

## **Bellapaïs. First Year of Operation of the Enclaved School 1974-75. A Report.**

**[Πέλαπαϊς. Πρώτος Χρόνος Λειτουργίας του Εγκλωβισμένου Σχολείου 1974-75. Μελέτη.]**

**Rina Katselli**

**Kyrenia Folklore Club**

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Oral history is about the revision and utilisation of sources other than archival material. More specifically, oral testimonies are not exclusively related to major historical events, but also to the salvaging of experiences and the study of the life of social groups through the researcher's dialogue with the informant. This kind of material salvages the testimony of those whose voice is missing from official documents.

Oral history collects the life stories of invisible heroes and presupposes the existence of a memory, from which they draw their material. It is thus an active memory whose mechanisms function as a survival strategy for individuals, supporting their effort to classify their memories in order to manage their experiences. The discourse provided constitutes not only of memory, but also of oblivion, silence or repression. Testimonies are valuable because individuals remember and reconstruct their past as members of a social group, while formal history permeates individual experience.

Rina Katselli's book indeed belongs to this category of oral testimony/soul testimonial. At the same time, it is included in the general framework of the publishing activity of the author herself and that of the Kyrenia Folklore Club towards the rescue of 'the history, customs and contribution of remarkable people of the region', as indicated on the book's jacket flap. More specifically, the book is structured, in addition to the introduction, in three chapters with subsections, while it is accompanied by an indicative bibliography and a rich photographic material.

In the *Introduction* (pp. 9-11) the author evokes the reason for writing this particular book at the instigation of the refugees and enclaved former inhabitants of the village of Bellapaïs, with a dual objective: First of all, to preserve in memory this valuable aspect of the occupied village's educational history, and, secondly, to commemorate the contribution of all those who have voluntarily contributed, in one way or another, to the operation of the school. The author then explains that the material

presented is derived from a large number of oral testimonies, which contributes to the 'objective' recording of events, since testimonies are cross-checked with and verified by each other. It is important to point out to the future reader that the Primary School and the High School of Bellapaïis operated for a period of two school years, from September 1974 to May 1976, when the inhabitants were finally forced to leave their village under the pressure of the occupying troops. Katselli's book deals exclusively with the first school year, since for the second year there is already a study that is mentioned in the bibliography.

The first chapter, entitled *Bellapaïis. First Year of Operation of the Enclaved School 1974-75* (pp. 13-34) refers to the location and the history of the village and especially of the Abbey after which the village took its name. The Abbey, whose church is dedicated to Our Lady of the White Garments (Παναγία Ασπροφορούσα), was -and still remains- the main attraction for tourists and foreigners, some of whom were so enchanted by the natural environment that they bought and built houses in the village. Rina Katselli then describes the difficult conditions that followed the Turkish invasion of July 1974 and especially the second invasion of August 14, 1974, the enclavement of the residents within the boundaries of the village and the valuable help and protection provided by the Red Cross that supplied them with food and handled their correspondence with the free territory. As the narration of the testimonies progresses, so does the suffering of the residents due to the presence of the Turkish army in the village, the arrest of the men from 18 to 60 years of age and their deportation to a camp in Turkey for three months, the forced departure of the Finnish contingent of the United Nations, the lack of water and food for many days, the curfew, the ongoing pressure to leave their homes, etc. At the same time, the author points out the beneficial role of some people -holders of foreign passports- who risked their lives in order to cross to the free areas bearing correspondence of the residents with relatives and information regarding the situation in the occupied village. Throughout this very moving narration, Katselli does not omit to pay tribute to the comfort that the enclaved people found in the Sunday church service.

The last part of the first chapter is devoted to the establishment and operation of the school. According to the testimonies, it was the result of the fortunate coincidence of some teachers being among the enclaved in the village. Katselli vividly describes the steps taken both for the occupying authorities to allow the school to operate, and for the Cypriot authorities to send the necessary teaching material. She once again mentions those who, having foreign citizenship, would cross to the free areas and

directly communicate with the Ministry of Education. Details of school life are then described: the opening hours of the Elementary and the High School, the subjects that were allowed in the curriculum, the number of students, their villages of origin, the names of the teaching staff and the subjects each was teaching, their limited cultural activities, the short school trips within the village boundaries, etc. At this point the author emphasises that, apart from the three teachers, all others offered their help voluntarily. Some of them were sixth grade students of the Kyrenia High School while others had just graduated High School. As the author points out, these young men and women proved to be worthy volunteer teachers, as they 'gave their souls to educate these children'. The first chapter ends with the gradual departure of some volunteers due to personal problems and to pressure, and the supplementation of 'educational' staff with other refugees from Kyrenia.

The second chapter entitled *Testimonies* (pp. 35-56) presents the oral testimonies of the 'leading heroes' of this venture. This, in my opinion, is the most moving part of the book, as personal testimony confirms, clarifies and sheds light onto the facts' various aspects. Furthermore, it is most impressive that all living narrators recall what happened with journalistic accuracy, while their testimonies cover any gaps and questions that the reader might have. All, without exception, refer to the contribution of others, to the difficulties they encountered, to their fears and anxieties from the moment they conceived the idea of establishing a school and until the moment they were forced to leave the village. Their profiles are mixed: educator, priest, volunteer nurse, enclaved foreign national. Most of them are still alive and, through their flowing speech, exhibit the imperceptible bitterness of the refugee who knows that they are 'a stranger in their own land'.

The third chapter of the book is entitled *Biographies* (pp. 57-76). Half of it consists of the biographies of the volunteer teachers, while the other half consists of the very touching photos of the teachers and students of each class that are customarily taken at the end of each school year. The first part of the chapter includes 14 biographies, starting with the then assistant priest and teacher, and then the seniors and graduates of the Kyrenia High School who volunteered to teach the younger classes. Their biographies refer not only to their contribution to the enclaved students and to their forced deportation to the free areas, but also to their life until today. Most left the village in June 1976 along with the last remaining children.

The book ends with the *Bibliography* (pp. 77-78) which refers both to the area of Bellapaïa and to the general history of Cyprus.

Katselli's language is vivid and flowing, easy and enjoyable both for reading and for inspiring further research. Personally, I would like to emphasise two points that impressed me. The first is how people manage to deal with life's woes and how they adapt their lives accordingly in order to survive. The second is Rina Katselli's extensive use -in almost all of her books- of oral history as a negotiation tool. In her case, oral history is not about verifying or refuting official sources, but it's about providing an alternative narrative and interpretation of the past.

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