian father in what is now the Czech Republic, and was raised a Jew. He witnessed the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1939, mere weeks before he and his parents fled to Le Havre and sailed on the steam liner to New York City, where he gained his life-long passion for subways, baseball, and folk dancing.

Some of his ardent supporters openly proclaim Marcel to be a 'true renaissance man.' He studied Physics at Cornell University, eventually earning his PhD in Quantum Physics from Princeton University during Einstein's tenure there. Marcel moved to California to work with Lockheed, settled in Palo Alto in the early '60s, and later worked for NASA Ames Research Center at Moffett Field. In fact, he worked at his Ames office the day he died. His scientific contributions included NASA's manned space program and co-authored theorems in fluid mechanics.

He was an internationally recognized master instructor and historian of Balkan and Israeli folk dance. He was instrumental in building a large folk dance community on the San Francisco Peninsula through his 60+ years of teaching up to four classes a week at Foothills College, at UC Santa Cruz, and in Menlo Park. The annual calendar for the 'Menlo Park Folk Dancers' (as his following was called) included monthly Saturday night folk dance parties, monthly retreats at a private Japanese tea garden in Saratoga, as well as annual Mother's Day dance weekends in Yosemite Valley (including this past year), and New Year's Eve parties back home.

With his wife, Kathy, Marcel was an avid supporter of the Arts, ranging from ACT in San Francisco to the Redwood Symphony and the Lively Arts at Stanford.

Marcel was a political activist who met his surviving wife Kathryn in Palo Alto during the campaign to block Oregon Expressway back in the early 1960s. Ever on the go, he was an Alpine hiker, with his last Alpine trek in Austria and Germany in 2003, age 74.

Marcel is survived by his wife and son, two stepsons and eight grandchildren.

Erik Bendix will do a workshop at the Albany Y Balkan Dancers

The Albany Y Balkan Dancers will celebrate their last night of folk dancing at the Albany YMCA facility on January 16, 2015. The night will be especially meaningful because the group will be going out in great style with a workshop featuring Erik Bendix, a teacher who has long been a favorite with the Albany Y Balkan Dancers. Come and join the group for an enjoyable and full evening of dancing to the strains of lovely Balkan music with a master teacher.

The price for this event will be \$10.00 for members and \$15.00 for non-members. It will begin at the usual time of 8:00 pm and go until 11:00 pm. The Albany YMCA is located at 921 Kains, near Solano and San Pablo Avenues in Albany. For more information contact Kay James by telephone at (925) 376-0727 or by email at kay.james@comcast.net



Memoriam

Chester "Chet" Wright

Folk dancing lost a true friend November 10, 2014. Chet Wright passed away at the age of 83. Anyone who attended Stockton Folk Dance Camp will remember Chet as the smiling face at the mid-morning refreshment break. We'll always think of him and his constructions of coffee cups when we get our morning coffee and fruit.

He was raised in Stockton, married to wife Jan for 62 years and they lived the last 20 years in Shingletown.

Chet and Jan have three children, Lynn Haskins (husband Dan), Ken Wright and Sue Klein (husband Dan) as well as 11 grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.

He loved backpacking, fishing, cross-country skiing and international folk dancing.

Chet raised his children to attend the East Side Presbyterian Church, where he had attended as a child and served as elder and teen group advisor.

He served 18 years as a Stockton Police Officer and 21 years with the Marine Corps Reserve including 2 years active duty in Korea.

He was active with the Shingletown Volunteer Sheriffs for the last 18 years.

A Celebration of Life was held at Risen King Community Church on November 23rd. He was laid to rest at the Veterans Cemetery in Igo.

Chet will be missed by all his friends, in Shingletown, and at the Stockton Folk Dance Camp.

Carol Friedman's 2015 class schedule:

Petaluma Snap-Y Dancers - January 5-May 4 (no class April 6); \$65 for the 17-week session or \$7 drop-in. Mondays, 7:00-9:15 pm. Herman Sons Hall, 860 Western Avenue, Petaluma.

College of Marin - January 28-March 11 (no class February 25); April 1-May 5; \$54 per 6-week session. Class number 0292, Wednesdays 2:10-3:30 p.m., PE#22, Kentfield Campus, College of Marin.