

North Cyprus: Complicated, contradictory, charismatic*

Jayati Ghosh

Paulo Paolides was a lawyer in Cyprus in the 1950s and 1960s, a very prominent citizen who was a friend of the Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios, famous for his eloquence in winning high-profile legal cases. He was also and simultaneously a smuggler and gun-runner with dubious tastes, and may well have been a pederast who brought young boys from orphanages to his home for his pleasure. This home – a 16-room double-storeyed house known as the Blue Mansion – was wonderfully situated: on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean, from where he could watch and monitor the movement of contraband traffic even as the house remained invisible from the seashore.

That home is now a museum, a reminder not only of the inequalities that characterised that time but also of the lingering tensions between Turks and Greeks on the island, which have been lidded over but not resolved over more than four decades. It is also testimony to a truly unusual life. Photographs of the owner displayed around the house indicate a man who fancied himself: rakish hats and buccaneering attitudes on the face of a potential Italianate actor, whose oratorical skills were rehearsed and honed in a specially designed personal amphitheatre that allowed him to project his voice.

The rooms are decorated with lavish if uncertain aesthetics, from the downstairs reception room with a sunken bath at its centre, in which Sophia Loren is said to have bathed in milk, to the variously coloured rooms upstairs that provide some indications of his equally varied activities. There are blue and red bedrooms for the master of the house and honoured guests like Makarios; the yellow room has a smaller sized bed meant for the children who were probably unwilling forced “guests”; the meeting room has a small table in the middle around which mafiosi would gather while Paolides ran the meeting from his desk and chair in the corner; the “open” verandah is actually protectively covered in glass and looks out on a lovely parkland vista from which the house itself is obscured by tall trees.

That search for privacy and security is evident in many other ways, and reflects the exigencies of his double (or triple) existence. Fear of attacks from his mafia brethren led Paolides to devise multiple strategies for his own protection. In addition to posting security guards all around the compound, he built a complicated labyrinth of tunnels below the house – which proved to be invaluable when the Turks invaded from the sea a few miles to the north, allowing him to escape unseen. For nearly a decade afterwards, he persisted in the hope that he would eventually return, even periodically sending over special polish for the Chinese lacquer armoire that was his favourite object. (As it happens, he was eventually killed anyway in Italy in the 1980s, not by Turks but at a meeting of mafia bosses that ended unpleasantly for some of them.)

The house – and Paolides’s extraordinary life – in some ways symbolise the many contradictions and complexities of North Cyprus today, where natural beauty and historical attractions coexist with unresolved issues that pertain to its very existence as a distinct entity.

The Turkish Republic of North Cyprus is an extraordinary place, a carved-out segment of an extraordinary island. It is an artificial creation, after severe ethno-religious conflicts and killing from the late 1960s to the early 1970s tore apart the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. These culminated in [the Turkish occupation of the northern part of the island in 1974](#), officially undertaken to prevent the extermination of Turkish Cypriots after the military junta that had just taken power in Athens encouraged the “cleansing” of the island by the majority Greeks. The strife forced the movement of Turkish Cypriots northwards and Greek Cypriots southwards, with subsequent exchange of properties and all the mess that such displacement can entail. Currently the area is recognised as a country only by Turkey, implying an uncertain (though stable) political and economic existence.

Professor Eyup Ozveren of the Middle Eastern Technical University in Ankara, economic historian, wide-ranging scholar and engaging raconteur, provides some insights into the complex many-layered historical processes that led to a syncretic culture that has unfortunately been torn asunder in the recent past. In geographical terms, Cyprus is much closer to Syria than to Greece. Indeed, it is only the identification of the indigenous population with Greek Orthodox Church (irrespective of its ancient ethnic origins and diversity) that has enabled Greece to lay any claims to it and created demands for “[Enosis](#)”, a unified Greek state. Its vantage position in the Mediterranean made it valuable for trade routes and provided much diversity in its admittedly small population of around 1.2 million, of which only 300,000 are currently in North Cyprus.

Through time it has been ruled successively by, among others, the Assyrians, the empire and heirs of Alexander the Great, Romans, the East Roman Empire of Byzantium, Richard Lionheart of England who picked it up during one of his Crusades, then a Lusignan dynasty of Frankish origin, the Venetians, the Ottomans, and most recently the British before Independence in 1960. The relatively small area of North Cyprus contains a wealth of spectacular locations that have inexplicably not found place in UNESCO’s list of world heritage sites. There are archaeological finds from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages. There is the breath-taking 10th century Lusignan fort and palace of St Hilarion perched atop – and carved out of – rocks at an elevation of nearly 800 metres above the nearby sea, one of four such forts of which the others are even more inaccessible. There are the exquisite remains of the monastery of Bellapais, overlooking the sea near the northern port of Kyrenia. There is one of the more remarkable Gothic churches of the Middle Ages, now the Selimiye mosque in Lefkosa (Nicosia). Restored Ottoman caravanserais compete for attention with Roman ruins, Armenian churches and Venetian forts near harbours.

Evidence of the tangled past is still to be found in what are very peaceful settlements today. A small 900-year old village has an entirely Maronite population, that still owes spiritual allegiance to Lebanon. It’s mostly weekend residents (who generally work in Lefkosa) are entitled by quirk of political history to vote in the south, in the Republic of Cyprus that is a recognised country and member of the European Union. So before those elections, politicians come from the south to campaign for the 500 odd votes from people whose walls are graced by pictures of the Maronite Patriarch along with those of Attaturk and the red-and-white flags of both Turkey and North Cyprus, rather than the blue-and-white flag of Greece. Armenian families still live in neighbourhoods of northern Lefkosa. Islam here seems much more restrained and casual than on the Turkish mainland, and the general feel is European.

But divisions are also clear, now expressed in physical or geographical terms. The capital city of Lefkosa (Nicosia) and the eastern port town of Famagusta are divided between north and south by “Green Lines” monitored by UN peacekeeping forces. The conflict has thus far resisted peaceful resolution; even though it is now effectively a peaceful conflict, with no border incidents or other signs of flare up. [An elaborate plan to resolve the standoff, drawn up by Koifi Annan a few years ago](#), was comprehensively rejected by Greek Cypriots in a referendum even as Turkish Cypriots approved it. Since then attitudes may have hardened on both sides, despite economic and financial crises in both Greece and the Republic of Cyprus.

This leads to a very anomalous situation for North Cyprus. The global trade embargo means that all trade must occur via Turkey, effectively limiting the opportunities for economic diversification despite the advantageous location. The area is arid and dry, constraining agriculture other than the oranges and lemons that do not find adequate market and are often left to drop and decay on the ground. So great is the water shortage that Turkey is investing in a 60 kilometre pipeline on the bed of the Mediterranean to carry fresh water from southern Turkey to northern Cyprus. There are other features of Turkey’s financial responsibility to its protectorate: aid from Turkey dominates the budget of the democratically elected government of North Cyprus and accounts for around one-fifth of its estimated GDP, and the Turkish lira is the currency.

The service sectors have expanded recently, some more promising than others. There has been an explosion of tertiary education, with both public and private institutions providing enrolment for around 65,000 students. These originally catered to the surplus Turkish students unable to access higher education within Turkey but now also admit a growing number of international students. Tourism has huge potential, but thus far the main growth in this sector has involved less salubrious activities, ranging from the big casinos dotting the shoreline near Kyrenia and Famagusta to the rather seedy-looking nightclubs that are randomly strewn along the highways.

The English writer Lawrence Durrell (author of “The Alexandria Quartet” and other works) lived for three years in Bellapais in the 1950s during the struggle for independence (and rise of religious conflicts). He wrote a tragic/humorous account of his time there, “Bitter Lemons of Cyprus”, which describes the descent from the good fellowship and good wine of an apparently peaceful sun-drenched sea-stroked island, to the “envenomed shrillness” and “feast of unreason” that developed from “the medieval compost of religious hatreds”.

Durrell’s book also captured the tension between insularity and cosmopolitanism that must be a feature of so many populated islands. The peculiar situation of North Cyprus today suggests that, just as cosmopolitanism has defined its history, it could also be its deliverance.

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