

Aja Zanova, Top Czech Skater Who Defected to West, Dies at 84

By [MARGALIT FOX](#) AUG. 1, 2015

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[Aja Zanova](#), a world champion figure skater whose defection from Czechoslovakia as a teenager in 1950 made headlines around the world, died on Thursday in Manhattan. She was 84.

Her death, at Mount Sinai St. Luke's hospital, was from complications after a recent stroke, her stepdaughter, Carol Steindler Whitcomb, said.

A five-time Czech national champion from 1946 to 1950, Zanova won two world titles, in 1949 and 1950. On the ice, she was famous for her lithe grace (she was tall for a skater) and her physical prowess.

She is credited with being the first woman to land a double lutz in competition — the jump entails taking off from a back outside edge, executing two rotations and landing on the same edge — a feat she accomplished at the 1949 world championships, in Paris.

After defecting to the West the next year, Zanova turned professional, skating for several seasons with Ice Follies before spending 18 years as an international star with the Ice Capades. In later life, she was a judge of professional skating competitions; a New York restaurateur; and a socially prominent, perennially glamorous member of the Czech expatriate community.

Alena Vrzanova was born in Prague on May 16, 1931. Aja (pronounced AI-yah) was a childhood nickname; after settling in the West, Zanova simplified the spelling of her surname.

Zanova began her athletic life as a skier, taking up the sport as a child. But after the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia made travel to the mountains impossible, she laced on a pair of skates.

Her mother, Anna, an opera singer, was her first coach. ("She learned from reading skating books," Zanova said in [a 2005 interview on the website of Ice Theater of New York](#), a performing ensemble based on skating and dance.) Her father, Miroslav, a cellist, chose all her music.

Zanova rose each dawn, in all weather, to practice outdoors. "We were the opposite of spoiled," she said in the same interview. "We even prepared our own ice. We learned how to be resourceful, let me tell you."

By the time the war ended, she was a skating star in Czechoslovakia. In 1947, needing world-level coaching, she was permitted to train in London with [Arnold Gerschwiler](#), a renowned Swiss-born skating coach.

She journeyed there alone: To pre-empt the family's defection, the Czech Communist government would not issue passports to her parents.

For the next few years, Zanova lived in England with her coach and his wife. She soon embarked on her string of postwar victories, which also included first place at the 1950 European championships.

Zanova, who placed fifth at the 1948 Winter Olympics, in St. Moritz, Switzerland, was considered the gold medal favorite for the 1952 games, in Oslo. But Communist Czechoslovakia had other plans for her: In the late 1940s, she was informed that rather than compete in 1952, she would be dispatched to the Soviet Union to work as a skating coach.

The news cemented her decision to defect, which she did in March 1950, at 18, at the close of the world championships in London. After announcing her intention to stay in England, she managed to evade Czech agents who tried to bundle her into a car, and she was granted asylum.

Her parents remained in Prague: Her mother was able to defect not long afterward and joined her, but her father, sent to work in the coal mines, was held political prisoner in Czechoslovakia for 13 years. He emerged “a broken man,” Zanova later said.

Zanova eventually settled in New York. In Czechoslovakia, “my name was stricken from all official records and documents,” she said in the Ice Theater interview, adding, “It was as if I hadn’t existed.”

In the United States, she found new renown, not only through her live shows but also through her television commercials, including a memorable one in which a Bic pen keeps writing after being strapped to her skate blade and ground into the ice.

In 1969, Zanova married Paul Steindler, a chef and restaurateur originally from Czechoslovakia. Together they created and ran two well-regarded Manhattan restaurants, the Duck Joint and the Czech Pavilion. Mr. Steindler died in 1983.

In 1986, she helped oversee the refurbishment and reopening of Wollman Rink (now the Trump Skating Rink), the outdoor facility in Central Park.

Zanova had homes in Manhattan and Miami. Besides her stepdaughter, her survivors include a stepson, Paul Steindler; four stepgrandchildren; and six step-great-grandchildren.

She was inducted into the [World Figure Skating Hall of Fame](#) in 2009.

After the Velvet Revolution of 1989 ended Communist rule in Czechoslovakia, Zanova paid the first of many visits to Prague, which has been the capital of the Czech Republic since 1993. She received a hero’s welcome, a crowd of 50,000 filling Wenceslas Square to hear her speak.

In 2004, President Vaclav Klaus of the Czech Republic presented her with the Medal of Merit for service to the state.

Each time she returned to Prague, Zanova recalled, she was met by throngs of her childhood fans, now in old age, who held out the fragile, yellowed newspaper clippings about her exploits that they had saved for half a century.