

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28546-9 - The Heart Grown Bitter: A Chronicle of Cypriot War Refugees

Peter Loizos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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## Part I

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# PEACE

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## Chapter 1

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# ARRIVAL

August 1966

First sight of Cyprus was alarming and took me by surprise. It was about 5:30 a.m. and when I came on deck the Paphos coast loomed large on the port side as the boat made for Limassol. It was the bare, parched quality of the yellow hills that immediately disturbed me, for it seemed that in so inhospitable a landscape no one could live at all, let alone live at ease. Perhaps Cyprus was an awful rural slum, in which people would be suffering vastly simply to survive? From a few miles out to sea the sparse, dark trees on the hills seemed to offer little sustenance; I did not then know the olive and the carob and just how nourishing in their different ways they are. After watching the shoreline for a while without seeing anything more encouraging than sheep, I went below to make sure my baggage was in order.

My father, a Greek Cypriot, had left Cyprus in 1930 and never been back. I had grown up with my Scots-Irish mother in England, knowing little of my father, Cyprus, or things Greek, except that my surname was proof of a link to all three, and that my mother had some interesting things to say on these subjects. In recent years I had got to know my father a little better and had become intrigued by his stories of his childhood on the island, how he had become one of the first communists there and how this had led to his clash with the Church and subsequent self-imposed exile.

I was twenty-nine and without knowing quite why had just resigned from a good job in the BBC. I was attracted to the idea of research in social anthropology, which had grown out of earlier exposure to some of its writings and practitioners. Once on a Moroccan holiday I had passed a haunting hour in a village off the tourist routes and had left feeling that I should have stayed to find out about its people, who seemed innocent of the industrial revolution and who clearly found me as exotic as I found them. Perhaps my father's village in Cyprus would seize my imagination in the same way? My visit to Cyprus now was exploratory – if everything

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went well, I might study anthropology in London, and one day return to the island to do research.

When my father heard I was going to Cyprus he was delighted, and gave me a list of old friends and a rough guide to the closest members of his family. He assured me I would receive a warm welcome, and enjoy my visit. For me the whole notion was exciting, but unnerving. It all seemed very unlikely, somehow, that after spending half a lifetime in England and America, being treated in most respects as a fairly standard Englishman, I could really arrive in Cyprus and expect a number of Cypriots to treat me as a relative. I rather expected to be given a lukewarm welcome, to stay a few days with some people who would do their best to ignore the fact that we were total strangers, and then, with embarrassed relief on both sides, to set out for a walking tour on my own.

By now the peasant ladies who had moaned and vomited in the cabin areas for three days and nights were reviving and pressing in great numbers against the various exit points on the rails. Half a mile out to sea, we were to await the arrival of small boats with immigration officers. Clearly it would take hours; it was extremely hot, and like a proper young Englishman I was above milling about in a crowd of hysterical Mediterraneans when it was quite obvious that pushing and shoving would make little difference to who got off the boat first. To prove my superiority to myself (since I was the only person interested in the problem), I stretched out on a bench, and started to doze.

'There's a policeman come aboard and he's looking for you.' I opened my eyes to see who it was that the policeman might be seeking. Perhaps some of these short dark men were gun-runners or smugglers. There was no one around except a young Englishman I'd been drinking with a few nights before. He said it again, only to me. 'What does he want?' 'I don't know, but he's asking everyone if they know where Peter Loizos is.' He went away to see to his baggage.

Explanations sorted themselves rapidly in my head, none of them very pleasant. Because of my father's communist past, the authorities were going to turn me back. Or, because of my English citizenship, the independent government, men who had won their freedom by a bloody campaign against the occupying British army, were now going to humiliate me in the name of my ambiguous background. What indeed had I done to help Cyprus in her hour of need? And now I thought I could simply arrive for a holiday with a British passport, and do what I liked? I would be taught a lesson.

'Peter Papa-Loizou?' A policeman, three stripes, a pistol on his hip, dressed in very smart tropical cream drill, appeared. He had a thin moustache, like Ronald Colman, and very steady, somehow familiar,

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brown eyes that gave nothing away. What was going to happen now? 'Yes. That is, Peter Loizos.'

'I am your cousin Lefteris.' He was smiling now, and grasping my hand, pulling me towards him and embracing me, with formal kisses first one cheek, then the other. I knew this was not a good time to be very English about men kissing each other, and I also knew where I had seen the eyes before – in the shaving mirror. They were remarkably like my own, and indeed with a similar moustache, a suntan and a slightly different hairstyle, I could have passed as his brother. We also appeared to be the same age.

'Where are your luggages? I take you off the boat.' We got the bags, and he led me to the rail. Immigration officials were coming up on to the boat from a small craft below, and my cousin had a word with one of them, who then took a cursory look at my passport and stamped it. Saying goodbye to the acquaintances of the last few days, I followed my cousin down on to the ladder. Since it would clearly be hours before the rest of the passengers would get ashore, I could see that having Cypriot cousins was going to prove advantageous. But then it occurred to me that many of the *real* Cypriots on the boat must have had Cypriot cousins too, and they were not getting any help. 'How can you get me off so easily?' 'The immigration man knows me – we are friends.' He went on to explain that only a few of 'our family' had come to meet me, because it was a long way from the village, there were few cars available, and there was a lot of work on at this time in the fields.

We came ashore and passed through the customs in short order, it again being apparent that the officials knew Lefteris, and I was virtually waved through. We came out of the customs shed, and a dozen people surrounded us.

My cases were seized by some, my hands pumped by others, my cheeks kissed by all. Introductions were made, and even though I had tried unsystematically to form some picture of who my various relatives were, this collapsed straight away. There was a small woman who seemed in charge; she turned out to be one of my father's sisters, Aunt Stylou Pipis. It was hard to tell whether she was fifty or seventy years old; she was dressed all in black, with a cowl over her head, and had a huge hook nose and very bright eyes. She had seized me in the *mêlée* and pulled my face down to her level, so that I was bent double. She then bestowed a number of wet kisses on me. Although this was uncomfortable and I felt embarrassed to be nuzzling in the folds of her black garb, my strength (which should have been greater than hers) seemed to have gone. Perhaps it was something to do with the necklock she had on me.

Other people of different ages and sizes were standing about looking

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very friendly. The three youngish men who knew some English had found that I spoke no Greek at all, and the others were discovering this for themselves as I stood gaping, failing to make the appropriate Greek replies to comments such as:

I am your first cousin, Tomas. You are welcome.

I am Maroulla, the wife of your cousin Lefteris. You are welcome.

I am your uncle Ioannis, the brother of your father. You are welcome.

Eventually, when translated introductions had been made, and everyone had now seen that, although willing to look as if I knew what was going on I clearly didn't, they looked expectantly at me. Something had to be said or done now, and yet I had no idea what, being quite swamped simply by the fact that I had all these relations and that they seemed spontaneously pleased to see me. This made me also pleased to see them but, since we could not talk very much, here we were standing around grinning foolishly.

Mutterings in Greek. 'We go to the cars?' 'Yes, of course.' 'Perhaps you are hungry?' 'Oh no, I just had breakfast on the boat.' 'But it is time to eat.' Eventually we went to Lefteris' house near by, and had a snack of refreshingly cold red water-melon, iced beer, and a white cheese called *halloumi*. It was about 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and I was completely unused to the heat, so this snack made me feel much better. Lefteris was trying to persuade everyone to stay for a proper meal, and this would, I learned a few days later, have developed into a ceremonial affair lasting at least three hours, with three types of meat dishes, bottles of light local brandy, beer, fruit, cheese; a feast by my standards, or indeed anyone else's. Eventually, Lefteris' offer of hospitality was overruled, and it was decided that we should set out for Argaki. I think I was consulted about this, but I was being extremely careful not to commit myself to anything which might be burdensome for everyone else, since I was highly aware that for reasons I could not understand my slightest whim was likely to be taken very seriously. Besides, I was genuinely keen to get to the village, and also thought I could see on one or two faces a certain guardedness, a watchful quality that suggested that beneath the enthusiasm for my arrival and the apparently timeless spirit of mutual exploration, there were the pressures of normal workaday life. Since I had no idea of how rich or poor these people were, what jobs they did, or how difficult it was for them to get time off, I felt that the sooner the ceremonies were over, the better for them.

We set off in three cars and were soon outside Limassol and into the barren countryside which had so intimidated me from the boat. But now it was a landscape with figures and, even if it was semi-desert, people

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managed to live here and express warmth and pleasure which belied the arid hills, the dust, the scrub, and the parched, chemical feel to the land. I was in a car with my cousin Andrikos and my Uncle Kouvaros. My uncle had many questions about my father, whom I greatly resembled, he said. Andrikos translated questions and answers. It was said that we would have to stop off in Nicosia to see Eleni, who had been unable to come to the boat; she was another cousin, the daughter of my father's dead brother Zenon. He had been a wealthy man, for many years *muktar*, headman of the village. But Eleni, his only surviving child, lived in a 'big house' in the capital; having been educated in England some ten years previously, she was now the senior school inspector in Domestic Science, at the Ministry of Education.

Her house was certainly large – an off white two-tiered rectangle which would have occupied the space taken by two or three English terraced houses. There was fragrant jasmine around the door, making me almost drunk in the late afternoon, and someone had just sprinkled the garden with water, which, as it evaporated, cooled the air. In the house another little old lady in black gave me a very careful looking-over, agreed that I resembled Prokopis, my father, and explained that we would have to wait for Eleni to arrive. Our party seemed a little subdued in this huge cool house, but we sat and drank home-made lemonade until my cousin came.

With Eleni I again had the odd illusion that I was looking at a version of myself in disguise, or, at the very least, at a sister. The similarity about the eyes was the most forceful resemblance. We stood and stared at each other for some time. After some politeness in English, she asked me why I had come, in a way that suggested she was quite puzzled. I explained as best I could – curiosity, a wish to get to know the island and my family. Hard to explain. I didn't go into the more personal feelings I had about understanding my parents by this journey; it hardly seemed the right time.

It was getting dark, and Eleni explained (in English) that the villagers had had a long journey to fetch me from the boat, and that it was still a forty-minute drive back to the village, where there would be a 'feast'. She was apologetic because she would not be able to come to it, and because her husband was not there to greet me. But she hoped I would come and stay in their house for as long as I liked when I 'grew tired of the village'. I thanked her and we set out again.

Even in the thickening dusk I could see a decided change in the landscape as we drove west out of Nicosia. The yellow barren hills of the Limassol district were repeated for the first ten miles, but then quite suddenly gave way to marked-off fields of rich red-brown earth, reminding me of Devon. Trees, dark green and suggesting fruitfulness, were

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planted in packed rows. These proved to be orange groves. But the light went, and I could sense only that we continued over an equally promising landscape.

We reached Argaki, which seemed dark and silent. There were weak street lamps – sixty-watt bulbs fixed high up on telegraph poles – which barely revealed the mud-walled houses on the narrow streets. I was dazed and didn't take in much else. Although I now know we must have passed through the well-lighted and crowded coffee-shop area, I have no reliable recollection of doing so. We followed the randomly winding irregular streets and finally turned into an apparent dead end. There were a few people sitting outside my Aunt Stylou Pipis' house on chairs, and when we stopped I was unprepared for the idea that we would now meet any more.

I was wrong. At first I thought that the whole village must have been inside the house. There were, my rapid count informed me, some seventy persons of all ages. In the courtyard a long table – several tables laid end to end – had been set with food and drink of all kinds. It could accommodate only about twenty of us but this seemed to worry no one. Pakis, who had taken over from his brother Andrikos the role of chief interpreter, explained that all these people were my relatives, and that was why they were there. The *whole* village? No, just my *close* relatives. 'We did not invite the second cousins, because the house is small and they are perhaps one hundred and fifty, perhaps two hundred . . . later you can meet them all when we go to the coffee shop.'

This was why they had been mildly apologetic at the quayside about the allegedly small numbers of those who had come. Eventually I was to get straight just who they were and where they all came from. My father had had two brothers and four sisters who had all married. Between them they had produced twenty children who had survived to adulthood. This is an important qualification in Cyprus; one of my aunts had exactly one living child to show for thirteen pregnancies. Most of these cousins had by now married. Six married uncles and aunts put twelve persons into the room. Fifteen married cousins added thirty more, making forty-two. The five unmarried younger cousins brought it to forty-seven. Then there were large numbers of small children, assorted in-laws, neighbours, and odd people who had dropped by to see if I had news of their relatives in England. My grandfather had been one of eight, and most of *them* had had large families; from this, the second cousins became 'hundreds' – and hence were necessarily absent tonight.

People had been waiting a long time to eat, and now they started. I found my plate piled high with all kinds of ceremonial foods – stuffed vine leaves, roast goat meat, lamb, chicken, red-gold roast potatoes, salad with

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piquant coriander, macaroni stuffed with mincemeat (which alone would have made a very acceptable meal in London). Whenever I made a small hole in the food on my plate, an aunt would seize a particularly juicy chicken leg or chunk of goat, and swoop it down on to my plate. If I cunningly tried to control this cornucopia I was urged on with the words 'phage akoma ligho' (eat a little bit more), or more imperatively 'phage Petro' (eat, Peter). My glass was being continually refilled as well. It took me some time to realise that whenever I picked it up, everyone else picked up theirs. In Cypriot village company, you do not drink alone, in your own time, or simply when you feel like it. You drink ceremonially together, and each round emphasises the collective nature of the event. Since I did not understand this, and was also the guest of honour, my bad manners were being redefined and overlooked, and instead I was being treated as a kind of toastmaster or pacemaker, even though I was not making any toasts.

But these were being made for me. 'To our much-loved cousin Peter who has come to get to know us'. Of course I couldn't drink to myself. 'To our relative Prokopis, so many years in England'. This was all right. The technique was that when all were holding their glasses raised in front of them, towards some notional centre of the table, the toast 'Eh-ee-vah' was pronounced, a version of 'your health', and the glasses clinked in the middle. Sometimes everyone clinked glasses with everyone else, saying their names. 'Eh-ee-vah Tomas, Mikailis; eh-ee-vah uncle Kouvaros; eh-ee-vah cousin', and so on.

Pakis, on my right, was bearing the brunt of the ceremonies since he was translating all the remarks addressed from all sides of the room to me, as well as my numbed and fumbling attempts to reply in the spirit of the event. Unless you are remarkably unselfconscious it is extremely difficult to take part – let alone occupy centre stage – in a ceremony when you have no idea what is expected. Nor can you simply watch how others do it, as you might watch which knife they pick up; that will take you so far, but all sorts of things in ceremonial occasions are simply not symmetrical. If guest tries to imitate host it may add to confusion: it is for the host in England to say 'Shall we go and eat now?', and for the guest diffidently to agree. So although the food and brandy after my journey were helping to make me relax, I was also trying to respond to the very large and generous efforts being made towards me by choosing the appropriate kind of behaviour. Everything that was said to me needed a reply, and not just an 'oh, really' or a 'how nice', but an answer as warmly and elegantly phrased as the question. Since I have a strong sense of occasion it did not seem right that all the action should be going one way. It was also clear from some of the things that were being said that the people around the



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table were making very deliberate attempts to make me feel at home. Tomas, the oldest of my cousins and obviously one of the most influential members of the company, now made a short speech:

We all wish to express our pleasure that our uncle Prokopis, who has been away abroad so many years, has sent us his son, our relative, to get to know us, so we can show him hospitality.

There were also numerous comments about how like my father I looked, and how like various persons around the table, and many questions about my father's health.

Pakis, the translator, had throughout the meal prompted me tactfully with the names and relationships of people who were addressing me through him.

Your uncle Tchanggos, the man on my right . . . the husband of your father's sister, Klykou, wishes to say something to you. He says: 'You are welcome to the village and when you write to your father send him many greetings from his childhood friend . . . ' [and so forth].

Now he said to me that he thought I must make some kind of a speech. What happened next surprised even me, and looking back it seems that on a quieter level it had been in preparation for some time. I began,

When I was a small boy at school in England, I did not look particularly Greek, and because, as you know, I was brought up by my mother, I did not speak any Greek, only English, like any Englishman. And yet I had a long Greek name, Papaloizou, and this name caused me a great deal of trouble. For some reason the English children found it odd that I should look so English and yet have a name which to the English seems funny. So they used to tease me about it, and of course, like any child, I didn't like being teased. It used to get me into trouble and fights. For many years I carried this name around wondering why my mother hadn't done the sensible thing and given me an English name, so I could be exactly like everyone else. Now, coming here after so long and meeting you all for the first time, I feel all those difficult childhood years were worth while.

This speech (which, though apt, was also from the heart) produced a strong effect on the people at the table, some of whom were visibly moved, and all of whom were very attentive, while Pakis relayed the contents in Greek. Further things were said to make me feel even more at home, and the one that I have never forgotten was the dialect proverb which Tomas produced: 'Opios eschi dhendro, eschi schios.' This was probably the first respectable sentence of the dialect that I learned. It means 'whoever has a tree has shade'; whoever has kinsmen has protection.

## Chapter 2

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# ARGAKI

1900–1970

### Casual impressions, 1966

The villagers who had so graciously and ceremoniously received me were to preoccupy me for the next fifteen years, but I did not know that in 1966, and my six weeks in Cyprus were an extraordinary holiday. While others worked, I took my ease; since I could not speak Greek, and during the day the men who spoke English were out at work, what I learned then about the village must have been largely through impressions on my senses.

Much was conveyed through sound. At first I used to wake early, before dawn, hearing women calling shrilly, and fearing that dreadful quarrels were breaking out on all sides, so harshly strident were their tones. Gradually it became clear that these were neighbours calling over courtyard walls, or mothers chiding children. Men did not yell so often, but they started up their tractors at 4 a.m. so that they could get in a good stint in the fields before the midday heat. Dogs howled all night, inciting each other to frenzied competition, and the many cockerels delivered their *pronunciamentos* well before daybreak. As if to make up for this, there was in the noon heat a great silence, with only the buzz of flies to mark time passing, while in the evenings crickets and household doves were pleasing minstrels.

My senses of taste and smell were also stimulated. The aroma of the local food, which fortunately I found delicious, pervaded the village throughout the day, for the farmers ate when it fitted in with their work, rather than at set times. There were also other scents – of the dried mud-and-straw bricks of the houses and courtyards, and of the near-by animals, which were pleasingly fresh after the acrid fumes of my city life.

The surfaces of the village were usually hotter and rougher than I was used to; only the centre of the village was paved, and in summer the pathways out to the fields were hard and stony. The wood of the older doorposts and window-shutters had a curious dryness not to be found in