“İSTORIKOS”

ISAAC (İS’HAK) BENVENISTE
by Steven Nemirovsky

Isaac Benveniste, born in 1889 in Aydin, Turkey, was the son of İshúa Benveniste, a professional Turkish violinist, and Rahél Yafé. Due to the ongoing Turkish-Greek conflict in Aydin, the Benvenistes moved to the port city of Izmir. As a teenager, Isaac and his younger sister Rebeca would be called upon to perform Turkish-style dances at weddings and private parties, where their father, İshúa, would perform with his orchestra.

Isaac as a young man joined the Turkish Military Academy. He went with his best friend, a Turkish fellow named “Selahattin Upçin,” who would later marry Isaac’s younger sister, Alegra. Entering the Turkish military was unusual for a Jew at that time. Isaac was assigned to a military school in Izmir to be trained as a Turkish police officer (a.k.a. Jandarma), and in 1908 was assigned to the Turkish Infantry Police Department of Rhodes (Rodos Phyade Jandarma Dairesi) and resided there until June 1912. Being a Jew and a Turkish citizen, he fostered a good relationship between the Juderia and the Turkish civilian community. At that time, the Turkish Governor of Rhodes was Vali Nâzım Bey (1907-1912).

In 1911, Isaac’s father, İshúa Benveniste, arrived in Rhodes to visit him, bringing his Turkish violin. When the Fis family greeted İshúa on his arrival at the port of Rhodes harbor, Victoria Ángel Levin, Sarina Fis’s first cousin, recalled how İshúa was put into a horse-drawn carriage to honor his arrival. He was carried back to the Fis residence while playing his Turkish violin.

Similarly, Isaac, a military police officer in Rhodes, would perform the Zeybek dance with other Turkish police officers on most Turkish holidays. Zeybek is a traditional Turkish dance and music of western Anatolia. These popular dances, whether single or with a group, symbolize Zeybek’s dignity and bravery as a swordsman in southwestern Anatolian villages.

On May 4, 1912, when the Italians invaded Rhodes, Isaac, who was there, went into hiding and was aided by the Bensiyon Fis family, living on Via la Fasana. He then got engaged and married in Rhodes to Sarina Fis, daughter of Bensiyon and Miriam Fis.
Fearing for his safety and being caught by the Italians, Isaac escaped and arranged for a secret passage on a small Turkish fishing boat back to Izmir. His new wife, Sarina, followed, and they married again in Izmir by Chief Rabbi Rav Palachi, since some families could not attend the Rhodes wedding. Like many young couples at that time, Isaac and Sarina emigrated to America and moved to Seattle, Washington.

On numerous occasions, the Sephardic families in Seattle would host large gatherings for evening events (nochadas) in a spacious hall. Isaac would put on his Turkish uniform, boots, and military fez and perform the Zeybek dance to the music of a 78 rpm record player.

The oral history of Isaac Benveniste was from Steven Nemirovsky. He is the son of Rachel Benveniste Newman, the daughter of Isaac Benveniste of Izmir, Turkey, and Sarina Fis of the Island of Rhodes. Steven was born in Los Angeles and grew up within the Rhodes Sephardic community of Leimert Park and Ladera Heights.

Sources:
4. Photos from the RJHF archives: Turks in zeybek costumes in Rhodes, and the Fis family home on La Fasana, Rhodes, Greece.
5. Photos courtesy of Steven Nemirovsky: 1919 Fis family in Rhodes, Isaac and Sarina (Fis) Benveniste in California, and Steven with Udist, Udi Hirant in Istanbul, Turkey.
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