HOROHRENSKY CZARDAS

You had to be there.
 That’s the disclaimer that follows the punchline of a meant-to-be-humorous anecdote that barely elicits a grin.
 You had to be there.
 But over the years I’ve used that incomparable phrase when I’ve found myself coming up short in trying to convey to people what Goldensbridge was…is…meant…means to me. And when I’ve shared this frustration with my friends from GB, they have just nodded, a nod that could best be translated as, Yep, you had to be there.
 Well, I was. And in some ways, I had to be.

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 I was 15 in the winter of ‘62. My previous three summers had been spent at sleepaway camp in the Poconos. The third year I was an assistant counselor and got paid a hundred bucks with which I bought a Gibson 12-string guitar which was going to be how people identified me in the years to come. “Oh, you’re the guy that plays the 12-string, right?” Yep, that was me. And with folk music trending, my thoughts kept drifting to Greenwich Village and the coffee houses where I could play and sing. And hopefully, find romance, since so far that had eluded me. So, I penciled in spending the summer of ’62 in the Village on my calendar.
 My folks had a different idea for me.
 My mom was from Brooklyn, my dad from the Bronx, not far from Yankee Stadium. They met at a dance sponsored by YCL, the Young Communists League. They were married soon after at City Hall in Manhattan on May 1, 1938, following which they immediately walked out of the building and then up to Union Square to listen to the May Day speeches. They were both Party members and so when I was born eight years and six months and six days later, on November 7, 1946, the 29th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, I was officially not so much a baby boomer as a Red Diaper Baby.
 Now, I never heard that term growing up, and I grew up with quite a few other Red Diaper Babies. It wasn’t until the late ‘70s that it came up on my radar with the publication of The Romance of American Communism by Vivien Gornick (no relation; before Ellis Island, we were Gornitsky). But from the first it resonated. We had our own subculture, our own language, our own music, our own look, our own sense of what it means to be not so much un-American as anti-American when we believed our country was in the wrong, and being proud of it. And long before the phrase entered my vocabulary, I knew I was one.
 My parents’ friends had kids around my age, most of whom lived in our neighborhood and were my first friends as well. Up until age 11 we summered with them in the Adirondacks. By the time I entered my teens I had another group of neighborhood friends, some of whom were part of my culture, some of whom were attracted to it. But we tended to scatter over the summers, like my being shipped off to a decidedly not Red Diaper Baby camp from ’59 to ‘61. So, in the summer of ’62 I was going to take matters into my own hands and find my peeps in the place where I expected they existed in droves. I had been a regular at the Sunday morning folk music congregations in Washington Square Park and the taste of the Bohemian Left lingered through the week. This summer was going to be the deep dive.
 “It’s called Goldens Bridge,” my mom explained. “It’s very nice. There’s a lake. You’ll like it.”
 I was devastated. My folks had rented a house, actually half a house, in some place I never heard of. Apparently, the rental agent (well, he wasn’t a rental agent, he was on the rental committee in GB, but understanding the somewhat convoluted workings of the Colony would be a work in progress for me) had a son named Eric who went to my school.
 And sure enough, the following day a blond and energetic kid came at an excited clip through the lunchroom towards me waving enthusiastically. I was in my junior year at the Bronx High School of Science and had never seen this kid before. He began talking to me about the Colony – a term I actually found somewhat intriguing. A colony? But Eric was the poster child for “you had to be there.” Describing the prosaic wasn’t in his DNA. And so, he talked mainly in metaphors and similes, and I got very little of the substance. Over the years he was to become one of my closest friends. But he did little to lift my spirits that spring as I brooded over what the summer would bring. Or fail to bring.
 At the end of June we went up. My mom suggested that I could be a counselor in the day camp. I was totally uninterested. But she pressed me to at least go to a gathering of some kind that evening where I could meet the people on the Camp Committee. I reluctantly agreed and we drove over to the meeting which looked more like a casual party. I wasn’t there five minutes when a kid came up to me, introduced himself as Jeff, and said: “Let me show you around.”

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 My play was called Goldensbridge. The Colony was called Goldens Bridge. I purposely spelled it the way I did because to me Goldensbridge was more than a place where someone named Golden built a bridge. It was … well, you had to be there.
 I wrote it in the early ‘90s. It was my first full-length play, just the third play I had written. It jumped back and forth in time and from place to place with the actors playing themselves at ages 20 or more years apart. It felt unstageable, particularly in community theater where I made my artistic home, so I shelved it and moved on.
 But years later, my amazing wife, Robin, who didn’t think anything was unstageable, pushed me to submit it to a NYC Festival. I did, they accepted it, we cast it with some of the best actors we had worked with in Westchester and started rehearsal. Robin was directing but I was at every rehearsal tweaking the script. And I realized the incredible gift that had been given{?} me, or at least, the gift I had. I didn’t think my writing was going to ever be produced commercially anywhere. I didn’t think it reflected what contemporary writers were doing on stage. It was at times funny and moving, but not special. But what was magical about the writing was that when I watched it, I was transported back to the time and place, back to the childhood that I had left behind, back to the feelings, the smells, the summer breeze, the starlit nights of August, just the way all those things converged all those years ago in Goldensbridge.
 Some of the actors said they would like to go visit the community to get a feel for it. I knew that walking around, seeing the Lake and The Barn or our old house, was not going to really impart what Goldensbridge was. But it would give them some sense of what Goldens Bridge was, so that was something.
 The Colony was founded in 1928 by union workers from Manhattan, one of many similar communities that sprung up in the Lower Hudson Valley as summer bungalow colonies for New York Jews, most of whom were communist or socialist. They took the former farm, built a small lake, converted the barn into The Barn, a kind of rec center, and summered there, becoming a community association which was effectively self-governing, and establishing an identity rich in communal spirit and sharing. It is certain that my folks knew about this and similar places and were just biding their time until the time was right to make their move. Most of these sites had lost their leftist flavor over time, succumbing to rising property values and McCarthyism. But Goldens Bridge had tenaciously hung on, being small and out of the way. Or maybe, just being tenacious.
 My play was not about any of that. It was a somewhat romanticized memory of my first summer there juxtaposed with a more-or-less unromanticized memory of my parents’ last winter there and their painful decision to leave. And I watched as my actors tried to find their characters’ world on the dirt roads, in the dilapidated barn, and by the small lake. I was reminded of a story about Eileen Atkins, the British actor, who, after rehearsing a play for several weeks, was finally taken to see the set, which was the living room of her character’s house. She walked around, sat down at the desk, picked up some ornate pen that was on the desk and said: “Ah. Now I know who I am.” I don’t think any of my actors had that kind of a moment. But as I watched them, I did.

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 “You should take off your sneakers,” Jeff said. And then added, without any discomfort, “Can you do that?” I was walking with a cane, which I had been doing for the past four years since an operation to correct some of the issues that polio had left me with had been performed with less than satisfactory results. But of course, I could take off my sneakers and had always preferred being barefoot, so I did, and left them under an Adirondacks chair on Julia Goldenberg’s porch. Julia was head of the Camp Committee and was hosting this “start of summer” party.
 “Yeah,” Jeff continued, “walking barefoot on these roads…” That actually was a complete thought for Jeff, who seemed to have a bit of a head start on the stoner generation that was to engulf all of us in the next few years. And we walked and technically he did show me the Colony, including letting me know that people called it the Colony or GB, but never Goldens Bridge or the community. It was nighttime, and so I couldn’t make out much of the occasional spots he pointed out. But mostly he “showed” me the Colony by describing what it was. The Barn where they had social events and folk dancing. The Lake where he worked as assistant lifeguard and the people sun-bathed, played volleyball, kibbitzed and watched their kids grow up. We talked about Pete Seeger and the Weavers. He said he played banjo. How come we never met in Washington Square. Did I know this person or that person. Did I ever see Potemkin. Did I ever go to the Figaro. Had I gone to Kinderland. Did I play chess. As we passed certain houses, he would throw out a bit of history or gossip. “That’s Balter. He was in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.” And we both started singing Peat Bog Soldiers and our stroll transformed into a slow march. “That’s Gold. Jazz pianist. Has some very interesting parties, if you know what I mean.” I didn’t but Jeff’s tone certainly suggested something racy. “That’s Fenster. Trotskyite.” He didn’t have to say anything more, although I think he mumbled “revisionist” under his breath. “Mel Brown. He kind of runs the volleyball court.”
 As we walked, I was loving the feeling of the road beneath my feet. The odd pebble notwithstanding, there was a great comfort that in retrospect I find hard to understand. At the time I wasn’t really thinking about it, just feeling it. But over time I realized how liberating it was. In the weeks, months and years to come, when I would come up to GB, the first thing I would do was take off my sneakers and socks. And feel the ground I walked upon.
 We passed the Lake and he talked about the two rafts, the Big Raft and the Little Raft, that had been sitting on shore since last season until earlier that day he and the chief lifeguard, Richie Pankin, gave out a call to all those lounging on their chairs. “Rafts.” And immediately folks got up, encircled the structures, lifted them up and placed them on inflated inner tubes in the water. And several folks then swam them out to their positions in the Lake where they were anchored by rope to sunken cinder blocks. I tried visualizing it as he described it. When I saw it myself, was part of it myself, in the summers to come, I realized how wrong I had it. You had to … well, you get it by now, I’m sure.

Across the road he pointed to a house and said “Stand.”
 “Oh,” I said, “Eric goes to my school. Do you think he’s here?”
 “Calumet,” Jeff said without missing a beat. I had no idea what that meant at the time but later learned it was one of the socialist summer camps that kids like me typically went to, along with Kinderland and Unity and Webatuck.
 “What group are you doing?” Again, I was at a loss.
 “What do you mean?”
 “What group in camp are you going to be a counselor for?”
 “Oh, I’m not working in the camp.”
 “Oh. Why were you at Julia’s?”
 “Well, my mom said I should come. I mean, I guess she wants me to work there, I don’t know.”

 “You should. It’s fun. And besides, what else are you going to do with your summer?”
 “I was hoping to convince my folks to let me stay in the city so I could go down to the Village, play music, meet girls.”
 “You can do all that here, with better musicians and prettier girls.” And he proceeded to run off a list of a half a dozen or so teenage girls whose families had houses or regularly rented, some of whom were working as counselors, rating their attributes in a fashion I was not all that comfortable with even in the more unPC times of the early ‘60s (although in all fairness to Jeff, the tone of his observations was essentially clinical).
 I began to chew it over as we passed the old red barn I had seen on our initial drive into the place. “And that’s The Barn,” Jeff said, and we stopped in front of it, as if he was going to point out some historically significant aspects to it, like maybe a bloodstain from one of the Colony folks who had been at the Peekskill riot. But instead, he verbally opened the doors for me. “They have forums in there with great guests, like Ben Davis and Robbie Meeropol. And they do plays and have Camp Night and Talent Night, if you want you can sing there, and every Friday night is folk dancing, you’re not going to want to miss that –“

“I don’t really *dance*,” I interjected a tad uncomfortably.

“Don’t really *matter*,” Jeff said, in what I guess was intended to be a good-hearted mocking tone. “I don’t dance either. It’s what you do on Fridays. Half the Colony is there, including everyone our age. And the music’s great. Anyway, end of the year they have Banquet, where they serve food and everyone gets drunk and they have a show with songs and skits.” He resumed his walking. “I mean, it’s The Barn.”

Indeed, it was a barn. I soon got to realize it was The Barn and spent many of the best hours of my life on the small stage in The Barn, happily sinking deeper into Goldens Bridge, and being transformed into what I was always meant to be. And feeling how I was always meant to feel.

Home.

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The actors playing my mom and my dad and me didn’t look, sound or act like my mom, dad or me. But I had long before come to realize that in writing real life on the stage I was not a photographer but a painter, and what I needed was for the actors interpreting the characters I wrote to do it with honesty and understanding. Having Julie Griffin (from the Midwest), Pat McGuinness (from New Jersey) and Andrew Griffin (from Texas, and no relation to Julie) play New York Jewish communists with honesty and understanding was going to be a challenge. But that’s what actors do, although at times, like Eileen Atkins, they appreciate a little help.

Early on in my play, there was a scene in which my character, whom I had named Harvey, is introduced to folk dancing at The Barn. The girl that tries to teach him about folk dancing, Emma (an amalgam of several girls from my early years), was played by Julia Boyes (from Kansas). I recruited an old friend from Goldensbridge, Judy, to teach them both the dance in the scene, a Turkish dance called Iste Hendek. (That dance was first introduced in Goldens Bridge years later, but it fit the scene really well. And that photographer/painter thing, you know) She came down to my house and met with Julia and Andrew a few times to teach them.

Julia loved it. At one rehearsal she suggested to me that we go up to GB some Friday night that summer so she could dance there. She even researched places in the city (she lived in Queens) where she could go. None of that ever happened – well, not quite in that way. But the idea of going back to the Colony for folk dancing certainly did appeal to me.

“You wouldn’t recognize most of the people there,” Judy said when I mentioned it. It’d been so many years since I lived there I knew I wouldn’t recognize most of the people anywhere in the Colony. “There isn’t much of a turnout and most of the folks who do come come from the outside.” That wasn’t surprising but somehow it felt quite disappointing. Over the years after I left I think I had continually fooled myself that I would go back. I did go back for the 75th Anniversary celebration, and my wife, Robin, and I performed on several occasions at The Barn, doing several plays we had put together. And I sang a few times at talent shows. But that was performing. And curiously enough, considering how central performing has been to my life and emotional well-being, that wasn’t what I wanted.

In fact, that’s what my play, in part, was about. Harvey’s wanting to find himself as a performer, a star, which is what I did in my years up there. And Emma keeps wanting him to find the more essential part of growing up Red in GB, which he only gets many decades later, being part of a community, not just entertaining them. And as I, some 50 years later, worked on producing a play I wrote to entertain GBers, I realized what I wanted more than anything else was to feel like I was still a part of them.

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 Jeff and I got back to the Camp Committee thing and I saw my sneakers where I had left them -well, on the ground next to the Adirondack chair which was now occupied. I didn’t put them back on. In fact, I didn’t put them back on for another two months. I went over to Julia and told her I would like to take the job as counselor. She introduced me to the head counselor who told me I could work with Group 2. Camp was starting the following day. I was a bit nervous. I knew I could handle kids; I had been a counselor of kids about this age the summer before at sleepaway camp. I had a little trepidation. There was always the cane and the limp and the staring. But it didn’t take more than a day for me to go to my go-to method of redirecting the audience’s attention.
 The house we rented was a fair distance from The Barn so my mom drove me (although I walked home and after that first day I always walked, if for no other reason than to feel the road under my feet, even in the rain – maybe particularly in the rain). The owners of the house lived upstairs and had two kids. They were both working in the camp and were glad to hitch a ride. As they got in, one of them, Sandy, said: “We like your taste in music.” I had been playing a Peter, Paul and Mary album, their debut album, which had just come out. I smiled a thanks but immediately flashed to the previous summer at that not-at-all-lefty-very-traditional sleepaway camp where at a Friday night dance Bernie Schwartz from Brooklyn threw a Kingston Trio 45 out the window to demonstrate what he thought about folk music.
 The kids congregated at The Barn and the head counselor introduced himself and then talked about the schedule for the day that nobody really listened to since it was pretty much always the same and most of them knew the schedule for the day from before the head counselor was hired. It was a predictably unruly way to start the day: kids who knew other kids were chatting with those kids: new kids were sitting alone, looking apprehensive; and the counselors were essentially herding cats or ignoring them.

The following morning, I came with my guitar and suggested to the counselor that I sing to the kids – or more in keeping with our culture, sing *with* the kids. And I sang Clementine and the entire Barn joined in raucously on the Oh My Darlings. And that became a regular feature of the morning assemblies. I tried various songs but by far the most popular was Abiyoyo, a Pete Seeger favorite about a boy getting the best of a giant by playing his ukulele and singing *Abiyoyo* over and over. One of the other counselors, Gary Lipster, played the giant.

I wasn’t the counselor with the limp anymore. It was the counselor who played the 12-string like Pete Seeger.

We shepherded the kids to the ballfield, to the craft rooms, and in the afternoon down to the Lake. There was nothing particularly communist in anything. And all day camps are communal. But these kids were all my neighbors, as were their parents. And in a small way, they became my kids, with their parents’ blessing.

At nights I hung out at the Lake with my guitar. Jeff brought his banjo. We were joined by the seven or eight other kids our age and sang and basically were teenagers in summer. Came Friday night I went to check out folk dancing. Of course, I couldn’t dance – well, I didn’t dance. So, I figured it would be a short stay. But I was spellbound. I sat on the edge of the stage (where I would sit when I sang with the kids in the morning), right next to the phonograph where the hired dance instructor would come to change records. She taught some dances, but most of the ones she played people already knew. There were others who, like me, didn’t dance for whatever reasons. But it was clear that they were participating in this ritual. As many men danced as women. Kids under 13 were not allowed and I soon learned that for all GB kids, that moment when they finally took their place on the floor, fully knowing almost all of the dances, was the moment when they truly came of age. The Bolshevik Bar Mitzvah.

The music was mostly Balkan, with a fair helping of Russian, Greek and Israeli dances as well, and a few American favorites, Alley Cat and The Salty Dog Rag. The way it worked, the instructor would put the record on just for a few seconds so everyone knew what was coming next and could make their way to their places on the floor. When she started one particular dance, I could hear a few scattered cheers and “it’s about time”s. A smaller group than for most of the other dances gathered and took hands, but in a stylized way, with each person reaching across the person next to them and taking the hand of the next person. I came to learn that this dance was called Hoo Ha. Well, the Serbs didn’t call it that, they called it Sestorka. But at a certain point, as the weight shifted emphatically from right leg to left with a stamp, the dancers would call out Hoo for the right and Ha for the left. (In later years, I learned that this was not just a Goldensbridge thing) The music had a men’s chorus singing a slow, melodic introduction to which the dancers just swayed. Then they started their slow procession, first counterclockwise, then back to their left and then forward to their right again. After a few times the music’s tempo increased until they were going at a breakneck pace to the finish, which elicited applause from all who were watching, which was all of us, and I guess explained the smaller number of dancers. Hoo Ha was not for the faint of heart.

That included Bobbi Schneider, a stunning girl who was even a more stunning dancer, despite her tending to sit out Hoo Ha. Her family went back 35 years to the founding of the Colony, and we hit it off and she energetically filled in all the gaps in Jeff’s sketchy attempts to explain GB to me. We never managed to find a romantic connection that worked, but she became a close friend. In fact, the Emma in my play was based in part on her. And there was an Israeli dance where she particularly shone, Ken Yovdu. Over the years, I more than once heard folks say, when the music for Ken Yovdu started: “Oh, there’s Bobbi’s dance.”

I made it a point to never miss folk dancing after that first night. The newness wore off, of course, and the evening was, as most dances are, mostly about socializing. But there was never a time when my eyes weren’t glued to the dancing, my ears weren’t soaking in the music, and ultimately, when my soul wasn’t luxuriating in the familiarity of it. It was yet another way in which our people knew each other, recognized each other, and identified as the *other*. And took comfort from, and ultimately, pride in being the *other*.

But as I walked home, I found myself mostly remembering the music from one particular dance. I didn’t know the name. Other than Hoo Ha nobody really used the names of most of the dances. But there was something haunting about it. It was one of the dances that everybody knew. It was only after a couple of summers of hearing it, watching it, before I became curious enough to learn its name. Unlike Hoo Ha, it wasn’t at all intuitive and didn’t particularly roll off the tongue.

Horehronsky Czardas.

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When I wrote the play in the early ‘90s, I had just sold our house. My folks had moved into an assisted care facility in the Bronx. Their friends had mostly died or moved into facilities of their own. The Colony had been built as a summer bungalow colony. When my parents moved up it was at a time when people were increasingly winterizing their houses and likewise making them year-round homes. But despite that, the Colony in July and August was Goldensbridge. The Colony in the rest of the year was mostly Goldens Bridge, a small community association in a hamlet in northern Westchester. My parents by nature were gregarious and struggled a bit as the winters grew increasingly isolating. In ’86, my pop was diagnosed with liver cancer and told he had two years to live. In fact, he lived another fourteen years and died of something else but at the time my mom was concerned that she would be alone, totally alone. So, they made the very painful decision to leave.

I didn’t write the play then.

I met Robin in the summer of ’91 and we got married in ’92 and by then we had moved up to GB to take over my folks’ abandoned house. It was lovely for me, and Robin, who is not a Red Diaper Baby, still eased into becoming a part of the life of the Colony. But I worked in southern Manhattan, Robin in southern Westchester, and the house itself was two stories and I was beginning to feel the effects of having the upper half of my body carrying the weight my legs could not for 50 years. In the winter of 93-94 we had record snowfalls and I had to continuously shovel the driveway and dig my car out. So, we did some house-hunting, found a place in Hastings-on-Hudson where Robin worked, and I sold our house of 40 years.

That’s when I wrote the play.

I wanted to capture how my parents left their lifelong dream and created a new dream in their new home. And I wanted to capture how I had been seduced by Goldensbridge, but for the “wrong” reasons, and how I finally came to understand what made it so special.

But I’m a painter, not a photographer. And I knew I’d have to take some liberties to make the play work. I thought the worst aspect of fictionalizing the play was having my mother die. I mean, how could I share this play with my parents showing them that? But in truth, the most egregious twisting of the facts was having Harvey, my character, return to live in GB. Whether it was guilt or longing or a sense of not being whole, my leaving the Colony was traumatic for me, and I needed to create a fantasy world where that didn’t happen, in the hope that that would expiate my sense of betrayal.

It totally didn’t work. And never was that clearer to me than when I took my actors back up to the Colony to get a sense of what it was that had “inspired” my writing, my writing of the play, of their characters, of feelings I hoped they would feel. That I hoped the audience would feel.

That I hoped a very specific audience would feel.

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The summer of ’62 wasn’t quite like the summer of ’42 when the young boy loses his virginity. That rite of passage, which I was so desperate for, didn’t happen for me for another four years and not in GB but in Hartford. But nevertheless, when I wrote my play, I made it happen.

Again, not a photographer.

But the path of my life took a decidedly left(ish) turn that summer. And I bit by bit found out what my life would look, feel, taste and sound like. I would spend most of the next 30 summers in the Colony, and many off-summer weekends as well. I wrote my first song while babysitting the following summer and followed it up shortly after with a song that I wrote on the beach (to the extent lakes have beaches; to the extend our Lake was really a lake), focusing on two 9-year-old kids that I had grown quite attached to playing in the sand. That song became my signature song up in GB. I sang it and others at The Barn summer after summer. I eventually formed a folk/rock band with some other GBers, including Eric.

I did my first acting and directing on The Barn stage. I brought up a troop of Gilbert and Sullivan actors and singers that I worked with, and we had an annual company picnic and performance there for several years. The first play I ever wrote premiered on that stage. And I brought many others up there to follow.

In the mid ‘70s I wrote an entire Banquet Show by myself. They were traditionally written by an ad hoc group of residents a week before the show. I wrote mine a month before and unlike the usual shows, which were just a series of songs and the occasional skit, mine was a mini play, a story, a story about being in Goldens Bridge. It was funny but meant to send a message out about how difficult it can be for newcomers or summer renters. And the following two years I continued to write most of the Banquet show.

I had my share of romances over the years, most notably with an amazing lady named Rosalind who, aside from Robin, was the most important love of my life.

And I watched as my dad became an often times controversial player, but always a fixture, in the governance of the Colony, the most dramatic episode of which concerned his attempt to get the roads paved. The dirt roads which had seduced me that first night. The dirt roads which called to me and on which I felt a security that was inexplicable. He failed, made “enemies” of some of my closer friends, including Eric, but was unphased and continued on. I made sure to make mention of that in my play.

And I watched as my mom became the go-to musician for any event that needed a pianist. And how she would sit at her kitchen table in the house they bought as soon as that first summer ended, doing a crossword puzzle, or reading Trollope (for some reason I could never understand) and folks would just walk in. No one knocked. And they would sit down, and she would chat them up about whatever the latest gossip was or just as often, whatever was troubling them. We were situated centrally, and we got a lot of traffic, including folks who walked out of their way just to visit and talk. Of all the things I learned from my mother, learning how to listen was the most important.

And I watched as Friday night became the Socialist Shabbat. My folks’ dining area became the gathering spot for a group of regulars who came to our house and schmoozed as they ate Lender’s bagels and drank coffee and talked well into the night. “Talked” doesn’t really describe it. No conversation could go on very long without turning into a disagreement and escalating into an argument, which they all seemed to relish, like rabbis arguing over the Talmud.

But I think it was the common roots, the cultural ties, the sense of communal living, the lingua franca of the Red Diaper Baby generation that was the most intoxicating aspect of being there. In my play, the character who I based on Eric at one point, when he’s in his 40s, talks about how when his kid goes outside, he’s not leaving the house, he’s entering his home.

Not sure if that really conveys it. But … you had to be there.

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The play was being produced as part of a summer festival in New York. There were a ton of these, and it wasn’t hard to get a play accepted. Basically, all the producers did was rent a space. We were responsible for producing the show and bringing in an audience.

Bringing in an audience: My Achilles Heel.

I had learned over the years that I could put on a good-looking, well-acted, entertaining show. I knew plenty of fine actors, technical people, spaces to rent (in Westchester, where I did all my theater). I knew plenty of good writers and with Robin we could find strong scripts, whether it be ours, from other local writers, or published, professionally produced playwrights. We knew how to do theater.

What we couldn’t do was figure out how to get people to come. Like most local theater, we relied a fair amount on friends and relatives. And our modest theater company had acquired a bit of a following. But it was always a struggle and we always fell short of our aspirations.

Still, this was a play about Goldens Bridge. Some GBers had occasionally come to see past shows but now we had a show about the Colony. Surely, they would come in droves to see their beloved Goldensbridge on stage. And we’d have packed houses.

But really, I knew there was another reason why I was hoping that they would come. I wanted them to know that despite having left, I still loved and cherished my home for so many years. And that in my heart, I felt like I was still there. I wanted them to see that, to know that, to feel that. This script had sat on my shelf for 25 years. I could never find a way to bring it to life so that the people I was, in a sense, writing about could see it.

Many of my songs were written for people close to me. I had been baffled time and again at how unmoved they seemed to be. I mean, they liked the songs, sometimes said they loved the songs. I guess I was looking for something else. I sang the song, they said appropriate things, there was a moment of awkwardness, and basically it was “Okay. That happened. What next?” Those songs were supposed to make something magical happen with that person I wrote it for. It was the rare moment when they ever really did.

But now it was dozens of people. And all I wanted was to have them sit and watch this, the ultimate Banquet show, this love song to Goldensbridge and to the American Left that we were all nurtured by.

And I played over and over again in my mind what it would be like, putting person after person in the seats, hoping they would just softly nod their heads in recognition of seeing some aspect of themselves reflected in the action and dialogue. I was confident. I was anxious. I was coming to closure.

The festival told me the three dates that I had been assigned. Two of the dates were extremely auspicious, both on a weekend in early August. Perfect.

Or not.

It was, in GB, the weekend of the Volleyball Tournament. A hallowed tradition in the Colony that had first come into existence a few years after we became a part of GB. I had played in it – to the extent you could call my very limited athleticism playing – and I knew that it would take precedent over anything else.

The only other performance date was a Tuesday night.

On the first night a couple of expats like myself did show up, along with a fair number of other non-colony folks who were supporting me and the cast and crew, and maybe a few curious festival goers. One person who I hadn’t at all expected to come was Marisa Tomei, who had come up to Goldens Bridge in 1970 at age 6. I had the rare treat of watching this precocious kid for the next ten years grow as an actor, and even got to work with her and her GB friends. I normally avoid name-dropping, but I want to include her because she would be the first person to tell you how important Goldensbridge was to her.

And how you had to be there.

She said the right things about the show, but I discounted it a bit since she was used to more professional theater and really, what do you say to someone after a show. What made it special for me was how exuberantly she went to the few other expat GBers who had come, eager to catch up. It was my opening night, and it was a good start.

The second show, Saturday night, had a decent-sized house, largely comprised of my post-GB theater friends. And again, the audience response was good. I found myself, however, occasionally wondering who was winning the volleyball tournament – actually, wondering who was playing in the volleyball tournament.

I pinned my hopes on that final performance. And indeed, I saw that the advance sale for that Tuesday was pretty much a full house. And indeed, as they filed in, I saw one Colony friend after another. They laughed at and otherwise reacted to some moments that the previous audiences had missed. There were some tears at my pop’s final speech segueing into him and Harvey singing a left-wing union anthem, I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night.

And it all made sense. I’ve sat in the audience for all my shows and had audiences respond pretty much how I was hoping they would respond. They were watching my play, listening to my words, laughing at my humor. Them. Me.

But this night I was part of the audience. And it all made sense.

And you had to be there.

In the lobby after the show there was the occasional compliment at what I had written. But there was a lot more remembrance and identifying and nostalgia. So much more satisfying. My goal had been to make sure that GB knew that although I had left, like my parents in the show, it was more like I was pulled away by life. But that night I realized that nobody really gave it much thought at all. GB’s borders didn’t end at Rt. 138.

And I realized something else. I just wasn’t sure what it was.

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My folks bought Orenstein. Each house was referred to by name, and if the house was one of the original houses, it took a lot for that to change. Orenstein had been a founder. The house was now owned by someone named Tilser. True, he had married Orenstein’s daughter, but still the house was Orenstein.

Eventually, it would be Gorn.

They bought it as soon as the season ended in ’62, convinced that this was where they wanted to be – where they had always wanted to be. As was typical of many of the bungalows, one story was for the owners and the other was for summer renters. We followed suit, completely remodeled the upper floor for us, and for winter, but left the rather busy warren of small rooms downstairs for our summer tenants. I had a really small bedroom by the back entrance which actually suited me fine. I could come home at whatever time of the night I wanted, up the stairs and into my room without my folks even knowing.

But the idea was always to make it a year-round home, and after seven or eight summers, when my folks were ready to give up their apartment in the Bronx, they renovated the bottom as well, moved up my mom’s baby grand, and turned it into basically one room, as large as my upstairs bedroom was small, with a kitchen and eating area leading into the music area where the piano resided and then turning left into a living room replete with fireplace (which I don’t remember ever being used). There was a small room with a washing machine next to a bathroom. And a small, screen-enclosed patio led off the music area.

It was sweet.

And…it was mine. The couch opened up and that’s where I slept. And the timing couldn’t have been better. I needed a bed that could sleep two.

In ’75, at Camp Night in The Barn, I met Rosalind, a renter by Robbins (to speak in the GB vernacular), a Red Diaper Baby, engagingly sweet, really pretty, divorced with a 7-year-old, and one of the best folk dancers the Colony had ever seen. By the end of the summer, she was sharing the downstairs with me every weekend, with her daughter, Zoe, delighting my folks and bravely sleeping in my old room upstairs.

But I digress. The important part of all this is the couch. Several decades later I wrote a play about a Magic Couch that could transport the two siblings to a magical world whenever they sat on it. I wonder if it was that very prosaic couch in GB that I was channeling. There was nothing about looking at it, sitting on it, even sleeping in it that would seem remarkable. In fact, it wasn’t terribly comfortable. But there were a few mornings when I awoke to a kind of vision, a picture of something I could do that I had never thought about before, a vivid picture that contained the feeling of whatever it was as well. And I like to think it couldn’t have happened anywhere but in that room on that couch.

One time it was that first Banquet Show that I wrote. I woke up transfixed. I pretty much saw it from beginning to end. Another time it was a way to transform the patio into a real bedroom. Another time I was a vision of me dancing – well, not a vision, a realization that I knew the steps and could do it.

Horohrensky Czardas.

Yep. I knew the steps. I could do it. At a certain point it sped up and I would have to drop out, but still…

It was Friday morning. Folk dancing would be that night. I said nothing about it to Rosalind or anyone else. We went to The Barn as usual. I took my typical seat on the edge of the stage. I watched Hoo Ha and Ali Pasha and Miserlou and Harmonica and Ken Yovdu and Korobushka and Mayim and Rika. And then finally, I heard the warm, introductory measures, enough to cue everyone that it was about to play. The instructor stopped the music to let everyone get in place. I took a breath, got up off the edge of the stage, and walked over to the circle, making sure I was standing next to Bobbi, took her hand as she looked at me baffled. The music came back on and we all swayed and then…

Right Left Stand Together/Right Left Stand Together/Right In Left In 4 steps back.

And repeat.

Piece of cake. And I did it with attitude, and confidence.

And incredibly, other than Bobbi’s initial reaction, I got no looks, no stares, just the same smiles that people always gave each other. When I dropped out toward the end as the tempo increased and the movements became more athletic, again, no one looked. And when the dance ended, as in the lobby of the theater after my show, no pats on my back, no expressions of admiration or amazement, just the same camaraderie that had filled the spaces between dances every Friday night for almost 40 years, and would continue until – well, if as you’re reading this it’s a Friday night in the summer, they’re dancing at The Barn.

And I danced with them pretty much every Friday night from that night on.

Until I left.

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In the 25 years since I sold the house, I had been back to GB at least a dozen times, almost always to perform at The Barn. The Social Committee regularly booked different kinds of entertainment, a practice that had been going on long before we came up, and continued. Folksingers, pianists, dance troupes, comedians. Outsiders hired to fill The Barn on a few Saturday nights each summer.

And that’s what I had become. I didn’t ask for money, but effectively I was “booked” entertainment.

And I was an outsider.

There was a 75th Anniversary that I attended. And a few memorials for the departed (although I never set one up for my folks). Again, mostly the Colony in diminishing numbers over the years congregating at The Barn for yet another celebration of “us.”

I came, I schmoozed, I reminisced, I gossiped. Then I walked back to my car and drove home – in sneakers.

The play had its three performances, but I didn’t have closure. The largely self-indulgent show that took some rather graceless liberties with the truth worked well enough as a play. But not very well in recreating the events that I wrote about, or the people and place that I wrote about. At least not for me. I couldn’t really put Goldensbridge on stage. It was either too small or too large. But what was clear to me was…

You had to be there.

I wrote to Julia Boyes to see if she was serious about wanting to go up to folk dancing on one of the two Friday nights left in the summer. She wasn’t available. And of course, she wasn’t Goldensbridge.

I wrote to Judy Shulman, our folk dance coach for the show, to offer to take her out to dinner in thanks for her work. I told her I wanted to go to folk dancing, which she still attended regularly.

We met at a slightly upscale restaurant in Katonah, the town just south of Goldens Bridge, and one of the more affluent communities in northern Westchester. I had spent a lot of time in Katonah in my years in GB. It was changed, which was lucky for me since by that time I got around on a motorized scooter and it’s doubtful the restaurants from the ‘60s would’ve accommodated me.

I don’t remember what we talked about, although it definitely wasn’t the play. I was distracted to the point of being nervous. I had determined to see if, despite my severely limited mobility, I could still dance the Czardas.

I drove to the Colony, dropped Judy off so she could change, and drove down Branch Street, made a left on Lake, a right on Danger Road, another right on Main and a left onto Hall, slowed down as I passed my old house, then continued down Hall and parked across the road from The Barn. The scooter wouldn’t work here so I took a deep breath and grabbed my canes and started to walk unsteadily in. Then I stopped, sat back down in my car, and took of my sneakers and socks.

My steps were slow. Every one was calculated not to put a cane down on some small stone that might give way causing me to fall. Every step was followed by a slight pause to make sure I was balanced.

It was like a weird folk dance of my own design.

I walked into The Barn. The instructor was there, along with a few other people. I didn’t know any of them. I felt like sitting on the edge of the stage would’ve made me too prominent, maybe even a tad creepy. I thought I’d be more comfortable in the back, where there was a counter in front of a small kitchen area. I sat on the counter.

More people drifted in and the teacher put on some dance I had never heard, and taught it. Another dance followed that I was unfamiliar with.

Unfamiliar dances; unfamiliar faces.

But soon Judy came in. And Bobbi. And a few other people from my time.

And soon some familiar dances from my time came on. And I watched – and waited.

I don’t know why it became what it became, but whether or not I could still do the dance had become my reason for being there. I didn’t share that with anyone. Uncharacteristically, I was mostly quiet. I listened as the folks who were standing back by the counter talked through the latest Colony
“issue.” It was foreign to me, names of people I didn’t know. But the tone of the conversation was not. Like a song with new lyrics but to an old melody.

And then it came on. Horohrensky Czardas. Just a few measures, the teacher stopped it so people could get in place. I had no intention of joining the circle. But I did want to try to do the steps. I guess I could’ve done this at home?

Nah. You had to be there.

The dance started for real, and I started for real and…

Nope. It was beyond me.

This should’ve been a moment when I realized that the years had taken their toll on me. Like when, a few years before, I had started using a scooter and a wheelchair. I actually embraced those moments. 70+ years I had lived with being disabled. I had developed the gift of being able to accept and move on (or wheel on as the case may be). But this was something else. I wasn’t clear exactly why, but it was a crushing sense of loss. I just looked at the small circle of dancers. And felt so far away.

Then I noticed someone walking over to me. It was Faye Lieman, who had moved up with her family shortly after we did. She walked as one walked on Friday nights in The Barn, constantly taking looks at the dancers as she approached me. I mean, it wasn’t even clear that it was me she was approaching, except I was used to this from so many Friday nights before. She came and stood by me.

And said, still looking at the dancers: “That’s your dance, isn’t it?”

I smiled as I also kept my gaze on the undulating circle. I didn’t answer. It wasn’t really a question.

But another question was answered for me. And I took a deep breath and exhaled the sorrow and pain and distance and loss. And I watched them dance at The Barn.

And I was home again.

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