The Unwitting *Gastrol**

Felix Fibich,

Based on a 1997 interview with Felix Fibich, (FF), conducted by Judith Brin Ingber (JBI) for the Oral History Project, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation. (Located at Lincoln Center, New York City).

*The Yiddish word *gastrol* (accent on the second syllable) is a borrowing from Russian, and means "tour (of an artistic or theatrical troupe)." It sounds like "guest role," but isn't quite. E.g., when the Habimah troupe is visiting Berlin from Moscow they are *af gastrol*, or, on tour.

Felix Fibich, born August 5, 1917 as Fajwel Goldblat, grew up in Warsaw in a family with both Hasidic traditions and the pull of modern Poland. He saw men dancing in shul when he accompanied his father, enhancing their prayer and ritual and he also experienced dance in the Yiddish theater as it advanced plot, character and served to express the struggles of Jewish life. Dance was ubiquitous whether in small to medium-sized towns (where about 1,250,000 Jews lived) or in the large cities such as Warsaw, the country's capital (with 350,000 Jews or thirty percent of its 1,050,000 population). Hasidic Jews--with their ecstasy for life embodied in dance[1]--lived in both the cities and

the small towns, where life tended to be slower, more provincial and conservative than in urban areas.

The rhythms, the music and the occasion might be different, but dance unified the community at a traditional wedding with the *mizve-tanzn* (wedding dances),[2] or in the synagogue in the special ritual movement parades called *hakafot*. These included carrying the Torah while circling the congregation, and on certain holidays, like Simhat Torah, dancing out into the streets as a part of the celebrations. There were also parades for the autumn festival of Succos when the men and boys marched with the *lulav* and *etrog* whether in impressive large city synagogues or little neighborhood houses of prayer.

Bigger city life saw Jewish tradition mixed with liberal and secular beliefs including Zionism and Communism. For the Zionists, dance, too played its part in advocating a new kind of Jewish identity, centered in the return to *Eretz Yisrael* (Land of Israel). The hora[3] of *Eretz Yisrael*, helped to bond the youth together, establishing their group cohesiveness as they veritably circled shoulder to shoulder. The hora was especially important in left wing socialist Zionist groups like the *Hashomer Hatzair*, which prepared youth to live in the socialist kibbutzim of *Eretz Yisrael*. Felix's parents allowed him to join a Zionist youth group which was not leftist, called *Hanoar Hatzioni*. A gamut of political views ran through the many youth groups, and throughout the population, though dancing the hora was favored by all.

Secular Jews saw dance in theatrical revues, in film and in productions at the Yiddish theaters (including Goldfadden's classic plays which often incorporated dance) or in touring productions such as the Vilne Truppe's famous *Dybbuk*. Directors favoring

elaborate movement in their productions included the brother- sister duo of Jakob and Lia Rotbaum. Some prominent Warsaw theater artists and Yiddish theater directors had trained in the latest arts movements with Max Reinhardt; choreographers like Judith Berg, had worked with Mary Wigman in Germany to be current with the expressionist modern dance (*Ausdruckstanz*).

In addition to the profound differences between urban and shtetl life, Hasidic and modern, Zionist and secular styles of life, after World War I, newcomers with different styles of traditional dance were also added to the population. Some were refugees, others found themselves in Polish areas because treaties redrew boundaries, putting populations together that were once German or Hungarian, Romanian or Russian. This meant that dances at Jewish weddings, for example, might acquire new traditions from different areas.[4] As the largest Jewish center in Europe, the dance of the Polish Jews was the most faceted because of the variety of ways in which the communities celebrated, performed, prayed and lived together.

Ironically, Felix Fibich spoke Polish to his parents, because they wanted him to succeed in Warsaw's future Jewish life. He learned Hebrew in school and only studied Yiddish when he prepared for his chosen career, acting in the Yiddish theater. During the inter-war period, he began as an apprentice performer in the Yung Teater.[5] He took his mother's maiden name, Fibich, as his stage name. He became a reluctant dancer when he was selected by the choreographer and Yung Teater coach Judith Berg to study dance at her school in order to improve his acting. While there, she cast him in a theater revue she was choreographing.[6]

Fibich has been a *gastrol* – a performer in the Yiddish theater appearing on tour and

in theater revues or performances, forced by circumstances to areas he never anticipated, escaping Nazis, and later communism. The first *gastrol* occurred after escaping the Warsaw Ghetto, stealing the border and reaching Bialystok. By total happenstance he bumped into performers from the Yung Theater, including Judith Berg and they began performing. Later the couple joined the Yiddish revue called Bialystok Theater of Miniatures, directed by comic actors Dzigan and Shumakher. They toured to Odessa, to Moscow, to Yerevan, Armenia, and then into Georgia. Judith Berg and Felix Fibich traveled into Ashkhabad where Fibich joined the opera house ballet company. There they married.

By escaping the Nazis into communist Russia they survived. They were repatriated to Poland where they lived from 1946-1949, performing and directing a Jewish dance school for war orphans sponsored by survivors in Wroclaw, the city formerly known as Breslau. In 1949 the couple again escaped[7]--refusing to live under communism, reaching Paris with only a suitcase of costumes and music. They performed at the famed *Archives Internationals de la Danse,* and other theaters, until proposed work with Jewish war orphans brought them to America on August 26, 1950. Only a few months later, their first concert at Carnegie Hall was reviewed in the German New York newspaper *Aufbau* (on Jan.12, 1951) which declared they were "both understood and authentically of Yiddish, but breaking out of the folk tradition to bring out human experience." Their show was sponsored by the Congress of Jewish Culture.

Since then, Fibich has choreographed, performed, taught, directed and toured in the United States; he's returned to perform in Europe and also appeared in South America and Israel. Both before and after World War II, a geographic triangle of theatrical touring

developed for *gastrols* between Europe, the United States and South America: an artist might have work on Second Avenue in New York's Yiddish Theater district and when the season concluded, the performers would travel to South America. Because of the proximity to the equator, the start of the season in the large Yiddish speaking communities of Buenos Aires and Lima was the reverse of that in the north, enabling performers year-round work.

<Figure 1 here>

By the 1960s, Felix choreographed a revue on Second Avenue, then as *gastrol* appeared with Judith Berg and singer Tova Ron in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Peru.

Berg and Fibich also performed in Israel and in the 1960s Fibich choreographed three shows on Broadway: *Let's Sing Yiddish; Light Lively*; and *Sing, Israel, Sing*. He continued as a choreographer for the Folksbiene Theater, and the Workmen's Circle where he was their beloved choreographer for a company of eight dancers for the enormously popular "third seders" with full orchestra and singers held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City.

On television he choreographed *Lamp Unto My Feet*, for CBS-TV and *If Not Higher* for NBC; and a production about the Hasidic master, the Baal Shem, called *The Three Gifts*. His own dance group appeared in all these productions. In the late 1980s, he choreographed for the full-length feature film *The Chosen*, and was again seen in shows on Broadway such as *Today I am a Fountain Pen* and Martin Charnin's *Café Crown*, which had opened at the Papp Public Theater.

On March 22, 1987 both Felix Fibich and Judith Berg were honored, along with a very few others, as "Centennial Honorees of the Arts" by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York for "Excellence in the Arts and the Promotion of Jewish Culture." In the 1990s, by then in his middle eighties, Fibich experienced a renaissance as both a dancer and choreographer. He was seen as a master teacher of Eastern European Jewish style dance at several KlezKamp gatherings in New York; he performed a lead role in the musical *Planet Lulu* [directed by the Belgian Michel Laub][8] which toured extensively throughout Europe in 1998 and 1999; and because of his acting skills and facility with French, Yiddish, Polish and English he acted simultaneously in all those languages in the 1998 full length French feature film, *XXL*. His homecoming to Poland as a dancer/teacher at the famed Krakow Jewish Cultural Festival in July 1996 resulted in a Polish television special about him and requests for him to appear again in Poland. At this writing, he is planning to return to teach dance under the auspices of KlezKamp at the 22nd Annual Yiddish folk Arts Program in their special "Meetings with Our Masters: Interpreting Jewish Dance."

<Figure 2 here>

Oral History Highlights

JBI: Your family was Hasidic?

FF: It was with a Hasidic background, on my father's side, connected to the Modzitcher Rebbe--- famous for his *niggunim* (wordless tunes). My father sang them beautifully. I had only one grandmother alive in my childhood, Malkele, a descendent of

a *tzadik* (wise man and teacher) from Kovno. That's not only a very fine pedigree, but also means your family is very well thought of and you are probably from a long line of rabbis. My grandmother was from the Taub family, a dynasty of the Hasidic aristocracy. My mother was from a merchant's family, so it was like a criss-cross. She supplied the dowry to acquire a husband who was a Hasidic scholar. Then they went into business, opening the restaurant.

We were living in a transitional period. I started my education when I was four in *heder* (religious school). But eventually I switched to a less religious school, and then to *L'Or Gymnasium* (To Light Jewish high school). I studied Hebrew but the main subjects were taught in Polish so it was a recognized diploma unlike the Bund Gymnasium where everything was taught in Yiddish. My father had a restaurant, which I hated. When I got older, I had to help out…my father had more of an artistic nature, which I inherited. He loved to sing.

On the High Holidays he sang for the Eschel Orphanage as the *ba'al musof* (the leader of the morning prayer), which was a way to raise money because people would come to hear him. He was exceptionally expressive as he sang the solemn Yom Kippur *Unesaneh Tokef* prayer, pleading God for forgiveness for the whole congregation. He had a beautiful voice, and when he was performing as the cantor, it was like an acting job. He was crying with the prayers, expressing his devotion. My father understood my desires, my longing for the theater, for the arts, anyway, more than my mother. She admired my older brother, who was more businesslike and wanted to work in the restaurant.

JBI: Where was your parents' restaurant?

FF: In the heart of the Jewish commercial area —across the street was "Moment," a Yiddish newspaper—and this was Nalewki Street, but it's all completely erased. On the ruins there's something completely new now. I have to close only my eyes and all these memories come out and I transfer this into a dance form.

JBI: Didn't you speak Yiddish at home?

FF: No. Because I was raised by the Polish girl, the domestic, who was like my second mother. I was more with her than with my own, while my parents were in the business, and they spoke to me in a broken Polish. They thought I should have a good Polish accent for the future. Our assimilation was very strong. There was, for instance, a very prominent Polish Jewish newspaper, "Our Review" or Nasz Przegląd, which every week had a page for children in Polish.

JBI: So your parents were not for staying with the old culture?

FF: They were staying with the old culture because that was their culture. Among themselves, they spoke Yiddish and the business was Yiddish.

JBI: What were your dreams, do you think, when you were in high school?

FF: I was participating in plays in high school, poor in the mathematics. I loved literature, and by myself, I started to go to art museums to learn how to look at paintings. I started to go to concerts and I heard chaos but gradually I developed my ear…I was self-educated in this area, by instinct. I was like a misfit in a way because [my parents] did not support, really, my longing for the theater. Then, I was the only apprentice accepted in the collective of Yung Theater.

[Editor's Note: Fibich was expected to go into the family restaurant business. When sent to buy produce, he would steal time to sneak into theaters in Warsaw to watch. He

determined that theater would be his realm and eventually auditioned for the Yung Theater.]

FF: I didn't have formal Yiddish education, so I had to study Yiddish to prepare myself for the auditions, to learn Yiddish poems and to read basic Yiddish literature of Sholom Aleichem, Isaac Leib Peretz, and Mendele Moykher Sforim. I was very happy. The Yung Teater trained me in diction, in breathing, and basic theatrical craft though I needed a tutor to acquaint myself with the literature.

JBI: Your last performance at the Yung Theatre was in Wozzek. That's where you met Judith Berg, the choreographer and dancer?

FF: Judith asked me to come take classes and I studied [in her dance school] with her for a year until she told me "Felix, you have to go study with the men," because I imitated her and my movements were effeminate. Judith had engaged Georg Groke [Groke was the dance partner to Ruth Sorel Abramowitch, prima ballerina at the Berlin Opera, who had been forced to resign by the Nazis because she was Jewish. She and Groke performed in Warsaw and became guest teachers in Berg's school]. Judith and Groke arranged two summer courses in Zakopane in the Tatra (Polish Carpathian) Mountains. He taught in the modern German expressionist dance style, but the classes had a ballet base, the first time I experienced a *barre* [the warm-up for ballet classes where students hold one hand on a wooden bar for balance]. I didn't have money to pay for the course or the trip, but Groke and Judith gave me a scholarship. I had the typical ghetto boy's posture, with the round shoulders, and I was reading a lot. I was always with the books, so my head was always forward. I had very distorted posture, but through

exercises, completely reconstituted my body. I was studying about three years of dance when the war broke out in 1939.

JBI: So was Judith conducting her school at the time that you were in the theater?

FF: Not only conducting, she was choreographing in the theater, and touring. She was a very well known dancer. And she was choreographing for *The Dybbuk.*

<Figure 3 here>

Her close associate and guiding spirit was Jewish composer and accompanist, Henoch Kon, who was well known for the music he wrote for the film version of *The Dybbuk*. I was supposed to also be in *The Dybbuk*, but I got sick. I was not strong enough. She did a fantastic job in *The Dybbuk*. He [Kon] was very knowledgeable about Jewish culture, Hasidic lore. He had Hasidic education also, from Hasidic background.

JBI: Talk about Judith...

FF: [Judith] had the personality…when she was onstage, she was beautiful. She was not a beautiful woman in the [classic] sense of beauty, but onstage she was completely beautiful. Her face changed, everything changed. She was emanating some kind of spirituality--her special personality came through. Judith was trained by [Mary] Wigman, so Judith's work was in that style. She was very successful and moved beautifully. She had been enrolled in Lodz in a dance school. It was limited for her and so she went to Germany to get more education with Wigman in Dresden. When she came back with the Wigman diploma [in dance pedagogy], she opened a school in Warsaw on the premises of the Jewish Association of Doctors and Engineers at a beautiful hall with a

wooden floor. Judith, for me, was a celebrity. She gave recitals, traveled all over, and developed a dance group.

JBI: Were her dances and themes about Jewish life?

FF: She danced "Menachem Mendel"[a character in the story by the same name by the classic Yiddish writer] of Sholom Aleichem, and she danced a mother-in-law dance, "*Mahatenes Tanz*" [based on the traditional wedding dance by the same name making fun of the mother-in-law] and she danced "*Licht Bench*, [The Blessings of the Sabbath Candles]." She choreographed many themes from literature and Hasidic dances like *Pilpul Tanz*, [a dance showing the gestures of students and rabbis when engaged in a Talmudic argument]. She had a whole evening of solo dances in recital.

JBI: And you performed?

FF: Because "Menachem Mendel" was a male character; I later did it. I enhanced the dance by jumps and so on because it's a *luft mensch* [head-in-the-clouds-type character]…I danced like the downtrodden, the miserables, the group dance of the poor people. And group Hasidic dance. Everything was to live piano accompaniment…We gave the first full evening concert of Jewish dance in Warsaw at the Theatre Nowości. Judith had rented the biggest theater, and it sold out immediately. When we were supposed to perform, a mob [of fans] came to the theater. Police on horses had to stop the mob because not everyone could get into the theater. This was in the beginning of 1939.

JBI: Tell me about 1939...

FF: Actors in the theater I was with had to join the Yiddish Actors Union. But there was a limited amount of work for Jewish actors. There were many without work even though they were qualified. The director of the union told me, "You don't have any

qualifications to be active in the theater. Just forget about it." So, I went to consult with my director of the Yung Theater, Michal Weichert. With his encouragement, he told me I did have a future in the theater, so I decided to escape to Russia, because I knew that in Russia the arts and artists are esteemed. Poland was divided by the Nazis and by Stalin: part of Poland occupied by the Red Army, parts by the Nazis. After terrible bombardment in Warsaw in September, and we survived the bombardment, the Nazis came in and they called me to do physical work, abused me and so on. I realized that my life was in danger, that I had to run. My mother said, "We lived through one world war, the Germans will not eat us, and if we stick together, we'll survive." But I felt that I can't stick it out, and one morning, without saying goodbye, I put on two shirts, two pairs of socks. There was a Polish woman who was in love with me, and she sewed money into the zipper of my fly, and I left. The Nazis had built the ghetto wall and I somehow had to smuggle myself, not to be captured by the Germans. I, with another guy, we walked till we approached the demarcation line between the Russians and the Germans, and, when the sentries passed by, I run through. And I was running, running, until I found myself some distance away and hid in the bushes somewhere to catch my breath. Then I kept walking--I arrived to a little town and saw the red banners with the Cyrillic letters, and I realized that I am now on the Russian side. I took a train to Bialystok, a city which usually had about 100,000 but had swelled to half a million.

JBI: Tell me about your Russian performances…

FF: [The Russians] were always picking on us, that the themes are so religious. Here comes, a delegation of Jewish writers from Moscow, the leaders of the Jewish community…When they saw [us perform] they said, "This [is] what we need. This [is]

what we want. Because every nationality in Soviet Russia has a dance company, and we see you are presenting Jewish folklore with dignity. That is not embarrassing for, us and this [is] what we want." They got the approval from Moscow so that all the provincial little clerks could not touch us any more, and we were sent on a tour.

JBI: Do you remember where you performed?

FF: We performed all over Soviet Russia--Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov, all the big cities. Then in other republics, like Tbilisi in Georgia, even in Armenia… all over Russia. It was a fantastic adventure…We had an orchestra, and the leader of the orchestra was a composer. He wrote for us, music. He wrote according to do a scenario of the dances…

[At a Yiddish theater in Odessa] We were supposed to open June the twentieth [1941]…It was in an open air theater. Suddenly, a storm, rain, and the theater was flooded. The piano was swimming. So the performance was canceled. Next day, we look up into the sky. It's beautiful weather. They cleaned up the theater, brought in a new piano, and we are ready to open. Great excitement. And we hear an announcement on the radio that there will be a blackout. We said, "But we are playing in the open air, so it probably doesn't relate to us." Then at twelve o'clock, the announcement of Molotov that the Germans attacked--But we have to open, so we play, we opened with blue (camouflage) lights. We started the performance…We are dancing onstage and suddenly the Germans are bombing the port. The audience started to run in a panic. Here we are, dancing onstage. Show is interrupted. We didn't finish. And that was the end of our performances in Odessa…we knew from our experience in Poland that…this is blitzkrieg. And we knew that the Russians would not be able to withstand the motorized

army, German army, when they were so primitive…They will be in a few days in Odessa. So the director arranged immediate evacuation.

We went by train to Baku, and as soon as we arrived in Baku, we were surrounded by soldiers at the station and we were arrested. This was a strategic center for Russia because of its oil refineries. So we were put in house arrest because the city was closed. Next morning, under convoy, they led us to a hotel and [the entire company was] there a few days…and then by boat on the Caspian Sea and to cross the sea to Asia … the captain of the boat found out that we're a theater group,

"We want a concert. We are giving you free passage. You have to give us a concert."

"Okay, we'll give you a concert tomorrow."

"No, not tomorrow. Immediately, now."

"What's the hurry?"

"We want a concert now." So we performed for them immediately. He knew there would be a terrible storm. After the show we all got seasick.

[Editor's Note: The interview continues with Fibich explaining all that transpired in Turkmenistan where the revue disbanded. Fibich, a Caucasian European was allowed to join the all-Asian opera in Ashabad, only because they were desperate for men as so many had been mobilized. He eventually delivered food stuffs by train to Polish refugees in Kazakhstan and Siberia.]

FF: On our arrival to Poland…in May or June, 1946, was a traumatic experience. We were looking for survivors. It was hard to accept that no one member, not one member of my family survived…Luckily for Judith, her two sisters survived in France.

In Warsaw, the Jewish committee, the Jewish authorities, found out that we are in town, and they approached us to dance, to do a concert. We refused. How can we dance in a cemetery?… we didn't have the inner strength to start dancing. So cleverly they invited us to visit an orphanage near Warsaw. The woman, the director of the orphanage, showed us around…This was the breaking point because I felt that we couldn't abandon these children. We have to do something, to work with them, to give them some joy. Most of these children were baptized, hidden in monasteries, and they resented their Jewishness. They knew that to be Jewish meant to be killed, you had no right to live…They couldn't accept anything, any thought of being Jewish. The organizers told us that we are the only ones who can reach the children through Jewish music and Jewish dances. We started first to dance for them. Then, I introduced them to Jewish holidays, music, Jewish folk songs, Jewish movements, explaining to them the meaning of the movements…We really touched the lives of many of the children…

FF: The Jewish authorities said to us, "Look, you are the only one[s] who work in the field. Why don't you open a school? We'll support you. We'll build for you a dance studio and you will select children taken from all the orphanages and will have with the school build a dormitory…You will develop a Jewish dance group, a Jewish dance company." That was like a dream. We grabbed at this opportunity…We selected Breslau [before the War it was the German city of Breslau, but afterwards it became a part of Poland, renamed Wroclaw] because in this area called Silesia was the greatest concentration of Jews. They renovated two floors in a building. One floor held dance studios and the other floor had the dormitories where the children lived. We started to work with them every day for two hours. In the mornings, they went to school and they

did their homework…After a year, we developed a dance group and we started to visit certain centers of Jewish life, where Jews were concentrated, performing with the group…We were--with prodding by the Jewish community--we were trying to rebuild Jewish life in Poland and they told us, "We developed the only Jewish dance school in the world."

JBI: What year was this?

FF: This was already '49. We decided to arrange a concert in Warsaw, and through connections we got the big hall.

JBI: What did you dance?

FF: Our standard repertory. Dances to the stories of Peretz, Sholom Aleichem, we included also the Hora, but that was later. The hall had about three hundred in the audience.

<Figure 4 here>

Afterwards, we went to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. [Felix explains the remarkable circumstances of their escape from Communist Poland to Paris].

JBI: What did you do in Paris?

FF: We approached the *Archives Internationales de la Danse* (International Archives of Dance) and we told them that we are Jewish dancers, that we have some costumes with us, that we can give some recital of Jewish dance. They printed a brochure under the title "*La Danse Juive Mystique de la Secte Hasidim*"("The Mysterious Jewish Dances of the Hasidic Sect"). That was how they advertised us. Of course, we did do

Hasidic dance, but we also had the Hora on our program. We were trying to use every aspect of Jewish dance known to us: Hasidic, Jewish folk song, Jewish literature, and the Biblical themes we danced, also we had a dance of the Holocaust, *Ani Ma'amin* (I Believe in the Coming of the Messiah Despite Tragedy).

It was sold out immediately, and immediately on popular demand, we repeated again, did another. From this, some Jewish organizations started to approach us. We started to dance on different occasions and Judith started to teach in an orphanage of Jewish children near Paris…

JBI: How did you meet Bathsabee de Rothschild, patron of the arts and especially of Jewish artists?

FF: She came to our concert [at the *Archives*] because she was so interested in dance, and she came to us backstage and asked us what she could do for us. …She had an apartment in Paris on St. Honore, and she invited us there. What a contrast to our refugee life. The valet opened the door with white gloves…We were taken to the salon filled with flowers and a table covered with little enamel boxes was so beautiful…She came in, very gracious, invited us for tea, and she asked us again, "How can I help you?" We told her, "We live in a hotel…it is for us a hardship to pay for the hotel. I know there is a house for Jewish intellectuals, where you help support those intellectuals to live for free. We are dancers, we are not intellectuals, so if you can help us to get a room in this building, that will be for us a big help. After a few weeks, we got a letter…I opened the letter and it says, "On the request of Madame Bathsabee de Rothschild, there will be a room for us at the [housing for intellectuals]." This was invaluable help for us.

JBI: Did you do other performances in Paris?

<Figure 5 here>

FF: We performed in the biggest halls in Paris--Salle Pleyel, Salle Gavot, Palais de Chaillot, Theatre Sarah Bernhardt--and UNESCO programs. We performed, we danced a lot at that time. Of course, we danced for the Jewish Theater, too. I even played a part in a theater production, *Green Fields*. It was a classic and I played the lead at that time and performed for many Jewish organizations. [Editor's Note: There were riffs between the right wing and left wing organizations, but Fibich and Berg danced for as many as they could in order to make a living]. Then we got the invitation--suddenly came the letter from America--that a director of an orphanage arranged for us a contract from the Congress of Jewish Culture to come on a concert tour.

JBI: What year was this?

FF: 1950. We arrived by boat on August 26, 1950.

[Editor's Note: Felix and Judith arrived in the U.S. with no money and little possessions but their dance artistry. The concert at Carnegie Hall at the end of October sold out, and was repeated, and through this they started to make connections including one with the Jewish Welfare Board which booked them in Jewish Community Centers throughout the U.S.]

JBI: So, what did you do?

FF: Mainly, we had a niche with the Yiddish speaking groups the Farband, Workmen's Circle and summer camps. The first camp where we worked was for the Workmen's Circle and then Boiberik.

JBI: Boiberik?

FF: It was a small camp…The Workman's Circle was bigger. They learned about us so they approached us. They paid us very well with the twelve hundred dollars for the summer, so we could give up our furnished room and have a better place…Next summer, we switched to the Zionist Labor Unzer Camp and we had concerts and the Hanukkah festival of New York. Bonds of Israel sends us out of New York to Montreal, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Boston. But Judith created her style by instinct, not analytical. Later on, I started to analyze. Why are we doing, why we are moving this way? Why we are using this movement? We came to the conclusion that we are using angularity.

JBI: Angularity?

FF: Yes. Later, when I started to analyze this [I realized that] when we are dancing, our movements are not round. Our movements are…like the *Shin*…the letters…those broken angular lines…All these things, all these are Hebraic in style which nobody realized, that these are the images.

Then another thing we discovered, I discovered in movement…Opposition. The Jewish mood has two opposite moods: joy and sadness.

JBI: The Jewish mood?

FF: Not joy, but--they say what the Jewish woman at the wedding says, "Oy I'm so happy," but she sighs.

JBI: Looking so sad?

FF [miming sadness]: Oy, the *krechtz*! [Yiddish for "sigh"]. This opposition also expresses when the Hasidim are dancing on bent knees here and reaching out and the bent knees standing. The body, for example, they take the ritual cord or belt to separate

the physical or sexual from the spiritual.

JBI: Sexual?

FF: Sexual. [Pulled] in different directions.

JBI: With the belt dividing the body. What's the cord called?

FF: The *gartel*, divided. The division, the belt dividing the body in two parts, pulling in two different directions. So we discovered the opposition in the body. So when the arms go one way, the head goes the other way.

JBI: When your arms are going to the right and your head is looking to the left?

FF: Opposite, always opposition. This was the character, the style of the dance. The soul, the Jewish soul, which is torn between joy and sadness…this reflects in our body also when we are dancing. It's connected. We found the connection, the reason why we are moving in this way.

JBI: So you were the analytic person that found the descriptions?

FF: Yes. I started to ask questions: Why am I doing this? What's the reason? Then, it was later on a key to choreographing and maintaining this style.

JBI: So you designed your leg like *a la seconde*, [the ballet gesture where the leg is lifted to the side of the body, at least parallel to the ground] with the angular flexed foot to go with the angular arm?

FF: Yes. When I was jumping, I was flying. Also, I developed [angularity] in turns. And twisting, always in opposition. Because you know, all these things come from the character, from the inside. That's what makes us different. So my purpose is to leave these movements as our own authentic movements, Jewish. Different. We have a different culture, different way of life, different also in dance. The East European Jewry

developed a certain way of movement, moving, gestures, a vocabulary of gestures. Like the Yemenite does this. A Jew does this…You have to know the root of the movement, then you can do variations

JBI [watching Fibich demonstrate angular movements]: You're using your hands, how do you describe this?

FF: Chagall followed the same principles. We discovered that he uses the same opposition in the body. Wherever we could, we were trying to find inspiration to create in our authentic [style]. Later on, in Israel, [where he toured with Berg in the early 1960s] the Israelis wanted to get away from the shtetl. We were always saying to them, "You can't be a half person, without a past. You can't just cut off and start from the beginning." But we were like a voice in the wilderness. We were the old people, we were the past…But we didn't have any difficulties with our audience. They understood.

We were consistent, and I know you cannot cut off the past and you have to accept it. You can't cut off the *galut* (life in the Diaspora as opposed to life in Israel) in Israel. Now they've come back to it, and in America there's a nostalgia and a hunger for knowledge about life in Eastern Europe before World War II. With our audiences, we never had difficulties. Nobody ever wondered what we were doing. They always understood us.

JBI: What about your experience returning to Krakow, in the Jewish festival there?

FF: I was very ambivalent about it. I danced there fifty years ago. So here I am, going to dance after fifty years? It's incredible. So I reconstructed my dances, and I went. I did three or four workshops. I was absolutely overwhelmed with the reception. The

kids, Polish kids, were coming, growing every day, more and more people. Everybody knew about it and they wanted to learn Jewish dance. The mayor said that this culture was developed on this soil; this is part of Polish history, part of Polish culture. This was what had been rejected and, suddenly, it is accepted as part of Polish culture. They came to me, "You are unique." They took me to Warsaw, and the television station made a program.

JBI: You came back to New York for a production?

FF: When I [returned] to New York, someone recommended me to audition for the play *Lulu's Planet*. I auditioned--another venture with movement, with dance, with reading.

[Editor's Note: Felix had traveled extensively in his career including to South America, following others in the time-honored *gastrol* Yiddish theater circuit from Europe to New York to South America.]

Some further comments about Jewish dance made by Felix during the Lincoln Center Dance Division interview:

My idea--my *idée fixe*, I would say--was to preserve the elements of Jewish movements, of Jewish dancing, the vocabulary of Jewish movements, which is a foundation for Jewish dance, which was never used in Israel. They take from the Greeks, from the Arabs, from the Russians, from the Polish became an Israeli dance…but they never did any research in this direction…You have to know the source. You have to take the authentic movement and develop it…

I am very often disturbed by distortion of Jewish dance. Going against tradition. Presenting Jewish prayers, such as lighting the candles on the knees, which are against Jewish tradition. Why go against? Why not to develop the tradition, to show the beauty of the tradition, not to go against?…

I was trying to explore every aspect of Jewish life, like Jewish folk song, Jewish poetry…Hasidic dances, Jewish holidays, Sabbath services…Theater's a profession. You can't always be emotional about things. Emotion can be an inspiration, can be helpful, but I performed all my life. That's how I made my living, I got paid for it. It's not only a profession, I think it's a vocation, also an obsession.

Notes

This essay is expanded from the original version in *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, Volume 20, 1-2, 2000.

[1] See also Yehuda Hyman's essay "Three Hasidic Dances" p. _ and Jill Gellerman's "*Simcha Bais Hasho'eva* in Crown Heights: Rehearsing for the Ultimate *Simcha* Among the Lubavitcher Hasidim" p. _ in this book.

[2] See also Zvi Friedhaber's "The Dance with the Separating Kerchief," p._ in this book.

[3] Ruth Lieblicha, member of a Zionist youth group who danced the hora, was fourteen when she started a diary in the Warsaw Ghetto from her capture until December, 1943, when she was deported to her death in Auschwitz. She wrote (her unpublished diary is in the archives of Yad Vashem) "If I will be in *Eretz Yisrael* 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." (translation by Judith Brin Ingber from the Hebrew).

[4] Jacek Luminski, Polish dancer, choreographer, and researcher, did extraordinary field work in the 1980s, searching out survivors who could tell him about Jewish dances and traditions before World War II. For example, Tauba Finkielman and Sarah Flajs of Dzierzoniow, lower Silesia, told him that in the *koilitch tanz*, the parents of the bride greeted the couple with a loaf of bread and salt which were put on the doorstep of the house where the wedding feast would take place. However, in other areas of Poland, the *koilitch tanz* was performed as the bride went to her wedding with the community accompanying her to the sounds of the klezmer musicians. The mother of the groom held a *challah* or braided Sabbath bread and danced as the people paraded by.

[5] Founded by Michal Weichert, who had studied with Max Reinhardt, this was first a studio theater for idealistic young performers specializing in avant-garde, politically radical productions that were hailed in the Polish theater world and increasingly closed down by the Polish police. Weichert desired to turn Yiddish theater into "a powerful weapon in the struggle for national, social and human liberation." (From Michael Steinlauf's forthcoming article on the Yung Teater in the Yale University/YIVO Encyclopedia of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe). Fibich played in works about racial discrimination in the United States as well as radical remakes of Yiddish theater classics.

[6] Judith Berg was perhaps best known as the choreographer for the classic 1937 black and white Yiddish film "*The Dybbuk*" including the famous "Dance of Death" in which she

appeared as the masked death. The film was directed by Michal Waszynski, the music composed by Hanoch Kon, Berg's collaborator. The popular film about unfulfilled love, broken promises and mystical aspects of Judaism was based on the play by Ansky, drawn from folklore and tragic stories about a forgotten arranged marriage. The groom dies and inhabits the body of his betrothed, becoming a dybbuk who haunts her until she too, dies.

[7] The first ambassador from Israel to Poland was an invited guest to the concert. Fibich and Berg met him and asked that he arrange visas for them to Israel, but since Poland did not recognize the new country it was an impossible request. Instead, through requests to a classmate of Berg's who worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they were improbably given passports to France though they were allowed to take no money with them. They were permitted only one suitcase. At the Parisian train station, they heard someone yelling, "Joint," a code word for help for Jewish refugees. They knew they had met up with a representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, founded for the relief of Jewish war sufferers to help feed, clothe and rehabilitate the displaced from the European Jewish communities. See Yehuda Bower's "American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, "*Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem: Keter), 83.

[8] For two years, Fibich toured the major cities in Denmark, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden and Australia, acting and dancing. He celebrated his 81st birthday at the opening performance of "*Lulu's Planet*" in Denmark.