Cyprus in a nutshell

Καλησπέρα, ίντα ‘ν’που κάμνετε;

This means “Good evening, how do you do?” in the dialect of Greek that is spoken on the island of Cyprus, where I was born. Cyprus is an island about half the size of the state of Connecticut and with a population that is about one quarter the population of Chicago. So it’s a pretty small place. But it is a beautiful place, with sandy beaches all around and mountains with snow in the middle and you can cross it by car from one end to the other in around 3 hours. Tonight I will tell you the stories of four famous women from Cyprus. You can then go see their pictures on the display about Cyprus.

The first one is the ancient Greek goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, or Venus as she was called in Latin. According to Greek mythology, Aphrodite rose out of the foam, the afrós, of the sea off the coast of Pafos in South West Cyprus. And that is what her name means, the one that rose out of the foam of the sea.

The second famous woman associated with Cyprus is St Helen, Aghia Eleni in Greek, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, the first Roman emperor who became a Christian and moved the capital of his empire to Constantinople, which literally means “city of Constantine”, today Istanbul. According to Leontios Machairas, a Cypriot storyteller, St. Helen went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and there she discovered the three crosses on which Jesus and the two thieves had been crucified 300 years earlier. She had the crosses dug out of the ground and wanted to bring them to back with her to Constantinople on her ship. But the ship was shipwrecked off the coast of Cyprus. Fortunately, St Helen was saved but when she set foot on the island, she found it virtually deserted. There had been a drought, a serious lack of water to do basic things, like drink and wash, for 36 years. Not only that, but the island was swarming with poisonous snakes. St. Helen decided to help the people of Cyprus and when she returned to her home in Constantinople, she arranged for an entire shipload of cats to be sent to the island to devour the poisonous snakes. At the spot where her ship had landed, a monastery was founded, the Monastery of St. Nicholas of the Cats. The monastery is still there today, swarming with cats that are said to be the great-great-great-grand-children of those cats sent to the island by St. Helen.

Today we know that cats have lived on Cyprus for a very, very long time: 9,500 years to be precise. In 2001, archaeologists discovered at the site of Shillourokambos, not far from the Monastery that St Helen founded, a human grave from 9,500 years ago with a pet cat buried next to the deceased person. This is the earliest example of a domesticated cat that we know of, that is, of people keeping cats as their pets. And it comes from Cyprus. So Cyprus is an island with a very long history — and lots of cats.

In fact, DNA testing done at the University of California, Davis, has established that there are two breeds of cat that are unique to the island of Cyprus. They are called the Aphrodite, a larger, stronger and taller cat, and the St Helena, which is smaller, and they are named after the two great women I told you about so far.
The third great woman I’d like to tell you about is Caterina Cornaro, who was Queen of Cyprus from 1474 until 1489 and became known as the last Queen of Cyprus. For almost 300 years before that, Cyprus had been an independent kingdom ruled by Kings who hailed from France. But by the time Caterina came to the throne, the kingdom had long since declined and could not afford to protect itself and be independent. In fact, it had been paying taxes to foreign rulers for a while. Under Caterina, the island was controlled by merchants from Venice, a city in Italy where Caterina herself also came from. In 1489, after 15 years as Queen, Caterina Cornaro was forced to give up her throne and hand over the administration of the island to the Republic of Venice. According to George Boustronios, a story-teller of the time, "On 14 February, the Queen dressed in black and accompanied by the Barons and their ladies, set off on horseback. Six knights held her horse's reins. From the moment she left [the capital] Nicosia, her eyes kept streaming with tears. Upon her departure, the whole population was bewailing."

When Cyprus became a colony of Venice in 1489, that was neither the first nor the last time that the island was coming under foreign rule. The geographical location of Cyprus at the crossroads of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, means that it is like a watchtower, a prime location from where someone can keep an eye on the entire region of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. For that reason, Cyprus has always been a place where the more powerful governments have wanted to have a foothold. Cyprus changed hands many times during its long history. Today, the island is divided between two communities, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, who live in the South and the North of the island respectively. That was not always so. Until 50 years ago, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots lived side by side, sometimes in the same neighborhoods. But political disagreements about who should be the boss meant that eventually there was a war, and people had to flee to save their lives. People from both communities were killed in the conflict and others became refugees in their own island. That happened 37 years ago, in 1974. The next year, in 1975, a group of Greek Cypriot women decided to Walk Home, that is, they decided to claim their right to return to their homes and to their villages that were now occupied by Turkish troops. "Women Walk Home" is a non-party political initiative conceived by a group of Greek Cypriot women with the support of women from the United States and Europe that has as its goal the reunification of the divided island of Cyprus and the peaceful coexistence of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. After 1975, they organized rallies in 1987 and again in 1989, to protest the continued occupation of their island and the separation of its people. Unfortunately, Cyprus continues to be divided today. They are the fourth woman I wanted to speak to you about tonight.

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Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, was born off the coast of Pafos in Cyprus.

Caterina Cornaro, the last queen of Cyprus, reigned from 1474 until 1489.

The foundation of the Church of the Holy Cross (Stavrovouni) on Cyprus by Saint Helen.

"Women Walk Home", a non-party political initiative conceived by a group of Greek Cypriot women with the support of women from the United States and Europe, organize peaceful rallies for the reunification of the island which has been divided between Greek and Turkish communities since 1974.