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In Memoriam

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Ursula Samandari

Ursula Samandari, a Bahá'í who played an historic role in the development of the Faith in Ireland, Great Britain and three countries in Africa died in Buea, Cameroon on June 20, 2003 at the age of 93. In a tribute to Mrs Samandari, the Universal House of Justice said that her long decades of historic service “characterised by a purity of spirit, radiant joy and love for all peoples, are remembered with gratitude and admiration.”

Among her many acts of service, were membership of the first Local Spiritual Assemblies of Dublin, Belfast, and Mogadishu. She was a member of the National Spiritual Assemblies of the British Isles (1945-51); North East Africa (1961-70) and Cameroon (1972-74; 1975-80). She also served on the Local Spiritual Assemblies of London, Bristol and Nairobi.

Her move in 1953 to Somalia with her husband, Mihdi Samandari, won them the accolade of Knights of Bahá'u'lláh, a title bestowed on them by Shoghi Effendi. Mrs Samandari was born Ursula Newman in Mitcham, Surrey, England on December 29, 1909.

She was educated by a governess and then at Wimbledon High School and Swanley Horticultural College in Kent. She became a lecturer in botany at that college. She had her own flower decorative business in London and ran a nursery garden in Dublin. In Somalia, she taught English.

In biographical notes she wrote in 1986, Mrs Samandari described how, from a Church of England background, she came to declare herself a Bahá'í in 1938. She began learning about the Faith in 1936 in London from Richard St. Barbe Baker (who was founder of Men of the Trees), Hasan Balyuzi (later to be named a Hand of the Cause), and Dorothy Ferraby.

“Although I believed in Jesus Christ I was no longer a believer in Church teachings,” she wrote. “I first attended Bahá'í meetings out of impersonal interest and a desire to meet Persians. I read and studied and attended meetings for two years. Gleanings (a book of Writings by Bahá'u'lláh) was the strongest influence.”

In 1945, Ursula Newman became one of the first three Bahá'ís in Britain to answer the needs of a plan to spread the Faith by pioneering, by moving to St. Ives. Shortly afterwards, she moved to Dublin and there became a member of the first Local Spiritual Assembly of that city (and of Ireland), and served as secretary at the time when the now internationally famous and historic figure, George Townshend (later named a Hand of the Cause) was chairman.

A veteran Irish Bahá'í, Olive McKinley, described Mrs Samandari as artistically talented and a “magnificent teacher of the Faith. She had a wonderful sense of humour and everything seemed a joyful and hilarious occasion to her – no wonder David Hofman (Mr Townshend's biographer) wrote that George Townshend missed his secretary so much when she had gone from Dublin.”

Ursula married Dr Mihdi Samandari, with whom she had served the Faith in Belfast, at the Bahá'í Centre in London in 1951. In 1953, the couple moved to Nairobi, Kenya, and a year later went to live in Mogadishu, Somalia where they stayed until 1971. At the request of the

...from the Universal House of Justice, they pioneered to Cameroon.

Described by the Universal House of Justice as a “noble soul”, Mrs Samandari passed away at her pioneering post in Buea, Cameroon, after a long illness. Dr Samandari survives her. The Universal House of Justice has advised the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Cameroon to hold memorial gatherings in her honour throughout the country.

After the publication of this story (by BWNS, the Bahá’í World News Service), a report was received of the funeral of Mrs Samandari from the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Buea.

The report said Mrs Samandari was buried at the Bahá’í Centre in Buea following a funeral service which included prayers, songs and a eulogy. The service ended with the Bahá’í prayer for the dead. Throughout the burial, the Bahá’ís were singing, humming and chanting.

In attendance was Dr Samandari together with more than 200 people, from the Bahá’í and wider community, including two members of the Continental Board of Counsellors, four Auxiliary Board Members, and six members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Cameroon.

Among comments in the condolence register were those of the paramount chief of Buea, HRH Samuel L. Endeley, a friend of the Samandaris since they arrived in the country. He wrote:

“My dear Sister,

You lived with us like one of us, you served faithfully and lovingly to win souls into God’s redeeming grace. You loved us and our country, Cameroon, and you have demonstrated this in dying here like the good soldier of God you have lived to be. You died with your boots on. We thank God for all you were to us. May your soul rest with the good God, our creator, in perfect peace.”

