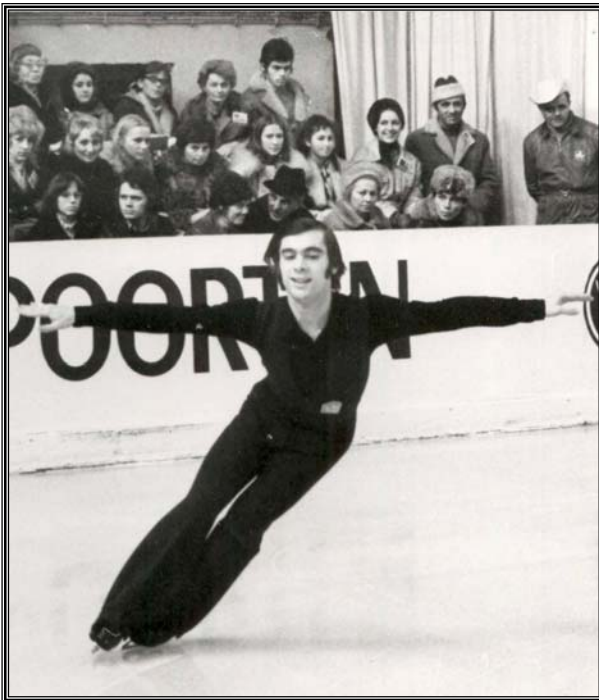


# ONDREJ *and* ZDENKA

## *Our Three Loves*



*Zdenka Nererová - Rebecca Jones*

## 5 The Beginning

I assume that most people have thought back to an important milestone in their lives at times. Maybe they have thought, "I remember this as if it happened yesterday." This is exactly how I feel about the particular event that I will describe now. It was a time of excitement, expectation, and possibilities. This moment influenced my life for years and finally changed it forever.

The year was 1958 and I was five years old. I was living in the city of Bratislava in communist Czechoslovakia, which is now Slovakia. The European Figure Skating Championship was about to begin. Since it was being held in my home town that year, my parents took me to the Winter Stadium to see some of the competition. I was absolutely enchanted by what I saw! At that time, the star of figure skating in my country was the great Karol Divín who won the men's competition that year. In addition, the wonderful pair skaters Otto and Maria Jelínek were very popular. These stars were exciting and very interesting, but I was not enthralled very much with any particular figure skater. The thing about skating that captivated me most were the jumps, pirouettes, and the many beautiful movements which were found in the choreography that was set to music. I was drawn to these things and knew that this was exactly what I wanted to do.

As it often happens, whenever a new sports hero comes along, that particular sport enjoys increased interest especially among children. When Karol Divín won the gold medal at the European Championship in Bratislava, he raised the children's fever about the sport of figure skating. Coming from all parts of town, many kids were ready to try and embrace a sport new to them. Many of these children lived on streets that were close to the Winter Stadium. One of those children, Ondrej Nepela, lived with his family on Trnavská Street. I lived with my parents and brother on Vajnorská Street. The year was 1960 and I was seven years old. Finally, my parents allowed me to begin figure skating lessons. I was so happy! Since my parents and others lived close to the stadium, it was easier to bring their children very early in the morning for training. Lessons began at 6:00 in the morning! So it was handy to live close to the arena with a better possibility of getting your "little ones" there on time. When I began skating, I studied with Mrs. Golonková and Mrs. Anderlová who worked at training beginners. As I gained knowledge in the sport, my coaches were pleased with my progress. At that time, I realized that the best coaches were looking for children with a natural talent who were also very hard workers. Among these coaches was a well-known trainer named Hilda Múdra. There were other famous coaches as well. They were observing all of the children that were training very carefully trying to decide who had the "right stuff" to succeed well in competition. Finally after a few months, Mrs. Múdra chose me as one of the children that she would coach personally. I was thrilled! In addition to me, she chose my very good friend Dana. Dana and I were quite close and were happy that we would be able to train together!

From there, Dana and I worked diligently with Mrs. Múdra. As we were training, we couldn't help but notice the boy who trained harder than anyone we had ever seen before. I came to find out that he was nine years old, just two years older than I. He had already been in training for two years with Mrs. Múdra. He was very focused and talented. When the rest of us were not with the coaches, we would often stand and talk to each other or rest. But this boy wouldn't! He just kept training and practicing. Around the Winter Stadium and skating in general, there was buzz that he was a prodigy. I also noticed other things. He was very quiet, but not because he was "high and mighty." He was just shy and otherwise quite dear. Despite his growing success and the attention heaped on him from others, he was very modest, always kind, and as I later discovered, very fond of his family. Add to that the fact that he was a nice boy with a bright smile. So this was Ondrej Nepela and I fell head over heels in love! As luck would have it, I had a rival to deal with - Dana! But that was OK because Dana was my close friend and Ondrej did not know that we adored him anyway. As little girls often do, we developed a special "hand signal." When we went to school or home from training at the Stadium, we would shape our fingers into an "O" and smile at each other. "O" stood for Ondrej. Even today, when I think back on this I have to smile. When I first fell in love with this boy I thought of different things. But the main thing I had in my head was this wish and desire. "Will you ever notice me, Ondrej? Maybe someday...."

## 6 Learning, Growth, Success

The years went by in a whirlwind of activity for Ondrej and me. Like all kids, we went to elementary school, although not to the same one. However, I was still with him every day at the Winter Stadium when we were both in training on the ice. My feelings toward him did not change. Ondrej behaved very nicely toward me, but also to all of the other children. Already at this young age, he was a true gentleman. He was never one to make little girls cry by teasing them. His shyness was charming in its own way. I'm quite sure that there were many girls who were already in love with Ondrej. This continued into his adulthood.

At that time, I often observed Ondrej as he trained. His commitment and attention to detail were astounding! As he grew, he became a master at the mandatory swirls and beautiful (not to mention difficult) patterns called "school figures" which at that time were very important in figure skating. (Unfortunately, they are no longer required in this day and age.) Eventually, Ondrej would be expected to place first in this discipline at competitions. He was that fine and precise! As more time passed, Ondrej became quite a skilled free skater as well, consistently placing high in this discipline. He was always improving his technique in jumps, combinations, spins, and all things needed to succeed in our sport. His overall style and carriage on the ice was strong yet very elegant. In 1962, he won the Veľká cena Bratislavy (Bratislava Grand Prix, a very important skating competition in our town of Bratislava). Ondrej was eleven years old.

From there, Ondrej was almost unstoppable. When he first entered the Czechoslovakian Championship in the 1964-65 season as a senior competitor, he won gold at 14 years of age. He then won this championship seven more times, his last gold medal occurring in the 1972-73 season. He won the silver medal at Prague Skate (Prague, Czechoslovakia) in 1964-65 and again in the 1966-67 season. Ondrej won the Moscow News Competition in the 1966-67 season as well (an international event sponsored by the Moscow News newspaper.) In 1964, when he was 13 years old, he competed at his first Olympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria. In 1970, he won the Winter Univerziade in Rovaniemi, Finland. Ondrej was the European Figure Skating Champion five times, and the World Champion three times. Finally, he won the Olympic gold medal at the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo, Japan. During his career, Ondrej also racked up more silver and bronze medals along the way. After each triumphant success, my parents and I would send Ondrej a congratulatory telegram. This is a phenomenal list of accomplishments which still makes me gasp! Ondrej's talent, diligence, and focus had brought him great results and success.

My diligence was paying off also! I was a very good figure skater, and in 1965 I also competed in the Veľká cena Bratislavy as Ondrej did. And I won the girls category! I was twelve years old at the time. I was very proud of my achievement! Unfortunately, when my prospects looked like they were gaining momentum, I began to have health

problems with my knees. My coach, Mrs. Múdra, took me to see Dr. Bínovský who was a specialist in sports injuries. It was decided that I should not skate for a year and during that time should undergo a variety of recommended treatments. I followed his instructions, then tried to return to the ice. But the problems with my knees persisted. They were so severe that I was forced to say goodbye to competitive figure skating at the age of 13 ½. It was a very difficult decision for me! But I had been studying ballet and music since the age of six, so I turned my attention to dance and playing the piano. I had been dying to be able to join the best Czechoslovak Folk Dance Ensemble, called Lúčnica, for quite some time. It was founded in 1948 and still enjoys an excellent reputation around the world. However, at that time as today, it was very difficult to get into this group. Lúčnica takes only the best! So I had a goal, and I went forward to meet this goal!

Under the leadership of a former prima ballerina and choreographer from the Slovak National Theater, I gained knowledge and skills in dancing. This dancer's name was Mrs. Ella Fuchsová Lehotská, and she was an excellent teacher! This was a private school of ballet in a socialist country which was the sort of thing that was unheard of. Mrs. Lehotská founded this school in 1930. Under her teaching, I studied classical dance and tap dance, and improved steadily over time. Actually, all of the time spent under her teaching was wonderful – except for one fact. She had a son named Janko. Janko was one of those boys who enjoyed teasing girls at any time that the opportunity presented itself. And I was a good target! When I was about 10 years old, (and for the rest of the time I was in dance classes under the guidance of his mother) he did something that I didn't like at all. He knew that Ondrej and I were both students of Mrs. Múdra. So, instead of using my actual last name, he began calling me Zdenka Nepelová (Zdenka Nepela) instead! It probably doesn't sound cruel to others, but I was in love and hearing myself referred to as Zdenka Nepela made me blush clear to my ears! Now it is not at all upsetting, but when one is a little girl many things can be embarrassing! Now, Janko has a very successful career as a well-known singer, musician, and songwriter in Slovakia. Another interesting thing about my time with Mrs. Lehotská is the fact that she choreographed an exhibition program for Ondrej when he was a young skater. Since he was already an admirer and lover of horses and horseback riding, she designed a program for him called "The Jockey." Ondrej skated this program dressed in a riding costume and carrying a riding crop. Today, having seen him skate this program, it remains a precious memory for me.

At 15, I successfully passed all of the very difficult tests required to be able to join Lúčnica. I achieved my dream! I danced with Lúčnica for 12 years and was able to perform in a wide variety of places. I was able to meet many interesting and inspirational people, and ultimately worked as a dance educator with the Lúčnica ensemble.

During high school, Ondrej and I did go to the same school. Of course we were both

very busy with our individual activities. At first, I was busy with preparations for my Lúčnica auditions and subsequently was extremely busy after I was accepted into the group. At that time, I was experiencing extremely challenging days and workouts as I met all of the expectations that Lúčnica deemed necessary in its tradition of a high level of dance technique and interpretation. Ondrej was still excelling on the World Figure Skating scene. We were both enjoying huge success. But with great success, there is always an equally great price to pay. I would watch the incredibly challenging schedule that Ondrej endured. Early in the morning he walked to practice. Then, unless he was competing somewhere, he went to school. After school, he returned to training. It was a very demanding daily regimen! After winning the silver medal at the 1969 World Championship (in the USA), Ondrej and the other medalists went on an exhibition tour to 15 cities. Then, he immediately returned home to prepare for the high school graduation tests. Ondrej always insisted on the same terms that all of the other students in school had to face when taking tests. Despite his busy life, he never asked for an exemption of any kind. When he began to study at the Comenius University, Faculty of Law, he had to ask for an individual study plan. All of the obligations arising from the study of figure skating as well, made it plain to Ondrej that he could not remain in law classes. It seemed to me that he had absolutely no time for himself and did not know what it was like to just sit down and relax. It made me feel sorry for him sometimes!

I have yet to tell about my problems. My brother emigrated from Czechoslovakia in the year 1968, as armies from the Soviet Union and other socialist states (Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria) invaded Czechoslovakia on the pretext of "liberating us from bad Western ideas." He and his family wanted to live in a free country. And the socialist regime never took kindly to people engaging in such activity! Therefore, my parents and I experienced a great deal of fallout from this action. The regime did not trust us and tended to watch us very closely. I had always been one of the best pupils in my class and I had never caused anyone problems. I was a lead dancer and specialist in Lúčnica. Mr. Štefan Nosál', the Artistic Director and Choreographer head of Lúčnica, allowed me to assist him in preparing new choreographies. Even so with these accomplishments, from the end of my primary school years through my university studies, I always lived in fear. Would I get to my next level of schooling since my brother emigrated? This was a serious concern because each time I tried to advance in my schooling, the socialist regime was distrustful towards me and my forthcoming change in schools. When I was with Lúčnica on world tour, I performed in the USA, Canada, South and Central America, in Western and Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia, Russia, Japan and many other countries. And poor Mr. Nosál' always signed papers explaining that he needed my presence on the tour. In fact he would actually give the authorities his personal guarantee that I would return home. The government was afraid that I would flee! I felt guilty about the fact that Mr. Nosál' had to do this for me and take a risk himself. But he was determined to do this because my talent was important for him and for Lúčnica. So this made me very happy!

After graduating from high school, I began to study in 1971 at the University of Performing Arts in Bratislava. There, I studied the art of Slovak folk dancing choreography. My main teacher was Mr. Nosál, choreographer and my “guardian angel.” Meanwhile, after his victories at the 1972 Olympics in Sapporo, Japan and the World Championship in Calgary, Canada, Ondrej wanted to retire and go on to a university career as I was doing at the time. However, at this time, we all learned that he was going to compete for another year! The 1973 World Figure Skating Championship would be held in our home town of Bratislava. I was thrilled! I had always followed Ondrej’s career, and because I was studying in Bratislava I would have a chance to go to the competition! And so I did. Ondrej skated, as always, very well. However, it seemed that he was under greater pressure than usual. Usually he was a very steely competitor – not a sign of nerves or pressure of any kind. But this time, I saw something going on yet I didn’t know what it was. In spite of that, Ondrej won his third World Championship. Two other girl skaters and I were able every evening to present to the winners their medals at the awards ceremony! The three of us were dressed in beautiful traditional Slovak costumes. Later at the reception for the medal winners and other skaters, coaches, judges, and invited guests of the International Skating Union, the Lúčnica Dance Group performed. For me, this is really a prized memory!

Suddenly, I noticed that Ondrej was paying more attention to me! I didn’t know why, but I said to myself: “Don’t ask why, just enjoy it!” So, I decided to invite him to the 25th Anniversary performance of Lúčnica at the Slovak National Theater, and also to the reception which was held at the Hotel Carlton in Bratislava. Finally we had the opportunity to talk longer and even to dance together to beautiful romantic music. I thought, “ This was certainly a long time in coming. But now it has become a reality!” I decided that I would wait and see what would happen.