

## DANCING DESPITE THE SCOURGE: JEWISH DANCERS DURING THE HOLCAUST

By Judith Brin Ingber

**Abstract:** Jews have defined themselves in many ways, however under Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, all Jews from 1933-1945 and all forms of dance they practiced were in peril in Germany and in all lands conquered by the Nazis. The near total genocide of European and some North African Jews meant the near end, not only of countless professional dancers, but also a whole genre of dance imbedded in the fabric of Jewish life. Despite all the Nazi laws and extreme actions against the Jews of Europe, this paper shows the unexpected fact that dance aided in the survival of Jewish culture, and it too, survived. Jewish dancers were to be obliterated, never mind admiration for their abilities in theatrical performance or their part in traditional communal festivities. There was surprising resilience, resistance and even rejuvenation through dance in the most unlikely settings. Through the skills and drive of dancers in transit camps, concentration camps, and extermination camps, dance as a tool to continue Jewish identity, Jewish expression and resistance continued, increasing the sense of hope and the urge to survive in manifold ways.

Jews have defined our selves in many ways over the generations just as dance and its practitioners have had many definitions and expressions through time, in different geographic and communal settings. However, under Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich, first in Germany and then in lands conquered by the Nazis, there was no definition other than that Jews were subhuman. The Nazi plan was annihilation. Despite this, Jewish dancers danced to enhance Jewish identity and even found ways to meet the religious obligations of celebrating life in a Jewish manner through dance. Not only did dance survive, it aided in the survival of Jewish culture despite all the Nazi laws and extreme actions against the Jews of Europe.

Because dance is a public art form where many join together in doing it, or in watching it, the dancer as a Jew linked one person to another, helping to form bonds and strengthening identity. Even when caught up in the Nazi's death machine, the dancers defied the oppressors' plan to eradicate both the soul and the Jewish body. By dancing even while starving, by dancing even while their audience was too enfeebled to sit. Dancers' imagination and their physical prowess could be inspiring. Dancers could communicate something beautiful in the midst of untold ugliness.

Through dance—professional, folk, traditional and religious--the nearly annihilated Jewish body gave vigor when only death had been the plan. I will speak about instances of performing dancing in cities invaded by the Nazis, in ghettos, in transit camps, in concentration camps and death camps. Information and photos have been collected through unpublished diaries and photographs in the archives at Yad Vashem (The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority of Israel); newly published biographies in Hebrew; information gathered by interviews with surviving dancers; and recently published scholarship from newly released information in Germany.

Humiliation began the deadly *pas de deux* between Nazi and Jew—which included public humiliation such as a German woman married to a Jew, obligated to carry a sign that said she was married to a pig whenever she went on the street. Laws became more and more intolerable for the Jews with the Nazi's rise to power. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish legal scholar coined the word *genocide* to describe the Nazi's systematic destruction of the Jewish people.(1) Genocide, Lemkin wrote, includes murder and also destroying the identity of a person and the culture of a people. The Nazi plan entrapped 9 million European Jews, stripping them of their dignity, their homes, their assets, their work, their schools, hunting them down no matter what their age. Jews were forced into ghettos, transit camps, labor camps, concentration camps, and certain death. The scheme from 1933 until 1945 was unyielding, minutely refined and maniacally effective.

There was not only the dance in religious life but the fact that Jews were an effective and important part of the European expressionist modern dance revolution (*Ausdruckstanz*). In 1933 when the Nazis were voted into power, they made a census of German dancers—and they noted there were 5,122 dancers, choreographers and teachers. Of these there were 703 Jewish dancers who could no longer legally work other than in private surroundings or in Jewish cultural establishments.(2) As the Nazis conquered other lands, it is unknown how many dancers, for example, connected with the Yiddish Theater were ousted, hounded and killed.(3)

In the early 1930s, there was defiance just by working and by making dances. Fritz Berger, later known as Fred Berk in America, was trained and performed in Vienna with the expressionist modern dancer Gertrud Kraus until she left for Palestine. He continued to perform and teach in Vienna and in June 1934, he won the bronze prize at the International Dance Competition for his solo "The Tyrant." (He criticized Hitler in his dance although Berk made what he considered a universal statement of wickedness by taking the Egyptian tyrant, the Pharaoh as his dance image.) Three years after, the program director of the Socialist Workers Organization invited him to teach a class for teenagers. Hitler invaded Austria on Friday, March 11, 1938. "The landlord of my "dance studio told me I could not teach there any more, but if I wanted to rehearse he would let me. But what would I rehearse for, I wondered? No one would hire me. The pianist who had played for me for years in the studio and in performances was seemingly a very close friend. However, he told me he did not dare to continue working for a Jew. Someone might report him. Whatever Jewish pupils I had gave up their studies, frightened to go out. The Gentile students would not go to a Jewish teacher. All contracts for my performances were cancelled. The sudden realization that we were paralyzed in our professional life and our personal life was terrifying. One was left alone without friends, fearful anyone and everyone would turn you in... The very same week Hitler took over, I got a call from the director of the youth group of the Socialist Workers Organization. He told me it did not make any difference who I was, 'our youngsters love you and we want you to continue.' I told him I was too afraid to travel in the streets. The director said he would send five or six teenage boys to accompany me to the dance sessions. They came, we walked together, they surrounded me on the street or on the trolley. I was taken to the back door of a suburban beer hall where the youth group met, and I taught the class..."(4)

The situation as it disintegrated is hard to grasp. We know some Jews tried moving to other cities, safe for a time, or other countries within Europe. Ruth Abrahamowitsch-Sorel, trained by Wigman and featured dancer at the Berlin Opera moved and found sanctuary, first in Warsaw, but luckily she had the means and the good timing to get a visa. Many were beguiled by the words the Nazis chose to describe the situation, an intentionally misleading. Deportation to death camps from central Europe, for example, was called "evacuation to the East" (*Evakuierung*). Many thought politics would change.

Ironically, in the early years, the Third Reich created a Jewish cultural system in the main German cities. It, too, had the effect of misleading artists and the Jewish public through performances held under the *Kulturbund* created by the Nazis. This allowed professional artists, including dancers, to entertain their fellow Jews in officially sanctioned concerts and to be paid for their professional work by the Nazis, few survived.

Because of time constraints I can't speak about the dancers in the *Kulturbund* nor can I detail the lives of other performers, who did escape. I will only mention Pola Nirenska who had been a dancer in Mary Wigman's company. At the end of the Wigman tour to the US in 1933, Wigman, purged her company of its Jewish dancers. Nirenska moved back to Warsaw, also won a medal in the international dance competition of '34, managed to get to England and eventually settled in Washington, D.C. where she worked until she ended her own life at 81 in 1992.(5)

Performing artists who were Jews, of course, represented many in the modern dance and in the opera houses. There were producers of dance, too, including Rene Blum who directed the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo for several years in the 1930s before he was deported from France and killed at Auschwitz. There were also Jewish dancers within the wide network of Yiddish Theater and cabarets throughout Eastern Europe. (Vilne Trupe, and The Dybbuk). Dancers could be seen in film as well. For example, the Polish Jewish choreographer/dancer Judith Berg had a coveted teaching certificate from Wigman, allowing her to open a sanctioned modern dance school in Warsaw. She also performed dances on Jewish themes; her most lasting work was choreographed for the 1938 Polish film version of "The Dybbuk." Ironically she played the role of death—you see her behind the bride. Dangerous times gave way to murderous times and all the while those in the arts continued. As Jews were thrust into ghettos, there were performances in some.(6) By 1940, the 375,000 Jews of Warsaw were required to move to the confines of the Warsaw ghetto. Thrown together were Jews of all different beliefs, some very orthodox in their observance and some secular and other Zionist. A diary written by 14 yr old Ruth Lieblich from August 1940 until she was deported to her death in Dec of 1943 is now in the archives of *Yad Vashem*. Before the ghetto she must have danced the new Israeli folk dances for she writes that "If I will be in *Eretz-Israel* I want to live in a kibbutz. Sometimes it is described to me as an idyllic place even if this world is washed in blood. The land is my homeland, its cities, its villages, its orchards, its kibbutzim...they dance the hora there—the hora is a fire that matches the Jewish

temperament. The hora frees you and lifts you up, and the hora arouses feelings adding to one's sense of strength, hope, self-confidence and joy. It is part of physical work and part of blessings."

The Warsaw ghetto was Poland's largest, with estimates that by 1942 half a million Jews were imprisoned within the ghetto walls and these included "139 members of the actors' union... people weren't allowed out on the ghetto streets after 5:00 so they started to creep into each other's apartments to chat, sometimes sing... eventually a regular show business developed from this in the apartments..."(7) Many argued that Jews should not create and perform when people were dying. On the other hand, it was said that audiences for even a quarter of an hour could hear political satire or disengage from the situation. The artists could give solace and even strength to continue.

Helping children survive included using the arts in the ghetto. An account from the Warsaw Ghetto says "Because classes were forbidden in the ghetto, adults turned to theatricals as a kind of education; 'in our kitchen, wrote one child, we are producing a very lovely play which our teacher wrote for us. I play the role of a Jewish mother who tries to steal a piece of bread for her children from a passer-by on the street. After that we danced the 'famine dance.' But the sun shines for us: The Germans are kicked out and we Jewish children live to see a good life and a new era. This is how our play ends. When I am performing, I forget that I am hungry and I no longer remember that the evil Germans are still roaming about.'"(8)

The arts including dance were used to enhance and strengthen the identity of the very people the Nazis were trying to wreck. Through lessons for children, through holiday celebrations and community gatherings, artistic performances were created under what others might consider hopeless situations. This photo shows young people dancing the hora in Lodz Ghetto. Despite the rules against it, you see obvious pride and joy in performance by young men and women.

Transit Camps were another waypoint to death for Jews who were rounded up from different cities. Performances are known to have taken place in France at Gurs and Rivesaltes; in Holland at Westerbork and in Czechoslovakia at Terezin also known as Theresienstadt. In the transit camps, it was the Nazis who organized the performances as a way to keep the artists working, to mislead them and to also mislead international organizations such as the Red Cross. That organization even made films to show the world how "good" the Nazis were to their Jewish artists. The performances also proved a way to entertain officers of the Nazi party who might be "visiting" the camps and for the Nazi officers overseeing these horrific sites.

At Westerbork, in Holland, many of the artists were from vibrant artistic Berlin—they had tried to escape to Holland, but were arrested. The Nazi commander at Westerbork transit camp, A.K. Gemmeker, was proud of the highly talented celebrities. He also saw to it that there were classical music concerts, recitals and the widely popular cabaret shows, but every Tuesday Jews were deported to the gas chambers. The cabaret called "Humor and Melody," premiered on Sept. 4, 1943 with 18 different skits, satirizing the daily life in the camp. The experienced German theater director Max Ehrlich created it with composers Willy Rosen and Erich Ziegler, and the Dutch Jewish stage designer Leo Kok. Dancers were a part of the cabaret.

Catherina Frank was one of six women dancers in this scene called "You Should Always be Artistic. Behave Yourself." The photo from Yad Vashem shows Catherina on the far left. Friends of Catherina, a trained dancer/actress, wanted her to perform even though she had given birth to her son Clarence in the camp only two weeks before. Her first night performing, the infamous Adolf Eichmann, chief officer of the Nazi extermination plan, was on one of his visits to Westerbork and took in the cabaret. It is reported that he wanted to know who the dancer was with the beautiful legs, so she was sent for. She later reported that he asked how was she and she explained it was hard because she had a new baby. Surprisingly, he sent her to Terezin or Theresienstadt with her baby and they were never deported from there so they survived the war.

A trained dancer from Prague known after the war as Helen Lewis came to Terezin following her performance in Prague in Milhaud's "La Creation du Monde." She relates in her autobiography when she got to Terezin that she met a fellow dancer identified only as Hana "and she subjected me to a 'rare treat, a kind of celebration of my arrival at Theresienstadt (or Terezin). She took me to the ramparts and there on the green slopes, I saw a group of young women dancing. I did not even try to understand, I just joined in. And so it was that I spent my first morning in Terezin dancing on the ramparts.'"(9) Before she was deported to Auschwitz, Helen worked with

children in the transit camp. She wrote, "If the weather was good, I would take my charges up onto the ramparts where we danced to the accompaniment of our own voices. All of us who lived and worked with the children deliberately and actively disobeyed the 'no schooling' orders, but we had to appoint lookouts to warn of any approaching danger...we tried very hard to keep the children mentally alert, to engage them in interesting, even amusing physical activities."

There were ballets presented in Terezin by a choreographer named Kamila Rosenbaumova amongst the long list of performances. These two watercolors, which Friedl Dicker-Brandeis painted in Theresienstadt, are costume drawings for Rosenbaumova's productions. They included "The Firefly." She also worked on the famous children's opera called "*Brundibar*." The painter Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (who was born in Vienna in 1898 and killed at Auschwitz in 1944) taught children painting (memorialized in the book "I Never Saw Another Butterfly") and she also painted these costume sketches. You see two today through the "Courtesy of Simon Wiesenthal Center Library and Archives, Los Angeles, CA." (I only know that the choreographer survived and lived after the war in Czechoslovakia.)

Teaching and dancing in ghettos and transit camps were different actions than maintaining Jewish identity through holiday observance. I have no photo to show you of a community dance leader before the war known as the *badchan* at weddings and celebrations Throughout middle and Eastern Europe prior to the Nazis, the *badchan* carried on a tradition from the 1300s in the tanzhausen or dance houses especially built to hold the Jewish community at weddings. To carry out the Talmudic obligation that all must dance at a wedding to make the bride happy, the *badchan* acted as a master of ceremonies, offering satirical rhymes about the guests and also, importantly, acting as a dance leader. Here is a picture of the itinerant musicians or klezmerim who went from village to village to accompany the music while the *badchan* directed the repertoire of wedding dances or *mitzvah tanz*. We cannot know who were all the wonderful *badchanim* and the community members who loved dancing at weddings. It is recorded that a *badchan* took heroic measures to keep the requirement of a joyful holiday observance at the holiday of Purim (10). The unnamed *badchan* danced and recited verses to amuse inmates in Bergen-Belsen one winter at Purim. A few specific dancers who can be named were known for what they did in the camps. Miriam, or Moussia Daijchas, was a trained dancer from Lithuania who had been a student of the Russian ballerina Olga Preobrajenska in Paris and performed in the capitols of Europe, in New York and in Palestine. After she was deported to Auschwitz, Mengele and his "doctors" carried out their hideous pseudo "medical experiments" on her dancing legs, hopelessly mangling her. Crippled, she was yet an inspiration for the young women around her because she created and directed her friends in little plays with movement.(11)

Some of the prisoners in camps were dancers without the official training or careers of either Caterina from Westerbork, or Helen in Terezin or Moussia at Auschwitz. Yehudit Arnon, or Judith Schischa-Halevy as she was known in Hungary, also has a unique place as a dancer in the camps. She was deported with her family from a small town in Hungary and sent to Birkeneau. Her charismatic power and physical abilities touched her fellow prisoners and caught the eye of SS officers "With my shaved head and my tattooed number, I was on work details and was one of one thousand women in one barrack. We slept ten to a slab, and if we wanted to turn over, all ten of us had to; we managed to entertain each other. We talked a lot about food, and someone would tell a recipe, someone else told jokes. If someone knew to sing, they sang." Judith entertained by setting up movement vignettes and survivor accounts at Yad Vashem describe Judith's humor and movements, gymnastic movements including splits between the sleeping slabs and pulling a boat.

The German officers heard about Judith and asked her to entertain at their Christmas party in 1943. "I decided to say no. We all wanted to die quickly, and I thought that I would be shot, considered a good death." Instead, for punishment she was tied up outside, barefoot in the snow wearing but a thin dress. "I could feel my feet freezing. I stood for hours, and I thought over and over about dance. I decided that if I would survive, I would dedicate myself to dance." Her story is long miraculously she survived. After liberation she worked for a Zionist youth group in Budapest with orphans. Here is a photo from a pageant she choreographed in a *Hashomer Hazair* summer camp with some 350 kids. She said, "I remember that nature was our background for the festival with the forests and mountains behind us and I created many different formations and shapes, including the six-pointed Magen David star."

I want to mention Judith Berg again and her husband Felix Fibich. Their escape story is long, and there's no time for it, but when they were repatriated to Poland in 1945 they also worked with Jewish orphans who had been hidden in convents and monasteries or survived in hiding. Recently Fibich told me, "The children knew from the war years that to be a Jew meant you would be killed. We had to change their minds and carefully work with them. We introduced them to Jewish tradition and holidays through authentic Jewish folk songs and tales which I choreographed. In this way, they came to love our traditions and we could implant a positive identity through dance. The children began to find new joy and hope." When the Warsaw monument to the ghetto was unveiled in 1947, the dancing children under Fibich and Berg performed at the ceremonies.

The dancer could hold at bay chaos, hopelessness and even death, and through movement could be transformed and redeemed. Jewish dancers brought through dance, moments of recognition, of defiance, of connection, of communication and even of joy despite the Nazi scourge. I conclude with a visual showing Jews descending from a train after liberation in some unnamed European site, dancing for joy.

Their revenge was to take the very body the Nazis sought to exterminate as sub-human and dance with it, to relish, to praise and to express life. Countless unnamed dancers faced horror and depravity with honesty, transforming their encounters with hell for themselves and those in their presence. Through their skill and drive, dance became a tool to strengthen Jewish identity. Dancers as avengers were unique; instead of seeking retribution for the Holocaust, if they survived and made new homes in Israel or abroad, like Judith and Helen, their counterstrike was to fashion new dance for healthy, whole bodies. On the precipice of extinction, dancers yet performed, taught, embodied life and kept Jewish culture meaningful. Through their skills and drive, dance as a tool to continue Jewish identity, Jewish expression and resistance continued, increasing the resilience and the urge to survive.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Information from Dr. Stephen Feinstein, Dir., Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota; [http://cghs.dade.k12.fl.us/ib\\_holocaust2001/Persecution\\_early\\_years/nuremberg\\_laws.htm](http://cghs.dade.k12.fl.us/ib_holocaust2001/Persecution_early_years/nuremberg_laws.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Laure Guilbert-Deguine's article "Tanz" in the *Handbook of German Teachers and Their Emigration from 1933-1945 (Darmstad, German: Wissenschaftliche Organizaition, 1998, translation provided by Sigrid Stern).*

<sup>3</sup> [I proposed searching for some through the long lists of names from the Yiddish Theater unions in the archives of YIVO in New York and last spring Felix Fibich looked there, and also in Russian, Yiddish and Polish texts. (All languages he reads still at 86.) I didn't take into account his tears so we haven't proceeded yet. There are few left to identify who in those lists were dancers.]

<sup>4</sup> Judith Brin Ingber, *Victory Dances, The Life of Fred Berk, A Modern Day Jewish Dancing Master*, Tel Aviv: Israel Dance Library, 1985, pp.28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Stoeckemann, ed., "tanzdrama magazin;" #42:3, September 1998, Berlin: Germany. (Issue #42:3/ September 1998, Berlin, Germany), published a special section, There have been exhibits by Andrea Amort in Vienna and Hedwig Mueller in Germany about Jewish dancers in this period as well as some articles such as Patricia Stoeckemann's special on dancers in exile from the Nazis in "tanzdrama magazin;" Richly illustrated, about dancers in Exile featuring both Gentile and Jewish dancers who continued their work in exile as a result of the Nazis. The research of Hedwig Mueller and Andrea Amort and Marion Kant with Lilian Karina is all important work on this subject.

<sup>6</sup> Nahma Sandrow, "Vagabond Stars, A World History of Yiddish Theater," New York: Limelight Editions, p. 338

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Nahma Sandrow, "Vagabond Stars," p.342.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Lewis, *A Time to Speak*, New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1994, p. 40 and 43.

<sup>10</sup> Passover in Bergen-Belsen. 188; Kol Nidre in Auschwitz, p. 203 reported in *From A Ruined Garden, The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, translated and edited by Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, New York: Schocken Books, 1983.

11A book “Wonder Child of the 20th century, Memories of Moussia” was published through the Friends of Vilna organization with reports about her from survivors in Quebec, Mexico, Caracas, Paris, and New York. Also see, Ruth Eschel, *Al Hamishmar* newspaper, 15 July 1990.

Regarding the slides shown during the presentation: children and young people folk dancing in the Lodz Ghetto; from Yad Vashem Archive 1602/199;4062/247;4962.515.4962.272. 2974.9; young people with yellow stars on their back are in the youth group in Lodz “Hazit Dor Bnei Hamidbar or the generation of the children of wandering in the desert. The names included at Yad Vashem in a circle are Franka Yaakovovitz, Arieh Frintz, Yechiel Dodoitz, Rozka Gorssman, Haim Diamont, Hesiek Stan, Aaron Yaakovson and Moshe Yaakovson.

The photo #1602/199 says this is a Hora around a “Dood Hamark” in the Lodz Ghetto, there are photo montages put together by the directors of the ghetto in Lodz, no date showing Children and young people dancing. Photo # 4062/247 has only the caption Young Jews Dancing in the Lodz Ghetto.

Cabaret show with the dancer Catherina Frank from Westerbork transit camp “Magdelein, Behave Yourself!” from the scene, “We’re Going to School” Leaf 38 from the album, *Humor & Melodie*, Yad Vashem Archive, AM4/1168, Donated by a. van /as, 1982. The photo shows Ulla Gross, Catherina Frank (later van den Berg, first on left), Lotte Heider, Beatrice Lissauer, Hannalore Cahn, according to the program for the performance, item 17.

Reproduction of paintings by Friedl Dicker –Brandeis at Theresienstadt for dances of Kamila Rosenbaumova’s ballets in 1943/44 from the Catalogue written by Elena Makarova, “Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Vienna 1898- Auschwitz 1944; The Artist who Inspired the Children’s Drawings of Terezin,” Los Angeles: Tallfellow/Every Picture Press in conjunction with Simon Wiesenthal Center, Museum of Tolerance, 2001, pp p. 176,177; “Courtesy of Simon Wiesenthal Center Library and Archives, Los Angeles, California.”

Snapshot photos of the pageants that Yehudit Arnon created in the summer after her liberation with Jewish children in Budapest are courtesy of Arnon; photo of Felix Fibich teaching orphans in Warlow courtesy of Fibich.

Judith Brin Ingber’s scholarship and performance centers on Jewish dance. Her writings include the “Jewish Folklore & Ethnology Review on Dance” (2000), “Dance Perspectives” (59), and The International Dance Encyclopedia. She co-founded the performance troupe Voices of Sepharad, has taught at the University of Minnesota and was a Faber Fellow at Princeton University.

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"Were all the dancers Jewish?" asked a pointedly indifferent girl with braids. I explained that while only one-third of the cast was Jewish, each dancer was as intent on telling the story as if it had been his or her own. The students were curious about what was real and what was fiction. I told them that the protagonist represented my mother as an adolescent, but that the "choreodrama" as a whole was filled with story lines I had read, heard or dreamed about. During the concentration-camp scene, student audiences usually laugh uneasily when the characters are forced to remove their clothes. But the tittering ceases as the action intensifies. "What happened when they took the baby from its mother?" one girl asked.