

The Forgotten Jews of Cyprus

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 ERETZ 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.

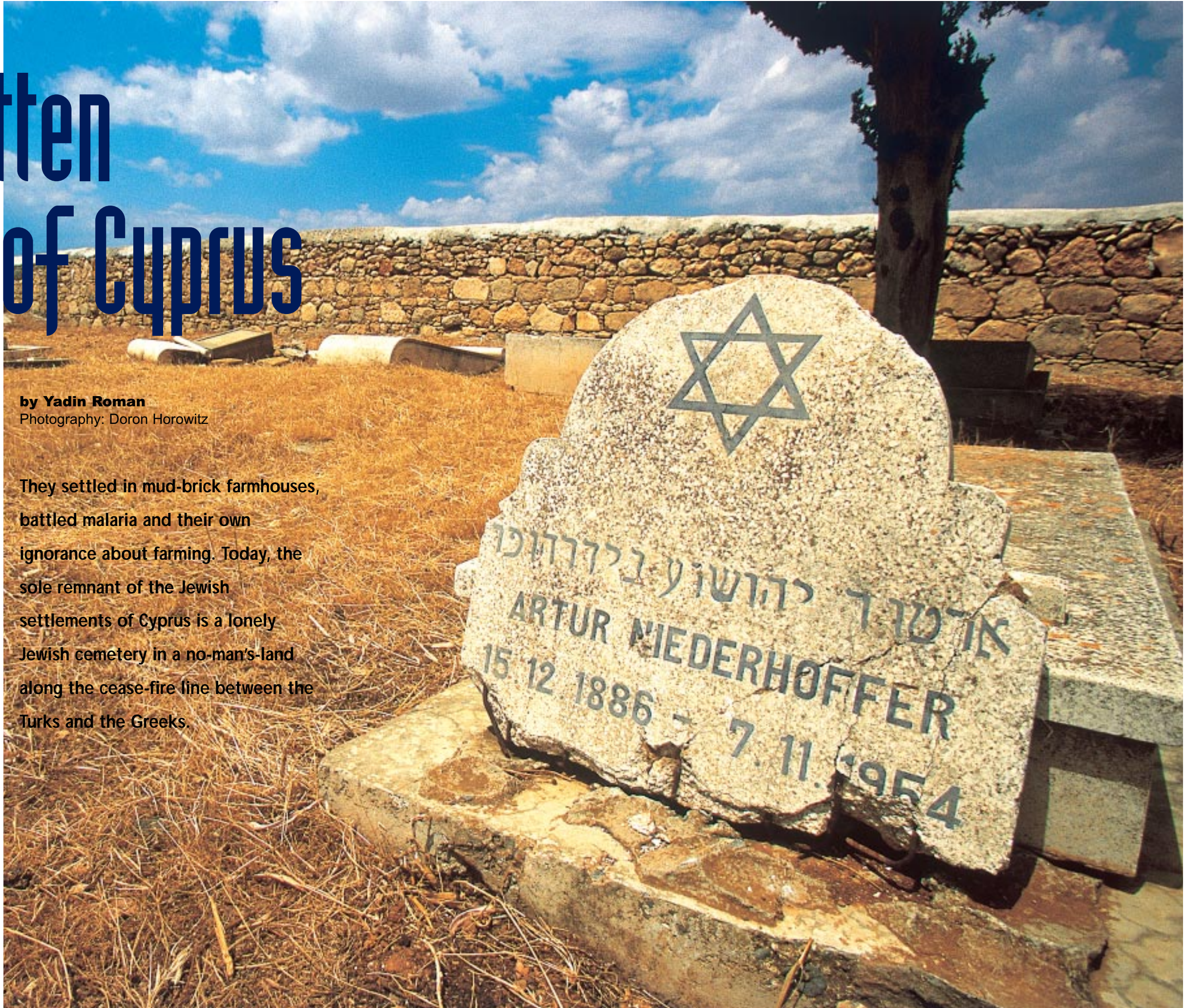
The plane was packed. An Israeli high-tech company was flying all of its workers, plus spouses, for a weekend in Antalya, Turkey. Doron and I were the only passengers aboard who did not feel the house party atmosphere. Forty-five minutes later we landed in Antalya.

I waited expectantly for an announcement of "for those continuing with us ..." but the loudspeaker was silent. The rev-

by Yadin Roman

Photography: Doron Horowitz

They settled in mud-brick farmhouses, battled malaria and their own ignorance about farming. Today, the sole remnant of the Jewish settlements of Cyprus is a lonely Jewish cemetery in a no-man's-land along the cease-fire line between the Turks and the Greeks.





Above: **Medieval castle of St. Hilarion in Turkish Cyprus.**
 Below: **Bellapa's Abbey, scenic village in Turkish Cyprus.**

elers deplaned and 15 Turks boarded with cleaning equipment, 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 tarmac 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 settlement had been funded by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), founded by the French Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch.



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 British-controlled Cyprus, only a day's trip by boat from the Turkish-ruled Land of Israel. Many of the members of the society had been farm managers in Russia. But they had more experience collecting rent than in actually working the land.

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, 15 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 center of Cyprus where Margo was located did not appeal to them. Cyprus was not Eastern Europe. The heat was unbearable, the mosquitoes 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. *Ahavat Zion* 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 was available, so there were graduates ready to accept the JCA's offer.

By 1902, the conditions on Margo seemed to have stabilized. 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 community numbered only 189 people, scattered in three locales: Margo, Chumlchuk (present-day Comlekci), and Koukليا (present-day Koprulu).

After 17 years of farming efforts on Cyprus, the JCA had come to the conclusion that a community of Jewish agricultural farms had little future on the island. In addition to malaria, 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 conclusion that they could improve their lives by emigrating to the Land of Israel where Jewish settlements already existed. Jewish culture was beginning to develop, and expansion and growth were happening. The JCA decided to dismantle the settlement in an orderly way – settling 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 Koukليا, 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 hung on in the small village of Koukليا, 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-



Wheat fields of Mesaoria.

tery at Margo from time to time, usually as part of a broader island tour. One of them was archaeologist Ram Gofna who visited the cemetery at the beginning of the 1970s. “The cemetery was on the main road from Nicosia to Limassol,” he told me during a meeting in his apartment in Tel Aviv. “There was a sign on the road in English: ‘Jewish Cemetery.’ I drove with the bus to a stone fence with a gate in it, entered, and immediately stood in front of my grandfather’s grave. It was very eerie.”

Gofna, however, was one of the last people to visit. In July 1974, after bitter fighting broke out between ethnic Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, the Turkish Army landed in Cyprus and the island was divided in two. The Margo cemetery was right on the front line – in a Turkish military enclave. Since the division of the island, the Jewish settlements and the cemetery have been out of bounds to visitors, Gofna told me.

My personal curiosity about this strange Jewish settlement effort on Cyprus was piqued even more by the challenge of reaching the former settlement area. So, I set up a meeting with the Turkish ambassador in Israel who politely listened to my request to visit the cemetery. “Everything will be taken care of,” he answered. And so it was.

We spent the first night on the island at the Palm Beach Hotel and Casino in Famagusta. The long, curvy, sandy bay was

the only remnant of the Famagusta tourism boom that remained from the 1950s and ‘60s. Along the bay stretched a long line of hotels, all empty like a ghost town – closed off by the Turkish army since 1974.

Famagusta came into its own in May 1291 after the fall of Acre, the capital of the Second Crusader kingdom. As the Mameluke soldier-slaves of the Sultan of Egypt, El Malik el-Ashraf Khalil, pillaged Acre following the collapse of its defenses, the population fled to the sea. Counts and knights, merchants and artisans piled into anything that would float away from the burning city. Famagusta, just a few sailing-hours away, embraced them all.

At the time, Cyprus was ruled by Henry II, a direct descendant of Guy de Lusignan, the last Crusader king of Jerusalem.

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 home to Crusader nobility – 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 east and west. That same wealth was now poured into Famagusta. The harbor was enlarged, city walls and gates were constructed, markets, warehouses, houses, palaces, and churches built. Following a church edict that forbade European commerce with Moslems, European goods streamed to Famagusta – to be relabeled 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 international city. Its streets were filled with the bustle of people from all over the Mediterranean world, and the wealth of its merchants was famous. City life was

full of pleasures, prompting moral admonition from clergy around the Christian world. The city’s “women 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 eased their consciences by building churches. The most famous edifice was the still intact Cathedral of Saint Nicholas. Contemporary reports mention 365 churches in Famagusta – one for every day of the year.

But the wealth of Cyprus did not endure. The battles between Genoa and Venice over control of the Mediterranean Sea trade put an end to Famagusta’s unique position. The Lusignan kings did not have the skill to balance the rivalry between the two Mediterranean sea powers – prompting a

until the island fell under Venetian rule in 1489.

Famagusta in the late fifteenth century was a mere shadow of her former glory. The Venetians exploited the city primarily as a military outpost against the rising Ottoman Empire, fortifying it with a massive cannon-resistant wall 3.5 kilometers long, a massive fortress on the seaward side, and a deep, dry moat. For 80 years the Venetian army in Famagusta prepared and waited for the Turks. In 1570, the day finally arrived. Cyprus fell immediately to the invaders.

Famagusta was the only Christian fort to hold out. The seemingly obscure siege of Famagusta is actually world-famous. It is the background for William Shakespeare’s “Othello.” Shakespeare never left England, but his realistic portrayals of the siege were based on reports from the battle in which, it is claimed, he discovered the story of the Moorish commander of the Venetian forces and his lovely Venetian wife.

On September 17, 1570, the Ottoman army appeared outside Famagusta’s walls. The defenders were confident in their ability to hold off the siege. Ninety massive cannons were mounted on the walls, 4,000 Italian regular soldiers defended the gates, complemented by 300 cavalry men, and 4,000 Greek and Albanian mercenaries.

Facing the Venetians was Mustafa Pasha, a veteran Turkish general with the most disciplined troops in the world. His initial 50,000-

man invasion force was reportedly joined by another 200,000 soldiers (although due to chronic European losses to the Ottomans, Western sources tend to exaggerate the number of Turkish soldiers).

The Turks dug in around the city, and 40,000 Turkish sappers started to tunnel towards its walls. The defenders laid booby traps, mines, sortied behind enemy lines, manned the defenses and waited patiently for reinforcements. And indeed, for months Turkish attempts to breach the walls were thwarted. Finally, after 10 months of siege, the Venetians surrendered. Only 500 of the 8,000 defenders were still alive. On August 1, 1571, the Turkish flag was raised over Famagusta. The city’s cathedral was turned into a mosque – named after Mustafa Pasha. The city became a backwater.

But 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 Cyprus 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 in return for a military base on the Greek island of Kephallonia and support in World War

I. 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, Greece invaded Asia Minor. The defeated Turks, under Kemal Attaturk, 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 left Turkey for Greece or Cyprus, and 500,000 Turks moved from Greece to Turkey.

Following the disintegration of the British Empire after World War II, the Greek-Cypriots, with the help of Greece itself, set up an underground organization – EOKA – to fight for unification with Greece. The organization terrorized the British and the Turkish-Cypriots.

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



Tahsin Ertugruloglu, Turkish-Cypriot Minister of Defense.



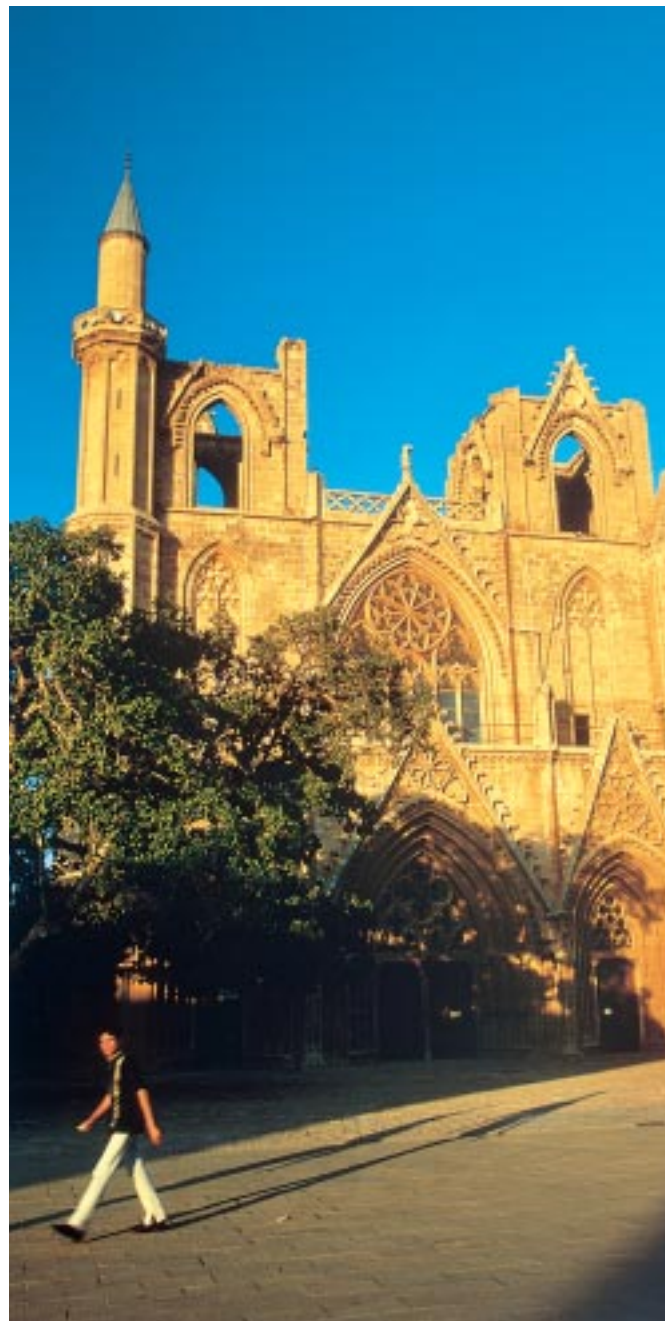
On the Greek-Turkish divide in Nicosia.



Above: **Margo Village today.**

Right: **Jewish house at Kouklia.**

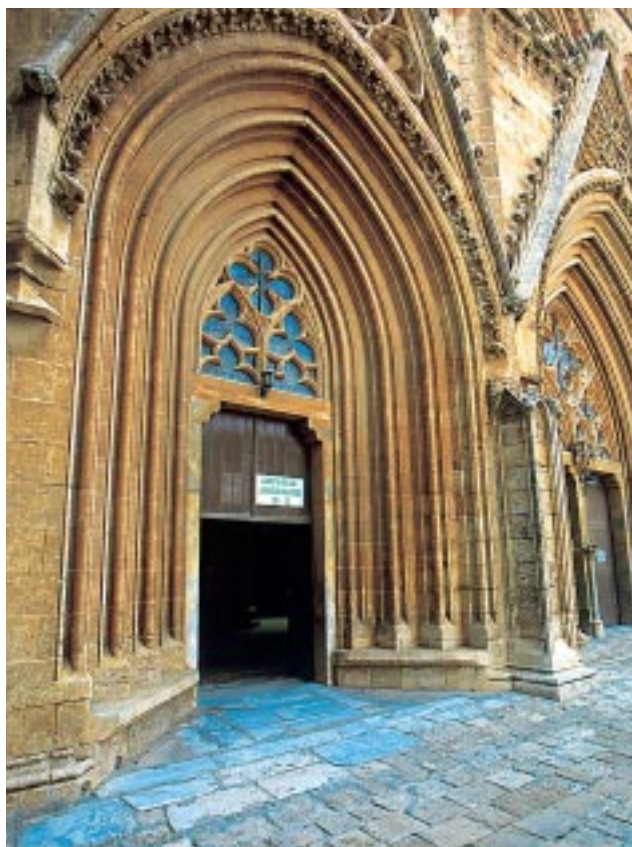
Far right and opposite page: **Gravestones at the Jewish Cemetery of Margo.**



Top right: **Famagusta Bay with the ghost town of Famagusta.**

Above and center (right): **St. Nicholas Cathedral in Famagusta.**

Below (right): **Medieval Fortress of Kyrenia.**



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 largely a 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 limestone 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 Cyprus, a settlement that fortunately had been dissolved before all of the political turmoil. The settlement today is on the border of ethnic Turkish and Greek-populated areas, one of the major battle fronts of the 1974 invasion.

A "what if" thought crossed my mind for a fleeting second. What if the Jews had remained? But such questions are not supposed to be part of the historical narrative, so I finished my Turkish pizza and went to bed.

The next morning we set out for Margo. A very excited Turgot picked us up at the hotel and drove us back in the direction of Nicosia (Lefkoshia to Turkish-Cypriots), towards the border between the two parts of the island. It was nearly

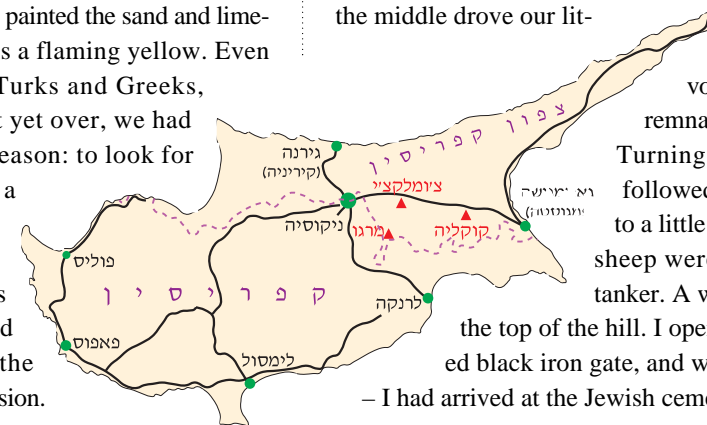


A mud-brick village in Mesaoria Plain.

Shavuot and the wheat in the Mesaoria Plain was in full yellow. The geography of Cyprus is very simple. Along the south of the island runs the nearly 2,000 meter-high Troodos Mountains, along the northern part of the island the Beshparmek Range rises to nearly 1,000 meters above the Mediterranean Sea. In between the two ranges is the Mesaoria Plain. The Beshparmek Range and half of the Mesaoria Plain is in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus – the Troodos and the other half of Mesaoria is in Greek Cyprus. Margo is on the plain, in the middle, between Greeks and Turks.

We picked up our discrete military escort, a single vehicle, near the airport. A few minutes later we ran into Turkish troops. They were clearing the fields of hay as fire prevention before the heat of summer.

A couple of Turkish officers appeared in a jeep. They 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 lit-



tle 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.

Many 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 malaria 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 Koprulu – 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

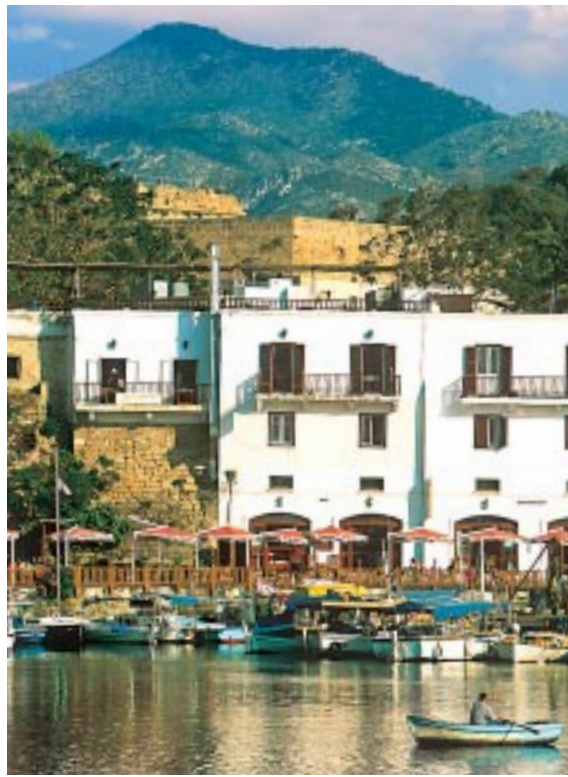
house on the hill near the road going south.”

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 bougainvilleas around the house flamed in red and purple. From here you could see it all: the Troodos Range, the Beshpamek, 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 Ertugruloğlu, 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 raring to go, ready to assemble the descendants of this special settlement for a grand reunion at Margo.



Kyrenia Harbor.