

# FOKINE'S JEWISH BALLET MOTHERS

by Ann Wilson Wangh

During the 1920's, when dinner in a good restaurant in New York would cost no more than \$1.50, there was a handful of Russian-Jewish immigrant women who felt impelled to scrimp and save in order to afford \$3.00 for a ballet lesson for their daughters with "the great Fokine".

Like Fokine, these women had recently come to America from Russia, although they arrived on a different boat. Like Fokine, these women had brought their samovars and their memories to the new world. Themselves ghetto-born they wanted their daughters to learn the noble art of ballet from the great master who was teaching in an elegant mansion on Riverside Drive.

In that mansion they sat, squeezed between the grand player-piano and the door, enjoined to silence, hardly daring to breathe. They gazed onto the parquet floor, watching their dainty daughters, listening to the count of "raz, dva, tri, chtiri" or a whistled melody.

When I was 9 years old, my mother used to pick me up after school on Wednesdays. From East Orange, New Jersey she drove to Newark to pick up my cousin Shirley and Shirley's mother Rose for the long ride to the mansion with the beautiful ballroom. In 1927 this trip was a serious undertaking. There were no tunnels under the Hudson River, so my mother drove through Jersey City rested a while on the Hoboken Ferry, then pushed on uptown via 12th Avenue, often sharing the road with railroad locomotives. Our quartet usually arrived just in time for the 5 pm. class. We girls ran right upstairs, while our mothers paused at the desk to pay and sign in before joining the other ladies on the 2nd floor. On the way home there would be hard-boiled-egg sandwiches.

The mothers' reward was an hour and a half of worship at the shrine of beauty, as Fokine composed before their very eyes. Their daughters became his drawing board. His dreams and theirs intermingled. The children became a link of art to homelands lost and found.

Who were these mothers? Who were their children and what

became of them? What was Fokine to them or they to Fokine?

Michel Fokine himself had been trained in a rich tradition of dance, a tradition built on dance forms of the Italian Renaissance, French spectacles, Greek and Gothic tales, as well as the pagan lore of Russia and Siberia. Classical ballet, contrary to popular belief, did not begin in Russia. At a time when highly trained ballet masters (many of them Jews) were perfecting the art of court ballet in western Europe, Russian aristocrats knew only the steps and forms of peasant dances. While Italian nobility was tasting the refinements of early opera-ballet, and the French in dainty satin slippers were gliding smoothly over parquet floors, Russian Boyars imitated their serfs, spinning and stamping on the beaten earth to the rhythm of the balalaika. The heart of the dance was the stamp of a boot, on the parquet floor as on the frozen earth. It was a dance less of elegance than of mood.

But when, early in the 18th century Peter the Great came back from his visit to western Europe, the art of shipbuilding was not the only thing he brought to his native land. He wanted his court to acquire western atmosphere and French grace. So he introduced social dancing in the French manner.

In 1737 the Empress Anna Ivanovna established the Imperial School of Ballet. She peopled her school with peasants, many of them orphans, under state care, and she got some of her noblemen to provide their healthiest, strongest serfs. These became their first Russian ballet dancers.

These "orphans" were often children born out of wedlock. What a boon it must have been for Mrs. Pavlova when her daughter Anna, fathered by a Jew and hastily baptised, was taken into the State School of Ballet. After one year of probation the child's career and full support were guaranteed for life.

Years later, at the studio on Riverside Drive, when Mrs.

Koreff asked Fokine whether he knew that Anna Pavlova was part Jewish, he replied: "One does not ask about the race or religion of an artist".

This imported ballet was an art full of charm and delicacy — so much so that at first the Russian dancers were not entrusted with the leading roles. French stars were brought in, Italians followed, dozens of them. They whirled around in multiple pirouettes, beat their feet together in brilliant batterie, for the Italians outdid even the French in elegance of execution — and the Russians brought up the rear. They were the corps de ballet.

But before long it was recognized that the Russian dancers had something to offer which the foreigners lacked. They gave the ballet a soul. They poured freshness into the effete old forms and they added a whole panorama of folk or "character" styles which the ballet had never known. The Russian audiences were thrilled. They would come at 8 pm. and stay through 4 or 5 long acts of an elaborate ballet until past midnight. Being aristocrats they did not have to get up next morning to go to work...

The 19th century was the period of Grand Ballet, in the manner of Grand Opera, ballets with a cast of 60, 70 or 80 performers. The 19th century was also the period of decay of the Russian Czarist regime. It was a period of exploitation of workers and of starvation of peasants. The peasants who contributed their earthy dances to Russian ballet were the same peasants who were beginning to revolt against their Czar. The Czar, in turn, encouraged them to let out their frustration in pogroms against the Jews. These were the years of the great waves of Russian-Jewish immigration to the United States. Revolt was in the air. Revolution was brewing in the shtetl, and in the rehearsal halls of the Imperial Ballet as well.

Until nearly the turn of the 20th century, Marius Petipa, the great French choreographer, remained the undisputed ruler of the Czar's ballet. He created 20 full length ballets in 20 years. He guided a whole generation of dancers. For him the stories of *Swan Lake*, *Raymonda*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, etc., were secondary to the display of virtuosity and brilliant technique which he could muster. His ballerinas whipped around 32 times in succession, or balanced on the tip of one toe regardless of musical distortion, or "flew" delicately in the strong arms of their porter-partners. It was said that Marius Petipa "squeezed the whole of dancing into a woman's corset". The claque (paid professional applauders) and balletomanes stopped the show after each tour de force. Classical ballet had reached a height from which it could go no further without turning into a circus show. It

needed rebels to give it new life. And the rebels were at hand among the artists themselves.

Their leader was a young dancer named Michel Fokine. He dared to question every tradition. "Why must we stick to this frozen expression?" Fokine asked. "The five positions do not exhaust the whole scale, the full beauty of the body's movements. Dancers are constantly exhorted to arch the back, to face the public, to turn out the leg. The arms and hands and head have set positions laid out for them. How limited a range".

Fokine felt imprisoned. For example a ballerina in the role of a gipsy maid might weep over her lover, but she would have to do so in 4th position. She couldn't bend at the waist, because she was corseted and remaining stiff. How could she possibly convey true emotion? Moreover, in order to show his dancer most clearly to the audience the choreographer was bound to use many steps based on the 2nd position. "What could be coarser and duller", cried Fokine, "than a second position like a pair of broken compasses? Why accept these steps"?

Fokine felt keenly the razor's edge between the sublime and the ridiculous. Years later, in the Louis Quatorze studio, he caught two of his best pupils dancing a little joke on the grand pas-de-deux from his ballet *Les sylphides*. In a moment his usual gentleness turned to fury. The girls had "meant no harm" and were crestfallen.

Unjustified distortion was anathema to him. "Why must ballerinas always be limited to wearing hard-tipped toe slippers? It's fine to use them for extending the line of the leg, or to give an illusion of lightness or stiffness, but to use them simply for acrobatics is degrading. Why not dance in a simple soft slipper, or even barefoot?" Barefoot dancing for Fokine was an artistic option, another style, an alternative technique. It was never, as with Isadora Duncan, the only way to use the foot.

Fokine liberated his dancers. He gave them back the full use of their bodies. "Why should girls always wear a tutu? Their skirts have grown shorter and shorter to reveal more and more, but their hips are still hidden under a pillow. If the ballet demands it, why shouldn't we see the whole torso? The body is supple, the reason for dancing is deep feeling, and the fabric of dance is not a succession of poses, it is a movement itself".

The revolution which Fokine started goes on to this day. Merce Cunningham, the American post-modern choreographer writes: "To walk magnificently and thereby evoke

the spirit of a god seems surprisingly more marvellous than to leap and squirm in the air in some incredible fashion, and leave only the image of oneself”

Fokine's career had begun in Russia. In 1905 he created the *Dying Swan* for Anna Pavlova, and followed it with the ballets *Carnaval* and *Chopiniana*, better known as *Les sylphides*, as it was renamed by Diaghileff. But that was only the beginning. His greatest works were to be choreographed outside of Russia. With the Diaghileff's Ballets Russes he gave the world *Petrouchka*, *Firebird*, *Scheherazade*, *Prince Igor*, *The Legend of Joseph*, *Cleopatra*, *Tamar*, *Spectre de la rose*, *Narcisse Dieu bleu*, *Les preludes*, *Coq d'or*, and many more.

After the Russian revolution and the first World War, Fokine with his wife and child, left Russia. In spite of repeated invitations from the new government, he never returned. In 1919, when he first came to the United States he was already famous. His dancers were Fokina Mordkin, Karsavina, Pavlova and Nijinsky. His scenic designers were Bakst, Chagall, Goncharova and Benois. He choreographed to the music of Stravinsky, Wagner Chopin, Schumann, Dukas and others.

In 1940, at the opening of the *American Ballet Theater* it became clear that Fokine had set the stamp of his genius on dance of the 20th century. His revolution-cum-tradition by then encompassed not only his choreographic works, but his philosophy and way of teaching as well.

In the mid-twenties, sure of his art, mature in his creative powers, Fokine opened his beautiful studio on Riverside Drive. It was in this school that the bridge from Russian ballet to American ballet was forged.

I became part of this bridge. When I was 10 years old my Wednesday class with Michel Fokine became the focus of my life. All the other days of the week seemed a tedious intermission between those classes. To bide the time on Sundays I would pull my costumes out of a big box. Then, using recordings of the music I had heard at Fokine's studio I would coax sister, cousin or neighbors to learn the Fokine steps, the Fokine poses the Fokine arms. Naturally I was always the soloist and wore the prettiest of the costumes.

Each Wednesday my inspiration was renewed as Shirley, I and our mothers drew up to the mansion at Riverside Drive. We girls had already changed to ballet slippers in the car. Once past the doorman we shed our coats and raced up the stairs, too impatient to use the slow-moving elevator-cage. Our mothers having signed in and paid for the class

mounted the sweeping marble steps to the second floor and joined the other ladies. Each arrival meant a shuffling of chairs, for certain priorities and seniorities had to be observed even in the narrow space between the player grand piano and the threshold of the studio door.

We girls ran further upstairs, ignoring Fokine's lifesize portraits of himself and Vera Fokina on the walls. We would trip silently past the private rooms, then glance briefly at the little studio to see who had arrived ahead of us. On the 5th floor, out of breath and highly excited I would shed my school clothes and my everyday identity. At last, wearing a silk tunic, pink on pink, my real self entered the little studio ready for the barre. If Madame would be giving the barre, there would be counting in Russian and attention to details of foot and ankle. If Mr. Fokine were to teach, anything might happen. He might ask for demi-plie in a quick sequence of positions to a whistled 5/4 Tschaikovsky melody. Or he might want "arms against legs" in counter rhythms or speeds. "Feel the line of your body" Fokine would say "Imagine that a raindrop runs gently down your arm from the shoulder, over the elbow not getting caught there, then over your wrist, down the first finger and off the very tip to the floor". We were never to look into the mirror. Even when he taught chains turns, he would not permit the usual snap of the head for balance. "You can spot with your eyes", he would say. "The head is part of the whole body design, and must not be sacrificed to mere technique". After 20 minutes of barre we would all proceed down to the 2nd floor, to the ballroom-studio with its herringbone parquet floor, its gold-framed mirrors and sconces of golden angels on the white walls next to the marble fireplace.

This glorious room opened to the west through three french windows from which one could see the Hudson River and the glow of sunset over New Jersey. Just beyond the east doors sat our mothers, almost as happy as we. Fokine would sweep past them with a soft smile and a graceful nod, while the Yiddish-English-Russian gossip would die down reverently to a whisper. In the silence Fokine would take his stance at the end of the room, his head lowered. He would glaze at us from beneath his brows, and begin to move.

Class was a choreography. Each step, each gesture developed the dance we would be performing at the end of an hour. He would teach each movement within the style-frame of the composition-to-be. There was a time when we learned and re-learned his choreography to Rubinstein's *Romance*. Nora Koreff (later Nora Kaye) always threw herself into this dance with great abandon. Nora and her mother were

very career minded. In those years they were close to each other. Afterwards Nora went ahead on her own, using her angry passion to great advantage especially in the works of Antony Tudor. She became one of the major stars of the American Ballet Theater.

Mrs. Koreff and Rosa's mother, Mrs. Feldman, were keen competitors in regard to their daughters' talents. Rosa's mother brought along goodies for Rosa to eat. She was always urging Rosa to do something "like Nora" or "like Anne". Rosa's mother took her around to auditions. Eventually Rosa joined the Ballet of the Metropolitan Opera in New York where she danced for a number of years.

Miriam's mother, Regina Weiskopf, was perhaps the least intimidated of the mothers. She was quite pert and elegant, and dared to chat with Mr. Fokine from time to time. Miriam's family lived close by which meant that Miriam sometimes attended the "grown-up" morning class I envied "Miyiam", as Fokine called her, for her closeness to him. After dancing in his companies Miriam became a fine teacher of Fokine-style ballet.

Betty Eisner (later famous as Betty Bruce) Winona Bimboni (a Swedish-Italian beauty) and my cousin Shirley (now a ceramic artist) were tall. They danced the long melodic phrases when we learned *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Betty, lean and elegant, could sweep a grande ronde-de-jambe like the sail of a windmill. She was the very match of Mendelsohn's violins. Mrs. Eisner sat and "quelled". Her nervous red-tipped fingers and mascaraed eyes vibrated with pride and tension as she held back from smoking during class time. Betty grew too tall for classical ballet, so she became a musical comedy tapdance star on Broadway. Fokine loved her wit and physical power. He never considered her career-switch to be a breach of loyalty. Tap dancing evidently did not constitute a fall from grace, any more than did the study of Spanish dance, although those who attempted modern dance were sure to feel the icy breath of Fokine's ostracism. Betty and her mother were inseparable for years until Betty suddenly contracted cancer and died in mid-career.

Class choreography necessitated casting, and in this, size played an important role. The little girls: Miriam, Leda Anchutina, Selma Schwartz, Rosa, Nora and I, often danced the counterpoint to Betty, Winona and Shirley. We bounced and perched around them. Sound turned into vision.

The dances we learned bore no relation to our level of ability. We were taught the 'idea' of dance not its technique. We all learned the solo variation for the White Swan. Not one of us could balance long enough on pointe to slide the free foot down the supporting leg in a bird-like caress. But we knew how it should be done and why. We agonized with a feeling of "swanness" in our bodies. Our mothers empathized and understood our swan souls.

Our mothers made the little Greek tunics which we all wore. Mine were of pale pink crepe de chine with piquot edging on the bottom and hand-hemmed binding. When we were photographed however, it was in tunics made of sheets torn up for the occasion. One day we arrived to find the whole house full of excitement. Photographers were everywhere. On the private third floor sheets were turning into costumes. Transported with joy I posed as shown, as corrected, as re-posed. I willed myself into beauty and stillness. Recently a friend sent me one of the photographs taken that day. In it we all look serious, dedicated and childish. What a pity that no one photographed the faces of our mothers.

Leda Anchutina (who later became Mrs. Andre Eglevsky) told me recently that she hated the lessons her mother made her take. Leda's mother, a White Russian seamstress made costumes for the Fokines. Leda was therefor privileged to attend many classes, but her mother could seldom afford to buy her new toe-slippers. I can remember Leda weeping in the 5th floor dressing room because her toes were bleeding. You could see the red stains coming right through the pink satin. I also suffered from blisters and bunions, but whenever anyone complained about the pains of toe dancing Fokine would reply, "Dancing on toes is beautiful. It is great pleasure". Our mothers paid \$6.00 a pair for our slippers, then darned and painted them with shellac to make them last. How could I complain that they did not fit, or that they hurt my feet?

Miriam's toes were straight across. Her feet were stubby and short, perfect feet for toe-dancing, and she was excellent on pointe. My feet were long skinny fish, which refused to arch in the right places. In 1928 I was 10 years old and just a bit taller than Miriam, even off pointe. In those days when the lesson centered around the grand pas-de-deux from Fokine's *Les sylphides* she and I were cast as partners. I learned the boy's part, she the girl's, and except for the lifts, we were expected to perform the dance as choreographed. We were a big hit with the audience of mothers who dubbed us "Gold Dust Twins" after a popular laundry soap powder.

There were weeks when swans and sylphs disappeared in

favor of Persian maidens. Asymetry, twisting arms, bent knees and arched backs took over. We were the wives of a Sultan, or at the very least his slaves. Pauline Koner shone in *Scheherezade*. She could look voluptuous and pure simultaneously. Pauline soon left the Fokines for the field of modern dance in which she became very well known, later dancing in Jose Limon's company, creating the role of Emilia in his *Moor's Pavane*.

After learning *Prince Igor* with Fokine I had the temerity to dance the part of the Wild Girl for another director, Alex Yakovleff. Nora and Rosa were also in that company, but only I was found out because my name appeared in print. I was forbidden entry to Fokine's classes until I made a formal apology and promised never to "betray" him again

There were others who shared those children's classes. I wonder what has become of Thelma Hirsch, or of Evelyn Braverman and Selma Schwartz who were both good pianists. Jeannette Witty who sometimes arrived in a chauffeured limousine turned to modelling. Esther Rosen danced for years at Radio City Music Hall. I have lost touch with Gedda Petry, a White Russian girl who went to a private school in New York City.

Later, in the 30's, came the professionals, and I became a professional too. But that is a different story This one has been about the children in the Louis Quatorze ballroom, we who were privileged to enter into the charmed circle, a more-than-real reality, a time and place and rite which enhanced the meaning of life itself. Did we struggle for a ballet technique? Yes, but for other techniques as well. We were to run unfettered, to leap to the stars, to fall, to float.

Miriam and I recently compared memories of those early years. We agreed that if Fokine had asked any of us to leap through those French windows over Riverside Drive no one would have hesitated for a moment. In that ballroom we became Fokine's creations — and so became ourselves in art. We were his paint, his palette. He spoke through us We became his bridge to the new American ballet We were no longer Jews or Russians or Americans. We were dancers. "One does not ask about the race or religion of an artist". ■

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The writer, Anne Wilson Wanh (née Wolfson) danced in the Fokine Ballet during the 30's, and later as a soloist in American Ballet Theater. She was a founder of the Dance Library of Israel in 1972, and now teaches and writes in Jerusalem

Thanks are due to Miriam Weiskopf, my loving aide-memoire.

