

Sept. 28, 2017

The Legacy of Ludmilla



Within forty eight hours, the figure skating world learned about the deaths of 1948 Olympic Silver Medallist [Hans Gerschwiler](#) and 1964 and 1968 Olympic Gold Medallist Ludmila Protopopov. Gerschwiler and Protopopov join a long list of skating luminaries who have passed away in 2017 - [Bob Turk](#), Donald Gilchrist, Ricky Harris, Mary Parry and Roy Mason and [Arthur Apfel](#) among them.

If you're reading this blog, I don't need to tell you who Ludmila Protopopov was. A two time Olympic Gold Medallist, four time World and European Champion with her husband Oleg, she was perhaps one of the most exquisite pairs skaters of all time. A three time winner of [Dick Button](#)'s World Professional Championships, her annual appearances in the Evening With Champions shows at Harvard University were an inspiration to so many. She was living proof that age is just a number. She was a figure skating legend from a time before skating put math over mindfulness... but that wasn't the half of it.



For starters, there's the story of Ludmila and Oleg's 1979 defection from the Soviet Union. Yuri Felshtinsky and Boris Gulko wrote of the events that fueled the Protopopov's decision to leave the Soviet Union in their book "The KGB Plays Chess": "For a number of years, the outstanding Soviet figure skaters Ludmila Belousova and Oleg Protopopov came under pressure from Soviet sports functionaries. The harassment campaign was initiated by the KGB,

which did not like their independence, their extensive contacts with foreign athletes and representatives of foreign sports circles and media. 'Little Vermin' kept on writing reports about the skaters' negative attitudes toward Soviet reality, about their admiration for the Western way of life. On the basis of these reports, memos were prepared for the Central Committee, which then gave orders to the State Sports Committee would clamp down on the couple. The consequences were not slow in coming... When in 1988, at the Calgary Olympics, the famous duo with other former Olympic champions and prizewinners, the head of the State Sports Committee, Gramov, told the Canadian organizers of the event that if Belousova and Protopopov came out on the ice, the Soviet delegation would boycott the closing ceremony at the Olympics. (They) did not come out on the ice." According to a March 1988 article from the "Montreal Gazette", Soviet officials were apparently concerned that if the Protopopov's skated an exhibition, "the crowd would boo the Soviet athletes as they marched into McMahon Stadium." Oh honey, please...