



Matti Goldschmidt

## All Around The World

Our folk dances exist in all corners of the world, even in the distant and most unexpected corners...

To date "Rokdim-Nirkoda" magazine has published articles, the vast majority of which have been about what was happening in Israel. We now want to open the magazine to information about all the places in the world where Israeli folk dances are danced.

It is important that we know how our dances have developed in each and every place, who the people are who drive this movement and what they think and do so that we become acquainted with the various dance communities.

We start with **Australia**.

# Israeli Folk Dancing in Australia



**On the development of folk dance at the various dance clubs in Australia**

*As the director of "Rokdim", I was somewhat familiar, though from a distance, with the intense competition among the dance clubs in Melbourne.*

*In the early 2000's, I had travelled to Australia and taught at Hora Shalom in Perth with **Sara Friedman** and in Melbourne, at Zooz with **Richelle Arber**; I also visited **Frances Fester** in Sydney. During my visit to Melbourne, I was well received by all the club directors and we sat down for a dinner together.*

*I decided that, in this issue, the first article would be dedicated to the country of Australia and its dance clubs. Since there are so many clubs there, this article will span two issues.*

*It can be said that the "father of folk dance" in Australia is **Sheffi Shapira**, who immigrated there in the early 1970's, and actually set in motion the process that created everything that is there today.*

*For the purpose of this article, I prepared a uniform questionnaire that was sent to all the dance clubs with which I have been in contact. **Matti Goldschmidt** compiled, wrote and edited all the incoming responses, and I thank him for the tremendous work he has done.*

**Yaron Meishar**, Editor

**E**ven though, for most of us, Australia seems to be really "upside down", somewhere at the end of the world, I was lucky enough through the last three decades to have had the opportunity to dance several times on the so-called sixth continent, namely in the cities of Sydney and Melbourne. While working in the early 1990s as a tour guide for some Pacific Islands, New Zealand, and Australia, Sydney always was the main destination on my tours. Back then the weekly dance sessions took place in the Sydney suburb of Bondi. Its perfect beach allowed me to have a good swim and a nice sunbath before joining the dancing. The

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security guard at the entrance of this privileged Jewish club (with lots of Las-Vegas-style slot machines for Jewish pensioners trying to pass their time and spending money they would not need for better things) was tough – once a security guard at the entrance to the complex did not even allow me to enter the premises wearing sandals instead of proper shoes and I had to forfeit the dance session. In all the other larger cities I visited in Australia, except for Melbourne, I could not find any Israeli Folk Dance [IFD], whether it was in Brisbane, Newcastle, Canberra, Adelaide, or Perth – just to have named a few places.

Only almost 20 years later, I eventually found my way to Melbourne and in March 2011 participated in two classes, accompanied by my host, **Aura Levin Lipski**: On a Wednesday night it was at the “Nirkoda” group with **Rosie Tusia**. An evening later, with only partner dances, at “Hora Israeli Folk Dancing”, led by **Helen Sokolski**. Interestingly, in contrast to the contemporary situation in Israel, Australia's dance scene is mainly led by women – as, by the way, was the case until around 1960 in Israel. Another fact that caught my eye is the unexpectedly high number of teachers, especially in Melbourne.

In the summer of 2022, together with **Yaron Meishar**, I tried to contact as many organizers of IFD in Australia as possible, to ask them to send us their resumes concerning their dance activities. Yaron even created a full questionnaire. Unfortunately, not all of them responded. Some responded only to a part of the questions and further queries remained mostly unanswered. Some responded in length, while others just wrote in a short sentence. That made the individual contributions of each group unequally long, but, in the end, all groups were treated equally and had identical opportunities and choices. Nevertheless, I tried to collect the data we received and sorted it out, so the result is what you can read below. Most probably the oldest and most important Australian IFD circles accepted their chances to be introduced here.

For those unfamiliar with the size of Australia, please bear in mind that, this country is 347 times larger than Israel, roughly about eighty per cent of the territory of the U.S.A and forty-five per cent of that of the Russian Federation (excluding the annexed Ukrainian territories). The distance between Sydney and Melbourne, which on most maps seem to lie next to



March 9, 2011, M. Hoenig, R. Tusia and the author Matti Goldschmidt (center), D. Borghi, J. Banky, I. Cohen, U. Krieser, J. Steel (top row right). Photo: archive – Israelisches Tanzhaus

each other, is still a hefty 900 km or 560 miles. No one just hops from one city to the other for a single dance evening, as we often do nowadays in Israel. The population of Australia is 25.9 million people including roughly 112,000 Jews (0.43%). Sydney, the capital of New South Wales, has 5.4 million inhabitants; Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, has 5.1 million, and Perth, the capital of Western Australia, has 2.6 million.

Nowadays, there are quite a few more dance sessions all over Australia than those listed in this article, such as in Brisbane (Queensland), Canberra, and even one in Darwin, the capital of Australia's Northern Territory.

## "Shalom Australia" – Melbourne

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**Sheffi Shapira** and his wife, **Yael**, had a certain vision: To share their love for Israel and her culture. Just one year after his arrival in Australia in 1975, Sheffi, together with Yael, founded a club called, "Sheffi's School of Multicultural Dance", which was eventually run for eighteen years. Sheffi was born in Tel Aviv in 1949. His love for folk dancing started as a child in the 1950s and 1960s at a youth movement. After his military service in a Nahal brigade (1967-1970), he became a member of Kibbutz Nachal Oz. This is where he met Yael. They lived there for five years when they decided together to move to Australia.

As Sheffi told the Australian Jewish News in its March 16, 1990, edition (p. 31): "In desperation, we danced with Greek and Yugoslav groups and eventually set up our own Israeli folk dance group in a hall in Ascot Vale. In those days 70% of our classes were non-Jewish". Soon they moved to a modest hall of a local youth movement, Hashomer Hatzair, where they taught some Israeli and, quantity-wise, more so-called international dances. Over three years, the school grew from a small group of enthusiastic dancers with a good variety of nationalities to a remarkable size of thirty. Within only a couple of more years, the demand grew so much that they trained some of their dancers to become teachers, thus being able to add some more classes until they had up to four hundred dancers per week.

The school conducted weekly classes for all levels and ages. Annual dance camps were introduced with guest dance instructors and choreographers, including **Moshiko Halevy**, **Yankele Levy**, **Meir Shem Tov**, **Moshe Telem**, and **Israel Yakovee**. In the field of folk dance, Sheffi hardly stopped being active while advancing in further education. He not only received a graduate diploma in "Movement and Dance" from the University of Melbourne. He also attended the first "Australian International Dance Teacher Course", danced ballet for five years, ballroom up to silver level, was involved in Greek dancing for five years, and attended a good number of international dance workshops (Turkish, Balkan, Chinese, Italian, West African, Japanese, and Romanian). He learned from and worked with several Israeli choreographers and teachers like **Yoav** and **Mira Ashriel**, **Eliyahu Gamliel**, **Raya Spivak**, and **Bentzi Tiram** – just to have named a few.

Looking back, Yael was doubtlessly the engine behind the community work, being an excellent researcher and organizer with a commitment to having the entire community dancing and celebrating. Great emphasis was placed on ethnic influences in Israeli dance such as Yemenite, Hasidic, Eastern European, and Arabic. A change in the repertoire of Sheffi's school from international to Israeli dancing took place in 1985. This was after Sheffi had visited Israel, where he met **Carmela Menashe**, aka **Ayala Shapira**, and **Seffi Bar Lev** at a session led



Sheffi Shapira

With the rising number of dancers, Yael and Sheffi decided to establish a highly trained dance performance group. They founded and managed "Shalom Australia", a Jewish folkloric troupe, and choreographed dances showcasing Jewish richness and its diverse origins, customs and costumes.



Group photo of Nirkoda Troupe

by Yoav Ashriel. Sheffi asked both to film as many teachers as possible, including **Mishael Barzilai** and **Eliyahu Gamliel**. All in all, he received a convolute with more than one hundred and fifty recorded dances which were subsequently introduced to his classes. Despite that, their love for international dances never stopped and so they hosted internationally well-known guests from many countries including, just to give two examples, **Bora Özkök** from Turkey and **Andre van de Plas** from the Netherlands.

Besides the activities in his own school, Sheffi taught at many primary and secondary Jewish, as well as non-Jewish, schools as a regular part of the school program. He was also closely linked to local Jewish youth movements and was regularly invited as a guest instructor to appear at camps and special occasions. Often, he facilitated sessions at Jewish weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Outside the Jewish community, he was regularly called to churches and other Christian organizations to showcase and teach Israeli dance, which they normally termed "Jewish dancing"; through these dances, the Christian participants expressed their joy of feeling closer to Jesus. Last but not least, Sheffi also conducted sessions with disabled young adults.

Sharing his knowledge and love of dancing, he participated in popular music and dance festivals such as the National Folk Festival in Canberra [the capital of Australia], the Port Fairy Folk Festival [about 300 km (= 187 miles) east of Melbourne], and the Cygnet Folk Festival near Hobart [the capital and most populous city of the Australian island state of Tasmania]. Local community dance groups invited Sheffi to teach in cities like Perth, Sydney, and Canberra.

With the rising number of dancers, Yael and Sheffi decided to establish a highly trained dance performance group. They founded and managed "Shalom Australia", a Jewish folkloric troupe, and choreographed dances showcasing Jewish richness and its diverse origins, customs and costumes. Sheffi was the artistic director and choreographer of the group, while all the costumes were designed and sewn by Yael. In the end, they had two age groups - a kids' group of about six to eight dancers aged 10-14 and an adult group of approximately fifteen dancers of all ages. Most of the dancers came from their dance school while some others were from the general community. [Not all of the performance dancers were Jewish.]. Certainly, they all had to go through an audition to be accepted. Some of the choreographies they used came from **Moshiko Halevy**, **Alida Segal**, and **Israel Yakovee** under the supervision of

Sheffi. "Shalom Australia" performed for over ten years with spectacular success at a variety of events and festivals, both within and beyond the Jewish community. Sheffi himself performed not only with the group but also in solo dances. In addition, he choreographed and performed for several Hasidic song festivals in Melbourne and was even featured in an ABC documentary called "Australia Dance".

In 1989, Yael retired from the school and **Helen Sokolski** joined the dance school in partnership with Sheffi. In 1994, after eighteen years of running the show, Sheffi retired from the school. However, nineteen years later, in 2015, he joined the Zooz dance group for recreational dancing and later associated with **Richelle Arber** for two years as a staff member. From 2018 until now, Sheffi, **Noni Gordon** and **Marie Feigel** are involved with a very rewarding folk dance class for older adults at the University of The Third Age [an international movement whose aims are the education and stimulation of mainly retired members of the community] that combines Israeli and international dancing with exercises to maintain and improve balance, stability, fitness, memory, and coordination.

Sheffi was active in several organizations, for instance, he was a committee member of "Multicultural Arts Victoria" (MAV), organizing workshops, exhibitions, and performances in multicultural arts. MAV provides services to support the diverse arts sector, catering to culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse creators and their communities. He was a founding member of RIDA, the Recreational International Dance Association which was renamed in 2019 to IDA, The International Dance Association, which was one of the special interest groups of AADE, the Australian Association for Dance Education, which was renamed in 1992 to Ausdance, the Australian Dance Council. RIDA offered dance courses for teachers and also conducted workshops with Australian and overseas experts.

As part of the 150 years celebration of Victoria, Sheffi was commissioned by MVA and the Education Department to produce an audio and video kit representing dances from different nationalities including Israel. The program was comprised of travelling throughout Victoria and conducting in-service sessions for teachers to establish a common folk dance repertoire for all schools.

Since he arrived in Australia in 1975, Sheffi has established himself as one of the country's leading folk dance exponents. Yael's and Sheffi's visions have become a reality by providing



Dance session at "Nirkoda"

a large number of weekly classes to hundreds of people. Throughout Australia, he has been responsible for introducing the joy of Israeli and multicultural folk dance to thousands of people of all ages. Today, Israeli dancing is part and parcel of the cultural life of Melbourne.

## **Nirkoda – Melbourne**

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The “Nirkoda Israeli Folk Dancing Club” was founded in Melbourne in 1988 by a small, but “enthusiastic group of dancers”, among them, **Ami Even Chaim**, **Uri Krieser**, and **Tzali Almagor** who previously danced at “Sheffi’s School of Multicultural Dance” (see above).

The club is a fully incorporated, not-for-profit organization conducted by an elected committee of management, with **Annette Bagle** – President, **Natalie Taft** – Vice President, and **Jack Ginger** – Treasurer, just to name a few. From its humble beginnings, numbers grew quickly and today, more than thirty years later, it continues with a very active membership. It offers four classes a week that include line, circle and partner dances, ranging from beginners to advanced. The city of Melbourne is particularly proud of its multicultural reputation which is certainly reflected in Nirkoda's membership.



*Sagi Azran, Sharon Elkaslassy, Israel Shiker*

Nirkoda has a teaching staff of six – namely (in alphabetical order) **Judi Banky**, **Denise Borghi**, **Christine Butson**, **Rita Fischman**, **Mary Hoenig** and **Rosie Tusia**. They even have an in-house choreographer and teacher: **Sharon Elkaslassy**, as they do have a very close connection with **Sagi Azran** who has come to Melbourne many times as their guest. Roughly every two years, the Club has run very successful and well-attended camps and workshops for the entire Melbourne dance community, as well as for dancers visiting from interstate and overseas. Other international guests have included **Tamir Shalev**, **Nona Malki**, **Rafi Ziv**, **Shlomo Maman**, **Israel Shiker**, **Michael Barzilai**, **Avi Peretz**, **Naftaly Kadosh** and **Kobi Michaeli**.

Nirkoda’s aims are simple. Dancing together generates a sense of being part of a warm and congenial group around a common love of Israeli music, culture, and body movements. According to the club’s “weltanschauung” [world view] members are supposed to gain

physically by exercise through dancing and its associated health benefits, in addition to gaining psychological and emotional benefits as they engage with each other across generations (the members range in age from their 40s to their 80s) and across all religious denominations.

Nirkoda has been aware that today’s youth is not interested in IFD anymore with so many other options and commitments available. In fact, to focus on that age group, they tried training younger dancers to become dance teachers



*Denise Borghi*



*Rosie Tusia*



*Judi Banky*

or dance leaders, but because of the lack of interest, they have not been able to continue the training. On one of his visits to Nirkoda, Sagi Azran ran once a “youth session” but even that had limited success. There must be some dancing at the local youth movements, like Habonim, but in the end, they are not “getting hooked” like the founders of Nirkoda had a few decades ago. Direct contact with these youth movements does not seem to exist.

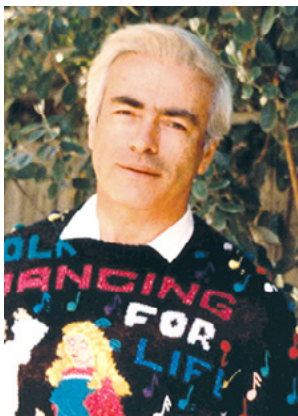
Since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns began in Melbourne in March 2020, Nirkoda has offered three classes a week via Zoom – that is to say, for nine months in 2020 and for seven weeks in 2021. Staying connected for those two years to the club members through ZOOM has been of paramount importance. An unexpected bonus, and certainly an additional pleasure, has been the opportunity to dance (virtually) with IFD dancers everywhere and almost all over the world. Now, since 2022, Nirkoda is again conducting old-fashioned face-to-face classes and continues to create a strong connection with Israel and the worldwide Israeli Folk Dance community.

**Uri Krieser** was born in Vienna in 1938. Just before the “Anschluss” [the annexation of the Republic of Austria into the German Reich by the Nazi regime on March 13, 1938], the family together with six-week-old Uri made it to Shanghai [China] (as the occupying Japanese authorities did not ask for a visa for arrivals via the sea). In 1948, **Mao Tse Tung** decided to expel all foreigners and less than a year later, in January 1949 they arrived in Haifa as “stateless refugees”. Uri’s father made an old abandoned and broken home in “Sh’chunat ha-Bulgarim” in Neve Sha’anan [a neighborhood in Tel Aviv] “livable”. However, in 1952, the family decided to move to Australia where Uri has lived ever since. He grew up in Hashomer Hatzair [a Zionist Youth Movement] in Melbourne (1956-1961) where he continued to develop a strong bond with Israel, its people and especially its culture. In 1962, he married “a wonderful girl” from Hadera who tragically died in 2016.

Uri’s first connection with folk dance was playing the accordion and flute at dance sessions. This was until about 1985 when he decided that he would rather prefer to dance. He became the first President of NIRKODA and started as a dance teacher conducting the Saturday classes. Uri got in touch with **Yehuda Emanuel**, purchasing the dance material he sold, such

as videos, music cassettes, and dance instructions. Later, when he came to Israel in 1992 and joined the “Chug Le’Madrichim Le’Rikudei Am” in Tel Aviv. He also purchased additional material provided by ROKDIM as well as some Maman-Productions. As the Australian Jewish News reports in its March 16, 1990, edition (page 31): “Uri’s three sons said of his father and his passion for Israeli dancing: 'He’s a dad who hasn’t grown up'.”

Uri first discovered the music for “Shabbat Matana”, officially released in 1992, during a prior visit to Israel and he loved this music immediately. He found it such a gentle and lovely tune that he decided to try to set a choreography to it. Uri was aware that, as an “IFD-nobody”, the chances to get his dance popular outside of Melbourne were slim. And as it seems, it took almost a quarter of a century until this dance became known in Israel. Besides his second registered dance, “Shalom Lach Aza (Gaza)”, (which he performed with teacher **Malka Goldstat**), he choreographed several others, but as a non-resident of Israel, he would, according to his own words, always have problems making them popular. He looks back, a little unhappily, to the “old days” of IFD in the 1980s. Much of the pioneering purity (not to speak about the 1960s, Uri added) has changed forever with growth, demand for more music at a faster rate, financial expectations of visiting choreographers, and a dilution with overseas influences.



Uri Krieser

Much has already been written about Nirkoda's latest addition coming straight from Israel, Sharon Elkaslassy (see Rokdim-Nirkoda issue 108, pages 35-38). His first contact with Australia was when he was invited to a dance camp in Melbourne in 2010, together with Sagi Azran. He was so impressed by the city, that he eventually returned to Melbourne to make this city his new home. Since then, his choreographies such as the latest one "Tirkedi Tirkedi", out of 70 so far, come straight from down under. Currently, Sharon is conducting three weekly dance sessions for Nirkoda, and leads special events such as so-called "nostalgia" workshops (definitely his favorites, as he pointed out) as well as a marathon session here and there.

## **Hora – Melbourne**

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"HORA Israeli Folk Dancing" was founded in Melbourne in the early 1980s under the leadership of Sheffi Shapira, and was originally called "Sheffi's School of Dance". It was the first IFD group in Australia. It was renamed "HORA Dance School" in 1994 when Helen Sokolski took over as Director. HORA's aim was and is to instil a love and connection to Israel through song and dance, providing most professionally, not only a fun atmosphere, but also a varied and exciting repertoire of Israeli dance as well as special IFD programs. An additional aim was to introduce IFD to children and teenagers enrolled in many Jewish Day Schools as well as private classes. HORA is a private business, not a registered charity, and therefore receives no financial support from a third party. There is no yearly membership fee or subscription. The cost of a session is AUD 15 (= US \$ 10 or ILS 35). A 10-session pass is available for AUD 120 (= US \$ 81 or ILS 280).



*HORA-group, Melbourne: From left to right front row Helen Mizrachi (grey hair), Helen Sokolski, Diane Grosman, Pamela Schwartz. Back row: Hanna Shuvaly, Asher Elazam, Sarah Raboy, Sue Appel, Julianne Bulkin.*

Today's goals include maintaining a high level of interest and enthusiasm in all the classes, creating an enjoyable environment, socializing and promoting fitness while catering to all levels and all generations. It is as important now, as it was then, to keep a finger on the pulse of current Israeli dance trends. Thus many new dances are introduced, albeit keeping in mind quality, not quantity while still maintaining the classic repertoire which HORA sees as important to ensure that the roots of IFD are not forgotten.



HORA provides four sessions per week, which includes two daytime classes of ninety minutes catering to low intermediate to advanced dancers. One evening advanced class includes line (block), circle and couple dances (three hours) while their fourth class offers partner dances only (two hours). Depending on the class, the number of participants varies from thirty to eighty, while the age range is from forty to eighty.

For many years, HORA has been the forerunner in inviting Israeli choreographers to Melbourne camps and workshops, so the dancers have experienced learning dances from the source. New dances are carefully selected to include a variety of Israeli dance styles as well as music tempo, always keeping in mind what is popular and what is played in Israel. "Where appropriate, we pay particular attention to the words and meanings of the songs and the special connections of the words to the dances." One of Hora's teachers, **Chana Shuvaly**, often prepares Vimeo presentations for special dances, explaining the background of the songs and including the singers who are performing the song as well as the name of the choreographer who created the dance to it. In the classes, while a certain song is being played, the details are displayed, showing the name of the dance, the choreographer as well as the singer, which helps the dancers to become familiar with the names of those behind each dance.

Originally, the dances which were introduced at the Hora sessions were learned from videos and later from DVDs. Now, dances are available online and via social media, so the material has become more readily available than ever before. Some of their teachers travel to overseas camps and sessions in Israel, often learning dances from the choreographers and then teaching them back home. Before new instructors commence teaching, they work extensively with and are mentored by a leading instructor. The following is a list of the teachers, all part of the big "HORA family":

**Helen Sokolski** - leader and director of Hora. She is a trained school teacher and graduate of the AADE (Australian Association of Dance Education) and started dancing in 1986 with Sheffi Shapira. She became his business partner in the dance school in 1990 which she then took over in 1994. She has wide experience in teaching children and adults at all levels, has been involved in many Jewish and multicultural camps, workshops and festivals as a master teacher, and is a choreographer and performer. As a young child, Helen grew up in Israel developing a certain love for Israeli music. In addition to her school teaching experience, she became "completely hooked on IFD". Over the years, she especially loved the challenge of maintaining high levels of professional interest and enthusiasm in the dance sessions, camps, workshops and special programs, and receiving positive feedback and response from the dancers.

**Sue Appel**, like Helen, is a trained school teacher and a graduate of the AADE teachers course. She has been doing Israeli folk dancing for approximately thirty-five years and teaches and conducts IFD for all ages in day and night classes. As an invaluable asset, she is a close friend of Helen who helps her in all aspects of running the school. Sue has organized dozens of IFD events such as community dancing sessions, school choreographies and presentations, school and synagogue Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, school debutante balls, for festivals and Jewish holidays, as well as organizing and running IFD camps.

**Julianne Bulkin** is HORA's newest addition to the teaching staff especially responsible for youth and children.

**Asher Ellazam** has danced for more than forty-five years and started teaching approximately



Helen Sokolski



Sue Appel





*Purim dance session at Zoot Club*

35 years ago. He also performed and taught in dance troupes.

**Diane Grosman** started dancing in Habonim and began IFD in 1988. She began teaching in 1998.

**Lili Hampel** started dancing in 1989 and teaching in 2000, specializing in teaching line dances.

**Helen Mizrahi** started dancing IFD 45 years ago and taught especially to youth groups.

**Les Posen** started dancing in 1991 and teaching in 1994.

**Sara Raboy** began dancing IFD in 1991 and in 1995 started teaching beginner classes.

**Pamela Schwartz** has been dancing for forty years (which is almost all her life). She represented Argentina in a performing group for five years and taught IFD for over 20 years.

**Chana Shuvaly** started dancing IFD in 1991 and teaching in 1994. Except for researching the background of dances, she is also responsible for some choreographies.

HORA is the longest-running Israeli dance group in Australia and according to their own data has the most extensive dance repertoire spanning the decades from the 1970s onwards.

Competition between the groups used to be important, sometimes even fierce, but as the years have progressed, it certainly has become less. Each of the Melbourne groups has its individual tastes and views on teaching new dances, so repertoire covers both common and different ground, creating for each group its own flavors and atmosphere. As many dancers attend more than one group each week, this contributes to a varied and exciting dance environment in Melbourne.

In the last decade or so, all four Melbourne groups have come together for combined Israeli dance camps called Rikud Oz. The organizing committee is made up of two leaders from each group, eight in all. They invite up to four choreographers to each camp. It takes a lot of cooperation and some compromise to achieve together the great success they have had so far.

Like all over the world, Hora also has a significant ageing dance population, even though it actively tries to encourage the younger generation to participate and be involved, ensuring that the repertoire and energy levels cater to them as well. They currently involve this generation in teaching and leading dance sessions, so that the future of Israeli folk dancing will continue to thrive at Hora.

Helen subscribes and uses the Rokdim website to access dance videos and information on all things related to IFD. She finds the Rokdim-Nirkoda magazine very informative, no doubt extending her knowledge of IFD worldwide. She is especially grateful that the magazine began to also publish its articles in English which led to an enormous increase in the number of readers worldwide.

**The Machol Israeli Dancing Club under Moshe's leadership saw itself as a vibrant and social organization dedicated to the promotion of Jewish and Israeli culture through dancing to the sounds of Israeli songs**

## Machol – Melbourne

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/297462716677>

The Machol Israeli Dancing Club was established in 1993 by **Moshe Lichtenstein** as the third IFD club in Melbourne. He started dancing in the 1960s while living on a moshav in Israel. Visiting youth leaders engaged the younger moshav youth in various activities including Israeli dancing. It became Moshe's favorite activity and, ever since, he has had a close attachment to this type of dancing.

After having left Israel for Melbourne, he found an opportunity to join an existing dance group in creating his own little Israel, thus in some way, keeping a connection to his homeland. In 1993, an opportunity arose for him and his wife **Shula Goldberg** to establish a club where they started teaching Israeli dances. At a later stage, they were joined by some additional teachers, among them the so-called "twins," **Lily Rose** and **Rita Blint**. They often dressed alike and specialized in block or line dances.

The Machol Israeli Dancing Club under Moshe's leadership saw itself as a vibrant and social organization dedicated to the promotion of Jewish and Israeli culture through dancing to the sounds of Israeli songs. Although the members of Machol were mostly not Israelis, Moshe still maintained the same approach in all their activities of uniting with Israel including donations to Israeli organizations such as Magen David Adom and others.

Reminiscing the early days of running classes, the Club used single-song cassettes for playing the music on a tape player with hundreds of cassettes carried in large boxes to class. In the mid-1990s they transitioned to minidisc players and eventually upgraded to a laptop computer with corresponding software. Learning new dances in the old days involved reading written instructions which later evolved into video cassettes produced by Yehuda Emanuel and then into a more organized system introduced by Yaron Meishar. Together with the video material, one of the Club's most dedicated dancers, Jack Steel, developed a code-based dance website called the Australian Data Base (ADB). Special mention should be made of the amazing Esther Blumenthal, who runs the administrative side of the club and is beloved by everyone worldwide.

**Shula Goldberg** is especially proud of the fact that Melbourne, with its four IFD clubs, is kind of a dance center in the diaspora. It was not for nothing that she was quoted in The Australian Jewish News (July 3rd, 2009) in an article titled, "Israeli Dancing to Melbourne's Beat": "Melbourne is one of the powerhouses of Israeli dancing outside Israel".

## ZOOZ Dancing – Melbourne

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In September 2005, **Richelle Arber** and her daughter **Belinda** (Bel) took a giant leap into the unknown and launched their first class, taking a huge risk in trying to run a fourth Israeli dance group in Melbourne. Their initial support staff were Richelle's husband, **Sam** (who only started dancing after returning from the Brazilula camp in 2001), her sister **Suzy** (z"l), her brother-in-law Jack, and a family's good friend named Claude. From the very beginning, Bel and Richelle placed a lot of emphasis on making sure that their classes were run professionally, were affordable for and accessible to all, and of course, all that had to be based on fun. Politics were not allowed!

It was Richelle's desire to work independently, as much as possible, in the field of IFD with lots of ideas to realize her goals – even though there were already 3 well-established Israeli dancing groups in Melbourne. From the beginning, Zooz's main goal was as it is now: To teach its dancers well enough so that they would feel the pure enjoyment of dancing with their heart and soul – and not just follow someone else's feet, as it often seemed to be the case. Beginners were to be inspired to progress and become competent and



*Dancing with Richelle Arber*

confident dancers within a short space of time. Zooz's goal for the advanced dancers was, and still is, to inspire them with a repertoire that is always to be varied and interesting. New dances should be taught as accurately as possible, with a minimum of time and fuss. Last, but not least, an important personal goal of Richelle should be noted: Her desire to coach and mentor capable younger dancers who have an interest in becoming Israeli dance instructors.

In order to put all her energy into Zooz, Richelle resigned from her prior jobs: She had been a tax accountant for professional sportspeople and entertainers, that is, saving taxes for her clients, but in the end, she felt that it would be much more preferable to save people's souls through dancing. She also worked for the Australian Open Tennis Championships for twenty-five years as a transport coordinator.

Through the first period, the only teachers were the founders of Zooz, Bell and Richelle. Over the years, however, Richelle has begun training several teachers who started as new beginner dancers in the classes. They became assets to the whole Melbourne Israeli dancing community. Richelle attaches importance to the fact that the soon-to-be teachers learn her terminology and teaching methods. They are encouraged to produce their own step notations of the dances and, highly importantly, to have a thorough understanding of various rhythms. Richelle supervises their teaching during their internship and never hesitates to give feedback. As Richelle pointed out, she also "can be very tough",

**Cindy Berg** is a speech therapist by profession. She started the teacher-training in 2008. For over 12 years she has been very capably running Zooz's Thursday morning beginners to intermediate class with assistance from **Annette** and **Colette**. Cindy turned out to be very caring and patient with a quick wit and excellent communication skills. She attended the Karmiel Foreign Teachers' Summer Course in 2009, 2016 and 2018.

**Annette Lieberthal** is a retired pharmacist. She had been dancing at Zooz's for a few years before she was invited to start a teacher's training approximately around 2012. Annette assists in most of the sessions and substitutes for Richelle and Cindy whenever they cannot take a class.

**Colette Lipp** was an occupational therapist by profession. Like Annette, she also started as a beginner in one of the classes and later took a training course for teachers. She is particularly knowledgeable about Israeli singers. Colette attended the Karmiel Foreign Teachers' Summer Course in 2016 and 2018.

**Shelley Cohen** is an optometrist by profession and is the latest new trainee teacher, currently

under Richelle's supervision. Although Shelley started dancing over twenty years ago, she has only started coming consistently to Zooz classes in 2022. She is in the process of learning Richelle's terminology and teaching methods.

**Laura Elkaslassy** (born Gilhome) joined Zooz's new beginners' class together with her mother. She was quickly "mirroring" and assisting Richelle in different dance classes as well as at school events. However, at present, Laura ceased dancing, as she has a young family. She recently moved outside of Melbourne and is busy running her expanding bookkeeping business.

**Bel Arber** seems to be a natural talent. As Richelle put it: "Few would argue that she is the best IFD dancer in Melbourne, and, I dare to say, perhaps of all Australia". She already had several years of experience teaching Israeli dances prior to founding Zooz's. Presently, Bel has taken a break from dancing and teaching due to her work (project manager) and her family commitments.

Zooz provides four classes a week. Tuesday evening is for beginners up to "high intermediate" with around forty to fifty dancers between the ages of 25-75. Thursday morning is for beginners to intermediate with around forty to fifty dancers between the ages of 50-75, while Thursday evening is for intermediate to advanced with up to thirty dancers between the ages of 55-75. Saturday afternoon is for new beginners up to "low intermediates" with around twenty-five to thirty dancers between the ages of 40-75.

Zooz has never received any financial or any other form of support from any organization. It is run as a personal business, not as a club or registered charity. Therefore, there are no joining or membership fees. All dancers, apart from very new beginners, pay A\$ 10 (= US\$ 6.70 or ILS 23) per class they attend or have the option to purchase a class pass - either 6 classes for A\$ 55 (= US\$ 36.50 or ILS 126), or 11 classes for A\$ 100 (= US\$ 67 or ILS 230). New beginners pay only A\$ 5 per class. Despite increased costs, Zooz continued to maintain these same fees for many, many years, since this club has never been profit-motivated. Zooz currently runs only four sessions per week (down from seven classes per week in 2019!). All classes are three hours each, starting with beginners and graduating to higher levels. The admission is for the whole session. If some keen new beginners wish to stay on for the whole class, Richelle always tries to encourage them to do so, without, of course, charging any additional fee.





Before a dance is taught, Richelle tries to do her very best to learn the meaning of the lyrics with the help of Hebrewsongs.com, google translate and certainly with a little help from some of their Hebrew-speaking dancers. Getting a good understanding of the songs is always of interest and importance not only to the teachers but to the dancers as well.

At Zooz, dances are never taught randomly or haphazardly. On the contrary, with Richelle's teaching methods, it is important to plan well ahead. Every now and then she may come across an older dance that has never been taught at Zooz and it may strike her as a good teaching tool to reinforce a particular step that she has just taught the beginners or low-intermediates. She normally teaches a mix of brand-new dances along with older dances (which she defines as the "pre-2000" dances) that have not yet been introduced into Zooz's repertoire. On the other hand, Richelle will often review dances that have fallen out of their repertoire, in preference to teaching something new.

In case of upcoming Jewish festivals, she would often either teach or revise a dance connected to that festival. All important Jewish holidays such as Sukkoth, Hanukah, Purim, or Shavu'oth are celebrated with dance parties. Those parties are open to the broad public, that is everyone is welcome and, as a result, and they are always well-attended. Certainly, a lot of effort is put into catering and - not to forget - decorating the hall according to the festival theme. Especially Zooz's non-Jewish dancers are highly appreciative to receive a brief explanation of a particular holiday.

Zooz's dancers also like to perform at charity events, as they did for example in November 2015 at the annual "Mitzva Day", as The Australian Jewish News reported in its issue, dated Nov. 21st, 2016.

At least seventy-five per cent of the dances being taught in the beginners-low-intermediate classes are classics from the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s and a few even from the 1950s or 1960s as well. On any given night, close to one-third of the dances selected for the intermediate-advanced class program are dances choreographed before 2000. As a matter of fact: The majority of their favorite dances, in all of the classes, continue to be from these periods.

It is needless to say that Richelle uses video clips extensively. For years, she has been sending the links to her dancers for dances posted on YouTube by Rokdim in order to preview the

new dance which will be taught. Naturally, they also become an invaluable reference for home practice for anyone keen to advance after teaching. Dancers and teachers alike are very grateful to have this resource. Therefore, Richelle is a long-time subscriber and supporter of ROKDIM. She is also familiar with its magazine since it provides excellent and informative contributions from many experts on many interesting topics.

Concerning the number of new dances, there were definitely too many of them - not only in the past decade. Richelle has no intent "to stifle anyone's creativity", but has no idea how to deal with this surplus. The major problem with all those new dances arises from having to make a decision about which of these new ones are chosen. No doubt, many of those new dances choreographed from both inside and outside of Israel are amazing. The other side of the coin is that it is almost impossible to keep up with all of them. In the older days, Richelle could have easily followed the repertoire in overseas camps or evening sessions in Israel. This, however, is not the case anymore, since enough common repertoire ceased to exist, even compared to other Melbourne classes.



*Welcome to Zooz (with Sagi Azran)*

Many of Zooz's dancers, and some of the teachers, also attend classes in the other three existing Melbourne groups. From the outset, when Richelle started her first class, she encouraged her dancers to continue dancing with any other groups they were already dancing with. Richelle herself has always attended the dance camps and workshops organized by the other groups. Likewise, she also encourages the Zooz dancers to join all dance camps and workshops available. When Richelle and her daughter Bel closed the partners-only class, they suggested that the dancers join the other groups offering partner dances so they would not lose their repertoire accumulated over the years.

Richelle is not too optimistic about the future of IFD in general and in her city. "I have been very concerned about the future of Israeli dancing in Melbourne for a very long time. I think it is in dire straits. I'm sorry to say that the average age of dancers in all the Melbourne groups, not just Zooz, is well over sixty-five years. I guess that this is a worldwide issue. Most of the experienced teachers in Melbourne are between 60-75 years old." Above all, who could have possibly predicted in 2019 what was in store for all in the year 2020 and beyond, looking at the outbreak of COVID-19 and how it would affect dancing? With a common goal, all Zooz teachers combined to broadcast about three Zoom sessions per week, teaching new dances and reviewing older ones. Richelle also led a special Zoom session just for absolute

**Richelle cannot see the possibility of all the Melbourne groups coming together under one roof in the very near future. There would be too much friction in deciding who would lead the classes**

beginners, that is those who had never danced before, and so-called beginners+ who had less than a year of experience.

ZOOM did not charge for any of its Zoom sessions. To everyone's surprise, they were joined not just by their own dancers, but also by many teachers and dancers from all around the world. Cindy, Annette, and Colette ensured that the Thursday morning sessions were always very entertaining and informative. The Zooz dancers loved the fact that they no longer felt isolated and were able to stay connected with each other and with their teachers. After all, they are all part of an extended family that cares about each other. Another positive aspect was that Australians made lasting friendships with many of the overseas participants.

Being "perfectly honest", Richelle cannot see the possibility of all the Melbourne groups coming together under one roof in the very near future. There would be too much friction in deciding who would lead the classes. Perhaps in about ten years or so, this could be considered. The number of dancers in each group may well have reduced in size by then, because many of today's over 70's will most likely have ceased dancing because of age-related issues. In the meantime, competition is great, no doubt the keyword for Zooz! Because it is the competition that makes each group try just a little bit harder to satisfy their dancers' needs. In the end, according to Richelle, it is the best thing for the Melbourne dancers to have freedom of choice and most possibly a richer repertoire.

Looking back twenty years and well before she started teaching, Richelle was actually not only dancing at the then three existing Melbourne clubs; she was also friendly with all their leaders. After she once returned from another fabulous experience dancing in an overseas dance camp, she called a meeting between the leaders. She then proposed the idea to them that they should combine for one large dance camp rather than each of them running their own smaller camps each year. Unfortunately, it took a further nine years before her dream finally came true: The 1st "Rikud Oz" was held in 2011, the 2nd followed in 2015, and a 3rd in 2018. These events were very much enjoyed by all the participants from the, by then, four Melbourne groups as well as by dancers from all around Australia and even from overseas visitors.

Dancing certainly plays a major role in Richelle's life. "Dancing is my life; it is my passion. It comes second to my family. I dance because there is no greater feeling in the world than moving to a piece of music and letting the rest of the world disappear. When I dance, it is healing. I feel as though I am flying. I stop feeling sad; I lose all the pain, I can let go, and I can smile. It is unfathomable how much my life has changed since I started Israeli dancing in 1992." Before Richelle started Israeli dancing, she had very little connection to her Jewish roots. Over the years, she had frequently visited Israel - not an easy and certainly a costly effort considering the distance between those two countries: There are no direct flights from Melbourne to Israel and the flying time, one-way, is at least around 20 hours; not to talk about a time difference of ten hours.

Israeli dancing has given Richelle a great love of what she calls "Eretz Israel" and an increased knowledge of the High Holydays and other Jewish festivals. She even became interested in Israeli politics and tries to learn as much as possible about Judaism, Jewish culture and traditions, which she subsequently passes on to her dancers. Many of her Zooz dancers have been so inspired and motivated by her stories that they've decided to join overseas dance camps and even to experience Israel dancing at sessions in Israel. Quite a few of them have started to learn Hebrew and many now also take an active interest in Israeli culture and politics.



Since 1995, she travelled extensively to dance camps and workshops all around the world. For example, Hora Keff, Machol Europa, Machol Miami (each three times), Chicago twice, Chile thrice, Los Angeles twice, Camp Bitnua twice, Brazilula, Horati (NY) as well as in different sessions all over Israel with many different markidim. Despite having had years of teaching experience, she enrolled in the online International Markidim Course in 2020/2021, as she is always looking for ways to improve and tweak her own teaching methods and terminology. Not surprisingly, she gained a teaching certificate from the University of Tel Aviv and also made some wonderful friendships with teachers and dancers from all around the world. Last, but not least, she joined the annual Karmiel Dance Festival four times, participating once in the Karmiel Summer Course for Foreign Teachers and Dancer of Israeli Folk Dance directed by **Dany Benshalom**.

There are several more topics Richelle mentioned, such as hosting a good number of guest choreographers and teachers, which included names like **Ofer Alfassi, Oren Ashkenazi, Dany Benshalom, Eran Bitton, Shmulik Gov-Ari, Avi Levy, Elad Shtamer, and Ira Weisburd**. ZOOZ has also organized a few nostalgia workshops and several so-called “marathons” as well, which serviced the entire Melbourne dance community. Richelle is extremely proud of the fact that ZOOZ has raised in excess of A\$ 35,000 = US\$ 23,480 or ILS 81,000) for various charities, both local and Israeli, through the running of a good number of fund-raising Israeli dance events.

## ***israelidances.com – Melbourne***

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**Aura Levin Lipski** is a singer, songwriter and concert performer who was born in Newcastle, New South Wales. She grew up in Canada, the United States and Israel. As a teenager, while she lived in Israel, Aura had fallen in love with Israeli music, learned to play the guitar, and started Israeli dancing on the Carmel in Haifa. It was a love that changed her life. She returned to Australia to finish high school and university studies in Sydney, where her show business career began. Her adult dancing experience began in Melbourne with its “thriving and lively Israeli dance communities”.



*Aura Levin Lipski*

On stage, she became a support artist for the late great **Ray Charles** and for many visiting Israeli performers including **Yehoram Gaon** and the late **Zvika Pik**. Doubtlessly, one of her highlights was a performance in Moscow’s magnificent, albeit aging, Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in 1989; a concert that attracted 3,000 Jews. In the recording studio, ABC, the Australian national broadcaster, commissioned Aura to record her own compositions with a twenty-five-piece orchestra, which ABC Radio then broadcast nationally. Aura also became a well-known public speaking trainer and developed group communication skills.

Meanwhile, she married the prominent journalist, **Sam Lipski**, who was involved in promoting the case for Israel. Their mutual love of Hebrew and Israel’s music created a formidable partnership. This included their work – through his writing and her music – in the campaign for Soviet



Yoram Sasson with Aura Levin Lipski and her guitar

Jewry and other cultural outreach experiences. This was also the time when the internet brought the international dancing community closer together, and one of the websites that can claim the credit is doubtlessly the one created in Australia: [www.Israelidances.com](http://www.Israelidances.com) which began in Melbourne. It has since become one of the global resources for Israeli dances.

The story began with its founder and publisher, Aura Levin Lipski, who believed that better communication between dance groups and dancers could lead to a happier dance community.

Over the years, it became internationally known as "Jewish Australia" and "Jewish World Life Online" and is followed in close to one hundred countries. In the early days of the internet, this was no doubt a ground-breaking initiative. Aura's next venture was [www.hebrewsongs.com](http://www.hebrewsongs.com) which publishes translations of Israeli songs into English and other languages so that dancers everywhere can understand what the lyrics of their dances mean.

Aura's websites served as a startup for the current global network of cultural exchange, information and inspiration. An originally non-intended but still welcomed side effect has been the opportunity for many website users to learn basic Hebrew by reading the Hebrew transliterations in English script. The site also features dedications from some of Israel's greatest musical artists: **Yehoram Gaon**, **David Broza**, **David D'or** and **Dudu Fisher**. One of Israel's most beloved songwriters, the late **Ehud Manor**, was deeply moved by this project: "HebrewSongs.com penetrates my soul and my veins. This is my home." He adapted his dedication to [hebrewsongs.com](http://hebrewsongs.com) from his famous song, "Ein Li Eretz Acheret," a song which the Israeli public voted as Manor's most popular song.

At the same time, [Israelidances.com](http://Israelidances.com) has become one of the go-to sites for dancers. It now lists 385 teachers and five hundred classes in thirty-six countries. All the teachers included can contact one another and view their dancers through the site. "Communication is its heart and soul", as Aura pointed out. Known globally as the ADB (the Aussie Database), the dance listings is the work of **Dr. Jack Steel**, who compiled and keeps updating his original creation, the hard-copy Israeli Dance Catalog. Aura believed that his amazing work should be shared worldwide by being put online. They collaborate together but separately in different fields. This means one can click on any of Jack's listed 10,952 Israeli dances (as of the end of 2022) and their sources, and find the song lyrics in case they are translated. Aura mentioned a bonus: "Chinese dancers can find 1,664 of the dance names in Chinese script."

Aura's love of singing and dancing has taken her all over the world where she is known for her golden voice and her Aussie sense of humour. Wherever she goes, she travels with her guitar and brings the spirit of Hebrew music to the dance community. "The joy of travelling and being able to dance almost anywhere in this world is fabulous", she said, "from Sydney to Singapore, Honolulu to Hong Kong, and any other place in Israel or the United States". 🇺🇸

More to come in the next issue,  
about more clubs in Australia

