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“Dance, Tell Them Everything”

Jewish Female Dancers during the Holocaust

Abstract

This article offers the first discussion of the fate of Jewish female dancers during the Holocaust. For young Jewish women who challenged the existing model of upbringing based on patriarchal tradition, modern artistic dance was an attempt at defining their own identity. Therefore, education in dance schools was very popular among Jewish girls and women, so much so that their pre-war graduates could be counted in the hundreds. Methodologically, the article focuses on individual life stories that can illustrate the scale of oppression experienced by Jewish female dancers. Their fates are presented as manifestations of three biographical matrices: emigration/escape/exile, life in the ghettos, and the attempt to survive on the Aryan side. At the same time, the article calls for systematic research on the subject.

Keywords:

Jewish female dancers, Holocaust, Jewish female dancers' exile, dancing in the ghettos, Jewish female dancers' life in hiding

Abstrakt

„Tańcz, opowiedz im wszystko...”: Losy tancerek żydowskich w czasach Holokaustu

W artykule po raz pierwszy podjęto badania nad losami tancerek żydowskich w czasach Holokaustu. Nowoczesny taniec artystyczny stanowił próbę zdefiniowania własnej tożsamości przez młode kobiety żydowskie, które kwestionowały dotychczasowy model wychowania w tradycji patriarchalnej. Z tego powodu kształcenie w szkołach tańca było bardzo popularne wśród dziewcząt i kobiet żydowskich, a ich absolwentkami mogło być w okresie przedwojennym nawet kilkaset osób. W pracy przyjęto metodę skoncentrowaną na prezentacji losów jednostkowych, które mogą ilustrować skalę opresji, jakiej doświadczały tancerki żydowskie. Ich losy przedstawiono jako realizację trzech matryc biograficznych: emigracja/ucieczka/wygnanie, życie w gettach i próba przetrwania po aryjskiej stronie. Artykuł jest jednocześnie postulatem w sprawie podjęcia systematycznych badań nad tym zagadnieniem.

Słowa kluczowe

tancerki żydowskie, Zagłada, emigracja tancerek żydowskich, taniec w gettach, życie tancerek żydowskich w ukryciu

The words cited in the title of the present article come from Peretz Markish's poem "To the Jewish Dancer," dedicated to the Polish Jews and their experiences during the Holocaust.¹ In the poem, a female dancer is presented as the custodian of the memory of war atrocities, occupying the position of both a witness and a victim, while dance is indicated as a medium used for manifesting memory, where "remembering was the only defense" against the ruthlessness.² The article addresses these issues, focusing on the lives of Jewish women dancers during the Holocaust. The present state of research permits the application of a research method based on documented case studies and tracing individual biographies. While the research outcome is not comprehensive enough to permit generalized conclusions, the article can be used as a reference indicating what kind of experiences may have been encountered by other dancers in similar circumstances. In the article, I will discuss biographical facts linked to about a dozen female Jewish artists active on stage before 1939, but it should be acknowledged that these examples can be viewed as representative of many nameless Jewish women and young girls who regarded dance as a means of expressing their modern identity and a tool of rebellion against the conventional gender roles ascribed to them by their conservative fathers—although, admittedly, the scale of this phenomenon can be at best only roughly estimated.

In metropolitan Jewish communities in interwar Poland, women were ready to reject the patriarchal order with increasing boldness. They aspired to education, sought to mark their presence in the public space, and undertook various activities outside of the family circle. Manifesting their agency, they were ready to break the tabu surrounding the female "Jewish body," and sought to transgress their traditional roles as wives and mothers.³ Their attitude formed part of the *frojen frage*—the women's question, one of the aspects of emancipation and modernization.⁴ Among the possible means of pursuing self-development,

¹ Peretz Markish, "To a Jewish Dancer," in *Inheritance (Yerushe)*, trans. Mary Schulman (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 2007), 6–45. As the poet's widow Esther Markisch indicates in her memoir, the poem was addressed to dancer Rachel Lyubelskaya; see Esther Markisch, *Le long retour* (Paris: Rober Laffont, 1974), 133. I am indebted for this information to Professor Sabine Koller of the University of Regensburg.

² Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 188.

³ See e.g. Joanna Lisek, "Jidisze mame – ciało i mit," *Cwiszn/Pomiędzy*, no. 3 (2010): 4–7.

⁴ Cf. Małgorzata Maciejewska, "Frojen frage – wieloaspektowość tożsamościowa poetek jidyszowych (Tożsamościowe ujęcie podmiotu oparte na wykluczeniu i marginalizacji, metodologia feministyczna jako afirmacja kobiecego wykluczenia)," *Miasteczko Poznań: Pismo społeczno-kulturalne*, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.miasteczko-poznan.pl/node/364>.

next to social activism, teaching, journalism, and sport,⁵ was artistic activity in such fields as literature⁶ and the visual arts,⁷ as well as dance. So far, no academic research has been conducted with respect to the individual emancipation strategies of Jewish women dancers. Young women born a generation earlier, in the late nineteenth century, not only into Orthodox Jewish families, but also into those from the assimilated affluent intelligentsia, had no possibility of pursuing dance and performance, even though ballroom dancing was taught in public schools. Born in Warsaw in 1888, Marie Rambert underwent dance education abroad—not only because there were no dance schools operating in Poland at the time, but more importantly because—as she explained in her memoir—it was unimaginable that a girl from an educated bourgeois family should decide to pursue dance as her profession.⁸

Nevertheless, after Poland regained independence in 1918, youth education underwent significant changes, both state schools and Jewish religious and lay schools coming to include dance in their gymnastics and music curricula.⁹ In state schools, dance education was usually limited to national dances and regional folk dances; however, dance traditions of students from ethnic minorities were not included in the curriculum. In Jewish schools, a different approach was adopted. In Orthodox cheders, both dance and other physical activities (i.e. sports or gymnastics) were usually limited. At the same time, as Agnieszka Jeż demonstrates, “in the Bais Yaakov Orthodox Jewish schools for girls, dance was considered as a crucial means of ecstatic expression”; in lay schools, on the other hand, physical activity was perceived as an important component of education. In Zionist schools, for instance, “the concept of shaping the new human through broadly understood sports culture was intended to create the image of a model citizen of the future Israeli state.”¹⁰ In many young people, these propaedeutic dance classes inspired authentic passion. One of such students wrote: “Some people do not realize that dance is the most accurate expression of the dancing

⁵ Teresa Drozdek-Matolepsza, “Sport kobiet mniejszości narodowych w Polsce w latach 1919–1939,” *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie*, no. 8 (2009): 75–8, <http://dlibra.bg.ajd.czyst.pl:8080/dlibra/docmetadata?id=835&from=publication>.

⁶ Cf. e.g. Joanna Lisek, *Kol isze: Głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od xvi w. do 1939 r.)* (Sejny: Wydawnictwo Pogranicze, 2018); Maciejewska, “Frojen frage...”

⁷ See e.g. Natasza Styrna, *Artyści żydowscy w Krakowie (1873–1939)* (Kraków: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2008).

⁸ Cf. Marie Rambert, *Quicksilver: An Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

⁹ See Agnieszka Jeż, “Taniec w szkole: Doświadczenia dzieci i młodzieży żydowskiej w okresie międzywojennym w Polsce,” *Studia Choreologica* 21 (2020): 175–194. The author offers a detailed discussion of educational curricula in state schools and Jewish private schools.

¹⁰ Jeż, “Taniec w szkole,” 187.

generation. The pace of dance perfectly reflects the pulse of modern life.”¹¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that as (non-Jewish) women dancers from Marie Rambert’s generation, having completed their education abroad, returned to Poland and opened private dance schools, many of their students (both boys and girls) were Jewish. Polish dancers Janina Mieczysłowska and Tacjana Wysocka were the first to open private schools rooted in German and Russian dance traditions. Their example was soon followed by other dancers, often their former pupils (some of whom were Jewish): Felicja Brattówna, Jadwiga Hryniewiecka, and Irena Prusicka.

In the school year 1937/1938, in Warsaw there were either twelve or thirteen (depending on source)¹² private dance schools; Łódź, Kraków, and Lviv had four such schools each; in addition, there were a further two schools in Katowice, one in Vilnius, and one in Gdynia—in total, they were attended by 1,283 students, most of them women (1,239).¹³ In his report entitled “Artistic Education in Numbers in the School Year 1937/1938,” Wiktor Czerniewski states that in Warsaw, 133 out of 483 dance school students were Jewish; in Łódź, the corresponding number was 162 out of 205 (the highest percentage of all the cities included in the survey); in Kraków—62 out of 128, and in Lviv, 112 out of 236. According to Czerniewski, such a high percentage (37.8%) of Jewish students could be attributed to the fact that dance schools were located in large cities, with large Jewish communities.¹⁴ Taking into account also earlier graduates, it can be assessed that in the years preceding the outbreak of the Second World War the group of Jewish female dancers and dance school pupils could amount to a few hundred. Yet we can only follow their experience during the Holocaust based on a limited number of individual biographies accounting merely for about two percent of the total group. While all of the known biographies were shaped by individual circumstances, personal decisions, and random incidents, it is possible to identify three basic biographical matrices applicable to Jewish

¹¹ Quoted in Jeż, “Taniec w szkole,” 191.

¹² Cf. Anna Banach, “Warszawska edukacja taneczna poza instytucjami w xx w,” in *Taniec w Warszawie: Społeczeństwo, edukacja, kultura*, ed. Hanna Raszewska-Kursa (Warszawa: Centrum Sztuki Tańca w Warszawie, 2018), 35–55.

¹³ Quoted in Bożena Mamontowicz-Łojek, *Polskie szkolnictwo baletowe w okresie międzywojennym* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1978). The statistics are cited from Wiktor Czerniewski’s series of reports titled *Artistic education in numbers*; nevertheless, it should be noted that, as Mamontowicz-Łojek points out, Czerniewski’s statistics present incomplete data.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mamontowicz-Łojek, *Polskie szkolnictwo baletowe, 192–193*, footnote 23. The author explains that “in the entire country, the percentage of Jewish female students in private dance schools was several times larger than the percentage of Jews in the country’s entire population.”

female dancers in that period: emigration/escape/exile, ghetto existence, and attempts to survive among the Aryan population.

Emigration/Escape/Exile

The persecution of Jews, including Jewish artists, in Nazi Germany began even before the so-called Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935, based on the law on the “reorganization of the civil service” (Gesetz über Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums) passed in the aftermath of the pogroms of April 1933. The law targeted all alleged (religious, racial, ideological, and political) enemies of the Third Reich, who were all to lose their employment. The regulation was to be enforced by the Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer), which included, among other departments, the Reich Chamber of Theatre (Reichstheaterkammer). The latter’s jurisdiction included the dance community, encompassing professional dancers employed at official theatres as well as independent artists and teachers.¹⁵ Even before the Chamber of Theatre undertook a survey to determine all dance artists’ eligibility for employment under the new legislation, many cultural institutions had conducted cleansings and terminated contracts with their Jewish dancers with immediate effect. That first wave of persecutions impacted, among others, the artists employed by the Berlin State Opera; one of the dismissed artists was dancer Ruth Sorel-Abramowitsch (Sorel). After her dismissal from work in April 1933, she entered—and won—the International Solo Dance Competition in Warsaw. Predicting further repressions against the Jewish populations in Germany, she decided to remain in Warsaw. Together with her long-standing partner Georg Groke, she toured in Palestine and the United States; From 1934, she taught classes at Mieczysława’s dance school, and in 1937, she started the Private School of Artistic Dance and Rhythmic Gymnastics. The war had already begun when on September 6, 1939, in a Protestant church in Kredytowa Street in Warsaw, she married Polish writer Michał Choromański, whom she met in 1935. In March 1949, with the help of the Polish literary community, the couple fled from Poland and travelled through Vienna, Rome, and London to arrive in Brazil on September 15, 1940. They resided in Brazil for three years, before moving together to Canada in 1943. Sorel made an important contribution to the development of modern dance in Canada. The Choromańskis survived the rough times safely and only returned to Poland in 1957.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the legal status and experiences of Jewish dancers in Germany, see Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Tanz unterm Hakenkreuz: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1996).

Many of the participants of the International Solo Dance Competition in Warsaw had no premonition about what was to come. German dance critic Josef Lewitan, editor of *Der Tanz* magazine (until he was expelled from the editing board in 1933) and husband of dancer Evgenia Eduardova, was one of the jury members in the Warsaw competition before returning to Berlin and subsequently emigrating to France thanks to the assistance of Rolf de Maré. Yet a much more puzzling presence on the Warsaw jury panel was Rudolf Laban—himself an executor of the racial purity in employment law in Germany, who authorized the dismissal of Jews from the schools and ensembles over which he presided.¹⁶ A similar fate was experienced by the Polish female dancers associated with Mary Wigman's Dresden school and dance ensemble, such as Pola Nireńska. A new law of April 25, 1933 imposed a 1.5 percent quota on the admission of "non-Aryan" students to public schools and universities, which forced Wigman to dismiss around 15 percent of her pupils (although she did manage to obtain state permission to retain 5 percent). At that time, however, Nireńska was already a graduate and member of the artistic ensemble, as well as possibly—as Weronika Kostyrko¹⁷ suggests—Wigman's partner. Nevertheless, upon her return from a tour in the United States, Nireńska left Germany. Her later life is well documented: she lived in Britain during the war and in 1949, she moved to the United States, where she could confront the European modern dance tradition, in which she was educated, with the nascent tradition of American postmodern dance.¹⁸ Although she did not experience the Holocaust firsthand, the trauma resulting from the loss of her relatives, expressed in her *Holocaust Tetralogy*,¹⁹ haunted her throughout her lifetime.

Another student of Wigman was Katia Bakalinskaya, who studied with Margarete Wallmann in 1928–1929. After graduating from Wigman's school, she remained in her ensemble and, together with Nireńska, participated in the American tour in 1933. Upon returning to Germany—probably as a result of the expulsion of Jewish dancers from the ensemble—she returned to her native city of Gdańsk, where she started her own dance school and performed in

¹⁶ Cf. Evelyn Dörr, Rudolf Laban, *Ein Portrait* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 2005), 283.

¹⁷ Weronika Kostyrko, *Tancerka i Zagłada: Historia Poli Nireńskiej* (Warszawa: Czerwone i Czarne, 2019), 88–92, 95–97.

¹⁸ For an extensive presentation of Nireńska's biography see Alicja Iwańska, "Pamięci tych, których kochałam, których już nie ma: Holocaust w twórczości choreograficznej Poli Nireńskiej," *Studia Choreologica* 17 (2016): 243–263.

¹⁹ Iwona Wojnicka entered into an artistic dialogue with Nireńska's oeuvre. See Iwona Wojnicka, "Odpowiedź artystyczna jako metoda rekompozycji tańca: Practice as Research na podstawie prac Poli Nireńskiej z lat 1929–1935" *Studia Choreologica* 19 (2018): 111–134; "Druga strona: Practice as Research na podstawie prac Poli Nireńskiej z lat 1949–1992," *Studia Choreologica* 20 (2019): 193–224.

Kulturbund-organized shows. “In 1938, she abandoned her school and illegally emigrated to Palestine. She opened her own dance studio in Tel Aviv, which she then ran until the 1980s.”²⁰

The wartime experiences of Yanka Rudzka (Janina Zajdel-Rudzka), a student of Mieczysława, Sorel, and Groke, are not documented; the only known fact is that she briefly resurfaced in Łódź after the war ended. She then left to South America and worked as a choreographer and dance and movement teacher in Argentina and Brazil. We can only repeat hitherto unanswered questions after her dedicated biographer Maria Claudia Alves Guimarães,²¹ concerning Rudzka’s wartime trials and her location during the years of Nazi occupation.

A different fate was experienced by those Jewish female dancers who decided to relocate eastward in order to escape the Nazi oppression. Sylwia (Sara) Swen, a talented dance performer and bronze medal winner in a solo dance competition in Brussels (1939), and wife of director Jakub Rotbaum, on the outbreak of the war moved to Białystok, where she worked as a dance teacher. She went on to study ballet in Leningrad (nowadays St. Petersburg) and did not return to Poland until 1947. Another such example is Lia Rotbaum, sister of Jakub Rotbaum, student of Tacjana Wysocka and performer in her ensembles. In 1934, Lia Rotbaum enrolled in the directing studies program at the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in Moscow, from which she graduated in 1941. Rotbaum found employment at the 1st Front Theatre in Krasnouralsk, then in theatres in Vologda and Sverdlovsk, and finally, from 1954, at the Moscow Operetta Theatre. In total, she prepared 26 performances in the USSR before returning to Poland in 1956, with the last wave of repatriation.

Sonia Mandelbaum, wife of Moses Broderson, also known as Szejne Miriam, had a much more traumatic experience. Dancer and co-founder of the Jewish Revue and Chamber Theatre “Ararat” in Łódź, she shared her husband’s fate during the war and Stalinist terror. In 1939, the couple fled to Białystok and in 1941 they were both resettled to Asia. From 1944, they lived in Moscow, where they kept in contact with the local Jewish artistic milieu. During Stalinist repressions targeted at Jewish artists, Broderson was arrested on April 28, 1950 and deported to Siberia. Sonia Mandelbaum followed her husband into exile, and they both returned to Poland in 1956.

²⁰ Mieczysław Abramowicz, *Teatr żydowski w Gdańsku 1876–1968* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2022), 363.

²¹ Maria Claudia Alves Guimarães, “Między czasem a przestrzenią: Skomplikowana trajektoria życia Yanki Rudzkiej,” in *Polskie artystki awangardy tanecznej: Historie i rekonstrukcje*, ed. Joanna Szymajda (Warszawa: Instytut Muzyki i Tańca, 2017), 126–147.

Some of the female dancers in exile found ways to continue their artistic endeavors, or even pursue artistic development; still, they had to pay the price of cutting ties with their former circles and abandoning their roots, often at the cost of losing their sense of cultural identity. In a way, they were held hostage by the Soviet terror.

Dancers in the Ghettos

The exact number of female dancers detained in ghettos in Nazi-occupied Poland is difficult to establish due to the limited availability of relevant archive material. While dance performances and performances including dance elements in the Warsaw ghetto are well documented, corresponding information pertaining to other ghettos is patchy and has been randomly preserved. While initially many among the ghetto populations protested against staging any performances, which were considered as disrespectful to the great calamity which was befalling all Jews (a leaflet distributed in the Vilnius ghetto bore the slogan: "No theatre among tombstones"), ultimately theatre became a form of "active remembrance"—an activity reminding people of their pre-war lives, providing refuge from their daily troubles, and allowing them to briefly forget about ghetto psychosis.²² There were five theatres operating in the Warsaw ghetto, four of which—Femina, Eldorado, Memory Palace, and the ephemeral Na Pięterku (Upper Floor) theatre, which only operated for three months—offered music hall and dance performances. Their repertoires can be reconstructed based on the preserved issues of the officially published *Gazeta Żydowska* (Jewish Journal).²³ Ryszard Marek Groński described them as follows:

Because of the curfew, the evenings on the ghetto "Broadway" would begin at five o'clock. But no doubt about it, it was Broadway all right: a place where stars were born, fierce rivalries flourished, and artists clamored for a solo act, a better part to play, a round of applause. Funding for new shows was obtained by offering to the

²² For more on ghetto theatres operating during the Nazi occupation see Małgorzata Leyko, "Teatr żydowski," in *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1939–2019)*, ed. Sławomir Buryła, Dorota Krawczyńska, and Jacek Leociak, vol. 1: *Problematyka Zagłady w filmie i teatrze* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2021), 460–502.

²³ The performance timeline was reconstructed by Barbara Engelking. See "Kultura i rozrywka," in *Getto warszawskie: Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście*, ed. Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, 2nd ed. (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2013), 624–654.

nouveau riches a percentage of profits or promising solo numbers to their daughters, mistresses, or wives. Nothing was missing from the theatre world before the war.²⁴

The ghetto theatres whose activity was authorized by the Polish Underground Theatre Council offered roles to female dancers who had gained popularity in the pre-war period, most notably Irena Prusicka and her pupils Franciszka Mann (Manheimer), Wiera Gran, and Stefania Grodzieńska, who revealed a great talent for cabaret performance.

Paradoxically, the artistic activity best documented from among this group is that of Prusicka, who in her postwar application to join the Union of Polish Stage Artists (ZASP) concealed the period of her ghetto residence, as if attempting to banish it from her memory.²⁵ According to the timeline compiled by Barbara Engelking (who states, however, that the data is incomplete), Prusicka and her ballet ensemble (as it was described in theatre announcements) performed at Eldorado in the following shows: H. Lewi's *Komediantka*²⁶ (The Actress, prem. March 28, 1941), Ajba Lang's *Dusze sprzedane* (Sold Souls, prem. September 5, 1941), I. Steinberg's *Icyk Kawalarz* (Ise the Prankster, prem. September 26, 1941), and Steinberg's *O czym dziewczęta powinny wiedzieć* (What Young Girls Should Know, prem. February 27, 1942). They also took part in revue shows at the Na Pięterku theatre: *Wiosna idzie* (Spring Is Coming, prem. April 1, 1942) and *Szaleństwo na pięterku* (Madness on the Upper Floor, prem. June 17, 1942).

At the Femina theatre, the performances *Batalion humoru* (A Humor Brigade, prem. June 20, 1941) and *Od Gminy do Feminy* (From Community to Femina, prem. August 15, 1941) featured the "Femina" ballet ensemble, though it is not known who led it. The revue show *Szafa gra* (The Jukebox, prem. July 22, 1941) featured a performance by Mann and B. Berkowicz's ballet ensemble; the show *Tylko dla dorosłych* (Adult Viewers Only, prem. April 16, 1942) included solo numbers by Mann and Prusicka, and Emerich Kálmán's operetta *Die Bajadere* (prem. June 26, 1942) featured Prusicka's ballet ensemble performing her choreography. The online database of the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research includes the names of female dancers performing at Femina: S. Kamińska (aka S. Kami), H. Wolska, B. Berkowicz (male dancer), B. Berkan, and Mimi Marten

²⁴ Ryszard Marek Groński, *Proca Dawida: Kabaret w przedsiönku piekieł* (Warszawa: Muza, 2007), 96–97.

²⁵ See Theatre Documentation Department, Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, ZASP Archive, item no. 308/1646, the file on Irena Prusicka.

²⁶ Full names of some of the artists were impossible to establish; whenever identification was not possible, initials are used.

(Maria Mart?); it can also be found that Eldorado employed the solo dancers Ina Holska and Zofia Karina.

Dance was included in three shows staged at the Melody Palace: *Wesele żydowskie* (A Jewish Wedding, prem. September 5, 1941) featuring dance performances by Mann and the hitherto unmentioned Waldman (most likely Helena Waldman, who before the war headed a dance school in Łódź in partnership with Yanka Rudzka); Moshe Schor's operetta *Wesele rumuńskie* (A Romanian Wedding) featuring a "ballet"; and *Weseli biedacy* (Jolly Paupers) including a "an impressive dance act" by Mann.

The abovementioned ghetto theatres did not present modern forms of free or expressive dance;²⁷ rather, they offered music hall and revue shows that were in popular demand. A good idea of the typical entertainment offered by the ghetto theatres can be drawn from a review of Femina's show *Od Gminy do Feminy* published in *Gazeta Żydowska*:

One of the highlights of the evening was the number titled *Street Music*, showcasing the skill of the great Femina ballet group in colorful, diverse costumes, led by IH [Ina Holska?], SK [S. Kamińska?], and HW [Helena Waldman?]. But the most fervent applause and most encores belonged to Ms. RC [Regina Cukier]. This brilliant Jewish artist is adored by the audience, charmed by her humor, singing, and dancing. Against the backdrop of a creative stage design and corps de ballet, she reproduced three types of national merriment: Argentinian, Spanish, and Jewish. Brilliant dancer FM [Franciszka Mann] vigorously performed a "Hungarian fantasia" and was rewarded with well-deserved applause—also for her contribution to the ensemble song and dance act *When You're Dancing Tango* (featuring very enjoyable lyrics by Jerry), in which she was partnered by Mr. Orenstein.²⁸

In the Warsaw ghetto, there were also tea dances organized in cafés and private dance parties in homes. A girl named Celina (surname unknown), a cousin of Halina Aszkenazy, enrolled in a ballet school after graduating from a secondary school; a year later, she had her stage debut and became a professional dancer. She performed not only in the official ghetto theatres, but also:

²⁷ The report on Prusicka's performance in *Komediantka* at the Eldorado theatre, in which she performed an "expressionist dance scene titled *The Labourer*—her signature number in the pre-war period—remains an exception. See Polish Centre for Holocaust Research, online database on the Warsaw ghetto, <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Osoby/P/Prusicka-Irena-Nieznanez>, accessed October 10, 2022.

²⁸ See *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 76 (1941): 3, <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Wydarzenia/Recenzja-z-Feminy-Od-Gminy-do-Feminy-ton-i-umiar-mile-przyjemne-i-dobrze-ujete-numery-b.-zgr>.

she dances at social occasions in Heniek and Oskar's room in spring 1943. . . . On one particularly sad day . . . Celina offers to dance. She does this very seldom. Halinka A. accompanies her with a gong. Celina improvises: her dance expresses despair and rebellion. The dancer grapples with an unknown enemy, then collapses, dies. Everybody understands what she is trying to say.²⁹

Children also demonstrated their dancing skills in performances (for instance to celebrate the opening of a children's playground at the corner of Nalewki and Franciszkańska Street on July 12, 1942). These were directed by, among others, Rena Szpacenkop, a specialist in children's eurythmics, and Rosa Weksler, who worked with children at the sanatorium in Falenica.

Yet this ghetto "Broadway" could not provide employment for all female dancers and dance students. As Leon Najberg wrote, "Everybody took to the streets: violinists and celloists, ballet dancers . . . —in the street, everybody is equal. All are driven by the same need: everybody needs to eat."³⁰ We do not know how many female dancers survived the ghetto. Franciszka Mann—condemned for her collaboration with the ghetto police, and at the same time applauded for her courage—died in Auschwitz. Grodzieńska and Prusicka managed to escape from the ghetto before its final liquidation.

Much less is known about Jewish female dancers living in ghettos in other towns and cities. Dorota Friedel, a student of Rudzka and Waldman, resided in the Łódź ghetto; however, we do not know whether she performed in Moshe Puławer's Awangarda music hall theatre. Emilia Wędrowska, who studied dance in Łódź, resided in Częstochowa ghetto; after the war, she emigrated to Denmark (1971).

Attempts to Survive on the Aryan Side

The most challenging part of the present research was to gather information concerning those female Jewish dancers and dance students who tried to survive the occupation in hiding on the Aryan side. The very concept of "life in hiding" involves a change of identity: social background, religion, and surname. In Warsaw under the Nazi occupation there were two officially operating ballet

²⁹ Halina Aszkenazy-Engelhard, *Pragnęłam żyć: Pamiętnik* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie, 1991), 52. See also online database on the Warsaw ghetto, <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Osoby/N/Nieznane-Celina--Nieznanez;> [https://new.getto.pl/pl/Wydarzenia/Pewnego-wyjatkowo-smutnego-dnia-podczas-spotkania-u-Henka-i-Os-kara-Celina-proponuje-ze-zatancy,](https://new.getto.pl/pl/Wydarzenia/Pewnego-wyjatkowo-smutnego-dnia-podczas-spotkania-u-Henka-i-Os-kara-Celina-proponuje-ze-zatancy) accessed October 10, 2022.

³⁰ Leon Najberg, *Ostatni powstańcy getta* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1993), 49.

schools (Leon Wójcikowski's, 1939–1945, and Janina Mieczysłowska's, 1940–1941); in addition, Jadwiga Hryniewiecka and Tacjana Wysocka taught underground classes of dance and eurythmics (1939–1941). In their published memoirs, Mieczysłowska and Wysocka describe their experiences during the occupation, but neither of them mentions their Jewish pupils or ghetto theatres.

The only account in which wartime scattered life under an assumed name and constant threat of hostility on the part of Poles can be found in the memoir by dancer Nata Lerska.³¹ In the early days of the occupation, Lerska was in hiding in Warsaw. She describes that period as follows:

We lived in a room on the first floor. On the ground floor, there was a large empty room with a piano. My mother played it all day long, and I danced to the music by Chopin, Bach, Poulenc, Albéniz. . . . I created choreography to the music and wrote librettos to match the themes. I worked all day long. Only occasionally would I run to the window and look down on the street to see if the Germans were coming for us. Then I would return to the barre and continue my practice.³²

Right before the war, Lerska studied at Mieczysłowska's School of Eurythmics and Dance in Warsaw, where she met Ruth Sorel and Georg Groke, who at the outbreak of the war left a suitcase with their stage costumes at Lerska's parents' house. Later, Lerska's mother exchanged those costumes for food in the village where the family regularly bought their provisions. When Nata travelled there to shop for food soon after, "it was Sunday. And anywhere you looked, there were farmers walking to church in Sorel's and Groke's costumes, dressed up in all those velvets, brocades, and tulles, all those harem pants and bolero jackets, some of which were too large, and some too tight."³³ This, however, was one of very few amusing memories, since the reality was somber in many respects.

After her escape from the ghetto, Stefania Grodzieńska became the guardian of Zofia and Gabriel Kijkowski's sons in Gołąbki near Mory;³⁴ Irena Prusicka, in turn, declared in her ZASP application: "during the occupation I resided in the countryside, working as an administrator on a country estate."³⁵

³¹ Natalia Lerska-Kowalska, *Wspomnienia tancerki: Nie tylko o tańcu* (Łódź: Oficyna Bibliofilów, 2001).

³² Lerska-Kowalska, *Wspomnienia*, 8.

³³ Lerska-Kowalska, 14.

³⁴ Stefania Grodzieńska, *Już nic nie muszę* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Akapit Press, 2001), 46.

³⁵ Theatre Documentation Department, Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, ZASP Archive, item no. 308/1646, the file on Irena Prusicka.

The fate of other female Jewish dancers is only discovered tangentially, for instance based on the interviews collected and archived by the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research. Krakow-born Klara Halbreich (b. 1923, née Gross), a ballet school student, initially went into hiding (under the assumed names Janina Birkenfeldowicz and Janina Szczubiał) outside of Kraków; later she was forced to move to the Kraków ghetto, which she escaped in spring 1943. She sought refuge in the country but she was blackmailed and threatened with denunciation to the Nazis. In 1947, she returned to Kraków where she worked as a ballet teacher for ten years before emigrating to Israel.³⁶ A Warsaw ballet student Krystyna Lewiarz (b. 1932, née Halina Ita Bitter, also known as Stefania Kołaczkowska and Krystyna Łukasik) hid in a cellar. Then her family were denounced and sent to the ghetto, from where she was carried out in a bag by her father. She survived the occupation thanks to the help of a Polish family (in the village of Chaśno Nowe near Warsaw).³⁷

Further Research

The biographies of Jewish female dancers presented in this article offer but a modest representation of the oppression they suffered under the Nazi regime. Further examination of this issue would need to involve extensive archival research concerning, on the one hand, pre-war Jewish dancers and dance students and, on the other, their experiences during the Holocaust (e.g. in the ghettos).³⁸ A potential research question could touch upon the representation of the Holocaust in dance art, for instance in the oeuvre of Pola Nireńska, Hanya Holm (*Tragic Exodus*, 1939), and Lester Horton (*Warsaw Ghetto*, 1949).

Translated by Aleksandra Kamińska

³⁶ Online database on the Warsaw ghetto, <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Osoby/H/Halbreich-Klara-Gross>, accessed October 10, 2022.

³⁷ Online database on the Warsaw ghetto, <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Osoby/L/Lewiarz-Krystyna-Halina-Ita-Bitter>, accessed October 10, 2022.

³⁸ Research on the biographies of actors and actresses, including male and female dancers, in the Warsaw ghetto is currently being conducted by Dr. Agnieszka Żółkiewska as part of a research project at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. To date, Żółkiewska has compiled 25 biographical entries for the online Encyclopedia of the Warsaw Ghetto; she is also working on a monograph on the cultural life in the Warsaw ghetto.

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