

Subject: "Ray Conniff in Moscow"



From the memoirs of Irina Palmova, the widow of Igor Preferansky, who is the author of several books published in Russia, but this story, written in 2018, has not been published anywhere so far. Some names require explanation for foreign readers: the restaurant "Aragvi" is a prestigious restaurant in Moscow with Georgian cuisine, "Staraya Ploshchad" is a square where the Central Committee of the Communist Party was located in Soviet times, now the Presidential Administration is located there.

Saved or almost killed?

This story is not just about a few seconds incident.

Recently, looking through LP records, I came across an album called «Love Album» The Ray Conniff». The cover was decorated with a beautiful face of a young woman or a girl with delicate features.

I've seen this face somewhere, I've seen it somewhere. Right, it's probably the face of Ray Conniff's wife, and I reached out to the shelf with the photo albums. In one of the albums, I collected all the photos related to my husband's business activities. And all the people here, all the places he has been to on business trips, and the people he met. Faces well-known, even famous, unknown to me, but very important for business activity of "Soviskusstvo", a department of All-Union Foreign Trade Association "Mezhkniga", the firm, which Igor was the head of for many years.

And here is a photo of a postcard where Ray Conniff is on a bicycle with his wife and little daughter. That's right, the girl on the record cover is his wife. There are also many photos from Melodiya company, that occupied a building of an old church in the center of Moscow. They show Ray with the Melodiya musicians, sound engineers, sound producers in a working environment.

I connected to the Internet, clicked on "Ray Conniff", and everything about the work of this famous American musician and arranger was revealed to me. I spent about two hours reading about the musician, watching clips of his music, and videos of him at various concerts. Still, what an amazing arrangement. He made the album "Ray Conniff in Moscow" with our songs in his arrangement and with a specially composed overture piece. Our songs sound so great, so unusually beautiful.

I read that he was invited to Moscow in 1974 by the Melodiya company. "Stop," I thought, "then why were the general director of Mezhkniga and his wife and my Igor and me in the restaurant with this musician? And there were no people from Melodiya company there. There was only one more comrade from Mezhkniga."

I pick up the phone and call Yuri Borisovich Leonov, the same one former general director of Mezhkniga. We had known each other for many years, had long ago switched to a less formal "you" and without any surnames. My Igor had already passed away three and a half years ago, and Yura, although two years older than him and not healthy either, but life spares him - his genes are stronger than Igor's. Yura explains to me that the Soviskusstvo company began working with Ray Conniff long before his arrival to Moscow. And, of course, without the help of Mezhkniga, Melodiya would not have been able to invite the celebrity, because it did not have the technical ability to work with such a musician. Igor did everything to provide Melodiya with both modern music instruments and recording equipment. For permission, Leonov went to Minister Patolichev, who allowed him to spend state money for purchasing the equipment. Thereby, that work with the musician in the old church, in which the Melodiya company was located, and in which the album "Ray Conniff in Moscow" was recorded, came about. "And Igor was always present there at that time," said Yura.

I remember the evening when Igor and I were returning, I don't remember where from, and we walked right past that old church, where "Melodiya" was located. Igor told me about it then. And, most likely, it was Igor who took those many photographs of the musicians at work, with workers and artists in the church, because I didn't see him in any of the photographs, but I remember that he told me in detail who was who in those photographs.

The very incident that I mentioned in the beginning, is the reason I remember our visit to "Aragvi", a restaurant, the management of "Mezhkniga" invited the famous musician and arranger and his family to.

I was a little late, I came straight from work. Marina, Yuri Borisovich's wife, arrived after me, also from work. I took almost no part in the conversation at the table, my English was rather poor, and so I concentrated on visual study of the famous family. Ray himself seemed to me rather elderly and boring. For some reason it occurred to me that he had German roots. His wife is very nice and could be his daughter, considering the difference in age. Probably an aspiring singer. That's what it seemed to me. Well, and the little girl, like all American children, has a narrow face (i.e., pincer-faced, as my friend gynecologist explained to me at one time. American mothers do not tolerate pain or doctors do not tolerate screaming, mothers are given painkiller injections, and they cannot push, and the infants are being pulled out with pincers. The narrowness of faces can go away with age).

From the restaurant we all walked back to the National Hotel, where the Conniffs were staying. A comrade from Mezhniga, named Valentin, was carrying the little girl in his arms. Crossing the street, he tripped over a curb of the sidewalk and, with the child in his arms, began to fall forward with his entire body. We froze in horror. No one uttered a single sound, including the young mother.

But Valentin, who worked at Mezhniga, in those seconds showed all his physical training as an employee of the most powerful organization in which he had worked before. Yes, he fell, but the child, in Valentin's arms, was like in a safe cradle and did not feel even slight jolts from contact with the asphalt. Perhaps the girl was even asleep and did not wake up.

I can imagine what happened to Valentin's elbows. I remember how I once fell wearing a fur coat. I was scared for my fur coat, but in fact the fur coat remained undamaged, but my arm from elbow down was covered in blood.

Talking to Yura on the phone, I reminded him of the incident with Valentin falling. To which he replied: "Yes, Valentin saved the girl then." Hilarious! He saved her! He almost killed her! Of course, I didn't say that out loud.

As a matter of fact, while I was describing this true story, a feeling of my enormous guilt before Igor did not go away. I never seriously delved into his work, although I understood that he was not an ordinary official. He is a creative person. It is not for nothing that, working at home in Moscow, his comrades considered these years the golden period in their lives and work. Igor was adored in the team. He was constantly elected secretary of the party organization. He never focused on this party work, did not organize any party meetings, resolved issues in the working order. He never betrayed anyone, never bowed down to anyone, he created, doing everything to make life brighter not only for music lovers during those difficult exchanges with musicians from other countries of the world, which were closed to musicians in the country. He pushed through the opportunity to invite and record wonderful foreign singers, pianists and, on the other hand, promoted our talented people abroad in those years when it was practically impossible.

Igor retired as soon as he turned sixty. Not because he was tired, but because his native organization was taken over by people from Staraya Ploshchad who knew nothing about the world of art and had only one thing on their minds - to snatch, steal, and get rich.

So, I was very lucky with my husband. This digression, as it seems, in fact, is related to the subject of the story. Without such a creative person, in love with his work, we would not have had the world-famous American musician and arranger Ray Conniff in 1974, and our music lovers would not have learned how our songs, and not only ours, sound in his arrangement. And Ray's little daughter is now over forty. She managed to be with her father all her childhood, youth, and, perhaps, even got married while her father was still alive. Did he or his wife talk about that incident with falling in the arms of a Russian fellow in a distant country of Russia?

Irina Palmova, January 2018

Note: Tamara gave her approval for the publication of the above story. She wrote, "I don't remember the incident of falling, but I do remember our trip to Moscow and visiting Lenin's grave. I remember the kindness of the Russian people. And I can also say, it was a very important trip for my dad, he often spoke of it with such fondness and it was such an honor for him to be the first Western Artist to record there. My dad never got to meet my husband, he passed before I was married."



Igor Preferansky and his wife Irina Palmova (1991)