

## ROSES AT THE QUAY

The last days of April, 1931 were rather hot. Mr. Guriatchikov (later Gillon), the impresario, in tie and suit, sweated profusely while he waited at the quay of Jaffa harbor, a bunch of roses in hand, to welcome the great Viennese dancer, Gertrud Kraus. He had never met the famous artist who performed all over Europe and had just received much critical acclaim for her suite "Songs of the Ghetto" which her troupe presented at the International Dance Congress in Munich. He had read what the critics said about her, and trusted the opinions of friends who had seen her dance and signed a contract with her sight unseen to come to Eretz Israel.

Everything about the solo recital series was decided by correspondence. She was scheduled to appear in Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem and at the kibbutzim in Emek Yezrael (Valley of Edsraelon). Then as now, the kibbutz--audience was "important" and constituted a good market for the arts, well beyond its miniscule size.

As a gentlemen of the old school, he presented himself, bouquet in hand, to receive his artist at the Jaffa quay. But none of the ladies emerging from the customs-shed seemed to fit his mental picture of the famous dancer.

Gertrud looked around for her impresario, decided that the man in the white suit was the one she was looking for, gave a tug to her eternal black beret, adjusted the kerchief around her neck and approached him. "Excuse me, perhaps you are..." "Sorry, I am busy, I am waiting for the great Viennese dancer Gertrud Kraus!", answered the impresario.

"I am Gertrud Karus," said Gertrud.

Mr. Guriatchikov stopped in his tracks, looked down at the tiny figure and said nothing.

"I saw his disappointment. I did not look like the star he was expecting. Probably he saw his investment going down the drain..." says Gertrud, reminiscing about her debut in the country where she was to spend most of her life.

The impresario needn't have worried. Gertrud's concerts in Eretz Israel became a huge success. "Sixteen times the Viennese dancer appeared before full houses from Dan to Beer Sheva" wrote J.M. Ben-Gavriel, the correspondent of the Berlin monthly, "Der Tanz," somewhat stretching the geographical phrase, which in Hebrew means "all over the country." "She danced in Jerusalem, again and again at the Bet-Ha'am Hall in Tel-Aviv before an audience of more than 5,000 people, in Haifa, and in the legendary communes of the Emek, and even at a Bedouin tent-camp straight out of a Karl May story."

Gertrud's encounter with the Bedouins took place at Kibbutz Beit-Alpha. Lea Bergstein, who had danced with Gertrud Kraus and Vera Skoronel in Europe and later became a folk dance creator in Israel, tells the story: "Gertrud came to give a performance for the kibbutzniks at Beit-Alpha. We told her about our Bedouin neighbours, their festivities, marriage ceremonies and their dances, which we used to watch. Gertrud was eager to see genuine oriental dancing. But since the bloody riots of 1929 our relations with the Bedouin tribes were less than cordial, and just at the time of Gertrud's visit there was some tension. So a visit was out of the question. But Gertrud insisted. Many of the kibbutzniks were quite familiar with Arab dancing and song. I myself was frequently asked by the sheik to do the Sword-Dance for him. So we decided to stage a "fantazia," a Bedouin festival for our honored guest. She was told that we had invited a Bedouin tribe to perform at our kibbutz. We got together all the Arab gear we possessed, put on all the finery, and did a spirited Debka and a Sword-Dance for her.

While the dance was still on, I remembered to my great consternation, that most of the girls had rather elegant shoes on their feet, of vintage Berlin fashion of last year. This gift we had received from a friend, Margot Klausner, whose family owned a famous shoe-store-chain in Germany. But Gertrud apparently did not notice this peculiar footwear."

In the evening people from settlements near and far came to Beit-Alpha to watch Gertrud's concert. After the show, everybody joined in a spirited Hora in the dining-hall hut."

Gertrud's side of the story is as follows: "I noticed that the 'Sheik', who rode so gallantly on his horse in the afternoon, now had britches and riding boots on, and was dancing a Krakowiak with one of the girls. Such cordial relations seemed a bit odd. And over there one of the 'Bedouin' girls was dancing hand in hand with a Jewish settler... Strange." But Gertrud did not give away the hoax and kept a straight face.

The impact of Gertrud's meeting with the country and the people was to reverberate in her life and in her art for a very long time to come.

"The sun, the emotional impact of the landscape, the very special light of the country were stunning," says Gertrud. "Right from the first moment on I felt a deep relationship with the people, the land, the whole place. I knew my dances would never be the same after this encounter."

While she stayed in Jerusalem, she went to the market in the Old City and bought bolts of oriental material, belts, jewelry and Arab dresses to take back to Vienna. These later served her in her new dances, even though in her very first concerts many years before her visit to Palestine, oriental themes crop up, especially in her biblical dances. Now her encounter with the eastern reality, its odours, colours and sounds gave a new impetus to her choreography.

"Triumphant voyage for Viennese dancer in the Holy Land" writes "Der Wiener Tag" in June 1931. "Following her tour in Palestine a series of concerts in Egypt will take place. Perhaps there the soil is not as ready to receive the art of modern dance as it is on the banks of the river Jordan".

A Hebrew daily critic writes: "Gertrud Kraus is one of the revolutionaries of contemporary dance. Each little toe, every facial expression, show the soul of a true artist. Kraus reminds one of the Russian dancers, but she is always herself, always original. Her composition is consistently new, different, delightful in its simplicity, full of light humor and classical beauty. Her rhythm-- the quintessence of the feelings and reality of a daughter of the Jewish nation which combines in her movement and music to make a harmonious whole. In her "Ghetto Song" suite we feel the spirit of East European Jewish music and dance. In the "Vodka"-dance she is a typical Russian."

Gertrud performed most of her repertoire, including her "Strange Guest," "Guingol" DeFalla's "Fire Dance", her Jewish dances and exotic dances of Java and South America.

It seems that those few weeks in Eretz Israel determined the course Gertrud's whole art and life took, although she had not yet made the momentous decision to immigrate and settle in Eretz Israel. After her first tour, more followed, undaunted by the difficult material circumstances she met. Besides, the audience in Eretz Israel of the early '30's was accustomed to theater and music, but quite unprepared for dance. Until Gertrud there had been only sporadic ballet 'numbers' in Maestro Golinkin's "Opera" and the performances of Rina Nikova's "Biblical Ballet," a group of Yemenite girls the Russian ballet dancer coached and directed in her own dances. Agadati's solo recitals had not been seen for some years.

Gertrud finally came to settle in the country in 1935. She periodically went abroad to perform in Europe until the beginning of World War II.

The coming to power of the Nazis in Germany cast a shadow which made all Jewish artists in Central Europe consider their future. Some of Gertrud's colleagues went to England or America, others, like her teacher G. Bodenheimer, finally settled in Australia. But Gertrud came to Eretz Israel.

"I had several choices," she says. "Perhaps if I would have gone to the U.S. my artistic development would be quite different. But not even for a moment did I regret my de-

cision," she explained in the "Dance Magazine" article about her (by Judith Brin Ingber, March 1976).

But even more than her personal life, her immigration to Eretz Israel affected and determined the development of modern dance in this country. She left Europe at the very summit of her career, after a series of international successes, with offers of work arriving from all parts of the continent. But she decided otherwise.

"I never used to say to myself I have to do this or that. My education was never connected with imperatives and momentous decisions. I always used to let things be decided by themselves, so to say. I felt that just as with a leap on stage, the travelling in space is more important than the height of the jump itself. When the direction is right, the leg will rise sufficiently by itself. I simply embarked on a voyage in a new direction. But still, my decision to come to Eretz Israel was a conscious one. I believe that destiny and nature are much more powerful than all human deliberations," muses Gertrud many years later.

From her trip to the Middle East, Gertrud returned to Vienna, where several projects were awaiting her. The most famous of stage directors, Max Reinhardt, asked her to participate as choreographer in staging a Passion Play in the arena of the Zirkus Renz. Ironically, Jewish artists, with the help of hundreds of actors, dancers and extras, recreated the life story of another Jew (the one who lived in Nazareth).

The opportunity to move masses of people on vast rostrums excited Gertrud, who throughout her work was always fulfilling the dual role of director and choreographer, which are, in any case, two facets of the same creative activity. The director creates spatially structured movement as part of a whole artistic creation, while the choreographer, also concerned with staging does his work from within, the impetus being the kinesthetic impulse. In both cases the final product is theatre, but arrived at from different points of departure.

A play which afforded such opportunity for Gertrud's choreographic staging gift was Karl Kraus' (no kin) "The Last Days of Mankind." This mammoth play about W.W.

I, was never actually produced in its entirety. Certain scenes from it were staged in 1932 by artists affiliated with Left-wing trade unions, and Gertrud's group was asked to participate. "All the dancers were lying on the stage floor, which was broken up by means of rostrums. Everybody had a gas-mask on," reminisces Bettina Ziska, a former pupil and dancer of Gertrud's. "What the audience saw were rows of moving gas-masks, insect-like with their goggles and rubber trunks. The dancers drummed with their fists on the stage-floor, creating a percussion background for the actors reciting the text. It was frightening."

Several of Gertrud's Viennese pupils became independent artists and started groups of their own. Each dancer had his or her own group, demanding total allegiance, and nobody would allow another choreographer to create for his "own" group. So a process of procreation by division, similar to cell-division, took place. Mia Slavenska, the famous ballerina of Yugoslav extraction and a Kraus student, says in an article about herself ("Dance Magazine" March 1973): "With Gertrud Kraus I discovered endless possibilities for expression and creative freedom in dance... She also encouraged my first attempts at choreography."

Studying newspapers and posters of the period shows the surprisingly extensive influence Gertrud had on the modern dance scene, through these pupils.

## A CITY WAITS

The performance was just over. It ended with a powerful vision of hope, an apotheosis of the bright future awaiting liberated mankind. The dancers, still excited and breathless, hastily bowed to the enthusiastic applause of the audience assembled in the hall belonging to the Viennese Institute for Popular Education and rushed to the dressing room to listen to the wireless-set.

The day was the 5th of March, 1933. In neighbouring Germany, a general election took place that day and everyone was eager to hear if the German people gave the mandate to Hitler's Nazi party to take over the government. The elections were held soon after the Reichstag

(parliament) building burned down. The building was actually burned down by the Nazis who accused a young, feeble-minded Dutchman, Van der Lubbe, of being the arsonist acting on behalf of the Communists. The Communist Party was out-lawed, and the voters at the following general election gave the Nazis a resounding victory--44% of all the representatives in parliament. Their allies the Nationalists, exponents of the landed aristocracy and the industrialists, received 8% of the votes. Thus, the way to Hitler's dictatorship was open.

Gertrud Kraus' show ended with a statement of ardent belief in the future, while in reality that same night, twelve years of darkness and oppression descended on Europe.

The modern megalopolis, a monstrous portrait of the times, was the theme of Gertrud's dance-drama, "The City Waits." In 10 scenes she depicted both the gay and cruel city, devouring its denizens, who danced in the bars while the unemployed dragged their weary feet in the streets.

The work was based on a short story by Maxim Gorki, "Songs of the City," from his book "Fairytales of Reality." A friend of Gertrud's, Marcel Rubin, composed the music and himself conducted the chamber orchestra during the performances.

The dancer's bodies were in fact the city. "We, the youngsters of Gertrud's studio, stood in pairs on top of rostrums, holding our arms up to form the steeples and roofs," recalls Bettina Ziska, now a dance teacher in Vienna. "I myself was standing, my arms spread to the sides, representing the cross on top of a church spire. It hurt terribly to hold your arms like that..." But what doesn't one do for the sake of Art!

To the city gates came a youth, dressed in simple black jacket and trousers, as if on his way from his native village. The youth was danced by Gertrud Kraus.

A boy goes to town.

Night plays music for him for his way is a long one.

At dawn the fields and pastures awaken.

He hears the sounds of poverty and he knows the city

needs him! intoned the voice of a woman. The reader was Grete Landers, the text was by the poet Cannetti, also a close friend belonging to the circle of artists around Gertrud Kraus.

The Boy approaches, and the whole city begins to move, slowly, sorrowfully. "Choir of the Suffering City" as the program notes have it. The Boy meets the glamorous rich amusing themselves in a bar in the scene called "Entertainment." Jazz music sounds, gentlemen in evening clothes and ladies in gowns of black lace hold glasses and dance.

Inside a happy few sat together

Beauty danced for them, for Poverty stood alone  
intones the voice.

"Some beggar-children, attracted by the splendor of riches which passes before their eyes like a dream, are eager to participate in so much beauty and they stray into the Bar as into a magic land" -- (from the program notes of a performance of scenes from "The City Waits" given by Gertrud's group in 1936-7 in Israel).

"But the workers (says the program) "worn out and indifferent, live in constant monotony of Waiting -- Drinking - Work, and again Drinking - Waiting -- Work..." (The somewhat peculiar English of the original program notes has been ameliorated a bit by the present author. G.M.)

From the vicious circle of hopelessness a "Machine Dance" emerges (in the scene titled "The Unfinished City.") In true cubist (or perhaps Futuristic) style of the times, the dancers' bodies become pistons and cogwheels. Everybody now in grey overalls, the individual disappearing in the mass. Each person becomes part of the faceless machine, a mere cog in the process of the industrial production-line.

The portrayal of industrial processes in dance may, of course, serve diverse purposes, according to the choreographer's intentions. The machine became a frequent symbol used in modern ballet of the 20's and 30's in the Soviet Union and in Eretz Israel, both places where the building of the country was one of the ideals shared by all.

While in Europe the machine was the symbol of exploitation and the subduing of the individual, in pioneering countries it stood for progress, communal effort and the bright future. Meaning is apparently, like pornography, a matter of time and place.

Another interesting artistic aspect of this trend of Mechanical Ballet is the two-dimensional nature of the choreography. As parts of a machine or conveyor belt, the dancers are, so to say, stuck in more or less fixed positions, and just as in Cubistic painting, depth and perspective is obliterated. This also stresses the graphic element of art in the service of propaganda.

Gertrud was a true daughter of her times. But instead of using wire contraptions and cardboard to obliterate the human figure in order to turn it into a part of a machine, like other choreographers of the period, she chose to integrate the dancers into a whole, creating the production-line by the use of bodies alone.

Outside, many toiled in the sweat of their brow.

They built and demolished, demolished and built.

But in vain, the buildings they erected were not for them... intoned the commentator in "The City Waits."

The mechanical dance of the "Unfinished City" dissolved into a "Dream of Happiness." The Boy joined a general procession in the scene called "The Boy Among the People," and the ballet ended with a dance titled "Expectation."

They gathered together and dreamt a great dream.  
Freedom — Freedom.

The Boy linked his dream to theirs.

He went among the people.

They took him along with them.

A happy end, optimistic in spite of everything. Perhaps this was the result of a paedagogical wish not to conclude on a dismal note, or perhaps of an artistic consideration to contrast the elegaic mood of the penultimate scene with a bright one. Maybe the classicist in Gertrud desired a link between the expectant atmosphere of the opening and the concluding scenes.

"How well G.K. builds a touching and at the same time shocking picture of a city awaiting bliss and the Boy's journey to it", writes the "Neue Freie Presse." And the critic of the "Der Wiener Tag" says: "A city weary and groaning, full of contradictions, in which poverty and light mingle, a town being built and demolished at the same time, but always 'yearning for beauty and the proud light'. The itinerant youth lives the exciting experience, his person dissolving in the whirlpool, a participant and brother-in-arms. This mysterium G.K. created with the help of movement and a voice-over commentary. Realistic and symbolic elements are intermixed, without interfering with each other."

Gertrud was at the very climax of her career. Starting with solos, she developed her choreographic art to become total theatre. What magnificent symbiosis of a personal style with the objective demands of time and place. This apogee occurred just on the very day that darkness descended, destined to destroy the world as she knew it, as Jew, socialist and artist. ■