Michalakis, 83, Shirt Manufacturer, Nicosia

**1. Can you tell me a few things about yourself? For example, when and where you were born? Did you study for anything? Have you travelled or lived overseas?**

*I’m 83 years old, I was born in 1935. I’m a widower, unfortunately I lost my wife a year ago [he looks down sadly]. I’ve got three children and grandchildren. I was a tailor in the past then I opened this manufacturing business and made shirts. Gradually it expanded and I bought the shop you can see across the road [he points to a large shop]. You can see the sign “Midea” [the name of the manufacturing business], it’s still there. We are in what used to be the warehouse. The owner of the shop across the street wanted to throw me out so he could rent it to restaurateurs, back when there was a surge of cafes and restaurants opening in Nicosia. He took me to court....eh, now the shop’s sitting there unrented. I come here every day, five days a week and stay here until late in the afternoon.*

**2. Have you ever owned another business in the past? How long have you been an owner of a business? How many businesses have you owned in the past?**

*I started this manufacturing business in 1955. Our shirt label was “Midea” as you can see [the whole place was full of boxes of shirts; stock which remains on the shelves, among old photographs, old calendars and furniture]. When we first started we sold to retailers in Cyprus, then we started exporting overseas – England, the Soviet Union, Arab countries. We had resellers who would stipulate in contracts with their clients that they would only stock Midea shirts. We had a good name in the market. Then in the 80s, the government introduced development grants and we built a factory on the Strovolos industrial site. There were a lot of businessmen like me. During that period the shoe and clothes manufacturing sectors in Cyprus bloomed. Then other situations came along that I don’t want to remember... [obviously annoyed]. I prefer not to think about it, I don’t want to trouble my heart and my mind.*

**3. Can you tell me about the history behind your business?**

*I started the business with my wife in 1955, after many struggles. As I said before, I was a tailor, I knew how to sew. I learnt the trade as a young lad and so when we decided to go into the clothing business, we took on the shop you can see across the road. Not as you see it now, first we took on the corner shop and then we expanded and took over the next two shops; three shops in a row. Things were going well despite the fact that there were troubles in Nicosia; first with the British and then in 1963 [the inter-community struggles]. I’ve been witness to many events, just think, a little further up an Englishman was murdered as he was going to get his haircut. Then the British police officers came to ask me what I had seen and heard. Anyway, in 1980 we opened the factory on the Strovolos industrial site in accordance with the government’s directives. We had invested a lot; we bought machines and hired staff. It wasn’t easy finding staff. Just think that there were so many people who wanted to be a part of the clothes manufacturing industry, even those who were in the government monitoring us were opening their own manufacturing companies! Everyone wanted to benefit and they would take each other’s employees. But back then no one had told us what being in the European Union meant and then the downhill trend in the sector began, up until 1990. Businesses were closing one after the other. Some divorced, others got sick, others even committed suicide because of their worries. We invested in the industry, but when the industry began to suffer the government didn’t offer any compensation. The area here in old Nicosia was in ruin after 1974, but during that period there wasn’t an industry or trade that didn’t go under. Over the last few years the area has come back to life, it’s filled with cafes. Things have changed a lot...it’s lost its commercial character.*

**4. What advantages did you see in opening your business?**

*It’s what I knew how to do. We made good quality shirts, we chose our materials carefully, which button was better suited for which shirt. I helped my children through their studies overseas, thinking that one day they would come back and take over the business. How was I to know that there would be nothing left? The handlers of our economy and the government destroyed us based on guidelines from the European Union. Now the machines just sit in the factory, the factory is still there; if you pass through the Strovolos industrial site you can see it.*

**5. Are you facing any obstacles or problems in keeping your business going?**

*What business? There’s no business left [he lowers his head].*

[in answer to the question why does he still come to the shop since it isn’t open]

*If you think about the answer that I gave you at the beginning about my family status, you’ll understand why I still come here [he is obviously emotionally distraught].*

**6. Considering the experience that you have built up over the years but also the experience that you are going through now, would you say that you are still able to maintain the business and deal with the problems that affect it?**

*I like this job and I’d never thought about stopping, even with all the adversity we faced as a sector in the economy. Unfortunately, we’re paying for other peoples’ mistakes, they told us about our business prospects and outlined an idyllic upward course and they fooled us into investing. But the market isn’t how it used to be, things have changed especially with Cyprus joining the EU. There is no manufacturing industry in the country today. And unfortunately this situation wasn’t caused by the businessmen, we tried, we listened to the advice that they gave us but...nothing came of it [he says obviously frustrated].*