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NEWSLETTER

“What’s in a Name? Jack London and Racism” by Joanne Lafler

In 1951, land in Oakland between the estuary and the end of Broadway was named Jack London Square, in honor of the famous writer associated for decades with the city. A bronze statue of London was placed in the square, along with a replica of the log cabin in which he was said to have lived during his time as a prospector in the Klondike. If you live in Oakland, you have probably visited the site, which became known for seafood restaurants and views of the Bay.

In the spring of 2019, a citizens’ group campaigned for the renaming of the square and circulated online petitions to that end. (One of the petitions suggested naming the square after beloved Congresswoman Barbara Lee.) A newspaper columnist shared his personal story. “The Jack London that I learned about in grade school was a seafaring adventurer. High school teachers taught me about his prolific pen and penchant for weaving together intoxicating descriptions of elemental sensations. It wasn’t until adulthood that I realized that London was more complicated than his reputation.” As well as being a progressive socialist, he was a white supremacist and racist. The square must be renamed! (In the end nothing was changed, either because there were not enough responses to the petitions or because it would have been far too expensive to remove London’s connection. The square stands today as it was first created.)

London had never been silent about his beliefs and opinions. On one occasion he proclaimed: “I am first of all a white man, and only then a socialist.” An essay that he published in 1902 expressed pride in his “Anglo-Saxon” heritage and his belief in so-called “social Darwinism”—a popular theory of the time that justified political conservatism and racism and discouraged intervention to help those in need. Readers of that period would have understood his position. Many would have agreed.

As time went by, London would be remembered chiefly as a writer of dog stories. (To one academic author this amounted to “castration.”) Another author described London as “mercurial.” To another, he was “the most misunderstood figure in the American literary canon.” In the politically sensitive 21st century, biographers have attempted to account for London’s beliefs. I would like to consider him in relation to events in San Francisco at the turn of the twentieth century—a time of ugly, often violent prejudice against the Chinese. I discovered this story in the process of researching the biography of my husband’s father, Henry Anderson Lafler—London’s friend for many years.

Born and raised in northwestern New York State, Lafler arrived in San Francisco in 1901, at the age of 23. He found a city wracked by disputes between labor unions and business owners, culminating in a prolonged strike and the birth of the new Union Labor Party, whose candidates defeated establishment Democrats and Republicans in the November 5 municipal election. There was one issue on which all parties were united: the threat of unrestricted Chinese immigration. Tensions were particularly high because the current version of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was set to expire in May, and the possibility that it might not be renewed aroused already-existing anti-Chinese prejudice. Newspaper editorials and articles engaged in undisguised, vicious racism.

Popular sentiment called for strengthening provisions of the Act and making it permanent. A statewide Exclusion Convention in San Francisco on November 21–22 attracted elected officials, labor leaders, clergy, representatives of business and professional organizations, and representatives of women’s groups. With a few exceptions—notably Quaker and Unitarian clergy—there was agreement that the Chinese were alien by nature, incapable of assimilating into American society, and that in large numbers they were a danger not only to wage earners but to public morality, public health, and the general welfare. The convention concluded with passage of a resolution directing the California congressional delegation to “use utmost endeavor” to make the Act permanent. Inflammatory wording in the initial proposals was slightly moderated in the final draft, which merely deplored Chinese immigration as “an aggravation of many evils.” Not only did the Chinese Exclusion Act become permanent, it remained in force until 1943.

– continued on page 8

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

This is my farewell column as president. Our bylaws provide for board member term limits of three consecutive two-year terms, so I will be leaving the board immediately following the annual meeting on February 25. Having previously served as president from 2010 to 2012 and now since 2018, I’ve done my bit!

I want to thank all of the members who have served on the board with me for their dedication to the organization. Attendance at board meetings has been excellent, and all have contributed ideas and wisdom. It’s gratifying to know that almost all who are eligible to run for another term have agreed to do so; we are still recruiting for another board member or two. In future years, if you are asked to serve, I hope you will do so—it’s not all that demanding a role.

Thank you also to members who have provided our monthly programs, and to Maria Sakovich for continuing to serve as our administrative secretary and newsletter editor. She has played both roles for more than twelve years now, with only very modest compensation. I don’t know what we would do without Maria!

I’ll still be around, sharing my Zoom account, dealing with videos, and as the monthly speaker in March.

Please plan to attend the annual meeting via Zoom on Saturday, February 25. Following the business portion at 11 am PST there will be a program until about 1:30 pm.

– *Ann Harlow*

A post-script from the editor: Anne MacLachlan and I thank the outgoing president for her offer to step in as copy editor for this issue of the newsletter.

Forthcoming Institute monthly presentations Sundays at 2 p.m. –

February 19: Oliver Pollak: “Disability and Disbelief: The Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why of Paraplegic Vivian Edward’s Transcontinental Goat Cart Odyssey, 1907-1910”

March 19: Ann Harlow: “Kissing Cousins: The Artistic Lives of San Francisco’s Albert M. Bender and Anne M. Bremer”

April 16: Daisy Brown Herndon: “The Port Chicago Porthole”

NEWSLETTER EDITOR

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MONTHLY PRESENTATIONS

“Eternal Flames”

In years past the Institute called its monthly presentation “Works In Progress.” Jim Gasperini reverted to this model in his December talk, basing it on a chapter from his two-volume work in progress, a cultural history of fire titled “Fire in the Mind: From the Burning Bush to Burning Man, How We Imagine Fire.”

For most people the term “eternal flame” probably brings to mind the memorial flames that became popular in the middle of the 20th century. One of the first of these burns by the French Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is in Paris. There are now flames burning next to monuments to unknown soldiers in twelve European nations.

The widespread practice of keeping fires burning perpetually for ceremonial or practical purposes has ancient roots, going back well into prehistory. The superhuman longevity of fire can create an animated link to a community’s past and future. Reasons for doing so include: to symbolize the unity and continuity of a family, city, or nation; to honor historical events or persons of significance; to commit to a goal or principle; and to represent the everlasting light of the divine. The oldest reason however was simply to stay alive. The 1981 film *Quest for Fire* dramatizes how early humans struggled to keep fire alive as long as possible before they learned how to make it. They needed it for warmth, protection from predators, and the cooked nutrients required by their expanding brains.

Citing examples from ancient Rome, Circassia, and Mongolian nomads, Jim explained how the ever-burning family hearth continued its central importance into historical times. Fires burned perpetually for practical, symbolic, and spiritual reasons. Chinese families burn perpetual lamps before shrines to their ancestors. Ancient Greeks

venerated Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, both at the family hearth and the public heart symbolizing their city-state. Ancient Romans kept an eternal flame dedicated to their goddess Vesta for a thousand years; the safety of the fire guaranteed the safety of the Roman state. The council fires of Indigenous American nations burned for hundreds of years, sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically.

Jim went on to cite the complex histories of the eternal flame of St. Brigid in Ireland, the Tabernacle of the Israelites, and the sanctuary lamps of synagogues and Christian churches. A fire burning in a Japanese temple for 1200 years was used to light the Peace Flame in Hiroshima, intended to remain burning until nuclear weapons are abolished. The religion that places the greatest emphasis on keeping fires eternally burning is Zoroastrianism; for Zoroastrians earthly fire is a living, energetic manifestation of the presence of the supreme creator, Ahura Mazda.

Jim recounted lighter stories of inextinguishable lamps supposedly burning in tombs for many centuries and a strange legend that grew along the Santa Fe trail to explain the abandonment of the Pecos pueblo, which eventually incorporated the Vestal Virgins of Rome somehow revived in New Mexico. He discussed naturally long-lasting fires, including flames over which temples were built in India, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Burning Mountain in Australia has smoldered for over 6,000 years. Some fires lit by accident have burned for centuries, including coal mine fires in Germany, India, and Pennsylvania.

The invention of gas technology made keeping a ceremonial flame going much easier, sparking a proliferation of eternal flames. Flames honor the victims of war and assassinated leaders, celebrate national independence, commemorate calamitous events, and express hopes for peace or cures for diseases. Then there are the lamps

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on the altars of some Taoist temples, which never go out because they are never lit, since the light of the Tao remains unaffected by cycles of creation and destruction.

We humans tend to vastly overestimate our significance in the context of “eternity.” Alive for such a short time, from our myopic perspective anything that might last a generation or two before or after us seems to qualify as “eternal.” The Vestal Virgins of Rome kept their fire going for a millennium, but it has now been even longer since the Christian Emperor Theodosius extinguished their fire and disbanded their order.

Eternal flames kept in public places may suffer from the vagaries of weather, the attacks of enemies of whatever the flame symbolizes, the clumsy or malicious acts of visitors, or the shifting priorities of those charged with keeping the fire going. Jim cited amusing examples including the grave of John F. Kennedy, where over-enthusiastic Catholic schoolchildren once managed to put out its eternal flame with holy water, and a flame in Serbia extinguished after only a few months when the leader who established it was overthrown.

Jim concluded his presentation by noting the frequent overlap between eternal flames and New Fire ceremonies, the subject of the next chapter of his book, sure to become an international best-seller if he can manage to find a publisher.

A video of Jim's presentation can be viewed on the Institute's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jprd1X8l_8c); more about his book at (<https://jimgasperini.com>).

– *Jim Gasperini*

“The Genocide in California’s Closet”

Author and historian Robert Aquinas McNally opened his presentation to the Institute on

December 18, 2022 with a stark reference. He put on the screen a paragraph from a major speech in 1851 by California’s first governor, Peter Burnett. In it, Governor Burnett called for a “war of extermination” against California’s Indians.

Robert had placed this quotation in a prominent place in his award-winning book, *The Modoc War: A Story of Genocide at the Dawn of America’s Gilded Age* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017). The research he did for the book formed the basis for his talk.

Governor Burnett was no outlier. Not only were his intentions widely echoed by others, and by California newspapers, they were reflected on the ground. Among the many-fold horrors were a series of massacres by so-called militias as well as the paying of bounties for killing Indigenous people. Our modern term for this, Robert emphasized, is genocide. Hence, the titles for his talk and his book. He used much of his talk to explain in detail his use of that term.

The horrific story of the Modoc people in the 19th century represents one chapter of the history of Indigenous people of California. In his talk, Robert placed the Modoc within the larger California context of that era. He singled out two books as valuable resources: *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* by Benjamin Madley (Yale University Press, 2017). Robert described his reading of that book like experiencing an avalanche, with a relentless recitation of murders and massacres. The other book is *Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846-1873* by Brendan C. Lindsay (University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

It’s crucial for historians to look at the larger context for historical events. But the fine grain can often be yet more essential. Robert deserves praise for going into substantial detail about the

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mid-19th century saga of one of the tribes of California in his 400-page book.

Most Institute members surely already realize, at least in a broad-brush sense, that the Native Peoples of California were ravaged by incoming waves of settlers. As historians, we can appreciate that this continues to be of great importance in California. As Robert commented about the genocide of California Indians, “when it’s over, it isn’t over. Repercussions continue.”

That understanding doesn’t, however, necessarily prepare us to answer a haunting question, a question that might arise multiple times in one’s life. “Now that I know, what should I do?”

Robert provides an example, I believe, of at least a starting point in answering that question. By his own admission, he didn’t know, at the outset, just where his research about the Modoc would lead him, thinking of it as a “cowboys and Indians” story. However, he soon began to realize that he had made his way into a very grim saga. Rather than turning away as the story became more painful, he went deeper. He did a great deal of reading of primary and secondary sources, as one can see from his book’s extensive bibliography. Beyond that, his research became more intimate, as he met with Modoc people and went to what had been their land. As he told me:

“The Modoc War did become personal for me in that when I now visit and walk that landscape, way up in northeastern California, I sense the ghosts of the place. I look upon the descendants of the Modocs who fought the war differently than I would if I had not written the book.”

Robert McNally, by leaning into a difficult history, by taking it personally, placed himself in a position where he could try to speak the truth about what happened to the Modoc people. That seems so necessary when coming to grips with a traumatic history. What happened to the

Modocs that their population decreased by more than 95 percent in the mid-19th century?

Robert’s also gone another step further, which could only have happened because he kept on with his path of learning from the Modoc. He realized that their story didn’t end in the 19th century, even though he ended his book there. What they learned from their experience, and what we, in turn, could learn from them, goes beyond their history of horrific suffering and loss. Here’s how he put it.

“They [the Modoc descendants] come across as people who endured a terrible injustice yet now are doing well, even thriving, carving out a place for themselves. Scholars of Native America call this survivance, an odd word that means more than simple survival. The Modocs are a prime example of survivance.”

I hope Robert will write a sequel, focusing on how the Modocs made the journey from near annihilation to survivance. One feels that it must be a remarkable story.

– *Lyndon Comstock*

Writers Group

Our group continues to be productive and successful. Dan Kohanski’s book *A God of Our Invention: How Religion Shaped the Western World* has been published by Apocryphile Press. The first volume of Jim Gasperini’s cultural history of fire is virtually complete. Members continue to present new segments of their works in progress.

In October Cathy Robbins submitted a chapter of her work on the Italian province of Calabria. This chapter was historical in nature, tracing the developments in the area from prehistoric times through the rule of the Normans that began in the 11th century. The group felt that the section was well written and that the material it contained was extraordinarily interesting. Some, however, suggested that the detail may have

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been excessive and took potential readers away from the stated larger goal of the book, which was to focus on the contemporary efforts to lift the region from what many Calabrese see as its present state of “degradation.”

Our November session was devoted to a consideration of Pam Peirce’s latest re-working of her study of the life and achievements of Katharine Gibson Wicks. Pam presented what she intended to be a substantial introduction to a reissuing of *Reluctantly Told*, the work that Katharine published under the pseudonym Jane Hillyard. This account of Katharine’s descent into serious mental illness, her incarceration in an asylum, and her recovery, although published in the 1920s, is still considered to be a work of considerable value by psychologists today. What Pam proposed to do was to provide readers with a fuller and more accurate account of Jane/Katharine’s life and accomplishments that would enhance their understanding of *Reluctantly Told* and of the woman who wrote the remarkable memoir. In the discussion that followed the group praised the quality of the biographical information Pam offered, but felt that it might be misplaced as an introduction and could deflect potential readers from the work itself. The general feeling was that it would best serve as an afterword.

In December Esther Mordant presented a section of her study “God, Good and Evil,” devoted to a discussion of “state predation.” She offered a consideration of historic evil when the perpetrators of evil acts are not individuals but collective entities such as the state. Esther outlined the distinguishing features of state predation and the specific steps that characterize the predation process. Esther offered a concrete example derived from the diary of Nikolai Stepanovich Tagantsev, written in the early 1920s but not published until after perestroika. Tagantsev was a distinguished jurist in pre-revolutionary times whose status made him suspect in the eyes of the Bolshevik regime. His

son Vladimir’s membership in a counter-revolutionary organization brought the Tagantsev family into the clutches of the CheKa, the first iteration of the Soviet secret police. Esther used the diary to show how the revolutionary state step by step destroyed the Tagantsevs, ultimately executing Vladimir and his wife. The group found the Tagantsev diary to be gripping and the only suggestion made was that Esther might supplement the diary with a broader consideration of the many other examples of state predation that Russian history provides in abundance.

– *Richard Robbins*

Mini-Grant

Mini-grant recipients are required to report on their use of the funds. Dot Brovarney received a grant in 2021. Her book, *Mendocino Refuge: Lake Leonard & Reeves Canyon*, has just been published. “It all began,” she writes, “with a 2014 invitation to view a trunk filled with historic photographs depicting life in a forested canyon along a creek that feeds the upper Russian River. Research led me to Washington state and a cache of intimate letters written at the creek’s headwater, Lake Leonard, between 1917 and 1949. The letters begat more photographs, and over eight years, the project blossomed into a 184-page book with 200 images. It tells a multifaceted story of place through the interconnected lives of plants, wildlife, and human inhabitants in this Northern California watershed.

“With the support of the Institute, I was able to hire an indexer, a first time experience for me. I’m pleased to report that I found Nancy Ball in Washington state who is kind, patient, flexible, efficient, and reasonably priced. The only caveat I would make in terms of hiring an individual at a distance pertains primarily to historians such as myself, who write about regional and local subjects. It would have saved time in the long

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run had I provided, in advance, a list indicating the significance of specific topics, particularly cultural material unfamiliar to a non-resident. (Nancy: Nota Bene Indexing, 9962 NE Shorty Campbell Road, Kingston, WA 98346 (360) 265-2080, notabeneindexing@gmail.com)

Member News

On October 14 and 15, 2022, **Marilyn L. Geary** presented her book *Miners, Milkmen & Merchants: From the Swiss-Italian Alps to the Golden Hills of Australia and California* at “Settimane Ticinesi,” a series of events dedicated to Switzerland’s Italian-speaking Canton of Ticino held at the Consulate General of Switzerland in San Francisco. On the first day focused on Ticino’s immigration to California, actors from the American Conservatory Theater read letters from Marilyn’s book dramatizing the immigrant experience. On the next day she gave a talk on the history of Swiss-Italian immigration to California, a mass migration which brought 28,000 Ticinesi to California between 1850 and 1920.

Marilyn also conducted oral histories of the Rev. Dr. Jane Spahr and Paula Pilecki for the Anne T. Kent California Room of the Marin County Free Library. Presbyterian Minister Janie Spahr has committed her life to advocating for justice and greater inclusivity for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. She was the founder and first executive director of Spectrum, the Center for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Concerns in San Anselmo, California, now called the Spahr Center. Paula Pilecki served as its executive director for over sixteen years. Both were instrumental in providing services for the LGBTQ community and in changing attitudes by reaching out to and collaborating with organizations throughout Marin County.

In October, California Audubon published **Leslie Friedman’s** poem, “Meeting the Vulture.” “At a very large online gathering discussing raptors,” Leslie writes, “my name was picked out of a pot. I was asked if I had a comment or story about raptors, so I read ‘Meeting the Vulture.’ I was immediately asked for permission to publish it (<http://www.livelyfoundation.org/wordpress/?p=3896>).

Jim Gasperini’s work in progress “Fire in the Mind” won the Grand Prize in the 2022 San Francisco Writers Conference Writing Contest. For this annual contest, literary-agent judges read excerpts from unpublished manuscripts and choose First Prize Winners in four categories. The Grand Prize Winner is then selected from among the four winners. “Fire in the Mind” took top honors in Adult Non-Fiction.

At the November meeting of the American Academy of the History of Dentistry, held in New York City, **Peter G. Meyerhof** was awarded the Hayden-Harris Award. “This award is the Academy’s highest award and given to those who have made outstanding contributions to the advancement of the history of dentistry. Dr. Meyerhof shares an interest in dental history as well as in the history of California.”

Dan Kohanski’s latest book is now out: *A God of Our Invention: How Religion Shaped the Western World* (Apocryphile Press, 2023). The book examines the history of the development of Jewish and Christian ideas of God and then explores how this history has led to Christianity’s enormous impact on the western world. Dan wishes to acknowledge the tremendous help of the Writers Group, without whom this project would not have been successful. On April 4th, Dan will be speaking about *A God of Our Invention* at the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, in conversation with Club member George Hammond.

The paperback edition of **Robert McNally's** *The Modoc War* is now available. "It was a nonfiction finalist in the Northern California Book Awards and the winner of a California Book Awards gold medal from the Commonwealth Club as the year's best book on California. Available online from Bookshop.org and University of Nebraska Press."

A book launch and reception for **Peter Stansky's** *The Socialist Patriot: George Orwell and War* (Stanford University Press, 2023) will take place Thursday, February 23 at the Green Library at Stanford at 4:30, in the Bender Room. The program features a talk by the Orwell scholar John Rodden about Peter's earlier Orwell work, *The Unknown Orwell* and *Orwell: The Transformation*. Peter himself will speak about his new book. *The Socialist Patriot* should be available for sale, along with the combined edition of the two previous books. The event, probably hybrid, will require registration. Further information coming later.

Katya Miller's essay "Conversations with Clan Mothers: Searching for Meaning in a National Statue" can be found on the website of Women Rising Radio. Katya's work to bring these North American leaders together also resulted in WRR's program 44, "Indigenous Women Envision Rematriation," a half-hour listen. (<https://www.womenrisingradio.com/explore/featured-essay/> and <https://www.womenrisingradio.com/2022/12/26/women-rising-radio-44-indigenous-women-envision-rematriation/>).

—continued from front page

London's racism was mild in comparison to sentiments such as these. Contemporary historians have found evidence that it moderated over time, through travels and personal encounters with non-Whites. I recommend an academic study, *Jack London's Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* (Jeanne Campbell Reesman, University of Georgia Press, 2009). A man of his time, London was also able to rise above his times.

"Moscow, 1985: Beginning of Transition"

The phone rang at 5 a.m. It was 1985; spam calls had not been invented. I picked up the receiver. The caller said he was at the American Embassy in London, is this Leslie Friedman? Yes. He called to find out if I would be willing to travel to Russia to perform. I sat up. Yes. Are you sure you could do this? YES. He asked a few more questions which I do not remember. I interrupted him and said, "Russia is the Mecca of ballet. Of course I want to do it. When do I go?" The caller told me there were other posts which would like to have me come to perform and perhaps to teach. The caller was in charge of planning the presentation of American specialists like engineers and artists. He knew about my 1983-1984 work in India, Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Tunisia from reports sent to him by US diplomats in those places. The caller, Cal,* said that he would get back to me with the details of other posts and travel dates.

Cal called again. Hungary, Romania, and Spain invited me. None of them had co-sponsored an American artist before this. There had been no cultural exchange with the USSR for 14 years. I would perform for an all-Russian audience of officials and artists. This was completely new. He did not have to tell me, but he did, that Russia, with its great ballet tradition might not know what to make of me, if they came at all.

Long lines of travelers were waiting to show their passports at the Moscow airport when I arrived, March 13. My papers accepted, I heard someone nearby ask if I were Leslie. It was the Cultural Attaché from the Embassy. I was ready to leave the airport, but first my suitcases needed to be searched and then kept for further inspection. My companion asked if I needed anything in the suitcases. Definitely: fluids and a case for contact lenses. Ted* said the Embassy kept supplies on hand; we could go there.

We got the needed items and looked into a ballroom. It was full of people sitting on folding chairs. I remember only men sitting there,

looking half or entirely asleep. Their jackets hung over the backs of chairs; their heads rested on their hands draped over the chair in front of them. I asked Ted who they were. He said they were journalists awaiting news of who would be the new leader of the USSR. Chernenko had died a day and a half before. His death and funeral could have called off my program.

Ted said the sleepy writers knew that eventually Secretary of State George Schultz would appear and make the announcement. He asked me if I was ready to go. I asked him if we could stay. "How long do you want to wait?" he asked. "I would like to hear the announcement." "You mean you're interested?" "Yes, this is history, and I am here. If we can stay, let's stay." We waited. Nothing happened. Then, George Schultz appeared. The room was suddenly alert, chairs filled, jackets back on, all eyes turned toward Secretary Schultz. He said that he had "had a good meeting with Russian leaders. The new person heading their government will be Mikhail Gorbachev. I have met him. He is someone we can work with." Secretary Schultz smiled. He beamed positive vibes.

Ted said, "Now I can take you to your hotel." It was very cold outside. Ice and snow were on the sidewalks. Ted escorted me to my room. It was very small. Bunk beds. The window would not close. The shower had only cold water. Ted had said that Paul Newman had stayed in this hotel. I thought, definitely not in this room. I worried about icy muscles before dancing. The next morning, Ted arrived to drive me to the ambassador's residence, Spaso House. He told me that visiting artists would normally perform at the residence for an American audience. I met the ambassador's wife. Donna Hartman, a tall, beautiful, blonde lady, told me that I could do my stretches on the floor of their dining room. Mostly, I remember how good the carpet felt. She got down on the floor and did stretches with me. She asked about my hotel room. I told the truth. I said maybe I could move to another room. She invited me to stay there in their home with Ambassador Hartman and herself. I feel my eyes pop as I remember that moment. I slept in the Vice-President's room in a wonderful, warm bed.

Before the program, I was introduced to Valukin, the artistic director of GITIS.^ I was scheduled to do a performance and lecture there the next day. GITIS is Russia's crown jewel of the theater arts, revered for training choreographers, ballet dancers, and folk ensembles. Valukin himself had trained there and became a star of the Bolshoi. After my presentation at GITIS, Valukin asked me to return to teach. A First for an American dancer.

Friendship House, a grand, pre-1917 relic, was to be my performance venue. It is the stage for foreign artists. I changed in a small room with a drapery for a door. Ted surprised me by walking in. There was barely room for one person, me, and one person's stuff, my costumes and notes. Ted had decided there were things I needed to know and a few minutes before my performance was the best time to inform me. He said that one of their great ballerinas, Olga Lepeshinskaya, a Bolshoi star in the 1930s and '40s, would introduce me, but there was no guarantee that she would show up. The invitees included artists, art administrators, the symphony orchestra, dancers from the Ballet, ballet students, Russian officials. He added that it would be an all-Russian audience; no Americans except the ambassador and Mrs. Hartman. The Russians might not want to come, and they might be told not to come. I told him that this is not what I need to hear at this time. He emphasized that it was important. I told him, "Please leave. Get out of my dressing room." As I remember this, I feel nervous; his messages were so distracting. At the time, however, I was calm. Especially once he left.

Mme. Lepeshinskaya was onstage introducing me in Russian. It was a moment when everything was in harmony. The dancing went well. When I ended, the audience stood, applauded, even cheered. Mme. Lepeshinskaya praised me in loving comments. She looked into my eyes, held my hand, and told the audience they should follow my example, expanding ballet and expression to bring Russian Ballet into the present. That's what the translator told me. Praise from a Prima; what a gift.

– continued on the back page

When I went backstage to the reception room, Valukin picked me up and swirled me around in the air. He was elated. He said I had “done what he had hoped for: showing that a dancer—an American!—could dance beautifully in this new dance.”

Ted accompanied me that night to the Embassy doctor. The unfinished wood floor had left an impression on me. I had many splinters in legs, feet, body. They hurt, but I was too happy to notice the doctor’s needles.

Then, I took the train to Leningrad for performances and meetings with Kirov ballerinas. I stayed in Consul General Charles Magee’s residence. After my Russian program was over, the Consul General told me that my program was so successful it was a significant element in getting a new cultural exchange agreement.

– **Leslie Friedman**

* Name changed for publication. ^As Leslie has noted, GITIS, State Institute for Theatre Arts, is Russia’s preeminent training for theatrical arts. Since its founding in 1878 the school has expanded greatly and lived through various changes in name. GITIS is the longest-lived appellation and was incorporated into the 1991 change in status: “Russian Academy of Theater Arts – GITIS.”

Leslie is a modern dancer. “My early training was ballet with Mme. Victoria Cassan, an Englishwoman who was a soloist in Anna Pavlova’s company. Much later, I was offered a scholarship at the Alvin Ailey school and a place in the Martha Graham school’s professional training program. My choreography is musical and expressive. That means that some ballet people think it is modern dance and modern/contemporary people think it is too balletic.”

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