

Izmir

Izmir is an artist's book made with hand-formed paper containing many of the remnants of the photos and documents of my family's journey and from the Ottoman Empire to the United States and Cuba and South America and back again to New York. My mother, Rachel Benjoya, recorded her memories about these photos and documents. An edited transcription of this recording follows.

Izmir

My paternal grandparents

Calomira Bohora, nee Daniel married Mordichai Benjoya in Bayindir outside of Izmir, Turkey. (*Bohora* -- Hebrew for first born.) Calomira had been married previously to Abram Farhi. He abandoned her and his son. She received a get (Hebrew for divorce) For some years she and her son lived with her parents until she met Mordichai Benjoya. Her parents were attached to her son Alexandro Behor, while they gave her permission to remarry they insisted on keeping Alexandro. Calomira bore four more children: and Mordichai, Rosa, Isaac (my father), Sasbona, and Avram.

In the following years, her husband Mordichai died. Then their daughter Sasbona died from blood poisoning after stepping on a bottle when she was bathing in the nearby Aegean Sea.

At the beginning of WWI the Turks drafted Avram into the Turkish Army (they just grabbed him). My grandmother and her family never saw him again. Her sons, Isaac, Alexandro and Moshon who had moved to the USA, were not able to send for her until 1921.

Izmir

Isaac Benjoya

My father was born in Bayindir, a suburb of Izmir, Turkey. I don't know when his family moved to Izmir. My father never got beyond the first grade because his father, Mordichai peddled assorted goods in the environs of Izmir and would often take him out of school to help him in his work. He did learn to write and read Hebrew and Rashi [Hebrew letters used for Ladino transliteration]. He wrote letters to his siblings using Solitreo script [a script version of Rashi]. He had nine siblings but only four made it to adulthood. My father, Isaac Benjoya, was able to go to the USA because his oldest brothers Alexandro and Moshon sent him a ticket. He traveled in the steerage class of a ship and arrived in the US around 1905.

Izmir

South America

Both my father's older sister Rosa and my mother's older sister Estrella could not get into the US because of quota system. Rosa and her family went to Buenos Aires, Argentina and Estrella and her family went to Montevideo, Uruguay. They must have written Solitreo, this was the writing that they knew and used. My father, even though he wasn't that well educated, knew how to write and read. He had been in the first grade for a long time because of having to help his father. I can't remember Tia (aunt) Rosa's husband's name. It was an unusual name, I wrote it down once and I don't know where that piece of paper is. For many years my father used to talk about visiting his sister, of course that was very romantic -- and impossible because we were very poor and we never could afford the fare for all of us to go down to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Izmir

Cuba

My parents went to Cuba because my father thought that he could make out better in business and Spanish was the language they were comfortable with and knew. In America, they had to speak a totally foreign language. But my father's business failed. In 1917 they tried to come back to the US. At customs when he said that he and my mother both spoke Spanish, Turkish and Greek; that their religion was Hebrew; and the country they just come from was Turkey, that was very suspicious sounding. They were interred in house arrest at the Rabbi's house in Key West. It was very pleasant. I think, that they stayed there for about a month.

Izmir

Solitreo

Solitreo is the script of the type of writing, I guess you could call it, which was used by the Spanish Jews and which they developed in the tenth century in Spain. It looks Arabic because the Moors controlled most of the people of the country. Then it was not a country, it was a collection of city-states and the Moors controlled most of it by 711. They had controlled everything in Spain, just about, but not the very North, the Basque country, I guess. But, anyway slowly the people who were Catholics started taking over more of the country. That's my father's brother's signature on the letter. His name was Moshon Benjoya.

Izmir

Dolsa Nahum Benjoya

My mother was born in the Izmir suburb of Idin. The family had a winery; they were sort of well-to-do. My mother was born at the time of her mother's change of life. She had siblings who were twenty and twenty-five years older than her. The Nahum's lost the winery. I'm not sure about the exact dates. My mother told me that she hardly remembered her father. She always called him "Mi Senor Padre" which means, "My Sir Father" to indicate how formal they were. He died somewhere in Turkey, maybe on business, but there was some talk that he might have been murdered. I don't really know because it was such a vague thing that I didn't really pay attention to the story. My mother was left with her mother. I don't know exactly at what point they went to Izmir, but certainly it must have had to do with the earthquakes and the subsequent fires. They were living in a school where they were housed because their house and everything had been destroyed. My grandmother's family didn't have enough room to take in the two of them. They were in this school, in Izmir and my mother and my grandmother slept in one bed. It was more like a cot than a full bed, but they managed--they were both thin, small people. My mother usually slept facing her mother.

Izmir

Dolsa Nahum Benjoya, cont'd

One day my grandmother decided to go into town to see how her grandchildren were doing because she was worried about a cholera epidemic. She didn't come back until evening. My mother was nine. My grandmother came back late and she felt that she must have gotten cholera, so she had my mother sleep at her feet on the bed. In the morning she was dead. My mother then went to live with her older sister, whose name was Reina (queen in Ladino). She indeed looked like a queen, a very regal, tall woman, very different from my mother, who was tiny and had a dark complexion

Izmir

Dolsa and Isaac's Marriage

My parents met in Coney Island at the restaurant run by my mother's oldest brother, Moshon. Then my father, an itinerant worker traveled with friends to work at the San Francisco World's Fair. One evening an older man in the group commented that he had enjoyed living a carefree bachelor life but know that he was older, he felt very lonely. His parents were dead and he had no family. On hearing this, my father returned to Coney Island and asked Dolsa Nahum to marry him.

They were married in the city of New York in a civil ceremony first. Then when everybody in the community knew, everybody knew everybody's business. A woman named "Ma" something; they called all the older women "Ma" as though to say they were, everyone's mother. She took a very keen interest in my mother, I guess because my mother was orphaned, even though she had a foster mother. She insisted that my parents get married according the Jewish religion. She said if they weren't married properly then their child would be a bastard. They got a minyan, which is ten men, who are enough to witness any legal event among the Jewish people. My mother was legally married in the Orthodox style.

Izmir

Bohora Calomira Benjoya

This is my father, Isaac Benjoya's mother. She came over four years after the First World War. She came December 1921 because I was born January twenty-seventh, 1922. She lived with my family for four months of the year. The three brothers figured out that they would each keep her for four months and she would then move to another house. She was unfortunate that she had no daughter because it's much easier for any mother to live with a daughter than it is for her to live with a daughter-in-law. And, her sons I think all loved her very much and, yet they could do nothing because the house was essentially run by the women, and the women on the whole resented it. My mother told me, she did feel very sorry for the tragedies and how long she had to travel. By the way, my mother was a seamstress. She was very good at it--not only good at sewing, but, creative.

Izmir

Family picture

I'm the oldest one in this picture. I have my arm around Calomira, my third sister. The sister who was born immediately after me is Luna, Luna Luisa; she's at the end. I'm on the left, and she's on the right. And the baby was Esther. We were on a porch. Those were the curtains of the door that led to the porch. It was in Coney Island. We lived there, but I don't think I started school in Coney Island.

Izmir

Isaac Benjoya

My father was an unskilled laborer, a moving man. He had worked in the wineries in Turkey. We first moved into Brighton Beach, where it was predominantly Jewish. We moved to Neptune Avenue, that's when my father had a store. His store sold second-hand furniture, which he received from the people who he moved. When they didn't want the furniture anymore and they gave it to my father. He was able to make extra money selling the furniture.

My father was a natural linguist. Wherever he went, he learned a language. He spoke some Arabic because in Turkey there were some Arabs; it was a Moslem country and he wrote in Solitreo. Of course, in Spain, the Jews spoke a lot of Arabic and wrote very often in Arabic. He also was able to speak Italian; both my parents could communicate to somebody in Italian because Italian is practically like Spanish. My father spoke English, Spanish, Turkish, Greek, and Arabic. My father quickly picked up Yiddish and Italian in the United States.

Izmir

Isaac Benjoya, cont'd

Eastern European Jews were predominant in the American Jewish community and they thought Yiddish to be synonymous with Jewish. This is not true because there are many Jewish languages. Yiddish happens to be one of them, and of course Judeo Spanish, and there is Romanique, which is the Greek Jewish, and then there is an Arabic form that Jewish people speak which is closer to the Hebrew. The Persian Jews lived in Persia a long time. They were all called Sephardic, because in their ignorance Jews in the United States thought that anybody who didn't speak Yiddish must be Sephardic. That was not true. Because, Sephardic, "Sepharad" means "Spain" in Hebrew, and this is the Iberian Peninsula, and that's where the Spanish Jews came from.

My father and his brother were running a little hat and coat check place in a place where they had big events like bar mitzvahs and weddings. Two of these Yiddish speaking men came over to my father and heard him and his brother speaking rapidly in Spanish. They came up and asked my father and uncle "What's your nationality?" My father, being a linguist--and liking to show off a bit--said quickly: "Ich bin a Yid", which means in Yiddish: "I am a Jew." And, this man turned to his friend and said: "Er ist ein yid, als ich bin an Irishman" -- "He's a Jew like I'm an Irishman."

Izmir

Photo of Benjoya sisters

Rachel: Oh, the biggest and oldest is me, and next is Luna, and next is Calomira. And, as you can see, we're all dressed up in our holiday clothes. We got clothes regularly for Passover and the Jewish New Year. My mother made all our dresses. She made them from fabrics that Tia Reina, her older sister, gave her. Tia Reina worked in a shop where she sewed quilts and she got all these fantastic fabrics. Unfortunately, when I went to school I hated them because I wanted to wear cotton like all the other kids did. I did not appreciate these elegant things.

Izmir

Growing up in Brighton Beach

This girl next door in Brighton Beach, Ethel Wexler, who was about a year younger than I was, she said to me: "You're not Jewish, you don't speak Jewish," by which she meant Yiddish, of course. "And your father works on Saturday." Well, I went in to my mother crying: "She said we're not Jewish." My mother said, "Tell her we come from the aristocracy." That made me feel better and I went out and told Ethel. My mother was very proud.

My father did work on Saturday. The Orthodox Spanish Jews are very different; they're more like the Italian Roman Catholics. They take their religion sort of lightly. If you had to support your family, it didn't matter what day you worked.

Izmir

Rachel's birth

Before I was born, my parents had several children. I think they had four before I was born. I know my mother had stillbirths and I think she had a miscarriage and then finally they had a beautiful little girl, named Sasbona, who lived until she was two and a half but then died of either infantile paralysis or Huntington's Chorea. It was very severe, and terminal.

There was little that my parents could do about it. In Coney Island there was a place called Luna Park, which was an amusement park. It was very pretty. It looked like a little town and in that place they had incubators. They put her in one hoping that they would be able to revive her, but they couldn't save Sasbona. My father was really torn-up about it. My mother said she was embarrassed because anywhere they would go, if there would be a child, he would pick it up, hold it, and then start crying. My father was very emotional. My mother said before I was born she thought maybe, since she was quite religious, God was trying to tell her something: maybe she shouldn't have any more children. But, my father was determined to have children. It meant a lot to him. While my mother was pregnant with me she developed dysentery. She was in a sanatorium of some sort, and there they had her eat cereal.

Izmir

Rachel's birth, cont'd

She expected that when she was going to give birth, she was back home, she would have a skinny little kid at best. What they did to try to make sure that I lived was to get God to be on their side by not buying anything at all for me as though I were really a poor, little orphan who needed somebody to take care of her. And, then all the Moshons in the Sephardic community, contributed silver, it was enough silver to make a ring large enough to put a baby through. And, when I was born, first of all my mother was amazed at how big and fat I was, with curly black hair, and then they put my through the ring. After the ring they bathed me. Then they took the silver from the ring and fashioned my name in Hebrew, "Rahel." They put it on one of the prayer scrolls in the synagogue.

Izmir

Rachel' education

I was not a very good student in grade school because I couldn't speak English. I felt like a foreigner; I was uncomfortable; I didn't understand half of what the teacher was saying. When I did understand it, it was boring. So, once I learned to read, it was really a safety valve for me. I used to read all the time, every chance I got. When I was in school I always brought a book, and while the teacher spoke I had it on my lap and read. I was not really in that class totally. I was aware enough to not get shamed before the class because I didn't respond. I would be reading the book and would look up every so often to make sure I hadn't lost where the teacher was, if she was going to pick on someone next to answer. So, I got "B"s; I did all right. When I got into high school I met a friend, named Shirley Eiss. That was at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn on Ocean Parkway, between Brighton and Coney Island. There were children at the school of Jewish and Catholic backgrounds. Anyway, Shirley said she was going to go to college, and I said, "How can you do that, you know pay for tuition?" She said, "I'm going to get a scholarship." That really put a bee in my bonnet. I decided: if she could get a scholarship so could I. I knew I'd have to study and work hard in order to get the kind of grades that would allow me to get a scholarship and I did. I was in the "Arista", which was the honorary society for scholarship.

Izmir

Rachel' education, cont'd

I also had to work in high school because my father had a difficult time earning a livelihood for us. I was in the NYA, one of those things that Roosevelt started, the "National Youth Association." I was able to work in the school and earn some money. That was nice. I was working and then, of course, I always had to help in the household. My mother would not think of having any child, particularly a daughter, not do housework because that was the primary function of a woman. She also taught me how to embroider. She had a, sort of a, demonstration piece where I did different kinds of stitches and embroidery. I don't think I have it anymore, I was not that good at it, but you know, I did it. She made me do housework. I knew when I had to obey her. I often didn't obey her if I could get away from her. As long as I was in the house with her I'd agree; as soon as I got out, I'd do what I wanted.

I was a good student in high school. I loved to dance, I always loved to dance. I danced in the programs we had. I also played the violin in the orchestra, even though I had to stop taking lessons by the time I started high school. I had made a contract with my mother when I started high school that I would speak to her in Spanish and she would speak to me in English and that way she would pass the citizenship test and I would do well in Spanish.

Izmir

Rachel' education, cont'd

I did very well: I got the medal from the teachers of Spanish. I got other honorable mentions, but that was the best one. Anyway, when I finished with high school I said to my mother that I wanted to go to college. My mother said: "What for? I taught you all you need to know." I said I wanted to go to college. My mother said, you know, she didn't think that I needed to. Besides, she thought, my father needed my help earning enough money to keep the family comfortable. But I felt I would do better for myself, and probably for the family in the long run, if I got an education and could earn a higher salary. My father was of the same opinion. He was very ambitious for us; he wanted us to get everything he didn't get. It didn't matter that we were girls. He was a very liberal person. So my father said, "Sure she can go to college." It didn't cost them anything because college was free then in Brooklyn. We had one of the City Colleges of New York. I had to pay for my carfare into Manhattan and back from Manhattan and then back home because I was working in the factory of a friend of my father's on Broom Street in Manhattan. It was a factory that made Christmas lights and I could get a job there. I put links in fuses on a table where there was a moving belt; the pieces we put in the, links that we put in the fuses were melted and stuck on to the fuse. I earned five dollars a week when I worked half-time.

Izmir

Rachel' education, cont'd

I really thought I wanted to get a scholarship. I wanted to go to these fancy schools out of town. It was not so much that they were fancy, but I wanted to get away from home and be on my own. I often resented the fact that I had to share everything with my three sisters. I didn't see why—I remember very young wondering why my parents had these three kids. I didn't need them, what good did they do? The scholarship was not meant to be because my father and mother both agreed that no young woman should ever leave her home unless she was going to be married. That was the only way you were able to get away from home. So, that blew that.

Izmir

Rachel's first marriage and the University of Pittsburgh graduate school

I had two majors. When I started college I thought I'd teach Spanish like my cousin did. However, the first year that I had psychology, I just became fascinated by the subject and I wanted to do something with psychology. I graduated from Brooklyn College with a double major in Spanish and Psychology. I got married before I finished college. I lived in Manhattan with my husband, William Schneidernmen. He got a job, at first he had The Ballet Theatre, and we stayed a couple years in New York City. He was a timpanist. We moved to Pittsburgh because he got a job with the Pittsburgh Symphony. I went to social work school at the University of Pittsburgh instead of becoming a psychologist and graduated from the graduate school of social work at the University of Pittsburgh in 1946.