

It takes two to put Ballroom Icons on the shelf

By Dominik Kurek
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

After seven years of work, Oakville's Brigitt Mayer-Karakis has created something she felt was missing from the world of ballroom dancing.

The former professional and competitive dancer-turned-author has published her book, *Ballroom Icons*, which is a biography of the people who shaped and moved her favourite sport into the spectacle it is today.

"In the last years of my career, I was really thinking there is nothing documented at all regarding ballroom dance history, how the competitive and social aspects came to be what they are today," the 47-year-old said. "I felt there was a void there and I ventured out to fill it."

The expansive book features the stories of some 64 couples and individual dancers, some of whose careers date back to before the 20th century.

For the author, the project wasn't easy. She had to contact dancers from across the world including those in Japan, Germany, United States and Great Britain. But being a former dancer she had a leg up.

"We all know each other in dancing. It's like a little fish-bowl. Everybody knows everybody. Since I go judging, I was able to do some of my work there."



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TEAMWORK: Dancer and author Brigitt Mayer-Karakis with her dad, Ulrich Hans Mayer, a photographer. The father and daughter duo has teamed up to create the book, *Ballroom Icons*.

Mayer, a professional photographer, did the photography and the book design was put together by the pair. Her father currently resides, as he did during the production of the project, in his native Germany. Because English is not the German-born dancer's first language, she received help from editor Mary Jermyn, who resides in Oakville.

nastics and dancing at a young age and began competing when she was 16 years old. When she was in her 20s, she turned professional and has represented Germany on the world stage. Upon moving to Canada in 1991, she began representing Canada at world-level competitions. She has often been a finalist at world championships.

room dancer entered her final professional competition in 1999 and then she started a family with her husband who has a dance studio in Oakville and whom she met through dancing.

Currently she is a dance coach and competition judge.

The idea of the book was always on her mind and she began working on it in 2002 until she finished the project late last year.

Long-distance travel was not the only roadblock for the author either. Because much of the book deals with history, she had to deal with an aging group of people.

"It was really tricky," she said. "I interviewed mostly the generation that was on the edge, I have to say it. Six of the people I have featured in the book have passed away and they never saw the finished product. And they were my living link to the generation that had passed away already."

The book explains how ballroom dancing began in the 17th century, but the bulk of it deals with how competitive dancing began at the end of the 19th century and covers the later generations of dancers.

The book is printed on heavy archival paper and its first run is of only 2,500 collector's-edition copies all of which are numbered. The book is packaged in its own box. It sells for \$150US.

Mayer-Karakis' husband, John Karakis, owns the Arthur Murray Dance Studio on Lakeshore Road in Oakville where she teaches dance.

The studio is part of a chain named after the famous dancer who kept ballroom dancing alive through the Great Depression in the 1920s.

Murray and his wife are also featured in *Ballroom Icons*.

The book can be purchased at the dance studio or at www.ballroom-icons.com.