

A Sunday CHAT: Q & A with Peter Orenski

From an article by **Samantha Burkardt**
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NEW MILFORD, Connecticut – With nicknames such as the "Flagman," "Flag Dude," "Flag Dancer" -- and because he received a Ph.D., the "Flag Doctor" could become another nickname -- Peter Orenski lives a very colorful life.

Before coming to America, he lived some 20 years under communism in Romania and was constantly on the run.

Q: When did you come to America?

A: I arrived as a refuge from Romania on Aug. 30, 1960. My parents and I came here as Austrian citizens because they were Austrian; a few weeks after arriving I started in the second year of college in New York City.

Q: Where did you study?

A: I studied chemistry at universities in Romania, Poland and Austria. When I came to America, I went to Columbia University, where I had to quickly pick up the English language. I finished college in 1963, and in 1967, I received my Ph.D. in chemistry. That year I also won a Fulbright Scholarship, which gave me the chance to study abroad in France. Those were the days where you could get three or four job offers from company recruiters who came to meet you on the university campus.

Q: Where did you work before becoming the Flagman?

A: After finishing my Fulbright work in 1968, I started working at the research labs of a large chemical company, Union Carbide in Tarrytown, N.Y. For 20 years I worked in research and national and international sales there. After that, I started my own company, TME Co., Inc., home of Ambassador Lapel Flags®, which you can find on the Web at www.tmealf.com

Q: How did you come up with the name Ambassador Lapel Flags?

A: Because you're an ambassador for your country when you go to international meetings.

Q: That's an interesting transition from doing research for a chemical company to making flag pins. How did that happen?

A: By nature I'm a peddler, so when I was in international sales I asked myself, 'What can I make that will put a smile on all these peoples' faces?' When I noticed that they all loved lapel flags, I thought, 'Wow! Those are cheap, effective and they'd make good ice breakers at meetings.'

I found that people like to see their country's flag crossed with other countries' flags to wear when going to international meetings. It shows respect, makes for an unexpected gift and leaves a positive impression with those you're meeting. I found an excellent company in Rhode Island, which at the time had been around for some 45 years, and made a handshake deal with them in 1984: I would invest thousands of dollars in new special tooling lapel-flag designs in return for exclusive rights to the **Ambassador Lapel Flags and Accessories** product line.

When you start operating out of a kitchen, you've got to do things people at a big corporation can't do ... otherwise they'll crush you.

What you must know is that even though flags are simple sounding, they have all these color and design specifications that have to be absolutely right or you risk losing a customer. I learned that the hard way and, after I did mess up a few times, I hooked up with this organization called the North American Vexillological Association. They know everything about flags – You can find them at www.NAVA.org. That's when I started adding real flags to my lapel-flag line.

Q: What happened?

A: NAVA has annual meetings and often the discussion turned to town and city flags. And so around 1993 I started to think: Wait a minute, New Milford is almost 300 years old, and we don't have a flag! That's why in 1994 I started speaking in town about holding a contest to design a New Milford flag. Jeanne Price won the contest, so you could call her our Betsy Ross. We didn't want the seal of our town as our flag. Everyone's got that.

Jeanne work and many other entries had the town's gazebo as a prominent symbol. It really is very visible part of our town, a central location where many of our community events happen.

Q: What is a flag that you take great pride in?

A: The flag of the Jatibonicu Taino. I spent hours on the phone with the (Chief) Cacike Pedro Torres figuring out how he wanted it designed going through many options of colors, how simple it should be and so much more. With flags, you can explain to the world who you are by tying symbols with history.

Something else I take great pride in is another book I put together, called *Honored Glory: A Tribute to New Milford Veterans*.

Veterans made it possible for me to speak Russian and German, not because I have to, but because I want to. I have other projects for our local Veterans that I'm working on, like refurbishing the memorial on our Town green that's dedicated to Civil War and World War I Veterans from New Milford. We too often forget about our Veterans. It's because of them that we get to take advantage of the freedoms that we have today.

Q: What's something interesting about yourself that not a lot of people know?

A: Beside the fact that I'm a "flag doctor," I also ran in a marathon called The Spirit of Pheidippides. It started at the site of the first battle for Western democracy in the Greek village of Marathon, Greece, and ended in the Olympic stadium of Athens. When that battle fought in 490 BC was won an Athenian messenger, Pheidippides, ran the 26-plus miles to Athens to tell of the great news. My time wasn't so great, though ... 5:21:50.

I still like to jog and walk a lot, but it's more or less the "geezer shuffle" now.

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