The History of Israeli Folkdancing

As told by one of the Pioneers of the Movement

(A short summary by Shalom Hermon)

The new Israeli folkdance is one of the better known cultural phenomena of the young State of Israel and its people. Israeli folkdances are danced all over the country and in fact all over the world. Although Israeli folkdances are new creations nobody denies them the name “folkdance,” because they express the spirit of the people of Israel and are based on the dance tradition of the bible, the Jewish ethnic groups, the peoples who lived in Eretz Israel for many years, and the dances of the pioneers who built a new country and a new society.

In this history I shall try to trace the development of the Israeli folkdance from the very beginnings to the present. This span of time may be divided into five periods:

1. 1882-1923 – The beginning of social folkdancing in Eretz Israel;
2. 1924-1943 – The first creations of Israeli dances;
3. 1944-1948 – The first Israeli folkdances and the development of the folkdance movement;
5. 1968 to present – New trends and outlook for the future.

1. The Beginning of Social Folkdancing in Eretz Israel (1882-1923)

The population of the “Old Yishuv”, the Jews who lived in Eretz Israel before the First Aliya, mainly in the “Four Holy Cities” (Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed and Tiberias), both Ashkenazim and Sefardim, did not know social dancing as such, but danced as part of their family celebrations (birth, brith, bar-mitzva, wedding) or religious holidays (Simchat-Torah, Lag Be’omer). So did most of the Olim of the First Aliya (1882-1903), who were all very religious Jews. It was only a small part of the population, which started to create new cultural values – the Chalutzim (Pioneers).

A small part of the First Aliya (the “Biluim”) were Chalutzim, but officially the “Hechalutz” movements was (sic) founded only during the Second Aliya (1904-1914). They created training places in the diaspora and youth movements, such as Hashomer Hatzair, Gordonia, Hechalutz Hatzair, Hanoar Hatzioni, Habonim and others.

The Chalutzim and the youth movements developed already in the diaspora and later in Eretz Israel a new lifestyle: boys did not wear neckties, girls did not wear silk stockings or makeup, ballroom dances were taboo. But because there was the need for social dancing they made folkdancing their mode of dancing and picked up the dances of the countries they came from: Hora, Ronda, Krakoviak, Polka, Tcherkessia (most probably learned from the Tcherkessim in Eretz Israel). So at the end of the Third Aliya (1923) we find in Eretz Israel one part of the population very different from the “Old Yishuv” and the first settlers: “Eretz Israel Haovedet” (working Eretz Israel). They lived mostly in communal settlements, worked hard manual labor, led a frugal life, and danced folkdances.

2. The First Creations of Israeli Dances (1923-1943)

During the years of the Fourth and the Fifth Aliya (1924-1944) folkdances from many countries continued to be the main expression in dance of “Eretz Israel Haovedet” in Kibbutzim, Moshavim, and the youth movements. From this period we know dances such as Alexandrova, Tcherkessia Kefula, Scotch, Polka Litait, Debka Meshuleshet, in addition to those mentioned before.

At this time of intensified interest in folkdancing we witness the first beginnings of the creation of original Israeli dances (not yet folkdances!). The initiative came from professional dancers and teachers, who were born in Eretz Israel or came to the country during the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Aliya (1919-1939). Some of those creations were picked up by the people, were danced again and again, and in this way became folkdances. Let me state my view clearly: it is not the
choreographer who makes a folkdance; it is the people who continue to dance it, who turn a dance into a folkdance.

The artist, who may be credited to have choreographed the first Israeli dance which became later an Israeli folkdance was Baruch Agadat: (1924, Hora Agadati).

Lea Bergstein, born in Vienna, had trained with Rudolf von Laban and came to the country in 1925. Together with the well known composer Matitjahu Shelem she staged at Kibbutz Ramat-Yochanan the ancient biblical agricultural festivals such as Hava’at Ha’omer, Hava’at Habikurim, Chag He’assif and the ancient ceremony of sheep shearing. Some of the dances of these pageants became folkdances such as Shibbolet Basade, Rav Berachot, Shiru Hashir, Hen Yerunan.

Rivka Sturman, born in Germany, studied dance in Berlin, came to the country in 1929, and settled at Kibbutz Ein Charod. There she taught the children dance. In cooperation with the composer Emanuel Amiran, Rivka created the dance Goren, performed by the youth of Ein Charod at the first Dalia Folkdance Festival (1944). This dance was received enthusiastically by all the participants of the festival and was identified with the spirit of the “Sabra” dancing the new Israeli folkdance. Rivka Sturman became the most prolific creator of Israeli folkdances, which are well known (Kuma Acha, Harmonica, Dodi Li, Iti Milvanon, and many, many others).

Yardena Cohen was born in Haifa, studied dance in Germany. In the early 1940’s she created festivals in Kibbutzim, inspired by the words of the bible, the countryside which is the land of our forefathers, and dance movements of the Arabs and Druse. She introduced the clay trum (tambour) as an important accompaniment to Israeli folkdance. The only dance created by Yardena, which became a folkdance, is Mechol Ovadya.

Sara Levi-Tanai, born in Jerusalem of Yemenite parents, started her creative efforts as a teacher at Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh in the early 1940’s. Sara introduced the Yemenite movement into Israeli folkdance. Many of her dance creations became folkdances such as El Ginat Egoz, Ana Halach Dodech and others.

In addition to those dance creations we witness spontaneous folkdance creations in the youth movements and young Kibbutzim (Naan, Bet-Hashita), variations on dances danced before. We still have to find the origin of such dances such as Debka Meshuleshet, Tcherkessia Kefula, Mayim, Simi Yadech, Tel-Avivia and others.

3. The First Israeli Folkdances and the Development of a Folkdance Movement (1944-1948)

Suddenly during a period of only four years (1944-1948) after those many years of “pregnancy,” we witness the birth of the New Israeli Folkdance and the development of a movement. The real hero of this drama was Gurit Kadman, who succeeded in channeling all the diverse creative efforts into one big idea and remained for many years the driving force behind the development of New Israeli Folkdance.

On July 14-15, 1944, Gurit organized the First Israeli Folkdance Festival at Kibbutz Dalia, which many recognize as the day of birth of the New Israeli Folkdance. In this and the following three years Gurit produces the first pamphlet of 22 folkdances, organizes the first leadership course, introduces Israeli folkdance to curriculum of the seminary of physical education teachers and the school curriculum, publishes pamphlets of six dances in English, organizes in 1947 the Second Dalia Folkdance Festival. Shalom Hermon organizes in 1946 “Evenings of Community Folkdancing” in Tel-Aviv and later in Haifa (1947), popularizing Israeli folkdances as a social activity in the cities.
On November 29, 1947, the decision of the United Nations to establish a Jewish State in Eretz Israel is greeted with dancing in all the settlements, the villages, and in the streets of the cities. The State of Israel is born accompanied by folkdances.


During the War of Independence the dancing did not stop. Shalom Hermon organized folkdance evenings at his artillery regiment, Gurit Kadman taught at many army camps. But only after the war continued the growth of the movement. In 1951 there was the Third Dalia Festival. In 1952 the Folkdance Department at the Histadrut was established with Tirza Hodes as its head. Gurit was active in creating a Hebrew vocabulary for the dance steps for notation. We started folkdance programs on Radio Kol Israel. Folkdances were taught to the many new immigrants thus being a vital factor in the absorption process. In 1954 we started the first “Ulpan”, a leadership course lasting a whole year. In 1954, too, Shalom started the Folkdance Parade on Independence Day in Haifa, when the greater part of the population danced in the streets. Other weekly mass community dances followed.

In 1958, there was the Fourth Dalia Festival, staged by Shulamit Bat-Dori, which was a great artistic achievement, but pointed already to problems of authenticity and simplicity of performing groups. In 1961 there was the first Israeli Ethnic Dance Festival, which was repeated several times during the following years, and showed the wealth of folk culture of our people.

Many new folkdances were created. After the first wave of creators (Lea Bergstein, Rivka Sturman, Yardena Cohen, Sara Levi-Tanai, Gurit Kadman) there was the second generation from 1947 on (Seev Chavatzelet, Shalom Hermon, Tamar Alyagor, Viki Cohen) and from 1952 on the first (Yoav Oshriel, Yonathan Karmon, Raya Spivak, Zvi Friedhaber) and from 1960 Moshiko, Yaakov Levi, Eliyahu Gamliel, and others.

In 1968 we celebrated the 20 year festivities of the State of Israel with the Fifth Dalia Festival, which surpassed all the preceding ones in quality and quantity, but also turned out to be the last one for the time being.

5. New Trends and Outlook for the Future (1968 to the present)

Many more dances were created and are being created almost every day (Yonathan Gabai, Benzi Tiram, Yaakov Dekel, Shlomo Maman, Moti Alfassi, Saadia Amishai, Amnon Shauli, and many, many others). Israeli folkdances are danced all over the world and performing groups are travelling to all the corners of the globe. The Israeli Folkdance is thriving on the spreading, developing old traditions, as well as absorbing new elements, some related, some foreign. Many believe that the quantitative growth is too fast and has a bad influence on quality. But nobody can deny the vitality of our movement. There is a need to analyze and evaluate the present, but only history will prove the real value of the present.