

Published by Telegraf

EUROPOST



www.europost.eu europost@europost.eu

Volume 9 Number 409

Weekly for politics, business and culture

20-26 September 2019

WAN  **IFRA**

World Association
of Newspapers
and News Publishers

www.wan-ifra.org/

Martin Koenig:

Folk dancing keeps your brain alive

I do believe that there is a need that people have for shared cultural enterprises

Neyka Krasteva



- Mr Koenig, when did you first feel the magic of folk dances and music, and how did they become your profession?

- It was very interesting. If university is to bring you in touch with your passion, then my university did do that. I went to my first folk dance when I was a senior in high school. In college I joined this folk dance club, and it was just this recreational thing, but by my last year in college I was dancing every night of the week. I found it very powerful, and the Balkan dancing was the most exciting for me of all the dance forms - both Scandinavian and Balkan. I started out first as a high school teacher, teaching history, and then I went from there to teach dance. But as far as I was concerned, I was still teaching culture because even (with) the history I was teaching, I was interested in the cultural history - what makes a people a people. And then I taught Balkan dance workshops all over the US. After the bicentennial, I started my own not-for-profit arts organisation to present doing research, documentation, presentation and publications of different ethnic communities in America. So the research that I did in Bulgaria was the same sort of research that I did in the US. You all know me here for the work that I did here, but that was not the mainstay of my work - the mainstay of my work was working with American communities of

different ethnicities and doing the same research that I did here, but then I took that material and I put it on festivals, concerts, classes and then also did publications of videos, books, magazines, different things like that. And I am still doing it (all those years later).

- What good wind brought you to the Balkans and to Bulgaria in particular?

- I had been working at a very unique high school in New York in the 1960s. It was unique in that it attracted people from all sorts of communities; it was open enrolment. One of the groups was the children from Bulgaria's trade mission. I had a folk dance club in this school, and these Bulgarians (all boys actually) who were in my classes, I invited them to come to the folk dance club and they used to dance. One of them said to me one day, "Why don't you simply go to Bulgaria and learn some dances there?" I answered, like, "Now, that is a great idea!" So he gave me the idea and so I came to Bulgaria in 1966 for the first time.

- And what were your first impressions of our country?

- My first memory is, as I cross the border, I see this guy, and he is watching a cow, his responsibility was to stay with that cow as the cow ate on the side of the road. I spoke with him in broken Bulgarian - I knew some Russian from college, and I had learned some Serbo-Croatian because I was there for part of the summer. I asked him if I could take this photograph (shows photo). And you could see the quizzical look on his face, like, he did not quite know what I was saying, but he was very amused, he just looked great. So that was

my first impression of Bulgaria. That was the first person I photographed.

- Do you really remember the places and names of people you met in Bulgaria half a century ago?

- Is it not remarkable that I remember that, and I do not remember people that I met an hour ago?! It is very strange how the mind works, but yes, I do. Some people I remember; there are some incidents I do not remember, some people I do not remember, but, by and large, the people I worked with I have a very strong memory of what occurred. My comments in the book are my memories. For many, I had not written anything down and yet I remembered so much that had occurred. I should say that being in Bulgaria was a very life-transforming experience, that it really moved me into the line of work that I went to, basically because of the reception I got here and the opportunity I got here to do this work.

- Some say folk dances heal both the body and the soul. What do you think?

- I totally agree. There is a whole thing of keeping track of

how you move and work those aspects of your brain, that keeps it alive and healthy. It goes completely against the whole thing of senility; it just keeps your brain healthy, it makes you think in ways that are crucial, which older people do not do usually. So that is one of the things that people say, "Go folk dancing, it is helpful." And you are joined with people moving in synchronised fashion, which makes people feel good, it is a very joyful experience.

- Is it not curious that no matter how distinct national folk cultures can be, they are uniting people rather than dividing them, and they share many common elements?

- I totally agree with that. It is a thing that attracted me at the first time - you are joined with people and you are participating with them and not necessarily talking to them because not everybody is verbal. It is an enhancing experience to do this, it makes you feel good. I do not think anybody feels bad when they dance in that manner.

- The world is changing at an incredible pace. Are music traditions endangered? Or would,

instead, new technologies be beneficial to their preservation?

- I wish I could be positive. I do believe people have needs. I am saddened at the state of villages across the world - that population leaves, you cannot make a living working in a village. Millions of people everywhere are leaving, trying to look for a way to make a living, raise their families. It has been my experience that folklore comes from villages, that has been the nursing place for traditions. Yet, that place is being destroyed. So I do not know what happens or where or how it is going to happen, but I do believe that there is a need that people have for that music and dance form and for shared cultural enterprises. I do not know if it will be the same as before, but I do have a feeling that we cannot exist without it. So they, we will find some variation on it, and I have no idea what that will be. At least, that is my hope. I really have no insight into it, but I think it is our need, and it is my hope that that is going to happen.

The whole interview on www.europost.eu



Photo: Alexander Petrov

Close-up

Martin Koenig was born in New York City on 24 October 1938 to parents who emigrated from what was then Poland and is now Ukraine. He was educated in the City University of New York and graduated in 1959. After that he worked as a teacher in history and dance. In 1965 he and his colleague Ethel Raim managed to set up the Balkan Art Centre, later known as the Centre for Traditional Music and Dance in New York. On one of their visits to Bulgaria, they recorded Valya Balkanska's song which was later selected to fly into space on board the Voyager shuttle. On 18 September, Martin Koenig opened his photo exhibition, entitled 20th Century. Balkan echo. Sounds and Images from Bulgaria, at the National Art Gallery in Sofia. On the following day he presented the supplemented bilingual edition of 'Voices and Images from Bulgaria', along with two CDs featuring authentic folklore music.