



"ISTORIKOS"

ISAAC (IS'HAK) BENVENISTE

by Steven Nemirovsky



Isaac Benveniste

Isaac Benveniste, born in 1889 in Aydin, Turkey, was the son of Ishúa 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 Rebeka would be called upon to perform Turkish-style dances at weddings and private parties, where their father, Ishúa, 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 Piyade Jandarma Dairesi) and resided there until June 1912. Being a Jew and a Turkish citizen, he fostered a good relationship between the Judería and the Turkish civilian community. At that time, the Turkish Governor of Rhodes was Vali Nâzım Bey (1907-1912).

In 1911, Isaac's father, Ishúa Benveniste, arrived in Rhodes to visit him, bringing his Turkish violin. When the Fis family greeted Ishúa on his arrival at the port of Rhodes harbor, Victoria Ángel Leví, Sarina Fis's first cousin, recalled how Ishúa 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.



1873. Two Zeybeks and an artisan from Aydin, Turkey by Pascal Sebah.



Performing the zeybek in Rhodes. Photo by Dorothy Hosmer. National Geographic Magazine, April 1941.



Turks in zeybek costumes in Rhodes. RJHF Archives.

On May 4, 1912, when the Italians invaded Rhodes, Isaac, who was there, went into hiding and was aided by the Bensiyón Fis family, living on Vía la Fasana. He then got engaged and married in Rhodes to Sarina Fis, daughter of Bensiyon and Miriám Fis.

ISTORIKOS (cont.)

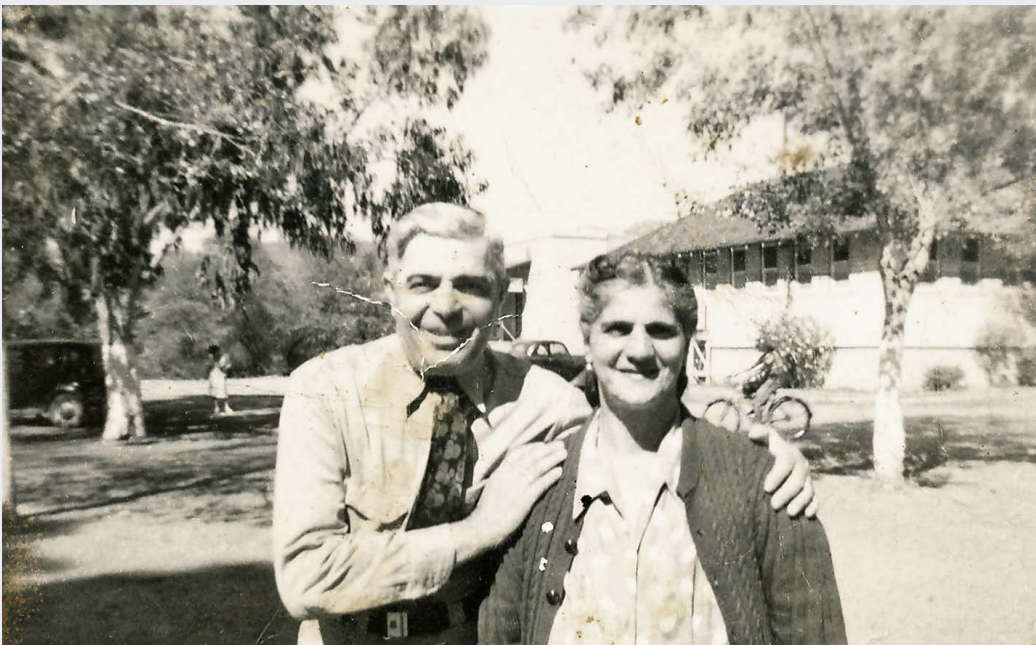


1919. Bensiyon & Miriam Fis Family in Rhodes.

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.



Bensiyon & Miriam Fis family home on La Fasana. RJHF Archives.



Isaac & Sarina (Fis) Benveniste in California.

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.



1973. Steven with the famous Turkish Udist, Udi Hirant Emre in Istanbul, Turkey.

Sources:

1. Nemirovsky, Steven, interview by Aron Hasson, July 27, 2022, Los Angeles, CA. RJHF Archives.
 2. Pascal, S. (1873). Photo of Two Zeybeks and an Artisan of Aydin, Turkey. Les Costumes Populaires de la Turquie en 1873.
 3. Hosmer, D. (1941). Photo of a Turk dancing the zeybek in Rhodes. The National Geographic. Original magazine print from the RJHF collection.
 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.
 6. Meriç, R. (2017). Dionysiac and Pyrrhic Roots and Survivals in the Zeybek Dance, Music, Costume and Rituals of Aegean Turkey. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/gephyra/issue/29654/318457>
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