

November 8, 2023

Obituary - Oleg Alekseevitch Protopopov

It is with deep regret and sorrow that the ISU has learned of the passing of two-time Olympic Pair Skating Champion Oleg Alekseevitch Protopopov, who died at the age of 91 on October 31, 2023 in Interlaken, Switzerland.

Mr. Protopopov was born on July 16, 1932 in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg), Russia. During World War II, he survived the blockade of Leningrad with his mother, a former ballet dancer. In his memoirs, he recalled that his stepfather gave him his first skating boots. After the war, the teenager saw Figure Skaters performing on the ice and tried the sport himself. Oleg was 15 years old when he fell in love with Figure Skating, and he would then dedicate his whole life to this passion.

It did not take long until the young man started a Pair Skating career and he quickly became successful. With his partner Margarita Bogoiavlenskaia, Mr. Protopopov won the bronze medal at the Soviet National Championships in 1953.

In 1954, Mr. Protopopov took part in a coaching seminar in Moscow and was asked to demonstrate Figure Skating elements with a young woman named Liudmila Belousova. Soon afterwards, they decided to continue their career together. They would go on to win two Olympic gold medals in 1964 and 1968, four World and four European titles as well as World and European medals. More than that, they became legends of the sport.

Belousova/Protopopov continued their path together not only on the ice, but also off the ice by getting married in 1957.

Belousova/Protopopov broke through on to the international scene in 1962 winning the silver medal at the ISU World Figure Skating Championships and 8 medals in European Figure Skating Championships. Coached by Igor Moskvina, they won eight consecutive World medals. With their coach and their choreographers – one being Protopopov's mother – the couple introduced a new artistic style to Pair Skating and significantly contributed to the development of the discipline. They are credited for the creation of the death spiral and its various variations, which is until today a required element in Pair Skating.

Following their retirement from competitive skating in 1968, Belousova/Protopopov worked for four years in the Leningrad Ice Ballet and in ice shows. In 1979, they took part in a tour in Europe and decided to stay in Switzerland, where they were granted political asylum.

For many years, the couple performed in shows and gala events and were on the ice almost every day at home in Switzerland or in their second home in Lake Placid (USA). In 2015, at the age of 79 and 83 respectively, Belousova/Protopopov performed in "An Evening with Champions" in the USA.

Belousova/Protopopov returned to Russia for the first time after more than 20 years in 2003 and afterwards came to visit sometimes. They stayed in touch with the skating world, continued to follow the sport and often were guests at international Figure Skating competitions.

Liudmila Belousova passed away at age 81 in 2017 after battling illness. Oleg Protopopov followed her six years later. According to his friends, he died peacefully in his sleep.

The ISU pays tribute to Oleg Protopopov and will remember him with great affection.