

SUMMARY

Interview with **Melpomeni Konstantinou**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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The interview was conducted in Greek.

Melpomeni Konstantinou was born on 25th February 1925 in Monolithos on the island of Rhodes. Her father was a highly entrepreneurial man, and would bid for a variety of projects both locally and in neighbouring Turkey where he would complete each one with locally hired workers. These projects included the building of houses, roads or even bulk transportation of goods such as building materials.

The family farm was looked after by her mother and her older three siblings, while young Melpomeni looked after the house. At peak times her dad would hire local workers to complete the various farming activities, as necessary.

Melpomeni's grandparents all died before she was born. She was named after her father's mother and everyone was excited as she was the baby of the family.

Melpomeni attended her local primary school which only offered classes to grade five as there were not enough students to warrant a grade six. Being of above average intelligence, she was allowed to repeat grade five in order to receive her completed primary school certificate. Her aim was to enrol in the capital's (Rhodos) high school. Unfortunately the Italian authorities, who were occupying the island at the time, decreed that all teaching would be done in Italian in all schools. Young Melpomeni was keen to attend regardless and wanted to learn. Her father however, did not allow this emphasising that "your Italian is good enough". She studied Italian, together with Greek, History, Religious Education, Geography, Maths, Science and her favourite Music and Singing where she always received full marks. End of year activities included role playing and acting with the highlight being the role of *Golpho* in the synonymous love story, with its tragic end which has captivated audiences to this very day. *Tasos*, *Golpho*'s lover was played by her brother, for it was acceptable to hug him but never a stranger!

Weather permitting, there were school excursions to the surrounds of a number of churches and monasteries that included St George, St Panteleimon and others. "As we walked, we sang various school songs. I was always number one" she says.

"I used to sing beautifully" she states, lamenting the fact that old age has taken its toll on her melodic voice. Her cousin John, the son of her father's brother, was equally as gifted. The two of them would lead the singing events while the rest of the gathering would follow by repeating the sung strands.

Dancing was another extracurricular activity undertaken by Melpomeni while at school with "Pentazali", the traditional dance of Crete being her favourite. (She recites the actual pentazali song, *Me tou Magiou tis Myrothies*)

Immediately after World War 2, the king of Greece was scheduled to visit Rhodes to commemorate its unification with Greece. This special occasion called for a big show and celebration. Each of the 44 villages of the island gathered its young boys and girls and transported them to the capital, where they put together on the designated day, a colourful and exciting display of traditional local and general Greek dances, dressed in traditional costumes. The main stadium reverberated with music and applause. Melpomeni lead her group with pride whilst her brother excelled himself as a musician.

Melpomeni recalls fondly her school days, her life at home and her involvement in the various social functions, expressing deep satisfaction and fulfilment. During World War 2 the German forces arrived and forced the closure of the shops in the capital where the youth were employed. As a result they returned to their villages and enriched the 'home culture', as they were worldlier, more polished, says Melpomeni.

Every Sunday recalls Melpomeni, there was a function that included dancing and singing and even the Italians were eager to participate. In fact many Italians married into Greek families. She never felt there was any oppression by the invaders. Even during the war with the arrival of the Germans, things were never nasty albeit they were moodier and somewhat remote.

After World War 2 at age 24, Melpomeni married Kostas who worked as a tailor for a local business. As a dowry, her family bought him his own shop in the capital Rhodos but because of the depressed economy the business did not do well. Consequently, he contacted his two brothers who had already migrated to Brisbane, Australia, asking if job prospects were any better over there in his chosen profession. Even though the answer was not very encouraging, it was suggested to him to apply for Australia, as job prospects seemed much better than in Greece, provided one was not fussed about the kind of work he did.

Reluctantly, he made the decision to emigrate towards the end of 1950, leaving behind his pregnant wife. Kostas farewelled Melpomeni and went to Athens in order to prepare all the necessary documents. Once ready, he embarked without going back to Rhodes and missing out on seeing his first born child Pelagia, who arrived prior to his departure for Australia.

Melpomeni and young Pelagia had their own house but they were never alone. Her family was right behind her and the young child was spoiled, especially by her grandfather, Melpomeni's father and her brother the musician (now running his own business) who lavished his niece with expensive clothes and toys.

Kostas arrived in Australia happily reuniting with his brothers in Brisbane, but decided to leave for Adelaide soon after as there were no opportunities for his skills in Brisbane. In Adelaide he met up with a friend from Rhodes and together they opened a tailor shop in Hindley Street.

"I'm not bringing you over", he wrote to Melpomeni "until I am able to rent a whole house. I'm not going to have you living in a house shared by another four families and competing for the single toilet/ shower/ kitchen/ laundry", he said to her.

Without telling her, he actually borrowed money and rented a nice house gradually furnishing it with the assistance of his cousin's wife. Four years after leaving Greece the big moment arrived and Kostas saw his daughter for the first time. Melpomeni was ecstatic. She was with her husband again and moreover she had a beautiful, complete house to live in.

From the first day she became acquainted with a lady neighbour who applauded her fashion sense, her excellent demeanour and the way she was bringing up her daughter. Kostas however warned her to keep to formalities only with her, as she was known to be a nosy and troublesome woman.

The wife of Kostas' cousin would come by and together with Melpomeni they would go to the shops or visit the city centre. Thus language was not an impediment. She was warned however, by Kostas, never to buy things on special, as they were, invariably, of inferior quality.

Soon their son Michael arrived (six years difference between the two siblings), and Melpomeni devoted her time to raising the two children until they both started attending school. At this stage, her husband had split with his business partner and Kostas ran the business on his own which was not very profitable. Melpomeni decided to join the workforce in order to help out with the home loan repayments, as they had bought their own home by now. She found work at the Adelaide Children's Hospital as a cleaner, where she worked permanent afternoon shift between the hours three and eleven.

One fateful evening Melpomeni returned from work and found her husband was not there. Pelagia informed her that he had gone fishing, with his 'koumbaro' (the father of his godchild). It was a cold and windy night and Melpomeni was most distressed. The next day she received the terrible news that Kostas' body was found. He had drowned. It wasn't until three days later that the body of his koumbaro was recovered.

Melpomeni reduced her hours of work from eight to four per day, so she could spend more time with her two children. Pelagia had found full time employment by this time, while Michael was still studying.

Melpomeni and Pelagia visited Rhodes for the first time since leaving with mixed emotions. Melpomeni visited her house (now used as a holiday house by her sister who resided in the capital) and went looking for the chest that contained her wedding dress and trousseau. Regretfully they only returned to Australia with the bridal sheets.

During the war the chest kept safe the title of a house Melpomeni's father owned in Smyrna, Turkey. The house he built was for his first love, the daughter of the local Smyrnian baker. When he asked his mother for permission to marry this girl, she slapped him and uttered, "Don't you ever mention that again!"

Subsequently, the house was rented and every two years he would visit. One day during the war the Germans demanded vacant possession of all houses in the village. The Greeks left their homes but when they repossessed them, all official papers were torn to shreds including the title of the house in Turkey. Her father now knew without the title he had no chance of claiming the house in Smyrna.

Melpomeni was invited to her younger sister's wedding in Rhodes but could not attend, so composed a brief personal poem and sent it to her. (This is included in her interview)

Melpomeni loves both countries; Australia though is the place she calls home.