

**Briefing to the
United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
(Helsinki Commission)
on “Cyprus’ Religious Cultural Heritage in Peril”
(July 21, 2009)
By Dr. Klaus Gallas
Historian, Byzantine Art and Architecture**

I would like to thank the members of the Commission for allowing me to testify before you on the issue of Cyprus’ religious cultural heritage in peril. “There is still no complete case by case documentation of the art thefts that have been growing catastrophically in both number and seriousness ever since the start of the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus. But there is no question that since the day of the invasion, July 20th 1974, such internationally organised thefts and the accompanying illegal trade in works of art plundered from churches in the Turkish occupied sector – some of which form part of the UNESCO *World Cultural Heritage* – have multiplied to a worrying extent”.

One shocking instance that typifies this plundering and illegal trading is the 'Dikmen case', the most spectacular example of international theft recorded by the LKA, the Bavarian central department of crime. It culminated in a court case in Indianapolis in 1989 against the American art dealer Peggy Goldberg which was successfully pursued by the Church of Cyprus and the Government of Cyprus. It concerned the 6th Century mosaics in the apsis of the Panagia Kanakariá church on the Karpassia peninsula. Parts of these are now in the Byzantine Museum in Nicosia. Probably the first major account of the barbaric desecration and destruction of Christian heritage within the Turkish occupied area was the one by myself that appeared in the German national newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, on March 30th 1990.

A striking example of this desecration is the Ágios Euphemianos Church about a mile outside the old centre of Lýsi, to the west of Famagusta. When I first visited the little church prior to 1974 I was overwhelmed by the glowing colors and expressive features of the Byzantine murals dating from the 14th Century. But when I returned to Lýsi in 1989, long after the start of the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus, I found that things in the village were completely changed. Even the altered name of the place, the Turkish designation 'Akdogãn', clearly indicated the intentions of the Turkish occupying powers: eradication of every cultural reminder of established historical structures on the island.

The little church of Agios Euphemianos was difficult to locate because it was enveloped now by the Turkish barracks. How was it possible for this jewel of Byzantine creativity to have fallen victim to international art thieves under the very noses of the watchful Turkish soldiers? The removal of all the precious frescoes from the walls and ceiling-domes in a professional manner and their transportation abroad in an undamaged state is something that would have taken the robbers days if not weeks. Scaffolding would have had to be erected, tools and materials would have had to be carried to the church through or around the outside of the barracks. And then there would have been the whole business of exporting the works of art. This too would have meant having the right contacts and connections. Nothing could have been done without the permission of the Turkish occupation forces.

In this context, there is also a mystery concerning the export license by the so called “TRNC“ for the 6th Century Golden Mosaics of the Panagia Church on the Karpas Peninsula, which was signed at the time by Osman Örek. Until 1963 he was defence minister in the Makarios government and from 1974 onwards the righthand man of Rauf Denktash, the leader of the Turkish Cypriot

community. Later on, Örek declared the document to have been a forgery. In 1988 Peggy Goldberg, a US citizen, had acquired these mosaics and attempted to market them illegally for 1.2 million US dollars. What followed was the celebrated court case in Indianapolis that ended in the autumn of 1989 with the decision by federal judge James Noland in favour of the Republic of Cyprus and the Church of Cyprus. This was a uniquely important decision by the US Court.

This case is symptomatic of the organised crime of ripping items of cultural heritage out of their context and, by doing so, destroying them for ever. Only in rare instances has the Government of Cyprus and the Church of Cyprus succeeded up to now in securing the return of stolen artworks to Cyprus either through court dispensations or by buying them back. The route taken by the works of art is usually from the Turkish occupied part of Cyprus to either Munich or Amsterdam, then from there to Zürich and on to the USA.

Following a house search of Aydin Dikmen's premises and subsequent confiscation, the LKA in Munich is currently holding Byzantine mosaics, frescoes and icons presumed to be from the Turkish occupied part of Cyprus, to the value of more than 30 million Euros. Meanwhile the legal proceedings against Aydin Dikmen have been dragging on for more than ten years without a conclusion. For mosaics and frescoes, identification is less of a problem. They are usually quite easy to ascribe to a particular historic monument. Icons on the other hand are hard to pin down.

The Republic of Cyprus may have secured the judgement in Indianapolis but it was less successful in its efforts to secure the return of the Lýsi mosaics, notwithstanding the fact that they could not now be sold to unscrupulous collectors. It was Aydin Dickmen who, in 1985, also sold the Lýsi frescoes to America. The De Menil Foundation in Houston, Texas, acquired these immensely valuable 13th Century frescoes for just 850,000 US dollars! The interior of the Lýsi chapel was then reconstructed true to the original within the halls of the Foundation's museum so as to allow the frescoes to be displayed exactly as they had appeared *in situ*. The De Menil Foundation broke new ground in the details of this arrangement. When it was offered the frescoes, it side-stepped all the importation rules, negotiated directly with the Church of Cyprus, made an agreement for a 'longterm assignment' until 2012, bought the frescoes, had them restored and in effect rescued this entire endangered piece of cultural heritage. All the same, there are also some hidden dangers in this *modus operandi*. It lends strength and encouragement to unprincipled art thieves by signalling to them that they will always be able to make a profit, one way or the other, from their stolen goods. Maybe what is needed here to nip thieves in the bud is an international certificate for the buying and selling of works of art, complete with details of provenance.

I wish to bring in another example to support the view that art theft in the Turkish occupied part of the Republic of Cyprus was usually only possible when it was tolerated or happened under the watchful eye of the Turkish military. On the south coast of the island only a mile from Kyrenia stands the Acheiropiitos Monastery, a dignified complex dating from the 11th Century that was erected on the foundations of an early Christian settlement including a basilica. The monastery used to be a treasurehouse of Byzantine icons dating from a variety of centuries but what has become of these treasures?

During a visit that I paid recently, gaining access to the monastery looked as if it would be impossible. Just as in the autumn of 1989, the Turkish forces were still ensconced in its handsome rooms. But after repeated attempts on my part to be allowed in, the officers and men suddenly appeared helpful and I was permitted to enter. Of the once magnificent display of icons there was nothing to be seen. Only the richly carved pulpit from 1819, with its touches of gold leaf, and the remains of the Ikonostasē, bereft of all its icons, gave a faint indication of the former glories of this empty chamber. How could this desecration of Christian cultural heritage have come about, right in the middle of the Turkish military camp? How could all these precious icons have been taken down

and carried off from a monastery that was actually occupied by Turkish officers and men?

The loss to Cyprus and to UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage is unimaginable. It can be assumed that the amount of booty we are aware of is only a fraction of the material that has actually been stolen from the Orthodox churches of Cyprus. Which begs the question: how many treasures altogether have actually been taken between 1974 and 2009 and are now lost to us for ever through having already been sold to collectors in all corners of the world? How many fortunes have the art thieves amassed for themselves in the meantime through these outrageous acts? They must amount to hundreds of millions of dollars. None of the plundered churches will ever sparkle again as they did in the light of days gone by...

My greatest wish, which ties in with the appeal to the Helsinki Commission, is that in the very near future the many works of art that have been stolen, and in part still remain missing, should be restored to Cyprus. Only through solidarity and joint action against worldwide art theft, as well as against the barbaric destruction and desecration of examples of UNESCO's World Heritage, can we keep alive our historic roots and our cultural identity.

I thank the Commission for its valued attention.