

Diana A. Apcar (1859-1937): The First Armenian Woman Diplomat

Written by: Ara Ghazarians, *Curator*, Armenian Cultural Foundation, Arlington, MA

Any attempt to write the biography of Diana Agabeg Apcar in few pages would be injustice to the legacy of an exceptional Armenian woman. Though short and stout in physique, she was greater than life in deeds and conduct. She touched many lives and shaped destinies of hundreds of destitute and huddled souls. She worked feverishly for justice for the oppressed, her people in particular, and for humanitarian causes with unwavering faith and indefatigable spirit.

Like her ancestors Diana Agabeg Apcar was a child of the Diaspora. Both her forefathers and her husband's were among those forcibly deported from the historic Julfa, Armenia on the banks of the Araxes River in 1605 and resettled in a neighborhood of Isfahan, the capital of Iran (then Persia) at the time, named New Julfa, in memory of their ancestral home.

Diana (baptismal name Anaid) was born in Rangoon, Burma (present day Yangon, Myanmar) on October 17, 1859. Her father, Hovhannes Agabeg, was a first generation Indian Armenian having migrated there as a young boy with his parents from New Julfa, Iran. Her mother Avet was from the family of Tadeos Avetum of Shiraz [Shirazets'i], another historic city in Iran. Diana was the youngest of the seven children of the Agabeg family. She grew up in Calcutta where she received her education in a convent school. She was fluent in Armenian, English, and Hindi.

Diana married Apcar Michael Apcar, also with roots in New Julfa, Iran, on June 18, 1889 in Rangoon, Burma. He was one of the descendants of the prominent house of Apcar, whose two preeminent sons were Arratoon (1779-1863) and Gregory (1795-1847) Apcar. The former founded Apcar and Company as early as 1819. Initially established in Bombay, Apcar and Company later moved to Calcutta and shortly after expanded its operations to the South Asia and Far East: its activities included shipping, import/export enterprises, and rice farming in the Dutch East Indies. By mid-1840s, the Apcar fleet sailed the Calcutta, Penang, Singapore and China routes.

The Apcars moved and settled in Yokohama, Japan in 1891. They were blessed with five children, only three of whom survived. Their first child Rose [Sirvart] was born in 1890 in India. Their son Michael and second daughter Ruth [Zumruth] were born in Japan in 1891 and 1896, respectively. After the unexpected death of her husband in 1906, Diana assumed the heavy burden of running her husband's business and raising her three children.

As the years went by her son took over the helm of the family business, leaving Diana with more time to delve into her literary, humanitarian, and diplomatic work. She collaborated with various journals among them Armenia (later New Armenia), The Japan Advertiser, the Japan Gazette, and the Far East. She became the champion of the oppressed and their causes. She wrote extensively about the condition of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in an effort to raise the world's consciousness, emphasizing the moral duty of the West to save the Armenian nation, the "Little Ally" during the First World War, from total annihilation.

By 1920 she had already published over nine books dedicated to the Armenian Genocide, international relations, the impact of imperialism on the world affairs and world peace.

Diana Aparcar was a crusader for the cause of oppressed people, principally those of her destitute brethren, refugees and survivors of the Armenian Genocide who had found their ways to Japan. The memoirs of the refugees of that period are testimony to the courage and devotion of Diana, an angel of hope and unconditional benevolence. “This wonderful woman used to work miracles, helping poor strangers in difficult situations, especially when women and children were involved . . . She was a woman of faith and prayer and a woman of positive action. She wrote letters to contemporary kings, queens, and governments, about the plight and persecutions, the ruthless murders. The genocide of her race, and the prevailing poverty of the remnants in all parts of Turkey, pleading with a deaf, blind world . . .”

In 1920, Japan became one of the first nations to recognize the independence of the Armenian republic, mostly through the efforts of Diana. In a letter dated July 22, 1920, signed by the Foreign Minister of the Republic at the time, Hamo Ohanjanian, in recognition and appreciation of her devotion, and “for defending the interests of the newly-born Fatherland, and mitigating the conditions of our compatriots . . .” Diana was appointed Honorary Counsel to Japan. This appointment made Diana Agabeg Aparcar the first Armenian woman diplomat, and probably first woman ever appointed to a diplomatic post in the twentieth century. Her services in that position concluded with the Sovietization of Armenia by the Russian Bolsheviks in the 1920s.

The new status added more to Diana Aparcar’s prominence and stature among the governmental circles in Japan. In addition to diplomatic duties, it facilitated her work on behalf of the Armenian refugees who sought safe havens in distant shores, the United States, in particular. She corresponded with several international figures. In a letter dated December 20, 1920, she pleaded with President Woodrow Wilson about the “Armenian agony.” She was in contact with the American secretaries and under-secretaries of State William Robert Lansing, William Phillips, and Alvey A. Adee as well as international humanitarians James L. Barton, then secretary of the foreign department of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and David Starr Jordan, director of the World Peace Foundation and president of the World Peace Congress, and Arthur G. Symonds, Secretary Balkan Committee -- to name a few. She was also instrumental in fundraising campaigns for Near East Relief.

Her devotion to her faith and the Armenian church was boundless. In a letter dated February 10, 1920, directed to an Armenian clergy in the United States, Diana Aparcar writes: “Holy father, . . . It has been twenty-nine years that I have been living in this remote country. I am longing for the church, I am longing deeply. There is not a church like the Armenian church with her vibrant spirit and consoling prayer, not even one which can have gratifying feeling of the Armenian liturgy. I do not know whether there will be a day that I would have the privilege of crossing the threshold of my church and be a participant of the holy mass, my ears listen and satiated by those prayers.” Diana Aparcar knew the Bible verbatim. She followed the teachings of the church faithfully, and reading the Bible was part of her daily routine. She even wrote a prayer which she asked to be read at the church service which read:

“I wish to spread this prayer among the Armenian nation (people), so that wherever there are Armenians they pray to God so that

*Armenia is liberated
That the Armenian Republic remains firm
Grant God and have mercy.*

Diana’s patriotism was consecrated with religious zeal. She was a devout believer, and yet a true realist. She had an excellent grasp of the behind the scene machinations of the Great Powers, whom she found responsible for the calamities that befell her people. “Those who are called European Powers” she once said to a visitor “are the Satan’s scourge of the world . . . I would rather trust the Satan than the European powers.”

At the age of sixty-seven Diana Apcar experienced various physical problems, among them hearing loss, failing eyesight, and arthritis. The final blow came in the hot morning of July 8, 1937 when Diana Agabeg Apcar closed her eyes forever with the longing for her beloved Armenia and mother church in her heart. On July 10, 1937 a capacity crowd gathered at the Yokohama Union Church to bid farewell to the pivotal figure of their community, who had lived among them for forty-six year with honor and dignity. In his eulogy Rev. Schenk spoke of Diana Apcar as the “good soldier of Jesus Christ, the sentinel on guard, strong, courageous, inured to hardship, loyal to her convictions, her racial heritage, to her mother church and to her beloved people . . .” Diana Apcar was buried in the Foreigners Cemetery of Yokohama next to her husband. Her tombstone is engraved with the simple words befitting her life and faith. “Out of Earth’s shadows unto Heaven’s Glorious Day. We Loved Her, but God Loved Her Best.”

Diana Apcar was a century ahead of her time. She was one of the leading figures of progressive thought among the Armenian women intellectuals: literary figure, orator and publicist in Imperial Japan at a time when women rarely ventured to fathom the thought of any public activities beyond the house chores, an untiring champion of humanitarian causes.

Works

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