



Winter 2011-12

AHIF POLICY JOURNAL

Reflections After A Summer Trip to Cyprus

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It would be my second trip to Greece with AHEPA and my first with the American Hellenic Institute. The expertise and guidance of Dr. James Dimitriou in a previous summer and the sterling reputation of Mr. Nick Larigakis of AHIF reassured me that my summer (2010) was promising to be most stimulating and educational.

My father was born in Athens, and my mother in Levithi, in the Peloponnesus. My parents have told me about their struggles and challenges in the United States and the adversities they faced when moving to Illinois. My parents have stressed hard work and accountability, and thereby I have learned not to take for granted the opportunities that I have had in my lifetime.

From an early age, besides my Greek Orthodox faith, I was very conscious of my Greek heritage. I am thankful that I attended Greek school since my parents placed as much emphasis on my Greek heritage as they did on the Greek Orthodox Church. But today, I am here inspired, because of the experiences and knowledge I gained studying in Greece and Cyprus this past summer.

My father, who all of his life has kept up with events in Greece, informs me that Greece these days has few honest friends and few honest reasons for rejoicing. Therefore it is necessary for those of us who are truly Greek, to commit ourselves to defend and help the mother country. For example there are 72 million Turks and only 11 million Greeks. So in my opinion, I feel as many as possible of the 11 million should stand up for the interests of Greece and Cyprus to counteract the Turkish numbers and the galloping Turkish propaganda machine. As I have become better informed regarding issues Hellenic, I realize that it is my obligation to advocate and do my small part to make a difference for the Greek American community.

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It has been frustrating to me to see my own country, the USA, being a passive accomplice to the illegal occupation of Cyprus by a NATO ally. For 37 years now, the Cyprus issue has been brushed aside, especially recently since Washington has more immediate problems, like Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Economy. So the Cyprus injustice fasters and the Turks, it seems, have entrenched themselves for a long stay.

Thanks both to AHEPA's Journey to Greece Program and the American Hellenic Institute Foundation's Foreign Policy Trip to Greece and Cyprus, I learned more about my culture and the important issues that face the Greek-American community. The experiences were invaluable in making me want to learn more about my rich heritage and compelled me to ultimately try and make a difference.

It was painful for me and I'm sure for my peers, to walk the streets of Famagusta in the occupied area of Cyprus and to see desecrated churches, mutilated cemeteries, and abandoned homes. As a personal commitment in rectifying the injustice done to Cyprus, I have, as a small contribution, published an article in my school paper (with a readership of 45,000) where I expressed my opposition to San Diego State University for sponsoring a study abroad program to the so-called "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus."

My university will also welcome a new president this May. I have made it a priority in the coming months to assemble a congregation of my compatriots and draft an official statement to express our views to the new president. I feel it is essential to inform my university's new administration of the injustice that the campus supports by validating an illegally occupied region.

My efforts for Greece and Cyprus may be small but they are heartfelt. I have not only through formal means tried to educate my peers about Hellenism but also informally in my small circle of friends. For example, when a few friends and I heard a Jennifer Lopez song played on the radio, we then had a conversation where I explained how I feel she is not only talented but also compassionate. I shared how she showed understanding as she declined a big paycheck to do what was right, even though it did not directly affect her. I then was able to continue and explain how she refused to perform in the so-called "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" and through her actions refused to recognize the illegally occupied area as a legitimate country.

Many of my friends are also big tennis fans. This summer, when the Cypriot tennis player, Marcos Baghdatis, defeated the number one player in the world, Rafael Nadal, I used this significant accomplishment as an ice-breaker to talk about the Cyprus issue. By finding ways to discuss issues that are relevant to

Greece and Cyprus, I have been able to educate my peers about issues relevant to the Hellenic community.

In my studies, I learned that the solution to the Cyprus problem ultimately depends not on the Turkish or Greek Cypriots, but in Ankara. As Cyprus Foreign Minister, Markos Kyprianou has said, “Given the fact that in any negotiations, Turkey itself is the power behind any solution” it is important for the U.S. to encourage— and if possible to pressure-- Turkey to be as constructive and positive as possible. So any influence and encouragement the U.S. can put on Turkey, would be most helpful. I believe, moreover, that the international community has a moral obligation to stand with Cyprus and reunify the island and end the prolonged military occupation. The injustice in Cyprus, I believe, has been tolerated long enough by the great so-called great powers.

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