

JEWISH DANCES OF EASTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE

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THIS paper examines the dances of the Jewish people in Eastern and Central Europe, from medieval times to the present. Included in its scope are: dances developed in the community *Tanzhaus*—an institution found in every ghetto in Europe, a place for weddings and major festivities and for recreational activities on the Sabbath; dances characteristic of the Jewish craft guilds, with occupational earmarks; dances of the Hassidim, a sect (originating in the Carpathian Mountains) the members of which made melody and dance a form of worship. These dances, performed by men only, were varied for special occasions and marked by a definite style. With the development of the Hassidic Movement, the dances spread rapidly, crossing numerous geographic boundaries. It will be shown how dances changed in form and adapted themselves to new localities, as communities of Jews migrated to the Western Hemisphere and to Israel.

Biblical Times. As a cultural form among the Jewish people, dance has been mentioned in a recorded history of more than thirty-five centuries. The story of the emancipation of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt describes how 'Miriam, the sister of Moses, the great liberator, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances' (Ex. 15: 20-21). In the centuries that followed, while the Jews were living in their own homeland, dancing played an important role in social and communal festivals. Every vineyard had an area reserved for dancing, and used exclusively by women.

Ancient Hebrew included as many as eleven verbal roots to describe dancing. Five verbs were used to describe the dance of King David before The Ark of the Lord (II Sam. 6: 14). He not only danced, *sahaq*, in the ordinary sense of the word, but rotated, *karar*, with all his might (verse 14); jumped, *pazaz* (verse 16); whirled round, *hul*; and skipped, *raqad*. The dance was an expression of spiritual ecstasy. The private and communal life of the ancient Jews included dancing in war ceremonies and on the occasion of military victories; harvest and wedding dances; wooing dances, when girls dressed in white formed an inner circle, and young men in an outer circle chose their brides as the girls circled round. (Curt Sachs asked who was choosing whom?) It was customary for celebrated scholars to display their versatility in the dance when entertaining a distinguished visitor of spiritual rank. The three major festivals during which the farming population made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, bringing gifts to the Temple, were marked with dancing and rejoicing, 'while the Levites made music with lyre and harp and cymbals and trumpets and countless other instruments' (MISHNAH, Seder Mo'ed, Sukkah V, 4).

The Middle Ages. When the Jews were forced to leave their homeland and dispersed to many lands, they had to adapt themselves to new environments. Since they were not permitted to till the soil, their mode of life changed from the agricultural to the urban with all its limitations. They were confined to cities and towns, and their celebrations and social functions were therefore conducted indoors. In France, Germany and Poland in medieval times, in almost every ghetto (where Jews were confined within walled areas), there was a communal dance hall, the *Tanzhaus*, or wedding house, where celebrations and weddings were held, and where it was customary to gather on Saturdays and festivals for dancing as a recreational activity.

Many interesting and curious dances can be traced back to this centre, some purely Jewish in origin, others borrowed and adapted from neighbouring communities. This communal dance hall developed a new personality in Jewish life—the dance-leader, *Tanzführer*, who, by his superior singing, dancing and improvisation, had proved himself capable of taking over the direction of the dancing and introducing variations and figures. The dance-leader never became a professional teacher, but remained very much like today's folk-dance caller. He was most often a lusty youth whose brawn, rhythmic sense, healthy vocal chords and good spirits, combined with a primitive and sometimes bawdy sense of humour and taste in rhyme, delighted and inspired onlookers and participants, most of whom he knew and called by name in exhortatory improvised dance songs. The dance leader was probably the prototype of the *Marshallik* and *Badhan* at weddings of a later period.

The Communal Dance Hall was used for wedding festivities which involved the entire population of the ghetto for a whole week, each day being highlighted by dancing to the accompaniment of instrumental music played by folk musicians. During this period, wedding festivities also included unusual dances, such as the beggars' dance and the orphans' dance, performed outdoors. The beggars of the village were invited to the wedding-feast, given the floor or market-place for dancing, and permitted to dance with the bride. This dance often had grotesque overtones because of the physical deformities and bizarre attire of the beggars. Again, at the time when great epidemics were sweeping over Europe, mass hysteria led to the custom of uniting two poor orphans in marriage. The ceremony took place in the cemetery, and the various rituals and dances were carried out with the whole community in attendance.

With the emancipation of the ghetto-dwellers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of new dances made their appearance. These included: (1) The *Sher*—a form of square dance with partners in which a pair of shears and the threading of a needle are described in dance formation. This dance originated in the tailors' guilds. Among wedding dances were: (2) The *Mitzvah* or *Kosher-tanz*—a couple dance, with a kerchief between the bride and each guest and finally with the groom, who would lead her to the marriage chamber while dancing with her. The original form of this dance goes back to Talmudic days, when a myrtle branch was used instead of a kerchief. (3) The *Machutanim-tanz*—a circle dance of the close relatives of the bride and groom. (4) The *Broyges-tanz*—a dance in which the two dancers take turns in expressing anger with each other, then make up their quarrel and dance together merrily, holding opposite ends of a kerchief. (5) The *Freilachs*, *Redle*, *Karahod*, *Hopke*—circle dances danced by men. (6) The *Klapper* or *Patschtanz*—a couple dance with hand-clapping and foot-stamping. (7) The *Challah-tanz*—the bride and groom are greeted by a dancing woman holding salt and a twisted, white, Festival loaf (*challah*), to insure plenty of food in the new home. (8) The *Besen-tanz*—a broom is manipulated in military manner by a man, or else the broom is used as a hobby-horse. (9) The *Flaschen-tanz*—the man balances a bottle on his head as he dances, perhaps to prove himself sober. (10) The *Grandmother's (Bube's) Dance*—the grandmother honours the bride and groom with a dance, facing them and moving forward and backward, towards and away from them.

Hassidism and the Dance. The beginning of the eighteenth century witnessed the spread of a unique form of dance performed by the many Jews who joined the Hassidic movement—an attempt by its founder to create joy out of misery. Israel Baal Shem Tov who, in the middle of the eighteenth century, emerged from the forests of the Carpathian Mountains, where he had spent many years as a recluse, was the young

mystic who inspired this movement. Most of his followers were workers and craftsmen, illiterate and unable to read the prayers. The Baal Shem Tov taught that dance and song in worship could bring one close to the Almighty. He called upon his followers to use the movement of the body in prayer.

The Hassidic dance is performed by men only; it is improvised. Most often the Hassidim dance in a circle, holding with one hand the shoulder or belt-sash of the man in front, while each gestures individually with the other hand as they follow each other around. If the room is too small, a circle is formed within a circle. Usually the dance begins slowly, with a touch of sadness, like the minor melody that accompanies it. Gradually it becomes faster and more joyous until it reaches a whirlwind pitch. At first there is swaying; then the arms are lifted in expressive gestures, especially from the elbow out and up, sometimes with hand-clapping and finger-snapping. The feet meanwhile change from swaying to light running steps. Then there are a series of quickening dance steps as the dance reaches its climax. The body moves with the mind; this can be seen in the inspired facial expressions.

The great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, taught his followers that every part of the body has a rhythm of its own. He said: "There is a special rhythm in the movement of the whole body which matches the rhythm of the melody. As melody brings out the beauty in poetry, the dance brings it to its highest expression." Hassidic rabbis have composed personal melodies and dances that are now part of the tradition of their followers. There are special dances for the Sabbath feast, performed around the banquet table of the rabbi, to welcome the Sabbath on Friday night with joy and enthusiasm. The dances of the Shalosh Seudot towards the close of Sabbath on Saturday night are filled with mysticism and sadness. On Simhat Torah, The Festival of the Rejoicing of the Torah, the usual ceremonial procession with the scrolls is enriched by the rabbi's dance while carrying the Torah. I shall never forget the dance of the Rabbi of Tarnov in Galicia, which I witnessed in 1937, as he lifted the very small Torah scroll, inherited from his forefathers, while the Hassidim stood in a circle around him, singing their traditional melody and clapping their hands. With light steps the rabbi raised and lowered the sacred scroll and waved it in all directions, symbolically. Then, passing the scroll to one of the Hassidim, he lowered his silver-trimmed prayer shawl (*tallit*) over his eyes and, placing his hands on his wide sash-belt, danced from side to side with great freedom and ever-quickening steps.

In the wake of the serious social, political and economic changes in Eastern Europe which followed World War I, and the Nazi holocaust that decimated the Jewish population of Europe during World War II, the community cultural life of Jews in Europe has been greatly reduced. With the mass migrations of Jews to other geographical areas in the past sixty years, however, the Jewish dance along with other cultural forms had been transplanted to new areas. In the Western Hemisphere, a selected number of Jewish dances are still performed at Jewish weddings: the *Sher* and the *Patsch-tanz* are the most popular. These, as well as the *Broyges* dance are also included in the repertory of folk dance societies all over the United States. In the numerous Hassidic communities transplanted across the ocean, particularly in the United States, Hassidic dance flourishes on Sabbaths and festivals, and at weddings. The Hassidic wedding in this new setting has even produced a number of new dances which enthrall the youth and reflect a spirit of freedom. In Israel too, the Hassidic dance has survived and continues with new fervor. When a famous Hassidic rabbi visited the U.S.A., from Israel, in 1961, he and his entourage danced off the plane and were greeted in dance by the Hassidim who came to welcome them.

Israeli folk dance has developed in entirely new directions, blending a twentieth century dynamic approach to culture with a resolve to re-capture the glory of past millenia. The youthful folk-choreographers of this young State have not been exposed to the rhythm and tempo of Jewish dances in Eastern and Central Europe; nevertheless, they have felt the desire to express, in folk-dance form, their reverence for the cultural values of an annihilated generation of their kinsmen, and have designed stirring and beautiful dances in East European Jewish style.

The study of Jewish dance offers a challenge to researchers and collectors of dance material. Wherever Jewish communities existed, there were always Jewish dances at weddings and on festive occasions. In many places where Jewish communities have ceased to exist, the dances live on in the memories of old people. These dances can still be recorded in the context of the cultural pattern of each country, just as in many countries Jewish music is being collected.

HOERBURGER mentioned that the last dancer in a Yugoslav chain-dance is known as the *hitz*, a Hebrew word, and asked whether other Hebrew dance expressions were known in European languages. Kiss drew attention to the occurrence of Hassidic songs in the Bukovina, recorded among the Székler. Jews have disappeared from this area, but their heroic dance-songs survived, though their choreography was forgotten. LAPSON observed that the Jews both gave and received.

CONTRIBUTIONS NOUVELLES A L'ÉTUDE DE LA DANSE DES SEPT SAUTS

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Résumé

CETTE danse a été l'objet d'une excellente étude en 1905. Que nous ont apporté les recherches dont elle a été l'objet depuis?

(A) Que la danse est bien plus répandue que ne le pensait Eduard Hermann en 1905, notamment en France et en Wallonie; au Pays Basque; dans la Lorraine de langue allemande, en Sarre et dans d'autres terroirs non signalés par lui; en Flandre et en Hollande; que la version germanique a été assez récemment popularisée en français par les mouvements de jeunesse.

(B) De même qu'en Allemagne, la danse porte différents noms en français: danse des 7 sauts, ou 7 pas, ou bourrée des 7 sauts, etc.

(C) (i) Que les versions wallonnes et basques connaissent une exécution sans la décomposition des mouvements qui conduit au contact avec le sol, lequel n'est qu'esquissé par l'accroupissement des danseurs.

(ii) Que le contact avec le sol, par décomposition du mouvement, mais sans association avec le chiffre 7, a lieu dans d'autres danses comme le Yan-Petit béarnais, le Petit-Jean Bonhomme canadien et franco-wallon;

(iii) Qu'une sorte de décomposition du mouvement a lieu dans le picoulet suisse-romande, la lanverne du Centre de la France, la ronde enfantine de "Savez-vous planter des choux?," mais sans aller jusqu'au contact avec le sol;

(D) Que les chants de ces danses et leur déroulement se construisent sur des schémas analogues à ceux des chansons à énumérations si bien étudiées par Patrice Coirault;