

# THE FIRST FOLK DANCE FESTIVAL AT DALIA IN 1944

By zvi Friedhaber

Forty years have passed since the first folk dance festival took place at Kibbutz Dalia in the Meggido region in 1944. It became a significant turning-point in the development of Israeli folk dance and the name "Dalia" became a well-known term, often used even outside of Israel, for example in American Jewish youth camps, to mean "a meeting of dancers". Nevertheless, though only four decades have passed, many of the circumstances of this pivotal occurrence have been forgotten and therefore a historical survey of the processes and personalities involved in its creation is in order. (1)

The Dalia Festival marked an important stage in the development and official recognition of Israeli folk dance, but the folk dance movement itself had already existed for many years. Its original impetus came from professional dancers, who used folk dance in their artistic work: for example, Baruch Agadati, who created his "Hora Agadati," in 1924, in which he used oriental as well as Chassidic and Rumanian elements. (2)

In 1925 the dancer Lea Bergstein came from Germany, joined Kibbutz Beth Alpha, and in spite of the great difficulties she encountered in keeping herself in training as a dancer while working full-time in the kibbutz, she continued to create choreography within her chosen community. She became the first dance artist to create works for the agricultural festivities in her kibbutz, especially "Shepherd's Dances" for the annual shearing celebrations. Her dances — unlike those of several other artists — were an integral part of the communal life of her kibbutz. (3)

We find a completely different approach in Yarden Cohen's work in staging festivities in kibbutzim. (See also Ruth Ashkenazi's article about her in the Hebrew section). Yarden, born in this country and intimately acquainted with its landscapes, went to Europe to study dance, but was unable to find herself in the alien dance-language she encountered there, so different from the sounds and rhythms of her background. All this she rediscovered when

she returned home and began integrating it in her dances. (4)

Yarden Cohen's agricultural pageants were based on several ideas and motifs: taking the participants out into the open fields; using ancient sources and integrating them in the modern festivities; establishing a connection between the historical past of the geographical venue of the festivity and its modern-day inhabitants. This was nothing short of a revolution in the way celebrations of nature and agriculture had been designed until then. (5) While Lea Bergstein created her works as a member of the celebrating community, and the works functioned as a means of self-expression of the kibbutz, Yarden on the other hand conceived the forms of her creations as an outsider, molding the festival to fit her preconceived ideas. A community which feels the need to express itself in artistic form requires the formative powers of the creative artist to cast the communal feelings into the mould of stagecraft.

Rivka Sturman came on aliya in 1924 and joined Ein Harod in 1937. She had studied modern dance but, as she herself points out, had no knowledge of folk dance. Her creative activity — especially with schoolchildren — was the result of her objections to the fact that the children were educated in dance and music terms taken from an alien culture (brought from Europe). She was very critical of the then wide-spread 'national dances' of many peoples in what was called "the Ben-Shemen style".

She began choreographing with her pupils at the local kibbutz school. A turning-point in her development as an artist came in 1942, when she was asked to stage a year-end performance at Geva, a kibbutz near Ein Harod. The theme of the pageant was to be biblical and the composer chosen to collaborate with her was Emmanuel Amiran (Pugatchov). She thinks her meeting with Amiran was seminal for her art of creating dance. The most important result of their collaboration was her "Threshing Floor Dance", of which more later.

Her first dance created for celebrating a holiday was אשירה



לה ("Singing for the Lord") prepared in 1941/2, which became an integral part of the kibbutz Passover Seder, which she thought was its most appropriate place. (6)

During the years of the Second World War, Sara Levi-Tanai worked as a kindergarten teacher in Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh. Sara, herself of Yemenite extraction, was orphaned at an early age, raised in Ashkenazi institutions and became aware of the Jewish-Yemenite tradition in dance and music only when as an adult she encountered her communal heritage. Her years in the kibbutz were – as she herself has stated many times – the formative years for her as an artist. The intensive community life of the kibbutz demanded constant renewal and creation of original material for festivities and holidays. She wrote songs and created dances for her pupils. These served as the basis for the first large pageant she stages at Ramat Hakovesh, for Passover 1944, which was based on the Song of Songs. This work she regards (as she states in her answer to a questionnaire in the early 50's) as the turning-point which brought her to seek her artistic expression in an "Israeli dance and the oriental-Israeli style." (7)

In all her creative work during her six years in the kibbutz three prominent aspects of her personality are to be found: her artistic creative urge, her feeling of belonging to the community for which she creates and above all, her ancient Yemenite heritage. (8)

Another creator in the folk dance field in Eretz-Israel was the dancer-choreographer Rachel Nadav, also of Yemenite extraction. Apart from being the chief dancer in Rina Nikova's ballet company she gathered together young people from the Yemenite community and founded her own dance group. This company, which performed in many agricultural settlements, was, as far as I know, the first ethnic dance troupe in Israel which appeared outside the specific ethnic community to which it belonged. She created dances in the Yemenite style, which dealt with themes taken from contemporary life in Israel, and these she used in several festivities in various settlements. Rachel Nadav was also invited to teach Yemenite dance at the Kibbutz Teachers' Seminary by Gurit Kadman. (9)

Thus we encounter the dominant personality in the Israeli folk dance movement: Gurit Kadman.

Gurit immigrated to Palestine in 1920, bringing with her a vast number of folk dances she had studied. At first she joined Kibbutz Hefzibah in the Emek. The director of the youth village at Ben Shemen invited her to come to his school and teach his students national folk dances. In 1929

and again in 1931 Gurit organized two folk dance pageants at Ben Shemen about which the opinions differed, ranging from enthusiastic to severely critical. From there Gurit moved her activities to Tel Aviv, where she taught folk dances at the Kibbutz Teachers' Seminar. In 1943 she was approached by Dr. Y. Spira, one of the leading members of the Music Committee of the kibbutz movement, and was asked to add a dance programme to a meeting of choirs which was to take place in the Emek that year. This plan did not materialise, but the idea made Gurit keen on organizing a meeting of folk dance groups from all over the country. A former student of hers at the Seminar asked Gurit to come to Kibbutz Dalia to prepare a dance-pageant for a celebration based on the Book of Ruth, to be performed at the Hag Habikkurim festival (Shavuot). This plan was postponed until the following year, 1944.

The performance Gurit rehearsed took place in a pergola surrounding an open-air stage in front of the kibbutz "reading room", as the cultural center of a kibbutz used to be called in those days. Gurit liked the site so much that she made up her mind that should her plan for a dance meeting materialise, it too would take place in this enchanting spot. Of course she didn't realise what a momentous decision that would turn out to be.

That summer she enlisted the co-operation of the Histadrut Cultural Department, the Music Committee (of the kibbutzim movement) as well as the members of Kibbutz Dalia itself, and the proposed dance meeting took place, in spite of the many obstacles, having little to do with dance itself, which had to be overcome. At that time the first reports and rumours about the Holocaust were coming in. Several people asked Gurit to halt the preparations because of the terrible news about the fate of European Jewry. But Gurit resisted, and that was why she called the meeting the "Davka Festival", *davka* meaning 'in spite of' and signifying resistance and an indomitable spirit. Fourteen groups arrived to participate in the first Dalia Festival. It took place on July 14-15, 1944, and most of the participants came from the collective settlements, with just a few representatives from the various educational institutions, sport associations and youth clubs in the urban sector.

Most groups performed international folk dances, which were popular at the time, on account of the folk dance activity at Ben Shemen. The first part of the Festival was devoted to each group's teaching its dances to the other participants, and on the second evening there was a public performance for spectators who came from all over the area. It began with the young people of the host kibbutz dancing Yarden Cohen's "Hallel" dance from her "Story



of Ruth" pageant. The original pageant was expanded, and dances not originally included when it was performed at the Hag Ha'Bikkurim festivities were added. (10)

Thus the format of the Dalia festivals was created, as future festivals were also to be made up of a meeting of the dancers, followed by a public performance which began with a pageant performed by members of Kibbutz Dalia.

There were several features of the first festival which merit closer examination. First of all, the appearance of a number of original dances, such as Rivka Sturman's "Ha'Goren" ("The Threshing Floor"), which was much praised by all and deemed the most original of the new folk dances presented. In her review Devora Bertoni wrote: "... Rivka Sturman's work with children and youths from Ein Harod and Tel Yoseph attracted much attention. It was folksy and simple. The instructor had created a new folk dance. She also gave her dances Hebrew names. (It is very important to call a folk dance by a name not borrowed from other languages.) Her "Mahol Ha'Goren", which I had the opportunity to watch several times during the two days, uses work movements, combined with oriental rhythms, which lends it the flavour of being natural [organic] ... One shouldn't forget the accompanying music [by Emmanuel Pugatchov Amiran], which gives it a folk dance flavour." Lea Goldberg in her review expressed a similar attitude. (11)

Another characteristic feature was the presentation of dances taken from pageants created for holidays and festivals at various settlements. "The Story of Ruth" by Gurit Kadman of Kibbutz Dalia; scenes from Sara Levi-Tanai's "Song of Songs" from Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh as well as Yardena Cohen's Hag Ha'Bikkurim pageant created for Kibbutz Ein Hashofet. (12)

The movement style of Sara and Yardena – each distinctively different – had in common the affinity to oriental dance and rhythm, a novel feature, not immediately appreciated by everyone. Sara stated many times that at the first Dalia, her poetry (texts) and songs (music) were appreciated more than her dances. This is corroborated by the composer Itzhak Dror, who stated that some of the songs he wrote for "The Story of Ruth", prepared by his own kibbutz, were influenced by Sara's music with which he was already familiar. (13)

Yardena Cohen was at first opposed to the idea of taking dances from her Hag Ha'Bikkurim pageant and performing them out of context, as she was afraid they would lose their significance and substance thus presented. In spite of her

objections her "Hallel" was chosen to open the proceedings.

Another special feature was the performance of Rachel Nadav's Yemenite group in authentic Yemenite folk dances, one a men's dance and the other a women's (14). The audience as well as the critics were enthusiastic about these authentic dances, which bridged the gulf between the traditional and the new aspects of the presentations. The influence of this was to be felt in coming years.

The other Dalia festivals took place in 1947, 1951, 1958 and the last one in 1968. (15)

At the 1947 festival new Israeli folk dances were presented as well as those of ethnic communities, including Arab and Druze dances. In the same period the new Israeli folk dance was shown for the first time at an international forum, at the Congress of Democratic Youth held in Prague. Rachel Nadav, with her Yemenite dances, was included in the delegation headed by Gurit Kadman and Rivka Sturman.

At that time the folk dance instructors were also taught Sara Levi-Tanai's dances, so that Yemenite steps began to play a more and more important part in Israeli folk dance.

In 1951 the third Dalia festival took place and that year also marks a turning point in the absorption of the ethnic dance traditions brought to Israel by the immigrants. Jerome Robbins was present at the 1951 Dalia and he expressed his impressions on several occasions. He was impressed by the enormous potential of talent he found, but he couldn't see a way to bring together all the diverse artists, because of the sectarian attitudes of the people concerned, each pulling in different directions. He felt that there was opposition to incorporating the different traditions brought by the new immigrants, an attitude he thought was detrimental to the creation of a 'Israeli ballet style', as he put it. (16)

He expressed his concern at a meeting of folk dance instructors and opined that the geographical position of Israel would undoubtedly bring about a fusion of oriental dance with Western culture, resulting in an authentic Israel dance style. He concluded his remarks by saying that he could already see some originality in the new folk dance. One should bear in mind that these ideas were expressed as early as 1952.

From that time on Gurit Kadman concentrated on the communities of new immigrants arriving in Israel. Parallel to her efforts to teach the newcomers Israeli folk dance, she discovered the ethnic heritage they had brought with them.



Gurit, always several years ahead of most other people, realized that this treasure could be lost forever because of the 'melting pot' atmosphere then prevalent. The ardent wish to forge one nation from all the groups of immigrants as quickly as possible made them eager to neglect their traditions and to forsake the dances, ethnic garb, the music and special musical instruments they had brought from the diaspora. Gurit organized a group of volunteers, most of them amateurs, but also including the musicologist Dr. Esther Gerson-Kiwi, who had researched and collected the musical traditions of Oriental communities, in order to go to the transit camps ("Ma'abarot"), to new settlements and sometimes even to the airport where planes with new immigrants were landing, in order to observe, learn, and record or film the dances and music. Gurit Kadman's activities began as early as 1951 and we shall see the far-reaching results of her endeavour later.

Another important means of popularizing the new Israeli folk dance and teaching it to wider circles was the Haifa "Folk Dance March", organized by Shalom Hermon for Independence Day with the help of the Haifa municipality. (17) The integration of thousands of young people and dance groups from kibbutzim as well as ethnic dance ensembles in a dancing procession were a beautiful sight to behold and marked a change in the attitude towards the celebration of Independence Day, which until then had centered on a display of military prowess. After the official procession was over, many of the onlookers joined in; the overflowing streets were living proof of our becoming a dancing nation.

In 1958 the fourth Dalia folk dance meeting took place, and because of the large number of participants involved, its staging was, for the first time, placed in the hands of a professional director, Shulamit Bat-Dori. Her methods, such as the use of several stages in order to make the presentation flow smoothly, marked a turning point in the presentation of folk dancing.

Gurit Kadman's survey and recording of the ethnic traditions of the various ethnic groups and the pressure she exerted on the dancers to preserve their cultural heritage finally made the cultural establishment aware of the importance of encouraging ethnic dance. In 1961 for the first time an ethnic dance show on a large scale was held under the title "From All the Corners of the Earth" (or "From All Over the Land", as in Hebrew ארץ means the country as well as the earth or world). It was the beginning of many similar events organized in the following years. The very appearance of the ethnic groups on a massive scale at an official event marked an important change of attitude, as until then their

participation in folk dance events had been sporadic or just an embellishment. The entire evening was in the hands of the representatives of the ethnic groups and only the presentation of Chassidic dance was done by an 'Israeli' dance group. The students of the Hadassim school performed their Hag Ha'Bikkurim pageant to round off the panorama with something contemporary. The event was so successful that the following year the Israel Festival included the first half of the program in its opening gala concert.

Gurit, who was more and more drawn towards ethnic dance as the most important source for inspiration in creating Israeli folk dance, presented the films she had made at international forums, such as the International Folk Music Council. Impressed by the wealth of ethnic traditions presented in Gurit's material, this body decided to hold its 1963 congress in Israel. For this purpose Gurit organized the first folk dance meeting which did not take place at Dalia, during the international congress. Its title was "Roots and Buds", the ethnic dances being, symbolically, the roots and the Israeli folk dances the buds.

In spite of the popularity of ethnic dance events and the infiltration of many ethnic motifs into Israeli folk dance, the younger generation, the children of the immigrants, were not interested in their parents' traditions and there was a danger of this precious heritage being lost. Therefore in 1971 the "Ethnic Dance Project" was founded, to record and preserve and as far as possible foster and sustain the ethnic dance traditions. In the framework of the project several research seminars were held in 1973-1975. Informants from such communities as the Kurdish, Bukharian, Mesopotamian (Iraqi) and North African were interviewed and recorded.

Because of the availability of these sources research in folk dance, which until then had had hardly any established research procedures, such as other fields of ethnology possessed, became a scientific discipline.

One can't conclude such a survey of conservation and creation without mentioning the natural companions of dance, namely composers and musicians.

In the rural settlements there was marked cooperation and mutual inspiration between local dance creators and composers. Such close collaboration may be seen in the work of Lea Bergstein with M. Shalem Yardena Cohen and Yzhar Yaron, Rivka Sturman and S. Postolosky, Nira Chen and E. Amiran and of course Sara Leve-Tanai, who combines in herself the functions of choreographer and composer. Many of the composers in the non-kibbutz

sector began their careers as accordionists accompanying the dances, becoming composers in their own right because of the demands for music by the dance creators. In this category one could put the collaboration of Shalom Hermon with Amitai Ne'eman and Effi Netzer, Tamar Elyagur with Gil Aldema and the couple Raya and Yosi Spivack. And there were composers like Emmanuel Zamir, who followed the development of folk dance groups with his music and encouraged young composers to write music for dance.

Israel is still a country continuing to absorb more and more ethnic traditions, such as, for example, the Georgian and the Ethiopian, and its own folk dance creation is still going on. One is unable to foresee the end of this process. But it is possible to state that folk dancing has become an integral component of life in the country. ■

*(The bibliographical source list is to be found at the end of the Hebrew version of this article).*

Members of Kibbutz Dalia dancing "The Story of Ruth", 1944

