Agios Elias of Occupied Cyprus: A Tribute to My Village

In a personal account, Andrekos Varnava, recalls moments in a bloodied past which still haunt 28 years on.

ON July 20, 1974, the Turkish army invaded Cyprus and following a second invasion on August 14, annexed 38% of the island, leaving almost 200,000 or 40% of the Greek-Cypriot population as refugees in their own country. Agios Elias is a Greek-Cypriot village in the Karpass Peninsula in north-east Cyprus, north of the village of Trikomo. In 1960, there were 422 inhabitants, and next to Trikomo, it was the most important village of the area. Since 1974, Turks from Anatolia have inhabited Agios Elias, and most of the village has been left as it was at the time of the invasion. The village church, dedicated to the Prophet Elias, now serves as a mosque. Agios Elias is the village where my mother spent 33 years of her life, growing up, enjoying the fruits of her and her family's labours by living off the land.

My mother's village has always fascinated me. At the base of the 'pan-handle' or 'ox-tail' as the Karpass Peninsula is known, it sits staring at the Kantara Castle and Monastery. My mother constantly lives, both during the day and the night, with the memories of her life before the Turkish invasion. Since she lives with these dreams and thoughts, I live with them too, and my inquisitiveness has developed into this fascination, and my ultimate choice to become a historian. Eighteen-months ago I took the opportunity, while researching for my honours thesis in Cyprus, to interview family and horiani, about what they remembered about the village. I would briefly like to share with you my findings based on these testimonies, and relate why the invasion has an added trauma for the 'Agii-Liotes' and an added personal trauma for my family. It has been 28 years since the invasion forced the villagers of Agios Elias to flee their homes. The Turkish invasion of 1974 produced a divide: a 'before' and 'after', which I was interested in investigating.

From the testimonies I concluded that the refugees' pre-invasion identity sits beside a new 'post' invasion identity to form a 'dual' identity. The 'old' identity has been lost, but by attempting to hold onto what has been lost, by trying to produce a permanence of the past and by emphasising a divide through the oral representation of the 'before' life, they have preserved it.

The creation of a new 'post' invasion identity is evident in the loss of the pre-invasion lifestyle. The loss of family identity, with the diminishing meaning that the extended family has after the invasion, was clearly stated by the refugees. This largely resulted because the villagers scattered all over Cyprus, and many migrated to Australia, like my mother. Now, it is rare to find siblings living in the same village, let alone to see cousins doing so, where before the invasion this was
The loss of individual identity was evident in the destruction of relations with land and nature, both personal and social. In Cyprus, men have a special relationship with the village environs, collecting wild asparagus, mushrooms, kapari (caper leaves), snails, and along with the women, various wild grasses and vegetables, like sinapia, rizonia, radikia, glitzia, pertikokavlia, galatoumes, tsambounous, wild spinach, and hostes or kafkaroues (similar to artichoke). Hunting was a favourite pastime for this area, especially birds and hares. It is not the same now when they perform these activities in the free areas, because they consider that they ought to be roaming their own villages like their forefathers. The women, on the other hand, not only have their household to look-after, but are active participants in the maintenance and development of their plantations. They work in the fields and tend to the animals, no less then the men, who for the most part worked their trades.

There was a general consensus that the 'post' invasion period was insecure and that there is less love and respect shown to relatives. Although historically speaking, the period before 1974 was no less insecure then the period after the invasion, the pre-invasion period is considered to be secure because of the trauma of the invasion and the uncertainty of the current political situation. The total annexation of Cyprus by the Turkish army is something that is still feared, as Greek-Cypriots are continually intimidated by kidnapping's and border incursions.

The loss of 'village' or 'group' identity is the most profound and evident loss. In their childhood years, boys and girls would have outings to their parent's fields with their cousins to protect the bostania 'summer crops'. There would be organised games and picnics. The traditional village wedding in Cyprus, was another socio-cultural group event, which lasted four days. It was a chance for both men, and women (particularly) to get together and participate in a village event. For Cypriot women, what was ordinarily a chore, suddenly became an expression of culture, and this remains a dominant memory of village identification and village harmony, even though such an event happened two or three times a year. During Easter and the Kalologos (Good Saturday service), the service would not begin until all the villagers were present, and on the way villagers would 'pick-up' others still at home. The men have also lost their kafenio, not simply a place to drink coffee, but a socio-cultural institution, a place of village meetings, politics, backgammon and cards. However, the greatest loss would have to be the village feast-day celebration, which would attract many villagers from the surrounding Famagusta District. Cypriot folk dancing and music, and Cypriot cuisine would be on show, along with particular village specialities. Although in recent years the 'Agii-Liotes' gather at the village of Kophinou on the feast day of the Prophet Elias to catch-up, the village celebration as they knew it before 1974 has died.

Most of those interviewed said that they had dreams of being in the village, and thought about it during the day, particularly when passing a village that resembled Agios Elias. My uncle, who has lived more years (28 of his 53 years) in
another village, dreams of Agios Elias and Kantara almost every second night. Clearly, even if they wanted to forget, the villagers could not. But they are driven by the hope that they would one day return, as my pother uncle emphatically said: "...as long as we live, it (the village) can never be taken from inside of us, it is our dream which we live by, our hope, that we will one day return". My aunt is less effected now than at the beginning: "I am nostalgic for the village but not like the early days, I cannot say that because it has been 26 years. But in the beginning it was very hard, because we left our homes, we left them full of clothes and things and we had to begin again. To go to buy forks and plates and so forth, it is a long story to tell of this hardship, but I am nostalgic and do want to go but not like first. My children have married here. (What are you nostalgic for?) For the old years, because life... now is not as nice as it was there. I am nostalgic for my home, the work in the fields, my sheep, now we do not have anything, all I do is wash and scrub and look after children, but life in the village was different. I don't know if it would have changed, but even if it did it would not be like this life we live now. Our neighbours, relatives, we lost them all, our parents, uncles. You might ask what will I go find, ruins, but we are still nostalgic..."

I concluded, that the encroachment of the 'before' identity and life in the 'after' invasion period had produced a protracted exile and a dual identity. This was encouraged by the refugees as they are nostalgic for their village and the lifestyle they had and expected to have. This dual identity is also nurtured by the public narrative of the government that repatriation is central to any political solution. They hope to return but are uncertain that returning will ever give them any form of closure. They are fully aware that they did not simply leave 'things', houses, land and cars, but homes, unique places that can only exist as they dream it under a unique environment.

Very few Cypriots, particularly the youth, would realise that the Turkish invasion of Cyprus happened on the day of one of the most important feast days of the Greek Orthodox calendar - the feast day of the Prophet Elias. It was at the time, and it continues to be, a double-whammy for the "Agii-Liotes." While in the process of preparing for the celebrations of 'their' Saints day, the Turks invaded. Although the "Agii-Liotes," were not forced from their homes during the first invasion, the village was in turmoil, men went of to war, and the women stayed at home as the ravages of war began to take their toll. The villagers went about their daily lives with a great deal of apprehension.

After the first invasion, on the eve of the feast day of the village, my family still prepared the "giortes" for Kantara, which celebrates its feast day on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on August 15. The day before, a soldier came and told the villagers that the Turks were going to bomb the base at Boghazi and that they were in danger. Most of the village got onto two buses, as they were, and left: all thought that they would return the following day. Most of the men left for the front. Almost all the village had left, with the exception of my family and a few other's. My grandfather was still out with his sheep and knew nothing of the second invasion threatening the village. It was decided that my mother would go out into the fields and plains to the mountainous terrain, which he took his sheep, to bring him back. My aunt decided to drive to Ardhana, a village to the north of
Agios Elias, closer to the approaching Turkish army. There, nobody knew what was happening. The news that my family brought triggered an exodus from Ardhana and my family and relatives headed for Agia Napa, where a cousin was building a hotel, Nissi Beach. However, my grandfather refused to go. He would not be convinced, and decided to remain at Ardhana so he could go the following day to the village and let out his sheep. Everybody thought that they had been evacuated because the Turks were simply going to bomb Boghazi, not to move down so swiftly, that by the following day the radio was informing the evacuees that they could not return to their homes. My aunt rang through to Ardhana from Agia Napa as the tanks were rolling into the village. My grandfather had left for Agios Elias before they arrived to take out his sheep. All contact with him and the others was lost.

The story does not end here. The Red Cross told the family that grandfather had died. Whenever the Red Cross officers were permitted to search he was out in the plains with his sheep and they could not find him to write his name. Then a miracle happened. One night grandfather decided to escape. He had lost his people, his children, his wife, and now his sheep. A man told him to head for the distant lights that were part of the Dhekelia Sovereign Base. He left from Trikomo, and walked all night, passing through Turkish controlled villages, falling into ditches and creaks, until he reached Acheritou. By now his legs were bloodied from the falls, and exhausted he fell asleep. However, the Turks were holding Acheritou. In the morning he woke to the sight of a man on a tractor. Either Turk or Christian he was going to speak to him. He figured the Turks would capture him in the daylight. Thankfully he was a Greek-Cypriot, who had gone to retrieve the sinks he used to feed his sheep. He put him on the tractor and bought him to Vryssoulles, a place north of Frenaros, where my mother was staying with her then fiancé, my father. The family was shortly reunited. This was three months after the invasion.

On another level for my family is the memory that the invasion happened on the day of the Kantara pilgrimage. My grandmother was the patron of the Monastery, and it was the main event for the family every year to lead the celebrations. Rooms were provided and the following day they would cook souvles, they would prepare baby goats, and lambs, and under the trees there would be a great feast, with traditional dancing and music. But in 1974 they could not go because of the war. The fact that the second invasion fell on the day before the actual feast day and prevented them from going the previous day adds to the trauma. They will always remember that the second invasion happened on the eve of the feast day of 'Our Lady' Kantariotissa.

As Herman Melville wrote in Moby Dick: "it is not down on any map; true places never are". That is why the refugees of Agios Elias cling to this 'before' identity and life itself.

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