

Early Bahá'í History in Japan

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I was here in Japan for many years before I became especially interested in Bahá'í history, although I was a history collector from the beginning. It was Hand of the Cause Miss Agnes Alexander who honed my sense of history. Her influence was one of the main reasons why I came to Japan. We were the only two women on the National Assembly of North East Asia for many years. The 1950s and 1960s was a time of great transition in both the Bahá'í world and the world at large. It was the time the Faith was to go truly international, with the Ten Year Spiritual Crusade of the Guardian's. When I look back I see that it was an exciting time to live as there were so many changes.

But to go back even earlier to the time when Miss Alexander first came to Japan, sent by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. She was a part of the history; she lived it; she made it.

Miss Alexander, Miss Martha Root and Mrs. Keith Ransom-Kehler, all later designated as Hands of the Cause made a lasting impact on the Japanese. Back in the early teens, the 1920s and 1930s -- 60 or 70 years ago, Miss Alexander lived in Japan. Miss Root and Mrs. Ransom-Kehler were visitors, however, during their stays they contacted and influenced countless Japanese especially in the higher echelon.

Those three women I mentioned were educated and cultured. They had something to say, spoke directly, and people listened. The writeups in newspapers, or what we now call proclamation, was really quite remarkable. Proclamation of the Faith in that era was to the top, especially academically. Then possibly it could filter down to the grass roots. It has happened this way in other countries. In the early days it had to be from the top to the bottom as the bottom was not accessible.

To give a striking example, in 1920 when Miss Alexander was in Japan she became acquainted with a Chinese newspaper editor who was traveling in Japan. He became interested in the Faith and so she gave him 25 articles about the Central Figures and the principles of the Faith. These were translated into Chinese and he printed all 25 articles at intervals in the Canton Times which was distributed all over China. By today's standards this would be a major proclamation accomplishment as these articles reached millions of people in their own language. We can't even begin to do that in Japan today and certainly not in China.

By contrast, today, during the persecutions of the Bahá'ís in Iran the Faith was occasionally mentioned within an article in a major newspaper but seldom in Japan and not what you would call proclamation, as the basic Teachings of the Faith were not usually mentioned. The only other time we had an article on the Faith in a major newspaper in Japanese was a press interview when Amatu'l-Bahá Ruhíyyih Khanum was in Japan. There was an article in the Asahi Shimbun, which had over 7.5 million circulation. Of course, there have been some articles in local and English newspapers, but the circulation was very small also the articles were not usually directly on the Teachings. The fault, if you can call it that, lies not with the Bahá'ís or their efforts but with the era. It's just harder to do now, the proclamation that is, not the pioneering, which was incredibly difficult in Miss Alexander's time.

In Japan in the very early days Miss Alexander was able to have articles printed in Japanese in major newspapers at no cost to her. Miss Root spoke over the radio with Japanese translations. Whenever she spoke to large groups, and it was quite often, she gave out typed

copies of her talks to newsmen and translators. When have we ever been able to obtain radio or TV prime time for a direct Bahá'í talk?

Miss Alexander spoke in English with translation, or in Esperanto, which at that time had many adherents in Japan. It is surprising that at that time many people spoke English and Esperanto. It was considered a worthy intellectual pursuit. As Japan moved nearer to the second world war the policy of the government either banned or greatly discouraged the teaching of foreign languages and it wasn't until the 1950s or 1960s that the Japanese began to study English again.

So there was a whole generation who were adults in the 1930s and 1940s who didn't learn the basics of English? Does it matter? There are some who think it held Japan back from faster internationalization.

Miss Alexander had heard that `Abdu'l-Bahá recommended that people learn Esperanto. She learned it because she felt that Esperanto was a means of becoming acquainted with a wider circle of people, and also because of the principle. In the 1920s and 1930s she attended all the Esperanto conferences, which were often very large. Usually she was the only foreigner. In the book "Traces That Remain" you can see photographs - 30 or so - of the Esperanto conferences she attended; the lone foreigner amongst countless Japanese. Through her blind friend Mr. Torii she attended many of the conferences for the blind, which were frequent with large attendance; there being many blind at that time. Miss Alexander sought out English Speaking Societies (ESS) at the top universities where she could speak to the students. New students were continually entering the universities so she always had a new audience. When she spoke of the Faith she gave the direct Teachings, no vague indirect teaching for such a person as she. The number of people Miss Alexander and the other two women reached was truly incredible. There she would stand, a rather regal woman in those days. Even with modern means of communication we, none of us, can come close to what that woman did; she with no great talents, spending little money.

The seeds she planted and/or the growth is another subject to explore in depth perhaps at another time. But for her time and circumstances she accomplished far beyond what any of us could dream of. Why was she so successful in promoting the Faith?

`Abdu'l-Bahá rather frequently in His Tablets to individuals mentioned "scattering the seeds". He referred to this four times in various Tablets to Miss Alexander. And he amplified that by saying that each seed sown in pure soil would bring forth seven ears and each ear would produce 100 kernels and God could double that number if He wished.

Let us ponder a little as to what that means. Inherent in the term of "scattering the seeds", is that they would germinate and be productive and ever increase. Why mention them if there would be no result? She scattered the seeds widely by the means mentioned earlier.

Time went on and as World War II approached there didn't seem to be anything left of her efforts. Before that time there were perhaps a dozen or so committed Bahá'ís. When the pioneers came in the late 1940s and early 1950s they found barely anything left from the past activities. Some people of the present generation have asked, "Well, what was left?" It does not seem likely that the three or four Bahá'ís left were the only long-awaited results from the seeds that she scattered. The Guardian appointed her a Hand of the Cause when she was 82 years old for the work she did as a pioneer. He said many things about her work in Japan. So let us look with a broader vision. She scattered the seeds; she instilled into the minds of many thousands concepts they could never think of, because those concepts came directly from the Manifestation of God, not from human minds. There the concepts took root and I am not the only person who thinks that those early Bahá'í teachers changed the thinking of a generation of vibrant young, and some not so young, people who were some day to become

the leaders, and to indicate the direction that the nation would take. Could those early Bahá'í women actually have changed the destiny of Japan? It hasn't finished yet. We cannot forget the prophecy of `Abdu'l-Bahá, often quoted, and as yet unfulfilled, "*Japan Will Turn Ablaze!*" [`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Japan Will Turn Ablaze*].

References

Japan Will Turn Ablaze, compiled by Barbara R. Sims, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Tokyo, 1974.
Traces That Remain, by Barbara R. Sims, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Tokyo, 1989.

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