

When Life is put to Music

THE "HORA"—EXPRESSION OF A PEOPLE'S HAPPINESS

By Dorothy Kahn

HORAS and kvuzoth have become synonymous. Almost any Zionist whether in Canada or South Africa, knows that the halutzim "dance in circles" after they have finished their work, no matter how little else he may know of life in Palestine. Then, when he comes here and visits the colonies, he is usually disappointed in not finding a trace of a hora.

In Paris a tourist may buy a ticket to see the Folies Bergere or the Russian Ballet; in London he may secure a place at Covent Garden; in New York he may see Radio City. But in Palestine, unless he is extremely fortunate, he cannot see the hora — the one thing about which the tourist has heard most.

This is because horas are an expression of deep joy, and therefore spontaneous. One who deliberately goes in quest of them must be as optimistic as small boys who believe that you catch birds if only you can put salt on their tails. It is said that a decade ago there were horas in the kvuzoth every Friday night. But even that "programme" is no longer adhered to. The unbridled enthusiasm of the early pioneer era has somewhat subsided, and the sources of entertainment have increased. The libraries are more ample; concerts are more frequent; some kvuzoth have radios.

BUT I have managed to put salt on the bird's tail! One Friday night I saw for the first time, the kind of horas that one reads about in books on Palestine.

The members of Givat Brenner were giving a party in honour of one of their comrades, who was leaving for America, where he will remain for two years to work among Jewish youth.

As soon as the supper dishes had been cleared away, the dining room began to take on a festive air. In one corner was a booth flaunting an "N.R.A." label while in the other the vegetables of the colony (including the heads of cauliflower wrapped in cellophane which have caused comment among the Tel-Aviv housewifery) were displayed in baskets.

The population began to assemble. Brenner has a large population now, the second largest membership among all the kvuzoth. The four hundred members were literally draped about the room, sitting and standing on benches, tables and window seats. The "programme" began. There were poems, speeches, songs dedicated to the departing guest. A newly arrived German girl sang beautifully—and one was tempted to break into applause at the end. But the ban against applause is a kvutzah rule which may not be broken. Then came a "film" comprised

of a series of pictures which showed the departing delegate's "biography," from the time he was born, bespectacled and very wise, until he left for America where he is to stand on corners extracting money from corpulent businessmen with the aid of a vacuum cleaner, and to return to Palestine in an airplane bringing the "booty."

THEN someone began to sing. In quick succession the songs followed one another. The tempo increased and so did the volume of the voices. Among the new German immigrants (and they comprise 60 per cent.) those who did not know the words of the songs hummed. The youngest among the new-comers aged from 15 to 17, were having a glorious time. They still have one link to Germany—and that is their clothes, many of which seemed incongruous in this coarse and rough-and-tumble atmosphere. Scattered throughout the group, each of whom bears in one way or another the mark of his contact with the soil and hard labour, were these youngsters, some of the girls still white, fragile and pretty in an urban way.

The songs went on and on, the tempo gradually increasing until it seemed that it must somehow break the bounds. It did. Suddenly there was the scrape of benches and tables being moved. Preparation for the hora. Four people formed a circle and it had started. In the flash of a second the four had increased to forty. And within

a few moments the forty were but the inner circle of a larger circle. And there were six circles, one within the other. Arms were wrapped around shoulders and feet in heavy boots kept perfect time to that song that all were singing.

Now there was a similar circle on the other side of the room. The few spectators were pressed against the wall. The room was a solid mass of swaying bodies. On and on they went, the rhythm increasing in speed until it became almost delirious. Then the singing stopped — there was just a wordless whistling — staccato — seeming at times like the beating of tom-toms. Heads were thrown back and feet pounded the floor tirelessly. The room seemed racked with youth and vigour. As it became more ecstatic it seemed one moment like the dancing of the Hassidim on Simchat Torah night. Then again as the melody died and became a repetition of sharp monotonous beatings, it seemed like an Arab wedding fantasia.

ELEVEN o'clock. Midnight. The dancers were too exhausted to sing now, so someone began to play a mouth organ — or more correctly four mouth organs which he changed periodically. On and on the hora went. A mass of heads and arms and feet. Sometimes the circle surrounded the man playing a mouth organ. Sometimes he left the centre of the circle and skirted it, dancing as he played. A boy came from the kitchen with a huge kettle of water which he threw on the floor — not particularly helpful "oil" but it cleared the air which was by this time heavy — he threw the water in all directions, sprinkling the dancers as well as the "ballroom."

But no one cared. A boy with a blue corduroy jacket was having a glorious time being stepped on; the water sprinkler was dancing with his kettle on high; the piper was playing on four mouth organs at once (almost).

And I was seeing at the long last the mad horas that books about Palestine tell us are danced in the kvuzoth!

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