

CYPRUS – Our Adventures begin:

So it's December 1956 and in a little town in the Welsh Valleys my Mother is preparing my brother Greg and I for the journey to Cyprus to join my father (Fred Tomkins) who had been posted there with the Peace Keeping Corps a few months earlier. This was to be the first of our globetrotting adventures that we were to experience throughout the rest of our childhood. At the time Cyprus was under British Administration until their Independence in 1960 and our four years term there spanned those years from 1956-1960.

There was a lot of conflict in Cyprus at that time between the Greek & Turkish Cypriots. I remember before we left Wales, everyone in our small Village said my mother was mad for taking young children to a foreign war torn country, but my Mother wasn't deterred, she was always up for an adventure and just wanted us all to be with Dad again.



Our plane touched down in the capital Nicosia on my fifth Birthday, the 14th December 1956, so it was the best present to be reunited with Dad once again. Our new home in Kyrenia with its picturesque harbour (left) was a small two bedroom bungalow, very square in shape as I remember and with a flat roof. We used to climb up a wooden ladder to get onto the roof to watch the sunsets. We had a large

back garden with an abundance of vegetables and lemon trees and I can still remember quite vividly the strong smell of tomato plants - even now when I smell fresh vine tomatoes it instantly transports me back to that garden in Cyprus.

Every week the egg lady or, sometimes, the egg man would come around selling fresh eggs. They were always elderly Cypriot/Turkish people with a basket of eggs, and they would say the same thing every week. "Plenty of trouble in Nicosia today!" Nicosia being the capital where all the main problems tended to be. On occasions the egg man had a donkey and cart and sometimes he would take my brother Greg and I on his rounds - we just loved that.

Dad went to work in a Land Rover and Greg and I would play pretend Army games in it sometimes, we also were allowed to play with his gun holster but not the gun.

I remember a Greek Cypriot lady (Gwlsain) who must have lived nearby, she was a magnificent dressmaker and used to come and sew pretty dresses for me. She also became a good friend to my mother and I think used to look after us when Mam and Dad went out to the occasional Police Dance. Mam was sick one time, can't remember what with but this lady tried to cure her with an old-fashioned remedy. She put a little cup of methylated spirits on Mam's back and lit it. I remember the skin on her back got sucked up into the glass cup, frightened the life out of her but I think it did the trick. During the afternoons in Cyprus everything closed down for a siesta. Greg and I didn't care much for that so we would climb out the window and go and play and explore the local area during that time.

After a few months we moved a couple of miles away to a lovely place near the sea. A magnificent two storey villa on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. We had the top floor of the Villa - three bedrooms, lounge and kitchen. There was a long balcony across the front overlooking the road and a balcony across the back overlooking the sea. During the hot summer months Greg and I put our beds on the back balcony and slept under the stars because it was cooler. I remember looking up at the stars every night, the Orion or Saucepan was always there - magic. Dad was very regimental, his training from his army days, so we had to make our beds up every morning just like they did in the army, we had to roll our bedding up and have it all neat and tidy at the top of the bed, and Dad would come and inspect it. Good grounding!

We also had a flat roof top in the Villa but this time it was accessed by stairs. That's where Dad first taught me to read. We would sit up there and read from a Noddy Book. Because

there were no English schools in Cyprus at that time, Dad decided he would home school us. He set up the lounge every morning with new pens, new pencils, new books and we would have to front up at 9 am every morning for three hours tutoring before he went on his shift. We hated it, Greg especially, this routine was now interrupting our carefree play time. We abided by the rules though because Dad was pretty strict, but I remember on one occasion, Greg talked me into wagging school. So we got up early and carried our bikes quietly out of the house, which wasn't an easy task, as everything was tiled and noisy and we had two flights of stairs to contend with. However we did it and took off for the day. But we paid for that because, of course, Dad was waiting for us when we got home and I think we were grounded for weeks after that. Luckily the British Army opened up a school for all the British children living in Cyprus. I enjoyed that school but Greg has always had trouble with discipline. In those days if we misbehaved at school you were sent straight to the Headmaster when he would give you a talking to and a whack across the backside with a slipper. Sadly Greg was quite often seen waiting his turn outside the Headmasters door. Otherwise the days were spent very carefree for Greg and I. We had no thought for the ongoing emergency at the time and we had no idea of the dangers associated with it. I found out in later years that apparently Dad and his colleagues had been a target on many occasions by EOKA snipers but for some reason they were watched over and escaped many a dangerous situation. When we went shopping in the town, I remember seeing British Army soldiers on the rooftops with machine guns, they were watching over us and protecting us apparently. On the odd occasion when we had to go to the capital Nicosia, we had to travel in convoy with the Army trucks to protect us from the EOKA snipers hiding in the mountains along the way. A great adventure for Greg and I but not so for Mam and Dad I suspect.

Next door to our house was an old Greek Orthodox Church. Greg and I would climb over the high wall and explore this fascinating building and its grounds. At the bottom of our garden was a steep cliff and in the cliffs were caves, we would explore those also, I particular remember crawling into one only to be confronted by a shabby old man cursing us in either Greek or Turkish and so I made a hasty retreat screaming all the way out. The little cove below our house was calm and tempting. Dad made us a little Canoe to use on the



water but he was so thorough in everything he did, he made the Canoe too heavy and it didn't float so he bought us a small red wooden dinghy instead. We kept it tied to something in the inlet and we would take it out and fish with our bamboo poles and safety pins. The water was always so crystal clear we could actually see the fish take the bait. Greg had been watching the local men dive into the harbour for their traditional Orthodox Epiphany Day ceremony of retrieving of the Cross from the sea - so he'd pretend to do that from our little boat. However, one day our dinghy was smashed to bits on the rocks in a storm, so that was the end of that little adventure.

Dad bought a bigger dinghy a few Months later and we all set sail for a small fishing village up the coast, but while we were there a storm came up and it was too rough to sail back. So Dad called a friend and he came and picked us up to drive us home. Dad sailed the dinghy back by himself but we followed in the car along the coast to watch him, needless to say Mam was beside herself with worry.

Our nights and days were full of adventure even though there was no high technology. We often played cards - The Golden Goose and Old Maid springs to mind, everyone always knew when I had the Old Maid apparently because I used to blush. Burl Ives would be playing on the record player along with Doris Day and Frankie Lane. Friday nights we would all go to the pictures, I can't remember the films but I do remember there was always a serial playing beforehand and we would wait in anticipation each week to watch the next episode. I think it was something like 'Danger Man'. After the pictures we would walk through town and have a kebab from a stall for supper - they were magnificent. Lamb kebabs with Greek salad in a pocket of pita bread fresh off the stall - I can still taste them now. Weekends were usually spent at the Naafi in Kyrenia Harbour. It was a café type place with a balcony overlooking the harbour. There we would snack on mezzes (Greek salad and



nibbles) and Pepsi Cola. Down in the harbour a local man used to make sculptures out of sand of Aphrodite (The Goddess of Love) They were very detailed sculptures of a naked lady in the sand,. Dad didn't like it, he thought it was too rude so we weren't allowed to get too close to look! (left - Me, Dad, Greg and Mam - carefree at the Kyrenia Naafi). We would often swim in the Harbour it was a brilliant place to be. However one day I nearly drowned there. I

remember swimming with a mask & snorkel, I had swum out of my depth and the mask started filling up with water and I couldn't breathe so panicked. I could see Mam & Dad as well as Greg's legs in the water, they were standing not far away from me but looked closer through the mask. I started bobbing up and down and gasping for air then Greg turned and saw me and said "Look at Alison she looks so funny!" Finally they all realized I wasn't waving but drowning!



They pulled me out and a local man fishing nearby resuscitated me and I remember throwing up all over him!

Dad bought a little Ford Prefect - registration M251, I don't know why I remember that registration number but I do. Some weekends we would take off to 'Six Mile Beach', there we would spend the day lazing in the sun, body surfing and playing in the sand. Sometimes we would go to 'One Mile Beach' which was more of a calm inlet. There Dad would string a tarpaulin between the trees for shade and then he would put a whole watermelon on the water's edge to keep cool for the day - and our picnic would begin.

Half way through our stay in Cyprus, Dad's father passed away. So Dad went back to Pontypridd for the funeral and brought Grandma back to Cyprus to live with us for a while.

This was a big surprise as I think Grandma had only left Pontypridd for day trips to the seaside on a bus, so we were amazed that she agreed to come all the way to Cyprus! Presents were brought back from the UK for Greg and I, mine was a tiny metal Vulcan Sewing Machine that actually worked. I just loved it and still have it to this day. Greg's present was a Violin. Which he quickly converted to a Guitar and that's probably where he started his career in music I expect.



Grandma to our surprise fitted into life in Cyprus quite well really she, like Greg and I, were oblivious to all the nonsense going on around the Country. She spent nearly all day crocheting, she made heaps of clothes for my dolls. She stayed about 6 months as I remember before returning home to Pontypridd.

TV first came to Cyprus around 1958 not many people could afford them but a Greek family living down the hill from us had one and used to ask us to go down some nights to watch it.

Trouble was there was a curfew on most nights so we had to sneak there and back under cover of darkness, (another exciting game for Greg and I) the TV nights weren't that good because the only show was Noddy but it was fun all the same.

Journey back to the U.K.

After our 4 years in Cyprus we moved back to Wales. I remember the trip back because we went nearly all the way overland in our Little Ford Prefect. I can't remember exactly the route but I know we put the car on an old Greek/Turkish boat from Cyprus to Egypt. It was called "The Lydia" and I can see it now, it was awful. An old, dirty thing with no proper toilets. I will always remember the toilet it was just a hole in the deck going down and down all decks to the sea I suppose, it was awful. I also remember we went through the Corinth Canal in the middle of the night while we were in bed. The ship hit the side because it was very narrow and I woke up crying and terrified.

The only other thing I remember from that voyage was being shown a map of where we were and where we were going. One of the crew taught us a poem relating to the map of the route we were taking and it went like as under and I have never forgotten it:

***Austria was Hungary
So it took a piece of Turkey
Dipped it Greece
Then along came Italy
And kicked poor Sicily
Into the Mediterranean Sea.***

I recall docking in Alexandria and we went to see King Furouk's Palace and the Sphinx, it was all very interesting and Mother bought a leather and wood camel stool that she had for years afterwards. We then drove all through Europe - Italy, Switzerland and France before heading back to the UK.

So there it is our first fantastic adventure done! We weren't to know then that ahead of us we had Nyasaland and Australia to look forward to. And "Oh what great adventures they turned out to be".

Footnote: *From Memory as an innocent child I thought Cyprus was the most beautiful island with wonderful people but alas it was spoilt by the constant conflict throughout the years. And I think there is still a problem with the island separated between Greek and Turk but nothing as bad as in those early days. I sincerely hope they sort things out soon and start enjoying the wonderful peace of Paradise they have.*

**Alison McLennan
October 2018**

