

CYPRIOI IDENTITIES:
CONVERSATIONS ON PAPER
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Daniel Hadjittofi's Identity

Daniel Hadjittofi

My life is full of people I admire.

My heroes are my father and two sons. All three, in their ways, taught me the meaning of life even if they themselves did not realize that they were my teachers. My father was generally admitted to be the John Wayne of the Mesaoria area – the area between the two mountains of the island of Cyprus. He would fight for what he believed but would be an absolute humanist and even-handed in his dealings with others even at his own peril. I recall many occasions where his actions did not make sense to me at the time, but nonetheless they are impressive in retrospect.

When we visited a mixed village (a village where both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots lived) he would insist on sitting at the Turkish Cypriot coffee-shop instead of at the Greek Cypriot one. When I asked him to explain it (I preferred the Greek Cypriot shop because I could at least know what the people were talking about) he never gave me a convincing explanation, and I am not sure he even knew why he was doing it. To my young eyes he indeed was a paradox: he got actively involved in the liberation struggle against the British but not in the military branch; even though he was perceived to be the leader of the anti-communist movement of the area, he participated in all the struggles of the peasants versus the aristocracy. He considered himself to be among the former, and in his early youth led alliances that included both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

In 1974, when the Greek Cypriot army enclaved the Turkish sector of Afania (during the period between the two Turkish interventions) my father received word from a Turkish Cypriot kid that the Turkish Cypriots were starving. Without saying a word to anybody – not even my mum – he loaded his van (a Morris Mini van that he used for

his cheese producing business) with flour from the local 'supermarket', drove through the Greek Cypriot siege line and was shot at by the Turkish Cypriot garrison (two bullets went above his head and pierced the front windshield of our car) in order to unload the flour. He was fully aware of what he was doing and of the consequences he would face if he was caught by the Greek Cypriots – this meant death for treason. He had four kids, two of them very young, but he thought that that was the right thing to do.

Similarly, when the Turks moved in and captured my village, Assia, even though he had prior warning from a neighbor who, though a declared communist, admired and respected him, he refused to leave the village. He said he believed that Assia was his place of living and nobody would kick him out. I remember him, vaguely, empowering the other Greek Cypriots who were enclaved in the village and particularly giving strength to those who were facing death squads in the village. After a week, the Turkish army separated the men from the women and children and took the men away. Among these men were my father and four of my uncles. All five remain among the missing.

On that day, two Turkish soldiers were fighting over my destiny; one was saying that I was a man, the other that I was a boy and therefore I should go with the women and children. I was young and wearing slippers and shorts in the hot summer of '74, and I looked like a kid. My fortune, I think, was the fact that the Turkish soldier who was saying that I was a child and who fought viciously hard with the other soldier (they were even throwing their helmets at each other), won the fight; so I went with the women and children.

I lived my senior high school years initially under trees and later in the tent, and for a year after 1974 I could not laugh. I began to be able to laugh again after I saw a Charlin Chaplin movie that I thought was exuberantly hilarious.

I went through college (with a Fulbright scholarship) trying to find the meanings of what happened to me and my family, trying to find some sort of meaning in what went on in my life. I studied politics,

economics and business, as well as sociology and anthropology and always felt that there must be a deeper meaning to what is happening and that nothing happens by chance. It may be a false presumption, but it helped me go on in life.

I came back to Cyprus, got married to an American lady in 1983, and had my first boy, Christopher, in 1985 and my second, Andy, in 1989.

When Christopher was about five, his mum insisted that I take him on a trip for what she considered to be a significant bonding experience between a father and a son. It turned out that she was right. I decided to take him to a family field we own in the buffer zone where we could check out the animals and birds and bring home some oranges, mandarins and grapefruits.

On the way to the field, my son kept telling me that he was not afraid of the Turks, that he was strong, and that he was able to protect both me and himself in case we were attacked by the Turks. I asked him why he should be afraid; after all Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots are human beings created by the same God. He said to me, "I know papa, I know, I am not afraid." However, when we stopped the car and got out into the field, the first thing he did was to pick up a rock and a cane, one of those that grow wild in that part of Cyprus, in order to protect both him and me from the Turks.

I was shocked. In my family we did not speak against the Turks. We were an international family, we thought to be beyond local complexities, yet my son, at the age of five, was terrified of the Turks. I had a flashback of my life, and I felt that it would be a curse to pass on the torch of violence and human suffering to my son. I felt I had to do something, anything that I could so that in a small way I could prevent this cycle of hatred, violence and destruction that existed between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots of Cyprus. I went back to the Commission and requested that I be given \$2,500 to do a bicomunal get-together of our scholars.

Now the Fulbright program, of which I became the Executive Di-

rector in 1986, was a unique institution on the island of Cyprus. We were the only institution that, by virtue of our Establishment Agreement in 1962 (before the intercommunal strife of 1963), enjoyed recognition by both the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and we were allowed to operate in both communities without creating political issues in either one of these communities. Under normal circumstances, any institution operating in the Turkish Cypriot community would not be allowed to work in the Greek side, and vice versa.

We have a bicomunal, binational Board and the Cypriot members – both Greek and Turkish Cypriots – are appointed by the Council of Ministers – the only institution for which the Government of Cyprus consciously has so far appointed Greek and Turkish Cypriot Board members. We were unique in that we have been giving scholarships to both Greek and Turkish Cypriots and meeting and conducting business in the buffer zone (in the no man's land that separates the two Cypriot communities).

At the time, the Cyprus Government was saying that they wanted to meet with the Turkish Cypriots – the Turkish Cypriots were our brothers – however, they did not allow for any meetings, because, by organizing such meetings they would recognize the so-called pseudo state. The Turkish Cypriot administration was saying that it wanted Greek and Turkish Cypriots to meet but that the Greek Cypriots would not allow it.

Under the aegis of the Fulbright Commission these constraints were removed. As an NGO, probably the first NGO ever to be established in Cyprus, in addition to the Red Cross, we could operate in both communities and we could therefore meet and bring our scholars together, without creating political problems in either of the communities of Cyprus.

The Board, with some concern, approved \$2,500 for such a get together provided that the security issue would be addressed. At that meeting I recall that there were more UN soldiers than Greek and Turkish Cypriot participants. The participants met, hugged, kissed,

and some of them cried, maybe crocodile tears but tears nonetheless, and then they sat down to business. It was then recognized that, yes, they had their differences, and they were proud people all of them, but at least they could sit side by side, meet and discuss things just like various ethnic groups do in the United States. The idea of co-existence that the Turkish Cypriot administration tried very hard to reject was actually possible.

During a follow-up trip to Washington, I gained approval for the Cyprus Fulbright Commission to use about \$7.5 million that were due to be returned to the U.S. government vaults (they were CASP program residual funds) to do bicomunal projects and provide a platform for rapprochement between the two communities.

We (the Commission) organized a lot of these get-togethers. We took politicians, business people, VIPs (what we would call Track I personalities) to two locations in Virginia – Coolfont and Airlie House – to do conflict resolution and to discuss the Cyprus problem. Many of these politicians are now the leaders of the rapprochement movement in Cyprus. We took journalists, educators, teachers, students, active citizens, doctors, engineers, accountants, judges, lawyers and other professionals to the United States. We did mediation training in Cyprus and we brought in professors to help us organize grass roots movements.

By 1996, the conflict resolution efforts had become the number one priority objective for both the United States and the UN vis-à-vis Cyprus. Even though the Turkish Cypriot administration decided to close the checkpoints in 1997 and forced us to do workshops outside of Cyprus (which were much more expensive), the movement had already taken root. The idea of Apartheid in Cyprus fell apart. Under heavy pressure from the Turkish Cypriots, the Turkish Cypriot administration in April of 2003 decided to open the checkpoints. The old regime began to lose power. In a back handed way, we got the best compliment ever from the Turkish Cypriot leader: When he was asked by the various international mass media why he does not listen to the voice of his

people who were demonstrating in favor of a solution to the Cyprus problem and reunification of the island, he briskly responded: "Yes, they are my people but they have been brainwashed by Fulbright".

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