

# **Place of Refuge: A History of the Jews in Cyprus**

**Stavros Panteli**

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Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, after Sicily and Sardinia, with an area of 3,572 square miles (9,251 sq km). It is situated in the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean, at a distance of some 240 miles north of Egypt, 40 miles south of Turkey, and 500 miles east of Greece. The present (2001) population of Cyprus is estimated at 790,000, of whom about 150,000 (with settlers from mainland Turkey) belong to the Turkish Cypriot community, and 640,000 belong to the Greek Cypriot community. Other groups include Armenians, Latins, and Maronites. The long history of Cyprus may be one of invasion and conquest, but it is also one of an extraordinary cultural heritage. Throughout its history, Cyprus has endured the conquests of a succession of races and cultures, besetting its rocky shores with the regularity of tides. These have included the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Byzantines. They were followed by the Venetians, the Ottoman Turks, and, late in the nineteenth century, the British. To visit Cyprus is to journey to a rich and dense intersection of culture and history. It is indeed an experience in the "footprints on the sands of time" (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *A Psalm of Life*).

In the history of Cyprus, certain dates and episodes are important for their impact on the island's history and therefore worth remembering: the fourteenth century BC, when the Mycenaean Greeks began to settle on the island; AD 1571, when it was captured by the Ottoman Turks from the Venetians; and 1878, when, under terms of the "Cyprus Convention", administration of the island was transferred to Great Britain. The Ottoman Turks, forebears of the modern Turkish Cypriots, dominated the island for three hundred years before they ceded control to the British. In 1914 Cyprus was formally annexed by Great Britain and became part of the British Empire. Nine years later, in 1923, by article 16 of the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey renounced all claims on the island. In 1960 Britain grants independence under a power-sharing constitution between Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

On 16 August 1960, Cyprus became an independent republic. On 15 July 1974, the ruling military junta of Greece staged a coup to overthrow the democratically elected government of Cyprus. But the Athens-backed coup fails. Turkish troops land in the north and occupy a third of the island. Thirty-one years later (1974-

2005), an estimated force of 35,000 Turkish troops are still in the occupied northern regions of Cyprus. On 1 May 2004, Cyprus was admitted in the European Union as one of the 25 member states. Alas, the historic accession of the island to the European Union left out the Turkish occupied northern area of Cyprus. A settlement of the “problem of Cyprus” seems so near, and yet so far. The outline of a likely settlement is clear – one federal state with a high level of autonomy for the two communities. In *De Republica* (Cicero), Rome’s orator-politician, wrote, “*Nostra autem respublica non unius esset ingenio, sed multorum, nec una hominis vita, sed alignot constituta seculis et aetatibus*” (II, 1, 2). A timely reminder to the leaders of the two communities of Cyprus from Roman statesman and former governor of the island. Indeed, the leaders of the two Cypriot communities, Greek and Turkish, should heed the words of Cicero (106-43 BC) in their efforts to reunify the island and end the continent’s last post-war conflict.

Stavros Panteli’s book *Place of Refuge*, is a study of the Jewish community of Cyprus in the *longue durée* of Cypriot history. In this small, but interesting, book, the author traces the “footprints” of the Jews in Cyprus from ancient times to the birth of the state of Israel on 14 May 1948. The seven main chapters argue the contributions of the Jews to the historical fabric and cultural mosaic of the island of Cyprus. There are four appendices, extensive notes, a map, some illustrations, a useful glossary, selective bibliography and index. The biographical section is a useful addition.

The earliest settlement of Jews in Cyprus “dates from around 587 BC ... “. Jewish presence on the island apparently began to develop (on a greater scale) beginning the “3<sup>rd</sup> century BC” (Panteli, pp. 16-17). The presence of the Jews in Cyprus is closely recorded prominently in episodes during the Roman era. Cyprus became a part of the Roman province of Cilicia (Strabo XIV, 6, 6). Christianity was introduced to Cyprus early in the first century AD, by “those who were scattered abroad” (Acts 11:20). The new religion was officially brought to Cyprus by St Barnabas, described as “Levite, of a Cypriot family” (Acts 4:36).

In the year AD 115, the prevailing peace on the island was disturbed. Towards the end of the administration of Emperor Trajan, AD 97-117, a wide spread insurrection of the Jews broke out in Cyrene, Egypt, and Cyprus. On the island the Jews, led by one Artemion, revolted against Roman rule. It is estimated that during the revolt the dead in Cyprus, mostly non-Jews, numbered 240,000, and the city of Salamis “utterly destroyed and the non-Jewish population exterminated” (George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, Volume I, p. 242) also (Dio, 68.32). Roman forces despatched to the island crushed the revolt and expelled its Jewish population. No Jew was allowed to set foot on Cyprus. However, the presence of a prosperous Jewish community is recorded in the Middle Ages.

The Jews were particularly active in trade, commerce, and finance. In money-lending business they are “remarkable”, wrote one Elias of Pesaro in 1563 (Claude Cobham, *Excerpta Cypria*, p. 74). The large Jewish community in Cyprus was well established by the ninth century AD. “Apud ipsos fides obstinate, misericordia in promptu, sed adversus omnes alios hostile odium” (Tacitus, *History*, V, 5 – of the Jews). In 1160 Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, observed: “Besides the Rabbanitic Jews in this island, there is a community of heretic Jews called Kaphrosein or Cyprians. They are Epicureans, and the orthodox Jews excommunicated them” (*Excerpta Cypria*, p. 5). The Jews in Cyprus were prosperous and well respected. “A man is lucky if he knows medicine, for the Greeks respect the Jews as good doctors, and trust them” (*Excerpta Cypria*, p. 76).

“Ranking high amongst the world’s most tenacious and adventurous peoples are the Cypriots and the Jews”, according to author. “For centuries”, Dr Panteli writes, the Jews as with the people of Cyprus “suffered from a string of oppressive overlords, yet despite all odds, managed to survive with their identity intact. The Jews, uprooted over 2,700 years ago ... have also preserved their identity in the most testing of circumstances.”

*Place of Refuge: A History of the Jews in Cyprus* is a good book. It is a book that should be read by anyone interested in the history of Cyprus and in understanding the struggle of the Jewish people for a land to call home. In *Place of Refuge* Dr Panteli is aiming beyond academia and to a broad, educated readership. It is a book well written, richly documented and with challenging insight. This book may be recommended without reservation.

**John Koumoulides**