

# Rivka Sturman

**Born in 1905 in Leipzig, Germany, she came to Palestine in 1929, creating what are now classic folk dances for the youth of Ein Harod. She was one of the first to become enchanted with dances of the Yemenite Jews and used some basic Yemenite steps in her creations. From the very first, Sturman was conscious of the mission and difficulty of creating dances for the new land of Israel.**

"Tradition and heritage have always been bound together in folk dance," Rivka Sturman said at her home in Kibbutz Ein Harod. "I have long addressed myself to the everlasting and deep discussion of whether folk dance is anonymous. Traditions do not usually record who created individual folk dances. Nevertheless, I believe in the idea that folk dance is the creation of individuals rather than a whole people. And, I believe that a folk dance creator is creative because of his own desire to solve his need for spiritual and emotional peace. As an artist works he is often influenced by his environment. Many times the elements or characteristics of his place of being can be identified in his work, but describing these environmental influences does not describe either the artist's personal search nor the work itself.

"The most important fact is not that we Israelis used the Arab debka or Yemenite steps or were influenced by the landscape. The artist's personality is the most important, more so than the steps he uses, which are really the means of expression just as the crayons for drawing are a painter's tools. Giving names to these steps does not describe them, nor explain why the creator uses them or why he puts the steps and rhythms together in the way that he does to make something so convincing in its simplicity and so beautiful that it is accepted at once by an entire people. When something is good, the people seek it out and drink it up and the dance becomes organic to all. This is a natural development and despite all I have said, I find it understandable that in past times the creator was forgotten and the folk dance became anonymous. But this does not have to be true for our time, when Israeli folk dance happened. We have radio, newspapers, television, notation, tape recorders, and videotapes that can document and publish what has happened. It is not fitting in our time to think that a dance today exists without a creator.

"My own involvement in folk dance began when I came to Israel [then Palestine]. Although it is true that as a child I took dance lessons in the afternoons, I didn't know what folk dancing was. Later, I continued my dance study in Berlin with Jutta Klamt and it was a great event for me to attempt choreography in her classes. However, aside from her encouragement, I never thought that I was particularly creative. Making a dance was just something I liked. I had wanted even to be a dance teacher, but there wasn't time for it. I was preparing for life in Palestine. I learned Hebrew and physical therapy as well as how to teach young children. These were things that would be useful in a new country, but I always remembered the joy I got from my dance lessons.

"My husband was a *sabra* [Israeli born] who was learning veterinary science in Berlin, when we met. We married and came to Palestine, settling first at Kfar Yeheskel, a farming village in the Jezreel Valley. There I started teaching dance to the children. I also went occasionally to Tel Aviv and studied with Gertrud Kraus and her assistant Paula Padani. In my own creative search, Paula Padani was very helpful to me.

"In 1937 my husband and I moved to Kibbutz Ein Harod. Folk dance was hardly known at this time. We had only a few international dances adopted for Israeli use, like the cherkessia,<sup>15</sup> the krakowiak, the polka, and the hora. I suppose the hora was really the Israeli dance at that time—not traditionally speaking, as it comes from Rumania, but realistically. It was so effective in making a meaningful statement to us. People could come from any country in the Diaspora and join in the spirit of the Israeli society by dancing the hora. It was accepted as the means of expressing the enthusiasm of building the country together. The hora was a way of celebrating this joy of dancing united in the new homeland.

"I remember there were a few other influences; perhaps the occasional troupes of visiting folk dancers, like the Yugoslavians, whom I especially remember. And in another agricultural settlement, Ben Shemen, there was a man of great influence. He was Dr. Lehmann, an educator who had come with his orphanage students from Kovno to Berlin and then to Israel. This cultured leader was very knowledgeable in folklore and developed folk dancing in Ben Shemen.

"His youth group performed in many places and came to Ein Harod, too. Their dances were very well received by our youngsters. But I realized that his work was not really Israeli. For example, he used mostly German songs. This was in the early 1940's and I was, frankly, outraged that Israeli youth should be bringing German songs and dances to others, for we were beginning to understand what the Germans were doing to us and grasping the whole tragedy of the Jewish people brought on by Hitler.

"My feelings became yet stronger when my two children started kindergarten in the kibbutz. They began learning German songs. I knew that what a child learns first he cherishes and remembers above all else and I did not want my children treasuring the same songs I had sung in Germany as if all in that land was glorious and good. What made me sad was the Israeli teachers' use of German material when they could have drawn on all that was new and developing in Israel.

"I asked my children's teachers why these songs were taught. They answered: 'But it is culture. You don't want to deny your child culture and rob him of appreciation for Beethoven and Mozart even though they are German.' I lived in a kibbutz and didn't like to isolate myself, so I came to a decision on my own in a quiet way that I must create what I felt was lacking.

"My idea was to create our own folk material that didn't come from Europe or any other place. I thought we would make our own for our children. I realized I'd have to find the basic steps and material that would be appropriate and comprehensible to them. I didn't know where to begin really, so I went to Paula Padani. She introduced me to international folk dance steps, but these didn't fit my idea. I remember also how I came to Gurit Kadman in Tel Aviv to show her my early endeavors. We had come from the same German city and I knew she was the most respected person in Israel regarding folk dance. I spoke to her about my experiences, how I was trying to create something Israeli. Unlike myself, she already had definite ideas and it seemed to me during our discussion that she felt folk dance was not a creation of an individual, but developed from

communal endeavors.

"I went back to Ein Harod and continued instructing the children in dance, searching for something new. First I thought about the music. I knew that it must be Israeli. At this time three songs (which I later found out were Sara Levi-Tanai's) were very popular. I remember they were *Ale Be'er, Or Havatzalot*, and *Kol Dodi*. I learned from these songs what might be the musical, authentic sources for our dances: Yemenite, Arabic, and something uniquely present—Israeli if you wish.

"In 1942 there was a high school graduation ceremony in Geva, in our neighborhood, and I was invited to create the choreography for the program which was to be entirely filled with new Hebrew folk values. The scene was a Biblical one and the music was by Emanuel Pugatchov [later called Amiran]. For the first time I became acquainted with an Israeli composer who was striving toward what I, too, was seeking. Amiran was already recognized for his beautiful songs like *Mayim, Mayim* and *Ki Mizion*. In these songs, he used a syncopated beat which was a very inspiring new element for me. I was convinced that this syncopation would become one element in our Israeli music and dance. Amiran's music and the whole experience at Geva gave me the push for building up my ideas. I laid the foundation at the 1944 Daliah Festival with dances such as *Hagoren* and *Ani Roeh Tzony*. One of the dances in the Geva program was a debka I called *Haroim*, which I adapted to Amiran's music. Because of our encounter at Geva I believed that Amiran should be the musical guide for my future work.

"Before the festival at Daliah I went to Amiran to show him *Hagoren*, the dance I had in mind. At that time I thought every circle dance should be called *goren* because this had been my experience. But this coining never succeeded although the dance was very enthusiastically received. It was performed at the festival by the youth of Ein Harod to Amiran's song. An orchestra of children, mostly percussion players, were directed by Dalia Carmy of Ein Harod.

"I remember reading a newspaper article by the late poet Leah Goldberg after the festival. She said she had been witness, there at Daliah, to an event that might develop into a national movement. It had been a most uncommon experience, she said. I know now that we had inspired those 3,500 spectators by our enthusiasm, and brought them full force into a whole new folk dance movement. From that time, I recognized that folk dance is worthwhile for educating our children to the special spiritual and rhythmic quality of our country; for me it is the best means of national and human expression. Folk

dance can reach beyond leisure, enjoyment, and recreation, as we saw at Daliah. These thoughts have been my guiding principle in all my years of creating and teaching since."

Sturman recalls some specific incidents that stirred her to create new folk dances. "In 1947 we at Ein Harod were thrust into fighting on the Gilboa, the mountain opposite our settlement. Our sons were involved in this battle and I felt an urgency to express their fight in a folk dance. Again, I went to Amiran and by chance we met on the street as I was walking toward his home in Tel Aviv. He was in soldier's uniform. I told him that I wanted new music for a debka that I would call *Debka Gilboa*. As I was speaking an air-raid siren sounded and we ran to a bomb shelter. He said that if I had come all the way to Tel Aviv from my kibbutz at this time in order to request music, he would go home and compose it for me.

"I showed him my ideas about advancing and retreating and then again advancing as if running to the peak of the Gilboa hills. The last section was to be a joyful victory. I had studied the Biblical story about the Gilboa which was cursed with no dew or rain. But we adapted the Biblical words in a positive way to show exactly what happened on the mountain—not a curse, but a triumph. Today there is an agricultural settlement atop the mountain and I find great joy looking up to the green on the Gilboa.

"In 1949 I was invited to form a performance group from soldiers of the Portzim division of the Palmach. [The Palmach was the continuation of the military branch of the Hagana, the voluntary defense organization of the Jewish community of Palestine.] It certainly wasn't usual for soldiers to dance and this was a great challenge for me. We admired and adored the Palmach which represented the best of our youth. I pondered what dances to make for this new group, *Lehakat Har-El*. I got my first idea from a soldier girl of Ein Harod. She said to me that when she was with her boyfriend in a cafe she didn't want to dance a tango with him, but something Israeli. I realized that we had almost no couple dances for young people to dance together, maybe because the kibbutzim frowned on social salon dances and always emphasized the group rather than the couple. So, I began to think about a couple dance. Again, the music was the central question, although I had doubts about finding something original that could be enjoyed as much as the accepted ballroom dances.

"I tried different tunes and asked several musicians. But I nearly gave up. Finally, I went to my friend and pupil Nira Hen, a member of the kibbutz who had only

just finished school. Occasionally she had written good melodies for my dances. I explained to her exactly what I wanted and we studied together the 'Song of Songs' from the Bible. We found the words to fit my idea and then she composed the tune which matched exactly the two dances I had already formed. We called them *Dodi Li* [My Beloved] and *Iti Melevanon* [From the Lebanon]. Nira knew me well and understood my longing and desire for Israeli folk dances, so our collaboration was a success.

"I decided to call my work *Mahol Haschnayim* [Dance for Two]. The Palmach group performed it in Jerusalem. The dances showed without a doubt that something new had entered into Israeli folk dance. What was it? Well, it is now generally acknowledged as the Yemenite step. This was the first time that this old, authentic folk dance step was adopted as part of our new dance. I had seen this sequence at an amazing gathering of Yemenites.

"When the big immigration of Yemenites came to Israel in the 'Magic Carpet' operation many were temporarily accommodated at Atlit, near Haifa.<sup>16</sup> Gurit Kadman planned to visit them and I asked her permission to accompany her. We took with us recommendations from the Histadrut [Federation of Labor] and we were consequently received with official honor. This meant that the Yemenites had prepared a gathering of all the families—babies, young children, parents, and grandparents—and the entire assemblage danced. I was bewitched by their grace and lightness and by their natural demeanor. One man beat on the side of a square biscuit tin as if it was a drum, and they sang songs from the prayer book. I was especially entranced with one step that I noted had a basic form, with many variations repeated in almost every dance. At the time I consciously realized that here I had come to the source, the fountain of one of our basic steps. When I left the camp of immigrant tents I took this step with me in my heart and it worked within me and came out afterwards as the basic step in the *Mahol Haschnayim*. I continued using this step in other dances, first *Or Havatzalot* and *Be'er Basadeh* [Well in the Field] and many more.

"Another influence which I keenly felt and which is evident in my work is the Arabic one. My husband and his whole family grew up with intimate knowledge of Arab life and traditions and they were very respectful and loving of them. The Sturman family had come to Israel in 1905, living amongst the Arabs in Jaffa and then in Haifa. Their seven sons and daughters became involved in building the agricultural life in Israel as

Right: Rivka Sturman's Ein Harod group rehearsing at Daliah, 1947. Sturman in background, wearing hat and reading notes. Below: Dancers from the army, 1949. Note shoulder movement, thrust forward, which Kadman calls uniquely Israeli.



guards for the settlers [*shomrim*] and they were creators of *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* [different forms of community life]. They had a profound knowledge of the Arabic mentality, language, and songs. My husband's brother, Haim, because of his Arabic expertise and his ability, became a negotiator with the Arabs in the whole Jemmal Valley. He knew I was interested in folk dance and from time to time would take me along on his official visits to Arab weddings and feasts. So by the end of the 1930's I had seen many Arabic dances.

"At Ein Harod I could watch the Arabs as they led their sheep down into the valley where the well lay. As they danced on the path, playing their *hallil* [simple wind pipe] their steps and behavior were of intense interest to me. I would watch for the good dancers I recognized from the village festivities. These observa-

tions gave an Arabic color to my earliest dances, especially in the step-bend, the restrained, erect bearing, and the special, abrupt rhythm. The first *debka* I did was *Ani Roeh Tzony* with the children to music by Amiran. Once I remember asking a teacher at Ein Harod for the meaning of the word *debka* and I was told it had the same root as the Hebrew verb *davek*—to stick together. I thought that symbolized the dance for me, because the men stand shoulder to shoulder as if everyone is sticking together. Other folk dance creators were aware of the importance of the Arabic influence, especially Yardena Cohen.

"We were all engaged in a heartfelt search for a means of expressing our life in dance. In the early 1940's, when folk dance was just beginning, we had many debates. One that I felt deeply about was with the late Tehilla Rössler, a most talented dance teacher in Tel Aviv. We had been good acquaintances in Germany and we continued our contact in Israel. But she always insisted that it was a waste of time for trained dancers to participate in Israeli folk dance. She could not understand the unprecedented fact that folk dance was so dynamic at this time.

"In 1947 we carried on a correspondence. Her opinion was that folk dance must evolve from tradition, not from individual creators. I wrote to her, '... allow me to continue our discussion, which I feel is important.... Creation is full of failures, mistakes, and ingenious attempts, but all this is not enough to deflect us from the final aim which is so important to our generation. It is as necessary for us all as bread to the body.... I regard every original step, movement, and rhythm that is accepted by most of the dancers in the country in a spontaneous way, as an important, precious heritage, as an element like a building stone. We are struggling and

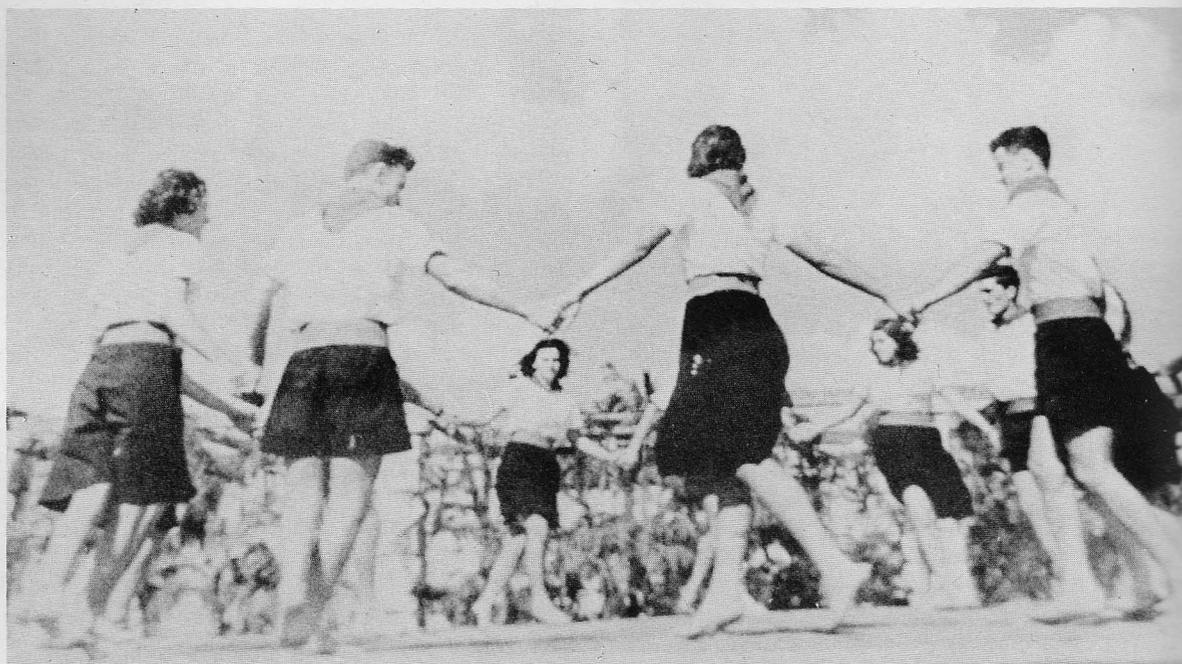
looking for original steps, still searching for our dance, but you must be assured that we search out those movements and also the spirit which merges with the melody so that altogether they will become one creation. You know folk dances from abroad—they are organic in form, are so lovely to dance, are the joy of life in movement. But when we reach the goal of creating a folk dance here, it will not be like German dance or those you've seen in Holland. Nor will its songs be those that trained dancers and artists know as folk dance songs. It will be something whole and pure, not something you conceive, because the Hebrew public look for new forms of expression for their lives and they will react very differently from you. The people here want to speak Hebrew, despite knowing German or Russian or French, and they are looking for an Israeli song and an Israeli dance. It is the youth who dance that will allow themselves to look and find their way. A majority, especially in the villages, take part with all their soul in this process of creation. They are ready to discard what does not fit and to keep what belongs to them and to their souls. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Sturman credits the youth in her kibbutz classes as helpers in her work of creation. She says, "They were all totally devoted to the folk dance, never one who wasn't

fascinated. From them I learned the principle that a folk dance can be made comprehensible to any age group, at any level of expertise. I learned how to keep the essence of my dances but vary their difficulty for the different groups. I thought that the folk dances gave the children a feeling of personal importance and happiness, for they knew they were helping me to create something. I also realized that they gave the children a chance to be noticed within the kibbutz community. In particular I remember a performance I prepared for teenagers about adolescence. Nira Hen made the music and Nira's sister Mirali [Sharon] was the leading dancer. It was with this dance that the kibbutz first noticed Mirali as a true performer. [Today she is a well-known modern dance choreographer.]

"Mirali was also a leading dancer in *Ozi Vezimrat Yah*, a dance that was taken to the peace festival in Prague. I had to remind the children, and Mirali too, that they were participating in a group work and were not soloists, but nevertheless she made a marvelous impression, symbolizing that unforgettable spirit with her upright, open posture and grace. The music for this dance I had learned from a Yemenite boy who was working as a volunteer on the kibbutz. I used to call the children together and we would listen to him singing.

*Ha Goren* by Sturman, performed at Daliah, 1944.





Right: Mirali Sharon leading Ein Harod group; Daliah, 1947. Below: Yemenites at Daliah, 1968. Note biscuit tin used as drum.



When he sang this particular Yemenite melody, I asked the music teacher, Shalita, to write down the tune so we could work with it.

"Shalita's wife Chaya was also helpful to me. It was she who suggested I should use a poem by Natan Alterman, *Magash Hakesef* [The Silver Platter] as the idea for a dance. The central image appears in the poem as the creation of Israel presented, not beautifully and gracefully on a silver platter, but through the sacrifice of its youth. I began working on the dance at Kibbutz Tel Yosef to Shalita's music. It underwent several changes; later I repeated the dance at Kibbutz Givat

Brenner to music by Yizhar Yaron and then again with youth of Kibbutz Yagur and finally at the Daliah Festival in 1951 with a combined cast from Yagur and Ein Harod. The young people who danced the piece really felt its entire meaning. One of the girls had just lost her brother in a border skirmish, so this dance was perhaps an expression of her sorrow."

This work, *Magash Hakesef*, was more than a dance. In Hebrew it was called a *masehet*, or a kind of dance pageant based on a theme with music and text. This form of dance drama became an original presentation of great importance for the kibbutz audiences—it was not exactly folk dance, but it gave expression to the pioneering spirit in the kibbutz. Sturman created several *masahet* including one called *Gideon*. Yehudit Ornstein writing in the Hebrew press on the occasion of the eighteenth anniversary of the foundation of Kibbutz Ein Harod Meuhad said, "The *masehet* dances of *Gideon* by Rivka Sturman, music by Dalia Carmy, used Biblical passages read and accompanied by choir and orchestra. Sturman's *Gideon* has the feeling of a kind of decorative base for the spirit of the settled kibbutz. It is difficult to judge and value this *masehet* in a professional way, but in its time and place it satisfied the needs and means from which it stemmed and for which it was created, a homespun creation which was a collective and popular expression received with surprise and eagerness by the audience . . . the ending chain of folk dance rondo was performed as the unification of the generations, with little children, soldiers, and old people joining in."

Another member of the Ein Harod community who contributed to Sturman's and her students' search for expression was Chaim Atar, a painter. Sturman approached him for costume designs and he was able to make original ones, many of which are still in use. "Atar

wanted to build a museum for original Israeli art and for European masters so that the children of the *emek* [valley] could see the finest art works. At that time we didn't even have good reproductions of the European artists, so his aims seemed very unrealistic and grandiose. But he was a determined man and today there is a charming museum at Ein Harod with a renowned collection of art. Often we would speak of our various projects. He suggested using the old Hebrew and Aramaic letters for embroidery on the folk dance dresses because the letters themselves were so very decorative and original in design. At the first Daliah Festival we used his idea and embroidered the dresses with the letters he had drawn on the material. Another painter, Ya'acov Zarchi, called my attention to robes of the Biblical Temple priests, their front and back panels hanging from the collar line, and we used this in designing the dresses. Unfortunately, when we returned from the festival we stored the costumes in a wooden hut and a fire destroyed all the original costumes."

After the first Daliah Festival Sturman continued to choreograph extensively. She also traveled throughout Europe and America on several occasions, sponsored by the Israeli government or invited by institutions, communities, and universities to teach Israeli folk dances.<sup>18</sup>

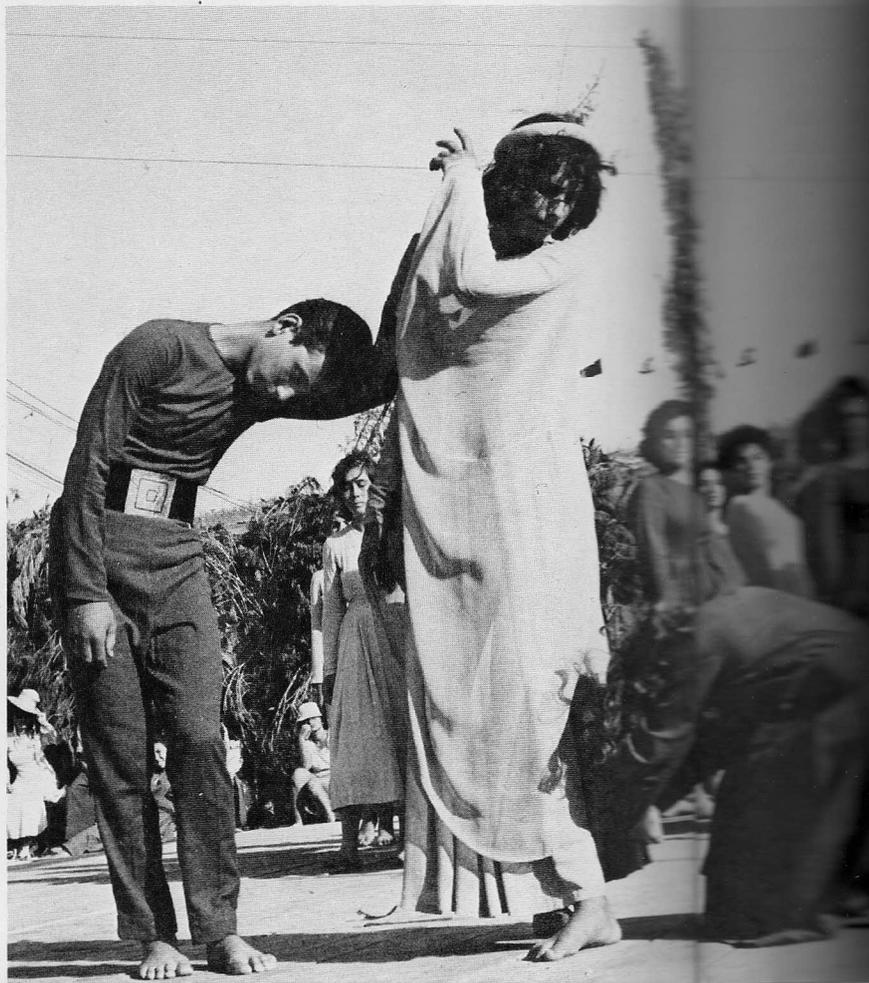
Today Sturman rhetorically asks, "How do I feel now?" as someone who has participated in folk dance for more than thirty years. "I allow myself to express the opinion that we introduced an enthusiasm to our own people at the beginning. But I don't think we have been able to transform this rare phenomenon into a reality. We didn't really live up to the prophecy of Leah Goldberg made after the first Daliah Festival. Israeli dance did become a beloved pastime for many people, an interesting feature of international repertory, and a fine entertainment for a certain category of the nation. But I don't believe we have planned systematically how to establish our achievements in our educational institutions so that our children can benefit from their new cultural elements.

"Kibbutz Ein Harod is an example of what I mean. We have passed through the whole metamorphosis from naive enthusiasm, when everyone burned with the excitement and felt the necessity of expressing themselves in folk dance, to the stage where youth simply accept it as part of the establishment. The dances that used to be requested so heartily at every festive occasion are facing a decline.<sup>19</sup> Something absurd has happened. In other countries these same dances have become very popular. I feel that people in other countries conserve

and guard our Israeli folk dances, especially in the United States. Those small groups of enthusiasts, I believe, will continue and eventually rekindle new folk dance activities. Like gardeners, they graft different roots and branches together, replant the ideas and tend them until they grow again, so that eventually folk dances will again be beautiful even to the youngest, newest eyes."

Gifted teachers and creators often cannot judge the impact of their own work in the way those touched by them can. In a recent Tel Aviv interview, Mirali Sharon recalls the time when she was a girl of Kibbutz Ein Harod and danced with Sturman and also when she participated in the First World Festival of Democratic Youth held in Prague in 1947.

"I studied and danced with Sturman from the time I was small. What became her most famous folk dances she always tried out on me, like *Harmonika*. Today these are considered our classic folk dances and they seem to be an obvious means of expressing our temperament.



Then they were experiments and gave me great excitement. Rivka had a fierce dedication for finding Israeli music and dance.

"From an early age I was encouraged by this creativity in the kibbutz. It seemed very important to celebrate and people gave great importance to each cultural event. I remember in particular a 'freedom dance' I did when I was eleven. I suppose there was great pride in seeing a child dance about this on the kibbutz, for the subject was something we learned about very early. I didn't know that traditionally little girls danced about flowers and spring nor did I know what was traditional in Jewish history. I was completely innocent—I was born in the kibbutz and that is what I knew and I did my 'freedom dance.'

"The adults were idealists and purposely broke with traditions in every way. What guided them, in my opinion, was a kind of German influence that made them either expressionistic in their style or mystical. Rivka's work was expressionistic I think—but there was

never really a division between these two styles of art; it was all a part of Israel.

"The festival at Daliah was the great event for all of Israel. It showed a kind of solidarity and a great pride. We were genuinely happy performing Rivka's work there. All the feelings of dedication to our new nation and pride and joy were imbedded in the syncopated, bouncy, fleet-spirited dancing we did. After Daliah in 1947, before Israel became independent, I was one of the soloists with a group of folk dancers led by Gurit and Rivka that was sent to Eastern Europe. It was the first time an exhibition group was sent abroad. We also traveled to Vienna and performed all around the Jewish refugee camps. You can't imagine what misery we saw. It was a shock that I couldn't comprehend. I remember that we sang *Hatikva*, the Israeli national anthem. I wrote home to the kibbutz that I couldn't understand why all the people were crying. Maybe what they saw was our pride, which Rivka's dances helped us to express."



Left: *Magash HaKesef* by Sturman; Daliah, 1951. Above: *Wine Dance* by Kadman; Prague, 1947.