

Cyprus

Loukianos Lyritsas interviewed **Kyriakos Charalambides**.

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Lyritsas: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. This is Loukianos Lyritsas, a Cypriot journalist from the newspaper “*Politis*” and correspondent of *Deutsche Welle* in Cyprus. It is a pleasure and an honour to have with us via phone - due to the measures taken for the coronavirus pandemic - the multi-awarded poet Kyriakos Charalambides, for the project “European Archive of Voices”. Kyriakos Charalambides was born in Cyprus in 1940. His poetic work includes 13 poetry collections for which he received three State Prizes for Poetry in Cyprus, as well as the State Poetry Prize in Greece in 1996. In addition, he was awarded by the Academy of Athens for his work as a whole, while in 2007 he received the Award for Excellence in Letters, Arts and Sciences of the Republic of Cyprus. In 2013 he was awarded an honorary Doctor’s degree from the Faculty of Philology of the University of Athens and he was elected corresponding member in Literature by the Academy of Athens. In 2019 he became a founding member of the Cyprus Academy of Letters, Arts and Sciences. Translations of his poems have been published in 18 separate editions in English, French, German, Swedish, Serbian, Bulgarian, Rumanian and Albanian.

Hello, Mr. Charalambides, thank you very much for this talk.

Charalambides: I am also delighted to be with you.

Lyritsas: Mr. Charalambides, let’s take it from the start, and the start being the place where your story begins. I am referring to your birthplace, Achna. Tell us a few things about it.

Charalambides: I was born in Achna in 1940. Achna is a rural village in a plain, at 17 kilometres distance approximately from the city of Famagusta. I mention this because when I was five years old, my family and I moved from Achna and settled in Famagusta where I grew up. For that reason I feel more like a resident of Famagusta than of Achna. I happened to be born in Achna and live there for the first four to five years of my life. This is the first thing I would like to say. During those five years my father was away at World War II, he was a volunteer. And so we lived in Achna where an aunt of mine, who was a midwife, was living there and it was easier for my mother to give birth to me there, at her sister’s. That was the first thing I wanted to say, but as I have said, I grew up in the city of Famagusta and my life evolved in parallel with the city’s evolution. The city of Famagusta, in the olden days, had a small population of two, two and half thousand residents but it developed rapidly because of its geographical

position. The most important port in Cyprus was there, it had the best beach, it was the best tourist destination and it was Famagusta's commercial and administrative centre. All of the above explain the reason for the rapid development of Famagusta.

I would say that I was growing into a man, biologically, along with the growth of the city, to such an extent that its physical expansion was imprinted on my memory with equivalent spiritual changes. Space to me was a living thing, the intoxicating scent of Famagusta's oranges is still with me. The city was filled with orange groves and in the springtime, it gave off a sweet smell, the city was like a flower field. Moreover, the sand dunes on the beach with the lilies was another characteristic feature of the beautiful coast of Famagusta, which was the best in Cyprus and one of the best in the Mediterranean. Also, two ancient cities, Engomi and Salamis, were very close by; Salamis was at five or six kilometres distance of Famagusta and a little farther was Engomi. These two cities secretly, and visibly, formed the borders of my Greek identity; they gave me a sense of who I am, that I come from this ancient Greek place which was across from me and which I visited very often. The period when I was growing up, my teenage years, coincided with the period of the Liberation Struggle of 1955-1959 to throw off British colonial rule in Cyprus. That too left a deep mark on us because it infused our souls with poetic exaltation and offered a more spiritual way to experience history. In this "formative school" of the Struggle, the soul of the place acquired character and discovered its essence. All these serve as a background and an outline of the city and myself in it.

Lyrtsas: I would like to understand what is the concept of home, of place for you? As you said that place is the city of Varosha, right?

Charalambides: Yes, yes.

Lyrtsas: And all these scents and memories you carry with you.

Charalambides: Yes.

Lyrtsas: How would you describe your childhood years? What do you remember?

Charalambides: It was an idyllic, unclouded time, because the Cyprus tragedy, the harm done by the Turkish invasion and the coup d'état preceding it, hadn't taken place yet. It was an unclouded period, despite British rule. We felt a longing for the freedom to express ourselves freely, to be the masters of our country, which was not yet allowed. Still, that period wasn't so hard for us, except for the fact that people were not rich and the land did not yield that much. Cyprus was an island, it didn't have a heavy industry or anything else, and so a lot of people went overseas in search of a better life and luck. For that reason Cyprus lost a lot of its youth, a lot of young people who went overseas, but later on created very strong and prospering communities. I am referring to three in particular; the community of London, the community of Melbourne, Sydney and Australia in general and the community of South Africa, where there are very strong Cypriot communities. This was also something typical of that time.

Lyrtsas: Since you mentioned that, Mr. Charalambides, what did your parents do?

Charalambides: My father was a policeman, but before becoming a policeman - as odd as it seems - he was a hewer [a person who cuts wood, stone, or other materials], let's say an artist, a sculptor of external claddings of buildings, temples and so on. Afterwards, he joined the World War in 1918, as he used to tell me. He was born in 1896, and I used to say jokingly: "You belong to the 19th century". He went off to World War I when he was approximately 24 and when he returned he became a policeman and advanced to police sergeant; he was very good at his work. When World War II happened, he joined in his uniform, officially. You could say that he was armed and ready, and for that reason he easily joined a combat company. My father fought in many battlefronts and received a lot of medals for gallantry. He had 17 medals in total and in particular, he had the renowned Gold Metal which was given to a selected few from all the colonial troops who fought with Britain. He saved an advisor of the King of Great Britain in the battle of El Alamein and Montgomery himself decorated him at Trafalgar Square, as my father used to tell me. He fought in the Battle of Crete, where he was later arrested; he escaped and went to the mountains and became a guerrilla. When the British left, he stayed on official assignment to spy on the Chania airport and report back. Afterwards, he fought in France, where he single-handedly arrested some spies who went in the barrack room to place mines. He intercepted them, shots were fired and he killed one of them, injured the other and arrested the third and again he was decorated for bravery. He took part in the battle of Maginot, in Dunkirk, in the bombings of London, in El Alamein as we mentioned, in Abyssinia (Ethiopia), in Eritrea, he descended to South Africa, to Madagascar. He was extremely energetic, to such an extent, where I say in jest: "James Bond, eat your heart out!" Because after all, James Bond is fake, it is a fantasy while my father experienced in the flesh the things I am describing and many more.

I am currently in the process of publishing his memoirs. It is a rather short chronicle, in memory of a father who left his mark on me with his bravery, dignity, uprightness and integrity. They asked him once during an interview: "How did your son come out a dainty poet while you are a battle-hardened person?" He answered: "It is exactly the same thing, because in order to be a good poet you have to be courageous!" That is all about my father.

My mother was a simple, common woman who got married when she was 14 years old. When my father was appointed as a police officer he was transferred to the village of Agios Theodoros in Karpasia. He was riding horseback when he saw my mother and fell in love with her instantly. He asked for her hand in marriage and her father told him: "She is young, she is a kid, my lad", "It doesn't matter, I want her", "All right but there is another thing, we don't have a dowry to give you". Back then, dowry was an... inescapable (laughter) institution, without it you couldn't get married. And my father said: "I have come to marry your daughter not your money". This depicts a very bold and progressive man, intellectually, with liberal principles. Something else came to mind now; when he was a police officer, one day they opened his police chest and found "*Les Misérables*" by Victor Hugo. My father always liked to read, he knew Greek very well and even Turkish, he graduated from secondary school - which was rare for

that time - he was cultivated. He was accused of having revolutionary books! “*Les Misérables*” by Victor Hugo was thought to be revolutionary and he was criticized for it! You can imagine the obscurantism of that time. That is all about my father.

My mother had finished primary school and even though she was a straight-A student - as she used to tell us – at the time they didn’t further their studies so they quickly got married. She was married when she was 14 and gave birth to my first brother when she was 15; he is 16 years older than I am. When my father was at war I used to call him “dad” because I thought he was my father (laughter). He took care of us too then, he assumed the responsibility for the family. My parents had five children and I was the last one age-wise; Andreas, the first child, was born in 1924. Mother used to read a lot, I remember her always holding a newspaper or a book and she was very proud that I wrote poems. Something typical of her to say, that I held on to, was: “My son is versed in verses!” She used the cognates “versed” and “verse” and she was happy, she was proud of it. I received the affection, caress and acceptance of my family for what I was, the poet of the family. My brothers and sisters were happy for me and helped me in a lot of ways with books and other things.

Lyritsas: Two things came to mind while listening to you. The first is whether your father’s participation in the war defined your thought and if so, to what extent? As you said, when you were very little war entered in your life, your home.

Charalambides: Yes, five years or more passed until I met my father, he went off to war in October of 1939, just as World War II broke. The British immediately asked for volunteers from the colonies, and the first volunteer corps from all the British colonies was the Cypriot one, which was integrated to the Cyprus Regiment. It was divided into the mule drivers, who took their animals with them for missions in precipitous places and the combat unit where my father belonged. This defined me because my father returned in January of 1946. The war had already ended a few months before but he was assigned to take charge of the safe return to Cyprus of all Cypriot captives. He went to various camps in different countries; off the top of my head, I remember Germany, Czechoslovakia, Belarus and others and he gathered them and brought them back. First, though, he looked after them in many ways because he couldn’t bring them back right away; some were debilitated, a few were dying, others were exhausted. They revived them, nursed them, had them exercise to strengthen their muscles so as to be able to stand on their feet, to walk. My father somewhat describes all these in the diary and that is the reason he returned much later.

He was among the first to join the war and he was almost the last to come back. I met him when I was older than five, since I was born in 1940 and he returned in January of 1946. During that space of time, he came to Cyprus while he was in Palestine. They were granted eight or ten days leave, but I was one or two years old and I don’t remember the details. Basically, I met him when I was five years old. What does that mean? That I grew up without a father but I didn’t feel fatherless. As I have said, I had my brother who was like a second father, since he was older and acted paternally towards us. However, the distance was not a negative factor. Father was a very warm,

extremely honest and fearless person. In contrast to my father I was a timid, reserved, shy child and they used to say to me: “Who do you take after?” When my dad was in the village and there were snakes on the rooftops of the houses, they used to call him and my dad went up the ladder and grabbed the snakes by the neck and came down. He used to do this kind of heroics. He was also the terror of the district because he went after the goat thieves, sheep thieves and the crooks.

His name was known everywhere due to the fact that once, he was ordered to march in an official parade with all his medals. He put them all on and it was the first and the last time he did it, as he said to me. He was at the front, and someone shouted: “Why, that’s Montgomery!” and that is how he got the nickname “Montgomery”. When they asked me: “Who is your father?” I talked on and on and when they understood, they said: “You are Montgomery’s son?” It was like an indication that my father was the one with the many medals. I don’t know if I said too much, what I wanted to say was that my father was a symbol of honour, decency and pride for me. He never marched with the veterans, he didn’t like to wear his medals and march, but when the parade was over he went over and talked to them, as I recall. He was a model of virtue and bravery to me, in the sense mentioned above.

Lyritsas: Let’s talk about school, what is your fondest memory, Mr. Charalambides?

Charalambides: I wrote poems since I was little, I started writing when I was nine years old and at elementary school the teachers had already singled me out and I was their pride and joy. Back then I felt that they had marked me out because I was different from the other children since I wrote poems. I don’t know if those poems were any good (laughter) but the point is that they singled me out because I was doing something that others didn’t do. In high school, I had a great professor, Dr. Kyriakos Hadjioannou at the Famagusta high school. He was the headmaster as a matter of fact, and he also gave preference to me, he gave me special attention in order to follow his path. He used to read the poems I wrote. Or when he told us to write a composition, in the spirit of anarchy and the audacity of teenagers at the time, I would write in the vernacular called “*malliar*” (hairy), of Psycharis (demotic Greek). And he commented underneath: “I am not going to grade you because you have a great talent, but if I were to grade you, I would give you a low mark because of the language and it wouldn’t be fair”. When something like this happened with such a professor, then you were made aware of your own existence or your own value.

I remember very vividly an incident from my high school years when I was in the 11th grade and Hadjioannou spoke quite disparagingly of the poet Andreas Embirikos and his collection “*Ypsikaminos*” (Blast Furnace). I broke in and said: “Mr. Hadjioannou, I disagree, Embirikos is not a bad poet and this is not a bad book, it is very nice”. He said: “Then come up to the teacher’s desk and explain to us the reason it is nice” to which I replied: “As a scientist, you must know that in order for one to speak and substantiate, one needs its sources and references. It isn’t right to ask me to come up and talk at a moment’s notice and without even my book!” I was referring to Embirikos’ book. He was impressed by this and he asked: “Does a week suffice for you to prepare

and talk?” and in the heat of the moment I replied “Yes” but surely it was not enough and I came under great pressure. Nevertheless, the library of the Famagusta high school was magnificent and enviable and one that is hard to find nowadays in high schools. So, I went there and found great books, I read what I could, kept notes and wrote a text sixteen pages long. When the deadline of one week expired, I read my paper. I tried to express my opinions boldly and even said: “This is the consequential Embirikos and those who question him are pig-headed!” and by that I meant the headmaster. It was bold and disrespectful as I would say today but he got up, came towards me and lifted his hand. I thought he was going to smack me so I bend down to protect myself, but he just wanted to embrace me. He hugged me and kissed me in front of my classmates and said to them: “From this moment on I believe in Embirikos, and please give your classmate a round of applause for convincing me”. It goes without saying that when you have professors of such high calibre and ethos who are real, genuine, it is unavoidable that you will reach maturity faster and create your path. These are some of the things I remember, of course, I had other important professors too.

I will mention just one, he was a Physics professor who used to say: “Tell me a number” and we told him a number, 3 or 10 or 12 and he laughed. Then he would say to someone else: “Tell me a number” and that person would say a number and again, he would laugh. “Why are you laughing, sir?” “Because it didn’t occurred to you to say $3\frac{3}{4}$ or 1.75 centimetres, 2.2 and so on. Aren’t these numbers as well?” Why do I mention this? Because this is what entered my conscience, that in order to approach the truth you need to be controversial and go beyond the standardised and the established and this is something I’ve put into practice in my poetry. I give great credit to my Physics professor for my poetry, for teaching us that a chalk contains so much nuclear energy that it can blow up the universe. He used to say that and it stayed with me and with that in mind I say that each word I use is an effort to interpret the coordinates of the universe.

Lyritsas: You graduated from high school and left Cyprus to study abroad. Was this the first time you left Cyprus?

Charalambides: Yes, of course, it was the first time, I went as a student of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Athens. I studied philology and I especially chose history and archaeology, because my department was divided into the strictly philology field and the field of history-archaeology. I opted in favour of the second and therefore I am more inclined towards subjects of history and archaeology. I study them extensively and I have a great understanding of them because it was my field of study.

Lyritsas: When did you go abroad for studies?

Charalambides: I went to Athens in September of 1958 and I came back in 1964, with intervals. At some point I worked as a philologist at a private school, before getting my degree, because I needed some money. I worked for a year and then I quit, I took the exams and got my degree. During that period in Athens I experienced what the Germans say “*Sturm und Drang*”, the storm and stress period. While I was a reserved

and polite child, I became a restless mind. All of a sudden the torrents of sensibility broke loose and I had a thirst for learning, a Faustian inclination towards knowledge, towards every direction, in full force. So, I enrolled in the Drama School of the National Theatre to audit theatre. I also attended lectures about philosophy, history, literary analyses and much more at the “*Athenaion*” club and I believe that solidified my knowledge. I was also a bookworm, and I used to buy a lot of books with the little money I had at Monastiraki, where old and used books were sold or near the university where used books were sold on book carts. Sometimes the salesmen saw my eagerness and said: “Here, take it, I don’t want any money from you”, they were moved by my interest to purchase books. Currently, I have an enormous library with thousands of books; the books I bought when I was a student form its basis and it is an indication of how much I used to read. All these moulded my character but I also had to suffer the consequences, because I wrote a lot of poems. Usually, my appetite for writing poems increased during the examination period at the university (laughter). I gave myself an alibi so as not to take the exams and as a result, I got my degree a year later because I wouldn’t take the exams on time. I was more interested in extracurricular knowledge and that knowledge is my support until this day and it created the supply and the structure I rely upon.

Lyritsas: I would like to ask you about that, were there any values or certainties you were taught either at school or at the university that you reconsidered later on?

Charalambides: Woe betide anyone who does not reconsider, because we are constantly changing and transforming. It is like walking; in order to cross a brook you stride and continue to the next step and then the next. Sometimes you leave behind the other steps. However, there are some constants that do not change. There are some basic principles that remain, just as when you are building a house and you place the pillars and the iron to support the framework and everything else. If you want to make a change in the house you can add a veranda or tear down an interior wall but not the basic pillars. The basic pillars remained and they support me until today, but at times revisions are made for a lot of things. The mistakes, blunders and the gullibility we used to have, we erased a lot of things we adored and we adored some other things we didn’t believe in and so on.

As I often say in some of my writings, the truth is a biological state, you never cease to evolve, or rather the truth inside you or what you consider to be the truth. Each person has its own truth, if your beliefs do not coincide with mine, that doesn’t mean you are wrong or that I am wrong, it just means that there are two or a hundred and two truths. Each person has its own truth and its own point of view to perceive things and that is why there are so many parties, certainties, doubts, bigotries, nations, flags and wars! This is due to the fact that everything is one; as the ancient Greeks used to say “the all is one”. However, in order to become one, you need to include everything in your soul in a philosophical, artistic manner. This is what I am trying to do and that is why a lot of people say judgmentally: “Charalambides is constantly changing”. They can’t define what I am but what they don’t understand is that the capability for truth does not stop at the north or south pole indicated by a compass. The compass is

delicate, its needle trembles before pointing to a direction, and that trembling makes the truth exist. Goethe said that the noblest trait of man is the trembling of the soul. This trembling for me is my shrine, my iconostasis. If something makes me love Christ, for example, I love him not for his miracles but for the fact that he was frail, for his frailty, his human nature. He is the only God appearing as a human being, all the rest are supernatural or mythical or something else. He came to earth and he shed his blood, Buddha didn't nor Muhammad. This frailty is the ultimate proof of nobility and ultimately, the divinity of man.

Lyritsas: I would like to ask about your relationship with religion.

Charalambides: Religion and church are two different things. I am interested in the subject and it is vital for me to give an answer. Religiousness and the ritual process that makes one a good believer, a good Christian or another kind of believer, the one who upholds all the rituals is one thing. The deeper relationship with the divine such as the Dostoevskian or the Heraclitean type is a different thing. Heraclitus, Aeschylus, Socrates, the question of "What is it? (*ti estin?*)", the ontological, the eschatological, these are things that Christian formalists do not discuss because they are not interested in them. I believe that therein lies the difference between the Orthodox faith and Catholicism or Protestantism in Europe. They pay greater attention to social contribution, to the social face of Christianity which is good. This is how a true Christian should be, to have a social sensitivity but orthodoxy gives a far greater importance to the metaphysical part. That is, an orthodox can sacrifice himself for a conviction, for a faith which is totally theoretical. However, what Vladimir Lossky characterizes as metaphysical in "The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church" or Paul Evdokimov or Schmemmann or other great ones, Florovsky, these very important theologians and to my mind, very important philosophers as well, have grasped things that in the West only a few have touched upon like Meister Johannes Eckhart or St. Augustine. The metaphysical element, the metaphysical relationship of man with the divine and not the formalistic, the ecclesiastic, the pious.

I don't know if I am being clear but I would like to explain myself because a lot of people tell me that I theologise. Yes, but what is my theological ideology? For me it is not about standing at the pulpit and saying: "Repent, make the sign of the cross, fast, be good Christians, do good deeds." It is nice to do these things, but this is what they do in America too with all the different religious subdivisions. I was invited to Princeton, once, as a poet in residence and as I was translating with a friend of mine - a professor who translated my poems - I asked him: "What is your religious affiliation?" He said: "Look, at the moment I am this thing, but I thought about becoming an orthodox, I don't know if I will go there and so on". He was talking about different possibilities of religious selection and I realised that this beautiful human being, this great translator and friend, behaved in the American, the Western European way. We, the orthodox, we are quite misunderstood because the Byzantium has not been studied in full in Europe. The proof is that the Byzantium was left out when Europeans were making the history of Europe; that is the Middle Ages of the West do not include the orthodox Middle Ages of the Byzantium. Europe has a truncated truth about a lot of things. But we are in

2020 and maybe in the years ahead the Byzantium will suddenly emerge, as a lot of things emerge, when mankind needs to redefine its being and its imprint.

Lyritsas: Do you believe that Europe has specific religious roots, “Judeo – Christian roots”? I am asking based on what you have said.

Charalambides: Europe has roots, but they are more of a practical type. During the early years of Europe, until the 6th century approximately, when even the Byzantium - the Eastern Roman Empire with Constantinople as its capital - formed part of the Roman state as a whole, it was just called eastern roman and the other western. The Eastern was the main, because the capital and the emperor were there and that is why the two were in conflict with each other. All of a sudden the Pope emerged and laid claim to his living space colliding with the living space of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The two emperors clashed, Charlemagne with the other emperors of Constantinople and then the Schism happened, which had a political character rather than a religious one. However, what all these demonstrate is Europe’s orientation towards another interpretative line of the church. Europe’s interpretative line is not eschatological and that is the reason it paid greater attention to its social organisation and so forth.

When you enter a catholic church you feel like you can’t make noise because of the way the seats are arranged, in astonishing order, and in the cemeteries the graves are arranged in astonishing order. While in our church there is great disorder and even a snotty kid, a child with Down syndrome or a woman who is suffering can suddenly cry out, and all these can happen and are accepted in an orthodox church, this is what I mean. I wrote a poem once saying that a girl in her bathing suit went into a church during mass and it was based on an image described by a friend of mine and it took place in Greece. She saw a little girl once going in a church wearing hot pants, and she gave the priest a rose while he was coming out the “Royal doors”. He was getting ready to read the Gospel and he took the rose and continued the service. This highly poetic moment to my mind, could not take place in a catholic or protestant church, where the priest stands high up and gives a sermon saying: “Today I decided to talk to you about this or that”. When he finished his sermon, he took out a tape from his pocket and said: “If you want to listen to my sermons, here is the tape. You will find it at the entrance and it is sold for three dollars.” This is something I saw in America. An orthodox priest would not say these things, and that is how spirituality survives, which is the desideratum in every deeply eschatological type church, despite all the mess and misery of the Orthodox Church. I have studied it and of that I am certain.

Lyritsas: Mr. Charalambides, do you believe that the European Union ought to have a specific religious identity?

Charalambides: Yes, another key question. The European Union, as the word indicates, is the union of European states. What kind of identity can Greece have with Hungary which at the moment is ruled by a dictator? North Italy does not accept South Italy, and they say: “They are scumbags, poor, to hell with them, we are rich”. Now the rich people are the ones who are footing the bill because of the spread of coronavirus

in North Italy, the centre of the pandemic in Italy. When there is such discontent within a country, then what about between two-speed countries? First of all, what do we mean by “Europe”? Do we mean a German Europe? Because sometimes this is the impression I get, that Europe is more German than pan-European. The agenda is set by the strongest economy and that is Germany, in cooperation with France. Sometimes they are friends and sometimes they antagonize secretly, there is a secret rivalry for first place and some countries are considered as a fixture and a burden at the same time. Like poor Greece and the memorandums or Cyprus and the “haircut” and its problem caused by the invasion and the Turkish voracity. It is an inconvenience for Europe because it has interests in Turkey and it is forced to scold Turkey against its will. How do all these define the concept of Europe and the common chalice from which we will all shall drink from? Europe’s economy is strengthened by a European Germany thus creating a one-dimensional image of Europe where concern about the poor peoples who are the fixtures, the “limbs” of Europe... Because one can be the head, the heart, the kidneys, the stomach and the lungs but there are also the nails and the legs. Or let’s say we are the hair and it doesn’t cost them anything to cut them off, and the “haircut” happened. Therefore, we are a bit of a burden and trouble for Europe.

I experienced this once in Berlin when I was invited to talk at the *Kulturhaus* the year Cyprus would join the European Union, it hadn’t joined yet. I was asked to offer my opinion as a poet on whether the accession of Cyprus to the European Union would cause a problem to the EU. I answered: “Based on what you said, you are the problem because you haven’t realised that the roots of Europe begin from the far end of the Mediterranean which happens to be Cyprus. An authentic Greek island through the centuries where the island of Aphrodite lies. Furthermore, the name Europe came from the shores opposite Cyprus, from Phoenicia. Europa was the name of a princess whom Zeus - in the form of a bull - stole by having her ride on him, and he passed adjacent to Cyprus and went to Crete where he impregnated her and Europe was born.” (laughter) These stories, these myths are more than just tales, they explain the process of many hidden truths. Cyprus was a very important place, through the centuries and it is the only one, among the ancient Greek kingdoms mentioned by Cavafy, which were founded after the death of Alexander the Great. It is the only one still standing, albeit crippled after the Turkish invasion.

Lyritsas: The question was about the religious identity of Europe, but since I wanted to discuss about Europe with you, let’s take it from there. I would like to ask, how do you imagine Europe in 50 years?

Lyritsas: That is a very good question, because this is the yearning of all the people who reflect or want to reflect on Europe. In order to properly see Europe you need to reflect on it too, you need to see it as a vision and an ideal. I remember the first person who conceived the vision of Europe - a French nobleman, I think - said that it begins from the shores of the Atlantic, let’s say from Spain or France, and it reaches up to Vladivostok! What did he mean by that? That Europe needs to integrate, at some point, the contrasts and the seats of war, to smoothen them out. A lot of types of people need

to acquire civility and leave behind their fierceness and primitivism. America at the moment is competing with Russia and China, these are the three world powers and in the meantime, others attach or detach themselves depending on their interests and balances and so on.

I was asked a question about my vision of Europe and I will reply. The ideal Europe to me, would be one who manages to include, at some point, Russia as a whole. If it succeeds then Europe will be truly powerful, it will be the mightiest state in the world, a European unified state that will include all the European continent, the Mediterranean and Russia. That is when the pieces of the puzzle will start to come together and form the ideal shape of a unified Europe, who will not be involved in conflicts, embargos and armaments. It will realise that we are all human beings and we need to live side by side without devouring each other. However, in order for such a process to happen it will take more than just 50 years, maybe centuries. First, the Russians need to realise it, because they are oppressed - I dare say - by the principle of one, because only one is dominant. In Russia only one is dominant, the party and people are subjugated and under surveillance. If, at some point, the people manage to become free and are able to express themselves and fly like birds towards the wind of freedom, as Solomos says "the beautiful air of valour", then Europe will begin to function. I am not referring to the legal part, because we hear a lot of legal terms nor the economical, there's a lot of talk about the economy in Europe. In order to function a wind of free spirit needs to blow through and bring about the realization of human as a human, then you will understand that everyone is interdependent. The philosopher Pascal, a great European, said that: "Christ will agonise until the end of the world therefore, we must not sleep during this whole time." I think about this often, that when an injustice takes place, for example in Siberia, in China, in Norway, in South Africa, when a human being is wronged, we are all to blame because we are part of mankind. This is what Europe needs to do, join its pieces, become whole and fight for this and maintain it at a high spiritual level.

Lyritsas: What, in your opinion, is the greatest danger for the European project?

Charalambides: There's a hysteria in Europe, a hysteric individualism, the individualism of states and then the individualism of individuals, because one thing leads to another. In my opinion, the most predatory individualism lies in the most powerful state of Europe, in Germany. Where money dominates thought is defined. A Greek professor at the MIT University, Christos Papadimitriou, once said that there is a predatory capitalism all over the world. You see it a lot in America, especially in the odious face of Trump, where the soul of America has been poisoned - not its body - and it led to a decaying society. Europe is also in peril because of the disproportionate liberalism, the primacy given to economy and the absolute surveillance through technology. We are so networked that even now someone might know that we are talking. There is surveillance through the internet, four or five internet monopolies controlling everything. A scientist once said that eventually the state will inevitably become a police state and at any given time it will know if I have a fever, how many white and red blood cells I have and more, just because I entered into the system.

Besides, once in a while police movies depict all these, they operate this way and arrest the perpetrator and this is just the beginning. Well, the biggest perpetrator is the states who control their citizens, who don't respect their citizens.

And what can a citizen do to rectify the situation? I feel that we are becoming more and more exposed and vulnerable in situations beyond our control. I insist and I repeat that we are under gradual surveillance which will become absolute in the end. The plot of the novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" says that Big Brother is watching everything; the Big Brother is the computers, excessive communication, oversupply, overproduction, overexposure. These "over-", these excesses are destroying our sense of proportion and sense of humanity. When we lose our humanity we lose our substance, our human essence and this is the great danger. Consequently, Europe's biggest obligation isn't just to salvage its economy or put its technology or financials in order but also to rescue the people. And no matter what we say, I believe that hope will start from Europe because it is the only place on the planet where a sense of collegiality is emerging hesitantly, despite all the untoward incidents.

Lyritsas: Regarding the major issue of national identity versus European identity, it is often presented as an either/or issue in public discussion.

Charalambides: This is a very good question too. I often say that in order to have a European identity you need to have a national identity, and as strange as it seems it is not a contradiction, it is a combination. Let's take for example a mosaic, what does the word "mosaic" mean? You place a green tile, a blue, a yellow, a purple, a red, a light blue one and you create a face, for example. Let's say that each tile corresponds to a European country and together, this colourful mosaic creates what we call the European Union; consequently, the European Union as an idea is not about having one prevailing voice but pluralism. Just as you go out in garden and you hear a bird singing and then another and another and you see all kinds of insects, flowers, plants and trees. Each tree is graceful in its way and has its own fruit; even Solomos says that the tiny worm "enjoys a happy hour". All these elements make up the concept of Europe. That being the case, if Europeans want to create a guild where everything is the same, it cannot happen due to the nature of things which is different. There is a difference between the nature of Holland and Greece or Cyprus, the Mediterranean region is different from the north. I was once at a conference in Sète, in the south of France, near Marseille and the French told me: "We are different from the French in the north, they are more phlegmatic, we are from the Mediterranean, we are outgoing." Therefore, each person is different, even brothers of the same family, even the fingers of one hand as we often say. Then, why shouldn't every state have its own consciousness of ethnicity, in the sense of identity and not in the sense of rivalry and fighting with others.

If you say to me: "You are not Greek", then what am I, if not Greek? Given that I speak Greek, I am an orthodox, I have a sense of my nationality through the centuries, of my continuity and consequence of my spiritual and cultural projection. Why would I deny it? In the name of what? In order to coexist with the Turkish Cypriots. But of course

the Turkish Cypriots must not lose their identity, they must preserve it to the fullest. Only when we preserve our identities, we are able to clearly see the other as well. Because in order to exist in a place you need to have authenticity, an identity and by having an identity you rise to the skies, you are lifted off and you meet the other in the air. You are joined in spirit with the other and that is different from the earth that gave birth to you, that fed and raised you. Different conditions of beingness are created. What's more, we have different dietary customs from France. The Germans, who are next to the French, drink beer while the French drink wine; therefore each place has its peculiarity. When you listen to German it is like a language forged in iron, when you listen to French it is like a ballet and these two countries are next to each other. Why would I take away the identity of these two countries or why would these countries ask me to take it away from them?

Lyritysas: Are you worried about the possibility that future generations might lose their national identity?

Charalambides: What might happen is a case of squint, it is not a pretty word but it applies for all peoples. I would say smaller peoples are at a bigger risk because they are easily alienated under the pressure of foreign powers. In Cyprus - and it is a known fact - there are a lot of villages called "Saint so-and-so" or a Greek village called *Galinoporni* and it is inhabited solely by Turkish. What does that mean? Its residents do not speak Turkish – or now they speak some – and they speak Greek. What happened? During the Turkish rule - at some difficult stage of the occupation - people converted to Islam, in order to escape heavy taxation, even the priest! Nevertheless, the churches remained and so did the names "Saint so-and-so"; *Agios Symeon*, for example is a Turkish village with Greek churches and orthodox places of worship. These are testimonials, and I mention them not for propaganda purposes but to portray the problem. The problem is that the peoples need to preserve their identity, which under difficult circumstances can be altered. If the peoples rely on spiritual values, which is very hard as I said before, it can be traced again.

Europe is hesitantly starting to pay attention, meaning that the funds Europe is giving for culture, for example, are very small in comparison to those for sending a satellite in space or making an elaborate plane or gun. Let's say that the meritocratic order of things would be for art to take primacy and for humans to start becoming poets, artists, beautiful people, to become "silky people" as the Greek poet, Carouzos has said. That silkiness, the lightness is what defines human quality and value. Chekhov once said: "If you really think about it, everything is wonderful in this world, except what we think or do when we forget our human value." Human value is instrumental and primary and that is why the archetypes of great religions, the important religious reformers, and I am not referring only to Christ, came to reform humans. And to the extent humans succeed, they become angelic or if they are unsuccessful, they might divert and become demonic, like the example of Nazis and Hitler. A great country that gave birth to Goethe, Beethoven, Schiller and Bach also created Hitler. Hitler was Austrian, of course, but the Austrians willingly sided with Germany, while poor Greece defended itself amidst the bombings. Now they say: "Cretes are such barbarians! We, the

parachutists, were descending and they were shooting us mid-air". To this I reply: "Why did you descend to Crete? To conquer the people. Why would the people allow you to conquer it?" The mentality is: "We were playing a game and the rules say that only soldiers participate, not citizens". But who told you about the rules of the game? That is why almost all Europe surrendered without a fight while the Greeks resisted; because it is in their culture, they had the sense of value, of human decency, honour and love for their country.

[Hélène Glykatzi] Ahrweiler did a paper once, a research and asked me to take part in it. The question was "Greece in Europe, what about Hellenism?" Greece was about to become a member of the European Union. Where is Hellenism? I said that Hellenism is Europe because Europe's DNA is Greek, even its name, that is where Europe starts and that is where it is going to end sometime. It needs to discover the Greek component which goes beyond the geographical definition. That is the reason why important writers, even Goethe said: "I feel Greek". That is to say that to hellenize is something more than a birth certificate. A lot of Greeks are not even Greeks, they just happened to be born in Greece. With regards to hellenize, Cavafy says in a poem: "This is not for us because we are Greeks, pettiness is not for us, we are Greeks!" The Greek component is associated with virtue, the concept of "hellenize" is profound; it has nothing to do with chauvinism. Oftentimes I am misunderstood and people say: "Charalambides is probably a nationalist since he talks about the concept of Greece and feels Greek". However, what did Cavafy mean when he said: "I am not Greek, I am Hellenic"? What he meant was: "Forget about the geographical identity and grasp the essence, which is much deeper". It is similar to what Solomos used to say "Enclose Greece in your soul *o'altra cosa*". He said it in Italian because he spoke Italian and his culture was more Italian than Greek. "*O'altra cosa*" meant "or anything else", "Enclose in your soul Greece or anything else and you will feel every kind of greatness flourish inside you". If you enclose not only Greece but any other thing, that "any other thing" refers to something beyond Greece, because Hellenism too surpasses Greece and ultimately, Hellenism is universalism. It is a blessing to be born Greek and experience virtue in a Greek way; that is to identify with Socrates, Heraclitus, Plato, with all these very important people who provided a different sense of the meaning "Hellenic".

Lyrtsas: Let's talk about the political awareness of Kyriakos Charalambides. Do you remember your family talking about politics when you were young?

Charalambides: I do remember because we had all kinds of politics in our family. My father was a centrist in a way, a right-of-center like all the serious, dignified public servants during British rule. I do remember him though, reading the newspaper "*Kypriakos Filakas*" (Cyprus Guardian) (laughter) and feeling moved about the things that connected Cyprus and Greece at the time. It was during the time of the "*Enosis*" (Union) issue and we were all a little sensitive about the union of Cyprus with Greece. We felt - and certain people still feel that way - that Cyprus was a Greek island who unfortunately couldn't be united with Greece because it was a little too far and it was occupied by the British. They offered it to Greece once but Greece couldn't accept it due to its bad condition, it had participated in costly wars and couldn't even support

itself, let alone Cyprus. When the time came and Greece asked for Cyprus, Britain would not grant it because it had lost all her colonies around the world, it had Suez and it even lost that, so Cyprus was all that was left. That is why it famously said: "Cyprus will never be given" because it needed it as its base.

This traumatic experience, the fact that the natural evolution of things could not take place and Cyprus could not be united with Greece - I am talking about the '50s - led to the uprising. The Turkish revolted as well, with the help and the cunning interference of the British who stirred up Turkish nationalism, and some people were killed from both sides. These things always happen when nationalisms are stirred up and we are now at a point where the situation cannot be fixed.

If you go back to the foundations of the island in ancient years, it had ten Greek kingdoms with pure Greek names and kings, which were connected to ancient Greece. Evagoras (Cypriot king) had done so many great benefices in ancient Athens, in Greece, that they placed his golden statue at the *Ecclesia*. Isocrates came here and wrote some texts about how the ideal leader should be and so on. Solon the lawmaker came to Cyprus as well. We are connected through one of the goddesses of the Twelve Olympians; Aphrodite was Cypriot and Cyprus is called the "island of Aphrodite". Both the god and the name are clearly Greek. I don't mean it in a chauvinist way but I am trying to explain the reasons for which the people asked to be united - naturally, I repeat - with Greece. Then everything else happened; the stupidities of the colonels and the coup d'état and Grivas who created the *EOKA B* (paramilitary organisation) towards the end, thus, creating a civil war. He is the direct culprit and for me, he is unforgivable. Then deplorable incidents took place that did not lead anywhere, and created obstacles and dead-ends. Now, we are like an unfortified state, surrounded by Turkish warships which are insolently entering our EEZ and threatening us. They publish maps depicting the Great Turkey and Cyprus in red, so Turkey is still planning to make Cyprus Turkish in its entirety. Those who say it now or those who intuit it are considered in good part nationalists but this is the only reality when Turkey is concerned. Its ultimate geopolitical purpose is to take over Cyprus as a whole.

I haven't given an answer though. I talked about my father; my brother, Andreas, was a leftist and he was an organised leftist. My brother, Frixos, was a rightist, he fought during the *EOKA* (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) struggle and I remember he used to have a gun, he was in the executive cell. So, the family had a little bit of everything and this provided me with political freedom. If someone listens to me when I speak at times, he would say: "By the way he is talking, he is a leftist" and at times when I speak about the concepts of identity and existence someone would say that I am a rightist. These characterisations are obviously wrong and I have managed - consciously and with great conviction - not to join a party, none at all! I am proud to consider myself uncommitted so I can criticize all the parties in the name of the truth and only that. Because the truth does not belong to any party, it does not depend on any party. When someone says: "I belong to the party", what does that mean? Are you an appendage of the party? If the party tells you: "Don't vote for this in Parliament" do you do it, even though you disagree, because the party told you? Then you are not a

free man, you are a slave. One might say: “Mr. Charalambides, some people must vote and some parties must exist” and I say let them exist without me. I will remain a poet, so that I can walk alone in this tragic space of Cyprus which is so stagnated. At least I will have maintained with profound dignity my identity, consciousness and humanity.

Lyritsas: However, do you remember any historical juncture during which you had to take a political stance?

Charalambides: Yes, during the *EOKA* struggle (*EOKA*, abbreviation of *Ethnikí Orgánosis Kipriakoú Agónos* (Greek: “National Organization of Cypriot Struggle”), was an underground nationalist movement of Greek Cypriots dedicated to ending British colonial rule in Cyprus (achieved in 1960) and to achieving the eventual union (Greek enosis) of Cyprus with Greece).

I was a team leader then, during the first period of *EOKA*, the genuinely liberating phase of 1955 – 1959. We were all young kids, mostly classmates and we had joined the *EOKA* struggle. I was a team leader for five teams, each team had ten kids; we raised awareness, handed out flyers, did graffiti on the streets, we pointed out hiding places, we transferred injured fighters, these sort of things. My nickname was “Stasinós” and the deputy head used to send praising letters for my courageous behaviour and actions. I tore them, because it said: “Tear them or chew them after reading, do not allow to be found.” I mean, I did join a system for some time, but that system was steered towards the liberation of Cyprus. Its orientation wasn’t partisan then, and when it did become partisan I took a stance against it and I strongly opposed to *EOKA B*. In fact during a television interview, two days ago, I said that I cannot accept the presence and facade of Grivas in Cyprus because he caused national division and disaster; he prepared the ground for the disaster.

Lyritsas: Nowadays, is there anything worth fighting for politically?

Charalambides: Yes, there is. I want to be fair to those people who are honest and belong to parties. One should not say: “I am honest and the others are not”, it would be dishonest to say that. There are a lot of honest and pure ideologists in the parties, but there comes a time when these pure ideologists - who remained pure until the end - will say: “We were betrayed”. It is the nature of the parties to betray their pure ideologists, while the “rodents” advance, the yes-men, those favoured by a particular leadership. That is the nature of every party.

I remember once when *AKEL* (Progressive Party of Working People) was elected to power and [Demetris] Christofias became President, a leftist friend of mine, a very nice lad, called me and said excitedly: “Kyriakos, what do you think?” and I replied: “Look, *AKEL* has been had”. He said: “What do you mean?” and I replied: “Because now that it is in power it will lose its purity as a party” and that is what happened. When *AKEL* came into power it appointed some of its own people, it promoted some of its own interests. This happens all the time, with all the parties and governments, right, left, center and because of this I cannot be on the inside but on the outside. This does not mean that I criticize all those who are in it.

Lyritsas: You talked about *EOKA* before, and we should address the subject. You come from a country where the concept of freedom was never taken for granted.

Charalambides: Right.

Lyritsas: Was there a historical period during which you remember feeling unfree and yearning for freedom?

Charalambides: Yes, certainly the *EOKA* period was the outbreak of the realisation that we are not free. The British were not like the Nazis, they weren't killing five hundred or fifty people collectively because one British was killed. But a lot of times I felt them breathing down my neck, I was beaten and they did come to arrest me. Once, they came to take me for interrogation, apparently they had their suspicions or information. Five or four British entered the house, grabbed me and they were going to put me in the jeep. My father was furious and he pointed towards the wall where it said: "Mentioned in despatches for gallant and distinguished services". It was given to him for the great bravery he showed during the war; he was given a mention in despatches with the signature of the Secretary of State for War of Britain and we framed it and put it on the wall. My father showed it to them and said: "I shouldn't have fought for you, sirs, since you take my son to torture him". I must confess that they set me free, apologised and left. I don't believe that a German would do that, maybe because British culture contained more democratic and parliamentary elements - in a profound sense - than the German mentality. I lived there for six months, I had a scholarship from the German government at the Bavarian Broadcasting for further education and I had a good friend who was showing me around. So I asked her: "Why did the Germans follow Hitler so faithfully?" She gave me an explanation that impressed me: "Because they lacked imagination". If you analyse it, what are the components of fantasy? What do you place before you in order to see, to understand? Fantasy has elements of spirituality, you need to have a vision, to understand things beyond the static that the ruthless killer places before you, like Hitler was. This fine distinction is the advantage and the only asset we, the small peoples, have. A lot of times I say: "Thank God I am not German or even French or Dutch!" Why? Because being part of a small people I can see the truth, I can see things that they cannot see because they push them aside. This fragility, being destructible, exposed and frail, I used the word "frailty", it is a capability that opens your eyes and you can see things.

Lyritsas: When was the first time you felt free, Mr. Charalambides?

Charalambides: That is a very hard question. I felt free spiritually from the moment I wrote my first poem, I felt like I was escaping. I have always felt free as a human being, even during the period of colonialism when we were fighting for freedom. Freedom is not something you hold in your hand and say: "This is heavy, it is this thing" or "The *Enosis* happened so we are free". We might have not been free if *Enosis* did happen, Greece might have disappointed us. I am talking about the ideals of a struggle, in the name of a vision and a fantasy, as I said before. I always felt free without ever feeling oppressed by anything. My human will and existence is free.

Lyritsas: Lastly, and in relation to the things we are discussing about freedom, I can't help but ask, due to the fact that you are Greek Cypriot, what do borders mean to you? I am asking for your answer considering that we are talking about a country, which until today, is divided in two.

Charalambides: Of course it is, and this is a very big chapter, but in a nutshell I will say that artificial borders were created and up until today we say - and the whole Europe says - that the Turkish north part of Cyprus, the occupied, is a pseudo-state. In the news we call it pseudo-state, the said pseudo-prime minister, the said pseudo-president. The only country who recognised this pseudo-state is Turkey, the country who created it. It doesn't exist on paper because Cyprus joined the European Union as a whole and this ruined Turkey's plans. This is a good thing because it is a great advantage, both legal and ethical, for Cyprus at the moment; the fact that it belongs to Europe in its entirety. As far as Europe is concerned there are no borders, those borders are artificial and fake.

When it comes to me, I didn't cross the said border crossings placed on both sides, not because I am a hard core patriot, my whole family went except for me. I don't feel very good about it because I grew up there and I have beautiful memories. I am 80 years old now and I carry them with me and I reminiscence about them daily. Right now, as we speak, I am at Famagusta, I am at Karpasia; they are constantly with me, I nurture them in my soul and they become bigger. Therefore, there is absolutely no reason to pay a taxi and go see Famagusta from a barb wire and get depressed. What is the point? I see it on television and it brings me to tears. One might say: "This is your personal view, Mr. Charalambides, and you are entitled to maintain your vision". Oftentimes when they talk about Famagusta and they say the "ghost town" I get furious spiritually, and say: "Come on, guys, call it the "city-vision" because the outer layer creates the ghost, but on the inside there is a mussel, an oyster that is alive. It is frail but it is alive and that is what makes the existence, meaning the city, to stay alive. Therefore, to me it is a vision, I see it in front of me as a vision, not as a ghost. That is why I wrote a book called "Famagusta Regina" where the city rules in the Kingdom of Heaven. There are other explanations but the word "Regina" is the fundamental, the most eschatological and so it reigns somewhere where no evil hand, no barbarian hand can taint it.

So, I personally, did not go and it is uncomfortable when one crosses over and shows an identity card, a passport to a Turk, who is also miserable, and is waiting to check your papers and allow you to pass. However, the act remains and it is registered in the soul, my soul that is, I am not talking about others nor will I ask them for an explanation. I do ask myself though: "Do you, Charalambides, want to show your identity card? Do you want to yield and consider that your country is under occupation? You do not accept this." My pride is what makes me say "No". In fact I once wrote an article titled "Why I didn't go" and I explain that someone must say "No" for once. I do not have a negative view of the Turkish Cypriots and I believe that one day we will live together amicably but there are others who interfere and want to divide us. Regardless

of that, I will not go to the occupied part for the reason I have said. Therefore, the concept “border” theoretically is a cut in my soul which I want to obliterate in this way.

Lyritsas: Mr. Charalambides, we have reached the end. It was an honour and I thank you very much.

Charalambides: All the best.