

CHAPTER 8

The things that I remember

Roza Eskenazi:

I was born in Constantinople, but I don't remember when, and we were four children, two girls and two boys. All of them died, I am the only one alive. My father, who was a good man, was Abraham Skenazis and his work was to take old things from families who were leaving Constantinople, and when they came back they would take them back again. That was the work that my father was paid for.

Afterwards we left Constantinople, as a family, and we went to Thessaloniki, but I don't remember when that was because I was very young then, seven years old. But this was before the events happened when the Turks massacred the Greeks, and in Thessaloniki it was before what happened in the War, when everyone was killed. That happened later. And it was also before the Turks massacred the Armenians. I remember some of those things.

There in Thessaloniki, in the house where we were living, in one of the rooms there was a lady who was very good at reading and writing, and she took in the children of mothers who went to work in the factories, so that they weren't roaming the streets. My mother and father were working in the cotton industry, so I went to the lady too, and she taught us reading and writing, just like at school. I never went to big school. And I never learned reading and writing apart from what that lady taught me in her house. When I was a bit more grown-up, we went more or less as a family (my father didn't come) to Kommotini, and we stayed there for a while, I don't remember for how long.

One day I had opened the window of the tall building where we were renting, and I was singing as I did my work. Down below two or three Turkish men were passing, because Kommotini was full of Turks, and they stopped below the window of our house and they listened to me as I sang. After a while they saw the door of our house and they came and knocked. My mother opened the door and asked what they wanted. They said: "We want the girl who is singing." My mother was scared, and she asked: "Who are you, and why do you want her?" – I remember it as if it was today, but I don't remember when it happened because I was very young. "Don't be scared," they told her. "We have an open-air club near here, and since she has a lovely voice we would like her to come and sing there." As soon as my mother heard this, she got very nervous and she chased them out and shut the door, because she absolutely did not want me to become a singer. Nobody at home wanted me to sing.

A dancer at the "Grand Hotel"

But the devil had got into me and as soon as I heard that, right from then, they were wanting me to sing, I went very crazy, because I wanted to be a singer. And since I was scared of my mother I couldn't tell her that I wanted very much to sing in the clubs. Also, at that time there weren't a lot of clubs, just as there weren't many women singers. The few that there were at that time, the ones that I remember, and from what I heard them say, had run a long way away from their original towns and from their homes, because their people didn't want the people they knew to see them. They said that they were bringing shame on people.

After a while we came back to Thessaloniki, and upstairs in the house where we were living there were some girls who were dancers. They worked at the Grand Hotel, in

Thessaloniki, which was a very beautiful theatre. Since I was young, the girls told me “Take our *boxá* (“bundle” – that was what they called their costumes) and take it to the theatre. I leapt with joy, I took their *boxá*, and ran to the theatre so that I could see them dancing. I waited till they finished and came out, and I couldn’t get enough of looking at them, with their beautiful smart clothes, their costumes, while they were dancing. I was envious, and I wanted to become an artiste too, and when I went home I got up onto a chair, because the mirror was high up, and I did the movements that I had seen the girls doing. I did them so that I could learn them. I had learned the coquettish movements and the gestures that they did, and as soon as I had grown up a bit the girls took me in with them, dressed me, and had me performing together with them in the theatre. One fine day they took me up onto the stage, and I was dancing in little ballet trousers, and since I had a nice little voice I had learned nice little songs, and I sang them there in the theatre. At that time, there, I sang both Turkish songs and a few – one or two – that I had learnt out of those that I had heard from them.

As soon as my mother found out about this, she gave me what-for, and I learned what a thrashing meant. “No, no,” she said, “you won’t become a dancer, or a singer, and I’m going to go and sort out those girls who took you into the theatre with them and seduced you.” The same thing happened with my father – we had a huge row. With all that fuss going on at home I was afraid, and I stopped going with the girls. But the yearning stayed with me – to go up on-stage and become a great singer and artiste.

At that time we had an aunt who was living in Athens, my mother’s sister, who had a lot of money and a lot of beautiful big houses. She was very rich and since she didn’t have children she wanted to take me as her own child, because she loved me a lot. And one day our whole family moved to Athens. We came, but my aunt wasn’t particularly interested, she just told my mother: “You can bring your children here to eat whenever you want.” My mother didn’t go very often, because she said that we had food to eat. Here in Athens my father had a stall with glassware, on Odhos Athinas, and he was doing that work where they change money. He took in gold as well, and we called that job being a *sarafis*. We were getting along well, until I said that I was going to go into the theatre, so that we’d be getting along even better.

On stage at last – Meeting Toúntas

I went out to work with some Armenian dancers – Seranoús, Zabél and some others – and they took me with them, because I knew their language, Turkish, and because I had a nice voice and I could sing. I was a singer and a dancer, I was both things, so people wanted me even more. Everyone loved me very much, and as soon as they saw me and heard me singing they went crazy. I worked in the theatres, but not in the “Café Aman” and the “Café Chantant” where the others worked. There were places like that in Piraeus, and in Kommotini, and in Thessaloniki, and I remember them. In the Café Aman they had instrumentalists with “alla Turca” singers (*αλλά Τουρκατζήδες*), as they called them, but there were also girls singing Greek songs, and they would go down among the customers and collect money. In the Café Chantant it was like being in a cabaret, they had all the songs, and waltzes, and that kind of thing. The girls did “*consommation*” there [were paid *pro rata*]. I didn’t work in those kinds of places, only later I went to Tzitzifiès, to an open-air outdoor music place of the kind they had there, and I sang and danced with other girls. It was the fashion, in those days, and even great performers would go down, and we handed round a plate to the customers, and collected money. We took it in turns, and we went to all the customers so that they could give us money, and some gave a little and some gave more. In those days we had a mixture of all kinds of instruments. Mandolins, guitars, violins, all that kind of thing.

One evening Panayiótis Toúntas arrived. He was a very fine composer, who put out records with the recording companies.¹ I didn’t know Toúntas, and he didn’t know me. That was

the first time we ever met. He came, and he sat like all the customers to listen to us. As soon as the moment came when we came down from the stage to collect money among the customers, I went to everyone, and of course I went to Toúntas. As he put his money in, he said: “Where do you live, my girl?” “Huh,” I said, “and who are you, to be asking where I live...?” I didn’t know who he was, and I thought he was asking me for bad reasons. Toúntas got angry, and he said to me: “Why do you talk like that?” “I’m sorry, sir,” I said. “But I don’t know you. That’s why I answered like that.” “Well anyway,” said Toúntas, “I want to put your nice voice onto a record, I want you to sing, because that’s my job and I shall help you.”

As soon as I heard that, I went crazy... I was leaping for joy... I was going to make a record... So I told him where I lived. The next day he came with Salonikiós, because in those days they worked together, with a little mandolin, because Toúntas played mandolin, for a rehearsal. They told you: “You’ll sing a *kalamatiano*.” “What’s a *kalamatiano*?” I asked. I didn’t know what it was, that was the first time I’d heard of it. Salonikios told me: “It doesn’t matter if you don’t know what it is... you’ll learn it, and you’ll sing it together with a *tsamiko*.” “*Tsamiko*...?” I said, “I don’t know what that is either. Honestly, I don’t know what a *tsamiko* is...” And I started to cry! “You will learn,” they told me, “You’ll learn, and you’ll sing them very well, because you have a lovely voice. In fact I did learn it, very fast, and after a little while, in the company, in Columbia, in the factory, I sang the “*Mantili kalamatiano*” and the “*Koftin Eleni tin elia*” – Mr Toumbakáris remembers it too, he was there at the time.² That was my first record, with the one song on one side and the other on the other side.

Later I sang “*Lili ti skandaliara*” [*Λιλή τή σκανταλιάρα*], “*Lela*” [*Λέλα*], “*Chariklaki*” [*Χαρικλάκι*], “*Dimitroula*” [*Δημητρούλα*] and “*As’ ta kolpa*” [*Άσ’ τά κόλπα*], all by Toúntas. At that time he was the best of all the composers. Whatever he wrote was immediately a success and everyone was singing it. My goodness, what wonderful songs he made – he wrote about everything, and they were all wonderful! Afterwards other composers invited me to sing their songs, because I sang them well and they sold a lot.

I sang many, many songs. I don’t remember how many they were. Songs by Skarvélis, and Lorénzos, and Salonikiós, and Tomboúlis, and Ogdhontákis, and Asíkis. All of them were good, and all of them were from Asia Minor.

Salonikiós, though, was from Bulgaria – not a Bulgarian... – and he played the best violin in the world!

Tomboúlis played the best *ud*, he knew all my songs, and wherever I went I took him with me, and he had a very fine voice, very lovely. He died just recently, *to poulaki mou*, Lord have mercy on him... We went everywhere together...

Karípis was from Constantinople. He played fine guitar and had a good voice. The “*Fora ta mavra, fora ta*” [*Φόρα τά μαύρα, φόρα τά*] which I sang on record in those days was one of his.

Skarvélis, whom they used to call “*Bastourmá*”, was from Constantinople, and played fine guitar, and he was a good composer, one of the best, but he didn’t sing.

Ogdhontákis, a good composer and a good violinist, as was Manisalís – we worked together for years. Lord have mercy on all of them, they were good people.

Noúros had a good voice too, he sang lovely *amanedhes*, and Arabákis, who sang *kleftika*, and Roukounas had a fine voice – so many troubles over the years, and still he sang beautifully.

And Stellákis had a nice voice too, we sang together, and he's on record singing "Whatever I have, I shall sell, my Roza, so as to have you".³

All of them had lovely voices in those days, but for a singer to be successful you also had to be lucky. Kávouras had a good voice, but I didn't know him personally.⁴ And the best of all was Dalgás.

As well as myself, Rita Abadzí was famous too. We were friends, but we fought like cat and dog, because we would argue if a song-writer gave a song to the other one. Rita was from Smyrna, a lovely voice. I went and saw her before she died, just recently, *to poulaki mou*. She was sick with a bad illness.⁵

"I liked the fancy clothes..."

With the songs that I was singing then I had become the most famous singer. My records were selling more than anyone else's. Everyone wanted me. Wherever I went people would say: "There goes Roza"! When we released "Skandaliara" I took Salonikiós, Tomboúlis and Lámbros with his *lyra*, and we went to a club in Odhos Dhorou, called "Taygetus". The place was packed every evening, everyone came to see the famous Roza. I sang and I danced too, and people liked that, because I was good at both things. Both at singing and at dancing. Fifteen years I worked in that club, and when I first went there I was getting 200 drachmas a night, in those days twenty drachmas was worth a *lira*.⁶

I knew great glory in those days, more than any other singer had ever had! Thousands of people came, and they would come and queue from the day before so as to get a seat. And if they came once they came back again and again. And a lot of people came who had a lot of money and were important people in Athens at that time. Industrialist and actors and everyone, to gaze in wonder on Roza!

I always had money, but I blew it on fine clothes and gold. I liked fine clothes and gold, and I still like wearing them. From all the money I earned in those days, I didn't keep much, because I wasn't sensible. If I'd been sensible I would be a lot richer than I am today. In Constantinople alone, when I went, I earned 5,000 dollars – that was when I went with Tomboúlis. And when I went to America, twice I went, I earned ten times more than that. And the same in Serbia, and in Albania. Wherever I went, I took Tomboúlis along with me.

Anyway, when I was working in the "Taygetus" I married Janko Zardinídhis, a great actor, whose family was from Kaisarea. A great actor, who knew a lot of languages and was very well-read. But his insides were burned up from too much drinking, he left me pregnant and died. I have a fine son now, and a fine daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren.

Later I went to Egypt and sang in many clubs there, with Tomboúlis and Lámbros. I sang all kinds of songs there – Greek, and Arabic, and Turkish, because there were a lot of Greeks there, and Turks. Maríka the Polítissa, she was from Egypt, and after she had lived there for many years she came to Athens.

Later we went to Serbia, and to Albania, and we sang Greek and Turkish songs, because there were Greeks, and Turks, and locals who knew Greek.

All this happened before the Occupation, and the war, before the Germans came – I don't remember much about that.

Markos – Papaioannou – Bayaderas – Tsitsanis – Ninou

Then, after a while, the bouzouki players started coming onto the scene, and they started making records with all the companies. We didn't even know what a bouzouki was – we found out from them! We had different instruments, ourselves – the “*alla Turca*” instruments, santouris, violins, *uds* etc.

Markos came onto the scene, and Papaioánnou, and Keromýtis, and Bayadéras, and Tsitsánis, and others that I don't remember. At that time I didn't have much contact with them, it was only later that I got to know them. And people loved them, and wanted them a lot – but they were a different public, the people who came to hear me and the people who went to hear them.

When I heard people talking about the “bouzouki” I asked: “What's that?” Toúntas told me about the bouzouki, and Peristéris, and Tsitsánis, who came to see me while he was on his military service, he came to my house to meet me, because I was the famous Roza, and we ate bean casserole together... I remember it as if it was yesterday. Tsitsánis wrote lovely songs, and poor Nínou sang them very well. Poor Nínou, it was me that put her into that work. She came to hear me where I was working after the Occupation, and she listened to me together with her husband. She did acrobatics, that kind of thing, with her child...

At that time I knew her mother-in-law, whose name was Loutsíka, and she told me: “Why don't you take Maríka on one of your jobs, she sings nicely.”

I took her and I signed her into our association, and later she started working, and she recorded with Columbia, where Chiótis⁷ took her on.

At that time I met Béllou too, who also came to hear me in the place where I was working. With the passing of a few years I started working with bouzouki players, but without my own instrumentalists. Tomboúlis wasn't with me at that time. I went and worked in Tzitzifiès for a while, with Markos, Keromýtis, Bayadéras and others that I don't remember. We had a lot of work in those days.⁸

Afterwards I sang on a record with Markos, and I sang songs by Bayadéras and Chiótis. And since I was the famous Roza, Chiótis invited me to sing that song about the *sporia*, together with Zacharías Kasimátis.⁹

Kasimátis had a fine voice, and he was a good guitar player. He was from Asia Minor, may the Lord have mercy on him. But the Chiótis song which I sang didn't catch on, and I don't know why. Later another singer sang it, and it was a hit. This is all luck of the draw...¹⁰

In Constantinople and in America

After a while, somebody came from America, whose name was Aidíne, and he came looking for me and asked if I would go first to Constantinople and then to America. I told him that I'd talk with the instrumentalists and then I'd give him an answer. I spoke with Tomboúlis, and we left for Constantinople, with our expenses paid.

We went to Constantinople and we worked in a lot of clubs, a lot of people came. At that time Tsitsánis was in Constantinople too, with poor Maríka, but they and we worked in separate places.¹¹ And I remember that everyone there laughed a lot when they heard the name Tsitsánis. Do you know why? Because in Turkish “*tsitsanis*” means “mouse”! I made forty records at that time in Constantinople, and I sang Greek songs, Turkish songs, and even *kleftika*.

All those bouzouki players, I knew all of them, and they were all good people and they had good songs. They all played really good bouzouki and sang well. Markos played well, and

so did Keromýtis, and Tsitsánis, and all of them. But the best of all on the bouzouki was Chióitis, him... The highest, the most first-rate, I remember him well.

Tomboúlis played, and Soukrí Bey, the best clarinet in Constantinople, and he was famous at that time too. On violin we had Amér Bey and others. Five thousand dollars I took from the records alone, leaving aside my wages from the places where I was working.

From there we went on to America, with Tomboúlis and Soukrí. We went to Chicago, to New York, to Detroit, we did very good work and earned a lot of money. And I put out a lot of records with Tomboúlis and Soukrí – I sang every kind of thing over there.

At that time in America I also met Papaioánnou, and later Polly Pánou, but we and they worked in different places.

I stayed in America for two years, and when I came back to Greece I bought the big beautiful house that I have now. Twice I went to America with Tomboúlis. They asked me a third time, but I didn't go.

The new singers...

I worked for so many years in this work, and even up till now I have never stopped working. From this work I earned a lot of money, thanks be to God, but I wasn't sensible! But anyway, I'm fine now, I have my house, my car, my nice clothes, my gold, everything I could want. A lot of people helped me and I helped a lot of people. I was good at this work – but I was lucky too, because no matter how good a voice you have, if you don't have *kismet* you won't get anywhere.

In those days I was earning more money than any of the others. And I was getting money from the record companies too, because I was selling the biggest number of records. Mátsas, the old man, was a good man, and he helped me. He was from Yannina. And Columbia helped me a lot too.

But it was Toúntas who helped me to become the famous Roza. If it hadn't been for him, I would never have become Roza.

Everyone loves me a lot, and I love everyone, because everywhere I go now you hear them saying: "Look, it's Roza", and "That's Roza", and "There goes Roza the Coquette" [Song title: "Η Ρόζα η Ναζιάρα"].

Everyone loved me. I was a coquette, and I was very flirtatious and tricky, but I never went back to the theatre looking for work. I like that song... They brought it to my house and I listened to it.¹² They all wanted me to go and work for them.

I also wrote songs of my own at that time, which were recorded and were very popular. The "Plystra" was mine, as was the "Kanarini", which says:

*"My sweet canary, you took my mind
in the morning when you wake me, with your sweet singing."*

My years were much better than what we have today. My songs were beautiful, tasteful, real *rebetika*, but also table songs, and *kleftika*, and people entered into the spirit of them. Today the young singers are always moving around, and they have no voices! All wiggling and moving around, and they make people dizzy, and make them tired. And their songs aren't anything! Our songs were songs for the ordinary people, lovely songs, all songs with spirit. I can't abide to hear the songs these days. Nor the singers either!

The things that I remember

And the people who used to come to the clubs were a different kind of people, because they knew how to have a good drink and enjoy themselves. Plate smashing wasn't allowed in those days, and Sereléas, the owner of the Taygetus in Dhorou, was from Mani and certainly didn't allow that kind of thing.

There we worked on modest stages, not moving around or anything, and the people who came were ordinary decent people, very nice people, families, children, rich people, poor people, everyone. We sang for people who knew what was good in life. I would dance *karsilamadhes* and that kind of thing, although not in Sereleas's Taygetus, and in the ouzo bars and beer bars where we worked in those days. Only in the Café Aman did they dance, and in the Café Chantant. I danced later, in the theatres and in the open-air venues, there where I met Toúntas.

Now they break everything, they dance, they quarrel with each other, they jig about, I don't like all that kind of thing, so I don't go. And I don't even know that singer, what's-his-name...¹³

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Translation: Ed Emery

[The footnotes for this article will be added at a later stage.]