

# Bezirdjian, Ida (Schlegel)

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## SHAWNA VYHMEISTER

Shawna Vyhmeister holds a Ph.D. in education, and is a professor and research director at Middle East University where she works with her husband. Vyhmeister and her husband, Ronald Vyhmeister, have lived and worked in Africa, Asia, South America, and the United States. Their two adult sons and their wives live in the United States. Her hobbies include music, writing, travel, birding, diving, reading, cooking, learning languages, and playing games. Her greatest joy is working for the Lord, especially if it involves young people.

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In 1899 Ida Schlegel, a nurse who was trained at the Adventist Sanitarium in Basel, Switzerland, was sent as a missionary nurse to Cairo, Egypt, along with Louis Passebois and his wife, who were also trained nurses. They started a restaurant and a nursing home, and did Bible work as well, mainly among the expatriate community in Cairo. They were not given any language study. As Ida explained, after nine

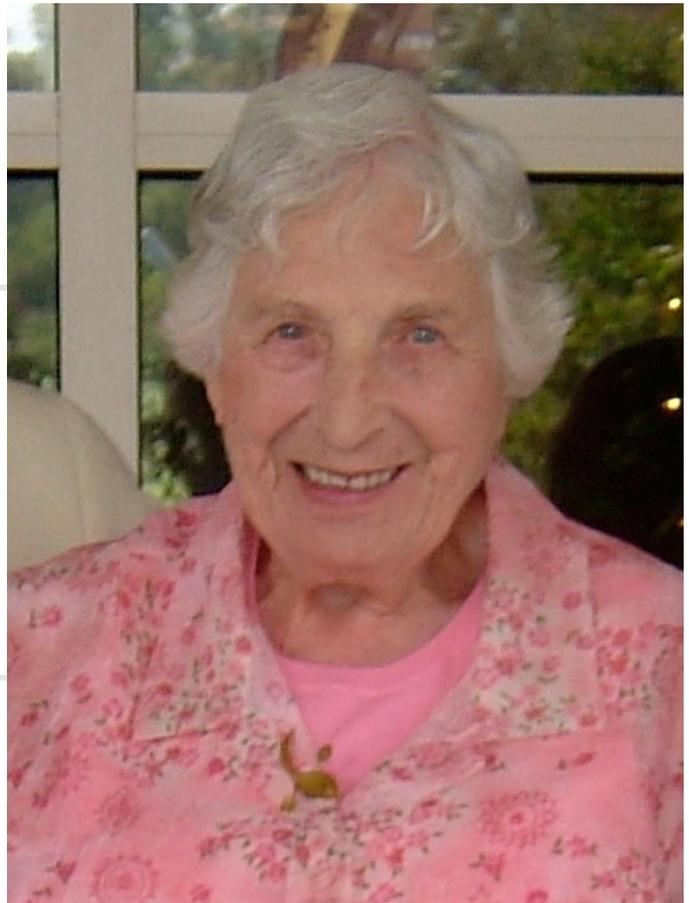
years she counted Cairo as her “second home,” though she had “learned only the most necessary words in the Arabic language,” but she said she was “still trying to learn more” as she had opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

By 1901, during the visit of L. R. Conradi, they officially established a small church and baptized several new believers in the Nile River. By 1903, the Passebois family had left the country because of shattered nerves. The two remaining nurses continued to operate the restaurant and nursing home and tend the small congregation, and their faithful work resulted in several converts.<sup>2</sup>

Ida wrote of her work as a missionary nurse in the early 1900s:

It is not easy to nurse in an Arabic house. In most of them, including those of the rich, are all kinds of insects. . . . If somebody is ill, all the relatives and friends come to the house, and the greater number go into the room of the sick one, and sit on the floor, talking, smoking, and drinking coffee, with all the windows closed. The people are very fearful of pure, fresh air and water.”

In 1908, Brother O. Bezirdjian was also working in Egypt. He wrote to the *Adventist Review*, saying:



Ida Schlegel Hasso

Photo courtesy of Edmond A. Haddad.

We need a good doctor, here in Egypt. In some cases I have secured wonderful results with our treatments. Some who were weary of swallowing drugs, and were almost in despair, are now enjoying good health. My knowledge is small, but the Lord helps me in such cases, and I practice with love and energy the little I know. I am earning my livelihood by sculpture in marble, and from time to time I give massage and other treatments to the sick.<sup>3</sup>

The work advanced slowly. Between 1906 and 1908, “an apostasy breaking out among the Armenian and Syrian believers reduced the number [of believers] temporarily.”<sup>4</sup> The scarcity of information on that period makes it impossible to know the reasons for the apostasy, but its outcome impacted the Egyptian church greatly. Some remained faithful despite the apostasy and kept attending the Cairo Church. Among the faithful were the Armenian Bezirdjian and the Swiss nurse Ida Schlegel, who later became Mrs. Bezirdjian.<sup>5</sup>

In 1909, Elder George Keough of Ireland came from England to take over the work in Cairo. Later he would work in Luxor as the superintendent of the field. The membership had to be built up again from almost nothing.

A friend of Brother Bezirdjian, Professor Tcharakian, who later became an Adventist in Turkey, reported that Mr. Bezirdjian, who was an artist and a sculptor, went to work in Egypt, and there he learned of Seventh-day Adventists and became friends with Keough.<sup>6</sup> Bezirdjian sent his friend and colleague, Professor Tcharakian, many Ellen White books, but he did not read them at the time. Later, after a second contact with Adventists, Tcharakian became a member of the church in Constantinople around 1914 and eventually gave his life for his faith. Bezirdjian was involved in church work as early as 1903, when he traveled with Pastor Conradi from Cairo to Alexandria to visit church members there.<sup>7</sup>

Until 1912, progress was relatively slow. There were only 18 members in Egypt (later increased to 42), two ordained ministers, one Bible instructor, four colporteurs, and two nurses.<sup>8</sup>

In 1913, Ida Schlegel is still listed as a licensed missionary. In 1913, O. Bezirdjian was working as “field Mission Agent” and was on the “Local Committee” for the Egypt Mission (Egypt Sudan Field). By 1914, Ida Schlegel no longer was listed as a missionary licentiate in the *SDA Yearbook*. It is possible that Ida and Bezirdjian were married in 1913.

Sometime before the Bezirdjians left Egypt, Ida Bezirdjian befriended an English lady named Mrs. George, from Alexandria. Mrs. George had recently lost her husband, who had been an engineer. In seeking to comfort the woman, Ida shared the book *Daniel and the Revelation*, which she enjoyed so much that she sent a copy to her daughter back in England. Eventually Pastor Keough went to Alexandria and studied with her, and he baptized her and her son in the sea at Alexandria around 1924.<sup>9</sup>

In 1920, the Bezirdjians moved to Constantinople, Turkey, to take up medical work with the new orphanage being constructed there.<sup>10</sup> The orphans’ home and training school felt fortunate to have two laborers of such quality, as both were trained nurses from the Basel Sanitarium, and Mr. Bezirdjian was an artist, a sculptor, and

an experienced colporteur.<sup>11</sup> The end of Ida Schlegel Bezirdjian's life is not known.

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## NOTES

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2. Mildred Thompson Olson, *Diamondola: A Little Diamond* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966), 37.
3. O. Bezirdjian, "Findings," *ARH*, December 17, 1908, 51:21.
4. M. Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1926), 514.
5. Information provided by Nabil Mansour, from his personal knowledge and research.
6. Olson, 106.
7. L. R. Conradi, "My Trip to the Land of the Pharaohs," *Australasian Signs of the Times*, March 23, 1903, 12:138.
8. L. R. Conradi, "In the Land of Egypt," *ARH*, January 16, 1913, 3:60.
9. H. H. Hall, "An Egyptian Seed-Sowing," *ARH*, April 22, 1926, 16:24.

10. Olson, 178-179.

11. W. K. Ising, "Orphans Home and Training School at Constantinople," *ARH*, September 21, 1922, 42:11

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