

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOLK DANCE IN ISRAEL

By Dr. Zvi Friedhaber

One may trace the beginning of Israeli folk dance back to the '20s and '30s. It is connected to two separate factors: the immigration to Eretz Israel of several dance personalities, and the initial experiments in creating pageants involving not only text and music but also movement, for the celebration of agricultural feasts in the communities of settlers in that era. All this took place a long time before the first Dalia Festival in 1944, which marks the start of an "official" folk dance movement in this country.

Let us return to the '20s, when — in chronological order — the following people arrived: in 1919 (for the second and final time) Baruch Agadati; 1920 Gurit Kadman (Gert Kaufmann); 1921 Czeszka Rosenthal; 1925 Lea Bergstein and in 1929 Rivka Sturman.

Each one brought his or her special interest in dance. Some were already full fledged professionals, others just amateurs in love with dance. Apart from Agadati, none possessed a knowledge of Jewish dance traditions.

Each one of this distinguished group settled in a different part of the country and started his or her own creative dance activity without connection to the others. This was also the period in which artistic stage-dance started in Eretz Israel. Margalit Ohrenstein (the mother of the dancers who became known as "The Ohrenstein Sisters"), opened her studio in Tel Aviv. The ballerina Rina Nikova, became the founder of her "Biblical Ballet" in Jerusalem, where she experimented in the use of ethnic elements in an artistic framework. For this purpose she incorporated into her group dancers of Yemenite extraction and those who came from Bukhara. They taught her the traditional steps and music which they had brought with them.

And of course we must mention Agadati, who based his Expressionistic dances on material gleaned from Chassidic and Yemenite as well as Arab folk dance traditions.

Each one of these personalities contributed according to his or her abilities and sensibilities to the development of

folk dance. I shall now describe this development, before the first Dalia meeting, in broad general terms.

Agadati in his individualistic ways created solos depicting folk types taken from the life of the diaspora such as those of the Chassidic environment he knew in his native Romania, as well as those of Yemenite Jews and Palestinian Arabs he met in Eretz Israel. His only dance which became a truly "folk" one, the "Agadati Hora" (in the version adapted by Gurit Kadman), he called "Ura Haglilit" in an endeavour to give it a Hebrew name. He taught his version to the actors of the "Ohel" theatre in 1924, and it spread in Gurit's variation all over the country.¹

The musical accompaniment for those early dances often played an important role. For example, Agadati composed his Hora based on a Romanian tune he knew. The composer Boskovitch was unpleasantly surprised when he realised that this tune belonged to an antisemitic student-song he knew. So he sat down to compose a new tune for the dance, the one to which it is now danced. Thus the first truly Israeli folk dance came into being.

When Gurit came to settle in the country, she lived at first in Emek Israel, at Kibbutz Hefzibah. Her knowledge of dance comprised mostly European folk dances. In the kibbutz the pioneers used to dance the dances they had brought with them from their countries of origin. The "Rondo" — really a procession dance of changing formations — was deemed the most 'social' dance, in which nearly everybody participated.

When Gurit moved to Tel Aviv, she was invited by Dr. Lehmann, the principal of Ben Shemen, a boarding-school near Lod, to become an instructor of folk dance there.

In this capacity she staged two folk dance pageants, in 1929 and again in 1931. These became widely known and helped to spread the fashion of dancing folk dances from all over Europe in the settlements in the Emek, where the students from Ben Shemen had performed.

In 1943 Gurit was invited to teach folk dance at the Kibbutz Teachers Seminar in Tel Avi. This institution also asked Rachel Nadav, herself a Yemenite, to teach the dances of her tradition. Nadav was a leading dancer in Rina Nikova's "Biblical Ballet" and led a Yemenite folk dance group of her own. The meeting is significant, as it was the first one between exponents of the two traditions, the Oriental and the fledgling Israeli folk dance.

Under the auspices of the Kibbutz Seminar Gurit published the very first manual of Israeli folk dance (in 1943/4), where she listed then under two headings, "Dances of Eretz Israel" and those of "Jewish Origin". The ones described are: "Hora Agadati", "Tel Avivah", "Triple Debka", "Sherele", "Nitzanim" (in Yemenite style), "Kol Dodi", "Isam Midbar" and "Lanu Hakoach" (in Yemenite style).² Gurit's work at the Seminar was of great importance to the development of Israeli folk dance. Among her students was Ilse Gutmann of Kibbutz Daliah, who asked Gurit to stage a "Story of Ruth" dance-pageant on the occasion of the Shavuot Feast that year at Daliah.

For several reasons this was to come about only a year later, in 1944. The "Bo Dodi Alufi Hagorna" dance from that pageant became very popular among folk dancers all over the country.³

In 1921 Czeszka Rosenthal arrived in Eretz Israel and joined Kibbutz Gan Shmuel. Born in a village in Poland, agricultural festivities were something quite natural to her. Her father was a farm manager and the village feasts took place next to their home. The first impulse which drove her towards creating pageants and village feasts was hearing that at the Shavuot Festival in Haifa a public ceremony of "Bringing forth the first fruits" was staged by the artistic director of the "Ohel" Theatre, Moshe Halevi and the dancer Yehudit Ohrenstein. A year later she began to stage Hag Habikkurim festivities in her kibbutz.⁴

It should be noted, that Czeszka too used European folk dance in a new guise, by composing Hebrew texts to the Polish dance songs she had known since her childhood. ("Pa'am hayeeti, pa'am hayeeti be Teman"). At a much later stage the composer Danni Factori (also a member of the kibbutz) composed a new tune to the text and dance, and so the Polish folk dance became an original Israeli one. It is known as "Rikud Hakotzrim" ("Shiru shir, tomney hazera.").

In 1925 Lea Bergstein immigrated to Israel and joined Kibbutz Beit Alpha. She was perhaps the most accomplished dance artist to arrive. She had appeared in modern dance companies in Germany on a professional basis.⁵ She was impressed by the life and customs of the Beduin shepherds she encountered. She took part in their dances, when they pitched their tents in the vicinity of her kibbutz. At the kibbutz she also met the poet and composer Matityahu Shelem, a man of many parts, steeped in Jewish tradition and culture, who was to become her most important partner in artistic creation. Their songs and dances have since become true folk art, sung and danced all over the country.⁶ They continued their collaboration when they moved with a group of members to another kibbutz, Ramat Yochanan.

A separate significant event in the development of Israeli folk dance took place at Kibbutz Na'an in 1937. Else Dublon had arrived from Germany and joined Kibbutz Yagur in 1936. There she met the composer Yehuda Sharett and with him prepared several kibbutz festivities. In 1937 Sharett was asked to devise a "Water Pagaent" for Kibbutz Na'an, where a new deep well had been bored, the newly found source of water making the existence of the kibbutz farm a viable venture.

Yehuda took Else with him to Na'an. In an interview she stated:

"...Yehuda gave me his song "Usha'avtem", which he had orchestrated, and I made it into a whole ceremony. My dance began with a step which I felt expressed waves (of water). The next part, in which the dancers entered the circle, expressed the flowing of the water from the well. The third part of what became a folk dance, with its jumps, is not my creation. (In my own version) there were no jumps. As I was choreographing for untrained dancers, I had to devise simple steps, but I didn't wish to have them just doing Hora-steps. This dance was done by several circles of dances, one inside the other..."

(This information was recorded by Shalom Hermon for the "Israel Dance Documentation Project".)

As there are several opinions as to the authorship of this dance, I did some research on the subject. Indeed I found material in the archives of Kibbutz Na'an supporting Else's claim.⁷

In 1929 the most important creator of Israeli folk dance arrived in the country. Rivka Sturman had studied

technique and choreography in her youth in Germany, but as she herself said, had no inkling of folk dance. In 1937 she settled at Ein Harod. The first dance she composed there was for the festival of the beginning of the wheat harvest, "Hag Ha'Omer", celebrated on the eve of Passover. This happened in 1940/41. It was the dance "Ashira", which later became a part of the Seder Pesach, a more appropriate spot for it.⁸ It has since become a popular folk dance.

Rivka devoted most of her energy to education of the kibbutz children. She created most of her dances for her young students. Her task was not an easy one. She explained her methods and the difficulties she encountered in an article, written in 1944.⁹

In 1942 a significant change occurred in her work, when she was asked by the regional high school at Geva to prepare a graduation ceremony. There she met the composer Emanuel Amiran (then: Pugatchov), whose rhythms influenced her choreography, since she felt they were the authentic Israeli rhythmic element she was looking for.

The achievements of her work with the students at the school came with her to the first Daliah meeting, the best known one among these being the "Hagoren" dance. Like Agadati, she called her creations by Hebrew names and even wished to use the title "Hagoren" -- meaning threshing-ground -- for all the circle dances, but this term did not catch on.

To the list of dance creators of Israeli folk dance we have to add those of choreographers born in the country, namely Sara Levi-Tanai, Yardena Cohen and Rachel Nadav.

Levi-Tanai, of Yemenite extraction, was orphaned at the age of 6 and received all her education in institutions run by Ashkenazy educators. Only during her studies at the Levinsky Teachers Seminar when she spent time with the residents of the Yemenite quarter in Tel Aviv, the Kerem Hateymanim, did she discover the Yemenite tradition.

She spent the years 1939-1946 at Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh. These she herself regards as the most formative years in her artistic career.

The intensity of the social life of the kibbutz and its cultural activity were, she thinks, incentives to her own artistic creativity. Indeed she prepared her first large-scale work, the pageant "Shir Hashirim" for the

Passover Seder at the kibbutz in 1944. The well-known dances "El Ginat Egoz" and "Ana Halach Dodech" were created for this occasion. It was, as she stated in an interview during the '50s, the beginning of the oriental trend in music and movement in Israeli folk dance.¹⁰ She brought the "Shir Hashirim" pageant to the first Daliah meeting. It was danced by members of Ramat Hakovesh. "People at the meeting tended to pay more attention to my music than to the dances..." — she stated later.

Another dance creator of Yemenite extraction was Rachel Nadav, whose best known folk dance is "Uri Zaphon". Rachel brought her ethnic dance company to the first Daliah, where it was the only one of its sort.

Yardena Cohen was born in Haifa and went to study dance in Germany. But she did not find modern, European dance congenial. As one may learn from her autobiographical books, she returned home, to pursue her own path, creating works in the language of her home-land, using oriental rhythms and accompaniment.¹¹

Her first assignment was the staging of the Hag Habikurim pageant at Kibbutz Ein Hashofet in 1943. A year later she created a vineyard pageant at the same kibbutz. From among these works the dances "Hayayin Vehagat" and "Machol Ovadia" (the latter at first belonging to her personal repertoire of solos) became popular folk dances. At first she was adamant against performing with her dancers at Daliah, as she "wasn't engaged in creating folk dances" and didn't wish her dances to be performed out of context. But she was nevertheless persuaded to do so, and in fact her dance "Hallel" was the opening piece of the meeting (not the "Story of Ruth" pageant, as is widely believed).

The Daliah meeting was also the beginning of the establishment of an "official" framework for the folk dance movement, within the framework of the inter-kibbutz committee for musical activities, under the auspices of the Histadrut. In spite of the fact that most of the dances presented were created by individuals for specific festivities in settlements, the first meeting produced a number of folk dances which became popular.

About six months after the meeting at Daliah the first course for folk dance instructors was held at the Kibbutz Teachers Seminar in Tel Aviv. It was certainly an audacious endeavour to convene a 12-day course, taking

into account the paucity of folk dances then extant. The curriculum apart from the teaching of the dances themselves, comprised such subjects as Jewish tradition and culture, and general subjects such as music or art. The following are extracts from an account written by Ilse, a member of Kibbutz Daliah, who participated in the course. It was published in the bulletin of her kibbutz in February 1945:

...the first course for folk dance (instructors) was dedicated to the search for Israeli folk dance. The question was, what shall replace the non-Israeli dances danced in the dining-halls of the kibbutzim. Just as in Israeli song, the direction is to face eastwards. Rachel Nadav succeeded in creating (joy and enjoyment) derived from Yemenite dancing. But it isn't the strictly traditional Yemenite dance which will provide the answer. Rivka Sturman gave a solution of sorts, but her dances seem to be too contrived, which makes them hard to dance. Instead of enjoying the dance, one has constantly to "watch the feet" of fellow dancers.

Ze'ev Havatzelet composed an interesting dance, well fitted to the music, which is an adequate expression of the rough soul of Israeli youth. The erotic side of this dance, an eroticism lacking sweetness and show-off, as well as the reticence of oriental erotic dance, gives an equal share of what is shown and what is concealed to both sexes. The woman answers the boys' enticements with female elegance, but full of self confidence.

The passage of time will show how many of the 15 dances offered will become 'natural', danced without regard for the choreography and the prescribed steps. Perhaps the forms will be changed and what will remain will be that which is easy (to execute) and close to the heart (of the dancers).

As to the musical accompaniment, the most successful ones were the tunes by Pugatchov (Amiran), (David) Zahavi of Kibbutz Na'an and that of Toto (a member of Kibbutz Dalia), 'Bo Dodi Alufi Hagorna'.

Yardena Cohen's dances are more appropriate to staging than to social dancing, except the "Debka" shown by the members of Ein Hashofet. Together with certain changes in the dances themselves, Rivka Sturman proposed to call them by new (Hebrew) names: the Debka, "Goren" and the

Polka, "Alumim". I hope the dances will become popular at the weekly dance-evenings at our kibbutz..."¹³

There was also a marked change in the organization of folk dance evenings by Shalom Hermon, who organized such meetings at the Hapoel House in Tel Aviv. In 1946 Gurit Kadman published her first series of instruction-sheets, each containing the music, text, the steps in words and graphic charts, as well as an explanation of the origin of each dance.¹⁴

These publications were prepared by Gurit for her planned visit to the U.S.A., where she wished to propagate the new Israeli folk dance. To fix these new dances, as yet unknown even to the majority of Jews in the country, in sheet-form required audacity which only Gurit possessed.

In 1947 the second Daliah meeting took place. And immediately after that the first Israeli folk dance ensemble went abroad, with the blessing of the national authorities, to represent the yishuv at the International Congress of Democratic Youth held in Prague, Czechoslovakia. After attending the performance in Prague, Gurit went to the U.S., in order to bring the new folk dance to Jewish youth there.

During the months of the War of Independence (in 1948-9) there was no further folk dance activity, but as soon as the fighting stopped dance resumed. Gurit began her teaching activities in the army soon after returning from abroad. In the army she again met her former students. Under the auspices of the Cultural Section of the I.D.A., she published the first two dance-brochures "Hava Nirkoda" in 1949, a publication series later transferred to the Cultural Dept. of the Histadrut.¹⁵ Rivka Sturman also became active in the army, organizing a course for folk dance instructors (who also performed as an ensemble) for the soldiers of the Palmach-Har'el division.

For these performances she designed special costumes with the help of the painter Chaim Atar and another member of Ein Harod, Ottia Bashewitz. The innovation was the outer garment, called "Ephod", also known as the "talith", which has since then become an indispensable part of the Israeli folk dance tradition.¹⁶

The climax of Gurit's activity in the armed forces was a meeting she organized that year, in which Jewish folk dancers serving in the army met with ethnic dancers from the Druze and Beduin communities for five days of

instruction, a meeting which culminated in a performance by the non-Jewish soldier-dancers. This was the first of many such meetings to take place in following years.

In 1951 the third Daliah meeting took place. In the years between the two meetings the Folk Dance Dept. of the Histadrut had intensified its activity which included several courses for instructors, dealing with the staging of pageants, choreography, as well as other aspects of folk dancing, implementing the lessons gleaned from the Daliah meetings.

1953 saw the first dance-procession in Haifa, celebrating the Day of Independence. This was instigated by Shalom Hermon and the Sports and Youth Dept. of the Haifa municipality. This dancing procession, in which dozens of dance groups participate, has become a permanent feature of the annual Hag Ha'atzmaut festival in Haifa. Other communities in Israel have emulated this example and organized similar events.¹⁷

The Histadrut Folk Dance Dept. was unable to hold another Daliah meeting in 1953 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the first and organized regional meetings instead. These meetings also took place in '54 and '55. Since 1975 an annual gathering of folk dancers takes place at Zemach, on the shore of Lake Kinneret.

The fourth Daliah meeting of 1958 was different from previous ones. For the first time a professional stage-director, Shulamit Bat-Dori, was entrusted with the planning and staging of the whole event. She introduced a new concept of simultaneous stages -- instead of a single central platform -- thus making the flow of the performance continuous. This was also a prominent feature of the fifth and last Daliah, held in 1968.

Since that time most folk dance activity has spread in the form of periodical local or regional meetings or amateur companies. These companies often travel abroad, performing and becoming unofficial ambassadors of Israel, even in countries with no diplomatic relations with the State. The Histadrut Dept. for Ethnic and Folk Dance continues its activity, the ongoing courses for folk dance instructors being the main tools at its disposal. From the participants in these courses arose the "second generation" of folk dance creators. Among these the most influential and prominent ones were the late Ze'ev Hvatzelet and the still active Yonathan Karmon.

At the first Daliah meeting, Ze'ev showed some of his

work presented by the folk dance group of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement from Tel Aviv. In 1945 at the first instructors' course his dances were enthusiastically received as a genuine expression of the spirit of the young Israeli generation.¹⁸ Even at that early stage Ze'ev endeavoured to perfect new didactic methods and forms of staging folk dance.

In 1951-52, when he served as the Arts Officer in the "Nachal" (the army unit created for the service of groups of people from youth movements intending to joining kibbutzim) he participated in the work of the Nachal Entertainment Company as choreographer for its shows and worked with folk dance groups within the military framework. The best of his dances include "U'banu Batim", "Shecharchoret", "Tidrechi Nafshi Oz", "Har Vekar".

Yonathan Karmon participated in the Palmach dance group led by Rivka Sturman. He then went on to study modern dance with Gertrud Kraus. Undoubtedly this influenced his choreography when he later returned to folk dance.¹⁹ The artistic as well as technical standards which he brought to his folk dance performances influenced the whole field of Israeli folk dance.

In 1954 he was asked to head the Central Folk Dance Group of the Histadrut, in which the best dancers participated. His dances such as "Shibolet Basadeh", "Al Tirra", "Yamin U'smol" became part of the basic repertoire of folk dance in Israel.

Itzhak Halevi (Moshiko) is a dancer and choreographer who grew up in a quite different dance company, namely Inbal Dance Theatre. While still a member of the company he composed a dance for it, "Chabanim", based on the folk dance steps of that region in Yemen. After leaving the Inbal company, he devoted his time to creation in the folk dance sphere. His work was influenced by that of his mentor, Sara Levi-Tanai, and, as one may perceive from the list of his early dances, his themes were gleaned from contemporary life in Israel. His "Eit Dodim Kallah", "Nitzanei Shalom", "Beduin Debka", "Debka Uriah", "Kurdish Debka" and many others have become a permanent part of Israeli folk dance tradition.

To the second generation of folk dance creators belong the creative instructors such as Yoav Ashriel²⁰, Tamar Elyagor, Rayah Spivak, Shalom Hermon²¹, Shemuel (Vicki) Cohen and the present author. For lack of space we were unable to list all their activities.

One cannot treat the development of Israeli folk dance without mentioning the contribution of composers, who became close collaborators of the choreographers. Sometimes steady companionships were established, as for example in the case of Lea Bergstein and Matityahu Shelem; Yardena Cohen and her oriental musicians on one hand and the composer Izhar Yaron on the other.²² Rivka Sturman and the composer Postolsky; Nira Chen and Yedidya Admon; and the couple Raya Spivak and her husband, the musician Yossi Spivak. In the personality of Sara Levi-Tanai the two -- choreographer and composer -- are united.

Another prominent group are the "Kleizmerim" of Israeli folk dance, the accordionists who accompanied the instructors and became composers in the process. Among them are those who worked with Shalom Hermon, Amitai Ne'eman and Effi Netzer; Tamar Elyagor and Gil Aldema. A special case was the late musician Emanuel Zamir²³, whose whole work was closely connected to folk dance. He used to suggest likely tunes to choreographers and indeed many were choreographed. He also encouraged young composers to emulate his example of collaboration.

An important factor in the development of Israeli folk dance was the influence of indigenous ethnic dance, that of Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic groups. This influence began among the folk dancers even before the first Daliah meeting. These traditions of course existed in Eretz Israel long before the advent of the foundation of the pioneer settlements, but their impact increased after the mass immigration in the 50's mainly from the Middle East.

At that time, three folk dance artists realised the importance of these ethnic traditions. Gurit, Sara and Rivka went to the immigrant camps and the settlements to study these traditions.

With her usual flair, Gurit Kadman began as early as 1951 to film and tape-record all she could preserve. She was helped by the well-known musicologist, Gerson-Kiwi. Active in the propagation of Israeli folk dance abroad, Gurit also began publicising the ethnic traditions she recorded. Her work was greeted enthusiastically by researchers all over the world.

In 1961 the first festival of ethnic dance took place, researched and staged by Shulamit Bat-Dori. It was so successful, that it was again performed at the opening of the Israel Festival the following year.²⁴

Gurit's international activity was instrumental in the decision of the International Music Council to hold its congress in Israel under the title of "East and West in Music". For this purpose a meeting was organised at Beit Berl -- the first one not to be staged at Daliah --, in order to present to the congress delegates the interaction of tradition and innovation taking place in Israel. The presentation was in two parts: the first was one entitled "Roots" and dealt with ethnic sources; the second was called "Buds" and showed the new Israeli folk dance.²⁵

Throughout the years many such presentations took place.

In 1971 the Institute for Ethnic Dance was founded jointly by the Histadrut Section for Folk Dance, the Hebrew University and the Ministry for Education and Culture, in order to preserve the ethnic traditions which were in danger of disappearing, since the younger generation of immigrants was not keen on preserving them. Gurit, aware of this danger, mobilised the elders of the various groups to teach whatever they knew to the next generation and indeed some of the youngsters responded to this endeavour.²⁶

Two years later, in 1973, a first seminar was held. It was devoted to the research of the tradition of one of the ethnic groups, the Kurdish Jews. This was followed by similar seminars dealing with the folk traditions of Jews from Buchara, Yemen, Mesopotamia and North Africa. About 100 elders were present for study and recording, to offer whatever they had brought with them from their countries of origin. Unfortunately, the only scientifically trained ethnomusicologists taking part were Dr. Avner and Naomi Behat, who were present at the meeting dealing with Yemenite tradition. The paucity of scientific research is one of the main failures of the Institute of Ethnic Dance. (Although there were several scientific research projects carried out by scientists such as A. and N. Bahat, Pamela Squires or Shalom Staub under the auspices of other organizations. Editor's Note.) Nevertheless, the activity of the Ethnic Dance Institute has been of great importance.

To sum up: Israeli folk dance, which began as a visionary initiative of a few enthusiasts, grew to become a mass movement. Today tens of thousands of dancers take part in the activities of folk dance groups and circles in Israel, and Israeli folk dance has become part and parcel of the international folk dance repertoire. All this would have been impossible without the Folk Dance Department of the Histadrut and the work of

Tirza Hodes, who headed that department since its foundation in 1952 and who has only recently retired.

The many courses for instructors, the annual meetings at Zemach and all the other forms of folk dance taking place during the years were guided by Tirza. Her work led to the renaissance of folk dance groups all over the country, a folk culture activity comprising young and old, unparalleled in any other sphere of folk art.

As a direct outcome of the participation of Israeli folk dance groups in international forums, Israeli dances are danced in Jewish communities as well as in non-Jewish circles all over the world. ■

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The bibliography for this article is to be found at the end of the same contribution in Hebrew, p. 35 of this publication.



Folk-dance festival at Ben-Shemen.



"Ozi ve'Zimrat Jah" — dance at the Hag Habikkurim at Gan-Shmuel in 1947.