



### Journalist of the Month

## Uludag Unearths the Missing Stories of Cyprus

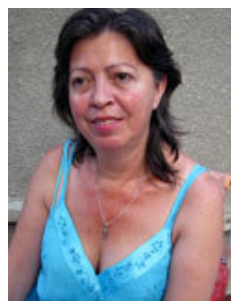
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By Yigal Schleifer  
WeNews correspondent

*After withstanding years of silence, Cypriot families--both Greek and Turkish--are beginning to learn about the relatives they lost to political violence and to reclaim their remains. Sevgul Uludag has spurred that process of national healing.*

NICOSIA, Cyprus (WOMENSENEWS)--Sitting in her shady garden sipping a cold drink, the smiling and relaxed Sevgul Uludag gives little indication that she is one of Cyprus' most crusading journalists.

For the last six years, though, Uludag (pronounced ooh-loo-dah), has been digging into one of the island's most sensitive stories: the fate of some 2,000 people who disappeared in Greek-Turkish clashes that gripped Cyprus during the 1960s and 1970s and led to the Mediterranean island's partition.



Sevgul Uludag  
Credit: Yigal Schleifer

"The missing persons issue was a kind of taboo on our side," says Uludag, 49, who lives in the Turkish half of Cyprus' divided capital, Nicosia. "People were told they are dead, don't look for them. The missing persons issue was a zone of silence in our community and I wanted to break that silence."

Since 2002, she has chronicled the stories of the missing and the relatives they left behind in a daily column for the Turkish Cypriot Yeni Duzen newspaper and a weekly one for the Greek Cypriot Politis.

She has set up a telephone hotline for people to call in their stories and offer tips about where some of the missing may be buried. A collection of her articles on the subject was translated into Greek and has been a best-seller on both sides of Cyprus since it was first published in 2006.

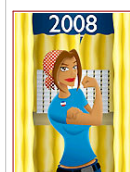
At first she was a lonely voice.

Gradually, however, Uludag has been joined by several other Greek and Turkish Cypriot journalists who now write about the island's missing persons.

### **Pain on Both Sides**

Ahmet Erdengiz, director general of the Turkish Cypriot Ministry of Foreign Affairs, says their efforts have helped the public come to terms with the

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violence. "Both sides have started to appreciate the pain of the other side," he says.

Meanwhile, after decades of inactivity, the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, a United Nations-sponsored search for the remains of the disappeared that was officially established in 1981, is moving into action.

In the past two years the committee, to which Erdengiz belongs, has exhumed the remains of some 400 missing Greeks and Turks at dozens of excavation sites and has used DNA testing to positively identify 104 of them.

Although the work of journalists sometimes led to false expectations by families that their missing relatives might be found, Erdengiz said, it also helped force the committee to address the issue seriously.

Uludag, a veteran of both the women's rights movement and Cyprus' peace movement, says she decided to start writing about the issue when she found out that an old friend of hers had a father who disappeared in 1963, something the family never talked about.

Among the stories Uludag wrote about were those of a Turkish woman who recounted being raped as a 13-year-old by Greek Cypriot irregular fighters during the fighting in 1974, and of a Greek man who, as a 10-year-old during the same period, was left for dead by Turkish Cypriot fighters who attacked his village, only to be found by a group of Turkish soldiers who nursed him back to life. The only Turkish word the man knows is the one the soldiers who found him kept repeating: "korkma," or "don't be afraid."

### 'Nobody Dealt With These Traumas'

"Many of the people I've interviewed never told these stories, even to their wives or husbands. Nobody asked them for their stories before. Nobody has dealt with these traumas," says Uludag.

Cyprus, ruled by the Ottomans from the 14th through 19th centuries and then by the British beginning in 1878, gained its independence in 1960.

By 1963, the new country--populated by Greeks and Turks--was in a shambles, with ethnic violence leading to the arrival of U.N. peacekeepers and the start of the island's de facto partition.

That partition became fact in 1974, after Turkey invaded in the wake of a Greek-led coup that sought to reunify the island with Greece. The fighting led to the displacement of some 162,000 Greek Cypriots and 45,000 Turkish Cypriots. The Turkish-occupied northern part of the island declared itself in 1983 the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a mini-state of 264,000 currently only recognized by Ankara.

After decades of futile negotiations, the two Cypriot communities have recently restarted talks in the hope of finding a settlement that will lead to the island's reunification.

One of the issues that will have to be addressed is the bitter legacy of the missing, some 1,500 Greeks and 500 Turks, whose names were rarely mentioned on either side.

### A Widespread Wound

"The two communities initially decided not to deal with this issue and to hide it," says Elias Georgiades, the top Greek Cypriot member of the



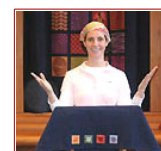
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Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus. "This is a wound, a wound that touches all of us and that gave great suffering to those involved."

Uludag has helped break new ground in another important way, writing not only about Greek atrocities committed against Turks, but also about what her own people did to their Greek neighbors. She's paid a price for such candor.

"I've received a lot of threats," says Uludag, whose brother-in-law, a peace activist, was murdered 12 years ago by unknown gunmen. "I am a kind of sitting target. Even if the killer has died, their sons have threatened me. . . I've also received threats from villages where there are burial sites and that don't want any digging there."

In October, the Washington-based International Women's Media Foundation will award Uludag one of its annual Courage in Journalism awards, along with Afghan journalist Farida Nekzad and another whose name has not yet been made public.

"These extraordinary journalists have shown bravery amidst threats and intimidation," said Judy Woodruff, chair of the award program, in a statement. "They are heroines of a free press and provide us with role models for the very best journalism in the world today."

Uludag says the threats don't deter her and she hopes her work will help bring about reconciliation in Cyprus.

"I am not using the pain to create hatred," she says about her writing. "I am using it to create empathy and bring people together. It helps to break these taboos about talking about this subject."

Across the border, on the Greek side of Nicosia, Tassoula Lazarou and her family may be some of the people who have benefited from Uludag's muckraking.

Lazarou's brother Nestoros, missing since 1974, is among those whose remains have been unearthed by the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, found in a grave in an open field with three other missing Greeks.

"I was very sad in the beginning," says Lazarou, "but now I'm feeling better, stronger. The sadness is still there, but it's not as strong. We feel more at peace." She keeps a Greek-language version of Uludag's book on her dining table, along with her brother's picture and documents from the U.N. search committee.

"I can sympathize with the families on the other side," she adds. "I want all the families to feel at rest."

*Yigal Schleifer is a freelance writer based in Istanbul, Turkey, where he works as a correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor and the Jerusalem Report.*

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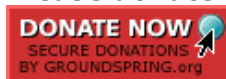
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