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Out of the way

Among Cypriots

Jonathan Raban

Across north east London there runs a long, uncertain, straggly spoor of Greek Cypriot settlement, a dismal trail of half-hearted immigration. It starts in Soho, in the cluster of kebab houses and groceries around Charlotte Street, reopens in Camden Town, where it divides south to Islington and north to Tufnell Park and Kentish Town. It winds through the sidestreets off the Seven Sisters Road near Finsbury Park, and peters out in the damp, poplar-dotted suburban wasteland of Turnpike Lane and Bounds Green.

This route traces the feckless path of late Victorian jerrybuilding, in that area of the city which, by 1860, had already been despoiled by land speculation and railway engineering. Cheapjack gothic terraces with fungoid stucco fronts; grim empty pubs; a continual mauve swirl of spray blown up by the wheels of passing container trucks as they grind east to Suffolk market towns and the North Sea ports. Topless go-go girls, used car lots, wire netting . . . this is a part of London which no one has really cared for for a century. Despite tiny chic settlements of middle class pioneers, stockaded behind their white-painted and repointed brickwork, it has the same air of ruined gentility which it wore when Dickens was boarded-out as a child in Bayham Street—where Greek cafes are now side by side with shaky car-hire firms and first-floor dressmaking factories with tangles of fire-escapes. It is, you feel, the sort of place you'd come to if you had low expectations, no arrogant dreams, a little fortitude, a lot of resignation. It is where Cypriots go.

Here are shoemakers up narrow alleys, and dark little workshops, and businesses in basements, and everywhere the same names and signs: "Tony's," "Machinists Wanted," "Christodolou," "Konstantin," "Olympic," "Athenian." Shawled women hurry under black hoods; in cafes, knots of men play cards all day and talk in that epic ripple of Greek conversation, with every sentence ending on a downbeat, like a recited mass. In the grocer's on Camden Road, there are piles of gunnysacks; pale cheeses float in bowls of scummy water; and the family gathers in the back regions—a crone for each dark corner. These small antiquated stores all reek of coffee, bread and olives, a sweet, tenaciously foreign smell—for the Cypriots remain stubbornly unassimilated. They are lightly attached to London, scratching a temporary living; grave nomads with a strong sense of tragic personal opera.

Since the 1920s, there has been a steady drizzle of Cypriot immigration. They come from villages and small towns, equipped with craftsmen's skills: dressmakers, tailors, bakers, shoemakers. You cannot bring much in the way of luggage on the long trip to England, by boat to Marseilles, then by train through France, with a cold and choppy Channel crossing, and an in-law waiting with your new address when you arrive at Victoria Station. A few tools, the head of a sewing machine, an overcoat—there is nothing more necessary in north London than an overcoat. Like the Jews, the Cypriots are in for a cold welcome; a place in a sweatshop, minding a machine in a noisy row, or, worse, piecework at home, sewing up dresses farmed out by one of the little Greek factories in Islington and Camden. A collector comes round in a van once a week, shelling out 25p for each garment sewn, and checking the stitches. English is a hard language, but in this part of London one can live in Greek—there are Greek newspapers, tiny Greek cinemas in upper rooms, cafes, shops, each one a poky place with a worried owner.

Eviction and demolition keep the Cypriots on the move along their route of settlement, shifting from furnished room to furnished room, living out the tail-ends of short leases on lock-up shops. Overcoats get thin, and at the back tables of the kebab houses, there are men of 30 who look 50, their faces going crinkled as burnt paper. The bachelors are best off: horsing about, playing bouzoukoi records on the juke box, they can afford higher stakes and longer chances at their poker than the old ones.

But it is the women who set the tone of this fragile, shifting, temporary community of urban immigrants. They learn the score harder and faster than the men; they have most to lose from leaving Cyprus and least to gain from life in London. Helena Petrou came here five years ago, with a husband and three children. Her husband is back in Cyprus with a new wife and a job in a casino, where he can whistle and wear a bow tie. She is in a flat in Finsbury Park. She has the funeral eyes and contralto voice of a heroine. At present, her life is going better, but at Christmas she was evicted from her last flat, her mother went back to Cyprus because she couldn't renew her visa, and Helena was left with her children—trudging the route of poverty, homelessness, and stoical depression.

On the Greek Easter Sunday, a week later than ours, they crack coloured eggs—red to symbolise Christ's blood—like conkers. You are supposed to say "Jesus Christ," and the person whose egg you're cracking replies, "I believe in His name." There are Greek pastries, and cards from Cyprus. On the table there are a stack of blue aerogrammes from home, and *The Diary of Anne Frank* on television. Helena finds the dialogue hard, but the children translate for her, when pushed: "They are more English than Cypriots, especially the little ones. It is a problem for me to learn English just to understand what they are talking about." She puts her arm around her pretty five year old; the children are drifting away into a foreign language, and she holds on to them tightly, afraid of being left behind.

Peter Boyce

Dipping into the traditional "funeral sweets," outside the Greek Orthodox church in Camden

"It take one week to come to England. The sea was beautiful, it was September. That was the first time I leave Cyprus. My brother-in-law found a flat for us. It was very bad flat, a basement in Tufnell Park. I left all my nice things in Cyprus, and came to England for better life, and I discovered I must live in a basement. Can you imagine my disappointment? No chair to sit, just bed, and one table . . . My goodness gracious. I couldn't speak English at all. Not any word. Just 'chair,' 'table,' 'window,' 'door,' something like that. I never went out. I was so frightened to go out. You know what happened to me one day? I thought I might go out alone to do my shopping. I came back to my house, was looking for my house . . . nowhere! Oh my God, I say, where is my house? Because all the houses was the same, except their numbers. I was outside of my door, and I was looking for my house. Is very difficult when we don't speak a language, easy to get lost.

"I was lonely. I specially like to meet English people, make English people friends, invite them to my house. I was working at home, taking in dresses from the factory. I used to work for four shillings a dress. To make 20 dresses in a day, I really kill myself. All day I have the electric light. Even if it is sunny outside, in a basement you have to leave the light open. It was very dark. Only my landlady keep me company. I work there, and think of many things—about my relatives, about my friends, about the nice things I leave behind. The little one stay with me. I shout at her, she cry. Sometimes I cry. What make me go out to the factory is when I divorce with my husband. He give me no money, and I do not make money . . . £15 was not enough for me and family, there was no other way to get money, so I had to go out to the factory. Another lady take me to her factory because she told that they got a lot of money. I discovered it was better. I forgot my problems, you know? I make some friends, I make my money for my living. The time passes without realising.

"I get up at seven o'clock. Half past seven, I catch the bus. Quarter past eight, I am in the factory. I take care of the dresses in the factory—if there are any damage, or something. The responsibility for the machinists is me. So is very hard. There are about 20 machinists: some of them do not make sure, some of the dresses, no stitches at all . . . I get home about eight o'clock in the evening. Till Christmas, I got my mother with me, it was much help for me, no worrying for my children. But she went back to Cyprus. I don't know if she is coming back again. I want her to come back, but they do not give us the permission, so I don't know; is difficult for me and the children now.

The phrase "is difficult" is threaded continuously through Helena's conversation. London for her is a minefield, and she steps cautiously through its wayward explosions of language. A visit to the housing department or the social security office turns into a dangerous and humiliating expedition. Each encounter entails a "piece of paper" with which she will trail from King's Cross to Islington and back again. Officials fail to understand her stories. She dreams of learning English, as if mere linguistic competence was an open sesame to the city. For the moment, she takes refuge in its impersonality: "I like the people here, they don't care about what you are doing, what you are, what you going to do. I never say anything about anybody." As Cyprus drifts further and further back into her personal history, so it turns into the Eden from which, long ago—almost too long to remember—she was expelled. She talks of its mountains and beaches, and how the women there go out "maybe two or three times every week." She has hardly ever been out of London, and speaks of the countryside as "out of England." "I never been to the English sea. I only been to Southend. The sea was far away from the beach. Is different."

She has the drastically foreshortened perspectives of the isolate in the big city. "I want to stay here for a moment. Life changes from today to tomorrow. Who knows?" There will be more pieces of paper, more rooms, more permissions, perhaps another sea voyage. But today is so difficult that she dare not think of tomorrow. The one thing of which she is certain is her solitude, and she has turned it into an object of pride. "I have many friends and many relatives, but I never go and ask for help. I always try to get on myself, not to need anyone. Even money that I have right to get from the security office or something, because they told me to go and ask for help, but I never bothered, because I do not want to prove myself in trouble. For a few pounds, I do not like . . . I prefer to work, to make another dress extra, and I don't go and ask for help. I am a dignified woman, and I don't want nobody to say something on my back."

The Jews in New York knew that they were there to stay; they lived through the sweatshops and the slums of the Lower East Side, recognising them as a stage along their route to citizenship. The Cypriots in London have no such investment in their future; for them, half a lifetime may be just "a moment," a temporary perch on a city which will never belong to them.

In a coffee-grinder's shop in Camden Town is another immigrant. He came in 1956, to put his children through English schools. He wants to go back to Nicosia. His face is large, prosperous, moustached and censorious; it wags like a great slab of lard at the London beyond his window. "Is only rubbish-people come to this town. Rubbish-people from all over the world. Here, you pay a fellow ten pounds, he kill someone for you. Till 1963, was okay. Now, is just world's rubbish. Know what I mean?" His son is at college, he's doing all right, can afford to take his holidays in Cyprus. "Compared to this, is paradise. Next year, maybe year after, I go home." He should be so lucky. At the back of a kebab house on Pratt Street, an old man sits spitting out the stones from bitter olives. He speaks no English, watches this foreign world wolfishly. His teeth are yellow. The stones pile up on his plate. He only came here for a moment.