

SUMMARY

Interview with **Charalambos Ppiros**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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The interview was conducted in Greek.

Charalambos Ppiros was born on the 6th of April, 1927 in the village of Vasilia, in the Prefecture of Kyrinia, northern Cyprus. He was the youngest child and the only boy amongst five siblings.

His family owned a small plot of land where they grew their own vegetables but his parents worked on other people's farms in order to carve a living as the area offered a plethora of agricultural activities. These included the growing of carob beans, olives, vegetables and cereals.

When Charalambos was born, Vasilia commanded about 350 inhabitants but by the time he reached adulthood, it had grown to almost 1000 people, an indication of how fertile the land was.

The distribution of wealth was not equal and Charalambos recalls with sadness how difficult times were as he was growing up.

He managed to finish primary school and then was apprenticed to a local 'chair maker'. Later, when his second sister married a carpenter, he worked with his brother-in-law and picked up his second trade. This was his main occupation until summer approached when he would accompany his parents to the neighbouring villages to assist with the harvest, something that continued for six or seven years.

At age 16 Charalambos worked in the building industry learning how to do form work. This was very handy as he, together with his mother helped in building the house of his youngest sister Elizabeth at the village. (She died a few years ago he said, in Adelaide). She had migrated to Australia in 1958 or 1959.

Cyprus was not involved in World War 2. Only once recalls Charalambos, German planes dropped a few bombs, nothing else. In 1963 however the island was rocked by the Turkish/Greek conflict, (instigated by the British he stated, for they were not willing to grant autonomy to the island).

There was never a problem between the Greeks and the Turks he states. He remembers well, how the young boys Greeks and Turks played together and delivered food to their parents who worked in the same field, happily interacting with each other. But the seeds of discontent were sewn, and things were never the same again.

By late 1960s 'EOKA B' [Greek Cypriot Paramilitary Organisation] was formed, sanctioned by the Military Junta in Greece which had gained power in April of 1967. [This body sought total independence of Cyprus and its re-unification with Greece]. On Monday the 15th of July,

1974, 'EOKA B' dissolved the Government of Makarios, spreading rumours that the President was dead and imposed a dictatorial regime under the command of Nick Sampson. Reputation had it, that Sampson had killed many civilian Cypriot Turks in 1963. Turkey, using that as an excuse, invaded the island on Friday the 19th of July, 1974 as Charalambos and others had feared.

The firing started and the bombs were directed at the houses forcing civilians to try and find refuge anywhere they could. Charalambos and his family spent the first day and night under the freshly watered and consequently muddy, lemon trees, a short distance from their home. Soon they were joined by their extended family and neighbours and they all watched gravely concerned as the night sky was lit up by constant firing.

On Saturday morning the youth was summoned to go and fight the invaders but no weapons were to be found. The junta, fearful of dissent, had forcefully collected everything, including slug guns and locked them away. Charalambos was suspected of concealing weapons from the Czech Republic because he was the Secretary of the local Union Movement. They turned his house upside down but eventually they left empty handed. Many of his comrades though were locked up in the fortress of Kyrinia, only to be freed by a policeman as the invading forces were advancing.

One official delivered some unarmed young men near the Northern coast to intercept the Turks. "Your weapons will come shortly", he reassured them but it never happened. (No one ever saw any of these young men again, laments Charalambos).

Before the Turks took control of the Northern Region, Charalambos, his wife and their three children took to the mountains of Kyrinia with limited clothes and food provisions. There they remained for six months, moving from one village to the next with the locals offering them hospitality. Eventually, they reached Lemesos and took refuge at a church building, where the local government authorities offered them daily rations which came mainly through the International Aid.

Here they stayed for three months, long enough to prepare the necessary paperwork, and on the 5th of March, 1975, they left for Australia with the invitation of Charalambos' sister who was already in Australia. They left Lemesos by ship for Piraeus as Cyprus did not have an airport and from Athens they flew to Australia. This, they thought was going to be temporary, and they would return back home once things settled down. All their possessions were still locked in the house. The Turks however came to Cyprus to stay.

Twenty years later Charalambos and his wife Artemis visited Cyprus but they were not allowed to go anywhere near the occupied land. No one was permitted to cross the dividing line which ran from the Village of Kokkinia on the west coast to Derynia on the east coast. It took them another 10 years on their second visit before they managed to see their house from outside only. The Cypriot-Turkish family that lived in now was not very welcoming, especially the wife.

The people that lived opposite their house were totally different. They embraced them warmly and offered them hospitality. This family used to live in the south of the island but were forced to move to the newly occupied lands in the north. "For your own safety", they were told by the invaders. The majority of the Greek-Cypriot properties were occupied of course, by Turks from Turkey.

The division of the island did not come about because of an isolated historical event, Charalambos recounts. This was always on the agenda of the British, who maintained military bases there and later the Americans who succeeded them. Its strategic geographic location enabled the controlling power to keep an eye on the Mediterranean region but more importantly on the surrounding Muslim countries. The Turks were happy to accommodate such plans. In return they were placed in charge of the most fertile half of the island.

In Australia, Charalambos and his family spent their first two and a half months in Shepparton, Victoria, with his sister's family. There he worked temporarily at the local fruit cannery and then they moved to Renmark, South Australia to be with another one of his sisters. "We are surrounded by Greeks" she had said to him, "so it will be easier on you language wise to be here".

They arrived in Renmark on the 21st of May, 1975 to live with his sister's family for a couple of months and then they moved into a rented property until they built their own house, about four years later.

In Renmark, Charalambos worked for the local council for a brief period. Soon he got to know the locals where he and his wife worked for the local farmers. They performed all manner of tasks, including the general management of a farm for one year. All this hard work enabled them to save enough money to buy their own home. Soon after, they used this as collateral and borrowed money to purchase a farm of their own that had grape vines as well as orange and lemon trees.

This was a rather neglected, small farm but it suited them well, as they were prepared to invest their collective efforts, children included and soon they made it productive again. Although it was paying all the bills this was not enough, so Charalambos and Artemis continued working for others. They only invested their spare time for their own property.

Charalambos' daughter enrolled at university in Adelaide and she wanted her parents with her, so they rented a house in Adelaide and bought and ran a fruit and vegetable shop dividing their time between Renmark and Adelaide. When the daughter's studies were completed, they all went back to Renmark where she found employment in the local public library, married and remained there for 22 years until her own daughter was due to attend university. Then Charalambos' daughter, along with her family moved and settled in Adelaide where she found employment at the Commonwealth Bank.

In the interim, the farm was passed on to the two boys but once they were married, Peter moved on to pursue other interests, leaving his brother to continue with farming on his own. Charalambos, at this stage together with Artemis, moved into their current home which had been recently renovated, and where they planned to enjoy their retirement. Their time was divided between two passions, enjoying the presence of their children and grandchildren and striving to create the ultimate garden. In fact, their efforts for the latter have been rewarded as they entered the Renmark Rose Festival each year where they have received many certificates.

Charalambos and his family left Cyprus with the promise to return within five years. Instead, Renmark claimed them for good and Adelaide became the home of their children's families. The tragic events of the war however followed them even there. Artemis' elderly father remained in Cyprus as he did not want to come to Australia but he was evicted from his home and forced to sleep on a table in the local kafeneio (coffee shop). Later, when he tried to enter

the occupied lands and check on his daughter's house, he was lucky to escape with just a broken arm.

With tears in her eyes, Artemis recalled how her 19 year old nephew (whom she raised as her own after her brother's death) was sent to the war and disappeared without trace like so many others, Charalambos added, we'll never forget, they said.