Dancing with a Foreign Accent ~ Travel Journal Excerpts

by Marge Bruchac

De Dundelle, Bakkeveen
February 24, 2000

Folk performers Marian Nesse and Marita Kruiswijk run a dance house called “Tsjoch-danshuis” where different kinds of ethnic dancing are offered every week.

When Justin and I performed here last year, a “terrible” snow storm of two inches threatened, but crowds thronged the dance house to hear Abenaki stories and learn the Snake Dance and Friendship Dance. We explained that this particular Friendship Dance was created by copying the line dances of the colonial French and English, but replacing stately behavior with Abenaki energy and good humor. Our usually reserved Dutch crowd shuffle-stomped with so much hooting and hollering and laughter filling the room that the hall shook.

...The English and American dances here were not as familiar as I expected — for example, the moves of English dancing, Playford style, looked the same, but all the instructions were in Dutch, and whenever the caller spoke English, it was with a very thick upperclass British accent. That accent continuously caught me by surprise (of course, it’s because the Europeans learn British English, not American English).

When the Danshuis offers Israeli and Klezmer dancing, the demand is so great that they often do it three weeks running. One of the best European folk dance bands in the region plays live (the band includes some prominent Frisian officials who are also musicians), and the sense of overwhelming joy in dancing is remarkable. The teacher, Annette, who is Jewish, speaks eloquent Dutch and only halting English, and the Dutch consider her an exotic and wonderful gift to their community.

The interest in things exotic, so common among the Dutch, goes beyond simple curiosity when it comes to Jewish culture. I have been told that World War II is responsible for their love of things American (including the omnipresent American pop music on the radio), their generous financial support of relief efforts across the world, and their support for Jewish literature and culture. Klezmer bands are wildly popular in the Netherlands...

Fascinated as they are by the exotic, and respectful of cultural difference, the Dutch participate joyfully when invited to dance. And dancing these ancient Israeli movements, to the fiddle and sax, with those ethereal melodies sung in Germanic accents, is an exuberant prayer for survival and continuance.

Greeting Songs and Guinness, Suhl, Thuringen
March 22, 2000

A little piece of Ireland in the former East Germany, the “Feuchte Echte” Irish Pub comes into view as we are speeding by on the motorway encircling the medieval town of Suhl

Within minutes of landing on a cobblestoned side street, we have off-loaded our performance gear, tapes and CDs and overnight bags, handed our car keys to the barkeep, and are in a taxi speeding up the steep streets in search of Rode Pension, our cozy accommodations. We have surrendered our fate to total strangers, but we feel as though we are among dear friends. Before we leave for the performance, Frau Hofmann calls her neighbor in to take a picture of us together. The neighbor, giggling, touches my arm, saying in German that she has never seen an Indian before.

Mr. Kurt, the proprietor of what may be the only Irish Pub in the Thuringen Mountains, speaks passable English, but we have discovered en route that we are among the first American tourists in this part of the former East Germany. I have become the family interpreter, smiling and nodding and saying "Yah" a lot, and encouraging people to keep talking until I hear a familiar word. Justin overheard the innkeeper telling her neighbor: "This man understands nothing...but the Frau knows German very well."

Off we go, in full costumed regalia, down to the pub. The crowd is already eagerly pouring in for the sold-out show, every patron is smoking, many are drinking Guinness and sampling an astonishing supply of single malt whiskies.

When we start, the crowd is so quiet that not even a glass tinkles. After a long introductory greeting song, in the process of explaining that every now and then I will say "Ho," and they can respond to me "Hey," I call out "Ho?" . . .and am met with silence. Very few of these people speak any English. How on earth am I going to do any storytelling? The answer, as it turns out, is to tell the story in a very original way, with many gestures and movements, facial expressions, and carefully chosen tone, timber and intent in every word. We also sing a lot. When I speak in Abenaki, they listen, entranced, seeming to understand it better than English or my hilariously (and probably insultingly) broken German. They love our singing, so we draw out each song as long as we can, adding improvised harmonies. At the break, nobody leaves, so we figure we must be a hit.

During the second half, the smoke is getting to us and our voices are wearing thin. By the end of the evening, we have received wonderful applause, sung a very throaty encore and been well paid by an exuberant Mr. Kurt, who keeps saying, "It was fantastic, with no microphones, you kept them entranced. Fantastic, very good."

We gratefully accept two frothing Guinesses after the show, and Justin is forced to sample some of the best scotches. There is no arguing on this point. It probably helped when he declared that Suhl has the most beautiful women in East Germany and Mr. Kurt serves the best scotch.

Staggering uphill home, Marge and Justin

International Rhythms, somewhere in Germany
sometime in April 2000

Justin keeps asking "What the hell are we doing here?" and I think I have begun to figure it out. The people who run these venues — pubs in the old town centers, cafes in local schools, folk clubs in every imaginable kind of hall or space — have chosen to travel by bringing the world to them. Although the Dutch seem to be world travelers, the Germans we have met tell us that traveling is very expensive. Instead of going to Britain, which is just across the North Sea, they bring the best Irish, Scottish and British performers to their doorstep. We are playing in venues where we have been preceded by The Battlefield Band and hosts of other names I can't remember at the moment, and small pubs where Ghanaian tribal rhythms, Australian didgeridoo and dream-time stories, British cabaret and French torch singers have all graced their stages.

We have been welcomed, not just as an exotic novelty act, but as an opportunity to gain insight into other ways of expressing life and identity through music. Our audiences have continued to surprise us with their empathy and understanding. Shy bear-like men have jumped at the invitation to join in a friendship dance or shake a rattle. People who don't understand a word of English have sung perfect choruses of Abenaki songs. Stoic faces have shed tears at the mere thought that so much fear and prejudice hid the Abenaki language and culture from its own children in the early twentieth century, in the America that they thought was a land of freedom and tolerance. We are feeling a little like ambassadors for ethnic appreciation and survival of ancient traditions in the modern world. As Justin has so sagely observed, it is the differences in our languages that comes between us, not the differences in our hearts.

Dancing across the borders, Marge and Justin

Konninginsdag (Queen's Birthday),
northern Netherlands, April 29, 2000

In Assen, the street musicians are out again. Last week, the day before Easter, they were on every street corner, dressed in traditional garb, from wooden shoes and knee breeches, to folded caps and braids, black suits, striped stockings, patterned and embroidered textiles, a different song and different costume on every corner, with their hurdy-gurdys and player-piano-roll hand-cranked music makers. Then at precisely 17 uur (five o'clock) they rolled to a café in the center of the pedestrian shopping area, kicked off their shoes and hats, doffed their country accents, lit up their cigarettes and sipped their beers and cappuccinos. At precisely 17 and a half, they were on their way home for the customary 6 o'clock dinner.

On an average shopping day, speakers in the street set the mood. A pleasant but insidious mix of American pop picks up tempo in midday to stimulate activity, and settles down to a nice classical number just before 5 pm when all the shops close. Like clockwork, when the shops close, the streets empty of people but for the stray American who is left wondering what happened. The precision of the Dutch social schedule continues to astonish me.

The highlight of today's street performances was a male choir from the town of Rolde: Shanty Koor Rolde. I rounded a corner to hear a deep male voice booming out the verses to "The Ship Titanic," and a forty-man chorus singing the harmonic refrain. Their repertoire included "Rolling Home (to dear old England)," and an assortment of sea-related songs about ships, pirates, sweethearts at home and the like, but the finale and crowd pleaser was "Anchors Aweigh," celebrating the arrival of American troops in Europe. The audience was clapping, the chorus and listeners were swaying, teenagers were waving their fists into the air in support, older folks were singing along and youngsters were watching and listening in awe.

The favorite music, for community choruses, social get-togethers, local gatherings and piped-in store shopping music, is a mix of American easy-listening, soft rock and fifties music. Dutch traditional folk music is carted out like a beloved costume or custom to be paraded about on special days, to remind one of the past. The hands down favorite, of young and old, seems to be World War II nostalgia. The only explanation I've heard that makes sense of this, is that the Dutch have turned their backs on the mistakes of nationalistic behavior in favor of egalitarianism, and that American music reminds them of freedom.

Liberation Day, on May 5, will be another big day of celebration, when every town will hold parades and festivals to celebrate the end of World War II. And in the spirit of equality, freedom and personal liberty, every festival will start and end at the precisely appointed time by the Dutch clock, and each will feature American music.

Anchors aweigh, Marge

An Island in the Noordzee, Texel, Netherlands
April 30, 2000

"Het Maartenshuis," in De Koog, Texel, is an "anthroposophic" community, for the mentally ill and disabled, one of only a few in the world where staff and residents all live under one roof. It is also a religious community, following a liberal form of what looks like Dutch Reformed, with readings from Biblical texts, lighting and extinguishing of candles for beginning and ending every gathering, silent meditation, music and dance, and special programs like ours.

When we arrived, the first thing that caught our eye was an enormous pile of brush, wood and broken furniture that looked like it was waiting for a torch. "Oh, yes, that is for the May eve bonfire, to drive out the last traces of winter and welcome in the spring." I asked, "Are there other old traditions that have survived on the islands." "Oh, no," Ellen replies, "All the old traditions have died out here."

At Het Maartenshuis, we found willing dancers and singers, and a wonderful acceptance and appreciation. Peter, one of the resident staff, translated for us while Justin played musical accompaniment

to the stories, in a mystical atmosphere.

But for us, one of the best stories was later, in the group house, when one of the residents, a tall, gentlemanly, noble-featured man named Dennis, performed a story for us of a magical stone fallen from the sky. When Dennis sings, the songs all have French words, although he has never learned French. As the story ended, Dennis folded his hands and the stone to his breast like a monk holding a precious relic, intoning, “Hold the stone in your heart.” We imagined that we were in the presence of a storyteller of medieval times, like the holy fools who accompanied the Norse on sea voyages and the Templar Knights on Crusade.

Only later did we learn that this community is on the site of an old Templar community that left the mainland in the late 1300s to worship in the mystical way that the Roman Church so hated, a way that incorporated birds and animals, plants, sun and moon and stars as living, expressive beings.

At morning service, the flute player played a tune from the thirteenth century that raised the hair on our head, with its ancient harmonics echoing through the blood and bones of all present. Justin recognized it as a Scottish tune, from the family of Sinclairs, Knights Templars.

On the edge of the world, Marge and Justin

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“Dancing with a Foreign Accent” was published in the CDSS News, issue #164, January/February 2002.