

Deb & Arnie Ziskovsky - Biography 2011

Both Deb and Arnie are of 100% Czech decent. Deb's mother had been in contact with her relatives in Moravia since she was young. Because of this personal connection, Deb's relatives sent one of their family's National costumes to Deb when she was younger. Arnie's parents currently live on a century family farm near Veseli, the first property purchased by his immigrant ancestor. These ties to both Deb and Arnie's Czech roots have only grown throughout the years for both of them.

Their passion for promoting Czech heritage and traditions started when they were dancing partners, members of the St. Paul Czech & Slovak Folk Dancers in St. Paul MN. Deb started in 1984, Arnie in 1990, both of them leaving the group in 2004. While in the dance group they performed at the many events and festivals the group attended. Some of these venues include the annual Festival of Nations in St. Paul. One of our first National performances together was in 1993 at the Dvorak Festival in Spillville IA. One of our highlights was the 1995 dedication ceremony of the opening of the National Czech & Slovak Museum in Cedar Rapids IA in which 3 heads of state were in one city; President Bill Clinton, Czech President Vaclav Havel and Slovak President Michael Kovač. Another highlight was dancing for President Havel & his wife Dagmar at the Vaclav Havel Civil Society Symposium - St Paul. MN in 1999; where we were only feet in front of them. They also performed at numerous ethnic festivals across the Midwest in MN, WI, SD, NE and IA.

Initially neither Deb nor Arnie had connections for purchasing authentic costumes (kroje) to perform in. Deb sewed several costumes using pictures in books at guidelines, matching them to specific regions of the Czech Republic. This started their interest in researching more on traditional kroje. They shared this venture with another dance couple, Don and Jeanette Pafko. Part of their research was going to libraries and the National Czech and Slovak Museum in IA. Most of the books they found information in were in Czech and needed to be translated. Research also included comparing pictures of kroje between books to see the consistencies and differences between folk regions.

Many times they were guest speakers together, attending conferences sharing both information on dance and kroje along with presenting examples of kroje. Pafko's represented Slovak dance and kroje, while Ziskovskys represented the Czech. Today Don is the current Honorary Consul for the Slovak Republic.

Some of the conferences Ziskovskys facilitated at were: Kroje and Dance presentation at Mingei International Museum Balboa Park - San Diego CA, Czech & Slovak Kroje Presentation at Sokol MN and Czech Fest - Bechyn MN; all in 1999 and a Dance Workshop at Tompkins Cortland College - Dryden, NY in 2000. While in NY they were able to spend a lot of our free time with Helen Cincebeaux, founder of the Slovak Heritage & Folklore Society Internat'l, author and travel agent. She is also very well known for her collection and displays of kroje.

Ziskovskys also facilitated at the Czech & Slovak American Genealogy Society of Illinois Conference - Berwyn, IL in 2001, and a Kroj Conference at the National Czech and Slovak Museum & Library (NCSML) - Cedar Rapids IA in 2002. It was at this

conference in IL that they met Dr. Langhammerová – an ethnographer from the Czech Republic and author of kroje books used as references here in America today. It was also around that time they did their first local presentation of costume and folk dance to the NP Historical Society and then to the Czech Heritage Club shortly thereafter.

Deb and Arnie have displayed their own personal kroje for public to view and learn about in surrounding communities of New Prague. Their initial debut was for the National Kroje Network in 1997 in Montgomery. This was a group they were a co-founders of along with some good friends they met along the way, Bob & Jill Bastyr. Their mission was to explore and log information on costumes. In the beginning the two couples took a road trip to Chicago to gain information from a woman and her private collection. These types of visits were common for the two couples to gain more accurate details on the costumes when displayed. They wanted to know more and be accurate with what was presented, and still presented today. Most recently Ziskovskys have displayed their kroje at the Czech Village Exhibit in New Prague Dožinky festival 2009 and the Arts & Heritage Center in Montgomery in 2010.

Ziskovsky's greatest accomplishment was starting their own dance group, the Domáci (Hometown) Czech Folk Dancers in 2000 when they moved from the Twin City area to their hometown near New Prague. The Group's mission is to preserve Czech customs and traditions. They promote this through dance performances where they not only dance, but sing and act out traditional skits.

The group initially started with 12 adult members. Throughout the years they have had young adults perform, and today have primarily a children's group with members between the ages of 4 and 13. To date, over 89 children have been members of the group at some point over the past 11 years.

The dance members have done more than just learn traditional dance steps. Deb and Arnie have given members opportunities to learn traditions of their heritage thru activities such as a kolače making class and a Christmas party that featured a visit from Svate Mikuláš with opportunities to make tradition beaded Christmas ornaments and decorating perníky (gingerbread cookies).

The Domáci Dancers also perform at a variety of venues including nursing homes, expos and plays as wells as ethnic festivals across central MN. Some performance highlights were: the Grand Opening of the Catholic Workman - New Prague MN, and the National Dance Festival - Cedar Rapids IA, both in 2002, a performance for Petr Kolář the Ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United States - Montgomery MN in 2006, the WFLA MN state convention and St. Wenceslaus 150th Anniversary - Spillville IA, both in September 2010.

Deb and Arnie have planned carefully to ensure their dance performances are not only accurate in step but have a complete traditional feel and look. The costumes of the group are imported folk dress, or kroje from southern Bohemia; some of which brought back by themselves on one of their trips there. The choreography is modeled from traditional dances and performed to authentic Czech folk music. The authentic folk music includes instruments native of the Czech Republic as the dudy (Czech bagpipe) and the dulcimer.

Ziskovskys acquired their repertoire directly from the Czech Republic. They have traveled there 7 times, visiting with Deb's relatives who have shared many stories with them about family and politics as well as folk traditions done in their area. On each trip they have tried to make sure to visit a different folk festival they have not been to yet. Going to these various festivals they find information on costumes and dancing. They have attended training at three Folk Dance camps at own expense for the purpose of bringing dances back to their group. The Dance camps are taught by Dvorana Dance, directed by Jitka Bonušová, daughter of the well known folk dance director František Bonuš.

The Domáci Dancers not only provide opportunities of learning to its member, but also to the parents. Because the parents are bringing their children to these various events, they have shared with Ziskovskys that they too have become aware of so many Czech activities and information because of their child's involvement in the group.

Deb and Arnie have shared more than the dance steps they have learned from our trips. They replicated a carnival skit seen done in the Czech Republic at the 1st Annual Masopust event in Montgomery in 2000. This Czech Mardi Gras has continued annually, with the traditional Czech skit being a constant each year.

Deb and Arnie have also hosted visiting dance instructors and groups from the Czech Republic. These visits gave their dance group, and the general public, an opportunity to see this tradition performed by professional groups. Visiting dancers include the Dvorana and Jaro Dance groups from Prague in 2003. Ziskovskys arranged the dance group's visit to southern MN; scheduling a public performance in New Prague, and a private performance to the students of the Montgomery elementary school. This was the first visiting dance group from abroad to perform in the south central areas of MN. Those interested from the community housed the dancers while they were here; some creating lasting friendships still today.

Another young dance instructor visited in 2007. She was able to come to a dance practice where she shared basic dance techniques. To share this opportunity, Ziskovskys had invited the dance group from Bechyn MN, who had started their own dance group but have no direct connections to authentic folk dances themselves.

Deb and Arnie are both members of the Czech Heritage Club (CHC) based out of New Prague. The group started as a social club in 2000. In 2003 under Deb's leadership as President, the group changed from a social club to an active group of the community. The group started promoting the heritage more actively with the interaction of the public.

Through their travels and networking, Ziskovskys were able to bring ideas and opportunities to the CHC. In the spring 2008, they organized a Community Education class on traditional egg decorating for the CHC. The egg decorator was Marj Nejděl, a well known artist of this craft from Cedar Rapids IA.

Inspired by the layout of festivals in the Czech Republic, Arnie shared his idea of featuring all Czech things; vendors, entertainment and information booths to be under

one tent for the Dožinky festival in New Prague, which we simply named as the “Czech Village”. Thru their networking of past years, Ziskovskys were able to contact a number of vendors to ensure the first Czech Village would be filled. Consecutive years have proven just as successful. This village was the 3rd annual this past September 2010.

New this past September for the CHC group was Deb’s long time passion to crown Czech Heritage Junior Royalty. The idea of the Royalty is to give the younger generations an opportunity to get involved in promoting their heritage. This in turn incorporates their parents and family.

Inspired by festivals they have attended, Ziskovskys shared the idea of a European Christmas with the CHC. This annual event is scheduled for the 1st weekend of December and is a combination of European entertainment, food, vendors and a special visit of the Czech St. Nicholas, Svate Mikulaš. This event is another opportunity to educate the public about Czech traditions regardless of the age.

Through their dance camp connections, Deb and Arnie were able to connect the CHC with Dvorana Travel to organize a tour in 2010. Twenty two people from the immediate area, some who have never traveled to the Czech Republic, received an amazing tour. Tour participants were able to see tourist attractions, traditional craftsman at work, authentic folk dancing and much more.

Throughout the past 13 years, Deb and Arnie have been consultants to 6 Miss Czech/Slovak MN candidates. They have been consulted for both kroje information and folk dance directions for their talent presentations. Some of these contestants have placed at the National level. This past year, they organized an Exhibit of a combination of authentic kroje along side past Royalty’s kroje in conjunction with the 21st Anniversary of the State’s Miss Czech Slovak MN pageant. At the exhibit, guests were not only able to view authentic and replicated examples of kroje, but learn what Folk Regions they originate from.

Deb and Arnie are also both members of the New Prague Czech Singers since 2007.

Both recently became members of Sokol MN, for their 2nd time around. They had been members years past, Deb holding the position of both Treasurer and Membership Chair, and Arnie on the Board of Trustees.

Arnie has played the drums for the past 37 years. He started playing with his cousin’s band. Since then he has been the drummer for numerous polka bands of the area including the Ben Barta Band. Currently he is with the Dale Pexa band, also doing Czech vocals. These bands have also had appearances on local cable stations highlighting the talents of musical groups of MN.

In conclusion, their membership in various Czech groups, directing their own dance group and participating in polkas bands, have allowed them to promote their love of the Czech heritage; share the traditions they have learned and bring opportunities of learning to others in this community. Both Deb and Arnie are appreciative to those who have

allowed us to do so, and invite those who share this interest in the Czech Heritage to keep sharing with others.