

Family Trees from Burma

Bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, with China to its north and Thailand to its southeast, lies the country of Burma. This land, larger than Spain and Portugal combined, is a resource-rich country and can sustain itself by what nature has provided. Currently known as Myanmar, Burma has been influenced by many cultures, religions and governments. While it was under British rule, Armenians played an integral role in its transformation.

Text Ani Garibyan | Photo courtesy of Vahe Apcar

Author Margaret Sarkissian explains in *Armenians in South-East Asia: Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* that in 1605, “with the aim of stimulating trade within his dominions, Shah Abbas [of Persia] resettled many of the urban Armenians from Julfa [a province in Ottoman Armenia] to the royal capital at Isfahan [Persia] and granted them a monopoly of the silk trade.” New Julfa soon became an epicenter for trade between Europe and Persia. Sarkissian, a professor of music at Smith College, adds that, “Armenians had a great reputation for skill with languages and often acted as interpreters for Europeans in Southeast Asia.” Christianity also played a great role when it came to trusting Armenians as the middlemen of trade. In *Armenian European Relationship in India*, Bhaswati Bhattacharya, a lecturer of art and history at Erasmus University, writes: “When the Portuguese arrived in the East in the sixteenth century, the other factor they shared with the Armenians was faith: Christianity. Armenians were good at

taking both sides. To the Europeans, they were more like them, and to the Asians, they were more Asian than European. Armenians were able to establish a trading network that spanned from Holland to China.” Only a handful of Armenian merchants initially settled in Burma. Once their families immigrated there, the community insisted on building an Armenian church and invited an Armenian priest to head the church. The connection of Burma’s first Armenian priest is where the stories of native Burmese Noel Minus and John Martin come to play.

The Minus’

Noel Minus’ story began when his great-grandfather Mackertich Minassian (Minus, born in Shiraz, Iran) was sent to Mandalay as a priest. As Noel explains, “There was already an Armenian community living in Mandalay, which at that time was part of the Burmese Kingdom. The Armenian community had already built a church and was looking for a priest, preferably from Persia. No

married priest would move to Burma, and so the higher-ups in Constantinople sent Mackertich to Burma to be the community’s priest.” Shortly thereafter, Mackertich met fellow Armenian Miss Johannes, and they married. By this time Britain had occupied all of Burma and was ushering in a new era in the region with English being the main language of communication. It was replacing the traditional Hindustani and Burmese languages. “My great-grandmother did not speak English. My father remembered growing up in the complex his grandmother had created, not being able to speak to her in English. They would converse in either Burmese or Hindustani,” says Noel. “They were more accustomed to Indian and British food, but they were also exposed to Armenian food such as dolma made of cabbage leaves.” Noel’s grandparents’ ten children were mainly raised by servants who conversed with the children in English, thus the children never learned to speak Armenian. Noel recalls, “We used to go to church

but mostly on the feast days of Easter and Christmas. We could not understand the sermons.” Noel explains further that when there was a marriage in Burma between a Burmese-Armenian and Iranian-Armenian, their children would not speak Armenian. But if the couple married in Iran and then moved to Burma, their children would speak Armenian. Exposure to his roots was heightened when Noel spent his summers with his Iranian-Armenian cousins, attending church and singing in the choir. Noel began attending the American Baptist College Judson College in Rangoon to study medicine. The college was closed during the spring due to unbearable heat. Noel and his cousins spent their youthful days at the resort town Maaymyo. One day when they were biking back to the resort, Noel’s cousin demanded, “Come on! We must follow that car!” To which, Noel asked, “What for?” and his cousin explained that a girl in the car winked at him. They quickened their pace in an attempt to reach the vehicle. The cousins were unable to match the speed of the car, but they managed to catch her name – Nancy. They crossed paths again when two years later Nancy attended Judson College to also study medicine. She turned out to be Noel’s future wife. In early 1942, Japan invaded Burma and changed the country forever. Many fled to India, as did Noel’s cousins. They sneaked onto a boat in the dark and it wasn’t until months later that Noel received word from a person named George Apcar that they arrived safe and were doing well. Soon after that, Noel and his brother headed out in a three-car convoy towards India. On the road, they were advised to abandon their cars because road conditions were unstable and instead to travel by boat. They heeded the warning and continued by boat. “At a certain point, the men would get off the boats and walk the rest of the way. At times, we had to slash our way through the jungle,” says Noel. The entire trek to India took about 24 days. When they finally arrived in Calcutta, they reconnected with their friends at the Armenian-owned Agabeg



↑ High-ranking priest, Ter Essai Johannes and family, 1918

→ Grandfather of the Martins, 1929

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Hotel. Eventually, Noel and his cousins relocated to an isolated town in India to be safe from bombings. Two months later, his brother joined them as well. Noel’s father stayed behind and luckily survived. The marketplace in Calcutta was not only a place to purchase goods but also a place to receive information about friends and family. One night in the hustle and bustle of the market, Noel learned that Nancy had also escaped to India. That same night, without a moment’s hesitation, Noel went to her home and in 1945 they married. Noel explains that “there was a lot of intermarriage between Armenians

and Burmese, and Armenians and Anglo-Burmese. There were not enough Armenian girls for the men to marry.” Unlike many, Noel was fortunate enough to continue his education in India. “I hated that university,” he admits. “I was the only non-Indian there. In Burma, there was much more diversity in students.” Upon returning to Burma, he could not find a government job. By then, it was “Burma for the Burmese.” He quickly understood that there was no future in his birthplace. They decided to move to Australia and as they prepared to go on their journey the Burmese closed all ports

in Burma. After a second attempt to leave, they decided to remain and opened a business with Nancy's brother. By the late 1940s, Burma had gained independence, and it was difficult for a non-Burmese to build a solid future. "My cousins who had stayed on in India went to Hollywood, Calif. After a third attempt to move to Australia, we decided to head to California instead in 1951."

Burma's mines attracted President Herbert Hoover, who was known as an outstanding mining engineer. Hoover worked closely with A.C. Martin.

The Martins

Noel's brother married Maisie Martin. The Martin clan moved to Burma from Isfahan, Iran. As Noel explains, the Martin children understood Armenian because their parents were from Iran. Yet their understanding of the language was not as advanced because the children were sent to Darjeeling, India for schooling. In Burma, similar to the Minus', the Martins employed servants who maintained everything on the premises, including their tennis courts. Katherine Martin explained that though she and her sister were already in their early and mid-twenties, they did not know how to make coffee or do laundry until they moved to the United States. She did not remember doing homework, at least not the way it is in the U.S. What she remembers is constantly playing. "We would just play. We didn't do anything. We were just stupid," she laughs. On weekends, their parents



← Johanness family in New Julfa, 1895

Sarkies Brothers

The Strand Hotel in Rangoon, Burma was considered the jewel of the hotels owned by the Sarkies brothers. The brothers were born in Isfahan and singlehandedly brought the concept of the luxury hotel chain to South-east Asia.

According to *CNN Travel*, The Strand Hotel has played host to many famous individuals. Some of them have included George Orwell, Noël Coward, Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham, David Rockefeller and George Soros. Aviet, one of the four Sarkies

brothers, bought what was once the British Burma Hotel and renamed it "The Sarkies Hotel." These hotels have been and continue to be landmarks in Burma and southeast Asia. One of the biggest names to visit Burma was President

Herbert Hoover, who was also the first American president to visit Burma. Hoover had done so first in 1905 prior to his presidency as a mining engineer. During his visit, he met with A.C. Martin, Burma's mining and railway mogul.



→ Burmese Armenian children performing in a school play.

John says, "There was a funny story when my father explained to my uncle that if a customer comes in and you don't have a certain product, suggest a different but similar type. One day, a customer came in and asked my uncle if they had toilet paper. Not quite understanding, he said, 'no, but will sandpaper do?'" John continued with another story regarding shoe polish that was named Cobra. "When another customer asked for Cobra boot polish, his uncle jumped on the counter and started yelling, 'Cobra! Cobra!'" That uncle too was sent back to Iran. Dentist Dr. Yokohama warned the Martins to evacuate to India six months before Japan's invasion of Burma. The Martins would later learn that their dentist was a secret intelligence agent in the Japanese army. As the wealthy evacuated Rangoon, they entrusted their valuables to Balthazar Bank. Due to his respect for the Martins and the Balthazars, Dr. Yokohama gunned down a Japanese Colonel on the steps of the Balthazar Bank because of his intentions to rob it. As the Japanese invasion grew, Martin's father moved his merchandise to another store on Sule Pagoda Road, a location where he had his first liquor business. It was one of the last remaining stores to remain open during the Japanese bombings. The British merchants also gave him their warehouse keys as they fled. However, the Martins evacuated to India. Their father was on one of the last boats to India. Armenians made a grand impact on the development of Burma similar to their relatives in Singapore, Japan, India, Indonesia and other Asian countries. It is no wonder that Shah Abbas took in these hard-working, business-minded and resourceful people to transform his kingdom. ■



↑ John and Maisie with parents



→ Graduation photo of Arsham Aparcar.

would always host parties. The siblings expressed that they knew more about their mother's side, the Aparcar side, compared to the Martin side. John Martin, Maisie's and Katherine's brother, spoke about the country and stated, "Burma is a rich country. They have three rivers. The country produces large amounts of rice, tea and coffee. They have plenty of natural resources." Northern Burma had silver and ruby mines; rubies of the highest quality came from the mines in Mogok. He proudly spoke about his uncle, A.C. Martin, a mining and railway mogul in Burma. He was part of the team that built the railway connecting Rangoon to Mandalay. A.C. also supported the creation of Burma's many infrastructures. John explained that this resourceful territory once fell under China and with the help of his uncle, the British were able to occupy the mines. These mines also

attracted President Herbert Hoover, who was known worldwide as an outstanding mining engineer. Towards the end of his mining career, Hoover was stationed in London and worked closely with mining companies from the British territories, including Burma, where he closely worked with A.C. Martin. Another famous Martin, Uncle Balthazar, also became wealthy and purchased a bank, calling it the Balthazar Bank, which was sold to the Americans who converted it into the American Embassy in Burma. The Martin last name comes from Martirosian. As many Armenians in Burma, the Martins shortened their name to make it easier for the Burmese and English to pronounce. The patriarch of the family owned various stores in Burma. However, not all the Martin uncles became famous in Burma. In fact, some of them were sent back to Iran by the patriarch because they could not run the businesses.