

Chapter Thirteen

Ask Your Sister to Dance

Steve Kalishman and his Russian-born wife, Natasha, helped found the City of Gainesville's Sister City program in the early '80s. Steve met Natasha while in the Merchant Marines, and they proposed a cultural and business exchange with her hometown of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea. They had heard of my work with WUFT and asked if I would like to film their next Sister City delegation to the Soviet Union. They were planning to take The Cross Creek Cloggers, a Gainesville-based, Appalachian folkdance troupe, and their musical accompanists, The Bucksnot Barndance Band, to help promote peace and goodwill with our Cold War adversaries.

As always, the major issue seemed to be funding. I learned that there had been a trip the year before that included the mayor, business leaders, teachers, and others, and that one of the delegates, Nancy Cash, had taken stunning images of the exchange. I proposed we transfer the images to video at WUFT and that we use them as B-roll over my interviews, taking the audience to Soviet classrooms, businesses, meetings with local government officials, and the like. The idea was to show the completed program to Eastern Airlines and seek their sponsorship in the form of free airfare for the performers and our film crew. Eastern was slowly marching up to its 1991 dissolution, and getting their brand out on regional public television was a sufficient incentive to seal the deal.

A major issue loomed mysteriously over our entire 1985 trip and was only made fully apparent in my conversation with Steve Kalishman during the writing of this memoir. As our Aeroflot jet landed in Moscow, the United States and the Soviet Union had no existing cultural-exchange agreement. Jimmy Carter terminated the agreement after the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan. Technically, we were not allowed to perform or film. Had I known this, I doubt I would have been landing with 1,600 pounds of recording gear, provided gratis by WUFT in return for a film highlighting our city's landmark cultural exchange program. Turns out Steve and Natasha Kalishman later discovered that our official tour company, Anniversary Tours, was run by the Communist Party of the United States, who had learned about the Citizen Diplomacy program and wanted to promote a backdoor cultural-exchange program under the radar, or so we presumed.



Kindergarten students in Novorossiysk, Gainesville, Florida's Sister City. Photo by Henry Gonsoulin.

I thought our host from Soviet television was the eyes and ears of the KGB or some other internal spy agency. Turns out she was representing the tour company and charged with traveling with us as we made what turned out to be extemporaneous appearances during the three-week tour. I can now appreciate in retrospect why Steve and Natasha seemed a tad unnerved, as we were always one step behind the tour company in figuring out where we could perform and film. We didn't make matters any easier when the dance troupe decided our first morning in Moscow to warm up on the steps of a building on Gorky Street, a major thoroughfare, causing traffic to come to a standstill as Muscovites gawked at the Cross Creek Cloggers' first unofficial performance.

The evening we arrived from the airport the mood went from ominous to magical. We flew in over what appeared to be a shanty town and were greeted by Kalashnikov-bearing soldiers. They collected our passports and we were told we wouldn't see them again until we boarded a plane for home. In those days, visitors to Moscow from foreign countries were put up at an Intourist Hotel, where each floor featured a "key lady" who would serve you tea and hold onto your room key while you were out and about.

But what I mostly recall from that first evening was the magical glow of light on the lawn outside the hotel, where we were greeted by Soviet dissident Joseph Goldin and Dimitri Pokrovsky, revered Russian folk music researcher and musician. Pokrovsky had brought along his Dmitri Pokrovsky Ensemble to regale us with near-extinct songs sung in an ancient Slavic register so ethereal we were all soon enveloped in a '60s bubble of peace and love. In our very first moment of unauthorized, likely illegal, cultural exchange, the Bucksnot Barndance Band led singers in our group through an evening of back-and-forth folk singing, an ancient song from Russia's past to a contemporary American folk music standard. This went on until the wee hours, when angry voices in various foreign tongues came crying out from open windows of the Intourist Hotel. A handsome, baby-faced Russian policeman came over to tamp down the revelry, but when he saw Goldin and Pokrovsky, he simply smiled and walked away. The last light on the onion-domed buildings that surrounded us was a certain reminder we weren't in Kansas anymore.

Our crew included videographer Bill Abrams, and our sound engineer was the late Ross Wynans, a big bear of a man capable of toting the absurdly heavy, one-inch video editing equipment. Today we would get better broadcast quality video on my iPhone.

Also joining us was Robert "Hutch" Hutchinson, a video producer for the City of Gainesville and, as of the time of this writing, our Alachua County Commissioner. Besides the dancers and their band, also joining us was Gainesville Mayor, Jean Chalmers and her debonair husband, David, an esteemed faculty member of UF's History Department.

By the time we reached Kiev, news of the Cloggers' impromptu Gorky Street warmup had reached our hotel. The Intourist hotel reminded our delegation that no unofficial performances were allowed. In the absence of a governmentally recognized cultural-exchange program, our entire enterprise was technically unofficial. Perhaps infused with joyous memories of exchanging song and dance with Dimitri's welcoming committee, some of the dancers and musicians headed to Independence Square. This square in the center of Kiev has been the site of political protests over the years, most recently the Euromaiden protests of 2013, which progressed to violent clashes ending in the February 2014 Ukrainian revolution. I'm sure our giddy band of travelers were largely unaware of the square's political significance when they opened their guitar cases and laced up their clogs. Aside from attracting a hand-clapping audience, no international scandal or

government scolding followed.

Somehow, as the trip progressed, Steve, Natasha, and the Anniversary tour folks were able to organize, in a manner of speaking, a diverse range of performance opportunities. Our visit to a collective farm was particularly memorable. Upon our arrival, farm workers greeted us. They seemed to have come straight from the fields, if not from the pages of a Russian novel. The women wore head scarves and clothing not unlike that of their clogger guests. They ushered us into a tent, where a bounty of fruit and other local delectables sat in beauteous mounds upon flower-adorned tables. It was as if we had been painted onto the canvas of Pieter Bruegel's "Peasant Dance." After helping ourselves to what we thought was the day's feast, we were then marched off to the Grande Bouffe, where, like the characters in Marco Ferreri's 1973 absurdist film, we were presumably invited to eat ourselves to death. If not death by food, certainly by drink.

The dining hall was also the auditorium where the cloggers were scheduled to perform for the collective farm workers. Each table had bottles of Russian vodka and champagne. Their very presence, we learned, had political ramifications. The Russian government, mindful that many of its citizens were expressing their collective disdain by anesthetizing themselves with alcohol, had issued a nationwide prohibition. The ban did not extend to tourists, which must have generated some ill will amongst our servers. But they had the last laugh. Having warned us with a wink of the eye that we should drink the vodka or the champagne, but NOT both the vodka and the champagne, they left us to our just desserts and insatiable thirst.

I'm sure the meal was superb, bowls of Russian caviar, creamy rich yogurt, pickled this and salted that. But we had gorged at the horn of plenty and so mostly we drank and toasted, drank and toasted. Indeed, I could have edited a half-hour sequence of drinking and toasting across the Soviet Union. Ritual toasting would open most dinners and close most post-performance parties. Our mayor loved to toast our hosts, who loved to toast in return, initiating a series of alcohol-fueled pleasantries so sloppily exuberant that all possibility of war between the toasting parties was rejected out of hand.

And then came the moment for the Cloggers' performance. As they staggered onto the stage, laughing and slapping each other on the back, I saw trouble ahead. The band tried to tune up, but not for long, or well. I told Bill to shoot a lot of B-roll. He got it. Lots of shots of the farm folks clapping, big smiles, close-ups on clogger faces, avoid their feet if possible. Back in the editing room it was clear no amount of B-roll could cover a dance sequence. Clogging, like any other form of choreographed dance style, is a matter of timing. It also requires the dancers to follow the music, and the musicians to follow their score. Wide shots were mostly out of the question, unless you were working on a mockumentary, in which case we were golden. I'm not sure where we spent the night, but as cultural exchanges go, it was a good day.

You will understand when I say that the rest of the trip was kind of a blur. There was a dance exchange in a nightclub with a lighted glass stage. Our hosts were professional night club performers dressed in the best of Vegas. Turns out the sound of clogs on a Plexiglas stage can make quite a racket. I think the audience was there by special invite. I'm sure they came for the after party to enjoy under-the-radar libations. I did include a long pan in the film of the table that was set up as the bar, and the sheer number of dead soldiers, gin, vodka, champagne, is impressive and always gets a good chuckle from viewers.

The film might well have been titled, *Ask Your Brother to Dance*. Throughout the trip, Ed Hoovler, a big-hearted, bearded carpenter, had become one of

the troupe's most animated and beloved ambassadors. On this, the last night of performance before heading home, Ed began a high-stepping duel with one of the Russian dancers. The Hopak is a Ukrainian folk dance originating among the Cossacks and most often performed by males. No doubt you have seen this dance performed and wondered how they avoid hernias. Based on what I saw that evening, it helps to be lubricated—with alcohol, that is. At some point in the contest, Ed thought to invite his partner to exchange shoes, after which the crowd cheers in recognition of the symbolism of this moment. Aware our cameras are running, Ed tells the crowd that he can't imagine ever going to war with someone after you have danced in their shoes.

If only such a gesture had the potential to diffuse the racial, gender, and other divides that now haunt the daily headlines. But you would have to walk in that person's shoes over the span of many generations to truly get it. We met the grandfathers of those young Russian dancers in virtually every city we visited. They would gather at gargantuan memorials to the Great War, their coats bearing medals symbolizing a nation still mourning insufferable loss. Young couples on their wedding day would make a pilgrimage to the eternal flame burning at these sites. Wounds are easily monumentalized, whether in Moscow or Gainesville, where it's easier to topple a Confederate statue than to try and walk in another man's, or woman's, shoes.

Having left the Soviet Union, we made our way to East Germany, where we had a chance to visit the Brandenburg Gate and remnants of the Berlin Wall. One last scheduling coup by the Kalishmans and the tour company resulted in a Cross Creek Cloggers performance in Brussels' Grand Place. In the photo that captures this exhilarating finale, the high-stepping troupe is surrounded by the Gothic City Hall and opulent guild houses. From onion domes to this centuries-old square, we brought home a wealth of memories and that rearview-mirror sort of experience through which one can reflect on that which changes and that which stays the same.



Ed Hoovler (left) was the clogger's ambassador and asked our Sister City hosts how we could go to war when we "had danced in each others' shoes." Photo by Henry Gonsoulin.



Cross Creek Cloggers dance at the Malamude Music Festival at the Grand Plaza, Brussels. Photo by Henry Gonsoulin.