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OK, you can start playing around now

BY MICHAEL MILLIUS

Fun and games aside, it was intense tennis tours subsidized by the Communist Party where the new Didi's toy store in Bedford Hills got its origins.

About 20 years ago back in Bulgaria, eight-year-old Diana Milorieva displayed enough athletic talent to catch the attention of Communist Party leaders, who put her on the fast track to tennis stardom.

"The training was intense for young athletes under Communism," said the now Diana Rudman, owner of Didi's. "I traveled a lot on the (tennis) circuit and turned pro at 13."

However, while securing her rank as one of the world's top 100 tennis players by the time she was 19, Ms. Rudman was doing something else while she traveled. She collected toys.

"It helped me to have a childhood," she said, "and it also reminded me of my father. He was an architect, and when he'd travel he'd always bring back a toy for me. And it was always something special, something handmade or something wooden that was unique."

Ms. Rudman came to the United States in 1991 and attended Campbell University in North Carolina, where she got her MBA in international business. In 1994 she moved to New York, where she met financier Errol Rudman; they married in 1996.

The Rudman family lives in New York City and has been enjoying long weekends at their house in Bedford for the last two years.

The doors to Didi's opened three weeks ago at Depot Plaza in the Bedford Hills hamlet.

And if there were any single word that best describes Didi's, that word would have to be "unique." Because besides having whimsical, wonderful and wildly imaginative playthings, it's also a world-class children's clothing boutique carrying "Pape d'anjo" children's nightgowns and robes (in Portuguese flannel, thank you). You don't expect to find such stuff north of Madison Avenue.

Also too beautiful to be believed among Didi's kids' clothes are the

one-of-a-kind, handmade magic "play pretend" skirts for little girls that are conceived and designed by Ms. Rudman's mother, Savi, who also manages the store. But these you just have to see for yourself.

Didi's is off to an auspicious start.

"The real test was my own kids coming into the store right before we opened," said Ms. Rudman, referring to her five-year-old daughter and three-year-old son. "They were so excited and loved everything, so I figured I must have done something right."

But walking into Didi's you have the feeling that everything is done right. There is literally not one item in this store you wouldn't want your child to have. Quite simply, Didi's has to have the most eclectic collection of Pan-playthings ever assembled for sale in the United States — the Papo French figures on horseback, Haba wood toys from Germany, the Quercetti puzzles from France, Melissa & Doug educational toys from California, more educational toys from Europe's Schylling Company, even stuff you've never seen before, such as lifelike favorite fruits made from hardened foam in Peru.

"Here's something I got for my kids for when we go to restaurants," said Ms. Rudman, proffering a 10-inch by 2-inch clear plastic Nature Play Tube filled with an assortment of colored rubber animals.

"My husband and I put them away to have for the kids when we take them out to eat," said Ms. Rudman. "They look forward to playing with them and are completely occupied while they're eating. It really empowers the kids, too. They can carry the tube and then take out the animals and put them back all by themselves."

"I find myself stealing glances at the kids when we're out. It's just adorable to see them playing and then taking care of things."

Among other popular items are the animal backpacks and the ballerina backpacks. And one could go on about the incredible selection of dolls from Europe, some of which are collectibles, or the finger puppets or the jewelry craft kits or the jewelry Ms.



Diana Rudman, with finger puppets, is the proprietor of the new kids' store in Bedford Hills called Didi's.

Rudman makes herself or more of the beautiful clothing or the holiday window in the front of the store.

If you can't go immediately, at least stop by on Friday, Oct. 25, between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m. for the Halloween costume contest. If you don't win a

prize for best costume, you'll at least have a trick or treat.

Didi's, at 9 Depot Plaza in Bedford Hills, is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 to 6:30 p.m. You'll meet Savi or Diana. They really love kids, and you'll love them.