The Greek-Cypriot Migration to South Australia: An Oral History Study

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This paper is an examination of the Greek-Cypriot migration to South Australia and the importance of oral history. It is based on interviews conducted on the Greek-Cypriot migrant population with first hand experiences. Furthermore, the paper looks at the meaning of oral history and puts theory into practice. The main method for researching this paper involved collecting information through interviews conducted with individuals and established groups, in South Australia. The paper will analyse the social cohesion and the activities these migrants and established groups had undertaken for successful survival in an Anglo society.

Background to the study

To understand some of the reasons for migration, a brief description of the historical background of Cyprus must be considered. Throughout the ages, Cyprus was occupied by many, constantly pulled from the East and the West. The British had taken over the island’s administration in 1878. The island was refused self rule by Britain because the British wanted to secure a strategic outpost in the Middle East. The island, between 1955–1959, had a national liberation struggle launched by EOKA. On 16 August 1960, Cyprus became an independent republic. It also became a member of the United Nations, the European Council, the British Commonwealth and the Non-Aligned Movement. In 1963, there was an uprising involving inter-communal clashes and the UN Peace-Keeping Force (UNFICYP) in 1964 was sent into Cyprus as a mediator. Furthermore, to assist the UNFICYP, the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) appointed Special Representatives to implement the “Mission of Good Offices”, in 1966. In 1974, Turkey invaded Cyprus and occupied 37% of the island. Until today, an agreement cannot be met on the Cyprus problem and the island still remains divided. In April 2003 the green-line was opened and in 2004 Cyprus joined the European Union; however this did not include the Turkish occupied side.
Migration movements

The Greek-Cypriot migration waves came at various times throughout history, not only around the world, but also to South Australia. The majority of migrants went to British colonised countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa.

Between 1955 and 1959, the period of anti-colonial struggle, 29,000 Cypriots left the island. In the 1960s, there were periods of economic recession and inter-communal strife. During 1974–79, 51,500 persons left as emigrants. In 1953–73, Britain took more than 75% of the emigrants; 8–10% went to Australia, and about 5% to North America. Only about 2,000 Cypriots emigrated during the years 1980–86, while 2,850 [people] returned to the island (Solsten 1991:1).

According to a 2006 Australian Census record from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the largest amount of Cypriot-born residents was in Victoria with 8,400 people, whilst Tasmania had the least amount with 50 people. South Australia had 1,380 Cypriot-born residence (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2006).

The first known Greek-Cypriot to have come to South Australia arrived in 1893; a “native of Cyprus in Turkey” named David Kitovich. In 1900, there were approximately eight Greek-Cypriots living in Adelaide. Between the period of 1916 and 1929 a large
group arrived, and in the mid 1920s about 20 Cypriots arrived from the Aradippou and Rizokarpaso regions. Port Pirie was a favourable destination for migrants who arrived during the 1920s and 1930s. These people worked in the BHP smelters, coffee shops, delicatessens or fish shops. By 1947 there were approximately 105 Cypriots in South Australia. A large influx of Cypriots arrived in South Australia during the 1950s and the 1960s. It was relatively easy for Cypriots to enter Australia because both countries were part of the British Commonwealth. In 1961 there were approximately 876 Cypriots in South Australia and this further increased to 1,119 by 1966. Migrants worked at Chrysler, Holden, Coober Pedy opal fields, defence projects in Woomera, and shops. Due to the 1974 political crisis in Cyprus, a significant number of people arrived around this time. In general, the people who arrived in Australia around this time came as refugees under the United Nations and Australian government immigration policies (Migration Museum, 2003).  

However, when looking into the statistical information, it must be understood that there are limitations to the data. The first limitation is whether the source has defined Cypriot migrants as either Greek or Turkish — two different minority groups that need to be specified. Secondly, the statistics of Greek-Cypriots, in some instances, is combined with that of Greeks. Therefore, there must be an understanding that the data is not accurate, and numbers could possibly be more or less.

The theory of oral history

So what is oral history? Oral history has many definitions. In simple words, “oral history is a collection of memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (Ritchie, 2003:19). According to a leading British historian Paul Thompson, “oral history is a history built around people...[to bring an] understanding between social classes, and between generations” (Thompson, 2000:23). Furthermore, Alice Hoffman, a labour historian, states that “oral history may be defined as a process of collecting, usually by means of a tape-recorded interview, reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of events from the recent past which are of historical significance” (Hoffman, 1984:69). In addition to these views, according to Robert Perks, an oral history academic (Perks, 1992:5, 8):

... oral history is spoken history: it is the recording of people's unique memories and life stories. Over the past thirty years talking directly to the makers of history has emerged, not only as one way in which historians can discover more about the past, but also as an historical discipline in its own right. Although oral history is the newest form of history because it uses modern technology, the tape recorder, there is nothing new about talking to older people about the past, especially when written sources were absent or inadequate.

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2 This paragraph is information gathered from various sources. The main source, Cyprus, Adelaide Migration Museum, Adelaide, 2003.
Oral history is important because it preserves our past, gives us a sense of identity, social benefit, and helps create understanding between social classes and generations. This research tool can not only open up new doors to history, but can even alter history itself. However, this paper has limitations on various levels because of its specified nature. There has been no systematic academic research on the Greek-Cypriot migrant population in South Australia. Therefore, it is essential that these accounts be captured otherwise they will be lost. This is the same case for photographs and documents as they are vital pieces of evidence but they can either be damaged, or individuals may not be want them to be exposed due to personal privacy.

Through the oral history discipline, there are numerous limitations that are faced; some of these include memory loss, resources, funding, ethical and moral responsibilities, sensitive topics and speaking candidly. “The validity of oral history is sometimes questioned because it relies on human memory, which maybe faulty and prone to fabrication. People remember most accurately what has been particularly interesting or important to them” (Robertson 1995:4). “Memory does not provide us with the kind of pinpoint accuracy found in documentary evidence. [Therefore it is] necessity for cross-examination, digging for details, and even confronting an interviewee with contradictory evidence” (Friedlander 1984:135). Furthermore, “memories do fade over the years, and it is difficult for most people to be objective about their own experiences” (Shopes 1984:245), and therefore “the biggest enemy faced by oral historians is the passing of time” (Douglas, Roberts, Thompson 1988:6).

Another limitation is the reservations a person may have in telling their story, as some individuals find it difficult or are unwilling to speak candidly about their experiences due to either the privacy/sensitivity of the topic, wanting to leave the past in the past, or are just simply being camera shy. The role of the interviewer is to organise more than one meeting with the interviewee and to make them feel comfortable and familiarised with the subject and the interviewer. Whilst conducting the interview, sensitivity, respect, ethical and moral responsibilities must be considered. Furthermore, it is absolutely essential for the interviewer to be culturally connected and to utilise the language that the interviewee feels comfortable with. This, in result, may help the interviewee open up on various issues.

Other forms of research methodologies, such as literature, historical text and statistical data, can be utilised as research tools, however the information gathered by these tools does not provide sufficient information for new findings. Instead, oral history combined with other research methodologies, provides an efficient tool for research.

Literary and historical text can be main resources in research, however it is not enough to bring a diverse and wider understanding of a topic. When conducting oral history, not only is it necessary to record the interview, either by tape or video, it is also important to consider future utilisation benefits. “Transcripts, audio recordings, and videos are all impart the same basic information, but video provides an extra dimension to oral history interviews. Transcripts reduce language to written symbols. Audio recordings convey tone, rhythm, volume, and speech patterns. But the facial
expressions and body language captured by video reveal even more of an interviewee’s personality” (Ritchie, 2003:135).

**Migrants**

Through consultation with a variety of individuals from a mixture of backgrounds, education and family, prime examples of the Greek-Cypriot migration to South Australia were demonstrated. From these candidates, I propose to present three examples. I put forward two migrants who settled during 1951 and 1954 because they migrated during the migration movement. The third migrant, migrated during the 1960s, and this would therefore uncover a variation from the previous two decades. I was conscious while undertaking this research, of keeping in mind the difficulties involved in gathering the required information. This project was more orientated towards oral history and looking for interpretations of individual cases, rather than scientific analysis based on substantial statistics and significantly larger numbers of people.

**Individual interviews**

Migrant #1, was born in Rizokarpaso 21 January 1932. He migrated to Australia by boat. He was 19 years of age when he arrived in Australia in 1951, and caught his first plane from Melbourne to South Australia. He went to work at Chrysler and then Holden. He changed his age to obtain a higher pay. Back then he was paid 4 pounds and on the weekend, time and a half. Migrant #1 was a hard worker and over the years progressed in the company to become General Foreman. He learnt English gradually after he arrived in Australia. He married his wife, an Australian, in 1956 and they had four children. There was a misperception at the beginning when he wanted to marry his wife, as the Greek side viewed her as being an outsider, claiming she was a Turk. They also found it difficult when they invited friends over, because the Greeks only mixed with their own kind and vice versa. Therefore they leaned more towards socialising with fellow Greeks. Migrant #1 became an Australian citizen in 1968. He was one of the original committee members; acting as the Vice President, of the Cypriot Aged and Pensioners Association of South Australia Inc.

Migrant #2 was born in Famagusta June 1944. Her father migrated to South Australia in 1951 in search of a better future. In May 1954, aged 10 years old, she migrated with her family by ship to Australia. Both her and her family did not know a word of English. They thought Australia was a beautiful country, even though they found that there was a lot of discrimination against migrants. She attended school; however she had to teach herself because the teachers would not. She left school and got a job in the Savings Bank of S.A. for 6 years. Migrant #2 married in 1969 and had two children. She found it hard to teach the children the Greek culture, customs and religion because they were living in two cultures. Also she found that in the 1950s and 1960s Cypriots and Greeks were very close because they tended to
mix with their own kind due to Australians not accepting them because they were of a different cultural background. In 1980, Migrant #2 became an Australian citizen. Throughout the years she worked in various jobs, such as, in banks, secretarial positions and retail. Currently she is a committee member for the Cypriot Aged & Pensioners Association of South Australia Inc.

Migrant #3 was born in Famagusta 7 March 1943. He migrated with his family in 1956 to England for political reasons. In 1963 he married his wife, and they had a child. They decided to migrate to Australia with other members of their family in 1965, and they came to South Australia because the climate was identical to that of Cyprus: in addition they had been sponsored to come and work in South Australia. He didn’t find any difficulties because he knew English, from doing schooling in England. Whilst here, he did a course in injection moulding. After completing that he found a good job and reached a managerial position. Also they had their second child. After 3–4 years, he tried his luck at the opal fields in Coober Pedy. They stayed for 9 months until they ran out of money, and then they came back. He started up his own business in pool building. Years later, due to health reasons, he retired. Migrant #3 became an Australian citizen in 1978 because they decided that they would live in Australia. Currently he is the treasurer for the Cypriot Aged & Pensioners Association of South Australia Inc., a position he has held for the last seven years.

**Interpretation**

It should be understood that the three migration experiences are to be interpreted in an historical and social context. This paper does not intend to cover the Greek-Cypriot migrant population as a whole.

After the Second World War, people migrated to countries in search of a brighter future. Through these three migrants’ accounts it is quite evident that in the 1950s migrants faced hostility and discrimination due to being different, and as a result intermixing was not common. For example, Migrant #2 faced discrimination, stating “there was a lot of bullying going on at school. For quite a few years, the Australian children didn’t like us because we spoke a different language, we dress differently. Quite often we would come home beaten by someone at school.” Furthermore, not only was there hostility from the Australian side, but also from the foreign side as well. Migrant #1 found it difficult when he married his wife, he states:

... we found our problems after ... Greeks, Cypriots should not marry Australians. That was a crime. A big crime. And especially if other people say “oh, you should write to your family and tell them the person your marrying is a Turk”. “Turk, I’m not marrying a Turk.” That was a big crime.  

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3 Migrant #2, interviewed November 2009.  
4 Migrant #1, interviewed November 2009.
Also, he stated, when holding family gatherings, the Australians would stay in one corner and the Cypriots would be in the other corner. There was no intermixing. However, it must be considered that this was not the case for all. From Migrant #3’s interview, he stated “we found Australian people very good, we also met a lot of Greek-Cypriots and Greeks in Australia ... we made a lot of Australian friends because of our business and we still keep in touch with them”. Therefore, this shows that Migrants #1 and #2 faced hostility and discrimination. However, after the 1960s it became easier for migrants to intermix as boundaries started to be broken down. This is because of two significant aspects; firstly, the “White Australia” policy had been in place for 25 years but was removed in 1973 by the Whitlam Labour Government. It was replaced with the “Multiculturalism” policy which consisted of acceptance and tolerance of other cultures. Secondly, as Migrant #2 says:

The Australian people have accepted the migrants because I believe we have bought a lot of good things to them. We have opened their eyes to foods that can be eaten. I remember as a child, we were told eating green almonds and onions was poisonous. They wouldn’t eat rabbit and a lot of other things, like chicken livers. It was something unheard of, and yet now you can find them in the shops. Now they are accustomed to eating our foods and they love our Greek sweets.

Therefore, multiculturalism evolved over time, and it helped establish an appreciation for the finer aspects of culture, diversity and traditions.

When arriving in a new country, many foreigners have encountered barriers, such as language. Migrant #1 did not know English very well when he arrived in Australia. He states:

I knew ABCD and the pronunciation as I said was different to all the words I used to pronounce. I used to learn English at school but it wasn’t the same pronunciation as here. And of course, when I found out when working in Holden, you have to learn a little bit of English, you have to know. Everything I used to hear, it used to sink. And I used to go to the pictures too, and I would concentrate on what they were saying in English and everything, and learn a lot.

Furthermore, Migrant #2 did not know a word of English when she arrived as a young girl in Australia.

Oh yes, teachers were not tolerant. They weren’t interested in helping us. I remember I was put in grade four, I was told to sit down at a desk and that was it. I had to find my own way around the classroom, pick up the alphabet on my own, teach myself to write and had to pass exams with my own studying, with no help from the teachers at all. So it was very very difficult.

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5 Migrant #3, interviewed November 2009.
6 Migrant #2, interviewed November 2009.
7 Migrant #1, interviewed November 2009.
8 Migrant #2, interviewed November 2009.

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
Therefore, these migrants were isolated in a country in which they did not know the language, resulting in adaptation to a new way of communicating. Overall, they needed this skill to bridge the barrier with the non-Greek speaking population, and in so doing avoid becoming outcasts.

Even though hardships were faced, there were positive effects that came from it. These people strived to succeed, either with schooling, in a job or in life. They all became successful. Migrant #1 reached General Foreman for Holden, Migrant #3 was in a managerial position before building his own business, and Migrant #2 was not only at the top of her class, but also worked for some important people. Furthermore all three migrants established themselves here in South Australia, raised families of their own, and were involved in and supported the Greek and Cypriot communities. Throughout their lives they found difficulties, but they overcame them, and they are appreciative of what they have today and proud of their accomplishments.

**Groups established in South Australia**

**Established groups**

The Cypriot Dance Group was a way in which the Cypriots in the community could hold onto their culture and traditions. It created a place where dancers could express themselves in a creative form and share this with fellow Cypriots and other people in the community. This was done through dinner dances, festivals and social gatherings. The choreographers would incorporate props, such as vases, the “tucha” (sift) and the “drepani” (sickle). Unfortunately, the group does not exist today: however it had the most interesting and lively dances which had the power to mesmerise people as they watched. Through the dance group Cypriots held onto their culture, by bringing dances back to the basics and
incorporating original pieces, whilst still being interesting and innovative in their use of props. The group had their own distinct character. This meant that the audience could appreciate the individuality that Cypriots and Cyprus brought to the wider community. For the Cypriots, they were proud that they were represented in such an expressive way.

The Omonia Soccer Club was founded in 1972. It was created to give Greek-Cypriot migrants a way to socialise through an aspect of their heritage, which was soccer. It was supported through families, Cypriots, the Cypriot Community of South Australia and various companies. Dinner dances, BBQs, and fundraisers were a means of people
getting together and supporting the Club. People were proud they were part of something which represented their motherland. Through this, it was a way people could meet, and coincidently, a lot of marriages and long life friends came out of it. Today, it is such a successful group that it has State and Amateurs Leagues, and is known as the Adelaide Cobras. This is because when they were accepted into the State League, they were required to have an Anglo-English name that was not so ethnic. This was so they could compete on an equal level in the League. Effectively, they may have changed their name, but it did not change their identity in any way. They still wear the same green and white uniform, and receive even more support from various avenues.

The Cypriot Aged & Pensioners Association of South Australia Inc. (CAPA) was formed in 1993 to give the ageing migrant population a place to socialise and participate

Players receiving trophies at an award ceremony for a tournament played in Mt Gambier

A team player receiving a trophy at the end of season party, in the late 1980s
in activities that otherwise they would not be able to. The group meets at the club rooms on a fortnightly basis to play bingo, and to have lunch together. On every other occasion, trips to interstate and local destinations are organised for them to enjoy and experience Australia. The Association is financially supported through members’ subscriptions, donations, volunteer work and government grants. It is evident that the organisation supports the social structure of the Cypriot community by giving an opportunity for the elderly to meet and mix with other Cypriots. It also gives them support for living in the community by making information such as government services, health and social security available to them. Its identity as a social network group is much appreciated within the community and outside. Also dinner dances and BBQs are organised, welcoming people from the community to bring their family and friends to join.

**Interpretation**

The reasons for the establishment of these three Greek-Cypriot groups, in particular, had one aspect in common. This was to have a place where people would come together and socialise. As well as many other aspects, such as creating “a home away from home” and a way to hold onto the culture and traditions, it is evident that these groups had an impact on the community. Interviewee #2 stated, “it meant a lot for migrants to have something to belong to the Cypriot Community. Omonia was created in a way for families to get together, have picnics, and go out have dinner dances”. Furthermore, the pensioner’s fortnightly meetings established a popular social gathering for the elderly community. It would also give the support to individuals living in the community.
The establishment of the groups in a new country nourished cultural values. These three groups, in particular, had family atmospheres. The soccer group was created on family values, with parents attending matches to watch their children and supporting each other. The dance group demonstrated the Cypriot culture in their dances by utilising original dance moves, props and by wearing authentic costumes. This helped sustain and form a unique identity for the group. In addition, the pensioners demonstrated the welcoming and hospitable nature of Cypriots when conducting dinner dances and welcoming the wider community. Therefore, these established groups display the cultural values that Greek-Cypriots embrace.

Community groups have received support from various avenues, including people from the public becoming members of a community group and attending social gatherings, be they dinner dances, picnics, or festivals. This was highlighted in all three established groups. Furthermore, from the functions held, people would meet and either form relationships or become long life friends. Therefore, the public’s support of the community groups helped the establishment and the sustainability of each individual group. Overall, in a social context, people helped one another, and from this form of bonding, people became close friends. Therefore, not only did social networking play a vital role for individuals as a way of establishing themselves in a new country, but it also helped the functionality of the groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident how important it is to have these accounts documented. It gives an insight into the motivations of individuals striving to establish themselves in a new country, through an historical and social context. Not only are oral history accounts important, but so are photographs and other forms of documentation. Throughout the paper, it is evident how the waves of migration were impacted by historical events. Cyprus was a rich and vibrant country and so are its people with stories and experiences to tell. Overall, the Cypriot Dance Group represented the creative and expressive side. The Omonia Soccer Club represented the social and competitive nature of Cypriots, whilst the Cypriot Aged & Pensioners Association represents the social network for elders. Whether in one or the other, people are proud of the groups because they have been able to hold onto their culture, traditions and customs. Through oral history, it is evident that there is an appreciation for what we have today. Even though limitations are faced when conducting oral history, it is obvious that more research is required if we want to understand, on a larger scale, the Greek-Cypriot settlement in South Australia.
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