

Ludmila and Oleg Protopopov **REVOLUTIONARIES IN PAIRS SKATING**

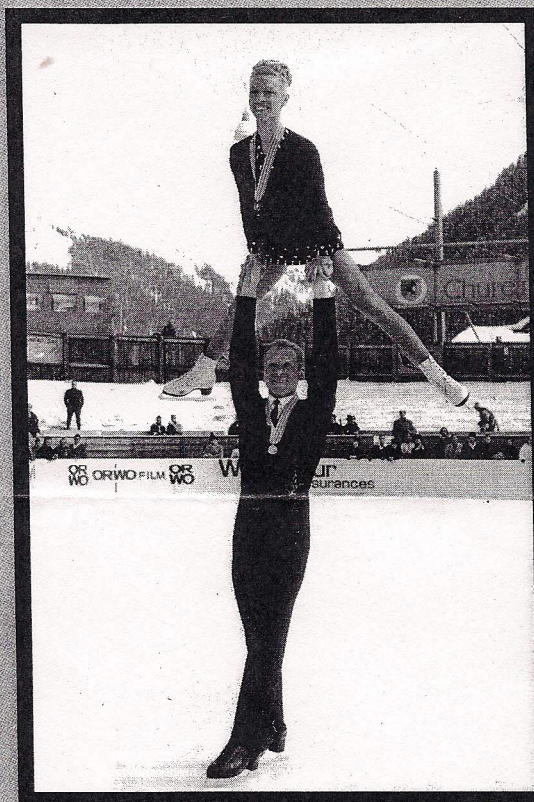
In 1954, Ludmila Belousova, 20, and Oleg Protopopov, 23, met by chance when both attended a skating seminar in Leningrad, Russia. They were interested in skating together but Soviet officials told them they were too old to compete and denied them any support. They did not have a coach or choreographer, nor did they have leather skating boots or attractive costumes. What they did have was a passion to skate and for each other; they married in December of 1957.

Defying the system and determined to skate, Belousova, who was studying engineering at university, joined Protopopov after classes to train on outdoor rinks. Often they skated in temperatures that sometimes dipped to minus 35 degrees.

After winning silver medals at Europeans and Worlds from 1962-1964, the Protopopovs won their first Olympic gold medal at the 1964 Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck, Austria. They won four straight European and World pairs titles from 1965-1968. In Grenoble in 1968, they secured their second and final Olympic gold medal.

The Protopopovs were the first skaters to perform side-by-side jumps, an element they developed. They invented new spiral moves: the life spiral (forward inside edge), the love spiral (forward outside edge) and the cosmic spiral (backward inside edge).

At the 1969 World Championships, the Protopopovs placed third behind the new Soviet teams of Irina



Ludmila and Oleg Protopopov display their golden touch.

Rodnina and Alexei Ulanov and Tamara Moskvina and Alexei Mishin. After the event the Protopopovs were told to retire and were excluded from the 1972 Olympic team. That December they entered and won a professional invitational event in Japan. After their return to the Soviet Union, nine months passed before they were offered a job in Leningrad's ice show. Their names were not included in the program. By 1978 they stated they felt their "souls were being drained away."

After skating with *Ice Capades* for a season, they defected to Switzerland

in 1979. In 1985, their names were removed from the Soviet Union skating directory. Following their defection, no Soviet skater, coach or official was permitted to speak to them until 1992, when the Soviet Union broke up.

Twenty-four years passed before the Protopopovs returned to their homeland in 2003 to skate at the Jubilee Palace. In 2004, the Protopopovs celebrated their 50th anniversary of skating together. In 2005, the president of the Russian Figure Skating Federation, Valentin Piseev, extended an invitation to them to attend the World Championships in Moscow as his honored guests. "Russia has now won 73 gold medals and all this history began with Belousova and Protopopov," Piseev told the press following the competition.

In recent years the Protopopovs have split their time between training in Lake Placid, windsurfing in Hawaii and relaxing at their home in Switzerland. Ludmila, 69, and Oleg, 72, are still able to execute difficult pair elements and Ludmila can still do the splits. They perform each year in "An Evening with Champions," a Harvard University event, which raises money to fight childhood cancer.

In 1965, the Protopopovs were made honorary citizens of the city of Colorado Springs. In 1978, they were inducted into the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame. Ludmila Protopopov was inducted into the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame in 1992. — SUSAN D. RUSSELL ●

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