

BOOK REVIEW

Sevasti Kyrias Dako, *My Life: The Autobiography of the Pioneer of Female Education in Albania*. Compiled by Dana Stucky. Edited by David Hosaflook. Tirana: Institute for Albanian and Protestant Studies, 2016.

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Sevasti Kyrias Dako, the woman who founded the first school for girls in Albania, and in Albanian language as the medium of education, was a fascinating personality in many aspects. For any student of the history of education in the Balkans, her autobiography is a treasure trove of information. On top of it, Kyrias Dako's educational efforts coincided with the birth of national consciousness in Albania, and the Albanian struggle for independence. The readers of this book will learn how much a language and, even more intriguingly, the formation of a common alphabet have played a major role in the historical becoming of Albania as a country. Sevasti Kyrias Dako is a multifaceted figure: an educationalist, a feminist, a patriot, she was also a convert to Protestantism, her brother being one of the first Albanian Protestant preachers.

I first became interested in the history of education in Albania when I was teaching in an international school in Tirana. On March 7th, unexpectedly, my students presented me with flowers, postcards and home-made jam: it was Teacher's Day in Albania. This date commemorates the day in 1887 when the first Albanian-language school opened in the town of Kortcha (Korça). It was an immense achievement, for Ottoman rule prohibited Albanians from educating their children in their own language. Four years later, thanks to the efforts of Sevasti Kyrias Dako and her brother Gerasim, the first Albanian school for girls opened its doors, also in Kortcha. The still palpable joy of celebrating the Teacher's Day brought home to me the importance that the Albanian people give to the educational possibilities in their country.

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The delightful autobiography of Kyrias Dako, originally written in English and detailing the author's path toward becoming an educated woman and a pioneer of female education, would not have been published if not for the efforts of Dana Stucky, who compiled it and wrote the Foreword. While working in Kortcha as a teacher, Ms. Stucky researched the Albanian Protestant movement, one of the major figures of which was Sevasti's older brother Gerasim Kyrias (Gjerasim Qiriazhi in the modern Albanian spelling). In 1994 Ms. Stucky "stumbled," as she herself puts it, on Kyrias Dako's manuscript in the Albanian National Archives. She decided that this memoir should be edited and published both in its English version and in an Albanian translation. Thanks to her tireless work (both researching in the archives and interviewing Kyrias Dako's descendants and specialists in Albanian history) and thanks to Mr. Hosaflook's editing, we can now learn the fascinating history of Albanian education and its pioneers, the siblings Sevasti, Gerasim and Paraskevi Kyrias. These memoirs are also a precious witness of the symbolic importance that a language and an alphabet can have in the national consciousness of a people, vastly superseding, at least in the Albanian case, that of religion. It is also a testament to the importance of the Protestant missionaries' activity in the development of the Albanian literacy: since the ability to read the Bible in Albanian was considered especially important by Protestants, the development of a common alphabet and the spread of literacy were the matters of utmost importance for the (American) Protestant mission in Albania, whose first convert was Gerasim[†]. Sevasti's autobiography and Gerasim's biography[‡] are invaluable documents for any scholar of the history of Protestantism in Albania and in the Balkans. Yet nowhere in her text does Sevasti Kyrias Dako push her beliefs in the foreground: the book is devoid of missionary zeal.

It reads like an entertaining and highly informative story of an exceptional Balkan woman who had managed to "have it all" (an outstanding career, international fame, a loving husband and family), until the darker forces of history intervened.

The Kyrias (Qiriazhi) family originally lived in Monastir which was, in the

¹ Please see "The Theological and Geographical Origins of Protestantism in Albania" by David Hosaflook, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, George Fox University, Vo. 38 (2018), Iss. 1, Article 9 Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss1/9>

² Quanrud, John Michael, *Gerasim Kyrias and the Albanian National Awakening 1858-94*, Institute for Albanian and Protestant Studies, Tirana 2016.

19th century, a multi-national town in the Ottoman Empire (now called Bitola, in the Republic of North Macedonia). Sevasti Kyrias was born in 1871. Growing up, Sevasti spoke Albanian, Vlach (Aromanian), Greek, and Turkish. Her older brother Gerasim, a founder of the Protestant Church in Albania and a hero of the Albanian National Awakening, was a major intellectual influence in her young life. With his support, she was able to escape being secluded until marriage (a practice prevalent in her time) and leave home in order to get further education. Her primary schooling, in her home town, was in Greek, but she continued her studies in Constantinople Woman's College (an American missionary college) where the language of instruction was English. Sevasti, with her positive and optimistic outlook on life, remembered the years spent at the college extremely fondly. She was a studious girl beloved by teachers and classmates alike. Moreover, she came to the college with the express purpose of getting an adequate preparation for opening a school for girls. The Albanian National Awakening – trying to establish the Albanian cultural, as well as political independence, a movement that started in the 19th century – was never far from her mind. While at college, she visited Kotto, a fighter for Albanian independence, in the prison of Yedikule. At the same time, her brother was translating the Bible into Albanian and had his translation printed in Bucharest (the seat of several Balkan independence movements in exile in the 19th – early 20th century) using Latin letters.

“The story of the first Albanian girls’ school reads like a romance of adventure,” writes Sevasti Kyrias. Kyrias and her brother opened the school in the city of Kortcha in October of 1891. Three girls attended initially; by the end of the year the attendance rose to twenty-seven pupils. The school, accepting girls of different faiths, Christian as well as Muslim, grew despite the hostility of local authorities (Turkish and Phanariot Greek). The next year, the school had fifty-three pupils. Sevasti and her younger sister Paraskevi were tasked with translating and authoring many textbooks that had never before existed in Albanian language.

Further adventures awaited Sevasti when she took a year off teaching, leaving the school in the hands of Paraskevi, and went to the United States. There, she met Jane Addams at Hull House, a women's community providing education for working class and poor immigrants, and gave lectures at various institutions. On her return, during a stop in Bucharest, she met her future husband, Christo Dako, a mathematician and the General Secretary of the Albanian Society *Dituria* (“knowledge”) with whom she went on

to have two sons. The Kyrias sisters encountered many other exciting and difficult things: Paraskevi took part in the Alphabet congress in Monastir, and Sevasti was invited to attend the educational congress in Elbasan, but could not go due to the sky-rocketing school enrollment. Both Sevasti and Paraskevi kept up the struggle for the right to use the Latin alphabet for the Albanian language in all educational institutions (as opposed to Latin, Greek, and Arabic alphabets used in the past according to students' religion, undermining the unity of Albanians as a people). Paraskevi composed the "Alphabet hymn," and Sevasti mentioned being prepared to defend the new alphabet "with the last drop of blood." They had to face opposition to Albanian-language education by the regime of the Young Turks and the devastation of two Balkan wars that drove them into temporary exile in the USA. Upon return they reopened their school, but this time in Tirana. There they taught girls in Albanian and English until 1933, when King Zog closed all private schools in the country. Disappointed with his decision, Sevasti Kyrias Dako decided to write the autobiography that we now have the opportunity to read and that is a treasure trove of information on Albanian women's history, education, and culture.

The Appendix includes excerpts from Viktoria Dako Ruli's (Sevasti's granddaughter's) letters to Dana Stucky obtained during the preparation of this book. These letters tell the story of the Dako family after Enver Hoxha's party took power in Albania. The regime arrested Sevasti's sons, then in their 30s, accusing them of being American spies. They were tortured. One allegedly committed suicide in prison; the other stayed in gaol for seven years. His mother, Sevasti, was not allowed to see him and died of broken heart in 1949. Later, the regime tried to use the Kyrias family achievements for its own ideological purposes and gave Sevasti (posthumously) and her sister Paraskevi the title of "Teacher of the People." This tragic irony of this end provides a harrowing epilogue to the book so full of optimism and sense of purpose.

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