

A New Life

Accountant husband and wife find work here after immigrating

Volunteers helped Marcela learn English

Marcela Pomieranic and Luis Rubin arrived in Winnipeg from Buenos Aires in September 2002 with their twin daughters, Denise and Melanie, then nine years old.

Among their reasons for leaving Argentina were "the difficulties of the life in our country...security problems, the uncertainty and instability of everyday life, political problems, social problems in general," says Luis. "It's a jungle. You survive if you know the rules and obey them." Marcela adds that many people stay there because they are not willing or able to emigrate.

Both Marcela and Luis were chartered accountants in Argentina. Since Luis was working for a large international company that has offices here and already knew English, he was able to obtain a transfer to Winnipeg. This greatly speeded up the immigration process; he received a work visa immediately.

Only four months after applying, they found themselves here. He began work right away. In that short interval, the family had to finish up their work, sell everything, pack and move. Although the move was positive, it was a very stressful time.

When they first arrived, Marcela and the girls



The Rubin family, from left: Melanie, Luis, Denise and Marcela. Photo supplied by Rubin family.

knew no English, so language was a major challenge. The girls started school at the Gray Academy of Jewish Education, where they were in ESL.

Marcela found herself in a difficult position for the first five or six months. She did not have a work visa and Luis's visa did not allow her to study. Fortunately, volunteers Leslie Singer and Margot Tass helped her learn English during that time.

Then, a friend she made here helped her to obtain a work permit. She got a job as a bookkeeper in a women's shelter, where she has worked for three years.

She is currently finishing up at that job and starting to seek new work, as well as studying to upgrade her accounting qualifications locally. Only in April 2004, when the family obtained landed immigrant status, was she finally able to go to school.

When asked about initial challenges in adjusting to life here, Marcela states that "All is different, not only the language but the culture in general is different and we had to start again: with the work, the language, the people." "Changing from a Latin environment, it's very shocking to go to a change in climate, in language..."

adds Luis. "One big help was the Jewish community. We had lost all of our identity - The first time I visited the (Asper Jewish Community) campus and there was a big ad at the entrance speaking about the immigrants, I felt that here we are welcome. That's perhaps why here we are more attached to the Jewish community than we were in our country. And one of my identities is my Jewish identity."

"All the people from Jewish Child and Family helped us a lot," adds Marcela. "We had a host family, Sheldon Glow and Leslie Singer...They opened their house to us for holiday celebrations. We are now part of the family."

The Rubins have most of their families in Argentina. Their parents are too old to consider moving here, but Marcela and Luis plan to visit Argentina to see them. Luis also has a brother in Spain. Melanie and Denise, now in Grade 7, commented that in Buenos Aires, they were always in separate classes and had separate circles of friends.

Here, it was odd being together so much at school and having the same circle of friends, but they are getting used to it. They are currently preparing for their b'nai mitzvah, to be held at Shaarey Zedek Synagogue this month.

When asked whether the celebration here is similar to that in Argentina, Luis answers that it is "similar but different". Marcela comments that there, the synagogue ceremony is generally a group one. Then, "each family makes its own party at night", for both adults and children. The party can go from 9 in the evening to 5 or 6 in the morning, culminating with pizza for breakfast. Also, many wealthy families throw very extravagant parties. Here, they feel that bat mitzvah celebrations in general are more modest. There are some cultural differences as well. The notions of volunteering your time and making donations to charities, which often arise at bat mitzvah time, are new to them.

While they are not overly fond of Canadian winters, Marcela said that she and Luis appreciate living "more quietly and not being afraid to let the girls go out alone on the street. Also, here we can think of the future; in our country, that was not possible in recent times." The girls also like the fact that "here, we can go out alone to malls and to movies."

The writer is a professional personal historian, specializing in helping people write their life stories. If you know of any Jewish immigrants to Winnipeg in the past decade willing to be interviewed in this "A New Life" feature, please e-mail Thau at chanathau@shaw.ca

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Chai Folk Ensemble 2005 California tour 'unforgettable' experience

Moving 47 people around state no easy task, emcee David Gale recalls

By DAVID GALE

Last February philanthropic executive producers Earl & Cheryl Barish led 47 Jews (and a few non-Jews) to the American "Promised Land." If you're thinking Florida you're on the wrong coast. Yes, that's right, California: the land of film and money. "We were so impressed with the professional level of the Chai concert in May 2004 and we wanted others to enjoy the same experience," wrote the Barishes in a letter to Chai. And so it became Earl and Cheryl Barish's mission to take Chai to California and come kvell or chai water, they were going to do it.

These people don't fool around! In no time, Winnipeg's very own Chai Folk Ensemble was booked to do a three-city tour of California with concerts in Thousand Oaks, San Jose and that Winnipeggers' home away from the snow: Palm Springs.

California? When I was a dancer in Chai - back in the mid-70s - we traveled to Stony Mountain Penitentiary (twice) and we toured to Regina, Moose Jaw and Saskatoon, in the winter, by bus! (To be fair, I also performed in Montreal, St. Catharines and Toronto in 1976.)

Convincing a group of Winnipeg kids to fly to California in February to perform was a no-brainer. Arranging the halls, selling tickets, marketing, advertising, booking flights, buses and hotels, and feeding and managing 47 people, while keeping everyone healthy and well-rested was another story altogether. Although the Barishes knew that they could depend on Chai's fearless artistic director Greaves for most things, at the time of the trip Tracy was pregnant and beginning her third trimester; Tracy was advised by her doctor to not travel. Oy! Tracy could help with all of the pre-planning, but it would be up to production director Benjamin Ross (head electrician at MTC) to act as director on the tour. More than once, his patience would be tested.

A tireless team of former and snowbird Winnipeggers living in California were contacted and took it upon themselves to spread the gospel of Chai. Wendy Erlanger (nee Barish) in Thousand Oaks, Cheryl and Hal Borden in San Jose and Eihel Chochinov, Donnie Stern, and my father Hartley Gale in Palm Springs became the new apostles of Chai. By the time we got to California, the three communities were positively twitching with anticipation.

Moving 47 people around California isn't easy. Right from our arrival at the airport in Los Angeles, a bus and a van were contracted and stayed for the whole week. Our production team was over-seen by Chai's administrative director Reeva Nepon, who was ever present and seemed able to handle anything and everything. Musical director Zack Antel, dance directors Marla Simcoff and Sadira Garfinkel, vocal director Shayla Solomon, stage manager Maury Steindel and costume mistress Lil Brooker all made sure their departments were smoothly supervised. Former Chai president Len Ganetsky also came along as something between a troubleshooter and the "merch" man.

And I came along as emcee, performing songs and jokes specific to each of the cities and getting the crowds whipped up while the dancer made costume changes. I became Chai's latest emcee after a chance encounter with Tracy and her husband David on the beach in Jamaica (they were on their honeymoon and I was in a



BENJI ROSS, director of production and Sadira Garfinkel, co-dance director on a San Francisco trolley.

Speedo.) Tracy was looking for a new emcee and since I was an alumnus (and had always wanted to sing with Chai) it seemed to husband David - a Chai singer himself - to be a perfect fit. After my first year, Tracy asked me to choreograph a segment and now they can't get rid of me. I've exceeded all the shows since 2001 and staged the alumni music show this past June. Since leaving Chai in 1979, I moved to Toronto and established a career as an actor, writer, singer, actor, dancer, producer, director and choreographer. I've achieved success writing for the theatre (Chutzpah a Go-Go) and hosting four seasons of the critically-acclaimed TV show Loving Spoonfuls. Really, I'm just a Chai-dancer kid who done good.

UNFORGETTABLE TRIP

The traveling troupe, many of whom had never been to California before, consisted of dancers, singers, musicians, and technical crew. It was for most an unforgettable trip. A few of the kids were surprised that I rode with them on the bus (sometimes over 10 hours between cities) - my private jet was in the shop.

We were treated lovingly in each city and even managed to spend a whole day sightseeing in San Francisco. But the way the group takes care of its own is a marvel to behold.

"I am the youngest member of Chai and almost immediately I realized I wouldn't have any trouble fitting in with all the older members of Chai. My new friends took me under their wings and make me feel as much of a part of Chai as themselves." Lexi Leibl - Singer

The tour went off with relatively few glitches. Okay, sometimes the singers had to stand in the orchestra pit rather than on stage. And yes, just before the trip one of the group's veteran dancers - Madeleine Kettner - injured her leg and was not able to dance - co-dance director Marla Simcoff had to fill in. (Madeleine still came on the tour, watching from the wings, hoping to heal quickly.) And, it could be mentioned that the theatres didn't always match the specifications that were sent ahead of time to Benji Ross. But the show must go on! And it did in spades.

"Undoubtedly this was the FINEST Jewish Folk Dance Troup we've ever had perform down here! I have never seen our crowds react with such enthusiasm and appreciation! The costumes, the incredible dancers, the wonderful orchestra and the talented singers... will remain in my memory for a long time to come. The only sad thing about your show was that it had to end." Leonard Sternlieb (Palm Springs resident)

The reception we got in each of the three cities was phenomenal. We were greeted with huge ovations, and meeting with the crowds afterwards we were delighted to see a number of former Winnipeggers. Mostly, we could tell how

much we had touched the audiences in their Jewish souls. The words of the Chai members say it all:

"It was very interesting to see how people who do not know us would react to our performances... people were amazed with the show. In San Jose... a woman beaming with happiness said: "I have never been so proud to be Jewish in my life!" I really took this comment to heart and it just goes to show how incredible Chai is and what it does for people." Avi Posen - Dancer

"The first show (in Thousand Oaks) holds a special place in my heart because it was the first time that cousins of mine could see my sister and I perform... Performing for people who not only had never seen us before but also had no idea what to expect and blowing their minds with our show... led to one of the most incredible adventures of my life." Leandro Zyberman - Dancer

"I'm not going to forget, in my life, those three shows, especially the audience standing, cheering and applauding after each show. Six months ago, in my first rehearsal I said: "I'm a soccer player." Now I say: "I'm a DANCER." Marcelo Izraelowicz - DANCER

Since its creation 42 years ago, The Sarah Sommer Chai Folk Ensemble has had a history of spreading naches "on the road." The touring started when Chai was only three years old in 1967, with a performance at the Centennial Folk Arts Council in Ottawa attended by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. Since those regal beginnings, Chai has afforded its members the opportunity to travel to some very exotic locations around the world including concerts in Drummondville, Quebec, (2002) Israel (1998) Mexico City (1995 & 1998) Epcot Centre and Walt Disney World (1996) and of course Fargo, North Dakota (1992.) Most recently, in November, 2005, Chai's singers and musicians wowed the crowds with their boundless energy and unique brand of yiddishkite at the United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Toronto.

"Go West Young Mensch! Take the Chai Road to Vancouver & Victoria!"

The tour to California gave the Barishes a taste for travel, so now Chai is preparing for another tour. This May, Chai will be again be the "ambassadors of naches" presenting a new concert in Vancouver for the 60th Anniversary celebration of the Louis Brier Jewish Aged Foundation. We will be playing the Stanley Theatre, 2750 Granville Street and tickets will be available through Louis Brier as well as TicketMaster. Then it's off to Victoria to perform (for the first time in Victoria) at the Royal Theatre. We've again enlisted the help of Eihel Chochinov (she lives in Victoria most of the year) to chair the Friends of Chai-Victoria committee, some other former Winnipeggers with previous Chai experience (Gerald Arron and his wife Phyllis, the Casiro family) and my brother and cousin... you get the picture. So call your family, your friends and your business acquaintances and let them know - don't miss the show!

Winnipeg will be able to see Chai's new show - including a tribute to the late Naomi Shemer (Yerushalym Shel Zahav) which I choreographed for a group of very talented children - later in May at the Centennial Concert Hall. That night we induct Chai's newly formed Board of Governors.

We should all hope that Chai continues to tour, representing the very best of Winnipeg and spreading Yiddishkite and joy all over the world. Who knows? Maybe for our 100th anniversary, we'll play the moon! (I hear they have a shul there.)



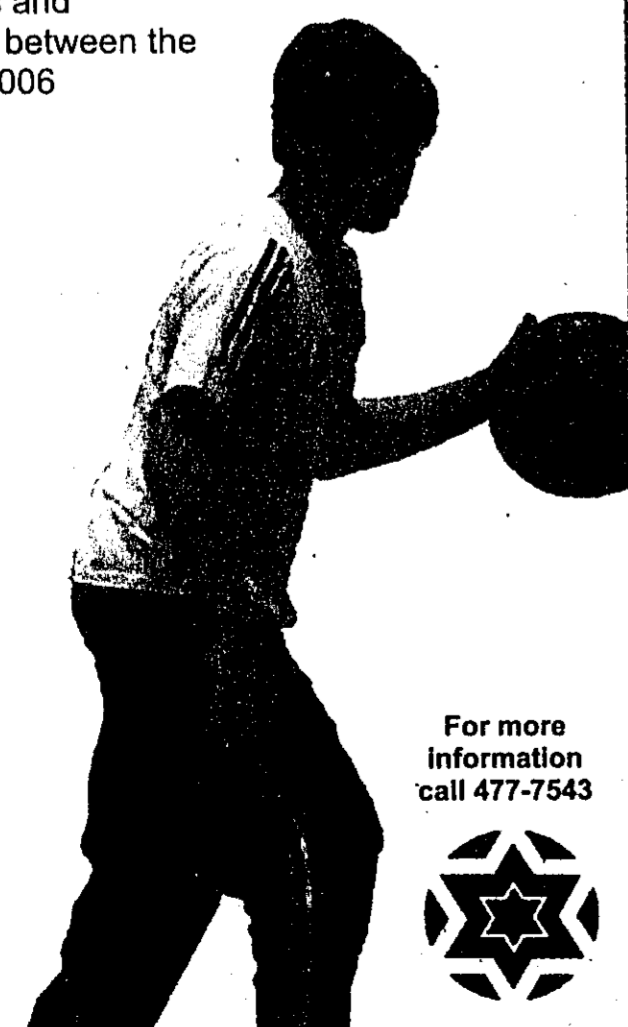
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