

## **I am Cyprus: 25 Stories of the Migrant and Refugee Experience in Cyprus**

**Annetta Benzar**

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'Memory has become a battlefield. We no longer fight with words but with stories... Yet, these stories are soon lost, forgotten, burned to the ground and buried in the soil. Left in suitcases at the bottom of a lake. There is rarely a memorial for them,' writes Annetta Benzar in the introduction of her book *I am Cyprus*. Her evocative writing makes me imagine a memorial created from concrete suitcases in the bottom of the lake. It reminds me of Nigeria-born novelist Chimamanda Adichie's warning about the dangers of hearing only a single story about a person, community or country.

Benzar, who grew up in Cyprus when her family moved there from Belarus, has written a powerful, evocative and challenging book about identities in Cyprus, collecting 25 stories of migrants and refugees. These are the people whose stories are not often heard, stories of people trapped in margins and trying to overcome borders: stories of people across the divide, stories of immigrants, of Cypriots and others displaced, of LGBTQ+ individuals, of artists, among others. The stories were collected between 2017 and 2018 and written in collaboration with their protagonists. Her literary and literature background is evident in her powerful writing as she offers her own thoughts, comments and observations: 'the Old City [of Nicosia] leads you to lose you...'. Or elsewhere: '[T]here is a smell, a blend of leftover chili, fresh dog waste, body sweat and mosquito repellent...' You may not be able to imagine this bouquet of smells, but somehow you feel it. It speaks to you about the atmosphere of the place she describes (the Occupy Buffer Zone movement in Nicosia) and about the kinds of humans and non-humans who were there.

With stories, she urges us to move beyond numbers, or more specifically beyond 'the numbers game' which is used by politicians, often through distortion, to frighten and create moral panics regarding migrants and refugees. While there is no doubt that this book is also informed by her academic and theoretical background, her choice of focusing on individuals' own voices is a welcome addition to theoretical and academic analyses of these issues which, more often than not, relegate the individual

narratives to the margins of the text. By bringing together stories of Cypriot refugees with those of many others who recently fled wars, she attempts to connect the experiences of violent displacement. This is a clear, and I would suggest, welcome political gesture in the context of Cyprus, where Cypriots, even Cypriot refugees, often show little empathy to others' stories of forceful uprooting.

We hear the voices of the protagonists of her stories, which are enlivened through Benzar's acute observations: 'she laughs but there are creases at the corners of her eyes, an anxious frown resting on her face.' The combination of autobiographical stories, enriched with Benzar's evocative writing, provides an entry point into these individuals' life-narratives, allowing us to intimately meet them, sharing their large and mundane concerns, their hopes and dreams, their nasty or positive experiences in Cyprus. While these pertain to stories of concrete individuals, they provide vivid glimpses into broader collective stories.

The power of her writing emerges in part from the shortness of the stories, making the reader crave for more. I hope we will get to hear more from her.

**Yiannis Papadakis**