

"PORTRAIT OF A JEW": ETHNIC IDENTITY AND NATIONAL BELONGING IN CYPRUS

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Abstract

"Portrait of a Jew": Ethnic Identity and National Belonging in Cyprus is a critical examination of Jewish presence in Cyprus and a case study of Abigail and Daniel Miller who have been in Cyprus since the 1930s, and who have lived since 1974 in a military camp in the Buffer Zone. The paper discusses the "Cyprus Problem", but mainly focuses on how the Millers negotiate living between two communities, and on how their Jewish identity is articulated between the cracks of protracted conflict. The paper is a glance at the relationship between Jewish diasporic identity and post-colonial national identity in Cyprus.

Introduction

In the Eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus, questions of national belonging and conceptions of ethnic identity – Greek and Turkish – have violently besieged the island since well before independence from British rule in 1960. Before 1960, however, there was no striving for a Cypriot nation.¹ There was, on the part of most Greek Cypriots, a "national" *raison d' tre*, *enosis*, union with Greece, "the Hellenic ideal of the coming together of all territory that was culturally Greek" (Kyle 5). In reaction to the "Greek cry for *enosis*," some of the more militant Turkish Cypriots looked towards the Turkish motherland, and supported the idea of *taksim*, the division of the island into two separate national bodies (Kyle 7). The question of national consciousness whether Cypriot, Greek, or Turkish has, throughout the century, polarised different inhabitants of the island, especially the political left and right. In general, those on the far left tended to support an independent Cyprus – independent from either Greece or Turkey – while those on the right have been more in favour of either *enosis* or *taksim*.

Further clarifications are in order. The definition of nation outlined in this paper describes a community of people with a shared idea of who they are, where they came from, and what they would like to become. "A nation is a community of people,

whose members are bound together by a sense of solidarity, a common culture, a national consciousness" (Seton-Watson 1). By ethnic identity, I mean a "basic human category", and not a sub-group or minority (Connor 43).²

National struggle in Cyprus transformed the island into a sovereign state (and not a component of the Greek state) in August 1960; Cyprus became a Republic with two official languages - Greek and Turkish - a national flag, a Greek President and a Turkish Vice-President, each of whom "had an absolute veto over decisions relating to foreign affairs, defence or internal security (...)" (Kyle 8).³ After the establishment of independence and the signing of the constitution, the relationship between Greek and Turkish Cypriots resulted in intense clashes, violent encounters which precipitated the arrival of United Nations Peacekeeping Forces (UNFICYP) in March of 1964,⁴ and which turned into a full-blown military conflict among Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus.

Cyprus has been divided into two "entities" since the summer of 1974 after the Greek junta staged its (failed) military coup to overthrow the government of Archbishop Makarios, and Turkey, under the Treaty of Guarantee, sent troops to Cyprus.⁵ The consequences of 1974 and subsequent division of the island have taken a toll on both communities in terms of lost land and businesses, refugees, missing persons, and so on. Efforts by the UN and other international mediators to bring both communities together, and to find a viable diplomatic solution have continuously ended in a deadlock. This "deadlock" has become internationally known as the "Cyprus Problem". At stake is the issue of ethnic identity and its relationship to the question of national sovereignty. Greek and Turkish Cypriots each want to be heard by the international community; they also want their different territorial claims to be respected and recognised.

A Short Overview of Jewish Presence in Cyprus

In the cracks of this protracted conflict exists another peoples' story, that of the Jews of Cyprus. The Jewish presence in Cyprus can be traced back to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70AD, when a large population of Jews, expelled from Palestine by the Romans, were living in the city of Salamis. Following a wave of violence that was spreading across the region (Egypt, Cyrene, Cyprus), the Jews staged an insurrection against the Romans in 115-116AD. The city of Salamis was completely destroyed, and the Romans forced the Jews out of Cyprus. Jews were officially allowed to live in Cyprus after 1160, during the Byzantine Empire, and there were Jews present in Cyprus during the Venetian rule of the island (1489-1571). It was not until the 16th century, however, when Cyprus was under the Ottoman Empire, that a strong community of Jews was again present on the island. Because there had been Jews in the higher ranks of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan invited

them to settle in Cyprus in order to help consolidate Ottoman power. In fact, Cyprus was considered a place of refuge for the displaced Jews of the 16th century, most of whom had been expelled from Spain following the Inquisition.

When the British took over the island in 1878, the "Jewish question" again came up. During the Berlin Conference of 13 July 1878, Benjamin Disraeli, the British prime minister, recommended that Cyprus be a haven for the Jews of the Diaspora. Ten years later, Theodor Herzl, the architect of modern Zionism, had proposed that Cyprus, because of its proximity to the "Promised Land", be transformed into a homeland for the Jews. At the turn of the century, Jews, escaping persecution and poverty in Eastern Europe, began immigrating to Cyprus where, with the help of the Rothschild family, they set up collective farms and established the commercial citrus industry (which is booming today).

In 1946, Jewish refugees from the Holocaust who were trying to make their way to Palestine were re-routed by the British and put into detention camps on the island. Because of strict immigration laws and quotas, many of these refugees tried to enter Palestine illegally. They were imprisoned in squalid conditions under armed guards and behind barbed wire. The internment camps lasted from May 1946 to January 1949 - after the creation of the state of Israel. The British did allow a certain number passage to Palestine every month.

The small community of Jews that continues to live on the island are mostly the children and grandchildren of Eastern European immigrants.⁶ Holidays are spent either at home or at Israeli Embassy functions. The only functioning synagogue on the island is located inside the Israeli Embassy.

This essay is less of a socio-historical investigation of the Jews of Cyprus than a critical examination of the figure of the "rootless", "displaced" Jew who, today, lives in a land wrought with ethnic and national conflict. My point of departure is Abigail and Daniel Miller⁷ who have been in Cyprus since the 1930s, who are from Austria-Hungary and Siberia, respectively, and who have lived, since 1974, in a military camp in the buffer zone. Questions will be addressed in light of "the Cyprus Problem", and also against the backdrop of Albert Memmi's *Portrait d'un juif* ("Portrait of a Jew") [1962]. It is my contention that Memmi's figure of the Jew as an outsider who lives "apart from the national community," (imperfectly) describes the situation of the Millers who live on the fringes of two national bodies, which, since decolonisation, have been struggling to articulate and legitimise their different experiences and aspirations. My discussion of the Millers provides a preliminary glance at the relationship between Jewish diasporic identity and post-colonial national identity in Cyprus. A subsequent study could provide a more in-depth analysis of Jewish displacement and national struggle and the political situation in Cyprus, which not only has dis-

placed so many Greek and Turkish Cypriots, but which has also brought the problem of national homelands to the fore.

The Millers

Trained as an agronomist in Palestine, Daniel Miller created the Cyprus-Palestine Plantation in Fassouri, Cyprus in 1933. In Cyprus, land was good and cheap, and Miller easily developed vast and rich plantations. At one point, he had over a thousand Cypriots (Turkish and Greek) working for him on the 600 donum plantation.⁸ He grafted grapefruits and lemons, tangerines and bitter oranges, and brought sultanas from Crete. Miller's produce was shipped to England and sold to various local and foreign markets.

In 1939 Miller went to the United States to attend an agricultural conference that was sponsored by Caterpillar Tractors. On the boat across he met Abigail Hirsch, who was fleeing Romania. The Second World War was imminent, and Abigail and her sister were on their way to a relative's home in Chicago. Three months later Abigail and Daniel were married in Chicago; they soon moved back to Cyprus, to Daniel's plantation in Fassouri, a small village located seven miles west of the port city of Limassol.

After the fall of Crete in May 1941, the Millers were evacuated by the British to Palestine. During the course of the war Abigail remained in Tel Aviv, with her family who had managed to emigrate thanks to the British Colonial powers. Daniel, however, was eager to get back to his plantation, and received special permission to return to Cyprus. After the war, when Abigail and their young son came back to Cyprus, the Millers played an important role in aiding the tens of thousands of Holocaust refugees who now found themselves interned in British detention camps. Abigail remembers supplying sheets, and Daniel recalls providing the refugees with food, fruit, and clothing. In 1948, Daniel wanted to go to Israel to fight in the Arab-Israeli War. He didn't manage to leave until 1953, after the Millers had sold their plantation. Daniel started a new plantation in Israel, but life in the young nation-state was difficult. Israel was populated with newly-arrived immigrants, most of whom were Holocaust survivors. Food and basic necessities were scarce. In 1956, they returned to Cyprus and bought more land in the north and in Larnaca.

When war broke out in 1974, the Millers, who were at this time residents of Nicosia, remained in the bomb shelter of the new house they had just built. They had been living in their house for only five years before the fighting began. Having already experienced exile and immigration, they decided to stay. Abigail's experience as a Jew living in Europe during the rise of Nazi Germany made this decision easy for them. Moreover, not only had the Millers experienced displacement when the British

evacuated them to Palestine during the Second World War, but also, as Abigail explains, they had lost so many homes over the course of the years; they were not prepared to lose another one. "I had lost four houses. A house in Austria, a house in Romania, a house in Yugoslavia, and a house in Israel. I didn't want to lose another house." Although the Millers were able to remain in their home, the Turks confiscated all their property in the north which was now under their control.

That their home in Cyprus found itself in the middle of the crossfire was less significant than the trauma of displacement. Luckily, because of previous generous acts towards their workers on the plantation in Fassouri, the Millers were protected by Turkish Cypriot soldiers who formed a ring around their house. Today their "neighbourhood" is a Turkish Cypriot Military Camp which borders the UN-patrolled demilitarised zone. Their house is surrounded by abandoned buildings - only a few are occupied by the military. The area is so peaceful that it is hard to imagine that this exact site was where so much violence had taken place. Yet, the edifices of their "neighbours'" homes are marked with bullet holes the size of golf balls, and their own home bears the scars of the summer of 1974: lace curtains are ripped from the passage of bullets, and shrapnel decorates kitchen cabinets and living room doors. Abigail has chosen to keep these remnants as mementos of 1974.

The Millers move freely from one side of the island to the other.⁹ They carry two "national" identity cards; one claims that they are permanent residents of the Republic of Cyprus, and the other affirms that they live in the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus". The Millers even have two separate telephone lines in their house. Their electricity and water come from the Greek side but their bills go to the Turkish side. If they use the airport on the Turkish side, however, they will no longer be able to enter the Greek Side. The Millers feel privileged to live where they do. "This is the first time I've been allowed to live somewhere because I am Jewish", Abigail states. "This is the first time I feel like I am welcome - for the time being."

Abigail and Daniel have come to accept their living situation as normal, many would not. Not only is their neighbourhood an enclave surrounded by barbed wire, but also, when they leave their home, they must pass through a military checkpoint and hand in their identity cards.¹⁰ To go from their home in the military zone to the Greek side (which is less than three minutes by car), they must pass through three checkpoints. "I feel nothing handing in my ID card", Abigail says. "I am so used to it. The border police [on both sides] all think we're crazy, but I once overheard a Greek policeman say that we are 'kaloi anthropoi,' good people."

The Millers have never experienced anti-Semitism in Cyprus, yet, according to Abigail, they have been viewed only in terms of their Jewish identity, and never have been considered to be any other "nationality". Abigail explains that she feels an inex-

plicable warmth from the Turkish Cypriots, but that she feels more and more Greek in her outlook. "The Greeks have a soft approach, and I have a soft approach. But I cannot be one of them if I am not the same religion."

This liminal position suits Abigail. "I have never been anything. I've always had an American passport,¹¹ yet I didn't grow up in America.¹² When I lived in Austria I was not Austrian, when I lived in Romania, I was not Romanian, when I lived in Hungary, I was not Hungarian. I was nothing. I am used to being on my own. I don't know any other way." Nothing. Used to being on her own. Jewish. Not only does Abigail meta-physically see herself as a Jew who does not belong to any national community, but also, she and Daniel physically live between two "states". Indeed, they live in both but in neither.

Jewish Identity, Liminal Subjectivity: Theoretical Concerns

Albert Memmi, the French-Tunisian novelist and essayist, would argue that there is no other way. That the Jews of the Diaspora are necessarily living on their own and are perforce outside the national community of their "adopted" country; the Jew is "he who does not have the same religion as those around him" (Memmi 229), and who cannot relate nor identify with the national symbols and traditions that surround him. "Whether I like it or not, the history of the country where I live appears to me as if it were an assumed history", he writes in his autobiographical study on Jewish identity, *Portrait d'un juif* ("Portrait of a Jew"). "How can I feel represented by Joan of Arc", he continues describing his relationship to France, "do I hear, as she does, those patriotic and Christian voices?" (234).¹³

Memmi's observations were made on the heels of the Second World War, when he was a student in France. Any hope the young scholar had that France, the first European country to grant citizenship to Jews in 1791, represented *the* cosmopolitan and universalistic dream, were shattered by the horrors of the Holocaust and Vichy France's own anti-Jewish policies and practices; approximately 75,000 French and foreign-born Jews were deported from French soil to concentration and death camps.¹⁴

In the 1950s, Memmi returned to his native Tunisia and saw the national aspirations of his compatriots. He realised that the "mythic melting pot", the universalistic and secular world of French and Tunisian, Italian and Maltese, Muslim and Christian, coloniser and colonial subject was about to become dismantled. "My compatriots were aspiring to become a nation: in a world essentially composed of nations, or of oppressed minorities, what could be more just?" (12). When the constitution of the young nation-state declared Islam to be the official religion, Memmi was not shocked. When the Suez crisis erupted in 1956, the Tunisian newspaper for

which Memmi not only worked, but also helped found, ran the following title on its front page: "Quiconque repand le sang de l' Egypte repand notre sang" ("Whoever spills Egyptian blood, also spills our blood"). Memmi felt for the first time that Jewish destiny was evolving separately from that of the national consciousness of the post-colonial Arab world.

Memmi expresses his desire to integrate himself within the French and Tunisian societies, but he was made to feel as if Jews were different and did not and could not belong. In his writing, he therefore appropriates the identity of the stateless and cosmopolitan Jew as a kind of defensive stance against the atrocious historical events he witnessed as a young man. Accused of refusing to belong to any national community, the Jew, according to Memmi, is the one who is rejected from society: "Is it really my refusal, or that of others which I experience and which makes me suffer? [...] I haven't refused anything, alas it is the nation which has refused me, which has left me outside" (233-234).

These observations and experiences which reinforced the Diaspora Jew's cultural, historical, and religious difference from his or her adopted country caused Memmi to exercise a certain caution when expressing his own subject position.

I have never been able to say "we" while thinking of those historical lines of which my fellow citizens are proud. I have never heard another Jew say "we" without batting an eyelid, without vaguely suspecting him of thoughtlessness, connivance, or of forcing his tongue (236).

Memmi's articulation of the Diaspora's Jew's inability to say "we" describes, to a certain extent, the subject position expressed by Abigail Miller ("I cannot be one of them if I am not the same religion"), who lives physically and psychologically separated from the two dominant national communities of Cyprus. Indeed, the Millers are a minority presence on the island, and do not share certain civic responsibilities (voting, army, and so on) with either Greek or Turkish Cypriots. Although they have experienced in a personal way the impact of the political events that have touched Cyprus, they are, to a certain extent distant from the realities of the "Cyprus Problem". Indeed, their identity as (Jewish) foreigners, which is so clearly different from both the Greek Orthodox and the Turkish Muslim traditions, situates them outside the binary opposition of Greek/Turkish; they are not only considered to be foreigners, but also external to any political conflict. However, because of their history on the island, their contribution to Cypriot society, their equal and unbiased treatment of the Cypriots who worked for them for so many years, and the fact that they have never presented any threat to either ethnic community, the Millers are respected by both communities; they are also granted a certain "privileged" status. Moreover, unlike Memmi's personal and historical description of Jewish experience, the Millers

do not feel rejected from Cypriot society- Greek or Turkish.

Throughout history, Jews have been expelled from European and Asian countries and cities, and/or forced (or "encouraged") to live in ghettos. The term ghetto dates back to early sixteenth century Venice which had commanded the Jews to "re-group in a general neighbourhood that was called the "Ghetto nuovo" (Sobol 34). Towards the end of the sixteenth century the Jews of Italy were forced to live in segregated quarters which were called ghettos after the first "Ghetto" of Venice.¹⁵ During the Second World War, the Germans erected ghettos in most Eastern European countries they occupied. It became "the means of imprisoning the Jews before sending them towards extermination" (Sobol 34).¹⁶

In his *Histoire du Judaïsme* ("History of Judaism"), Andre Chouraqui explains that the ghettos of the sixteenth century were a sheltered refuge from the hardships of daily Jewish life which gave hope and freedom to the Jewish residents. During times of peace and prosperity, they were centres of biblical and Talmudic culture which provided a serious Jewish education to children.

Concluding Remarks

The military camp where the Millers now live can be likened to a ghetto because it is segregated from both the Turkish Cypriot and the Greek Cypriot communities. The Millers also must present their identification cards to the military police guarding the entrance to their "neighbourhood" in order to leave or enter. For all intents and purposes, they must receive "permission" to move about. The Millers, however, identity and belonging that have concerned European, Asian, and African Jews until the end of the Second World War are "normalised" and converted into routine, daily activities by Abigail and Daniel Miller. Not only have they normalised identity checks that have determined Jewish lives over the centuries, but the Millers have appropriated, and perhaps even affirmed the experiences of exile, displacement, and to a certain extent internment. Their situation in Cyprus presents a positive version of the ghettoised existence of European Jews during Renaissance Europe and during the Second World War.

The Millers are quite comfortable and at peace living where they do; they no longer notice the barbed wire that surrounds them, indeed encloses them, nor the heavy military presence that controls their movements. Although they are quite active, they spend most of their time in the sanctuary of their home where Daniel devotes weekends to rest and to the study of the Talmud, the books of Jewish civil and religious law. Their "ghetto" is their haven; they do not seem to be too troubled by the fact that one day they could be prevented from crossing over to the Greek side

where they shop, attend to business and financial matters, and visit doctors and friends.

In a land where internal and external conflicts still rage, where questions of religious and national identity are paramount, this elderly Jewish couple - exiles of anti-Semitism in Europe - enjoy the freedom of movement and expression that no Greek or Turkish Cypriot is able to exploit at the present moment. By continually crossing the border, they remind both communities of the fissure that separates them and of their less than perfect statuses as unifying and unified sovereign "nation states".

Notes

1. Journalist Andrew Borowiec writes in his forthcoming book on Cyprus: "In Cyprus, there was no attempt at enforcing any concept of Cypriot nationhood - as no one claimed that there was such a thing as a Cypriot nation (...)." Vangelis Calotychos, in his introduction to *Cyprus and Its People*, discusses the notion of "Cypriotism" that "foregrounds citizenship of a Cypriot state over ethnic demands of the respective motherland or metropolitan nations" (16). He argues that one of the most obvious expressions of Cypriotism manifests itself in the context of the political far left (17).

2. In this sense, the notion of ethnic identity can be compared to that of national identity. "[T]he idea of the 'nation'", states Max Weber is apt to include the notions of common descent and of an essential, though frequently indefinite, homogeneity. The nation has these notions in common with the sentiment of solidarity of ethnic communities, which is also nourished from various sources" (Weber 22-23). An important difference, however, is that ethnic consciousness does not necessarily mean that the group in question is working together to secure for itself a "territorial-political unit", a nation-state (Connor 39), or that ethnic awareness can be unequivocally equated with national consciousness. "An ethnic group may be readily discerned by an anthropologist or other outside observer, but until the members are themselves aware of the group's uniqueness, it is merely an ethnic group and not a nation" (Conner 45).

3. The constitution, consociational in nature, gave ethnic balance "higher priority

than majority rule" (Kyle 8). The Turkish Cypriots never wanted to be considered a "minority", but rather, a separate community of equal "co-founders" of the Republic.

4. The "Green Line", a neutral zone that exists between the Greek and Turkish areas in Nicosia, was established in 1964, when the British intervened (from their sovereign bases on the island) to prevent intercommunal violence from escalating.

5. "Under the Treaty of Guarantee with Britain, Greece and Turkey, the Republic of Cyprus undertakes to uphold her own independence and her own constitution; not to participate in any political or economic union with any state whatsoever; and to prohibit any domestic action likely to promote union with another state or partition. In return Britain, Greece, and Turkey recognise and guarantee not only the independence, integrity, and security of Cyprus but also 'the state of affairs' established by the Basic Articles of the Constitution" (Kyle 8). Since August 1974, thirty-eight per cent of the island is under Turkish occupation and a heavy military presence. In 1983, the Turkish Cypriots proclaimed the attachment of their community to a territorial-political unit, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognised only by Ankara.

6. There is also a small community of Lebanese Jews who emigrated during the outbreak of civil war in the 1970s.

7. The name "Miller" is a pseudonym chosen by this author.

8. 4 donums=1 acre.

9. Although tourists who stay on the Turkish side of the island are not allowed to cross the border ("because, according to the Cyprus Governments' rules they will have entered the country illegally", [Kyle 15]), foreign residents who have been living in the North prior to 1974 are able to pass freely from one side to another.

10. Abigail explains that their neighbourhood gradually became a military enclave, and that gradually they became used to living with the restrictions that were being placed on their movements to and from their own house.

11. Abigail was actually born in Brooklyn, New York, but her family moved back to Europe soon thereafter.

12. The Millers lost a lot of property and money after 1974, and Abigail went to the States in 1975 to work and to help the family re-situate itself. The family shuttled back and forth between Cyprus and New York for over ten years.

13. Memmi is originally from Tunisia (a French protectorate since 1883, which became independent in 1956). He left before the Second World War to go to France in order to study at the university. Memmi has written extensively on the condition of the post-colonial subject: *Portrait du colonise* (1957), and also on questions of Jewish identity.

14. The occupying Germans and the collaborationist Vichy regime bear responsibility.

15. See Joshua Sobol's *Ghetto* (Lyon, La Manufacture, 1986).

16. The word "ghetto" used in this essay refers to the sixteenth-century understanding of the term: a place where Jews were either forced or encouraged to live, and that was sheltered and separated from the rest of the national community. My sense of "Jewish nationality" - as something distinct from Israeli nationality - is that the Jews, as a people (albeit multicultural) and a religion, comprise a community that indeed shares a cultural history and identity, and most certainly a connection to the land of Israel - whether Israeli, American, Ethiopian, secular, or anti-Zionist.

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