

*"Everywhere in the world, the United States is considered a dream. I know now why." — Elinor Smoljan*



KARL MONDONT/TIMES

SOFIA BOUZOS, 8, gets instruction from Elinor Smoljan, who was a national rhythmic gymnastics champion in her native Romania.

# Romanian connection

■ Smoljan coaches a top rhythmic gymnastics program in Concord

By Jay Heater  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**N**ot long after arriving in the United States in 1998, Elinor Smoljan discovered she hadn't come to the land of equal opportunity.

Smoljan, a former member of the Romanian national rhythmic gymnastics team who was working as an instructor at a private

club, watched sadly as a promising little girl walked away from the sport because her divorced mother was unable to afford the fees.

Smoljan asked her employer if she could make an exception and cut the fees, but she was turned down.

Disillusioned, Smoljan quit. She thought there had to be a better way.

She found one.

In 2001, Smoljan walked into the Concord Youth Center (now the Community Youth Center) and asked if there was interest in starting a rhythmic gymnastics

program. Thanks to her credentials, she was hired on the spot.

"I was pushy," she said.

Since that day, Smoljan has lovingly cultivated a program that is becoming known on a national level. In the past month, two of her students — 8-year-old Zoe Gwizdak of Concord and 11-year-old Sofia Bouzos of Walnut Creek — have won national championships.

Gwizdak won an all-around national title at Level 5 last month in Virginia Beach, Va., and Bouzos was the best performer in the rope apparatus at the Ju-

nior Olympic Championships in Lynnwood, Wash., earlier this month.

"Zoe has talent way beyond normal," Smoljan said proudly. "She is amazingly smart. And drive is what makes Sofia who she is."

Gwizdak and Bouzos are on their way to becoming elite athletes in the sport, but Smoljan coaches all talent levels.

"Every child is different," she said. "Some are immature, and there is nothing wrong with that. Zoe improved more in two years

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# Smoljan

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than most do in four years. But that doesn't matter. I welcome everyone."

On any afternoon at the Community Youth Center, Smoljan keeps a close watch on her pupils, who perform with different props — ball, clubs, hoop, rope and ribbon.

The sport is performed on a 13-meter square floor, and each 90-second routine is set to music, each gymnastic move is choreographed, and each individual act contains a mix of athleticism, showmanship and drama in which the girls not only display remarkable flexibility but also juggling and acrobatic skills.

The girls labor for hours in front of Smoljan, who fills the role of gentle taskmaster. She is firm in her instruction, her thick accent containing a sharp edge that lets everyone know she means business.

"It's not a good thing," Smoljan said to Gwizdak, as she attempted a new trick with the rope. She then looked over at Bouzos, who was lying on the floor looking exhausted. "Sofia, are you dead?"

Gwizdak later was plunked on the nose after flipping the hula-hoop style ring. Tears were about to come to her eyes, but Smoljan quickly interjected. "Are you bleeding? No. OK. You are all right. Now try ..."

Breaking the rigid instructions are calls of "sweetie pie" and other terms of endearment. For Smoljan, 33, this is her family. After each training session, there are hugs all around. Three hours of labor end with giggles and laughter.

"The discipline did worry me,"

said Gwizdak's mother, Nicki. "I talked to Eli about it when we started. But she assured me that she develops an off-the-floor relationship with the girls as well, and she has. We just adore Eli. And what Zoe has been able to do just blows me away."

Bouzos' mom, Súsanna, said that aspiring rhythmic gymnasts in the Bay Area are fortunate to have such a coaching presence available. "It's been a blessing," she said. "We've been together with Eli since my daughter was about 4. It has been such a good match. Eli has high expectations for her girls, but the kids rise to the challenge. And these girls are having a great time."

Sofia Bouzos, who just finished fifth grade at Buena Vista in Walnut Creek, admits there are days when she would like to forgo practice. But mostly, she can't wait to get to the gym.

"I love to be here," she said. "I love to work with (Smoljan). She makes sure that it isn't like we always are competing."

Growing up in Romania, Smoljan was part of a rhythmic gymnastics program that didn't emphasize camaraderie. "It was very competitive in my country," said Smoljan, who now lives in Concord. "A lot of the girls hated each other. I used to cry behind closed doors. I was lonely."

When she began coaching, Smoljan promised herself that she wouldn't allow animosity among her girls.

"My girls have the best time," she said proudly. "They are best friends. I tell them, 'If you hate each other, it's not going to change anything.'"

Smoljan started rhythmic gymnastics when she was 6. By the time she was 10, she was training twice a day, from 8:15 a.m. until noon and from 6 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. "This sport takes

time," she said. "There are a lot of precision moves. Every task takes precision. If even one finger moves the wrong way, it is all gone."

By the time she was 13, she was a national champion who was spending so much time in the gym that her father pulled her off the national team and told her to give up the sport.

Devastated, she instead secretly started a club at her high school, keeping it from her father, who worked until 9 most nights. "It was like an addiction. I could not live without it," she said.

Starting the club also forced her into coaching others at a very young age. Although her Olympic dreams had died, she discovered coaching was her passion.

She finished high school and entered a program to prepare for a life of coaching in Romania. Then life took a swift turn when she turned 23.

Her sister, Diana, filled out a form to see if she could win a diversity visa that would allow her to move to the United States. Although Smoljan didn't have a lot of interest in the "lottery," she allowed Diana to fill out one for her as well.

"Then one day my mom called me and said, 'You've got this package from the United States.'"

Smoljan had been selected.

Each year, the U.S. awards 50,000 diversity visas to people from countries that have emigrated less than 50,000 people here in the previous five years combined. Laura Tischler, a spokesperson for the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, said that 5.6 million people applied for diversity visas last year. There were 6.3 million applicants the year before.

Smoljan had been happy living and coaching in Romania, but when the opportunity presented itself to move to the U.S., she couldn't refuse.

"People come to the United States because they want a better life," she said. "People come here because there is better opportunity. I was in shock and I was scared, but I don't take those things for granted."

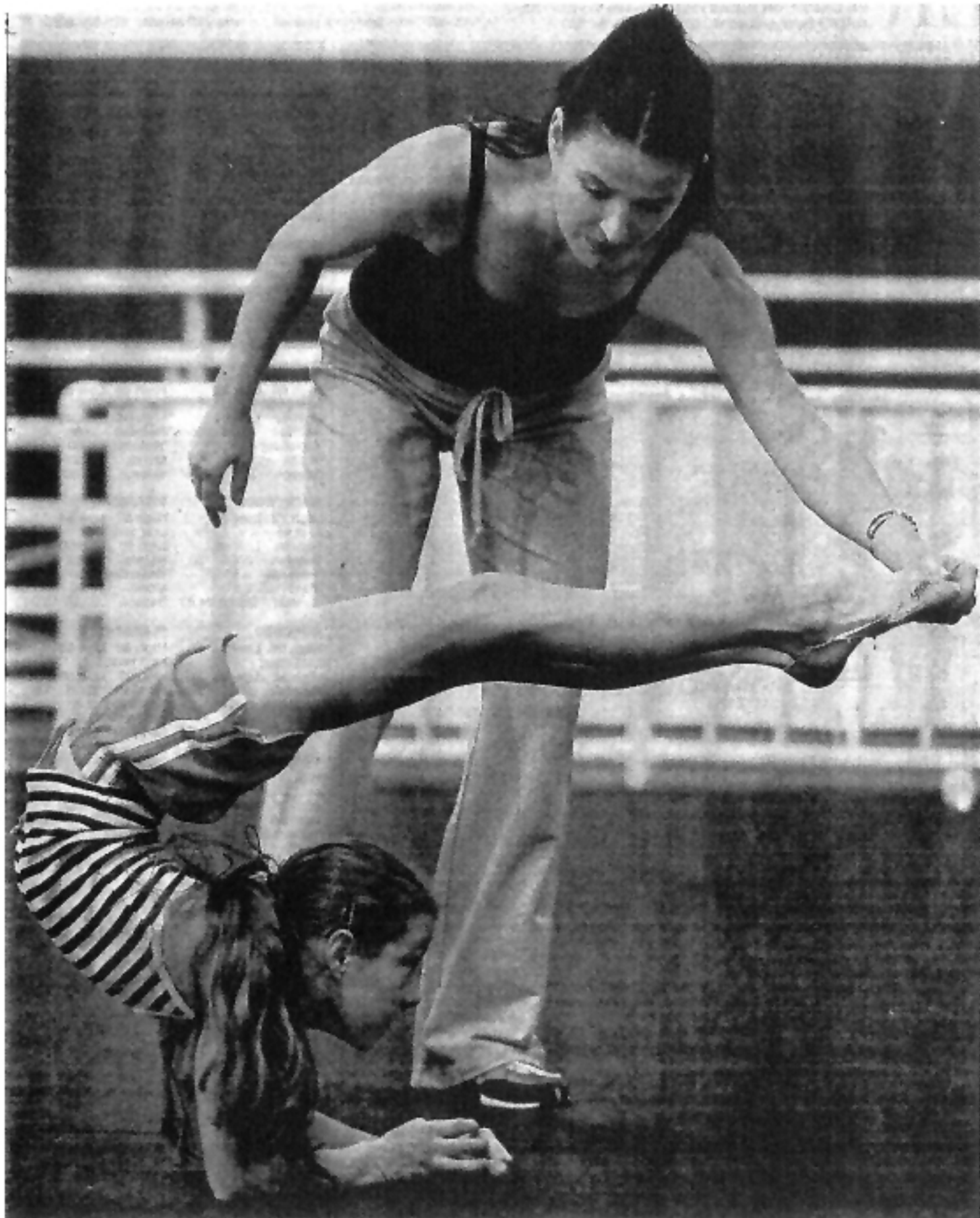
"Everywhere in the world, the United States is considered a dream. I know now why. You have the freedom of saying whatever you want, with certain limitations and boundaries. In other countries, you have to worry about what you say. In Romania, you never knew if the (government) security could be your neighbor. Where I lived, you could not make any jokes about your country."

She landed in the Bay Area because a woman she met in Romania was moving to Walnut Creek and needed a roommate. She arrived with little money, no job, she couldn't speak English or drive a car.

Her co-workers initially thought she was aloof because she wouldn't speak to them. Within a month, she had a command of the language.

Now she dreams of representing the U.S. someday as the coach of an Olympic athlete. "I think I love America more than some Americans do," she said.

Her goal also is to help the U.S. catch up to Eastern European countries such as Romania that produce most of the top rhythmic gymnasts. "Americans have two arms, two legs and two eyes, so why can't they be as good?" she asks.



KARL MONDON/TIMES

**ELINOR SMOLJAN**, working with Jessica Roginsky, has brought national prominence to the Community Youth Center in Concord.

CENTRAL COUNTY

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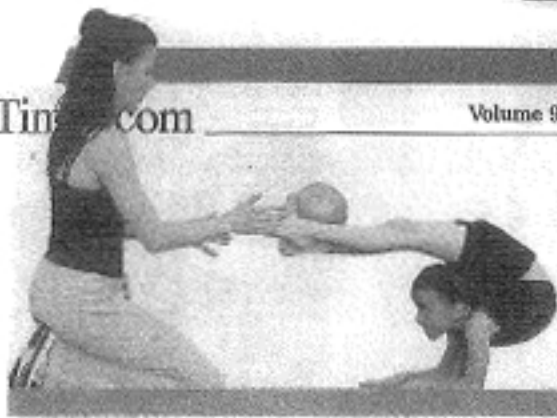
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love of her sport to Concord  
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