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HOME AND AWAY

'I started hearing the siren call of Cyprus once again'

Returning in middle age to the island where she spent childhood holidays helped Xenia Taliotis rediscover her bilingual past and cultural identity

Oh no, Mrs Taliotis, not again? Or, as I hear it, "ksjlkjdj Taliotis, lksjfkf." I'm five years old, and it's my first day at school. The only words of English my mum, fluent in the language, has taught me are "thank you", "I want my brother" and "I need the lavatory" - but none of these are coming out of Miss Hadley's mouth.

Miss Hadley is my teacher, and her dismay is justified. Three years before, she had stood in exactly the same classroom looking down on the tear-filled, olive-black, non-comprehending eyes of a non-English-speaking boy child hanging on to the same woman's hand. She'd had to get my brother Nico through his traumatically alienating first weeks of school, and clearly wasn't looking forward to doing the same again with me.

Back in 1970, when I started school, cultural diversity was not yet something to be celebrated. Immigrants were keen to integrate and to

anglicise. There were other Greek Cypriot children in my class, but their families had chosen to take them down the fit-in-fast path rather than the stand-out one. Their children were Andreases who became Andrews; Yianoullas who became Joannas - children who spoke pidgin Grenchlish at home. My brother and I have always been Nico and Xenia, and we've never spoken anything but our mother tongue to our parents and to each other.

My parents were accidentally ahead of their time in recognising the importance of heritage. Of course they wanted us to make England our home, but they never wanted us to forget that our roots stretched from her mountains green to the mountains copper of Cyprus. They wanted us to be equally proud of both cultures, and to learn both languages properly: they took care of the Greek, and handed us over to our teachers to teach us the English.

And so we grew up bilingual and binational. Whenever money allowed - every two or three years - we'd return to Cyprus, to bask in the

warm embrace of her seas, gorge on foods not yet readily or affordably available in England - chunks of village halloumi eaten with watermelon, juice streaming down our chins and pips flying out of our mouths to see who could spit them the farthest; gleaming olives and nutty, aromatic olive oils; tomatoes so full of flavour and scent they needed no embellishment; eggs laid minutes before they sizzled in the frying pan - and to meet relatives who pitied us for living anywhere other than there.

After the Turkish invasion in 1974, there seemed both more and less reason to go: more because the traditionally agricultural south - where my father was from - needed to entice tourists to its shores to make up for the loss of holiday hotspots such as Kyrenia and Famagusta - and less for exactly the same reason.

My brother and I grew up, family holidays came to end. By the time I reached my 20s, my visits were infrequent, eventually stopping entirely: I ditched poor Cyprus for the tastes and smells of Asia, the sophistication of Italy, the youth of Australia and the States, and Scotland's wind-worn, spray-splattered cliffs and coasts.

I thought I'd done Cyprus, but once I hit middle age, I started hearing her siren call again. At first a whisper, a suggestion I was losing something I didn't realise I needed. I suggested to my brother that we go back with our parents, so he took time off from his family, and we returned - just the four of us. We stayed in a swish hotel in Paphos, and spoke endlessly of times before, making new memories from old.

When my beloved father died and my mum started disappearing into dementia, that call became louder, more persistent and impossible to silence. With one parent gone, and another going, I felt that my identity, bound to theirs, was fading. I wanted it back.

Rusi Jaspal, professor of psychology and pro-vice chancellor for research at De Montfort University Leicester, says this is not unusual - that we need to reconnect with our culture after those who have anchored us to it are no longer with us: "A death can spark a desire in people to learn more about their heritage - as can an awareness that our time is running out, too. Sometimes, it's a way of trying to keep those who have died close, or of maintaining some kind of

continuity. We are very strongly connected to the people and places we come from, and that ancestral connection can span many generations and countries, as programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are* demonstrate."

For the first time in decades, I picked up a Greek book to read to my mum. It was Aesop - not quite entry level, but not fully adult either: I was ashamed to find that my fluidity had gone. Not so bilingual after all. My skills in the kitchen were also limited. I had three, maybe four easy-Greek dishes I could make - not good enough now that I was caring for my mum. Life may have been too short to stuff a vine leaf before, but with my mum undeniably nearing the finishing line, life was too short not to.

So I went back to Cyprus to take a crash-course in being Greek, starting with cookery lessons at the Almyra Hotel, Paphos. I'd asked to be taught two things that had been family staples throughout my childhood: *pastitsio*, a pasta, mince and béchamel sauce dish baked in the oven and made with halloumi, mint and a good pinch of cinnamon, and *koupepia* (or *dolmades* as Greeks from Greece call them). As I wrapped and rolled my vine leaves, I told my teacher that when my mum made these for the first time, she'd tied them with thread to keep them intact. The story made me smile, and sharing it with a stranger who, like me had been raised in another country, but who, unlike me, had finally found home in Cyprus, gave me the chance to talk about those deep-planted roots, and how we answer the question "where do you come from?"

In Cyprus, this is still sometimes preceded or followed by "who's your family?". When we were growing up, we and our aunts, uncles and cousins were the only Taliotises - my grandfather Nikolas Nikolaou, after whom my brother is named, having left his village, Tala, to move all of eight miles (13km) to Yeroskipos. There the locals gave him a nickname that became our surname. Now there are so many branches of the family that tracing them back to my grandfather is not something I can do, despite the prompts of the driver who picked me up the next day for my village tour. "Are you related to the doctor? What about the mayor? The actor? Is he a relative? Whatever happened to him?" It's like a game of tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor. All I can say with certainty is that my grandfather was the master builder and stonemason who built the town hall, the gymnasium (the senior school) and many of the other notable buildings in Yeroskipos.

My guide takes me to meet family-run businesses producing authentic foods with quality ingredients. At Katsouras, the halloumi is made with goat's milk, and the *soutzoukos* with no added sugar. This is a sweet: a fat, knobby, chewy cane of strung walnuts or almonds dipped in unadulterated grape juice. The taste is one the others in the group don't want to acquire, but for me, it's pure Proust: instantly transporting me back to my childhood self. Then we head to Vouni Panayia Winery, to meet Andreas Kyriakides, maker of fine wines and - I can't help

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noticing - of rather fine sons, too. Vouni Panayia, the first private regional winery, has planted indigenous varieties, including the rare promara, and is doing for Cypriot wine what Nyetimber, Chapel Down and the like did for English wine. Sitting in the winery's superb restaurant, enjoying proper, traditional Cypriot food - the kind you'd only find in people's homes - I think about how much my dad would have loved this. It would have been his perfect day.

I leave Cyprus the day after. I had wanted to learn Greek dancing, visit my oldest-surviving first cousin - now in his late 80s - to find out about my paternal grandfather, the one grandparent I never met. But I pick up the slack in London. I start dancing classes in the new year, and will Skype my cousin when I work out how. In the meantime, I see the roots that lie deep in the soil of Cyprus, and the tree that grows from them, here in England, are one and the same. Where do I come from? I come from them.

Destinology (01204 474801; destinology.co.uk) is offering a seven-night stay at Almyra Hotel, in Paphos, from £729pp based on two people sharing on a half-board basis, including return easyJet flights from Gatwick and private transfers. Additional activities and meals, including a winery tour, Katsouras visit and fishing trip, cost from £206pp.

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