

THE RUSSIAN BALLERINA AND THE YEMENITES

by Judith Brin Ingber

How is it that a Russian ballet dancer turns to the desert for inspiration and creates dances that capture the imagination of Parisian art patrons? The secret might lie in the personalities from the desert life she met. One of them, Rachel Nadav, the Yemenite star of Rina Nikova's "Yemenite Ballet" in the 1930's related something of her own life and Nikova's--the Moscow ballet dancer who came to Palestine in 1925--in a recent interview.

"I was born in the desert on the way from Yemen. My family reached Palestine and settled first in Hadera. I remember going from there on camelback to Tel-Aviv and also walking behind my elders in the eucalyptus-woods collecting kindling and fruits. It seemed everything was always accompanied by song. I simply absorbed the traditional Yemenite melodies (and also many dances) that I heard or saw again and again at weddings, celebrations and in the synagogue."

In fact, it was these traditional melodies that stirred Nikova's creative spirit. Surprisingly, her first encounter with this enchanting source took place in Poland at a performance of the Yemenite singer, Bracha Tzifira. Later, when Nikova decided to create dances about Biblical stories and personalities she turned to Yemenites. "She felt Yemenite dancers were the only ones who could truly express the Bible. I remember in 1933 she auditioned 30 girls and chose seven. She did train us in ballet but mainly we rehearsed her dances arrived at through dance improvisation. During the day I worked in a factory, because we never received a salary for our dancing. Sometimes I think it was our idealism that supported us for so many years. Nikova knew how to draw from us--although she was European, she had a talent for using movement and music from our Yemenite background."

Udi Shankar, the famous Indian dancer, visited Erez-Israel and inspired Nikova's dancers. Also helpful were poets, including Shaul Tchernichovsky and painters who often came to Nikova's studio. In addition to performances throughout Palestine, in 1935 the company travelled to Beirut and performed at the University and the French

Embassy there. The most extensive company tour began in 1937 financed by the Baron Maurice de Rothschild. "I remember dancing in his castle near Paris," said Nadav. "He turned over to us one of his elegant homes on the estate as a rehearsal hall and every evening he would arrange private performances in the big hall for different groups of his friends. The baron would take us to see the Paris Opera from his box; in fact, we learned so much from our travels to Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Holland, England (where we stayed 6 months) and the Baltic states. I think we were in Estonia when we celebrated Passover. The snow was everywhere but unbelievably someone from the Jewish community secured us a very special present--a few oranges carefully wrapped in tissue. How that made us miss Palestine and the fragrant orange groves! I also remember being surprised in Riga for the Jews there spoke a beautiful Hebrew. By 1939 our performances were cut short. We were given gas masks, and instead of going to America, we came back home because of the war."

By then, the exotic, imaginative outlook of Nikova's dance was received differently in Palestine. Nikova continued her company work but began to concentrate more and more on teaching.

Nadav left her to perform independently and then began working in kibbutzim. She was the first to teach basic Yemenite steps to Israeli folk dancers and one of the first to create dances of Yemenite origin. They became popular in the new Israeli folk dance movement, "Uri Tzafon" being probably the best loved. Today, song and dance of the Jewish communities, like the Yemenite, have an honored place and are sought after by museums and universities who tape, film, catalogue and research them. The authentic folk material forms programs for many Israeli performing groups and still is inspiration for innumerable artists and choreographers, especially the renowned Sara Levi-Tanai. Certainly it is a curio that the first to grasp the excitement and meaning of such syncopated, special movements and to bring to Mid-Eastern and European audiences was a ballet dancer from Moscow.