



On Parker Pond, Mount Vernon, Maine

How I met Nik

By Ruth E. Grauert

In early September 1941, the German Siege of Leningrad had created much anxiety in the free world, not only for the desperate plight of the native Russians, but also The Hermitage, where Katherine the Great had preserved many of Europe's great masterpieces, was in peril.

The arts community of Hartford, led by Wadsworth Athenaeum Director Arthur "Chick" Austin, had formed a committee called "Artists for the War Relief of Russia." And, early that month they had organized a cocktail gathering to raise money.

At the time, I lived in a large house that all of the residents cooperated to run (my share of expenses was \$18 per week as I recall). Because our house was spacious, and we were all for the relief project—and because two of our residents were White Russian refugees—what better place to have the fund-raising "tea" than our house?

When I got home from teaching school, the affair was in full swing. I got my required cocktail and looked around for a place to sit. All chairs were occupied, but on the floor sat a man in his early 30s who observed my dilemma. He indicated the floor beside him and said, "Why don't you sit here?" So I did, with cocktail in hand. "Oh," he said, observing my movement, "Are you a dancer?"

I said, "Well, I've had a semester with Martha Graham and one with Hanya Holm."

"Oh, my Gawd!" he said, "You have got to come down to the studio."

I looked him over. My very first impressions—a lanky guy with big, graceful hands, thinning dirty blond hair, and a receding chin. I said, "I'll see."

So I inquired. I learned he was the darling of the Hartford artists—he was a *man who danced!!*

I went to his studio to investigate. In the attic loft of the Brown Thompson Building (the prestigious Hartford department store of the day) Nikolais had a decent-sized dance space with a cot in one corner and alcove kitchen and sanitary facilities out in the attic. There were eight of us all told. We had class, the familiar Holm floor series and centripetal and centrifugal circles and lots of great jumps to end with (I loved to jump). Then we went directly into repertory. What I didn't know was that just because I showed up, I had joined his company. (That was the beginning of a life-long association.) The first thing we did was a Pavanne that he had choreographed for *Eight Column Line*, an anti-war opera. That was a "body buster," performed entirely off vertical—a minimum 30 percent lean!! And absolutely in unison à la Nazis (this was after all 1941). Nik also included the Pavanne in all his programs as a separate dance.