TRIBUTE, CELEBRATION OF KOLKATA ARMENIAN ACADEMY

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Liz Chater, London UK

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Picture from files of Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy

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Less known is that Kaloos was one of the earliest financial contributors to the Armenian Church in Singapore. The will and the estate accounts of Kaloos show that he was a subscriber to the building and completion of the church.

Arratoon Kaloos was the headmaster of the Armenian College during the first years of its inception and it can be seen from his will and supporting accounts that he was a generous man. As well as supporting the school and the church, he and his wife adopted a child and brought him up as their own.

In his will (Feb. 9, 1832), Kaloos left a legacy to the Armenian College. The will said: “To the Managers,

for the time being, of the Armenian Philanthropic Academy in Calcutta in trust, to be applied for and towards the maintenance and education of the indigent Pupils of the said Academy the sum of two thousand Sicca Rupees. Rs2000.0.0."

Another founding member of ACPA was Aviet Agabeg. Rarely remembered these days, he was one of several Armenians who changed the life of many. His obituary, which listed his achievements, reflected the loss to the community.

Another person who played a leading role among the 19th century Armenians of Southeast Asia was Sir Paul Chater. Born in Calcutta, he had moved to Hong Kong at an early age. After making his name as a Hong Kong mogul, in 1899 he took six Armenian college students from Calcutta to Hong Kong. He gave them commercial opportunities that would not have been otherwise available to them. Although Sir Paul had not attended the ACPA, by investing personally and professionally in the future of the six young students he demonstrated his warm memories of the Armenian community of Calcutta, the city he had once roamed as a bare-foot orphan boy.

Chater suggested to the six young men to give up their Calcutta studies earlier than planned and take advantage of his offer to immigrate to Hong Kong and fill jobs he had obtained and held for them at the post office.

The students were G.M. Gregory, Tigran Matthews Gregory, Stephen M. Joseph, Nazareth Malcolm Manuk, Mackertich Cyril Owen and a person nicknamed Goblin. They boarded "Lightning", the ship Chater had sailed in 1864 when he had left Calcutta for Hong Kong. The ship belonged to the Calcutta-based Armenian company Apcar & Co. Thus the promise of a new life and brighter fortune was instigated and carried out by Chater and Apcar. Both were influential in their own right in the Far East, having paved the way for further Armenian settlers to seek their fortune in the Fragrant Harbour (aka Hong Kong) while maintaining contact with the Armenians of Calcutta.

As promised, the students joined the Hong Kong post office but eventually left and made a good living, particularly TIGRAN MATTHEWS GREGORY. He established T.M. Gregory & Co. Gregory was well connected and known as a diamond merchant. Without that first leg up from Chater, Gregory would not have been in a position to donate to the Armenian Church in Calcutta so generously. Tigran died in Hong Kong in 1962 and is buried in the same cemetery as Sir Paul.

NAZARETH MALCOLM MANUK worked at the post office briefly and then joined the Chartered Bank of India. After about 18 months he moved to the Dairy Farm, a company that Chater had helped start. Within a year, Malcolm (who dropped his Christian name Nazareth to fit easily into British society), was promoted secretary. Malcolm held senior positions for most of the 27 years he worked at the Dairy Farm. During WWI he served in the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps. He was a good marksman and won many shooting trophies.

Malcolm took a keen interest in theosophy and was the presidential agent of China of the Theosophical Society in Hong Kong where he often gave lectures.

The six Calcutta-born men had a close friendship for the rest of their lives, in particular Malcolm Manuk and Tigran Matthews: the latter married Manuk's sister Ripsey. Manuk died in Hong Kong in 1931.

After three years at the post office, STEPHEN M. JOSEPH tried his luck in Shanghai. But perhaps because of youthful exuberance or a slight immaturity he wasn't as successful as he would have liked. Undaunted, he left for Japan with one of the original six friends, and secured a job with an American firm. He lived in Japan for 23 years and became highly successful. In 1927 his brother Abraham Joseph, who had a shellac business in India, asked to join him in India. With 100,000 rupees in his pocket, Stephen got ready to return to India, but just prior to his departure, he learnt of his brother's drowning.

During the Big Depression he lost all his savings. In serious financial difficulties, he received a letter from one of his six Calcutta friends who had heard of his hard times. The letter had a job offer with a firm in Bangkok. He immediately left for Bangkok to start a new life at the age of 60. He once again achieved financial success.

After leaving the post office, MACKERTICH CYRIL OWEN (known as Mack Owen) became an assistant with the well-known firm of A.H. Rennie & Co. In 1909 he married Phyllis, the daughter of Arathoon Seth, the court registrar. Seth's family was originally from Madras.

Other Armenians from India who settled and worked in Hong Kong during the lifetime of Paul Chater were Owen Elias Owen, Enos Seth, Harold Arathoon Seth, John Hennessey Seth, Seth Arathoon Seth and Aratoon Vertannes Apcar, to name a few.

The friendship of the six Armenian students was due to Sir Paul bringing them together, spotting their potential and giving them the chance to make something of themselves. They, in turn, held each other in the highest regard all through their lives. The bond of friendship forged on the decks of the "Lightning" on that long journey from Calcutta to Hong Kong was etched in their minds for life.

Over the last 195 years the Armenian College has turned out numerous students who have made a difference in India, in the Far East, and in Armenian life. One can find references to the college's students and ex-students in newspapers, periodicals, institutions, repositories and libraries.

"Congratulations" Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy on your 195th anniversary. May you have many more years of education and celebration ahead.

From little acorns, mighty oak trees do grow.

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The list of the school's founders:

