

Like The Illicit Lovers Or How I Discovered The Turkish Cypriot Poetry

By Elli Peonidou

Editor's note: Elli Peonidou is a Greek-Cypriot poet residing at the moment in New York. The Cyprus Republic was violently partitioned in 1974 as a result of the invasion of the Turkish army which separated the two communities. The article tries to depict the pain from the separation and the strive for unity through the hearts of the poets, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots. In this way it sends out a message of hope to a world torn these days by ethnic strife.

Translated from Greek to English by Eleni Fournouni

As I was walking with my husband towards Trafalgar Square in London on a damp June morning I felt like an adolescent on her way to her first date--the same excitement, the same euphoria and anxiety, the same questions. What would Nesie Yasin be like I wondered, the young Turkish-Cypriot poet whose work I have been reading for the past ten years, but had not been able to meet though she lived so close, in the other half of Nicosia, behind the barbed wire fence.

They say we must love our country,
that's what my father tells me--often.
My country has been split in two
Which of the two parts must I love?

This epigram was what brought about my meeting with Nesie, published in the progressive Turkish periodical, *Sanat Emegri* (The Labor of Art,) in 1978 with other poems by her, sent to us by our friend, the poet Ataoi Behramoglou. (Shortly after the periodical was shut down, some of the editors, including Behramoglou, sought refuge abroad, the rest were imprisoned.)

With the help of friends who knew Turkish we translated and published Nesie's poems. The response was great. Her poems brought the first message of friendship from the Turkish-Cypriots since the Turkish invasion. The Minister of Education honored Nesie Yasin with a special award, and the Greek-Cypriot composer Marios Tokas used her four stanzas, both in Greek and Turkish in a song. In less than a year "Which Half," came close to being the national anthem of divided Cyprus.

Those first "Juvenilia," as the publisher of *Sanat Emegri* called Nesie Yasin's poems, contained the entire tragedy of the wounded island seen from the Other Side. Until then the few things we knew about Turkish-Cypriot poetry had created a picture of deeply vociferous and nationalistic sentiments for the Motherland--Turkey! Nesie Yasin, unknowingly perhaps, had built the first bridge which brought us in touch with a poetry brimming with love, anguish and tenderness for Cyprus--a poetry with abhorrence for war.

The correspondence that followed between Nesie and me resembled illicit "love letters" which we sent to each other with whatever means we could find. Usually we would mail our letters to friends in London, Paris, Athens, or other European cities, and they would forward them to

us. I felt that the two communities, the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriots, were communicating through our correspondence. In our letters there was the kind of soul searching and candor one finds only in true friendships and in great love affairs--the same deep understanding, the same compassion.

6/3/81. Nesie writes:
I am searching for my roots, when I speak with poet friends in Turkey, they tell me that they have the tradition of Turkish poetry to draw from; they find their rhythm in the songs of Anatolia. I too study these roots. But am I simply, a Turkish poet, or am I a Cypriot poet? Is it perhaps only the orange trees in my poems that make them Cypriots? I want to tell the stories of my country, I want my poems to have the smell of Cyprus. I want to be remembered as a Cypriot poet. I want to know the literary past of Cyprus. We must discover our own culture. I feel that along with the Turkish language I must also learn Greek.

Nesie was then twenty years old, and she did not yet know a single Greek Cypriot (Since she was four, she and her family had been isolated in the ghetto created deliberately by the extremists.) She is now about thirty, has finished her studies, is married and has a son.

We arrived first at our meeting place. Trafalgar Square was crowded with all kinds of people--Anglo-saxon businessmen with their ubiquitous hat and umbrella, spectacular youths with earrings and pink-and-green lacquered hair, aspiring artists, beggars, Japanese tourists with cameras. Hundreds, thousands of people unaware of that group of Cypriots they were passing by, indifferent of their grief.

In one of her letters Nesie told me of her brother Mehmet. "He's a much better poet than I am, you must meet him," she wrote. She began sending me his poems and the poems of other Turkish-Cypriot poets. At the time I was putting together an anthology of contemporary Cypriot poets for Europa Publishers in Hungary, and I decided to include some Turkish-Cypriot poets as well. The anthology was published in 1986; five out of the forty-five poets were Turkish-Cypriots.

Mehmet is a year older than Nesie. After the publication of his book, *Stairwell to Light*, the Turkish poet Tziahint Kioulepi called him "the star of contemporary Turkish poetry," placing him among the five most important Turkish poets of the past fifteen years. His book, *My Beloved Soldier*, published in 1985, was confiscated by the police. Despite this, his book received the *First Poetry Prize of the Turkish Academy for young poets*, and the first prize of *The Book Institute A. Kantir*.

The Myth of Our Own Cat is a moving example of the poems in Mehmet's book.
I asked myself, a mere child at the time,
if our Greek neighbor's cat
was Greek.

One day I asked my mother
if cats are Turkish
and dogs are Greek.

The dogs, you see, had snatched our kittens.
A few days later

what do I see!
Our cat
devouring her own new-born

Nesie and Mehmet came to meet us with their younger sister. Mehmet later told me that after their mother died Nesie became a mother to the little one who since then had never left her side. And so the three of them, slender, dusky, dressed somewhat old-fashioned in the midst of the eccentricity and high fashion of London, conjured in my mind another image: It was the day after the invasion, July 20th 1974. We happened to have been in London, and we were outside the Greek church, waiting for President Archbishop Makarios to begin the Mass. Suddenly we saw a woman sitting on the pavement, in the middle of the street, obstructing traffic. She was middle-aged, heavy-set--one of the simple Cypriot women who decades ago had been driven by poverty into foreign lands. She was sitting there, in the middle of the street, lamenting and pulling her hair. And in her lament some English words were scattered--a meager harvest of migration.

"My island," she cried, "you the most beautiful of all the countries in the world, my island, what have they done to you. Twenty years I haven't seen you, my island, my child, and how can I look at you now..."

That image, straight out of ancient tragedy, was nailed in my heart and nothing could make it come undone. It was not strange that I suddenly recalled it the moment I saw those three children, alone like that, in the jungle of London. Our dialect, genuinely rich and succulent, was at the tip of my tongue. I think that I even spoke to them in Greek. They answered in English. The language barrier was already between us.

Koulis--a sharp blade between us

....
you are my voice calling me
in the same tongue.

Gioutzel Haki

The house in London where we were given hospitality was quiet. And the talk endless. By evening we were all worn out with so much giving and taking. But how can one fill, in one day, the void created by so many years?

But one image brings another, and I remember a tape which a shepherd from Morfou gave us a few years after the invasion. His neighbor, a Turkish-Cypriot shepherd, had sent it to him with someone from the UN peace-keeping force. His voice was incoherent at first--a few sob-choked words about his house (behind the barbed wire) and how he looked after it. Then he began to play the flute "to remember again the old tunes we used to play together."

Another time a soldier came to see us. "Over there, near the 'green line,'" he said, "we meet on moonlit evenings, a Turkish-Cypriot soldier and I and we talk together. Here, these are some photographs we took under the full moon." I look at the photographs. I see our soldier with the other one, the Turkish-Cypriot, embracing. Their uniforms strikingly similar--only the insignia differed. And their faces similar--dark, with the same wide Cypriot smile.

"My friend", said the soldier, "sends this poem to you. Translate and publish it without his name. He will go to prison if they find out."

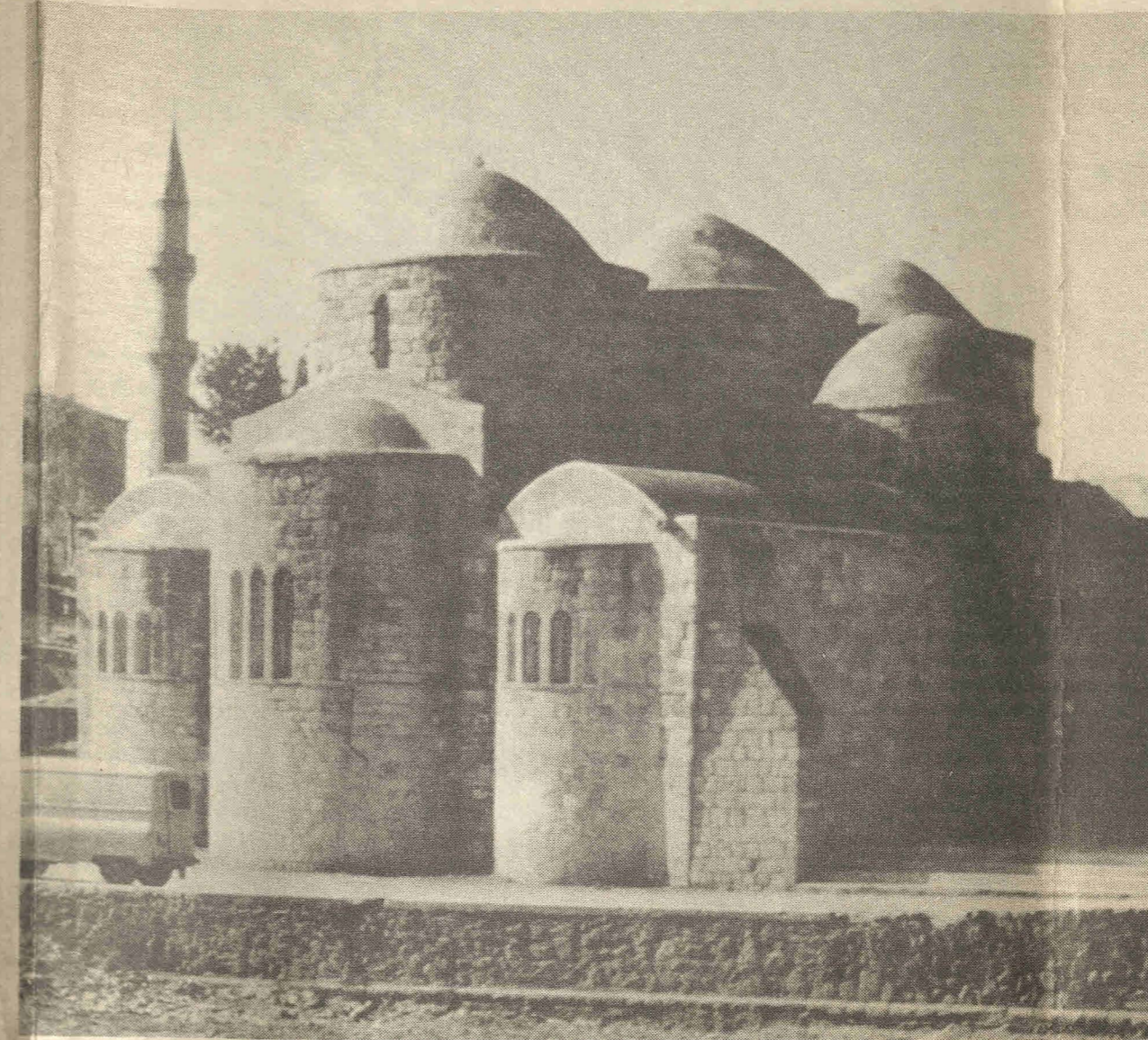
This is what the poem said:

The poem lives,
it walks, it swims
it eats and drinks,
it starts to sing
to make love
to struggle.

The poem is laughter and sorrow.

This poem, written by an eighteen-year-old boy, over there, on the Other Side, behind the dividing line, signed "a Turkish-Cypriot," was published in the newspaper *Haravgi*, on September 4, 1982.

In a few weeks our soldier came back. He was grief-stricken, on the verge of tears. He said: "It's all



Islamic and Orthodox churches in Peristerona near Morphou which is said to be given back to the Greek Cypriots under UN. chief's plan.

over with my friend, they found Greek books on him. But I brought you a letter and more poems by another Turkish-Cypriot soldier."

Out of a folded and refolded piece of paper emerged the following poem:

I am a Cypriot
son of the golden oranges
and of the clusters of unripe grapes.
I am saying this to you:
As the spring hangs on and climbs
from the plains onto the mountains
step by step, leaf by leaf
so the days of joy
also hang on and climb...

Signed: *Second Turkish-Cypriot*.

And the "love-letters" continued: Eventually, regular, thick envelop came to us, filled with more and more poems from a multitude of poet. I wish I could copy here every single one of those poems, but I can only give you only a sample, enough so that you can have a taste of this moving, electrifying poetry.

When they raised the fences
they confused the earth-
the smell is the same on both sides of the fence

Between the barbed wire weeps a daisy,
the stray, orphaned flower,
caught between us now, how will she ever break free?
She might be reconciliation's flower...
Fikret Demirag.

Mother always told me
I came into this world
in the midst of the bombs of July 1955,
and that the face I first saw
--though this sounds strange--wasn't my mother's
but a Greek-Cypriot doctor's.
Things like that happen in my country.
Ata Toulounoglou

Division
brought a grim beginning
more fiery than the summer of 1974.

Division
brought a grim longing
to those who left in the summer of 974.
Division brought a grim lesson
to those born in the summer of 194.

Division
brought grim shame
to those who stayed behind in the summer of 1974.

M. Azizoglou

I am alone
and you are alone, far from me, Lemesos,
the place I played as a child--barefoot-
blind man's buff, in the cold, in the rain,
my head shaved bald--defenseless.
Asik Mene

We were children
unformed, tiny, brimming with life.
The sound of guns, the shelters, the corpses
are my child memories.
Torze Karifista.

They locked us up. Our eyes fecund with life.
We were dead.
The birds, the kites--locked up.
The colors of flowers locked up.
Koumhour Delisirmak.

Int hat hospitable house in London, among Mehmet, Mesic, my husband and me, the faces of the young poet-soldiers became real. From the other side, from the "other half," they were fighting their own, special battle, the battle of the pen.

A Turkish critic said once that the most

authentic Turkish poetry was being written in Cyprus. (Something of the sort, I believe has been said in Greece about greek Cypriot poetry.) It seemed that love for our tiny country was growing like a flame, igniting every one of us. Mehmet was planning a new periodical which could publish all progressive writers, and he imagined joint cultural events for Greek and Turkish Cypriots...

"We must find ways to meet each other," he said over and over. "We must tear down the fences with art."

His English, though imperfect, had acquired a certain passion. Nesie was shy, spoke hardly at all. But the next evening she and I read our poems together. The event was organized by the Cypriot community of Isligton, the first of its kind, with audience from both sides. Nesie read my poems in Turkish, I hers in Greek. The people listened in silence, their eyes filled with tears. At that moment we all felt that there was still time, that everything was not lost, that perhaps the damage was no irreparable, that the ambulated parts could still be joined together.

After the reading we gathered in the house of Aydin, a Turkish-Cypriot social scientist who lives and works in London. We talked about the identity of Cyprus. The young Turkish-Cypriot scholar told us that they were organizing a conference on that theme.

"It is one of the greatest problems for us, the Turko-Cypriots," they said. "Our people, the clever ones, leave Cyprus by the thousands. They emigrate. The situation has become intolerable. Those who stay in Cyprus risk losing their identity, identifying with the new settlers. As long as there is no solution to this problem, the plans of the chauvinists will be facilitated.

As we were leaving, in the wee hours of the morning, a young woman who had said almost nothing throughout the night handed me some papers. When we returned to Cyprus, a friend translated for me those poems of Feliz Naltozen:
We distilled sorrow from bitter oranges
and scattered it behind the death of our days.
Then we distilled sorrow from our island's sage,
peaceful warmth in our blood. Then
from myrtle we distilled sorrow.
Bitter loves flowed through our lashes.
We distilled sorrow from grape clusters.
Nights we awake drunk with carmine blood.
In the end sorrow distilled sorrow.
Mailed on our breast-flower of our identity...

Mehmet Giasin accepted with joy the invitation of the international organization, *Artists for Nuclear Disarmament* (PAND). The meeting of the executive committee took place in Vassa, a small village surrounded with vineyards, near Limassol. It was the first time in fifteen years that Mehmet saw that part of Cyprus. The first few days he was upset. "I don't recognize anything," he said. With time he got used to it, he relaxed. But when the business of the committee was over and we took the representatives to see the "green line" dividing Nicosia, he begged to stay in the bus.

"I might do something crazy," he said, "attempt to cross over and cause you trouble. Can you imagine my plight. My aunt's shop is fifty meters away and a bit further on is Nesie..."
Mehmet returned to London, and a few weeks later he went to see Nesie in Cyprus. The pressure put on him by the regime of occupation was intolerable. They called him traitor, declared an all-out psychological war against him. He was forced to return to London. From there he telephoned often. He is full of new plans: to organize joint meetings in Europe, to publish bilingual poems, to give poetry a chance to fight her own battle.

We met again Mehmet at PAND Conference in Vienna. He was melancholy. "I don't like these European cities," he said. "they're nothing like our Cyprus, nothing is like our island..."

"My island, my child, what have they done to you..."
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