

Suburban Life

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From Czechoslovakia Professional dancers defected to find new careers in the U.S.

By Joan Boram
special writer

As featured dancers with the Czechoslovakian national dance troupe, "Sluk," Josef and Katarina Semjan had successful and interesting careers. They had toured every country in the world except Japan and Australia. When not dancing before an audience, they learned new pieces, choreographed, and taught both folk dancing and ballet.

Last November, on the last leg of their eighth U.S. tour, they decided to defect.

"We had discussed it before," says Josef Semjan through his interpreter, friend and mentor Milan Straka, a resident of Farmington Hills, "but we were reluctant to leave our parents and families and give up our careers for an unknown future. In the end, the pull of artistic and religious freedom was irresistible."

People defect in different ways. In the Semjans' case, they had friends in this country who walked away with their belongings, one piece at a time. When their possessions were gone, the Semjans walked away themselves.

"We had known Milan in Czechoslovakia, and we had met with him and Eleanor (his wife) several times on other (U.S.) tours," said Katarina Semjan. "We came from Seattle to Farmington Hills and stayed with them until we could find employment and afford an apartment of our own. The International Institute assisted us in filling papers requesting political asylum, which, after several interviews with authorities, was granted Feb. 17."

The Semjans will be eligible to apply for citizenship February 17, 1990.

STRAKA EMPLOYS Josef in his Warren machine shop, and, eventually, Katarina found a job housekeeping in a large hotel.

For a while, though, she was home alone while the others worked, and she did a lot of cooking.

"The supermarkets here are like a miracle," she says. "At home, we would literally walk from store to store looking for carrots to put in

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— Josef Semjan

soup. Here, there is everything you could possibly want."

Since she didn't yet have a valid driver's license, she biked to the store. She laughs at the time she wheeled the bicycle inside the store to safeguard it, and the clerk, who didn't speak Czechoslovakian, had to use sign language to assure her that her vehicle would be better off outside.

In addition to kitchen English, Katarina attended English language classes at Farmington Hills High School four times a week, while Josef, who was working, attended fewer classes. Today, they each take two classes a week, driving from their apartment in Wixom to Farmington Hills. And, of course, they both are learning the unique native dialect that is TV.

"It's not easy to change a lifestyle," said Josef. "But we know that we have to learn the language before we can attempt to resume our professional careers, and in the meantime we have to support ourselves."

IN THE PAST few months, the Semjans have danced with the

Brighton Ballet Company and were featured at a folk dance festival sponsored by the International Institute. In addition, they have performed with several local Czech folk groups, including one founded by Straka soon after he settled here in 1989.

And, like all good Americans, they jog to keep in shape.

In 1983, Katarina danced at Epcot Center for a month with Sluk, and the Semjans have sent a letter offering their talents to the Disney enterprise.

"Epcot Center likes to book authentic folk dancers as guest performers, as does Busch Gardens," Josef said. Eventually, the pair expects to make a living teaching ballet and folk dancing, appearing as featured dancers, and choreographing. Canada is rich with opportunities for them, but not until their American citizenship becomes final.

Katarina has an interest in learning cosmetology. "All the Sluk dancers are trained in applying their own make-up," she said, "and I always enjoyed helping the other members of the troupe with theirs." A friend with a salon in Dearborn has offered to help her if she decides to enter the profession.

WHAT KATARINA really wants to do is get married. Yes, she and Josef have been married for two years, but it was a civil service, as religious ceremonies are banned in Czechoslovakia. Now, she wants a big wedding at the newly-consecrated Sts. Cyril & Methodius Slovak Roman Catholic Church in Sterling Heights.

Her eyes sparkle when she talks about the white dress she will wear. The wedding must wait, however, until the couple can afford to bring their parents over, so it could be some time away.

Josef and Katarina Semjan are not children. She is 28; he is 40.

But they are so enthusiastic for their new life and its possibilities, so eager to learn and explore, so excited and happy about their prospects, that they appear to be much younger.



Josef and Katarina Semjan perform in freedom for the first time at the International Institute's International Folk Dance Festival this spring. The couple were the premier solo dancers of the Slovak State Folk Ensemble "Sluk."

FLAG

Group provides parents with needed support and advocacy

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

LAUGHTER SERVES only to interrupt the tears.

The people sitting on the couch in the church reading area all share one thing in common: They have a family member with AIDS.

"My brother was up vomiting the house three days before he died," one woman said.

"My brother is like that, too," another woman said. "He'll be up running around all day and then he'll be in bed the next."

"I always hold out for hope," said a third woman, the mother of a son with the disease. "I think, 'Maybe it's just a virus.' But everyone tells me I have to face it."

Their topics jump back and forth — how insurance companies tried to deny the loved ones medical coverage by raising premiums; the color of the skin brought on by the ravages of the disease.

They also share lighthearted anecdotes, memories that will only be reminisced about with the help of a photo album.

Without benefit of a pencil or paper, they are able to draw a sketch of their son or brother.

In the group is a woman whose brother recently died of AIDS, a mother and a sister of another person who has the disease and a man whose son was just diagnosed as HIV positive, meaning he stands a strong risk of developing AIDS.

Answers are hard to come by, but in talking, they find they're not alone.

Their group is only one of many at the monthly Parents FLAG/Detroit meeting, which takes place at Lutheran Church of the Master in Troy. Parents FLAG is a support group for mothers and fathers of homosexual men and women.

IN EACH cluster, people grapple with the various aspects that come with being the parents, relatives or friends of homosexuals.

As one group talks about AIDS, another group is made up of spouses of gays. They are joined by a group of new parents or relatives, ones who

have recently heard the common refrain, "I have something to tell you . . ."

"Often it's a very traumatic thing to hear your son or daughter is gay," said Harriet Dart of Farmington, who is the founder of Parent FLAG/Detroit. "It's not something you want to go next door and talk to your neighbor about."

Especially in these times of heightened homophobia, where violence against homosexuals is on an increase.

BUT MANY parents, themselves, don't always react in a nurturing way when a son or daughter drops the news they are gay. Some parents immediately shun their children, ostracizing them from the family.

Even the most understanding parents talk about feelings of shock and guilt.

"What I find is with the mother the reaction is, 'What is going to happen to my child?' Often there is a homophobic fear of what might happen," said Dale Ross, a Southfield-based social worker who counsels many homosexuals in the area.

"With the father, it's the opposite reaction. They are fearful of what that child is going to do to the reputation of the family outside in the neighborhood."

The Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Inc. was founded in 1973 in New York to quell those fears and misconceptions. Today, approximately 200 chapters of Parents FLAG exist in the country.

THE METRO area didn't have a chapter until three years ago. Harriet Dart, whose son is gay, formed the chapter along with her husband, Bill, after the family moved from Rochester, N.Y.

Today, anywhere from 60 to 90 people attend meetings that take

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Harriet Dart founder of Parent FLAG/Detroit

place the second Sunday of the month at Church of the Master in Troy.

Scattered in the crowd are friends and homosexuals themselves along with parents.

The purpose of the group is not only to help parents work through their feelings of shock or anger, but to educate as well.

ANSWERS WERE in short supply three years ago when a Troy mother was told by her son one weekend that he was gay.

"There was a tremendous amount of guilt on my husband and my part," said Mary (not her real name).

"We thought, 'There was something we did to cause this.' The whole weekend was spent questioning our parental role. We had three other children. Why him and not them?"

"My husband was devastated. I think maybe it was the male-to-male thing. If it was my daughter instead of my son, perhaps I would have felt worse."

Their son's revelation caught them by surprise. He dated women regularly, including one with whom he had a serious relationship for three years.

For three months, she and her husband kept the news to themselves. Then they told the rest of the family.

at first "because he put his brother on a pedestal."

Mary characterized her son as highly intelligent, but somewhat of a loner who always kept her and her husband at arm's length. Then she found out why.

But instead of reacting with anger, both she and her husband reassured him of their love for him. The process of educating began.

"I didn't have any prejudices against gays," she said. "But I did have a lot of misconceptions. One of the first things I asked my son was if he was going to wear a dress or if he was going to act any differently at all."

MARY and her husband began reading about the issue of homosexuality. Quickly, the myths and stereotypes started to fall.

Also, Mary was in touch with Dart, who was starting the Detroit FLAG chapter. She still regularly attends meetings.

"Every family has something in their family they're dealing with, whether it's drugs or pregnancy," Mary said. "We were just talking today in the meeting and one woman mentioned 'Would it be better if he was in jail?' or 'Would it be better if my son had died?' Could you deal with those situations any better?"

Please turn to Page 2

