

# Family planted Japan roots over a century ago

BY ROY K. AKAGAWA, STAFF WRITER

2008/7/9



Michael Apcar kneels in front of the tombstones of his grandparents A. Michael and Diana Agabeg Apcar in the Yokohama Foreign General Cemetery on Tuesday while family members look on. (SATORU SEKIGUCHI/ THE ASAHI SHIMBUN)

YOKOHAMA--Few Westerners trace their family roots in Japan as far back as Michael Apcar can.

His family had a thriving business here way back in the Meiji Era (1868-1912).

Apcar, 79, was born in Japan and spent most of the first 18 years of his life in this bustling port city.

Now, visiting the land of his birth for the first time in 62 years, Apcar, who lives in the United States, is on a sentimental journey that has brought back a host of memories--many of them pleasant, and some not so pleasant.

A key reason for his visit is to pay his respects to several generations of the Apcar family buried at the Yokohama Foreign General Cemetery here.

Apcar recalls growing up with a stern grandmother who was credited by many with saving the lives of tens, if not hundreds, of Armenian refugees fleeing persecution in Turkey in the early 20th century.

Apcar is accompanied on this trip by three generations of his family. On Tuesday, he ventured out into Yokohama to rediscover the city of his youth. To his surprise, he found a number of shops that he used to frequent decades ago.

Apcar lived in the Yamate-cho area known as the Bluff, where a large foreign community was already established.

"Life was very good," Apcar recalls.

In addition to a cook, two servants were in charge of housekeeping and taking care of the Apcar children, four girls and two boys.

He would often cycle to what was then Honmoku beach, an area now covered over with concrete as is much of the Yokohama shoreline.

"We were there all day in the summer," he said. "I would ride my bicycle to Honmoku and spend the whole day there."

The Apcar family also camped often on the shore of Lake Yamanakako close to Mount Fuji.

"We had an ojisan (old man) there who used to store our tents and who would cook us mori soba (buckwheat noodles) when we came and pitched our tents for us on the shore of the lake," Apcar said.

The family business, A.M. Apcar & Co., was established by Michael Apcar's grandfather and run by his grandmother, Diana Agabeg Apcar after her husband's sudden death in 1906. A.M. Apcar was born in what was then Persia and moved to India, then under British rule, and married Diana Agabeg. They were both from well-off Armenian families and decided to settle in Yokohama after spending part of their honeymoon here.

"She was a commanding figure," Michael Apcar recalls of his grandmother.

Diana Apcar was born in Rangoon, now called Yangon by the ruling junta in Myanmar, formerly Burma, and moved with her family to Kolkata (Calcutta) where she went to school. Although Diana never went to Armenia, she was fluent in the language as well as in English and Hindi.

Michael's father, also named Michael, took over the family business around 1920.

Once her son was in charge of the family business, Diana Apcar turned her interests to international affairs, especially the problems facing Armenian refugees.

She wrote numerous books about Armenians and gave talks at Japanese universities.

She is said to have served as a consul to Japan for Armenia for a short period in the late 1910s.

Apcar remembers hundreds of Armenian refugees passing through Yokohama. His grandmother negotiated with the Japanese government for the papers the refugees needed for passage to their final destination.

Diana Apcar was known as "the little mother of Yokohama" for the help and support she provided.

"I later met some of those survivors and they all said she helped them come to the United States," Apcar said.

Diana Apcar never left Japan. She died on July 8, 1937, and is buried in the Yokohama Foreign General Cemetery.

The Apcar family visited the cemetery on Tuesday and paid their respects to A.M. and Diana Apcar and four other Apcars buried there. Two of Michael's sisters who died young are buried in Yokohama.

"It's fate that we are here today on July 8," Apcar said. "I wanted to close the loop and I feel like the circle is now closed."

While Diana was politically active, Michael's father was more interested in business and sports.

He imported various products through his contacts overseas, including the shellac used to produce phonograph records.

Michael Apcar said his father was the first person to import Ariel motorcycles from Britain. As a publicity stunt, the senior Apcar drove and then hauled an Ariel motorcycle to the top of 3,776-meter Mount Fuji, his son recalled.

Michael's father also loved horse racing. He would travel overseas to buy horses and worked to introduce the sport to various parts of Japan.

Life took a terrible turn as Japan moved toward a war footing.

In hindsight, it is curious the Apcars did not join other Westerners who left Japan before fighting broke out with the United States.

Leonard M. Apcar, Michael's son, recalls a passage from memoirs written by Michael's mother, Araxe, about an exchange with her husband about leaving Japan. Araxe asked her husband if Japan would ever go to war with the United States.

Michael Apcar Sr.'s reply was: "No, it would be suicide for the Japanese to go to war with the United States. It's crazy and wouldn't happen."

On Dec. 8, 1941, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, military police surrounded the Apcar home and hauled Michael Apcar Sr. off to prison.

Among the reasons for the detainment was the fact that the elder Apcar was the highest-ranking member of his Masonic lodge in Yokohama.

He was imprisoned for 14 months, during which time he was often tortured for information about his fellow Masons, according to his son.

During his father's imprisonment, Michael's sister, Dorothy, died. Her tombstone was made in the United States and he had never seen it in the cemetery until Tuesday.

Life did not get any better after his father's release. The Apcars were given the choice of moving to either Hakone in western Kanagawa Prefecture or Karuizawa in Nagano Prefecture. They chose Karuizawa because it was thought there was a better chance of bartering for food with local farmers.

"My father knew the war was on and there was no business to be conducted, so he sold everything in the house," Apcar said, noting that the family moved to a much smaller cottage in Karuizawa.

"(My father) knew he had to get enough money to live on during the war and he didn't know how long the war was going to last," Apcar said.

The Apcars lived in Karuizawa for about two years, raising goats and chickens and growing potatoes after clearing land filled with tree stumps.

"The winters would get terribly cold," Apcar recalls. "If we spilled water anywhere in the house, it would immediately freeze."

What turned out to be a lifesaver for the Apcars was a makeshift oven for heating and cooking that was put together from sheet metal saved by Apcar's father from crates he received as an importer of horse liniment.

As the war situation facing Japan worsened, conditions in Karuizawa grew harsher.

"It got so bad in Karuizawa that my father and I had to keep watch because people were so hungry they would come and dig up the potatoes," Apcar said.

One of the few advantages to living in Karuizawa was the fact it was not a target for Allied bombing raids.

The same could not be said for Yokohama. After Japan surrendered, Apcar found work as a guide and interpreter for Swiss officials who were seeking permission from the U.S. Army to move the Swiss Embassy from Karuizawa back to Tokyo.

He went to his place of birth.

"Yokohama was flat," Apcar said. "I couldn't find my way in Yokohama because the house where I was born was gone. All I saw was a bathtub. Everything was burned up, gone."

Apcar eventually sailed with one of his sisters in September 1946 to San Francisco, where they had relatives.

Not only did the war make life difficult for Apcar and his family, but it also deprived him of any educational opportunities between the time he was 13 and 18.

His first goal upon reaching the United States was to make up for lost time in getting an education. He eventually received a degree in electrical engineering from the University of California at Berkeley.

For a long time Apcar never thought about returning to Japan since he was too busy with his job and providing for his family, which by that time included two children.

"I did not have much desire because the memories were too fresh," said Apcar, who now resides in Auburn, California.

He had a change of heart after his son was posted to Hong Kong. Leonard M. Apcar is currently deputy managing editor of the International Herald Tribune.

Despite having lost his business and home due to the war, Michael Apcar Sr. apparently did not hold bitter feelings toward Japan, but celebrated various aspects of the Japanese culture.

Leonard remembers going to his grandfather's home and eating sushi and sashimi long before such

foods became popular in California. The home was also decorated in Japanese artwork and accessories.

As Apcar and his family travel to other parts of Japan during the remainder of their stay, he will likely reflect on the tremendous journey taken by his branch of the Apcars.

"It's strange how life is because our family started in the Orient and now we are turning the circle back with (Leonard)," Apcar said.

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Staff writer Kim Han Il contributed to this story.(IHT/Asahi: July 9,2008)

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