

**“το χωρκόν των ορφανών ή το χωρκόν των γεναικών”**

**(the village of the orphans or the village of the women)**

## **A painful first contact**

*By Costis Achniotis*

We looked at each other in a hurry, we went past each other, we stopped for a while and we greeted each other. Consciously, he did not remind me of anyone.

“My name is Orhan and I come from Tochni” he said. I understood from the imperceptible motion of his hand as he showed to the north that he did not refer to the Tochni of Limassol, but the village of Vouno at the foothills of Pentadactilos almost opposite of Nicosia.

“I went there once in 1990 or 1991,” I said and a black cloth of sadness hang at a corner of my mind together with the torturous feelings that were with me on that 13th of November.

On the 13th of November of 1990 or 1991 there was going to take place a visit of Greek Cypriot journalists in the other side after an agreement was reached between the two Journalists Associations. Nevertheless, the day before the visit the Greek Cypriot journalists of Cyprus Journalists Association decided that the 13th of November is too close to the sensitive date of 15th of November and the recognition issue was raised. I decided that journalists neither recognise nor do they not recognise states. The newspaper for which I worked at the time did not allow me to go as its representative and so I went as the representative of the small magazine that I was publishing whose final issue was printed earlier that year. One or two buses were waiting for us and “many colleagues who were holding flowers. Apart from myself there were only three other Greek Cypriot colleagues who represented foreign media. The disappointment was obvious and everyone felt very uncomfortable not knowing exactly how to deal with the situation. In all the confusion I got in the car of friend and we drove away after leaving the message that we would go to Kyrenia and we would meet with the others there. So on that day I acquired, unofficially, the state of a free moving person.

I was certain that the other colleagues would write mainly about our enslaved land, the despoiled churches, the derelict villages and so on. For this reason and also because I was more interested in giving emphasis to people, I had decided to present my impressions under the general title “A journey among the Turkish Cypriots”. Nevertheless, for mysterious reasons, the title was eventually changed to “Journey In the occupied areas” despite the fact that I had made this very point quite clear to the page editor. Furthermore, while I had submitted for publication a series of photographs I had taken myself and which showed images of the daily lives of Turkish Cypriots, they appeared mixed with other photographs which showed churches and abandoned villages. The photographs which I had taken showed, for example, people walking dressed normally, households with tables, chairs, refrigerator and television, blocks of flats and roads, grocer shops with food on the shelves (I remember the Nicaraguan bananas which were banned in the south and the sale of Nicaraguan bananas could not be included in the activities of the Solidarity Association for this country), coffee shops with people drinking coffee, Turks who were evidently soldiers or settlers, monuments of the “barbarity of Greeks” and glory of the Turks and so on. I would take a photograph every few minutes so that one could see through these photographs a more real image of the other side.

I remember that a few days later, after the visit of a much larger number of Greek Cypriot journalists finally took place, a well known and bold journalist who supports rapprochement “finally discovered”

that the Turkish Cypriots are well dressed and stay in houses and one can see cars on the roads! All this is obvious to anyone who lives near the buffer zone.

So we went to Kyrenia, my heart cried at the small port and my shoulders felt heavy as I walked under the Turkish flag while entering the venetian castle. I remembered the school excursions there during my childhood days. I also remembered the images of Greek Cypriot soldiers surrendering when confronted with the tanks. We had lunch at the Dome hotel... the hotel of the unforgettable memory. We left early for Famagusta in the same way that came to have enough time to implement the plan we had made. We first went to Ayios Epiktitos in my uncle's house where I often went during my holidays in the old times. We were badly received by a "mavrotsakalos" {word used by T/C referring in a pejorative way to the Anatolian Turks) who grudgingly led us to the croft. The Turkish Cypriots from Avdemou who were there cultivating it were picking lemons and offered us some to take to my uncle. Then we went to the village itself but I passed through it quickly, not because I am not interested but because I want to focus my attention somewhere else.

...In the other side there is a village which is called, or at least it used to be called till that time "the village of the orphans" or "the village of the women" or, better still as my friends told me in Greek "το χωρκόν των ορφανών ή το χωρκόν των γεναικών". I was told that only women and children live there. They are those who remained from the Turkish Cypriot population of Tochni of 1974... On the road sign it says "Tuskent koy" which means Tochni in Turkish. It is the village of Vouno, next to Syghari to the south of Pentadactylos, almost opposite of Nicosia.

While we were still at Kyrenia, we organised by telephone a security team from members of organisations of the left which went to the village before me in order to protect me from possible angry responses from the inhabitants. I was the first Greek Cypriot who would be seen by the Turkish Cypriots of Tochni since 1974.

While we were travelling there I was thinking that some information about the slaughter of Tochni was made known in a Greek documentary made by Papademetrakis and Thekla Kittou produced a few years after 1974. A Turkish Cypriot who lived in Zygi spoke in the film about this matter. He said that some Turkish Cypriot men from Zygi were also among the dead.

The village seemed empty and all the doors were shut. Two or three persons then appeared in front of the coffee shop. We exchanged some words very uncomfortably and my escort led me for a walk round the village. after asking me if I wanted to do so.. We walked through the narrow streets to the small church, a tiny and humble building, all white, sitting on the side of the mountain from where one could see Nicosia sprawling over the wall that divides my country into two.

The little church was white inside, the icons were removed, it was despoiled but... All around on the walls in picture frames slightly bigger than the size of a palm were the photographs of their missing persons from Tochni. "All the male population over 16 years old" I was told. In the middle there was a showcase which contained some of the personal effects of each one... a piece of clothing, a string of beads, a cigarette holder.. God himself would have entered in that place on his knees. I tried very hard to stay on my two feet. I felt I was in a truly sacred place. My mind was filled with a cloud of mist.

A while later I found myself at the village coffee shop drinking the most bitter coffee in my life. I was sitting on one side and opposite me there were a few dozens of people. In their midst, at the front there was an old man. He told me he was the village mouhtar (leader) at the time and they let him live. Sitting there in front of me there was one middle aged man who was not inside the village at the

time of the slaughter; he had fled in the mountains he told me and he survived. In the village, I was told, there was someone who had been arrested with the others and eventually survived but he was not always a sane person. They also told me of another man who was not at the coffee shop, the teacher of the village, who was not from Tochni but from Dhali, a heroic figure they said. He died two years ago they said. He was the brother of another heroic figure in favour of rapprochement, Kemal Aktunc. I am under the impression that I did not notice any woman that day and as I have already mentioned, all the doors were shut.

The young people who were sitting round the old man were generally speaking, wearing casual modern clothes, had long hair and had the image of dissenters. Some nationalists, I would think, whom I had met earlier were looking at me with expressions that implied that I was representing a barbaric tribe, that I was a murderer. I felt I was ready to face that.

The old man sitting opposite me had an empty expression on his face, maybe due to many long years of deep pain. He was looking at me with a deep and penetrating look. The man was without hatred, he had passed through the land of pain and had reached the other side, the side of wisdom. "My son" he said, and he told me the story of how and who rounded up the men of Tochni and led them to the place from which they would never return. His voice was weak, expressionless but steady. Every family had lost loved ones. He told me that he would not like to return back to their village and that it would be good if Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots could live side by side -not together- in peace. This is the official policy as well. But his reference to peace in his soft voice had nothing official in it. And I did not believe him when he said that he would not want the Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots to live together again. On the contrary, I was under the impression that this man could bring the two communities together single handedly. He said, "Bring to me your own people who have suffered as much as I have so we can talk together".

From the rest of the young people who were there I only maintain the general memory of a group of people who, I think, are pioneers in relation to the rest of the Cypriots. It seemed to me that these people in their twenties and thirties had already worked through in their inner being the basic questions of society and of human existence. I was impressed by the lack of a competitive spirit in the way they talked, a lack of hatred and a feeling, not of love, but I would say, of acceptance.

Orhan, whom I met at the last bi-communal gathering at the Ledra Palace hotel was one of those young people I met six years ago. "I am the one who made you the sandwich", he reminded me shyly, trying to disperse the mist of time.

Another person standing next to us seemed to be trying to join us in our conversation. Was he a Greek Cypriot or a Turkish Cypriot? Trying to work out who is who is an interesting game we play in these bi-communal meetings. "Let me introduce you to my friend Fevzi" Orhan said. "Fevzi, Fevzi...Cyprus is so small whether unified or divided" I said with a smile. In another meeting at Pyla, for Hade, I met a girl whose surname was Fevzi who came from Tochni. "She is my cousin", he said. Günsel Fevzi was a subtle intellectual who lives in London and was telling us that day how, a few years ago, she had gone to Tochni and went to her old home in the midst of many difficulties. Herself being pulled by the passion of returning, even for a little while, to the house she was born, she dared this journey which ended up, as always, in tears. Maybe she went precisely for this reason; to cry.

I agreed with Orhan and Fevzi to meet again in the next bi-communal meeting. They said to me, "But we want you to tell to the people of Tochni to come to the Ledra Palace as well".

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