

From the court of Ali Pasha to the salons of Sydney:

The story of Aikaterine Plessou Crummer

Dr Panayiotis Diamadis

The life story of Katherine Crummer, born Aikaterine Plessou, remains little-told, even amongst the Australian Hellenic community. As she never recorded her own biography, historians are left to piece together the known fragments of her life to form a very rough picture of the life of Australia's first Hellene woman migrant. Covering almost an entire century (probably born 1809 or 1810, passing away in 1907), her life experiences are the stuff of Hollywood blockbusters.

The Plessos family were natives of the Epiros region of north-western Hellas. Specifically, 'home' was the small highland town of Plaision¹ in the Thesprotia district, not far from fabled Souli. Her father Georgios, was a merchant based in Serres in eastern Macedonia, and it appears he was absent for months on end. Aikaterine – nicknamed *Roushio* for her red hair – and her younger brother Konstantinos (known as Konstantis) were raised by her mother Vasiliki.

By the early 1810s, Vasiliki and her children were living in a substantial house near the Church of Ayia Marina in central Ioannina. Near the city walls, the neighbourhood was favoured by the city's wealthy Christians, who were banned from settling inside the walled city following an earlier rebellion.

How the Plessos family came to be in this residence is not recorded. However, Vasiliki appears to have become a lover of Mukhtar Pasha, one of the sons of the local Muslim Albanian/Hellene warlord, the Lion of Tepelene, Ali Pasha.

A third child was born to Vasiliki during this period, a son named Athanasios. Who his father was is uncertain, though he was raised by Vasiliki, and looked after her in her old age. An attempt by Georgios Plaisios

to reclaim his family after Athanasios' birth ended unsuccessfully and he thereafter disappears.

As Aikaterine matured, she began to catch the eye of both Mukhtar and Ali. In an effort to secure her daughter's future, Vasiliki arranged for her betrothal to Dr Ioannis Kolettis², Ali Pasha's court physician.

Life seemed to be going smoothly, until the failed uprising of Ali Pasha against Sultan in Constantinople³. A favourite tale of Ioannina is the encounter between the warlord and a wandering monk named Kosmas of Aetolia⁴. Renowned as a holy man and educator with gifts of foresight, Kosmas was asked by Ali whether he would ever reach the imperial capital of Constantinople. Kosmas responded yes, with a red beard. According to legend, Ali laughed, as his beard had already become white with his advancing years.

Whether this conversation unfolded this way or not, Ali was captured at his home on the island in Lake Pamvotis, shot and beheaded on the steps. His preserved head was sent to the Imperial Court as proof he was dead. So Ayios Kosmas was proven correct: Ali went to Constantinople with his beard stained red by his own blood.

With Ali's death, Kolettis fled Ioannina and broke off the engagement to a pre-pubescent Aikaterine. The next couple of years of her life are undocumented. The next confirmed place she is to be found is Mesolonghi, in the home of an 'uncle' named Georgios Kitsos. The city,



1. http://romiazirou.blogspot.com.au/2015/05/video_38.html

2. Kolettis went on to become a key figure in the early years of the independent Hellenic state.

3. Constantinople did not become Istanbul until 193

4. Now Saint Kosmas o Aitolos.