

Sima Libman And The Actors Of The Jewish Amateur Theater



Pictured in the photograph are the actors of the Jewish amateur theater after the performance of 'Mazel Tov'. Sitting: me and Joseph Shaikevich, standing (left to right) Avigal Fainstein, Ben Druil, Berta Danzig, Isaak Beilinson.

In the early 1960s, during Khrushchev's rule, there was a rumor circulating among Jews in Tallinn that Jewish amateur drama and vocal groups were already active in Moscow and authorities didn't oppose to this. Then, a small enthusiastic group got together in Tallinn and decided that it was time to revive Jewish cultural life. Some of those enthusiasts were Meishe Sher, Boris Pasov, and Jakov Pats. They were all raised in a Jewish cultural environment and had taken active parts in Jewish cultural life before the war. I was invited, too, because I knew Yiddish and had taken part in Jewish drama before the war. To begin with, we decided to set up a drama club and produce performances in Yiddish. At that time, many Jewish families in Tallinn still spoke Yiddish and even the children knew it well.

Meishe Sher handled all the organizational and legal part of the job. He was a lawyer and knew exactly which official channels had to be addressed in order to obtain a permit for a Jewish drama club to operate. The principal thing was to get the approval of the city's Communist Party committee. I have no idea how Meishe Sher managed to do this but a few months later, we had an official permit for our activities and a room for rehearsals in the furniture factory club. We asked all our friends and relatives, and found people willing to be a part of our amateur theater. Some of them were Fanny Halbreich, Tsezar Malkin, and Beilinson. They came and were happy to help. For our first production we picked Sholem Aleichem's 'Mazl Tov,' a one-act play, and assigned the parts. However, after it barely started it all fell apart because Halbreich broke her leg, Beilinson got sick, and Malkin changed his mind.

We needed a director urgently and found him. He was a young Jewish man from Tartu who had graduated from a drama college in Moscow and worked as a director and actor in the Estonian Drama Theater in Tallinn. His name was Ben Druif, he was a talented man with a true Jewish soul, and this may have been the reason why he agreed to help us immediately. Soon came the opening night of 'Mazl Tov.' I played the part of Beile the cook, and Joseph Shaikevich was my partner. He was born in Ukraine and spoke lovely Yiddish. In the production, he had the part of Rabbi Alter who was in love with Beile the cook. Berta Danzig had the part of the mistress, Avigal Fainstein was her housemaid, and Isaak Beilinson was the clerk who courted the housemaid. The small auditorium where we performed was full of people who wouldn't let us leave the stage afterwards. Those who couldn't be there on the first night demanded a second run. We had singers and musicians who joined us and soon they formed a Jewish women's singing band. So, our second performance, which took place in the Russian Drama Theater of Tallinn, was made up of two parts: the 'Mazl Tov' production in the first part and the singing band in the second. The show was sold out.