

## Martha L. Root<sup>1</sup>

“And the Queen,” said Martha Root, “met me at the stairs. I saw her standing there, a queen indeed, with her flowing black velvet dress and strands of marvelous pearls. ... We had tea in her inner library.”

I thought as I gazed at that small blue-clad figure eagerly sitting forward on her chair in my simple living-room, that this same beloved “Martha” who was now relating to me the fairy story of her adventures was identical with the one whom the Queen of Roumania had welcomed five times to her palace. There could be no other. Martha’s love had shown out upon and drawn the Queen, as it now did me.

“*Whosoever has lost himself has found the universe and the inhabitants thereof*”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had said.<sup>2</sup> How literally true this had proved to be for Martha Root! She had become a personage to whom the great scholars of the different countries had listened with respect, for whom the palace doors of many rulers had opened. But the woman who had talked intimately with Thomas Masaryk, and Eduard Beneš; who had had audience with King Faisal of Iraq; who had four times visited Prince Paul and Princess Olga of Yugoslavia; who said of King Haakon, “This spiritually lovable King of Norway who will never talk about himself ... made me very happy”; who was the intimate of Queen Marie—to mention some of the illustrious names—made no display of learning, nor did she depend on

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<sup>1</sup> In memoriam, *The Bahá’í World 1938–1940*, pp. 643–8.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Shahnaz Waite in ‘Meditation, supplication and service’, *Star of the West*, vol. 17, no. 11, p. 348.



Miss Martha L. Root  
Famous international Bahá'í teacher

*"Thou art really a herald of the Kingdom and a harbinger of the Covenant and doest self-sacrifice. Thou showiest kindness to all nations; thou art sowing a seed that shall in the long run give rise to thousands of harvests; thou art planting a tree that shall till eternity put forth leaves, blossoms and fruits, and whose shadow shall day by day grow in magnitude."* ('Abdu'l-Bahá)

dress or personal appearance. The true love is regal in its freedom from self-consciousness and fear; the true wisdom is unabashed in the presence of learning, and it was in these ways that she found congeniality with the great of the five continents which she had traveled.

Whoever you were, her loving interest was her introduction to you. There was no one, high or low, who had not felt that. Moreover she had a message for you, a Message from a King, the Greatest of All. There was a quiet stateliness in her manner, an element of ceremony. "Make every meeting an occasion," she instructed me. "Give something always, if only a flower, some candy or fruit. Pray that they will accept from you the Greater Gift."

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Who was Martha Root? What was the light her past threw upon such a career? She was born 10 August 1872 at Richwood, Ohio, of pioneer American stock. Her family moved to Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania, a town to which Martha's homing instincts always turned in her later travels. She graduated from Oberlin and attended the University of Chicago. She was a school teacher, then a newspaper woman. One day after a chance meeting with a Bahá'í trav-

eler in a restaurant in Pittsburgh, she heard the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. At that moment the “Concourse on high”, passed down its chalices of pure light. The star of Martha's destiny began to rise. A signal to that star was to use her connection with the press to call together a mass meeting of four hundred in the Schenley Hotel in Pittsburgh to hear ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speak in His journey from east to west in 1912.

In 1919 in answer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's call to American believers to scatter and spread the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, Martha, after a white moment of decision, embarked upon her world journeys as an ambassador of the Oneness of Mankind. On the ship bound for South America she called the people together and informed them of the nature of her mission. In her subsequent travels in Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia, Russia happened to be the only country she did not visit. The spirit of her world embracing love vibrated over the wires of radio stations from Cape Town to Oslo. Sheaves of newspaper clippings brought back her words to us from remote ports. A steady stream of articles appeared in which the flash of her insight into people and circumstances transported us to Belgrade, Athens, Stockholm, to Reykjavik (capital of Iceland), Antwerp or Adrianople. In Iran she continued her researches into the life of Táhirih, heroic woman pioneer and martyr in the time of the Báb, with whom the soul of Martha seemed mysteriously linked.

Her sense of Mission is illustrated by the fact that she carried with her a collection of photographs of the various rulers to whom Bahá'u'lláh had addressed His Epistles. Among these were the Czar of Russia, Napoleon III, Pope Pius IX, Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, Queen Victoria—it was a young picture of the Queen in accordance with the history of the times. The spirit of Martha's going forth was like that of Bádí', the youth who, in the time of Bahá'u'lláh volunteered to deliver the Tablet to the Sháh of Persia knowing that he would suffer death at the hands of an antagonistic government. The spirit of renunciation expressed itself, now, in this modern apostle of Bahá'u'lláh in subtle ways comparable in degree. She had become the embodiment of a love which does not passively wait, but which goes forth with a wholehearted reckless spending of personality, of time, of strength. There was the bleak daily discipline of a meticulous economy, the dedication of moments of exhaustion to the service of her Cause: her undeviating back-breaking obedience to the star she followed. In 1935, for example, we find her writing from Sweden that although very ill that fact must not impede progress in teaching the Cause of God. Her health shaken, she returned for one of her occasional visits to America in 1936, renewed her association with her beloved friends and family. Then in May, 1937, this brave heart again “took sail”.

I suppose there were many of us across the United States who had a troubling sense of finality as we caught through train windows the last tender flash of Martha's blue eyes. Her boat left San Francisco 20 May, docked for a few hours in Honolulu, then sailed for Japan. With the captain's cooperation she lectured on the boat. “I spoke for an hour,” she said, “and questions and answers followed for an hour. There were ten religions and ten nations represented. ... There were several young Japanese professors present returning from postgraduate studies in Europe. *Who can tell how far reaching are the words of truth?* She arrived in Tokyo 3 June for a month of brilliant teaching activity, then moved on to Shanghai early in that fateful July of the Japanese bombardment. She escaped under gunfire with other Americans to Manila on the night of the earthquakes. After about four months of intensive teaching she embarked on a small Oriental steamer for Bombay, arriving there from Ceylon 15 October.

The fifteen months of Martha's stay in India were the crowning triumph of her efforts, a sustained splendor of achievement. The Bahá'ís of India and Burma wrote to our 1938 Convention:

“The most outstanding feature in the year under report has been the teaching activities of our beloved sister Miss Martha L. Root. This star servant of Bahá'u'lláh toured from Bombay to Mandalay, and from Srinagar to Colombo. Wherever she went, she delivered the message of Bahá'u'lláh in

her own convincing way, and published the divine Cause amongst all the educated people of this great continent. ... In Karachi she attended the 10th Convention of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma and probably did the greatest service of her life. ... She stayed in that town for three months and got the book *Táhirih the Pure* printed and mailed the world over. ... In Shimla she graced the first Bahá'í Summer School with her presence and drew down the blessings of God on this institution. ... Miss Martha Root has opened the whole of India for us, and it now devolves upon us to utilize these openings and produce the best of results."

After her final three months tour of the Northern India Universities where her addresses had been enthusiastically received by thousands of progressive youth, she returned to Bombay. A gathering of the friends saw her off for Australia on the steamship *Straithard* 29 December 1938.

After visiting Australia and New Zealand Martha Root was on her way home in the spring of 1939. At Honolulu, on that island between two hemispheres, she was obliged to leave the boat because of illness. It was here after an illness of months that the soul of Martha undertook the journey "from earth to heaven". The date was 28 September 1939. The Guardian, whose words had continually cheered her heart with his tender concern, cabled the National Spiritual Assembly:

Martha's unnumbered admirers throughout Bahá'í world lament with me (the) earthly extinction (of) her heroic life. Concourse on high acclaim her elevation (to) rightful position (in) galaxy (of) Bahá'í immortals. Posterity will establish her as foremost Hand which 'Abdu'l-Bahá's will has raised up (in) first Bahá'í century. Present generation (of) her fellow-believers recognize her (to be the) first, finest fruit (which the Formative Age (of the) Faith (of) Bahá'u'lláh has yet produced. Advise holding befitting memorial gathering (in) Temple (to) honor one whose acts shed imperishable lustre (on) American Bahá'í community. Impelled (to) share with National Assembly expenses (of) erection (of) monument (in) symbolic spot,<sup>3</sup> (the) meeting-place (of) East (and) West, to both (of) which she unsparingly dedicated (the) full force (of her) mighty energies.<sup>4</sup>

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In a letter dated 20 October 1939, addressed to Roy C. Wilhelm, treasurer, the Guardian, through his secretary, refers to the passing of Miss Martha L. Root.

The very sad and indeed distressing news of the passing away of our beloved Martha was a great shock to the Guardian, who feels unutterably sorry at this heavy blow sustained by the Cause. Her departure constitutes the heaviest blow which the teaching force not only in America but throughout the entire Bahá'í world has sustained since the passing of our beloved Master. May the memory of the distinguished services it had been her unique privilege to render in so many fields and over such a long and uninterrupted period of years serve as a source of continued inspiration to the present-day and future generations of Bahá'í teachers, to whom she will indeed ever be the very embodiment of those teaching qualities which only a few Bahá'í teachers, whether in the East or the West, can claim to have attained.

To you, and to all the dear American friends who are now so profoundly deploring beloved Martha's passing, the Guardian feels moved to convey the assurances of his deepest and most loving sympathy in your great bereavement. May Bahá'u'lláh comfort your grief-stricken hearts, and cause this calamity to further cement the unity, deepen the devotion and increase the resourcefulness of the American believers, and in particular those dear pioneers who are so indefatigably laboring in foreign and distant

<sup>3</sup> Honolulu; for a photograph of the monument, see *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 9, p. 65. A memorial gathering was held at the House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, on 29 October 1939. (Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour*, p. 42)

<sup>4</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour*, p. 42.

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[In the Guardian's hand:] "The passing of dearest Martha and the circumstances of her severe and painful illness have brought profound sorrow, but I rejoice at the glory and joy that must be hers and which she fully deserves in the Abhá Paradise."

"Sometimes I have asked myself," Martha Root had said, musing upon the life of Ṭáhirih, "was Ṭáhirih great enough instantly to say, 'O God, I give my life to establish this Faith among mankind!' or did she, too, need to be trained by the Infinite God to long to give her life as a martyr to serve this new universal Revelation?" That that longing did come to fill Martha's whole being can be the only explanation of her remarkable career. As she pioneered further into the realms of the spirit a Will greater than her own resolve moved her. She became a lamp carrying a Light. Or you might say the abnegation of her very *self* was comparable to the crushing of the rose in the process of attar-making: the rare attar of a divine love drifted through every doorway and thrilled every heart.

As we bid farewell to her familiar, loved presence among us we, all the world let us echo her own words to her beloved friends in India: "I shall not say 'Good-bye', I couldn't it hurts my heart so! But we shall say: 'Alláh-u-Abhá! Always, Alláh-u-Abhá'."

Doris Mckay

### **Copy of the letter of her Highness Princess Olga of Yugoslavia**

Belgrade, 7 March 1940. Dear Mrs Ilić:

I was deeply touched by your kind sympathy on the death of my uncle and thank you very much for sharing in it. He seemed too young to leave us and had been rejoicing to settle down in Greece once more. It is strange that neither he nor my beloved Father were destined to do so.

I am deeply distressed to hear of the death of good Miss Martha Root, as I had no idea of it. We always enjoyed her visits in the past. She was so kind and gentle and a real worker for Peace. I am sure she will be sadly missed in her work.

Thanking you again for your kind thought in my bereavement,

I remain

Sincerely yours,

Olga.

### **Martha the blessed**

By T. L. Vaswani

Here, in my quiet retreat the "Krishta Kunj",<sup>5</sup> comes to me the news that Miss Martha L. Root has passed on!

But a year ago she was here in Hyderabad—a guest of our spiritual assembly, the *Satsang*. She came with the Bahá'í message—essentially our own—of the unity of races, of the brotherhood of religions, of a new world order based on peace and love.

In her advanced age—she was almost 70—she went through her daily work in the spirit of service and self-sacrifice! To many in many lands she gave the message of her great Guru—'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Message glowed not alone with a great ideal but, also, with the beauty of the life. It was a dedicated life. My dear loving brother, Mr Isfandiar K. B. Bakhtiari, who acted as her secretary in Sind, writes to me in the course of a letter from Karachi:

<sup>5</sup> T. L. Vaswani residence in Karachi.

“I need not say how much I am grieved at the passing away of our spiritual mother, Miss Martha L. Root. A month ago I got the news from Iran: and I was eagerly waiting to hear from America to know of the exact day on which she departed this world.

“I have learnt from Iran of the Guardian’s telegram to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran, stating the Guardian’s feelings on receipt of the news of her passing away so soon.”

Mr Bakhtiari kindly enclosed a copy of a letter which he recently received from her when she was at Honolulu. She went so far to give the Message of her Master. In the course of her letter she writes:

“I have been here [in Honolulu, Hawaii] since 7 June; have been very ill and only gaining very slowly. Please pray the Ahmad Tablet for me, all of you! I pray for you. Deepest, tenderest love for ever to you all in India.”

The letter reflects the tender, beautiful love of her radiant heart.

On receiving the news from my Iranian brother, Mr Isfandiar K. B. Bakhtiari, I wrote the following:

“Let not your sweet loving hearts be troubled. She lives in the Lord she adored and served with all her mind and heart and soul.

“There is no death! The stars sink but to rise again upon a fairer shore: and she, dear sister of my heart, goes to greet kindred spirits and shine for evermore.

“Sister Martha Root! Thou art not dead! Thou hast but gone before! And still to me is near thy soul, radiant, immortal, pure.”

It may be hoped arrangements will soon be made for a commemoration meeting in the Hall of Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly, Karachi.

Nobly, bravely, she played her part. Beautiful was her devotion to her Guru, and beautiful her faith in the power of prayer. To Alláh-u-Abhá she dedicated her life: in Alláh-u-Abhá she now abides. Her living spirit has passed the gates of the grave. And many in many lands will call her Blessed!

### **Martha Root dies in Honolulu**

Bahá'í lecturer well known in Pasadena

Word has just been received from Honolulu of the passing of Miss Martha Root in that city where for some months she has been detained by illness. Miss Root will be remembered in Pasadena especially for her very interesting lectures on her experiences in teaching the way to peace in universities throughout the world, and for her very enthusiastic broadcasts on the subject of Esperanto, which language she had acquired through intimate association with Miss Zamenhof, daughter of its inventor.

### **Advanced Bahá'í plan**

For more than 20 years Miss Root has been devoting her life to the advancement of the Bahá'í plan for universal peace and she is equally as well known in the Orient as in the Occident. Modest and simple in her manner, with a moving earnestness and loving self-sacrifice, she has gone her way attracting everyone where she went by her ardent and loving devotion to the cause of peace as adumbrated in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

It was she who met and transformed the life of Her Majesty Queen Marie of Rumania, who did not hesitate to make public declaration of her acceptance of the Bahá'í faith. It was she whose appeal to the youth of India and Burma a year ago brought about a real stampede for information in all the universities in those countries. It was she who went into the heart of Iran (Persia), meeting with thousands of people all over the country, who have reached out beyond the confines of religious fanaticism, have seen the human race as one family and the spiritual revelations of the past and present as one continuous unfolding of the eternal Truth of God which now is given to the world in all the fullness of a universal conception.

### **Paid own expenses**

Traveling alone, more frequently than not in third class accommodations, defraying her own expenses by her writing, for she was a journalist of note, she felt no sacrifice too great, no effort too strenuous, no privation too rigorous to impede her progress or dampen her ardor.

Miss Root was lecturing in China when the siege of Shanghai necessitated the evacuation of the city and she with many other Americans was forced to leave at a moment's notice for Manila. Arrived there she immediately began her work when the earthquake and subsequent fire consumed what very scant supply of clothing she had been able to carry from China. As soon as possible she took passage on a small Oriental steamer, third class for Bombay, and there she resumed her work. She visited all India and then went to Australia and New Zealand and she was just returning to America from there when she was obliged to leave the steamer at Honolulu because of illness.

### **Carried peace banner**

Commenting on her life today, a friend writes:

“Miss Root's passing will be mourned throughout the world and a day for general commemoration of her beautiful life will be observed in the near future. Like the disciples of old she carried the Bahá'í banner of peace

and reconciliation into the very heart of religious fanaticism and prejudice, breaking down the barriers which have divided the human race, teaching unity and not uniformity, consultation and not competition, loving all, serving all, sacrificing for all, knowing no difference of color, race or creed. The world has produced no greater soul.”