Nora Kovach

Nora Kovach, who died on January 18 aged 77 in Miami, was the first Eastern bloc ballerina to defect to the West, causing a sensation on both sides of the Iron Curtain in 1953, only weeks after Stalin's death; she and her husband, Istvan Rabovsky, were Hungary's most celebrated ballet stars when they walked into the underground in East Berlin and rode it into the British sector of West Berlin.

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Aged only 21 and 23, they were abandoning lives of the highest luxury and status by Communist standards for a highly uncertain future in the West, but their deed rapidly made them sought-after media figures in the United States and brought them commercially profitable engagements, if not the artistic glory they had hoped for.

Temperamental, amusing and saucy, Nora Kovach never lacked for admirers. When still only 12, she unwittingly attracted the attentions of a middle-aged Lothario. Married three times, she was extremely attractive to men and was once described as having the

most perfect face and body on the Western stage.

Born in a small Hungarian village on June 13 1931, Nora Kovach was 12 when she met the 13-year-old Istvan Rabovsky in Budapest's ballet school. The children defied authority by vanishing from Budapest Opera performances where they were supposed to perform in order to kiss in a quiet room, but they became the school's star pupils. In 1949 the great Soviet ballerina Galina Ulanova, visiting Budapest, arranged for them to become the first Hungarian students to train in Russia's leading ballet school, in Leningrad.

During their six months there, they performed solos at Kirov performances, the first "foreign" dancers to do so, and according to Nora Kovach. the USSR's legendary teacher Agrippina Vaganova made it clear that she was her favourite pupil, even hinting to her that she should make her career in the West.

On the pair's return to Budapest they became the leading dancers of the Budapest State Opera ballet, and rapidly built a privileged life within the political repression of Stalinist times, in which – as Nora Kovach remarked – even to jitterbug was seen as a sign of Western decadence.

Her mother, who considered Rabovsky a peasant, hoped the girl would marry a film director 30 years her senior, but during a performance of Swan Lake, while they danced the love duet, Rabovsky put an engagement ring on Kovach's finger, and they married in 1952. In March 1953 they were awarded the Kossuth Prize, Hungary's top cultural honour, and some $1,800 in prize money. Six weeks later, on tour to Berlin as stars of the Budapest Opera ballet, they escaped via the underground, which was near their hotel.

In their 1955 autobiography with George Mikes, Leap Through the Curtain, Nora Kovach told how she put on two extra pairs of pants and her jewellery in her raincoat pocket, all that she dared to do in order not to attract attention when she and her husband requested permission for a quick walk before their performance an hour later.

They caught an underground train, unsure whether the stop they got off at was in the West. She only knew it was when she saw bananas and oranges on a barrow as they left the station.

They sought asylum in the British sector, while the East Berlin gala at which they were to star collapsed in chaos. Nora Kovach's mother was arrested and uproar spread through the Soviet bloc, but it was a fortnight before the scandalous escape hit Western headlines, and some 200 journalists attended their first press conference. The American impresario Sol Hurok, then in Germany, was shepherded at 2am by three US colonels to meet the dancers in secret. He engaged them to dance, first with the Festival Ballet in London and Manchester in August and September, and then in the United States. In London Rabovsky attracted critical plaudits for the soaring quality of his

jumps, while Kovach's beauty, fiery allure and brilliant spins in the pas de deux from Don Quixote were thought equally outstanding. Interviewed in London at her Western debut, Kovach described her fears for her mother and worries about the future: "It's a very big problem. But freedom is better."

Docking in New York in November, Kovach and Rabovsky instantly became media darlings as "Iron Curtain refugees", appearing several times on Ed Sullivan's Toast of the Town television show and dancing on a bill with Marlene Dietrich.

Their popular appeal was not wholly matched by their critical reception. The critic Walter Terry wrote in the Herald Tribune of their New York debut in February 1954 that "the flourishes which introduce, pepper and conclude a particular daring passage have a circusy air about them. But this is not condemnation: e_SLpsindividual taste will be the deciding factor."

When in the late 1950s the Bolshoi Ballet made its American debut, Kovach and Rabovsky were now seen as lesser in artistic qualities than Moscow's great stars, and their careers became more directed towards popular guest engagements in various international companies. In the early 1960s they started a touring company, Hungarian Ballet Bihari, and in 1969 Nora Kovach opened a dance school in New York.

She married three times; after divorcing Rabovsky, who continues to teach in New York, she married Tibor Szegezdy, who died in 1985, and in 1990 Steve Farago, who survives her, with two stepchildren.