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British Cyprus of the Mid-20th Century through the Eyes of a Turkish Girl: The Memories of Özden Selenge

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to present the main elements of the world in which the future writer Özden Selenge grew up and to find and explore the value of childhood memories. Selenge (born 1946) is a Turkish-Cypriot writer and fine artist. Her recollections, entitled *Sahiden* [*Really*], cover her childhood and high school years, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The author's early childhood was spent during a period of peaceful coexistence between Greeks and Turks in Cyprus. It is only halfway through the book that the first mention of misunderstandings between Greeks and Turks appears, concerning the second half of the 1950s. In Selenge's memoirs, there are numerous descriptions of daily hardship, small and great joys, and details about living and learning conditions, clothing, food, activities, and games. Greek neighbors also appear, always warmly remembered. Among other nationalities, Armenian traders and wandering gypsies are mentioned. Selenge's memoirs, often colored by witty humor and self-irony, are not only an engaging read, but also help reconstruct perceptions of "Britishness" in Cyprus, although the author avoids direct references. It can certainly be said that childhood memories can provide a valuable addition to historical knowledge.

KEYWORDS: British Cyprus, Özden Selenge, Turkish-Cypriot memory literature, childhood memories

STRESZCZENIE

Brytyjski Cypr połowy XX wieku oczami tureckiej dziewczynki. Autobiografia Özden Selenge

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie głównych elementów świata, w którym dorastała przyszła pisarka, oraz znalezienie odpowiedzi na pytanie o wartość wspomnień z dzieciństwa. Özden Selenge (ur. 1946) jest turecko-cypryjską

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pisarką i malarką. Jej wspomnienia zatytułowane *Sahiden* [Naprawdę] obejmują dzieciństwo i lata licealne autorki, okres od końca lat 40. do początku lat 60. Wczesne dzieciństwo autorki upłynęło w okresie pokojowej koegzystencji Greków i Turków na Cyprze. Dopiero w połowie książki pojawia się pierwsza wzmianka o nieporozumieniach między Grekami i Turkami, dotyczy ona drugiej połowy lat 50. We wspomnieniach Selenge znajduje się wiele opisów codziennych trudności, małych i wielkich radości, ze szczegółami opisującymi warunki życia i nauki, ubrania, jedzenie, zajęcia i zabawy. Pojawiają się też greccy sąsiedzi, zawsze ciepło wspominani. Spośród innych narodowości wspomniani są ormiańscy handlarze i wędrowni Cyganie. Wspomnienia Selenge, często zabarwione dowcipnym humorem i autoironią, są nie tylko przyjemną lekturą, ale mogą również posłużyć nam do wyciągnięcia wniosków na temat „brytyjskości" na Cyprze, chociaż autorka unika bezpośrednich odniesień. Z całą pewnością można powiedzieć, że wspomnienia z dzieciństwa mogą być cennym uzupełnieniem wiedzy historycznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: brytyjski Cypr, Özden Selenge, tureckocypryjska literatura wspomnieniowa, wspomnienia z dzieciństwa

Introduction: Özden Selenge and Turkish Cypriot memoir writing

"I love what I left behind. I miss it all – whether it was good or bad..." (Selenge, 2007, p. 5) – these are the words of Turkish Cypriot painter and writer Özden Selenge[1] in the opening lines of her memoirs entitled *Sahiden* [*Really*]. And already this beginning puts the reader in a cheerful mood, announcing that the text will be mildly worded, pleasant to read, and optimistic. This initial impression does not change as one goes deeper into the reading. Until the last pages, the author weaves a cheerful, often self-deprecating tale, and the joyful atmosphere of the book lends itself to the reader.

Is this idyllic atmosphere due to the fact that the book deals with childhood and early adolescence, a period of life that we usually remember warmly? Or perhaps the author did not want her book to be dominated by sad and bloody images? Both factors seem to have played a key role in the construction of the text. The period described by Selenge ends with 1964, and the bloody events of December 1963[2] are mentioned in some passages. We find short sections

1 Özden Selenge (b. 1946) – graduated from the Turkish Girls' High School in Nicosia and studied pedagogy in Ankara, majoring in 'art education'. In 1969 she returned to Cyprus and for many years worked as a teacher of fine arts. She has exhibited her works in Turkish and Cypriot galleries. She has published four novels, four volumes of short stories, nine plays and a volume of memoirs.

2 This is about the so-called Bloody Christmas (Tur. Kanlı Noel) and refers to the massacre of the Turkish Cypriot civilians, that began on the night of 20–21 December 1963.

describing the rise of Greek nationalism since the mid-1950s and attempts to spread anti-Turkish sentiment in the Cypriot province, which had been peaceful until then. Some descriptions are truly moving. However, the author tells her story without going into political detail. It is clear that, in spinning the tale of her life, Selenge was careful not to make the text sad or painful for anyone – and especially unpleasant for the co-hosts of her homeland, her Greek neighbors, who were an important part of her childhood.

What was the development of memoir literature among Turkish Cypriots, and what place does Özden Selenge's book occupy against the background of this kind of writing? Autobiography and other forms of personal documents appeared very late in Turkish Cypriot literature. Moreover, we can observe a significant lag in the development of autobiography compared with world literature, also in Ottoman Turkey, where interest in this type of writing emerged only during the period of pro-European modernization reforms. It is known as the "Tanzimat period," the "Great Reform period" (second half of the 19th century). It was then that the Ottomans assimilated and fell in love with the novel, the novella, and the stage play. We are talking here about theater in the classical sense, as various forms of folk theater have been known to the Turks and other Turkic peoples for centuries.

As far as the Turkish Cypriots were concerned, their bond with the Anatolian motherland was severely weakened during this period. The Ottoman state (known in the West at the time as the *sick man of Europe*) faced many serious political and military problems, lost one battle after another, and lost territories in Europe, Africa, and Asia. The imperial ambitions of the West began to push Turkey toward decline. In such a situation, one could hardly expect the state to care about maintaining close contacts – especially cultural ones – with a small island province, moreover inhabited by a large majority of non-Turkish and non-Muslim population. In 1878, after another lost war, Turkey had to relinquish its rights to the territory. Cyprus then passed under British rule.

As one can easily guess, cultural contacts between Turkish people living in Cyprus and the Ottoman state became even more limited. Although various elements of British – or, more broadly, Western European – culture began to appear on the island, for economic reasons only a very small number of the wealthiest Cypriot Muslims had access to it. This also applied to the availability of European literature. This was probably the reason for the late appearance of autobiography in Turkish Cypriot literature. Works of a memoiristic nature appeared in Cyprus even later than in Turkey, only at the beginning of the 20th century, and only in the very modest number of two books,[3] while a real

3 The first published works of a memoir nature were: *Kıbrıs Osmanlılarına Mahsus Son Hediye-i Acizanem* [My modest last gift to the Cypriot Ottomans] (1909, new edition in 2000) by the physician, community activist and poet Hafız Cemal Lokman Hekim, and *Kamil Paşa'nın Hatırat-ı*

flowering of memoir literature can be observed among the Turkish inhabitants of the island only after the Greek coup d'état (1974), which resulted in the Turkish intervention and the consequent partition of the island. The intervention was carried out to stop the attacks and massacres perpetrated against Turks and to bring peace to the island. It was then that Turkish Cypriots were given unfettered access to national education, the Turkish press, printing, and – in general – to Turkish cultural achievements in various fields.

As counted by Cypriot researcher İsmail Bozkurt, the next autobiographical work written by a Turkish Cypriot author was published 68 years after these first two books (Bozkurt, 2019). It was the recollection of Murat Hüsnü Özad, a Turkish soldier from the period of ethnic struggle (1950s–1970s). To date, around 250 memoirs have been published by Turkish Cypriots. It should be noted here that at least half of them are written by politicians, officials, or participants in wars and riots. Only a few recollections focus on cultural, literary, or professional life. As we know, the content of memoirs is unlimited, and the authors are free to choose topics from their lives. Therefore, there are monothematic autobiographies and also multi-topic ones. Among the topics covered, politics and war definitely dominate in Turkish Cypriot autobiographical works (Yıldız, 2019, p. 526). The rapid growth of memoir writing among Turkish Cypriots dates back to the 1990s. Since then, an average of five to six new memoirs has been published every year. These include recollections of World War II (in which Turkish Cypriots served as subjects of the British Crown) and memoirs of politicians and officials, but there are also books written by writers, artists, journalists, or authors who could be described as "ordinary bread eaters."

The memoirs of Özden Selenge occupy a special place among Turkish Cypriot memoirs. The features that distinguish this work from others can be characterized as follows: It is one of the few autobiographies written by a woman; the book covers in full the years from earliest childhood to high school graduation – and thus the most innocent years of human life; the language of the work is light and often humorous; and the author does not try to be a serious mentor lecturing her readers on the past times she describes but, on the contrary, weaves a large dose of self-irony into her narrative. Lastly, one final feature clearly noticeable when comparing these memoirs with others is that the author dispenses with political themes, and the tragic events that affected the Turkish Cypriot population in the second half of the 1950s and at the turn of 1963–1964 are barely mentioned. Moreover, the recollection of these dramatic events is free of political commentary. It seems that the gentle tone used by the author is due in part to her character and personality, in part

Siyasisi [Kamil Pasha's Political Memories] (1911, new ed. in 1999) by Mehmet Kâmil Pasha, who served the Ottoman state for long years as military officer and statesman (Bozkurt, 2019).

to her conscious avoidance of political topics, but also to the fact that she is a woman. A casual, often humorous narrative dominates throughout the entire book.

Şevket Öznur, writing about Selenge's works, points out their epic and poetic style, creativity, and honest, simple yet aesthetic language enriched with local expressions (Öznur, 2018). On the other hand, Mustafa Yeniasır, Burak Gökbulut, and Anıl Bilgiç, in an article devoted to the role of women in cultural transmission in light of some of Selenge's works, draw attention to the richness of traditional and cultural elements found in her novels. These include, for example, cuisine, handicrafts, clothing and accessories, toys, children's games, architecture, folk traditions and customs, favorite books read at home, expressions and sayings, folk medicine, and traditional names of plants (Yeniasır, Gökbulut, & Bilgiç, 2021, p. 267). Reading Selenge's autobiography shows that the same elements can also be found there.

Remembered from childhood

Özden Selenge narrates her memories around several main themes closely related to the home, the school, the people from the neighborhood, and nature as observed by a child. Let us take a look at the main ones.

Place of residence and schools

The author lists the localities where she lived, devoting considerable space to descriptions of the buildings, their surroundings, and the garden. Living conditions were modest, but in Özden's memory, her childhood is recorded as happy and carefree. She was born in the village of Aynakofo[4] on the Famagusta district and spent the first few years of her life there. It was a village inhabited entirely by Turks:

> My earliest memories are of when I was about three years old. At the entrance to the village of Aynakofo and in every valley there were gardens with almond trees, pomegranates, plum trees, apricot trees and vines. Above the village rose Mount Ipsaro and it was the only thing I was afraid of as a child. At the time, it seemed extremely high and frightening to me. I believed that on this mountain lived the giants, which I knew from the fairy tales my mother used to tell me.
>
> For some reason, the village of Aynakofo seemed to me not green but yellow. A long, rocky road ran through the village. The yard of our house was also lined with stones. The house stood in the middle of the village. It was surrounded by

4 Agios Iakovos in Greek and currently Altınova in the borders of Northern Cyprus.

> a high wall and had two rooms. In the farthest corner of the yard was a latrine, and on the opposite side stood a bread oven, next to it a pile of wood, branches, and brushwood (Selenge, 2007, pp. 10–11).

In 1950, the father was transferred to a school in the village of Vasilya[5] in the Kyrenia district. The move was made by cruise bus, which may indirectly reflect the modest possessions of the family of five (Özden had two older siblings at the time). The house surprised newcomers with its size and appearance. To the children, it seemed like a palace from a fairy tale. It was a historic, two-story building from the Venetian era, with covered terraces and a magnificent view of the countryside, located in the higher part of the village. The upstairs flat was accessed by a staircase outside, while the ground floor housed a kitchen, a classroom, and a large prayer hall that served as a mosque. There was a bread oven in the courtyard and a latrine in the furthest corner. It, too, looked much better than the one little Özden knew from her previous home: the toilet in Vasilya was roofed with an oriental dome and consisted of two rooms.

Vasilya was a village inhabited by both Cypriot communities. There were slightly more Greeks than Turks, and they were a bit wealthier – or at least that was Özden's impression. For the first few months, the father faced a challenging task: he tried to discipline the parents of his pupils to send their children to school and not burden them with hard work in the fields. The implementation of compulsory schooling among Turkish families in this village was much weaker than in Aynakofo. Perhaps this is why Özden's father was transferred to this school, as he had a reputation as a teacher who could bring order. The low percentage of families sending their children to primary school – which is, after all, compulsory in countries under the British Crown – must have been a fundamental problem for the Cypriot education authorities:

> In those days, the Cypriot villager (and perhaps the city-dweller too) rebelled against any novelty, against anything to which he was not accustomed and was driven by prejudice. My father spoke to each inhabitant in turn, wherever he met him – on the road, in front of the house, in the pasture, in the café, everywhere – he stood in front of him and spoke to him the way you speak to a child when you want to teach him something. He explained and explained... This went on for several months, or maybe even a year. At first the villagers did not want to comply, there were arguments between them and the father. In the end, they somehow came to an agreement. The rules that the father demanded to be obeyed were, after all, for their benefit.
>
> Education was compulsory: every child enrolled in the school had to attend. But the villagers were poor people. They left the older children at home to look after the younger ones and went to work – in the fields, in the gardens. Most

5 Vasileia in Greek and currently Karşıyaka in the borders of Northern Cyprus.

> families had no property, no field or garden. They went to Lapta,[6] where they worked for a rich farmer, Halil Efendi (Selenge, 2007, pp. 31–32).

Some families had little property in the form of a piece of land, but in these families, the children also neglected their compulsory schooling because they had to help with the work. Such families had two or three goats or sheep each, and it was the children's duty to graze them in the mountain meadows above the village. On occasion, the children collected plants suitable for food and carried armfuls of grasses on their return from the pastures. The people of Vasilya used to harvest these grasses and cook them for seven to eight months of the year. The writer gives the names of some field plants remembered from her childhood, which were used in the Vasilya region as a supplement to meals. These included cornflowers, thistles, mallows, amaranth, wild artichoke, wild spinach, mustard, chamomile, swollen stickleweed, Judas flowers, and others. Mushrooms growing in the grasses were also a popular addition to dishes.

The teacher's work with parents and children in this poor community was hard, but it had an effect. After a year, school attendance had improved significantly, and most parents understood that sending their child to school was a good investment in the future, because an education – even a basic one – would give them the chance to find work outside agriculture, break out of rural poverty, and advance in society. Thanks to the attitude of the teacher, who persistently admonished both parents and pupils, even adults began to pay attention to inappropriate behavior.

> Let's go back to the rules applied by my father. If, on his days off or after school, he saw a child wandering around somewhere unoccupied or spending time playing, he immediately told him to go home, saying:
>
> "Instead of throwing stones at the dogs, you would go home to do your homework, read a book"
>
> With time, this became the rule and even the villagers adopted this attitude. When sitting in a village café they saw kids bored in the street, they would call out:
>
> "What do you have to do here? Get me home quickly! Read books!" (Selenge, 2007, p. 32).

The Turkish school in Vasilya was housed in one large hall. It taught six classes at a time (it was a six-year primary school) and had only one teacher. Özden lists the subjects that were on the curriculum: arithmetic with geometry, reading, writing, visual arts, music, nature, religion, history, and geography. As can be seen, there were no English lessons in state schools for Turkish children in British Cyprus. However, one can assume that even if such a subject had been

6 Lapta (gr. Lapithos) – a small town, 8–9 km from Vasilya.

on the curriculum, there would have been no one to teach it in the Cypriot provinces. From further parts of Selenge's memoirs, we learn that English lessons were part of the Turkish primary education curriculum, but not in rural schools (Selenge, 2007, p. 157).

During her years in Vasilya, the author's older sister passed the entrance exam for the Victoria Girls' School in Nicosia and left home to live in a dormitory. This famous school, which was the best school for Turkish girls in British Cyprus, is mentioned in the book (Selenge, 2007, pp. 85–86). On this occasion, the author sheds light on the problem of post-primary education in the Cypriot province under British rule: she writes that in the same year, three boys from the village also began their education at the secondary school in Nicosia and points out that, by this time, not a single child from Vasilya had continued their education beyond primary school, so it was a source of pride for the whole village. It was also a great success for Özden's father, who prepared the boys for the entrance exam.

The third village described in the book is the large village of Kaymaklı,[7] located close to the capital of Cyprus and today a district of the city. It was a village inhabited equally by Greeks and Turks. The Turkish primary school was located opposite the Greek police station. It was a large school with a dozen classrooms and a dozen teachers. Thus, it was quite different from the previous school, where the author's father taught six classes and all subjects. There was also a Turkish secondary school in this village. This highlights the huge differences in access to education between villages during this period. Özden quickly fell in love with the school and was very fond of its teachers. One of them was a well-known female poet of the era, Urkiye Mine Balman. Yet there was something in this school that astonished the girl: the pupils were divided into rich and poor:

> During breaks, the children sat in the shade of trees and ate what they had brought from home, forming separate groups – the poor and the rich. I was asked: 'Which group will you eat with?' Although I was very cheeky, I opened my mouth and couldn't say anything. What did that mean, poor and rich? I was not taught to divide people in this way. There was no such thing in the village I came from. There were poor and rich people, but no one divided people in this way at school, in cafés, at weddings, births or funerals. ... My favorite friends were in both groups. This situation was difficult for me. In the end, I decided that I would have lunch with one group on one day and with the other group on the next day. And I always condemned them for such segregation (Selenge, 2007, pp. 123–124).

7 Omorfito in Greek.

Non-Turkish inhabitants of Cyprus

Representatives of other nationalities appear in Özden Selenge's memoirs, but this is a marginal subject. One gets the impression that, for the little girl, the existence of people speaking other languages was so natural that it did not provoke any reflection in her. One of the girl's earliest memories involves visits from a hairdresser: "In the old days there were itinerant hairdressers. The one who used to come to Aynakofo was Greek. Since my mother spoke Greek very well, she could easily get along with her" (Selenge, 2007, p. 11). Upon hearing of the hairdresser's arrival, the women from all over the village gathered at the teacher's house, and a crude, scorching perm was performed collectively for several hours. Özden, who was three years old, found the sight very intriguing, but she sometimes shouted at the hairdresser when her mother hissed in pain and smoke rose from her hair.

> "What are you doing!" I shouted at her angrily. My mother, supposing that my resentment would not end there and, moreover, that I would start reciting one by one all the curses I had recently learned from the village children, laughed and said,
>
> "Come here, my baby, I'll explain it to you in a moment. Look, I'm going to have such lovely curls..." ...but I, tugging the Greek hairdresser by the skirt, began to beg her:
>
> "Leave my mother alone! Pour water on her hair! Oh, *manammu*! Don't do that!" (Selenge, 2007, p. 11).

Another representative of the Greek community was Çangar, an old, poor man engaged in itinerant trade. His miserable appearance aroused pity in the little girl, so much so that she felt the need to make him happy somehow. At the time, she had a real doll, brought from Turkey by her father, which she would not let any child touch. It seemed to her that she would make the poor man happy at least for a while:

> I would only let one person touch my blue-eyed doll, Uncle Çangar. Uncle Çangar, if I remember correctly, was an old Greek man. He used to wander with his donkey from village to village, trading something, or rather exchanging goods for goods. No money was used in those days, only goods were exchanged.
>
> I don't know if it was because we were the family of a village teacher, but in any case, it happened that he brought us plums, almonds, or nuts. Uncle Çangar's one eye was blue and the other was brown and he didn't have a single tooth. I think I felt sorry for him with my naive, childish heart, so I held out my beautiful doll towards him. And he, in a voice similar to something between laughing and crying, said, stroking my head:
>
> "No, *vre çoçuçuk*, you play!"
>
> After which he would turn to my mother:

> "Well, *hanimissa, simarlâdik*!," and getting on his donkey, he would ride away (Selenge, 2007, p. 16).

At this point in the memoirs, there is also a mention of wandering Romani people, called Mandi, which in Turkish Cypriot dialect means "a man of shabby clothes or a person engaged in the occupation of tinning pots" (Hakeri, 2003, p. 201). The mention of them is also linked to a doll, the three-year-old Özden's greatest treasure:

> Village children would come and look at my doll. Some wanted to touch it, but I didn't let them. And yet I was not one of those children who do not want to share anything with others. On the contrary, my mother kept complaining that I was able to give the begging Mandi everything, whatever was in the house. The Mandi were Gypsies of the Christian religion. They went from village to village, from house to house, collecting copper pots to tin them, sometimes bringing them back and sometimes not. They did this work for food or money, but they also lived by begging. One time they asked my mother for flour, bulgur, and oil. They got it and left. But then turned back and still wanted eggs. Mum told them she didn't have any. I quickly ran to the kitchen and brought them the eggs that Mum had kept in the basket. She scolded me well. It turned out that they were fertilised eggs, that my mother had put away to lay under the hen and have chicks. Eh, those were my most innocent, purest years... As all children's were... (Selenge, 2007, pp. 15–16).

After moving to Vasilya, four-year-old Özden found herself in a bilingual environment where Greek and Turkish families lived side by side. In this part of her memoirs, the author uses words related to ethnic tensions for the first time, but she writes this from the perspective of many years, having already had sad experiences:

> More than half of the villagers were Greek. The village barber, the cobbler, the shopkeeper, the driver – they were all Greek. Haciligo, Çidi (he was a carpenter), Yabuna, Sofokli... I had a friend named Marullâ. She taught me Greek, and I taught her Turkish. When I would go to play with her at her house, my mother would sternly admonish me not to eat pork there.
>
> At that time, when we moved to Vasilya in the early 1950s, there were still no tensions between the two nations. The residents experienced many events together. Weddings, deaths, births... Everyone visited everyone: when they had holidays or other festive occasions, they used to send us their *börek*, *çörek* or *pilâvuna*.
>
> They were a bit wealthier than the Turks. Their houses were a bit bigger, a bit nicer. I don't know what they ate and drank, but what they put on was more decent (Selenge, 2007, pp. 36–37).

The presence of Greeks in the immediate vicinity was natural for the author as a child that she treated them in the same way as she treated her compatriots. In the Muslim world, it is customary that on the day of Ramadan, children visit the neighborhood houses. They kiss the hands of the adults and receive small coins from them. Cypriot Greeks were familiar with this custom. One day Özden went to visit her neighbor, the Greek woman Mariya. She kissed Mariya's hand, and the latter gave her a few pennies, which is how Muslims would behave.

What was the knowledge of foreign languages among the inhabitants of Cyprus? It is a well-known fact that the Turkish population mostly understood Greek well; in a way, the Turks were compelled to know Greek. This was due to the fact that the Greeks outnumbered the Turks and most of the crafts and shops were in their hands, so one had to be able to get along in Greek. Selenge's memoirs confirm this: her parents spoke Greek very well and even used it at home when they wanted to talk about something that was not meant for the ears of children. When a sensitive topic came up in their conversation, they would switch to Greek. This continued until the children began to understand the language. The author's father, as a graduate of a Turkish teachers' college, also knew other languages. Apart from Greek, the author mentions Arabic, Persian, and English (Selenge, 2007, p. 92).

About halfway through the book, on page 113, there is first mention of misunderstandings between Greeks and Turks. Although the author hardly ever provides dates in her memoirs, her biography allows us to infer that it was 1955, the year of the move to Kaymaklı:

> It was the last year of our stay in Vasilya. The Greek villagers began to behave quite differently than they had before. Before, Greeks and Turks celebrated weddings and births together, attended funerals together, and shared their joys and worries. When someone got married, a hen was brought to their home, or, if someone was wealthier, a sheep or a goat. In this way, people supported the family holding the wedding. ... Greek and Turkish women visited each other on the occasion of the *lohusa*,[8] bringing sweets (Selenge, 2007, p. 113).

After this description of the once beautiful, shared life of the two communities, the author presents the growing problem of misunderstanding between Greeks and Turks. She writes that the main reason for the deterioration of relations on the island were the nationalistic activities of the Greek Church. Monks began to descend from monasteries located high in the mountains and went down to the villages in order to spread among Greek villagers the idea of annexing the island to Greece (Selenge, 2007, p. 114).

8 *Lohusa* – custom of celebrating the 40th day of a baby's birth.

These first mentions of the feud between Turks and Greeks take up two pages, so it is clear that the author's intention was not to describe the problem in detail. Elsewhere in the memoirs (Selenge, 2007, pp. 127–129) she writes a few more sentences about the riots and recalls that there were losses on both sides, as well as provocations:

> Greek police caught a group of young people in Kaymaklı who, using matches and bottles of petrol, tried to set fire to the house of a Greek man. They managed to escape.
>
> And then, every day after that, the painful news kept coming. Somewhere, several young Turks were killed while constructing grenades. On both sides, Greeks and Turks, people were injured, people died. Cyprus turned sad. Cyprus was on fire. Mourning reigned in all homes. Fathers were dying, mothers and children were dying. ... Funerals were held frequently. We, the children, after each funeral became quieter. The mournful faces of the adults and their tearful eyes also affected us. We stopped playing in the yard (Selenge, 2007, p. 128).

On pages 206–208, the author describes the harrowing experiences of the Turkish Cypriots during the ethnic cleansing that went down in history as Bloody Christmas. As these events took place after the proclamation of the Republic of Cyprus, they fall outside the scope of this study.

British authority

In Özden Selenge's memoirs there is seldom any reference to the state in power in Cyprus, i.e. the United Kingdom. It seems that the girl was completely uninterested in the political complexities and the question of nationality. The British appear sporadically in her memoirs, not as the main subject of the story, but only in connection with other themes. When the author first alludes to authority, the words "English" or "British" do not even appear, and readers can only infer whom she means. For example, she writes about the autumn period, when the classroom was getting cold and needed warming. The duty of warming the classroom fell to the oldest schoolboys. They would arrive earlier than the other children, light a few pieces of wood in an old tin, and once it had turned into embers, they would bring it to the classroom. This single tin of glowing wood had to heat the school until the end of lessons. On such hard, cold days, the schoolchildren received support from the authorities in the form of powdered milk in large metal cans. While the older pupils were busy lighting wood, the author's parents would cook the milk for all the children attending the school. The author refers to these cans as "aid sent to the schools" (Selenge, 2007, p. 40).

The British authorities are mentioned by name for the first time only on page 51. In the section devoted to one of Cyprus' biggest problems – the lack of water – the author describes the arduous transportation of water from the only well in the village and the quarrels among the villagers over access to water for irrigating fields. In this chapter, this sentence appears: "Finally, the British authorities solved our water problem by installing hydrants in many places in the village" (Selenge, 2007, p. 51). The British authorities are mentioned again on page 136, when the author writes about the police:

> At that time, the English recruited many Turks into the police force. In the folk language, they were called 'oksilari.'[9] Their summer uniforms seemed very comical to us. Their trousers were knee-length. They rode their bikes to work. ... Almost everyone had long purple, blue or green johns showing from under their trousers. My brother and I knew the times they passed through our neighborhood. We sat on the veranda and waited to make fun of them.
>
> The English recruited well-built young men from the countryside for various police duties. They left their homes, orchards, gardens, and tools to move with the families to the city. They earned very well. ... After moving to the city, they began to buy refrigerators, gas cookers, washing machines with wringers, kerosene heaters, and various beautiful household items. Of course, in instalments (Selenge, 2007, p. 136).

As Selenge writes, moving to the city had become a dream and goal for many rural families. Those who could not leave their village at least dreamed of marrying their daughters off to the city. "The mothers used to say: let the girl not breathe in the stench of sheep and cow shit, like us" (Selenge, 2007, p. 135). Many villagers sold all their belongings, left the countryside, and started a simple life in the city. This city of dreams was most often Nicosia, known locally as Şeher. However, the situation in the British colonies was not static, and the prospects of getting rich by moving to the city were diminishing. As in other passages in her memoirs, Selenge does not give the date, but it can be assumed that she is referring to the late 1950s, when Great Britain was preparing to return Cyprus to the Cypriots:

> Just when Turkish villagers employed by the English in various positions had become accustomed to city life, almost all of them lost their jobs. Most of them, unable to repay their loans or pay their rent, emigrated with the families to England. At that time, many Cypriots left for England in search of a better life and a better future and never returned (Selenge, 2007, p. 137).

9 Oksilari – term for an auxiliary police officer in British Cyprus (Hakeri, 2003, p. 228).

As the daughter of a rural teacher, Selenge knew and described primarily life in the provinces. From her words, it seems that everyone had to work hard from a young age, and the fate of widows and orphans was particularly difficult. In many passages of her memoirs one finds words that directly or indirectly refer to the widespread poverty in Cyprus. It gives the impression that the colonial authorities did not attach sufficient importance to improving living standards. These tough economic conditions likely affected the lower classes of Greek society to the same extent, as reflected in the images of Greek neighbors preserved in the memory of a little girl. It should be noted, however, that the author's family was well-off due to her father's occupation. Among the achievements of technology Selenge mentions in her book are the gramophone, the radio, electricity after moving to Kaymaklı in 1955, the refrigerator, and, finally, the Simca Aronde car, that saved Selenge's family and many others during the ethnic cleansing in December 1963. At that time, the author's father drove his car several times between dangerous Nicosia and the village of Gönyeli,[10] which provided shelter for refugees.

Conclusion

Writing memoirs carries profound significance. A person who decides to record their memories often shares unique stories that would not otherwise find their way into history books. It is a way of preserving a specific heritage, namely, collective memory, for future generations. These are often very ordinary stories about everyday, seemingly insignificant events or experiences, yet they can be of enormous value to researchers of the history of nations and communities. Özden Selenge's memoirs are a prime example. A child's perspective on the surrounding reality combined with a modest and unpretentious description of her observations reveal more than can be read in historical studies or in the accounts of political commentators or press correspondents.

European societies' knowledge of the recent history of Cyprus is often superficial and selective. Understanding the problem usually amounts to awareness of the "Turkish army's invasion" of the island in 1974 and to "occupation of the northern part of the island, which continues to this day." It is as if the history began in 1974 – as if there had been no period of British colonial rule, no provocative actions by Greek nationalists in the 1950s, no ethnic cleansing, and no coup d'état in 1974. Selenge's memories present reality as a child experienced it: an unedited picture composed of everyday observations, games, joys, and sorrows. Together, these form a portrait of Turkish Cypriot society that cannot be found in historical studies. It is highly advisable to introduce such Turkish

10 Kioneli in Greek and currently a district in the borders of northern Nicosia.

autobiographical works on the recent history of Cyprus to European readers through translations, at least in the form of an anthology of selected excerpts. There is no doubt that memoir literature can be a valuable addition to society's historical knowledge.

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