



NOW THAT WAS A TIME TO DANCE!

Evelyn Halper

A memoir of the early days
of international folk dancing
in New York City

The Society of Folk Dance Historians

*Evelyn
Halper*

is now 97 years old, has been dancing for 79 years, and still dances. Because she was there, in New York City, during the 1940s, she witnessed and was part of the pivotal events that foreshadowed the unstable onset of recreational folk dancing, long before it was accepted and adopted as a bona fida sub-culutre.

This is her memoir!

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NOW THAT WAS A TIME TO DANCE!

ALL FOLK DANCES --
mirror the culture which produced them;
from the cradle to the grave man danced;
religious, superstitious, amusing, confusing;
To Dance is Human,
and that's what it's all about!!!

I am 97 years, have been dancing for 79, and still dance. Because I was there, in New York City (NYC) during the forties, I witnessed the pivotal events that shadowed the unstable onset of recreational folk dancing, long before it would be adopted as a bona fide sub culture. This is my memoir!-Evelyn Halper

At the Fair

Amazing in retrospect, how what began as a simple response to a flip-flop side attraction at the 1939 New York World's Fair happened when MICHAEL AND MARY ANN HERMAN, with very limited publicity, were asked as a diversion to lead some folk dancing - which they succeeded in doing by personally urging and inviting the passing-by strangers to join them. Quite a few did!



Mural of dancers at the 1939 World's Fair

After the Fair

As the Fair ended, the Hermans felt encouraged and saw the possibility of attracting and extending a service to the general public. This would not be easy, but if successful, had the potential of ushering in a new era of visibility for the many faces of ethnic dance. They first rented space at a Ukrainian Hall in Greenwich Village, where the designated dance area turned out to be scorching in the summer and freezing in the winter. Nevertheless, it did not deter a small following - but their stay there was short lived. Management feared that the continuous, accentuated stamping with hard

soled shoes (no sneakers then) of the energetic dancers would collapse the ceiling. There were several other attempts at different venues, but not until the weekly sessions at the centrally-located Needle Trades High School in Manhattan, by this time with an increasingly loyal following, did the Friday night folk dance gatherings become SACROSANCT!

Ride, then Dance

I would be disingenuous, however, were I not to express my gratitude to an inanimate object. Blessed be the (5¢) nickel - the one with the Indian on front and Buffalo on back, that connected all of us by public transportation from the outer boundaries of NYC into willing co-operators with our Friday night addiction. We represented the largest group of first generation Americans, gathered in one place to dance, where strangers became friends and then some (romance). Undoubtedly, the equal distribution of male and female dancers, enhanced by the ladies' twirling skirts, encouraged the popularity of the flirtatious couple dances. Sure was better than just holding hands in a circle!



Michael & Mary Ann Herman



Ethnicity and Folk Dance

New York was a patchwork of ethnic communities. The folk dancing done by the children of certain immigrant groups during my youth reflected their specific heritage. Very little mixing occurred. Michael Herman visited and learned dances from several of these groups: Swedish *Hambo*, Swiss *Weggis*, Russian *Kohanochka*, Jewish *Patch Tanz*, Italian *Tarantella*, Bavarian *Landler*, and of course his own Ukrainian *Ohorodnik*.



EUGENE TSO also conducted dance sessions in New York. He was a really sweet person, and I can still hear the echo of: "*You mus putta da foot down!*" Tso's wife did all of the organizing. Tso also self-

published dance descriptions, five books of them, each dance described in exquisite detail, in contrast to Herman's sketchy descriptions.

VYTS BELIAJUS had been doing similar work in Chicago since the early 1930s, but on a more ethnic-specific level. Herman also began to acquire and sell danceable phonograph records for the



dances and to include his dance descriptions with the records, which further solidified the blended approach. Beliajus wrote several books of dance descriptions that, being more expensive, did not circulate as widely as Herman's, and Beliajus supervised only a few recordings of dance music. The Hermans

combined New York's ethnic influences under a recreation umbrella that they learned from JANE FARWELL, to create the blended folk dance movement that became the hub of recreational international folk dancing, nation-wide.



World War II

With World War II, our men succumbed to the draft and our numbers diminished. Somehow the Friday night sessions remained solid. An impromptu drop-in by one of our uniformed dancers merited a welcome worthy of royalty. Subconsciously we had become family. Then again, there was a darker side to this period. I recall vividly the time, whether attracted by the music and/or by the dancing, a burly man poked his head in the door and startled us by loudly yelling: "Why the hell don't you all go back to where you come from?" Folk dancing had its allotment of antagonists who considered it un-American or even subversive.



After the War

During the fifties, we had the whole world dancing at our feet, and "the pickin' was good!" We danced *Tarantella*, *Kreuz Koenig*, *Krakowiak*, *Czárdás*, *Cariñosa*, *Hambo*, the popular Russian *Sher*, which wasn't Russian but a Jewish Quadrille, *Patch Tanz* (pictured above), and the Czech national dance *Beseda*, which demanded two 78 rpm records.

The Suburbs

For many reasons, the returning soldiers temporarily put aside their folk dancing. They were anxious to fulfill the American dream of becoming first-time homeowners, starting a family, and taking advantage of the GI Bill granting housing loans, education subsidies, and insurance. Besides, the commuting became more expensive from the suburbs. Once settled, however, these new suburbanites were relentlessly wooed by a plethora of local organizations, urging membership. Bowling leagues, civic clubs, and social clubs such as square dance and folk dance clubs proliferated.

Square Dancing

Enterprising program chairpersons were always on the alert for the less conventional, and many became obsessed with the possibilities of the Square Dance. For example, MARGOT MAYO directed and played piano for her American Square Dance Group, which folk dancers also attended. Mayo hired Pete Seeger to entertain the group with his sing-alongs. Previously completing a Square Dance Callers Course with Ed Durlacher, I found myself in the right place at the right time, and with just a title change (a Barn Dance became Sadie Hawkins Day, etc.), I kept busy. The ancillary bonus was the opportunity to pursue a more serious participation in the Square Dance.



Folk Dancing

During this same period, underground "pop-up" folk dance encounters were taking place. Surrounded by basement appliances and ignoring the cement floor some former enthusiasts attempted to reconnect with their old time folk dances and friends. It remained a challenge. Eventually, these splinter groups, loosely structured but socially rewarding, merged into co-ops and were later welcomed into already established folk dance groups such as the Hermans' or Eugene Tso's international groups. Meanwhile, the Hermans were finally able to fulfill the long-awaited realization of their own Folk Dance House. Ideally located at 108 W 16th St in Manhattan,



they were the beneficiaries of a large, professional dance floor laboriously hand-refinished by Herman and noted Washington DC recreational folk dance leader, DAVE ROSENBERG.



The Hermans

Many of our folk dance leaders in the 20th century had personalities that were - how to say it - "less than desirable." The Hermans were no exception and have come in for their fair share of criticism, but without their persistent presence and visibility, the New York folk dance scene would have stagnated at Level One.

MICHAEL was a dancer, classically trained violinist, writer, record producer, womanizer, and a skilled teacher. [These statements concur with the testimony of everyone whom I have questioned about the Hermans at Folk Dance House.-ed.] DICK CRUM, by far the most knowledgeable teacher ever to grace a folk dance floor, in a 1997 interview commented: "Nobody contributed to the overall development of recreational folk dancing as much as Michael Herman."



Dick Crum

How true, but then there was MARY ANN, and although her austere, abrasive personality (and then some!) precludes more favorable comments by me, nonetheless I am compelled to acknowledge the contributions of the multi-faceted, multi-talented Mary Ann to the TOTALITY of the Folk Dance Movement. She transformed the bland entryway to Folk Dance House into an eye-catching gallery displaying an array of changeable artifacts relevant to the folk dance idiom. As a non-traditional technique for beginners, she painted the tops of her shoes two different colors (red for right, blue for left). Her



family fun day became legendary - she prohibited entry by any unless accompanied by a child. The day had always a long waiting list. And then there was the aristocratic *Hopak*. [Michael and Mary Ann had mastered Ukrainian dance under the legendary Vasil Avramenko. All Avramenko students that I have met exhibit an extraordinary passion for his particular discipline and styling.-ed.]

Mary Ann was a most demanding teacher, uncompromising on proper body language and adherence to styling which she kept repeating until she was satisfied - but unbeknownst to her, prior to the start of the class, we nonchalantly would have pre-picked a *Hopak* partner. On one



Michael Herman dancing Hopak, 1941

particular evening, my sister Anne arrived too late for an arrangement. When a nice-looking stranger approached and asked her, "Would you like to try this with me?" she agreed and when they finished she remarked: "You are pretty good for a beginner." The beginner was

GENE KELLY! Some time later, when Kelly appeared in the movie *Anchors Aweigh*, Kelly danced with little Sharon McManus the *Mexican Waltz* (embellished, of course) to which he had been introduced that night at Folk Dance House.



PETER LORRE (pictured below) was another celebrity to visit Folk Dance House, stroking Mary Ann's red boots in his best oily cinematic persona. Noted author and journalist DAMON RUNYON visited and published a column about the event.



Folk singer/actor BURL IVES attended between cinema and concert engagements. He danced very well and would entertain the dancers during breaks. Elizabeth Taylor and Mike Todd also dropped in



unexpectedly for a brief visit. The Koutev Ensemble, the Robert Iglesias Troupe, and the Beryozka Ensemble also visited, but perhaps the most prestigious was the Russian MOISEYEV FOLK BALLETT. They had planned a 20 minute visit but stayed for 120! Fascinated by the *Virginia Reel*, they learned the dance, and throughout the remainder of their US tour and subsequent tours concluded each performance with the *Reel*, much to the delight and to hearty applause by their American audiences.

The Israeli Dance Scene

Towards the end of the forties vibrations from early Israeli dances surfaced. The enchantment with *Mayim* was an omen for a meteoric rise in enjoyment of this dance genre.

Thematically those early dances embraced religion (*Ken Yovdu*), people (*Ve David*), things (*Harmonika*), animals (*Hashual*), heroism (*Kuma Echa*), and love/flirtation (*Dodi Li*). Themes changed, however. Israeli dance is alive and well - perhaps too well, that is, if you cannot differentiate between an Israeli folk dance and dances of Israel with the "made in America" label. If I had a crystal ball, I might be able to predict the future course of Israeli dance in America, but without one, at best I can only hope:

- 1 that the accent on accelerated movements which mesmerizes the young doesn't eclipse those that are gaining in years
- 2 that the dances not be held hostage to satisfy the greed for implementing new dances in order to sell more recordings
- 3 that the teacher not be caught in the middle of a dilemma of whether or not to teach every new dance
- 4 that a prolific period of creativity continue but without forgetting that a new dance, like a pair of new shoes, becomes more comfortable and enjoyable with wear.

Maine Folk Dance Camp

JANE FARWELL, the noted recreation specialist, helped to spread the concept of a folk dance camp which would serve as a prototype towards the amalgamation between Dance as Art and Dance as Recreation. She introduced the idea to the Hermans as early as 1941, and by 1948 MAINE FOLK DANCE CAMP had grown to its full vigor. I attended the Camp on 11 occasions and never could have foreseen what an impact it would have on my future career choice. Typically, after a 7:30 a.m. wake-up call to the sound of a conch, and following breakfast, the camp took on a life of its own as the special committees planned the day's events in whatever way (sometimes bizarre) to pay tribute to the designated ethnic theme. If the chosen country was Denmark, each meal would be in costume and dinner night feature a *Plommon Spackad* (a specialty of veal stuffed with plums), and Danish themes would predominate throughout the evening's performance. On one occasion, when a Swiss teacher wanted a goat for a Swiss day, miraculously one appeared.

Children's Theatre

- The Magic Carpet Players

When the ex-urbanites became settled suburbanites, the ubiquitous bridge and garden clubs emerged. But a need and desire emerged among many others for cultural outlets. With the assistance of a few dedicated individuals, a mini Arts Council appeared and offered classes in painting, music, photography, and especially folk and square dancing. Mobile adults could attend these cultural events, but there was a conspicuous absence of quality entertainment for the child, unless you include multiple versions of "Cinderella." So a similar series of classes formed for children.

I was invited to join "The Magic Carpet Players," a newly formed program that focused solely on songs and dances from around the world. For example, in our portrayal of *Zillertaler Ländler*, we came to life as two dolls. Another favorite was our interpretation of *La Burrita*. The kids loved it.

Once, when leaving the theater, I heard a little girl yelling: "Stop, stop!" When we were facing each other, she wanted to know: "How did you get out of the box?" A quick mental inventory confirmed that none of the dances centered around a box. Obviously, her frame of reference related to the *TV box*! She was puzzled as to how I could get out of the box and still be here!

Simply stated, the Magic Carpet Players served as an early anchor to the future of children's theater. Good news - the popularity initiated by our mini-Arts Council radiated out and encouraged other communities to implement similar programs. Also, the local libraries slowly began to feature special children's events. As of today, they are a model of diversification.

Balkanization

The Balkan dance scene, unobtrusively, came into focus after the 1954 introduction of a few, likable Yugoslavian dances by the culturally knowledgeable DICK CRUM. Crum annually doubled or tripled our Balkan non-partner repertoire. However, I am unable to anecdotally pinpoint the exact timing that ushered in Balkanmania - although the clues were there with the frequent appearance of Balkan dances replacing couple dances on the dance request list by the early 1960s.

Borsht Epic

Today, when we say: "Let's get together," it is usually an euphemism for: "At what restaurant?" Back then, it was simply an extended invitation to come over for dinner. Agreed that a dancer's top priority is to dance! True, that while the newcomers, from so many diversified backgrounds tended to hold tight to their own food traditions then perhaps through the mixing, mingling and subsequent friendships there arose an interest and a curious desire to sample from other ethnic culinary edibles. Satisfying this quest for the rest of us has not diminished.

True to my Russian roots, I decided to have an "authentic" Russian borsht dinner party. We numbered 10. It was a huge success, word got around, and suddenly there was a proliferation of Borsht Events. That summer,

one of our generous dancer friends graciously invited us to dance, once a month, on her oversized bucolicly-set deck, an event that we reluctantly had to conclude with with the first chill in the air. But not quite! We decided to celebrate our last gathering with a fitting tribute also to the conclusion of the Borsht Epic. Each member was to contribute their favorite version of this soup. Oi Vey! Surprises galore! The most original contribution was a creative concoction that resembled a Hungarian goulash.

Perceptions of Folk Dance

Curious, I presented in 2018 an unscientific survey to 75 active folk dancers of varying ages.

Question 6. Do you have a preference for dances from any particular region? (e.g., Scandinavia, Balkans, etc.)

√ Yes → What Region? "*Balkan*" (overwhelmingly)

√ No. (1) "*Love them all*" (2) "*Israeli*"

I was dazzled by the unanticipated number of accolades garnered by question 9 below. The responses resembled a merry-go-round, one that kept circling round and round with repeated praises and tributes that reflected on the multi-level values of friendships, all coming from the dance.

Question 9. Apart from fun and exercise, has folk dancing given you any personal benefits that might not have happened had you not danced?

My favorite -- simply: "*Life Changing*"

Note: My gratitude to Karen Goldenberg Marcus for her designing a totally insightful questionnaire from which questions 6 and 9 were extracted.

As each decade replaced the previous one, my passion for the folk dance never diminished, even as my disappointment mounted with the superfluous emphasis on steps and more steps, which is only a part of the equation for a dance and ignores its meritorious, ethnic qualifications. Unfortunately, some dance leaders, despite their passion and enthusiasm, are unqualified and tend to instruct robotically - which is the way that the class interprets the dance.

As a Career

It would be disingenuous of me not to admit that I thrived in the above environment, but emphatically I must credit my daily attendance at the brief "Culture Corners" sessions that enticed me the most. The miniscule meetings were intended for the day's designated specialist to share some cultural tid-bits relative to his/her ethnic specialty. Admittedly, some of these talks were of questionable quality; nevertheless the seed was planted and I was hooked. Fast forward: I have lectured extensively about aspects pertaining to the history and anthropology of folk dance and feel grateful and gratified for the five return visits to Lincoln Center in New York City.

To the Critics

1 Novelty dances need not be denigrated inasmuch as they have a purpose within the folk dance spectrum and are not in competition with "authentic" dances. I recall how following concentration on learning a demanding dance we were rewarded with the ridiculous novelty *Bingo* - yes, I said *Bingo* - and we loved it. Another novelty plus is its simplicity - easy to master - which might turn out people to try the "real thing."

2 We know that many dances are not genuine, but have been deliberately arranged as recreational dance. What matters most is that the dances are choreographed to some degree based on "traditional" dance steps and conventional rhythms. In other words, the dance tends to resemble traditional folk dances and should be enjoyed as such.

3 We would be truly naive were we to dream that folk dancing could solve some of the ills of this strife-torn world. It can, however, bring people to an appreciation of differences and similarities. The joy of dancing together can be the great equalizer. So - *LET'S DANCE!*

