

*Journey into the double reality of a divided island
Cyprus, the wall of lies
Greeks on the one hand, Turks on the other one. In between, the Attila line: since
1974 it has marked the boundaries of hate in a land of easy and wealthy tourism.
Between parasols and missiles, Russian mobsters and Orthodox priest, the
paradoxes of a soulless Mediterranean.*

(published in the monthly newsmagazine "Galatea", march 1998)

"Have fun in this land of ethnic purity and true apartheid. Enjoy the view of our desecrated churches. Enjoy what remains of our looted houses and inheritance". With this viaticum, due to the Information Office of the Republic of Cyprus (Greek one, to be clear; the only one, according to the international community), the foreigner is about to enter the Forbidden Planet, the Never-never Land, called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. We are in Nicosia, the capital, remained the only city still divided by a wall on the entire planet Earth (also this sad record is appropriately marked near the "green line", the border between Greece and Turkey, which cuts the city in two). Nicosia wall. Less famous and ideological of Berlin wall, threats to win it in duration: in August it has entered the twenty-fourth year and, given the relations between Greece and Turkey, there are no glimmers nor cracks.

Perhaps even Kissinger did not think, in the summer of 1974, that his little diplomatic "masterpiece" would last so long. Cyprus was an embarrassing burden for American diplomacy: conflicts between the two communities, erupted after the independence of the island in 1960, caused continual tensions between the two NATO member countries (Greece and Turkey), both led by soldiers.

Turkey was seen like a bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Mediterranean and the "watchdog" of a hot Middle East (in 1973 the third Arab-Israeli war sparked off, and the following year saw the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon).

The Junta of the colonels in Greece was falling into a nationalist delirium and pushed for the reunification of Cyprus to homeland Greece: Athens was no longer a reliable partner, and Turkey was much more strategically and militarily prominent. Then there was the problem of Archbishop Makarios, head of the Orthodox Church and President of the Republic of Cyprus: a leader known for his sympathies toward the Communist world, a friend of Tito and Nasser, a very troublesome character for the United States. Kissinger, after having closed Vietnam war, wanted to untie this Mediterranean knot, and he perfectly succeeded, in the name of the most cynical Realpolitik. In one shot, he rid of Makarios and the colonels in Greece, being able to satisfy the expansionist desires of Turkey on the island. Everything happened in a few weeks. In July 1974, an awkward coup orchestrated in Athens and conducted by a Greek-Cypriot nationalist movement (the EOKA B, the poor relation of the independence movement that managed to expel British from the island) caused the (legitimate) intervention of Turkey in defense of the Turkish Cypriot communities. The occupation of a large area of territory (a good third, the Turkish Cypriots represented only 18 percent of the population) followed a vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing (about 200 thousand Greeks fled south, almost 100 thousand Turks fled north), a couple of UN resolutions condemning the Turkish occupation. End of story.

For twenty-three years, representatives of both communities, Glafkos Clerides for the Greeks and Rauf Denktash for the Turks (already representatives of the two communities in 1974) have continued a dialogue of the deaf. In the meanwhile world has changed completely, but they are always there, to threaten and promise, to make appeals to the international community and to maintain business as usual. The paradox is that Clerides and Denktash were school friends, lived together for years without problems, just like the majority of Greeks and Turks of Cyprus. The old Cypriots are unanimous in regretting the good old times. Despite a sentimental hypocrisy (conflicts

between the two communities were real and deep, and caused one of the first operations of UN peacekeepers in 1964), they have good reason. Their island has changed dramatically, in spite of total diplomatic immobility, in the last twenty years. Changed for the worse, and on both sides. Beyond the "green line" (or "Attila line", a name much more appropriate), greeted by an equal and opposite propaganda (the play of two truths is even more blatant than the one between East and West at the time of the Cold War), you immediately notice an undeniable reality: Republic of Northern Cyprus is a military state. Soldiers (thirty-five thousand, one in six people) are everywhere, their presence makes threatening an otherwise quiet, asleep reality. Kyrenia, a charming harbor that saw the first ships of the Turkish invasion, seems to wait for the summer assault of tourists in total inertia. Very few people in cafes, quiet streets, a small community of old English people gathered around the small Anglican church (!) of Saint Andrew enjoying the Mediterranean sunshine. "This is the most beautiful part of the island - says an elderly lady- and also the most intact: we are fine with Turks". The international boycott (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey) means more unemployment and less wealth, because on the other hand there are the same Italian, German, American products and the same Japanese or British cars (with the steering wheel on the right but without keeping the left as in Greek part).

Truth number two: Turks are much poorer than Greeks. For statistical accuracy, poorer four times (in terms of income per capita). The underlying inflation of Turkish lira makes prices grotesque: for a lunch in a kebab bar in a small restaurant it takes half a million. A liter of gasoline costs 60 thousand liras. Prices are rising at incredible speeds, following the tumultuous and contradictory development of the "motherland".

Famagusta, the legendary Famagusta by Venetian walls, which before the invasion was the main port of Cyprus, is a ghost town. Here, even the summer will not be able to camouflage (rotting) scars of the war: the beach is interrupted by fences, barred by threatening "no access" (and banning photographs) that delimit the frightening decline of Varosha, a former zone of hotels and luxury homes, abandoned since 1974, in compliance with peace agreements. The ancient walls, heroically defended by Marco Antonio Bragadin, the walls of the castle of Othello, the Moor of Venice, are more solitary than ever: there is an air of decadence surrounding the memories of the wonderful architecture established by the Serenissima Republic on this natural bay that looks at Syria.

Around the mosque, which is a rebuilt Gothic church (the crescent moon of Islam in place of Christian crosses), you can see faces of other continents: Pakistani, Tamils, Bengali, Egyptians, Syrians. Avant-garde of a migration far more important: the one from deep Turkey, which made again minority Turkish Cypriot communities. It is no coincidence that no one knows the exact resident population data. The Ankara regime has "exported" tens of thousands of settlers, in many cases troublesome people as well as soldiers (there are many Kurds, both soldiers and civilians). The new society of the Republic of Northern Cyprus is now, after twenty-three years, a virtually incontrovertible fact, but Greek Cypriots do not give up. They want their homes, their churches back. They want to "restore human rights," they are not going to accept a situation imposed by force by Turks, the aggressors, the "bad guys".

It is a so insisted refrain, from Larnaca International Airport to the streets of Nicosia, which after a while it takes the distorted form of many "official truths". The women wearing mourning who more and more wearily protest every Sunday in front of the "buffer zones" controlled by UN troops, with their black and white photos of children, husbands, grandchildren, inspire a sense of compassion, yet they seem orchestrated, encouraged by an administration that certainly did not work much to restore peace. Foreign journalists arrive, there is a Canadian television crew that is accompanied, as in a touristic tour, which would look like a manifestation of pain, but it becomes an expression of hatred.

Greek side has always cultivated a nationalism that often takes grim and dark shades reminding more the sad Balkan vocation for war than a modern Western idea. It fosters an even racist aversion

against Turks (mostly victims of this situation), and in some cases they still dream, in secret, the famous Enosis, the union with homeland Greece. Periodically, the most rowdy young people look for the "heroic" act, as to rip a Turkish flag and raise the Greek one, just finding the violent reaction of Turkish fascists on the other side (the infamous "Grey Wolves", paramilitary militia supporting army and police since the sixties). If someone die, is a "martyr of freedom" who is added to the long list of died or missing Greeks (but even Turks have a long list of victims) during the blitzkrieg of 1974 (about twenty thousand men). And maybe there is just a poor old man (it happened at the beginning of 1997) who, picking mushrooms, encroached on the Turkish zone. Among who tries an alternative route to the frontal opposition, there are trade unions, which tries to establish relationships with Turkish Cypriots workers and AKEL, the Communist Party (one of the most voted in a Western country, it gets 30 per percent of the votes), which would like an independent non-aligned, fully demilitarized Cyprus,. Greek Cypriot government, instead, thinks of militarily pursuing Turkey, as if the defeats caused by the dream of Great Greece, New Byzantium had not yet done enough damages. So they buy T-80 tanks in Russia and order S-300 missiles, at Moscow supermarket (with the only result to scare tourists), in the name of "Si vis pacem, para bellum" (If you want peace, prepare war). An absurd policy, supported also by the Orthodox Church, which, though it is an expert in Realpolitik, did not understand that "peace is made with the enemy" (according to the intuition of Yitzhak Rabin). The getting excited around the ghosts of the war, all this rancorous pathos in recalling a past more and more distant, hide what is probably the prosaic reality of Cyprus. A reality built on money, the true national identity of the 90s (not only in Cyprus, of course). The quiet island in the Mediterranean, "the birthplace of Aphrodite", has become a "soft" brothel for unscrupulous financiers and a tourism that a journalist of Nicosia defines for "Northern European pensioners". Twenty thousand offshore financial companies, of which two thousand work, for the rest they are merely addresses. Four hundred million dollars a year entered the local financial market. The third shadow navy of the world. A relaxed banking system, which funded the war in former Yugoslavia (don't forget Greek sympathy expression for Serbia). And, last but not least, massive landing of the Russian mafia, with dancers, artists and prostitutes from Eastern Europe. At the time of the presidential election in Russia in 1996, seven thousand Russian citizens (with right to vote) living in Cyprus mushroomed. The arrogance of the nouveau riche is palpable. Lamborghini, BMW, Ferrari, Mercedes and the inevitable Japanese SUV speed and peel out from Larnaca to Nicosia. On the other hand there is not a network of public transport. Cyprus, the advanced and free Cyprus, the Greek one, is designed for tourists, not for citizens. The assault on the environment was wild, unrestricted property speculation, even the holy Orthodox monasteries in the mountains are surrounded by mini-apartments, residences, restaurants (no wonder, since the Orthodox Church is the main real estate agent in the island). The Greek Cypriot government proudly shows off the figures of the economic boom: inflation at 2.6 percent, budget deficit lower than 3 percent of GDP, the debt lower than 60 per cent of GDP, growth rate 5 percent, nonexistent unemployment (2.5 percent). In other words, Cyprus is the only country, with Luxembourg, able to fulfill Maastricht criteria. Europe is the magic word one tries to break the democratic stalemate with: by the year the Fifteen of European Union are supposed to answer a definitive yes, despite the opposition of Turkey that knocks loudly on the same western doors. And perhaps this is indeed the final solution: every one in accountants' Europe including the wall and barbed wire.

Cesare Sangalli