

## **The Icon Hunter: A Refugee's Quest to Reclaim Her Nation's Stolen Heritage**

**[Η Κυνηγός Εικόνων: Η Περιπέτεια μιας Πρόσφυγα στην Προσπάθεια να Επανακτήσει την Κλεμμένη Εθνική της Κληρονομιά]**

**TASOULA HADJITOFI WITH KATHY BARRETT**

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*The Icon Hunter* is the powerful story of Tasoula Hadjitofi, a Greek Cypriot refugee in the Netherlands. It revolves around her true passion and commitment to return stolen artifacts to her country, Cyprus, through years of dangerous operations. Tasoula is the central figure of the book, however, through her eyes the personalities of many different characters involved in the events are outlined, i.e. church officials (an archbishop and a bishop), art dealers, financiers, buyers, a private detective, a notorious Turkish smuggler, lawyers, police officers, civil servants, diplomats, family members, etc. This rich cast of characters, combined with the gripping plot full of negotiations, agreements, strategies, legal solutions, legal disputes, search for hard evidence, police operations, setbacks, sacrifices and flashbacks, captivate readers until the last page.

Through the presentation of the passion, drama and danger in the life of this dynamic woman, the book is valuable because it touches on the effects of armed conflicts. On the one hand, people lose their lives or are forcibly displaced from their homes and become the main victims of armed conflicts around the world. Tasoula was born and raised in Famagusta, Cyprus. She had a happy childhood in her hometown during the 60s and early 70s. However, in 1974, she was forced to leave her hometown with her family when the Turkish military invaded the country and occupied the northern part of Cyprus. This tragic event was a major turning point in her life and deeply influenced her later actions and beliefs. The young, talented and dynamic Tasoula relocated to the Hague, the Netherlands, and managed to build a new life as a wife, mother, successful businesswoman, Honorary Consul of the Republic of Cyprus in The Netherlands, and Representative of the Church of Cyprus.

On the other hand, armed conflicts and subsequent refugee crises have many collateral damages. In this context, a major issue is the destruction, looting and illicit trafficking of cultural heritage. It affects movable and immovable property, as well as intangible cultural heritage, archives, and documentary heritage. The issue is further complicated by the fact that illicit trafficking of cultural heritage is linked to international terrorism and other illegal activities. Destruction, looting, illicit trafficking and fight for the repatriation of cultural heritage are the most important points of the book. As such, *The Icon Hunter* is particularly relevant in today's world suffering from numerous violent armed conflicts and refugee crises while public awareness for stolen cultural heritage has increased. After Tasoula and the thousands of Greek Cypriot refugees fled their homelands, hundreds of Orthodox churches in the northern occupied part of the island, dating back to different historical periods of Cyprus (from the Byzantine to early modern times), were destroyed, while their contents, i.e. religious icons, mosaics, frescoes, wooden iconostasis, etc., were looted. These precious religious objects started another journey in the underworld of illicit trafficking of cultural goods.

Tasoula treats this stolen cultural heritage not as inanimate objects of art but as 'refugees' reflecting emotions, values and meanings. Although the Greek Cypriot refugees lost everything, what hurt the most was the looting and defacing of their religious objects. Through the pages of the book, Tasoula seeks to make readers understand how meaningful and revered these objects are to those communities. Her story shows how refugees are emotionally attached to their cultural heritage, which is an important part of their identity. Refugees stand between memories of their past and the attempt to build a new life. For many of them cultural heritage, especially religious objects, is a bridge that connects their past, present and future. The story of Tasoula shows that the looting and trafficking of cultural heritage deprives refugees of their history and culture. It destroys the important link between their past, present and future, which is reflected in the unquenchable desire of the refugees to return to their homelands. In an attempt to better illustrate this relationship and the importance of religious objects, Tasoula's narrative moves back and forth in time, offering interesting highlights of her happy life before 1974. This makes it easier for readers to understand how these objects can serve as a bridge between her former life in Cyprus before the Turkish invasion and her new life in the Netherlands.

Tasoula was fully aware of the significance of cultural heritage and was therefore committed to the hunt for stolen Cypriot religious objects. She worked with both the

church and the government, embarking on a long venture to track down, expose and bring to justice those responsible for the looting and trafficking of Cyprus' cultural heritage after the Turkish invasion of 1974. Its ultimate goal was justice for the looting of Cyprus' cultural heritage through the return of the stolen cultural objects to their rightful owner, the Church of Cyprus, and therefore the people of Cyprus. She put everything on the line to locate and repatriate these objects, even if it meant setting aside her husband and children, as well as her business. The Munich Operation was the result of years of sustained, hard, arduous and persistent effort, which led to the arrest of art trafficker Aydin Dikmen and the recovery of numerous stolen antiquities from Turkish-occupied Cyprus. The book also describes other smaller cases successfully handled by Tasoula.

This zeal may have been for her a kind of redemption dictated by the fact that she cannot return to her homeland, which is illegally occupied by the Turkish army. The book gives us a deep insight into the venal underworld of looting and selling cultural heritage. It describes in detail how complex trafficking networks are constructed and operated, taking advantage of inadequate legislation on illicit trade of cultural objects in many European countries. Although the international and regional legal framework for preventing the illicit trafficking of cultural property has been strengthened since the 90s, further steps need to be taken in this direction. The book also presents the various 'players' involved in the illicit trafficking of cultural goods, both through legal markets, such as auctions, and in underground illegal markets.

As for the style of the book, it should be noted that it is quite dramatic in many sections. Despite some repetition and the fact that narrative moves back and forth in time describing complex events and different characters, the book is easy to read. The Greek translation of the original English text is of good quality.

To sum up, *The Icon Hunter* is not only for Cyprus and the Greek Cypriots who lost everything during the Turkish invasion in 1974 while their cultural heritage was looted and sold worldwide. The true value of the book is that it is addressed to every refugee in every country in the world, helping to raise public awareness of the international issue of illicit trafficking of cultural heritage. Through the case of Cyprus, the book also encourages future generations to protect and fight for the world's cultural heritage. It points out that the application of high ethical standards of due diligence should be a priority for individuals, museums, other institutions and governments that engage with transactions concerning cultural objects. The book conveys clear messages to readers about condemning the illicit trafficking of cultural objects, ac-

quiring only ethically acceptable items through due diligent research, respecting the cultural property of every country in the world, and promoting cultural activism.

Long after orchestrating the Munich Operation, Tasoula Hadjitofi never lost sight of her goal to efficiently protect cultural heritage against illicit trafficking. She founded the non-profit organization Walk of Truth, which focuses on the importance of cultural heritage, promoting the idea that culture unites people rather than divides them. She also founded the Culture Crime Watchers Worldwide (CCWW), a digital platform that engages ordinary people, including refugees, in the struggle against the looting of antiquities from conflict zones.

**Konstantinos Roussos**