

Cyprus Album: Strife and Romance

By JACK GOLDFARB

THE PINK-AND-YELLOW Vauxhall taxi rolled through the Mesaoria plain along the highway ribboning east toward Famagusta. Having abandoned, along with the rest of the cafe-sitters, the dol-drums of Nicosia's Metaxas Square in its languid siesta hour, I fled from the broiling August heat across forty miles of green terrain to seek solace in the cooling zephyrs of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Two of the other three travelers and the driver of our between-towns collective cab drowsily exchanged comments in Greek. The other passenger was already dozing.

My thoughts were back in the Nicosia archeological museum with the bones of the little Neolithic man who had stalked through these Cyprian fields 5000 years ago. His marvelously well-preserved skeleton indicated that the gentleman had lived to a ripe 150 years before his contemporaries deposited him, huddled as he had been in his mother's womb, into the ground outside the door of his beehive hut. As custom decreed, his premises were sealed up, his artifacts and earthly possessions inside. The enduring chap, with his still perfect set of teeth, had lived in an era when excesses of alcohol, tobacco, and venery were unknown—according to the museum guide. Thus in good shape, at the average age of fifty they plunged into matrimony—these hardy ses-quicentenarian Cypriots of fifty centuries ago.

Their latter-day descendants in the taxi with me were all napping now, benumbed by the scorching sun. Occasional villages whisked by, their shops emblazoned with familiar-looking emblems proclaiming in Greek letters: "Pepsi-Cola," "Alka-Seltzer," and "Kodak." Far more advertising was of a political nature. Wherever a wall had offered a public view, the slogan daubers

had been busy: "Enosis!" "Makarios!" and "Rule Britannia!" But the signs were fading. The independent Republic of Cyprus has passed its second birthday and political tranquillity has taken hold.

Signs of the British presence have faded also. The highway skirted past disassembled bases and installations taken over by the Cypriot Army.

One of my fellow-passengers awoke. I asked him a question about politics and everybody awoke. The viewpoint of this all-Greek group was strictly pro-enosis—union with Greece. Once that was made clear, they began a lively recounting of personal experiences during the years of struggle against British rule. All had been arrested at least once on suspicion of terrorist activity. Though their resentment of the British had mostly mellowed, their ethnic conflict with the Cypriot Turks was conspicuously alive.

Not that this quarrel is of yesteryear. Archeological findings in the Nicosia Museum confirm that a lot of folks who had crossed over from Greek Thessaly and Turkish Anatolia were already sharing this tortoise-shaped island back in the days when Old Man Neolithic was chiseling artifacts.

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Famagusta, the chief port and ancient capital of Cyprus, nestled on the shores of the bay bearing its name, fulfilled the promise of refreshing breezes drifting in across the sparkling blue water. Founded in the third century B.C. and getting its name from the Greek *ammochostos*—"buried in sand," the old town is bordered by golden sandy beaches and the sturdy medieval walls built by the Venetians. In the thirteenth century, when Acre, the last Crusader stronghold in the Holy Land, was overwhelmed, thousands of Christian refugees fled to

Famagusta. The influx gave impetus to the town and it became the leading center of trade in the Near East.

Before long the flourishing city was taken over by the envious Genoese. Subsequently it was seized by the powerful Venetian Empire. The Venetians dug themselves in, constructing the fortified walls studded with stout bastions. A Lieutenant-Governor of that time, a Moor from Venice, named Christoforo Moro, became the inspiration for Shakespeare's drama "Othello." The staunch citadel built to defend the port later became known as "Othello's Tower."

The teeming center of Famagustan life is the Demotikh Agora, the people's market, which spills out of its rectangular concrete enclosure into the surrounding pavements and streets. Buses unload and fetch a steady flow of shoppers and browsers from near-by villages. The bustling bazaar is alive with colors, sounds, and smells: an unending array of green, brown, and yellow vegetables, heaps of orange, red, and purple fruits, multi-hued wildflowers galore; the bark and chatter of the vendors, the cackle of chickens, and the haggling of buyers; the fragrance of roses and honeysuckle commingled with the piercing odor of fresh and not so fresh fish, the fume of charcoal fires, and the pungence of roasting mutton; clothing new and old, straw baskets, plastic-ware, cheap souvenirs, and the inevitable bottles of Coca-Cola—all comprising one vast landing field where swarms of persistent, buzzing flies take off, reconnoiter, and alight in a ceaseless traffic pattern.

Dominating the town is a magnificent medieval edifice once known as the Cathedral of St. Nicholas and later turned into a mosque. This splendid example of 14th century French Gothic architecture with its elaborately ornamented stonework, curiously topped by a minaret, is today a well-attended house of worship by the followers of Mohammed, who, himself, ordered an invasion of Cyprus in the last year of his life. In this erstwhile cathedral were crowned the Lusignan rulers who purchased Cyprus from Richard the Lion Hearted in 1192. An

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interesting footnote here is that a doctor in London today, claiming direct descendancy from Guy de Lusignan, first King of Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Armenia, is demanding monetary compensation for his ancestral rights to the island.

Going north out of Famagusta past the ancient, moss-covered walls and crenellated rampart of Othello's Tower, the littoral on the long curve of the bay is imprinted with vestiges of history, ancient and recent. The coastal road leads to the ruins of Salamis, founded in the twelfth century B.C. by Teucer, a Greek hero at the end of his service in the Trojan War. He named the town after the celebrated isle of Greece where his father, King Telamon, reigned. Salamis became the throne city of the Cyprian kings, and was the home town of Barnabas, who with Paul and Mark introduced Christianity to the island in 45 A.D. Unearthed from the sands, in their desolated glory stand the temples of Greek gods, marble-columned Roman forums, a Christian basilica, a reservoir, and the remnants of a citadel, on the shores of the placid, eternal sea.

A few miles below Salamis at the village of Karaolos is another deserted site of recent times. Karaolos was the British detention center for Jews intercepted en route to Palestine in the years just after World War II. Made famous by the Leon Uris book and Otto Preminger movie, "Exodus," Karaolos today presents a bleak, spent picture with little to write about. Where once stood endless fields of faded brown tents and tin-roofed shacks surrounded by miles of barbed wire, there is naught now under this cloudless sapphire blue sky but a few slabs of concrete foundations, some scattered acacia and palm trees, and an open view to the white swell of the sea. Here frustrated, recalcitrant would-be immigrants, most of them survivors of Hitler's death camps, found themselves once more prisoners dreaming of freedom in a promised land. But not all were dreaming. There were ways of doing. Under and through the barbed wire there were nightly escapes aided by friendly Cypriots who also were dreaming

of a land of their own. Boats anchored off shore and vehicles on side roads whisked away the escapees.

A dark, curly-haired herdsman was tending his grazing cows at what was once the main entrance to the camp. He smiled under his bushy eyebrows and massive mustache when he spoke of the internees at Karaolos. "They were all my friends," he said. "It was like old times later when many people came back here to make the moving picture." He told me he had worked as an extra in the film and had been paid a pound and a half a day.

A group of children raced down the road, followed by a barking shepherd dog. They wanted the camera-toting stranger to take their pictures. They were Turkish Cypriot children, skinny and poorly-dressed. Afterwards they mustered around me and clamored for coins. They too, apparently, had watched the filming of "Exodus."

A Greek taxi driver ferried me back to Famagusta past rippling wheat fields and sweetly scented orange groves, watered by croaking windmills. The cabbie reminisced of the good old days hauling supplies from Famagusta out to the detention camp. "Fine for the Hebrews that they have got a homeland," he said. "I've never earned such good money since they were here, though," he added sadly. Did I know, he asked, about the gift Israel had sent later to the people of Famagusta for their help? They had sent a sum to build a town sports park.

More than sending gifts of gratitude, Israelis are returning to Cyprus in droves, but not to the painful scenes of internment. The Israelis are flocking into the cool, pine-forested resort areas in the invigorating mountains of Western Cyprus. In the shadow of towering Mount Olympus, the towns of Troodos, Platres, Galato, and Kakopetrio echo with the greetings of "Shalom! Shalom!" as friends from Tel-Aviv and Haifa meet each other here. The Cypriots have given the Israelis a warm reception once again, with signs profusely displayed in English and Hebrew saying, "Blessed are

they who come" and "Welcome to visitors from Israel." To the Cypriots the tourist traffic is a beneficial boost to the struggling economy, and to the Israelis it is a trek to a close-by and inexpensive vacation ground.

The long history of Cyprus is replete with chapters of bloody battles and politicians who fought for possession of its strategic location and its riches of copper (the word is derived from Cyprus). The hosts of ancient Egypt, Assyria, Phoenicia, Greece, Persia, Rome, Islam, Byzantium, Crusaders, and Ottoman Turks, among others, have made of the Cyprian soil a grim and brutal battleground.

But not all of the chronicles of Cyprus are of strife and intrigue. There is an ample history of romance and beauty.

The worship of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love, and Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of sex and fertility, are the first known religions on the island.

Then came Aphrodite, the most beautiful female of them all. Homer sang the description of her birth, "up from the delicate foam, to wave-ringed Cyprus, her isle." Today in the frothy surf at Paphos, on the western tip of the island, the richly-colored Rock of Romios marks the fabled spot where Aphrodite emerged from the sea. In ancient days pilgrims flocked from many lands to her Paphos shrine for the spring festival in her honor. Today, it is said, youths and maidens of towns nearby still go in secret homage to the ruins of her temple to sprinkle almond water or leave snippets of their clothing. Thanks to the inspired sculptors of ancient Cyprus, the museum-goers have been bequeathed much exquisite statuary of the enravishing Greek goddess of love, beauty, and fruitfulness.

Cleopatra, no ordinary enchantress herself, once came into possession of the island of Cyprus, when Marc Anthony presented it to her as a token of his love.

And that sturdy old warrior, Richard the Lion Hearted, pausing to conquer Cyprus on his way to the Holy Land, was captivated by the charms of Berengaria of Navarre and the lure of this romance-laden isle. He mar-

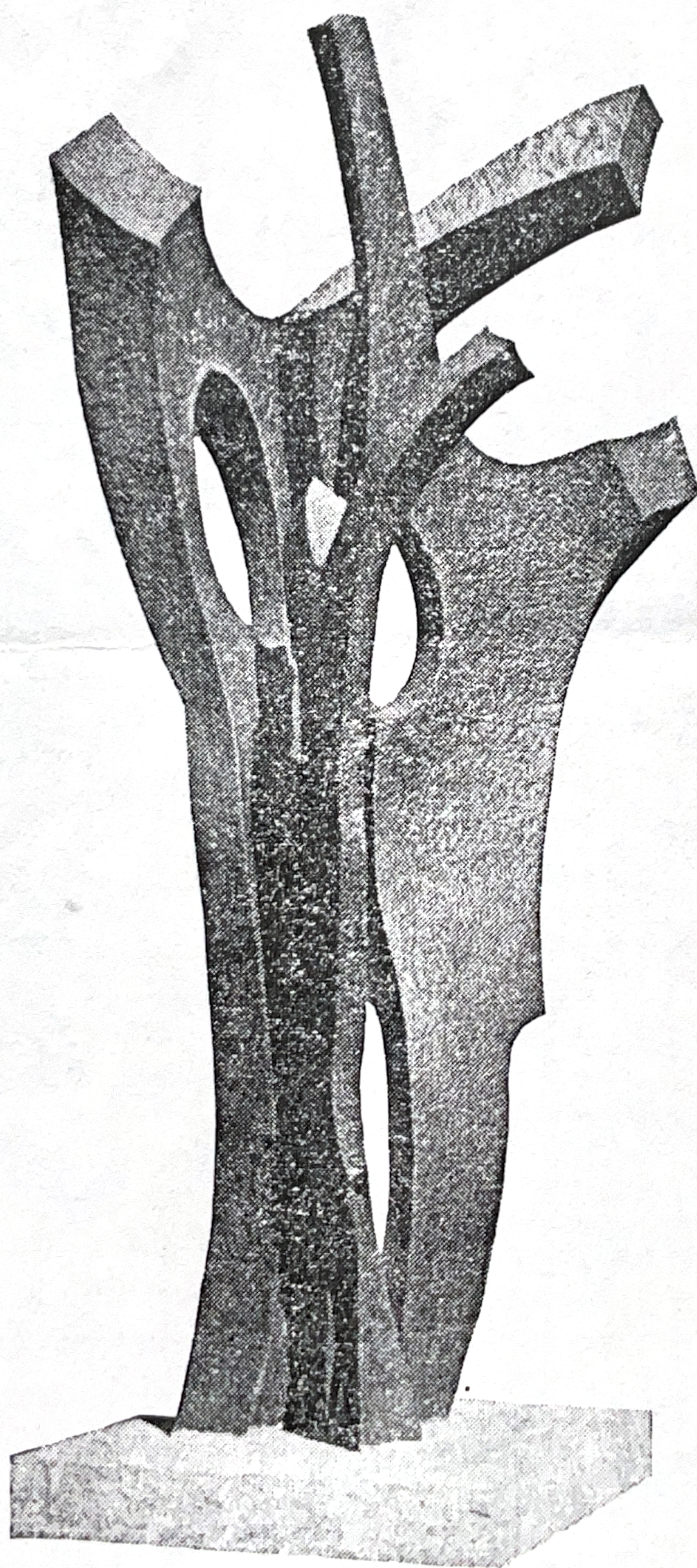
ried her here and crowned her Queen of England.

On a jagged peak in the Kyrenia mountains on the northern ridge of the island stand the craggy ruins of St. Hilarion Castle, once a royal abode, called by knights of old the "Castle of Amours." The panoramic view from here is the most stunning on the island. The eye sweeps past the remnants

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of the castle's fortified walls and towers, across the greenhood of the vineyard-terraced slopes, the groves of myrtle, olive, and cypress trees, where nightingales sing, and down to the azurine sea. In the hazy distance looms the coast of Turkey in Asia.

On one glorious landscape are blended strife and intrigue, romance and beauty, the vivid colors in the Cyprus album.



In Memoriam: To Victims of Nazi Persecution

HANS RAWINSKY