

# Florida Folk Dancer

August-September 2000

## Folk Dances Of Bulgaria, by Yves Moreau

*Excerpts of a presentation at the Symposium on Bulgarian History and Culture, Carleton University, Ottawa, March 20, 1981. Reprinted by permission. Yves can be contacted at: <http://www.bourque-moreau.com>*

### HISTORICAL OUTLOOK

The great variety of movements and steps as well as the intricate rhythmic structures found in Bulgarian folk dances indicate the various developments undergone throughout hundreds of years.

In the 7th century A.D., the Bulgars, under their leader Asparoukh, settled in the Balkan Peninsula. They eventually mixed with the Slav tribes which were already there. Both these cultures integrated, thus forming a new and rich cultural heritage which has evolved until today and which still occasionally carries traits of Thracian, Hellenic and Roman times.

Very little is known as to the precise types of dances which were done during the early years of the new Bulgarian state; however, old books contain information related to chain-type dances and point out that these songs and dances were quite popular among the people. Furthermore, many of these manuscripts, which were written by religious writers, suggest that dancing was very much frowned upon by the Church Elders, who attributed the devil as the main instigator.

The only information as to the folk dance traditions in Bulgaria during the Ottoman rule (1396-1878) is found in diaries and travel accounts of foreigners who were passing through the country on their way to Constantinople (Carigrad). Their actual descriptions of the dances were very vague, however. One of the best reports was written by a French scientist, Ami Boue, in the early 19th century. He clearly made mention of the horo danced in open circles with belt hold, as well as the couple dance "râcënica" with the dancers holding a handkerchief in their hands.

It is most important to state that the

long Turkish rule did not destroy the old song and dance traditions of the Bulgarians. In fact, because of their oppression, the people became more conscious of their cultural heritage.

Still today, folk dances in Bulgaria undergo transformations as they passed down from the old to the new generation. Many dances known to have been danced in the 19th century are still done today. This is easily proven by the accounts of the old folk who remember these dances from their parents. Therefore, in a given village dance repertory one usually finds a mixture of old and new dances.

### THE HORO (CHAIN DANCE)

The horo, or chain dance (derived from Greek *xopós*) holds a central place in the sociocultural activities of rural Bulgaria. The horo is mostly a community dance which, until recently, could be observed every Sunday in the village square. Today, due to the greater choice of free-time activity and the lack of interest on the part of the younger generation, folk dancing has been confined to a few specific occasions.

Most weddings, whether held in small villages or big cities, will include a good amount of horo dancing with exciting music provided by good local gypsy bands, generally using brass instruments. There are also regional fairs and festivals held annually or at specific intervals which will include spontaneous folk singing and dancing. Most towns and villages organize festivities including

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folk dancing at some specific time in the year.

Every village has its local repertoire of horos and other dances which reflect the local character of the people. It is important to note, however, that there are four basic horos characterized by their rhythm and steps and danced through the country. They are:

1. The PRAVO, or straight dance, in 2/4 meter.
2. The PAJDUŠKO, or limping dance, in 5/16 meter.
3. The POVÂRNATO, or returning dance (sometimes known as ŠARENI ČORAPI or SVOR-NOTO), in 9/8 meter.

4. The RÂĀENICA (literally meaning "small handkerchief") in 7/16 meter.

The RÂĀENICA is probably the most widespread dance in Bulgaria for it can be performed in many ways: solo, couples, trios, segregated and even in a horo form. The râĀenica is also considered by many as the liveliest of all Bulgarian dances for in it dancers can show their greatest skills.

The horo can be danced in a closed or open circle formation, or in a straight or "crooked" line. The best dancers are usually located at each end of the line. Both of them guide the group through exciting patterns while waving a "kârpa" (handkerchief) in their free hand.

There are many hand positions and formation used in Bulgarian horo dancing. Hands can be joined down at the sides or up at shoulder height, or crossed in front or back in a basket fashion, or the arms may rest on the neighbours' shoulders. Perhaps the most characteristic of all positions is the "na pojas" where the dancers hold each other by their belts or waistbands. When a group of dancers use this particular hold and dance in a straight line, this formation is known as "na lesa" (on a stave). Other formations include crooked or twisted lines and open or closed circles with mixed or segregated groups of dancers.

### REGIONAL DANCE STYLINGS

Bulgarian dancing is done mostly with the feet. There are, however, certain dance stylings which are proper to specific regions of Bulgaria. Dances of the ŠOP area (named after the šopi, an ethnic group found in Western Bulgaria and Eastern parts of Serbia and Macedonia) are usually quite fast with tricky movements and wild tunes while dances of THRACE are more solemn and generally slower. The dances from the western part of Thrace, west of Plovdiv and around Panagjurište and Ihtiman, are livelier and are sometimes confused with the Šop ones. Dances of the PIRIN region (named after the mountains of the same name) use larger steps and tricky movements as well. The dances of the PIRIN region are very much related to the types found slightly to the west in Yugoslav Macedonia. Many of these Pirin (Macedonian) dances begin slowly using an improvised pattern which develops later into a more regular form at a faster tempo.

North Bulgarian dances are in general quite energetic and exuberant. Dances of the Northwest have a similar character but have more marked influence from nearby Serbia as well as a strong Romanian flavour radiated by the imposing number of Vlachs in that area. The dances of DOBRUDŽA are probably the most exciting to watch. Dobrudžan dances are done generally at moderate tempo using slightly bent knees with the dancers' backs arched backward. Shoulder and arm movements play an important role in their dances. It is quite probable that some of these stylings were influenced by the Turks as similar forms are found along the Black Sea coast in Turkey. Not too many dances have been collected in the RHODOPEs. The types of dances observed there very much resemble those in East Thrace. Dances in the western part of the Rhodopes have much in common with those in the Pirin. In the east section, there are many Turkish settlements which have kept up specific traditional dances.

One must not forget the various minority groups throughout Bulgaria that have kept up specific dances and traditions. Among them are the Vlachs in North Bulgaria (mostly Northwest); the Kapanci, descendants of the first Bulgar settlers of the 6th century, A.D., that lived around Razgrad in Northeast Bulgaria; the Turks, also in the Northeast and Southeast parts of the country; the Gypsies, as well as the Armenians, Serbs, and Greeks.

## BULGARIAN DANCE RHYTHMS

The 2/4 is the most common measure found in Bulgarian folk dance music. However, the most characteristic rhythms are the ones which are the foundation of many unequal beats: 5/16, 7/16, 9/16, 11/16, or even intricate combinations such as 7/16 + 11/16.

Such rhythms are typically Balkan and are best thought of as combinations of "quicks" and "slows" rather than using Western time signatures. A Bulgarian village musician can rarely identify the time signature of a dance tune. Just like the drummer, he will relate to the melody in terms of "quick" and "slow" stresses.

The unequal beats found in Bulgarian and Balkan music are fairly complex. They are composed of alternating two and three time beats. At an accelerated tempo, these beats lose their significance as independent beats and turn

into simple and lengthened times (quicks and slows).

## RITUALS AND CARNIVALS

In the past, Bulgarian peasants performed various rituals which were mostly connected with farm life. To a certain extent, these practices have persisted until today although often the original meanings and purposes have disappeared. In many cases, the old ritual dances have been replaced by dances of everyday use. These rituals usually deal with demands for good crops, rain or drought, productivity, or even the chasing of evil spirits.

Among the most popular ritual customs today (1982) are:

**LADUVANE:** Foretelling happiness in wedlock, this ritual takes place on New Year's Eve or on the morning of New Year's Day, or even on another holiday in the spring or summer.

**KOLEDUVANE:** This ritual takes place on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. On that occasion, young men go from house to house singing carols and wishing everyone health, success and fertility.

**LAZARUVANE:** St. Lazarus' Day takes place a week before Orthodox Easter. On that day, the young girls go to each house in the village singing and dancing.

**ENJOVA BULJA:** The St. Enjo's Day ritual is still practiced in a few villages of Eastern Thrace. It is also a ritual for fertility and good health.

**NESTINARSKO:** This ritual is not performed any more. It used to be held on St. Helena's and Constantine's Day in the village of Balgari, in the Strandža mountains. One local woman was chosen to be the "nestinarka" and walk on hot coals carrying the icon of St. Constantine and Helena.

**WEDDING CUSTOMS:** Still today many weddings are accompanied by special songs and dances. A honey loaf is baked on Friday before the wedding and a horo is danced around it.

**KUKERI:** or Carnival dances can still be observed today throughout Bulgaria. Most carnival celebrations take place during the week preceding Lent but some other manifestations occur throughout the year as well.

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## Sarasota

Greetings to Folkdancers!

Miss you all! Looking forward to Fall Fling.

We had an exciting dancing summer. We went to Idaho with Ira Weisburd and 200 of his dancing friends from Miami, New York, California, etc. We heartily recommend any tour or event organized by Ira. Our days and nights were packed with new experiences that he planned. His taste is profound!

The 15th annual international festival in Rexburg included dance troupes from China, Hawaii, Slovakia, Croatia, Germany, Israel, etc. We watched performances and actually danced with them.

But the tours were the most spectacular: Yellowstone, The Grand Tetons, and Craters of the Moon --miles and miles of burned rock called "lava beds" on the map, with no vegetation and an ominous sense of planetary death.

When we returned, we danced our way up the East Coast. In Charleston, the Bells held a reunion of all the dancers who used to meet regularly and a new group. The party lasted six hours, with each leader doing a stint. Here's hoping they resume sessions.

In Baltimore, we and our friends performed at the Lemko Hall. Some of the Uki's listened intently as Metro sang a Lemko song that he had learned as a child. We spent the weekend at Buffalo Gap in West Virginia, dancing with Steve and Susan Kotansky and studying Tango with Liliana & Harby.

Then on up to Wyomissing PA to see Valanty's performing group do the Slavic dances we had taught Niel and Pat and to start them on some new ones. It was great to watch them do the classic Kolomyka with dynamic energy and real affection. The Valantys are totally occupied with shows, rehearsals and costume-making.

Back in Sarasota, we attended a farewell party for an Egyptian costumemaker and experienced the incredible talent of Tahja and Juan de la Sierra and their dancers.

So we have learned that before the Earth turns to lava beds, we have time to celebrate.

Please keep us informed of any parties coming up.

Shirley & Metro Babiak

## Orlando International Folk Dance Club

We started meeting again on September 6 after our two month hiatus. Everyone was anxious to dance and to find out what everyone did over the summer. So here is the update on everyone's summer activities. Joe and Lucy Birkemeir traveled to Buffalo and Washington DC. Ellie Hall and Annette Brand enjoyed a Mel Mann folk dance cruise to Portugal and Spain. Ellie also spent some time with family in Michigan. Art Pataky visited dance clubs in North Carolina and Georgia and attended woodworking show.

Ann Robinson went to Baltimore for the National Square Dance Convention. She also attended a creativity workshop in North Carolina. Joy Herndon had cataract and gall bladder surgeries. She is recovering nicely and dancing already. Phyllis Phelps retired and took a trip out west which included a boat ride on the Snake River. Virginia Johnson and Emilie Brozek both welcomed new grandchildren into the world. Palmira Mora-Valls attended to an ill niece in Texas for several weeks. Dora Cloud went to Boston to see a grandson graduate from Amherst.

Melanie Marecek and Barbara Cloer went contra dancing almost every weekend between Gainesville and Tampa. They also attended a contra weekend over Labor Day in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Eva Gaber shared that her daughter, Lila, learned how to swim (she's only 1 1/2!) and that they traveled to Michigan, California, and Philadelphia. Her husband, Larry, was laid off and is now adjusting to a new job.

Bobby and I danced in Detroit with Joan and Wally Washington and in Chicago with the remnants of Vyts's original International House group. What was common in both groups is the use of mini-disks for music. Bobby and I also toured Mackinac Island with Joan and Wally and then we went through the UP when they left to go back to the Detroit area. Bobby and I enjoyed the boat rides through the Wisconsin Dells and eating at a Swiss restaurant in the Swiss town of Glarus, WS. That's the update for members of our club. Now you know why we take two months off! We look forward to hearing what everyone else did over the summer.

On August 18, 9 members from our group danced with the Melbourne group. We thank the Melbourne dancers for their hospitality and the great refreshments!

Pat Henderson

**Coming Events**

**Sharpes Assembly**  
 Sebring, FL  
 October 6, 7, 8, 2000  
 Contact: George & Onie  
 Senyk  
 321-636-2209

**Fall Fling**  
 Melbourne Village  
 November 11, 2000  
 Details in October  
 Contact: John Daly  
 321-951-9623

**Autumn Leaves**  
 Durham  
 November 10-12  
 Tom Bozigian  
 Lebanese and new  
 Armenian dances  
 Cost \$55 'til Oct 25  
 Contact: Janet Epstein  
 615-297-2546  
 mlduram1@juno.com.

**Camp 2001**  
 Feb 23 to Feb 26, 2001  
 A Balkan Bash is planned.



"The Group" at South Brevard's Dance on August 18.

**South Brevard**

Our good friends from Orlando joined us on October 18<sup>th</sup> for an evening of dancing fun. It's always good to have a few more dancers. And when the Orlando group visits they about double our summer numbers. It was a really nice evening and thanks to all for driving over. It's always great to have you.

Despite various vacations and illnesses, we have been dancing steadily all summer.

George and Onie Senyk brought us several interesting dances from their vast collection. Many of us are looking forward to joining them at the historic Kenilworth Lodge in Sebring for the Sharpes Assembly Contra and English Country Dance weekend starting October 6<sup>th</sup>. There may still be time to register if you haven't already done so.

John Daly



Carol McGinn leads Louky.

Best wishes to Joy Herndon for a continued speedy recovery.

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