

In awarding Hassia Levy-Agron the Israel Prize for Dance, 1998, the jury stated: "The Israel Prize in the field of Dance, 1998, is awarded to Hassia Levy-Agron for her artistic and educational contribution, spanning approximately fifty years. First, as a dancer and choreographer, and subsequently as a teacher and educator, who has instructed many generations of dancers and dance teachers. [...]"

The acme of her achievements was obtaining, in 1976, the Board of Higher Education's academic recognition for the Dance Department she had founded and directed at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. This achievement made the Department the first academic institution to award academic degrees in dance, training teachers for dance instruction in all educational frameworks".

Hassia Levy-Agron was born in Jerusalem on 2 December 1923, to a family that has lived in Jerusalem for seven generations. On her mother's side she was a Rivlin, and her father's family came with the first immigration wave from Russia. Her grandfather, Baruch Shmuel Levy, was among the founders of Tel Aviv. Her father, Haim Leib Levy (who was

Talia Perlstein-Kaduri

Hassia Levy-Agron:

born in Jaffa) was a member of the APEC (which was to become Bank Leumi) Board of Directors. She was married to Danny Agron (a member of the Hagana organization, he was among the founders of the Aircraft Industry, as well as a famous wood engraver). She had a son, Amos Agron (a lawyer), and four grandchildren.

Levy-Agron remembers herself as dancing from the very first day: in the kindergarten run by the poet Levin Kipniss and David Shitrai; with her first rhythmic teacher, Teresa Goytin; and with Tova Berlin, with whom she danced around the olive tree.

In an interview with Ohav Plantz (*Kol Ha'ir*, 16 August 1991), she said: "Instead of taking a dog to the park, my sister and I used to take a stork on a rope. I've loved storks ever since. The storks, the peacocks and the rabbits we had in the yard – they all made me dance. And the wonderful teachers I had, too. I love storks to this day - their long legs, that beautiful neck, the unbelievable elegance. They're like elegant ladies. I still do stork exercises and other animal exercises with my students. For us the stork is the queen."

In primary school, there was no doubt in the minds of her dance teachers – the sisters Judith and Shoshana Ornstein –

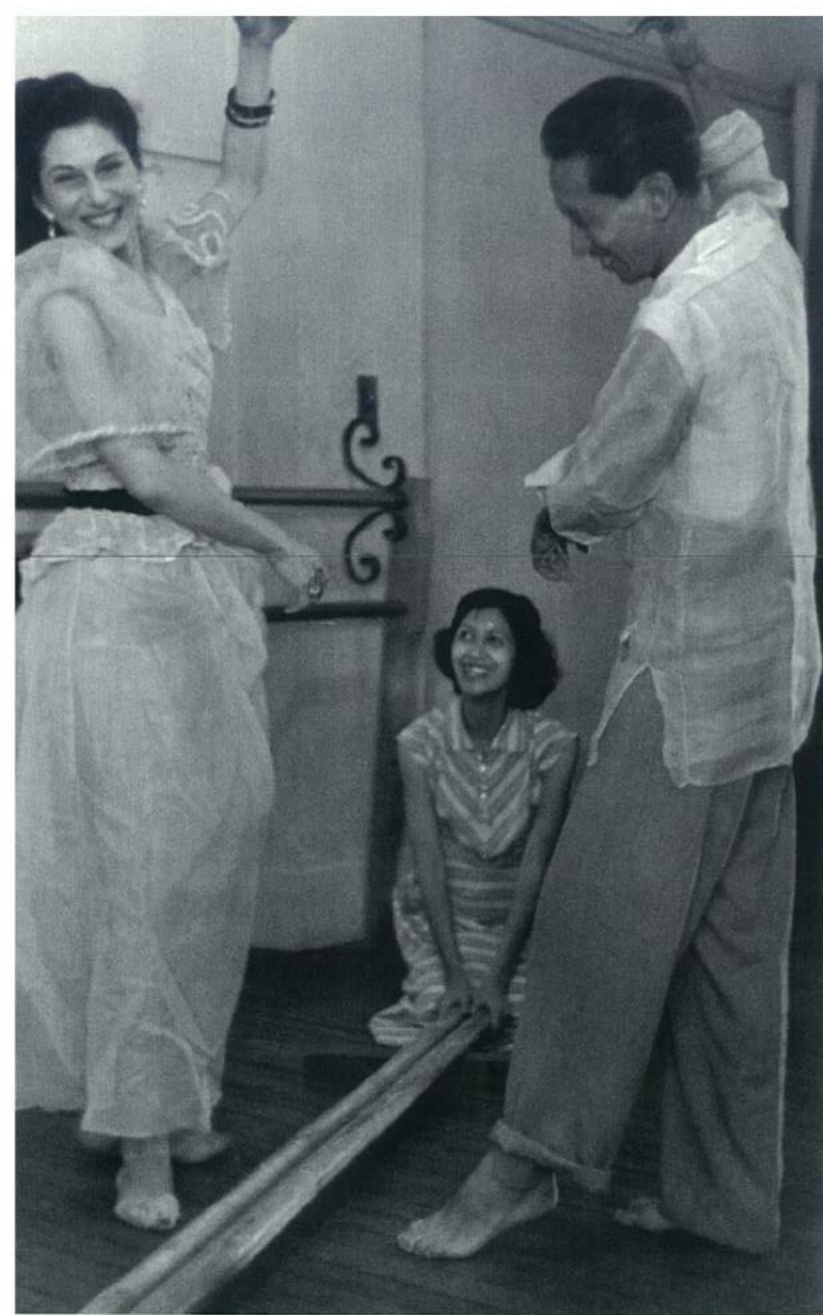
that Levy-Agron was born to dance. In an interview with Ruth Eshel (1989), Levy-Agron said: "Shoshana gave us a lot from the creative point of view; improvisations on literary, musical or personal subjects. The lesson would start with a progression to various rhythms (a sort of rhythmic), and end in creation." After five years, Shoshana stopped coming to Jerusalem. "I was consumed with jealousy, because in Tel Aviv famous teachers and dancers, who had recently arrived from Europe, were teaching. [i.e., Gertrud Kraus, Tille Rössler, Paula Padani and others. T.P.K.]"

In 1938, when Levy-Agron was a student at Hagimnassia Ha'ivrit High School, the famous artist Else Dublon, a former dancer in Mary Wigman's company, came from Germany to Jerusalem. Levy-Agron recounts: "At first I did not apply for her classes because I didn't like her name. I went to see Gertrud Kraus perform at Edison Hall in Jerusalem, and all the seats were taken. During intermission I saw an empty seat



Expressing the Sun and the Stars in Movement

חסיה לוי-אגרון, ערב סולו, שנות ה-40
Hassia Levy-Agron, solo recital, 1940s



חסיה לוי-אגרון מתרגלת ריקוד פיליפיני בעת ביקור במזרח-הרחוק, שנות ה-50
 Hassia Levy-Agron practicing Philippine Dance while touring the Far East, 1950s

and ran towards it. A woman told me, 'Sit here,' and I did. After a few weeks Dublon's advertisements made me curious after all. I went there, and the door was opened by a small woman who said, 'I knew you'd come.' It turned out that this was the same woman who had invited me to sit next to her. Afterwards, I was a household member there for years."

Through Dublon, Levy-Agron was introduced to Yardena Cohen and studied with her, as well as with Gertrud Kraus. She succinctly summarizes the unique features of each of her teachers: "Gertrud inspired me, Dublon gave me more tools, and Cohen was a symbol of Israeli authenticity."

Levy-Agron's dream to become a dancer was opposed by her family: "In those years, being the daughter of a good family in Jerusalem as well as a dancer was very unusual. My parents tried to prevent me from becoming a professional dancer, but I, of course, did not desist. I studied with all sorts of teachers. I paid for my studies by working as a babysitter, without letting my parents know, naturally, since they would have considered it a terrible shame. The allowance I was owed they gave to my big sister for safekeeping, so that I wouldn't waste it on dance. I could use it for plays or movies, but not for dance. It's interesting to note that father used to be one of the best gymnasts in the country. But I, despite their opposition, danced all day long. In order to please my father, I started studying in the Teachers' College in 1944, and father was proud of me. While studying there I also completed my education in other arts. I studied painting with Ardon, sculpture with Ben Zvi and music with Yaritsky... But only dance became an obsession" (from an interview with Elisheva Ayalon, *Olam Ha'isha*, October 1989).

In the early 40s Levy-Agron started performing with her own materials in 'Art and Culture Evenings' - a combination of music, dance and poetry - organized by impresario Moshe Valin. The programs featured other young dancers, just then in the process of becoming famous, including Naomi Alesovsky and Zmira Gon. A. Uriel wrote in *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper (19 January 1945): "Hassia Levy is not merely a dancer. She is an artist. She knows how to think, feel, and then perform and express. Her 'Hora' is original from A to Z. Such a subject does not leave much room for originality, and yet Hassia Levy has succeeded in bestowing upon it something of her own..."

In 1947 she put on her recital "Idiom Dance" - a combination of reading, dance and music. According to an article in *Davar* newspaper of 7 February 1947, "Idiom Dance is a new concept: This Jerusalemite, going back many generations, has dared to arrange a program - a combination of dance, reading and music - homogenously and organically. The whole program (one translation apart) consists of originality, Israeli characteristics, bible readings, Israeli poets - a matching selection in good taste. At a time when most of our stages are

inundated with translations and the spirit of the diaspora, this serious ambition should be commended.”

Even before the establishment of the State of Israel, when only a few people in Israel had heard of ‘The Great Graham’, Levy-Agron traveled to the United States in order to study with her. She was her first student from Palestine. As Levy-Agron told: “I discovered her through a book. Simply a book. Some journalist, who had seen my performance, said, ‘This girl must study with Martha Graham.’ He sent me a book about Graham and I read it and said: ‘This is who I would like to study with. This woman, this dancer.’”

Ha’olam Haze Journal no. 730 told the story: “As the petite Martha Graham, the goddess of modern dance, was leaving her rehearsal hall one day, she was disturbed by an impudent young girl, tall and brown-eyed, who asked her permission to enter the hall. Graham, haughty and domineering by nature, was astounded. ‘Young girl,’ she said coldly, ‘I am not accustomed to people talking to me unless I have spoken to them first. Moreover, I do not permit just anybody to visit my rehearsals.’ But this was not the end of the matter. The young girl, not at all embarrassed, courteously explained that she had come all the way from Israel, not in order to see America but to see Martha Graham, and it wouldn’t be right to drive away someone who has undergone such hardships in order to watch her art. Slowly, the little lady melted and smiled. ‘Oh, well, come in and register,’ she finally said. Such is the unusual way in which Hassia Levy, the upright Jerusalemite, entered the famous school for modern dance”.

Levy-Agron left Graham’s school before graduating because of the establishment of the State of Israel. She went to her teacher and said: “There’s a war going on in my country. I’m going there.” As the war of Independence broke out in Israel, she left America, carrying an unusually warm letter of recommendation from Mrs. Graham:

April 22 1948

To whom it may concern:

Hassia Levy Agronsky has been studying at my School for nine months. It has been most gratifying to have her. I have found her skilled and excellently suited to the Dance, and she has adapted herself and learned both quickly and well in the work here at the School which was strange to her.

I have liked her courage and her attitude toward accepting a new type of work and the eagerness and devotion with which she has studied.

I hope she will return some time in the not too distant future, but I feel that she has assimilated an astonishing amount of new work in the months that she has been here.

Martha Graham

משמאל לימין: חסיה לוי-אגרון, מרתה היל (מנהלת המחלקה למחול
בניו-יורק, ניו-יורק), אנה סוקולוב (מוריאוגרפית, ניו-יורק), פלורה
קושמן (הפלייס, לונדון) וג'ון קליין

Left to right: Hassia Levy-Agron, Martha Hill, Anna Sokolow,
Flora Cushman and John Klein



Levy-Agron said: "We became exceptionally good friends, and she would say that whenever she came to Israel her first telephone call was to Hassia, or at most the second. And so it was. Always. There is no doubt that I admire her, and I'm honored that she thought of me as she did".

During the War of Independence, Levy-Agron served in the immigrants' camps in Italy. In a letter to the editor of *Ha'olam Haze*, December 1948, she wrote: "...I was asked by the Jewish Organization to tour and perform in the camps. I have been in all the camps here and gave thirteen performances, of which two were in Rome itself. I am honored that in practically every camp my performance was a farewell performance prior to the people's immigration to Israel. In one camp, in which there were 1000 people, the performance ended at nine o'clock, and by ten thirty 961 people have left the camp on their way to Israel..."

At the end of 1950, after a five-year journey of study, training and performance, Levy-Agron returned to Israel. In *Davar* newspaper (11 May 1954), G. K. Gerr wrote: "Hassia Levy-Agron, of the young generation of dancers in Israel, has talent for choreography and her dances are constructed wisely. She tastefully prepares her costumes, and chooses her music with sensibility. She has all that is necessary for a successful dance, internally and externally. She is tall and presentable, her black hair adorning her erect body, her movements expressive to all sensitive souls, registering impressions and experiences and penetrating the essence of things that serve as raw materials for her dances."

In 1957 Levy-Agron stopped performing, and had since dedicated her energy to teaching dance and movement and to instructing generations of dance and movement teachers: "Dancing makes for a better person. It develops one's sense of rhythm and observation. Whoever studies dance also learns how to notice that a bird doesn't fly like a butterfly and a butterfly doesn't fly like a fly. One learns to make finer distinctions".

The seed from which her most important enterprise in the field of education was to germinate was sowed when in 1951 she founded the Dance Department in the new Conservatory (which was to become the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance), directed by Yocheved Dostrovsky-Kopernick. The lessons took place in the afternoons, and among the students were also Moshe Efrati and Yacov Sharir (who became dancers, choreographers and artistic directors of their own companies).

In the early 1950s she taught blind children. A plaque hanging at the Jewish Institute for the Blind in Jerusalem proclaims the names of Levy-Agron's grandparents, Frida Malka née Lipkin and Baruch Shmuel Levy – volunteers for the blind. The fruit did not fall far from the tree. Levy-Agron's bond with the blind came about by accident, as she

described in *Davar* (5 October 1954): "During a concert of the Academy's music students, a blind man sat next to me. I watched him, the way he responded to the sounds. Since he could not see the people surrounding him, he accompanied the music with movements that were not as inhibited as other people's. While watching him, the idea came to me that I should teach dance to the blind. It is well known that the blind's senses, other than sight, are more developed than other people's. But who knows what's in a blind person's imagination? How do they imagine things that they cannot feel, smell or hear? And how would they express what they imagine and feel? We develop their musical knowledge, why not teach them how to dance? I asked the directors of the Jewish Institute for the Blind for permission to carry out my experiment. I chose eight eight-year old girls – a small group, so I could devote attention to each and every one of them."

In 1956 an advanced dance class was established in Tel Aviv, in which Noa Eshkol, Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais and Levy-Agron taught. R. Azariah wrote about it in *Ma'ariv* newspaper: "...One fine morning, two artists decided to cooperate, perhaps not in their own best interest, but certainly serving their students. Without naming their establishment a 'Studio' or a 'School', Noa Eshkol and Hassia Levy, two dancers famous for their serious attitudes, announced the opening of 'an advanced dance class' in Tel Aviv. This advanced dance class is actually an annex to the new Jerusalem Conservatory and the Academy of Music. As such, it forms the basis for a possible future dance academy... To this modest beginning another formidable force has joined. Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais's interest is in the science of movement and the culture of the body... The founders hope that Gertrud Kraus and other experienced teachers will agree to give 'guest lectures' in the 'advanced class' framework."

On 8 April 1951, Levy-Agron wrote to Martha Graham:

Dear Miss Graham,

Several weeks ago I met Mrs. Bloomingdale-Rothschild [Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild] who had come on a visit to Israel, and she brought me greetings from you. I have no words to tell you how happy I was to be able to spend some time with this charming woman and to hear from her the latest news of the dance in America in general, and about you in particular. The long talks I had with her aroused a longing in me for you and for your school, which I have not forgotten for a minute from the time I left New York.

When I asked Mrs. Bloomingdale if she thought there was the slightest possibility that you might

come to Israel if an invitation was forthcoming she said that she felt it was certainly worth trying. And so I am taking my courage in my hands... Our country, young and small, is in great need of guests such as you. [...] To our regret we have so far not been privileged to see the great dancers. Our public is enthusiastic about the dance and is really hungry to see and to learn. I am convinced that there is no one who can bring us more in this sphere than you. [...]

I would be most grateful for a reply from you - whether you think there is any possibility that you might come and if so when it might be. Would you come alone or with a group? Would you agree to give as a short intensive course? Would you consider giving "Judith" with the Israel Symphony Orchestra? [...] Knowing your pioneering spirit, I dare to hope that you will feel drawn to come to this pioneering little land.

With my warmest greetings to you and all those I know at the school, I am

Yours devotedly
Hassia

In 1956 Martha Graham's company came to Israel and astounded local art lovers. Two years later, in 1958, the first summer course for dance took place in the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, dedicated in its entirety to modern dance in the Graham method, in which Martha Graham was the principal teacher.

Ofra Ben-Zvi Saroussi reminisces about the first summer course in a letter to Levy-Agron (8 June 1996): "The Academy's yard was full of people who had arrived from all over the country. In the entrance to the hall there was a desk, at which sat the secretary, registering people for the



להקת ירושלים למחול בן זמננו (מנהלת אמנותית: חסיה לוי-אגרון) בסיוור
הופעות באיטליה, 1967
Jerusalem Group of Contemporary Dance (Artistic Director:
Hassia Levy-Agron) on tour in Italy, 1967

first auditions. A short distance away, three women stood, only one of whom was familiar to me - Martha Graham. Next to her stood modestly a shorter, light colored woman - the Baroness de Rothschild. Between them stood a tall, upright woman, dressed in a sleeveless black dress, long thin hands, well-groomed fingernails, painted red - which was quite a rarity in those times - olive face, big black eyes and a full

פתיחת קורס הקיץ למחול הראשון באקדמיה למוסיקה ולמחול בירושלים.
מימין לשמאל: חסיה לוי-אגרון, מרתה גראהם, בת שבע דה-רוטשילד ויוכבד
דוסטובסקי-קופרניק
The first dance summer course at the Jerusalem Academy of Dance
and Music. Right to left: Hassia Levy-Agron, Martha Graham,
Batsheva de Rothschild and Yocheved Dostrovsky-Kopernick



mouth, also painted in red... A black mane, combed high, which made her look even taller, especially as she was standing next to two short women. When I asked who were the light colored and the dark colored women, I was told: one is the Baroness, and the other is Hassia, who has organized this entire happy event."

Marking the summer course's 10th anniversary, Yifat Nevo wrote in *Ma'ariv*: "...This year, many students have come from abroad, either professional dancers or students taking dance as their main course of studies... Of the 'first generation', about fifteen persist – quite a respectable circle. One of the 'faithful' is the experienced teacher Shoshana Aldor (Ornstein). She speaks of the many merits of this course: 'They bring very good, famous teachers. Without this course, we would not have had the opportunity to meet them in Israel, to learn from them and even to argue with them!'"

In 1960 Levy-Agron founded the Dance Department for instructing dancers and dance teachers within the framework of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance: "The dream was to establish an academic school for dance, because good teachers make for good students and good dancers..." Only in 1976 did the Board of Higher Education authorize the Academy to give its Dance Department graduates a degree in music (B.mus.). In 1980 it also approved the Movement Course - which is different than the Dance Course - as part of the Dance Department, and since 1990 the graduates receive a degree in dance (B.dance). The idea is to help talented students develop their capacities to the utmost, creating a framework adapted to their abilities while they are still in high school, thus training a reserve of young dancers and creators.

In 1978 Levy-Agron founded in the Academy's High School the first Dance course of study in the country to be recognized by the Ministry of Education as a study program enabling graduation examinations. The project "robbed her", as she said, "of seven long years of administrative battles".

In 1978 Levy-Agron was made Professor. In her letter of recommendation, Martha Hill, director of the Dance Department at the Juilliard School, wrote: "Hassia Levy is an admirable and outstanding candidate for full professorship. [...] [She's had] an outstanding career as an artist, teacher, choreographer, catalyst, pioneer, organizer and patriot. If this were England, she would be honored by the Crown".

Levy-Agron commented: "The degree in itself meant nothing to me. I have done in my life many things that I didn't want to do so that I could do the one thing I really wanted to do. I only wanted to create, but in order to do that I had to establish all sorts of frameworks, which consumed a lot of time; like a snowball. The degree's importance to me is in the fact that they have given recognition to dance. So much energy was invested in

persuasion, until finally the words on the building said 'Academy of Music and Dance'."

While acting in the field of academic education, she also founded and directed the Jerusalem Group of Contemporary Dance, which included ten female dancers, all graduates of the Academy. The group performed in Israel and abroad from 1962 to 1967.

In 1993 she founded the Keresheh-Kfiza (Spring-Board) Group, whose purpose was enabling Academy students to gain stage experience and preparing them for the professional stage. The group, funded by the Gertrud Kraus and Gertel Mülle née Kraus Foundations commemorates Gertrud Kraus, in addition to the annual choreography competitions held at the Academy yearly, since her death in 1978. Said Levy-Agron: "Gertrud was my spiritual teacher. We were good friends. We did many things together. We founded the Dance Department at the Academy together. She was the first to become Professor of Dance. I learned a lot from her. She was an artistic leader. We used to paint and spend many hours together. Three times a week we went to Atara Café. We understood each other by eye contact alone. In 1978 she passed away. Since then I talk with her daily, confer with her, ask her for answers to tough questions. I miss her a lot..."

On Wednesday, 22 August 2001 at one o'clock p.m., Levy-Agron closed her made-up eyes: "I do not go to beauticians. It is true that I have wrinkles. That's how it is. But I will never leave my house without wearing make-up".



חסיה לוי-אגרון מקבלת את פרס ישראל למחול, התשנ"ח
 Hassia Levy-Agron receiving the Israel Prize, 1998

למעלה: חסיה לוי-אגרון ותלמידים
 Top: Hassia Levy-Agron and students