

Fueling Advocacy Through Identity: Understanding the Cypriot Struggle

Sophia Athan

My summer memories growing up were saturated by the all-consuming Mediterranean heat and refreshed by the rush of cold air that came from opening the *periptero* ice cream case. Trips to Greece, which happened five times during my adolescence, were never complete without indulging in the cloyingly sweet taste of *glyka tou koutaliou*, spoon sweets from my family's island home. I would return from Greece with stories of chasing stray cats and late nights in Chora, falling asleep over a plate of *gigantes*, my childhood favorite.

From all these memories, I grew up proclaiming nostalgia for Greece; I longed to return to the stray cats and spoon sweets and vocalized these wishes to anyone who would listen. Growing up Greek American meant that I was consistently surrounded by family, heritage, and culture through the church, Greek dance, and Greek school. These institutionalized blends of motherland and homeland created a complex belonging to two different landscapes – part of me feels attached to my birthplace, and the other feels ties to the origins of those in my family that came before me. I am blessed to have the ability to travel between the two identities, spending summers in Greece and living life in America.

Continued fulfillment of my nostalgia is as simple as purchasing an airplane ticket. It was not until I visited Cyprus on the American Hellenic Institute Foundation's College Student Foreign Policy trip that I truly understood that Cypriot nostalgia ran far deeper and more significant than mine.

Milan Kundera wrote in *Ignorance*, "The Greek word for 'return' is *nostos*. *Algos* means 'suffering.' So, nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return."

Kundera's definition of nostalgia accurately describes the Cypriot struggle and puts into words the forcibly resigned nature of the free Cypriots. They know that in the current political climate, the prospect of returning to their own villages and cities in the occupied area remains slim. In the free town of Nicosia, Cypriot civilians sitting at *tavernas* look to their right to see bustling nightlife and look to their left to see the Green Line checkpoints covered in barbed wire that they cannot fathom venturing past. Overlooking the walls and makeshift barricades parallel to the Green Line, Cypriot homes and businesses are crumbling, left to decay by the Turkish occupying forces as the townspeople must sit and watch, helpless, from behind the checkpoint.

During a lot of our time in Washington, Cyprus, and Greece, my peers and I heard the same phrase repeated by high-ranking diplomatic officials. They explained how "values-based foreign policy" continues to be the tie that binds Greece and the United States together. A "values-based foreign policy" approach includes the promotion of fundamental freedoms. Alongside the five American fundamental freedoms, this trip allowed me to recognize that for the Cypriots, the most important freedom they could ever receive is the freedom to return. Deprived since 1974, the Cypriots exiled from their homes are left with only distant memories of their own stray cats and spoon sweets. Younger generations were born without the understanding of life before the invasion. These priceless experiences, ones that Greek-Americans have the freedom to enjoy and reminisce upon, are not shared by their oppressed neighbors to the southeast.

Displayed over one of the blue and white checkpoints in Nicosia stood a banner that said, "Remember Cyprus," with the northern part of the island painted in red. Greek and Cypriot flags line the streets of Nicosia next to one another, united. The struggle for freedom is intertwined between the two states, and it is painful. Cypriots are suffering, left with their unsatiated desire to return home. They are left without the ability to see the birthplace of those who came before them, unlike those of us whose familial origins reside in Greece. The Turkish occupation remains an aching reminder that unlike my own blended landscape of motherland and homeland, the Cypriots are living in a forcibly divided landscape – driven from life as they knew it and deprived of the chance for homecoming.

Realizing our privilege as Greek Americans can be as saddening as it is motivating, because it opens the opportunity for advocacy. The Cypriot people are nostalgic. They are deprived of their fundamental freedom to return to their homeland, unlike us Greek-Americans who have the blessing to do so. The title of Greek American bears the name of two states: the founders of democracy and the biggest advocates for democracy on the world stage. As Greek Americans, we must stand up for the Cypriots and encourage our

government officials to do the same. No issue ties more directly to “values-based foreign policy” than the protection of fundamental freedoms. We must understand that support for the Cypriots can no longer be passive.

They ask me to remember them. I do. Will you?

American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues | Copyright © 2022 American Hellenic Institute Foundation, Inc.

All rights reserved. All articles appearing in the *American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues* are the copyright of the Journal. The online edition is free to individuals and institutions. Copies of the individual articles are strictly prohibited. Reproduction, storage or transmission of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law is unlawful without prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) and other organizations authorized by the publisher to administer reprographic reproduction rights. Distribution of the published articles for research or educational purposes is possible, but requires the formal authorization of the Journal editor and the authors. Commercial use of the AHIF Policy Journal or the articles contained herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the Managing Editor at AHIFPolicyJournal@aheworld.org. AHIF 1220 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.