Boarding the flight to Ercan, in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, is not easy. It leaves Tel Aviv’s Ben-Gurion Airport from “Terminal 2” – which is actually the revamped domestic flight terminal. The terminal’s entrance doors are locked, and once you find your way in and complete the check-in process, a bus escorts you back to the main terminal.

But this, to me, was the least of the confusion as EREITZ staff photographer Doron Horowitz and I attempted to check in at the counter of Turkish-Cypriot “Kibris” airlines one Thursday afternoon in May.

“The destination on the boarding pass says ‘Antalya,’ which is in Turkey,” I remarked, bewildered, to the Kibris representative at the counter. “We want to get to Ercan, in Turkish Cyprus.” With largess he answered “Yihiye beseder,” a phrase that literally means “everything will be all right,” but actually means, to anyone fluent in modern Hebrew, “start worrying.”

“The plane will land at Antalya,” he explained patiently. “Everybody will get off. You and Doron stay on the plane and wait. It will eventually continue to Ercan.”

The idea of waiting on a plane without the faintest idea of where it was going to go did not appeal to me. But suitcases had been packed, arrangements made, the car put in long-term parking. So, we boarded, on our way into the unknown.

The plane was packed. An Israeli high-tech company was flying all of its workers, plus spouses, for a weekend in Antalya, Turkey. Doron and I were the only passengers aboard who did not feel the house party atmosphere. Forty-five minutes later we landed in Antalya.

I waited expectantly for an announcement of “for those continuing with us ...” but the loudspeaker was silent. The rev
erators deplanned and 15 Turks boarded with cleaning equip-
ment, ignoring us. Thirty minutes later we were airborne again.
The plane flew south along the coast of Turkey, and as dusk fell, we turned west, flying out over the Mediterranean. Ten
minutes later we landed on a small, nearly deserted airfield
where Doron and I got off. At the gate by the edge of the tar-
mac stood a solitary figure with a sign reading: “Mr. Roman
and Mr. Horowitz.”

“Welcome to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,”
said Turgut Vehbi, press and information officer of the
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Public Information.

We had come to Cyprus in search of a Jewish cemetery, probably the only remains of an attempt to create a Jewish
agricultural settlement on the island over 100 years ago. This
was a thing of the past. The estate was now owned by the
JCA.

The new owners soon found out that the original settlers
knew nothing at all about farming. They had sold the livestock
and the supplies provided by the JCA – leaving the estate with
six cows, hardly any provisions, and no equipment. But the
JCA was not daunted by the initial failure. New settlers were
recruited from among the graduates of the Mikveh Yisrael
Agricultural School on the outskirts of Jaffa. Conditions in
Cyprus were similar to those in the Land of Israel, and land
there was owner by the JCA.

The Cypriot settlement had a very brief life span. The saga
began in 1897 when a number of Jewish families – recent
arrivals in London from Russia – formed a society called
Ahavat Zion (the Love of Zion) for the purpose of settling on
the Turkish-ruled Land of Israel. Many of the members of the
settlement had been funded by the Jewish Colonization
Association (JCA), founded by the French Jewish philan-
thropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch.

Still, the members of the society approached the JCA and
asked for a loan to purchase 11,110 hectares of farmland in
the Margo-Tchiflik area of Cyprus along an estate known as Margo Farm. Although it’s not certain why they received the
money, the land was purchased.

And so, as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close,
16 families arrived at the farm, a short 14 kilometers from
Nicosia, then the British administrative capital of Cyprus. The
JCA built houses and farm buildings for the settlers, purchased
seed and livestock, and operated a school, synagogue, bakery
and mill. Three of the families returned immediately to
England. Conditions on the hot, dry Mesaoria plain in the cen-
ter of Cyprus where Margo was located did not appeal to them.
Cyprus was not Eastern Europe. The heat was unbelievable, the mos-
quitos carried malaria, and cultural life, Jewish or any other, was
nonexistent among the poor mud-brick villages around the estate.
Seven additional families gave up in the next two years,
leaving a total of five families on the estate.

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Agricultural School on the outskirts of Jaffa. Conditions in
Cyprus were similar to those in the Land of Israel, and land
was available, so there were graduates ready to accept the
JCA’s offer.

By 1902, the conditions on Margo seemed to have stabi-
lized. The five original families had been joined by four farm
workers from Mikveh Yisrael, who managed to increase the
number of sheep in their flock and to engage in more serious
farming.

Following these early successes, more Jews from Europe
began to arrive. By 1908, the number of families had risen to
16, although many of these newcomers left soon afterwards.

Malaria, in particular, drove the newcomers away, striking at
the settlers who had little immunity to the disease, unlike the
more veteran immigrants, or the Mikveh Yisrael graduates
who had grown up in the malaria-infested Land of Israel.

At the beginning of the settlement’s second decade, the com-
community numbered only 189 people, scattered in three locales:
Margo, Chumlchuk (present-day Comlekci), and Kouklia (pre-
sent-day Koprulu).

After 17 years of farming efforts on Cyprus, the JCA had
come to the conclusion that a community of Jewish agricul-
tural farms had little future on the island. In addition to malar-
ia, heat, water scarcity, and the absence of Jewish cultural life,
the Cypriot settlements ironically suffered from being too
close to the Land of Israel.

Those who were ready to bear the hardships of settlement in the eastern Mediterranean sooner or later came to the con-
clusion that they could improve their lives by emigrating to the Land
of Israel where Jewish settlements already existed, Jewish culture
was beginning to devel-
op, and expansion and growth were happening.

The JCA decided to dis-
mantle the settlement in an orderly way – set-
ting all debts, and selling the land and the livestock. But
the outbreak of World War I put the plans on hold. At the end
of the war in 1919, the three nuclei of settlements, Margo,
Chumlchuk and Kouklia, still numbered 169 souls.

Finally in 1923, the JCA’s farm manager was recalled to
London. The settlers were given notice that they were now on
their own: there would be no more help, subsidies, or grants.
The announcement generated a massive departure of families –
most of them for the Land of Israel.

Margo was sold and the nearby farm at Chumlchuk was
closed. A few Jewish families, apparently unhinged in the small
village of Kouklia, but by 1927 (the last year for which the
JCA reports on Cyprus are available), only 43 settlers
remained.

By the end of the 1950s it seemed that all of the settlers had
left. The last burial in the cemetery at Margo, which became
the Jewish cemetery of Cyprus, was in July 1960.

Over the years, a trickle of the Cypriot settlers’ descendants,
most of them now living in Israel, managed to visit the ceme-

Above: Medieval castle of St. Hilarion in Turkish Cyprus. Below: Bellapa’s Abbey, scenic village in Turkish Cyprus.
After Lusignan lost his kingdom to the invading Muslim armies of Salah-a-din, the Third Crusade set out to try and reconquer the Holy Land. One of the leaders of the Crusade, Richard The Lion Hearted, took time to conquer Cyprus from the Byzantine Empire. After marrying Berengaria on the island, Richard quickly understood that it was not worth the effort to keep – and so he sold it to Lusignan, who assumed the title “King of Jerusalem and Cyprus.” The new Crusader kingdom of the Lusignans became the second smallest in Christendom – and the last country included in the Crusader world.

The Crusader refugees from Acre brought wealth with them which had been amassed over the century in which Acre was the kingdom’s commercial link between the Latin and the East. That same wealth was now poured into Famagusta. The harbor was enlarged, city walls and gates were constructed, markets, warehouse houses, palaces, and churches built. Following a church order that forbade European communities from building churches, European goods streamed to Famagusta – to be rebated and reshipped to Moslem harbors. The merchants of the defunct Crusader kingdom with their connections and knowledge of the Moslem world, served as vital links in commerce. Famagusta of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was a fascinating interlocking city. Its streets were filled with the bustle of people from all over the Mediterranean world. The soul of its merchants was famous. City life was full of pleasures, prompting moral admonition from clergy and the city, “nothing of pleasure” seemed to be the most noteworthy subject reported on by visitors. Their wiles were legendary, and annals of the period described in detail their expertise in snaring rich merchants. The merchants of Famagusta cared little for the temporal wealth of its merchants was famous. City life was full of pleasures, prompting moral admonition from clergy and the city, “nothing of pleasure” seemed to be the most noteworthy subject reported on by visitors. Their wiles were legendary, and annals of the period described in detail their expertise in snaring rich merchants. The merchants of Famagusta cared little for the temporal wealth of its merchants was famous. City life was

The Memories of the Battle between the Turks and the European Christians were not forgotten. The Turks absorbed the island’s surviving Catholic Church institutions (imported by the Crusaders and the Venetians), into the Eastern Orthodox Church hierarchy – a last vestige of the defunct Byzantine empire, now under Turkish control. In addition, 30,000 Turks settled on the island; they were to comprise one-third of the island’s population.

Three centuries later, in 1878, Turkey leased the island to Great Britain, partly in exchange for a British pledge to support Turkey in its fight against Russian expansionism. The entry of British administration into Cyprus rekindled the dormant hope of the Greek Orthodox population of the island that they might eventually be able to unite with the newly-created country of Greece, much to the consternation of the Turkish population. Twice, in 1912 and 1915, the British actually offered the island to Greece, but the offer was rejected by Greece’s pro-German King Constantine. When Turkey joined World War I, also on the side of the Axis Powers, England annexed Cyprus. As the war drew to a close, Turkey invaded Asia Minor. The defeated Turks, under Kemal Ataturk, reorganized and defeated the Greek army. Greeks and Turks were now irreconcilable enemies. In 1922, following Greece’s defeat, a transfer of population was arranged between Greece and Turkey. Some 1.5 million ethnic Greeks who lived in Cyprus, or 500,000 Turks moved from Greece to Turkey. Following the disintegration of the British Empire after World War II, the Greek-Cyriots, with the help of Greece itself, set up an underground organization – EOKA – to fight for reunification with Greece. The organization terrorized the British and the Turkish-Cyriots.

The Turks fought back, and the issue ultimately came before the United Nations. In 1960, the UN decided to grant Cyprus independence. The agreement stipulated that Cyprus would not merge with Greece. But no sooner were the British gone than EOKA-sponsored terror came to life again. Four years after independence the situation was so bad that UN troops
Above: Margo Village today.

Right: Jewish house at Kouklia.

Far right and opposite page: Gravesones at the Jewish Cemetery of Margo.
had to be stationed on the Island. Cyprus was a time bomb about to explode.

In July 1974, Greece backed EOKA’s rebellion against the government of Cyprus. The Cypriot army, with the help of Greek officers, joined with the rebels. Cypriot president Bishop Makarios fled, and EOKA attacked Turkish-Cypriot population centers, murdering hundreds of villagers. Turkey responded by invading the island on July 20, 1974.

The island was now divided between Greeks and Turks. Some 150,000 Greek-Cypriot Christians fled to the southern part of the island and 30,000 Turkish-Cypriot Muslims fled to the northern Turkish sector. The Christians of Famagusta, who had previously received lands and incentives to develop the city into a new tourist center, laid siege to the Moslem population in the old city. The three-week siege ended abruptly with the Turkish army’s arrival in the city. The Christians fled and the modern urban quarters of Famagusta became large ghost town cordoned off by the Turkish army. Turkey set up the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the part of the island that it holds. The republic is recognized by no one else in the world. Despite the history of Christian persecution, the self-determination of the Turkish-Cypriot population is not something that the Western world is ready to discuss – the battle of Famagusta will never be forgiven.

We had dinner in the center of the old city of Famagusta opposite the mosque that used to be the Crusader cathedral. The last rays of the setting sun painted the sand and lime-stone bricks of the Crusader walls a flaming yellow. Even though the battle between the Turks and Greeks, Moslems and Christians was not yet over, we had come to Cyprus for a different reason: to look for the Jewish settlement of Margo. We had been preparing for our visit for quite some time. We drove through a military area, barracks, training areas, and positions. On the far side of the field were the UN troops, a little further on, the Greek-Cypriot defenses. In the middle drove our little three-vehicle convoy, in search of the Jewish remnants of Margo. Turning off the paved road, we followed the jeep up a small hill to a little clearing where a herd of sheep were being watered from a tanker. A walled enclosure stood at the top of the hill. I opened the recently repainted black iron gate, and walked into the enclosure – I had arrived at the Jewish cemetery of Margo.
It had been carefully refurbished in anticipation of our arrival. The ground had been raked and cleaned, the wall carefully rebuilt, the stones of the graves piled up neatly. The graves in the cemetery are in two groups. The older ones from the original JCA settlements are located near the entrance, and the newer ones from the twentieth century, are on the other side of the cemetery.

M any of the tombstones were broken, but the Hebrew inscriptions were still easy to read. “Here in Margo, Cyprus” said one of them. The tombs tell the story of the settlement, of the young children who didn’t survive the malar- ia epidemics, and of the young men who had come from the Land of Israel to assist people who had wanted to be farmers in Cyprus.

Margo itself seems to have vanished off the face of the earth. Dr. Ram Gofna actually supplied me with a map of the settlement which was drawn from memory a few years ago by one of the Margo kids. The river bed is still there, as are the black conical hills that everybody recalls. But nothing remains of Margo village, built by the Jewish community a century ago. Alongside the old Margo Farm site, we found a little church that the Jewish settlers referred to in their records. But that was it.

According to our research, near Margo stood two other small Jewish farm communities near two other villages. But the map and names that we had were in Greek, and the village names in the northern part of the island have been changed to Turkish. Our new Turkish army friends decided to help, military maps were checked and the names duly reported: they were now Comlekci and Kopulu – instead of the original Chumlchuk and Kouklia. We took off to continue our search.

The villages of Mesaoria are built of mud-bricks. Today, mud construction is fashionable among environmentalists in the developed world. In the Mesaoria plain, mud is the only option. We stopped for directions in one of the villages at the local coffee shop-cum-store. “Jews once lived here,” stated Turgot. “Do you remember where?”

“Of course I remember,” answered one of the old men.

“They had a farm on a hill not far from here – Chumlchuk,” he told us using the original name of the place.

We drove to the farm. It turned out to be a modern cattle ranch. The ranch hands gathered around. “No Jews here,” said the manager, “but this is a new place founded in the 1960s.” The veterinarian, on the other hand, saw the link. “The cows are Jewish,” he told us. “They are the offspring of cows that were originally brought from Israel.”

We drove to the last station – Kouklia. It is not sign-posted, but following the topography of the map that placed the village at the edge of a large marsh, we reached the village.

We drove along the mud houses looking for someone to ask for directions. “Jews?” asked a lady we finally spotted sitting on her porch. “Yes, a family called Popper used to live in the house on the hill near the road going south.”

We followed the instructions. On top of the hill, near the road, stood the house – white-washed mud-brick with blue shutters. A covered veranda surrounded the house on all sides. The road was flanked by a line of Washington palms – landscaping similar to many of the nineteenth-century Jewish settlements in Israel. The last Jewish family in Mesaoria, I fantasized, though clueless about who they really were. I would try to find out in the future.

It was afternoon, that special time of day when the light is extremely beautiful. The rays of the setting sun changed the color of the fields every few minutes. The bougainvil- leas around the house flamed in red and purple. From here you could see it all: the Troodos Range, the Beshparmek, and the Mesaoria Plain in the middle. “Noma Emek” or “Sleep O’Valley,” I hummed, remembering the words of an old pioneering song from the Jezreel Valley.

It was my last night on the island. I was having dinner with the Turkish-Cypriot Minister of Defense and Foreign Affairs, Tahsin Ertugruloglu, on top of a hotel overlooking the Mediterranean, a little west of beautiful Kyrenia harbor. “We want to preserve the cemetery” he told me, “something happened here in the past that should be remembered for future generations.” I thought of Ram Gofna in Tel Aviv who is racing to go, ready to assemble the descendants of this special settlement for a grand reunion at Margo.

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