

Three letters to Tehila Rössler

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Tehila Rössler (1907-1959) was one of the important and intriguing women who established Artistic Dance in Israel in the 1930s. She emigrated from Berlin to the country in 1933 where she became famous mainly as a teacher of expressive dance (Ausdruckstanz) (Eshel, 1991, page 34). Rössler did not raise a family, she dedicated her life to dancing; the career she preferred to raising a family.¹ Rössler never attained extensive fame, since she died of an illness at a young age (51) in 1959. Only few admiring students and a few relatives attended her last journey. According to her relatives and students, she was an amazing woman, intellectual and sensitive, who knew how to instill the love of dancing to her students' hearts. I will present her figure in an unusual manner, via three letters written to her by three well-known people: The author Franz Kafka, whom she met at The Jewish Home in Moritz in 1923; Gret Palucca, her admired teacher in Germany, and Noa Eshkol, her student at the first class of the teachers' seminar she established. Explanations and historical background are introduced along with the letters, indicating Rössler's relationships with the writers.

I am dedicating this article to my beloved father, Arie Rothman of blessed memory, and to my uncle Eli Rothman, may he live long, who has translated the letters from German into Hebrew. I thank Ya'acov Zack, Rössler's cousin and Yalta Bone her niece and student, who threw light on her figure and gave their consent to publishing the letters. And also to Doris Etzioni who has translated for me several texts from German.

Kafka's letter to Tehila Rössler²

"My dear Tile³, the post office has mixed up your letters! The second one arrived at noon, while the first arrived later in the evening. I received the evening letter while standing at the sea shore. Dora was present, and I was precisely after a short reading in Hebrew. After a long time, the sun was shining again in the afternoon; let's

hope it will last long. The children were noisy. I could not return to my beach shelter because my brother-in-law was treating a football player's injured leg. Therefore I read your letter standing up, while Felix was trying to shoot the ball above me, around me and through me in order to hit the pole standing behind me, nevertheless, I felt relaxed when reading your letter. I was glad that you missed us, but I was also pleased, because according to my present feeling, by travelling away from here you did not miss as much as you thought..."

This is how Kafka begins his letter to Rössler, whom he met in the summer of 1923 at the Berlin Jewish people homes' vacation camp at M ritz on the Baltic Sea. Rössler, who was 16, fell in love with Kafka. From the letter it appears that Kafka was probably aware of Rössler's love, and on his part offered her his friendship. The bond between Kafka and Rössler had more significance in Rössler's eyes and less in Kafka's, who met at that same summer camp his last mistress, Dora Diamant (Diamant was Kafka's spouse, with whom he lived the last year of his life until 3.6.1924).

Rössler arrived at the Jewish children's home at M ritz as a volunteer just like Dora. She met Kafka, who was staying at the time at his sister's house in M ritz near the shore where the home was located, even before Dora. In Martha Hoffman's book the poet and the girl – based on conversations she held with Rössler about her relationship with Kafka – the author describes the many profound and intimate conversations Rössler and Kafka held in the summer camp near the sea shore (Hoffman 1943). To Rössler's regret she had to leave the home earlier than anticipated and return to her home in Berlin, where she received the letter from Kafka. The day she left, which was a cold wet day, she came to meet Kafka who was staying at the time at the Hotel's lobby. She gave him a vase as a token of thanks for the red jar he had bought her a few days earlier (Murry 2011, page 298). At the end of the letter that he sent her he mentioned that moment and also wrote how he was guarding the vase. He also wrote her about his desire to relocate to Berlin, and the

rapprochement in his relationships with Dora.⁴ Rössler, who was, as mentioned, in love with Kafka felt hurt and broke down after reading the letter (Diamant 2003, p. 41).

"...I no longer enjoy myself here as before, I am not quite sure whether it is due to my personal fatigue, lack of sleep or headaches. But why, have they been fewer than now? Maybe I should not stay too long in one place; there are people who can internalize the sense of home only when they are travelling.

"After all, everything remained as it was, all the people at the hostel are closer to my heart than I can admit to them, particularly Dora, whom I spent most of the time with; what a terrific person. However, regarding the hostel, as such it is no longer as impressive as before. A simple matter, visible to everyone, has affected it a little, and other petty but undisclosed matters continued affecting it. As a guest and a foreigner, particularly a tired guest, I am unable to express or clarify things to myself, and therefore I am going away. So far I have been there each evening, but today, although it is Friday night, I am afraid I won't be going there!

"I am not entirely displeased that my sister has decided (her husband came to fetch her from here) to leave not on the 10th but a few days earlier, and I decided, despite it being more comfortable and cheaper here – I do not want to stay here alone – to join them and to travel with them to Berlin. If I am not too tired, I will stay a day or two and then for sure I will see you. However even if I did not stay, but continued travelling immediately to my parents at Marienbad (and later continued travelling for a day to Carlsbad, and instead of meeting Tile I would unfortunately meet only my manager), we would meet soon, because I hope to come to Berlin again.

"I had a visit here lately; a friend of mine, the Palestinian whom I told you about. She arrived at the same time Frida arrived, they have known each other before, and she resided at the hostel. The visit was short, barely a day, but she left behind her a sense of encouragement, thanks to her self-confidence and her joyous spirit. You should introduce her once to Berlin.

"It is nice that you write 'Schaale' (a bowl, the translator's note – A.R.), exactly as I believe one means by the word 'question'. Well, the Schale⁶ would like to address a question to you, which is as follows: you, Tile, when will you finally break me? Because I must sometimes struggle over the vase you have given me with Cristal, our bartender's daughter, who is three years old, one of those red-cheeked flowers with white skin

growing here in all the houses. Each time she comes to me she wants to take it. She claims that she wants to watch the bird's nest located in our balcony, she pushes herself in and immediately after standing next to the table she reaches for the vase and without much frills she declares, without interpretations and always very severely: The vase! The vase! She does it relying on her ancient right, that the world belongs to her, so why not the vase as well? And the vase probably fears the cruel child's hands, though it must not be afraid, I will always protect it and I will never give it away.

"Please give my regards to all my friends from the hostel, particularly to Biyova. I would have written to her a long time ago if it had not been for my insistence to reply thankfully for her beautiful Hebrew in Hebrew as well, though less beautiful than hers, if I were able to pull myself together from the tension I presently feel for the effort of writing in Hebrew.

"All my relatives as well send you their regards, and particularly the children. When your letter arrived at noon Felix and Gerti argued about who had the right to be the first to read your letter. It was hard to decide. In favor of Felix stood his senior age and the fact that he was the one to bring the letter from the postman. Gerti, on the other hand, claimed that her friendship with you was tighter than Felix's. Too bad, at the end the decision was made as result of using force and Gerti twisted her mouth...

"Have you already heard Grieg? This is actually the last clear memory I have of you; when the piano is being played and you are standing there, taking a bow, a little wet from the rain, humble before the music. I wish that you would always be capable of such posture! All the best! Yours, K".

About a month and a half after Rössler received the letter Kafka moved to Berlin to live with his sweetheart Dora. During this period he continued meeting with Rössler from time to time under Dora's supervision. Rössler, who came to terms with his choice, continued admiring him and went on inquiring how he was, writing him letters also when his condition deteriorated and he moved to a sanatorium near Vienna for treatment. During that year when she accompanied Kafka from afar until his death in June 1924, her desire to study dancing became more acute, and she began taking dancing lessons seriously.

The book "The poet and the Girl", in which the relationship between Rössler and Kafka is described, ends one day after Kafka's death. On that day, out of the sense of grief the girl was

feeling, her body awakens to dance. This awakening process described in a mythic manner, occurs under the inspiration of Kafka's commands to Rössler to continue dancing as it appears in the last sentence he wrote to her in the letter (Hoffman 1943, pp. 92-93).

After a year, in 1925 Rössler began studying dance professionally, and at the end of the 1920s she was admitted to Palucca's famous school.

Palucca's letter to Tehila Rössler

"I'm very happy after having received the message. Oh, Tile, this is indeed too beautiful... on 10.⁸ I'm going for one day to Dresden (the knee is in a worse condition)...I would willingly speak more with you. Take a day of rest.... Yours Palucca".⁹

This is how, in a short letter from the early 30s (not all of which could be translated, due to unclear handwriting) Palucca wrote to Rössler. The letter and the testimonies of her relatives indicate the warm and close relationships between the two⁸. Palucca was a choreographer, a dancer and an important teacher in Germany, belonging to the Impressive Dance stream. Palucca had special relationships with Rössler, she appointed her as a senior teacher and the director of her school in 1930. Rössler had served in this role for three years until 1933 (the year of the Nazi rise in Germany) and then was fired by Palucca with the rest of the Jews working with Palucca. In this part of the article I will introduce the "non-innocent" history underlying the innocent letter, in which Palucca reveals fondness and love towards her Jewish school director.

This history is being revealed in current studies and primarily in Lilian Karina & Marion Kant's study (Lilian Karina & Marion Kant, 2003). Their research presents the collaboration prominent creators in the field of dance had, among them Palucca, Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman, with the Nazi party. The collaboration began already in 1933. These creators, although banned by the Nazis in the late 30s, collaborated with them massively for three to six years.

According to Karina and Kant, of all the fields of art, the leading dance creators were the most prominent ones to collaborate with the Nazi party, (excluding very few, such as Kurt Jooss), some had done it for several years, others continued doing so throughout the Nazi regime. In these years they were granted artistic and financial support and refrained from expressing any moral sense towards their "non Aryan" colleagues. In their study Karina and Kant empha-

size that these creators received the orders for the deportation of all non-Aryan citizens without protest and any attempt to lend a hand. In cooperating with the Nazi party they agreed to accept the Nazi ideology, which distinguished between pure Aryan Art and degenerating art. Furthermore they adopted the racial theory which found expression in their school curriculum. According to the researchers, they "had taken Nazism upon themselves long before the authorities decided what it meant" (Karina & Kant, 2003, p. 110).

Among the many examples that prove their arguments, they bring Palucca's case in which Rössler is also involved and it is also introduced in the book about Palucca (Erdmann-Rajski, 2000). According to Erdmann-Rajski, author of the book about Palucca, during the years 1930-1933 (the years Rössler was appointed as her school director) Palucca was at the peak of her fame. Palucca received many work and performance offers, and her school's activity volume increased immensely; she even opened a school branch in Stuttgart (Erdmann-Rajski, 2000, p. 241). It was very important to Palucca to maintain her senior status as one of the leading creators and teachers in Germany. In order to maintain her status she joined in 1933, together with Wigman and other artists the school union – NS – Kulturgemeinde, as well as the Kampfbund. Upon joining these associations they had to sign that they would maintain the "Aryan standards" at their school. One of the meanings of maintaining the "Aryan standards" was the deportation of all the non-Aryan employees working at their school and their dance troupes. The researchers claim that the deportation of Jews (including Rössler) by Palucca and Wigman, instantaneously, was not absolutely necessary. That is because Goebbels racial rules had not yet been put into effect at that very and gave solo and group dance performances with her various students. Rössler was famous primarily as a teacher. Her lessons were influenced by Palucca and following her footsteps she developed an abstract approach⁹ to Dance Studies. In her lessons she created an integration between improvisation exercises and technique and built a methodology for technique and composition studies.

Noa Eshkol writes to Tehila Rössler

In 1943 Rössler established a teachers' seminar in her school, with Noa Eshkol attending its first class. The text introduced here was written by Eshkol in the seminar's first-year final exam. Of

all the teachers who taught theory in the seminar, Eshkol designated the text, written in German, exclusively to Rössler. In the text Eshkol formulates in a very 'virginal' and exciting manner her desire to dance. She also describes for the first time the important element characterizing her artistic work – the fact that movement is an idea in itself, not expressing a separate subject from the body.

"My goal"¹⁰

"I want to dance, dance, dance forever and continue dancing.

"How to dance?"

"I want to dance amazingly beautiful. I want nothing to block my body and to be able to create any subtle expression of mood, color or idea. I want my body to be a refined and perfect instrument.

"Where to dance?"

"Once I thought that I would be able to create big things, i.e. that I could concentrate the most essential in things to the point that they would unite into one element in a way that it could exist only that way and no other, for example: soil, winds, sun. However, I realized that I could not do it, that I was not such a genius. Therefore I would like to dance with a big ballet ensemble directed by a genius.

"In art it is very difficult to draw the line between the idea and the material. The movement within the dance – which is its material – is generated by the idea. But there is something else here: the recognition of the external world which turns into a movement (but this can only be done by a genius, and in order to be that way one needs to be born a genius). I would call it the World of Idea. The world of movement is performed with ultimate love and understanding. I would like to penetrate into the world of movement. I aspired to be a dancer!!!

"Why do I desire to be a dancer!?"

"a. I myself do not know.

"b. Something within me urges, pressures, brews and pounds giving me no rest, but when I dance I become calm, or better said, then I have the feeling that I could attain calmness.

"c. Because I want to become famous. Not only because of the desire to boast, but also because I do not want to settle for only few people, but in order to get acquainted with more and more human being, in order to live their lives, and to be involved in them. I would like to expand to all expanses – the entire world – and to taste from everything. However, if this is impossible, I want at least others to experience me. Fame enables that.

?How will I achieve it?

"I would like to practice technique for 8 hours. "Good God – if only all that were possible!!!"

Against the development of modern dance in Israel, which was influenced by Expressive Dance, it is this text, written by Eshkol in 1944, that stands out as the first text that appeared in the country expressing abstract thinking about dance. Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that Eshkol, of all people, who was Rössler's student, writes this way. Rössler, who was very much affected by Palucca, and being inspired by her, developed an abstract approach to dancing and implemented this approach mainly in her methodology, but not in her dances. Eshkol, Rössler's gifted student, took the abstract thinking of dance one step forward. Contrary to Rössler she implemented it also in her dances.

Summary

The letters of Kafka, Palucca and Eshkol illuminate from various angles Rössler's unique figure. Each projector shows part of her figure leaving a part thereof in the shade. Rössler, whose character and personality are being revealed, leaves some question marks about the relationships she had with these people. The only thing that becomes clear after reading them is that Rössler was a special figure, who experienced an impossible love, was a gifted teacher and knew how to forgive anyone who had hurt her.

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Notes

- ¹ Rössler was married for a short period of time to Hans Wiener whom she met on board of the ship when she immigrated to the country. However, since Rössler did not want any children they separated. An interview with Yalta Bone (Tehila Rössler file, Dance archive, Beit Ariela).
- ² The current letter is a translation a copy of the original letter written in German, which exists at the Beit Ariela archive in Rössler's file. An additional Hebrew translation exists in the book, *The girl and the Poet* (Hoffman 1942). Another translation into English appears in, *Frank Kafka: Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* (1978) translated by Robert and Karla Winston.
- ³ Tehila Rössler's pet name
- ⁴ According to Katty Diamant, Rössler is the first person Kafka told about his relationships with Dora.
- ⁵ Continuation of the letter from the previous passage.
- ⁶ In this passage Kafka is making a pun between the word Schaale with double A, which means in Yiddish "Question", and the word Schale (with one A) which means in German a peel, a bowl or a jar. Later on he uses the word Vase.
- ⁷ The letter Palucca wrote to Rössler was translated by Eli Rotman. Besides it there are 2 additional letters from that same period (Tehila Rössler's file, the dance archive at Beit Ariela).
- ⁸ See interviews of Zack' Bonneh and Gwili (in Tehila Rössler's file, the dance archive at Beit Ariela).
- ⁹ According to the researcher Karl Toepfer, Palucca was the most abstract artist among the expressive dance artists. To elaborate on this subject see (Toepfer, p. 188).
- ¹⁰ The first year final test is written in German, translated by Eli Rotman (Tehila Rössler's file, the dance archive, Beit Ariela).

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