

Getting to America: The Generous Assistance of Diana Apcar

In the memorable Part II of Robert A. Kaloosdian's book *Tadem, My Father's Village: Extinguished during the 1915 Armenian Genocide*, we follow the author's father Boghos Kaloosdian as he flees his genocide-ravaged homeland in eastern Turkey, eventually journeying through the Caucasus Mountains, and all the way to the Pacific shores of the United States. By the summer of 1919 he and his friend Hovanes Der Hovanesian had made it as far as the port city of Yokohama, Japan, having travelled some 6,000 miles by a combination of foot, mule, horseback, boat, and rail, including 4,700 miles on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Boghos and Hovanes were mostly on their own as they negotiated the journey's many challenges, depending for survival on their wits, bravery, and endurance. But at this late stage in their travels, the pair had finally caught a lucky break, and would be receiving some much appreciated assistance. They had made contact with a wealthy benefactor of Armenian refugees living in Yokohama named Diana Apcar, and she agreed to host them and provide aid. Upon arriving at the train station in Yokohama, Boghos and Hovanes went straight away to meet her.

To their delight, Boghos and Hovanes found Diana Apcar to be generous and hospitable. She fed them, and provided beds for them in her own house. But food and housing was just the beginning of her support. Apcar's greater philanthropic enterprise was in relocating Armenian refugees to elsewhere around the planet, wherever it was that held for them the promise of a better future. For Boghos and Hovanes, the destination they coveted was America, and Apcar helped to get them there. Immigrating to America was not easy at that time—U.S. officials were restricting access to the country in an attempt to thwart the spread of communism. Nonetheless, Apcar encouraged Boghos and Hovanes to wait for an opportunity, and in the meantime helped them to settle the necessary logistical matters, such as paperwork, immunizations, and medical

examinations. Their patience paid off. On July 23, 1919, quartered in steerage, the pair set off for America aboard the ocean liner *Fushimi Maru*.

Diana Apcar's concern for Armenian refugees like Boghos and Hovanes was motivated in part by her Armenian heritage. Although born in Rangoon of the then-British colony Myanmar, she had strong Armenian roots, and always felt a close kinship to the Armenian people. As recently as the eighteenth century, the Apcar clan had called the Armenian city of Julfa their home. About two centuries prior to the genocide, the clan relocated to New Julfa, Iran, but were forced to flee when a new shah came to power and enacted harsh policies against the non-Muslim, non-Persian minorities.

If heritage explains Diana Apcar's motivation to help the Armenians, wealth explains her capacity to do so. Her family had been successful merchants ever since their time in New Julfa, Iran. And when Apcar and her husband moved to Japan in 1891, it was to expand the family's shipping business. Yokohama was flourishing with trade at the time, and their business did very well. As a result, Apcar enjoyed a steady source of funding for her philanthropic endeavors.

While Apcar earnestly recommended the United States as a destination for the displaced Armenians that came to her, not all were eager to go there. In fact, Boghos and Hovanes had crossed paths with another Tadem family on the Trans-Siberian Railway, a family who would eventually reach Diana Apcar but then decline passage to America. Leon Krikorian's father told Apcar that in America the people work like animals, and that he would prefer to return to Cilicia where he thought there was an opportunity for him to reclaim his paternal lands. Apcar tried to persuade Leon's father that he was making a mistake—that America was not as he described it, and that in any case Cilicia is not part of Armenia. But the senior Krikorian stubbornly resisted, and Apcar arranged transportation toward Cilicia as he had asked. In the end, Leon's father was

unable to reclaim his family lands. The Krikorian family relocated from Cilicia to Cyprus, and then, eventually, they too found their way to America.

From his posthumously published memoir, *Biographical Memoir* (2009), we know that the survivor Phillipos Balikian also crossed paths with Diana Apcar, and, like the Krikorians, elected to return to the Near East rather than immigrate to the United States. Balikian was from the Armenian town of Arapkir, a town not far from the village of Tadem where Boghos and Hovanes grew up. Like Boghos and Hovanes, Balikian escaped the Ottoman Empire to the north through the Dersim Plateau, crossed the Caucasus Mountains, and traversed Russia via the Trans-Siberian Railway. Also like Boghos and Hovanes, Balikian travelled by boat from eastern Russia to Yokohama, Japan in 1919. There, he was invited by Diana Apcar to have lunch with her at her residence. Following a lively conversation, Apcar offered to aid Balikian and the others in his group by giving them money. They politely declined, and in the end accepted silk handkerchiefs and a box of cigarettes for each smoker in the group. Balikian and his group continued on their journey, stopping next in Shanghai, China. Eventually, they made it to the Sandjack d'Alexandrette, Syria—at that time under French mandate—and settled there. Like Leon Krikorian's father, they came back to the Near East in hopes that someday their homelands would be liberated, and they could return.