

REFLECTIONS ON A DIVIDED NATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH AVA NORRIS

Alexander Norris

History has not been kind to Cyprus. Given its (in)opportune location, nestled in the middle of the Eastern Mediterranean, many powers have sought political and economic control over the island. Over the past millennium, this pattern of conquest and reconquest has given the island a rich diversity of ethnicities, languages, and religions, all of which coexisted in intercommunal harmony. The most prominent ethnic groups, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots, co-inhabited the cities and villages of the nation as friends, neighbors, and countrymen. The onset of British colonial rule in 1878 changed the political landscape of the island, however, supplanting traditional sources of authority and administration and replacing the fragile peace on the island with racial fear and distrust. In the post-colonial era, these cultivated hatreds erupted into a civil conflict that displaced and killed thousands of innocent Cypriots.

A turning point occurred in 1974, when Turkey invaded the island nation ostensibly to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority. An uneasy truce eventually emerged, leaving the island ethnically divided to this day. Numerous efforts at reunification have been thwarted by one faction or another, with the ugly scar of division visible through a UN buffer zone that runs right through the center of the island. In the modern day, the predominantly Greek Cypriot Republic of Cyprus (ROC) remains politically divided from the predominantly Turkish Cypriot Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Some fear that the elusive dream of reunification may never become a reality for Cyprus.

History books can only teach us so much. I decided to reach out to my beloved paternal grandmother, a native Cypriot, to ask her questions about her own thoughts and hopes for the fate of her homeland. I never could have expected the tremendous depth of emotion and grief that accompanied her responses.





Ava Norris and her family in Agios Dimitrios, at the site of where the house still stands.

What do you remember most about British colonial rule over Cyprus?

I was born under British colonial rule. I had heard people talk about our rulers as being formal with a stiff upper lip and a rather condescending attitude towards the “natives.” I had never met an Englishman until the age of eight or nine, when a British high commissioner came to Agios Dimitrios [a small village located in the Troodos mountain range] with his entourage to address concerns in our area. Dad, who was a teacher and the only adult in the village who could speak English, welcomed him with a speech and referred to the fact that we had no water in the houses. Dad likened our situation to the Greek God Tantalus who was punished by Zeus to go thirsty despite being surrounded by water. My sister sang the English anthem [for him]! My older brother Achilles

coached her as his English was fluent.

We had moved to Agios Dimitrios when I was five years old and World War II was about to start. Dad thought we would be safe in that remote area should the Germans invade the island. We moved in with my maternal grandparents. Grandpa was a village mukhtar, the government representative. On the wall was a picture of King George VI. Grandpa, a very peaceful man, was pro-British. He wore his mukhtar badge with pride.

My dad had been a rebel in his youth. Back then he was a strong spokesperson for union with Greece. He apparently burnt a British flag, and had it not been for his father, who was very influential in the Karpas region and held in high esteem by the British, he would have lost

his job and possibly spent some time in jail.

Naturally, with his rebellious streak he often needled Grandpa for his pro-British sentiments. But Grandpa was a wise man who was never drawn into political discussions. He was such a dear. On Sundays, he was the chanter at the church and his crystal-clear tenor voice attracted people to the village just to hear him sing.

At the age of twelve, I was sent to a boarding school in Nicosia [the capital city, located in the center of the island] as there were no high schools for girls in the mountains. The school was run by French and English nuns. The boarders were from all over Cyprus, mainly of Greek descent with a scattering of other ethnic groups such as Turkish, Armenian, Maronite, and English. We got along well. I shone academically but felt humiliated as those of us whose parents could not afford full tuition were treated like maids. One had to pay for high school in Cyprus and Dad had five children to educate with boarding fees added for us girls.

I left Cyprus on Christmas Eve in 1954 for England, where I would study nursing. A few

days prior to leaving, I went downtown in Nicosia to pick up my passport and came across a political demonstration by Greek Cypriots demanding union with Mother Greece. This pro-Greek sentiment gained momentum and escalated after Archbishop Makarios [an influential Greek Cypriot politician who would become president after independence] sent Digenis Grivas to Greece to train in guerilla warfare. He came back and formed the terrorist organization EOKA. Many students secretly joined the organization.

One of the British colonial tactics was to divide and rule. Because of such tactics and mistrust, they fired many Greek policemen and other government officials and replaced them with Turks. This created resentment in the population. The Turks formed their own terrorist organization in response, called VOLCAN.

Hostilities were stirred up between the two ethnic groups and unspeakable atrocities were committed by both sides. People who had lived peacefully as neighbors and friends were now turned against each other. It was not a good time to be a Cypriot in England. A few

How did the independence movement change your views of Cyprus? What about the Turkish invasion?

I was never a fanatical Greek and preferred independence for Cyprus. Actually, the independence movement was a blessing for the island as a whole and for me personally. It educated many young people for leadership positions. Both the British and the emerging Greek political leaders realized that independence was the preferred course and began to prepare for the future. As the British held all leadership posts on the island, the rising local leaders realized that they needed to be proactive and educate young Cypriots to fill such positions when Cyprus got its independence. I was one of many young people given a scholarship to study in England. In my case, the training would be in nursing, midwifery, and administration. It would be a six-year program that would pre-

pare me for the position of a nursing direction in a hospital in Cyprus.

The Turkish invasion of Cyprus was an emotionally devastating event for me as it was for thousands of other people with connections to the island. There was the wishful thinking that Western powers would come to the aid of Cyprus and restore things as they were prior to the tragic political upheavals. There was a strong realization that Cyprus was at the mercy of politicians who were hungry for power and control.

There was also the worry and anxiety about the safety of loved ones. It took days to find out that my family members were physically okay. The Turkish invasion happened on July 20, 1974, so my parents were not at their

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house in Koma tou Yialou, an area invaded by the Turkish army, but up in the mountains. My sister and brother-in-law were not so fortunate. They were in their house in Nicosia when a mob of soldiers broke into their house and began shooting towards the presidential residence across the street. The family spent some terrified hours huddled in a back room. It was a coup by Greek terrorists trying to assassinate Archbishop Makarios, who was the president of Cyprus. Simultaneously, Northern Cyprus was being invaded by Turkish troops who were

killing and displacing many Greek Cypriots. I could not help but feel that the whole tragedy was masterminded by Greece and Turkey.

It so affected me that I could not face my Turkish Cypriot friends for about a year. I bore no resentment towards them but I carried many painful feelings which I needed to work through.

I have no ill-feelings towards Turkish Cypriots. Many of them were also victims of the situation that heartless politicians created for our island.

What are your thoughts about the prospect for reunification?

I certainly don't like Turkey's current political leadership. Unfortunately the present Turkish Cypriot leader [Ersin Tatar, President of the self-declared "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" since 2019] seems to be a spokesperson for the notorious current Turkish leader of mainland Turkey [Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Justice and Development Party], which makes the hope for reunification of the island a lost dream, not a future reality.

The Greek Cypriot old folks who ended up as refugees after the Turkish invasion carried for many years not just the trauma of the loss of loved ones and property, but also anger and bitterness towards Turkey and the West, mainly at Kissinger, who apparently gave the okay for such an unfair, tragic move. It took years for

them to come to terms that their homes and properties were lost to them forever.

The generation born after the invasion have no personal knowledge of the atrocities of the war. They do not carry the hurt feelings and trauma of their elders. Many of them, both Greeks and Turks, are active in seeking reunification.

Many Cypriots regret that they did not comply with the Annan Plan of 2004 [a UN reunification plan that was rejected in a popular referendum held on both sides of the island].

The borders are now open and many people travel back and forth. For old-timers like myself who once lived in the Turkish occupied zone, it remains painful to visit there.



PC: Julia Volk from Pexels

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

I traveled once to Koma tou Yialou, my father's old village. It was upsetting to see a mosque erected where my aunt Polyxenia's house once stood. My parents' house and Uncle Omeros' house are now occupied by Turkish families. My grandpa's house was in ruins. The church was depleted of all its religious items, such as icons, and the tombs in the cemetery were destroyed. After such a visit, one feels

deeply the unfairness that exists in our world and the victimization of people by ruthless political leaders.

In my imagination, I still see my father sitting on the patio in Agios Dimitrios fixing his fishing nets in the hope that someday he would return to his seaside village and his beloved fishing boat.