

# Sara Corning a 20th-century heroine

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The orphans that were safely relocated in Syros created this message of hope and thanks for the world to see. (Yarmouth County Museum & Archives)

Anyone with a penchant for dates and history may recall that in 1922, Marconi began making regular broadcasts from England, the British Broadcasting Corp. was established, and 14 republics formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

It's also the year that Ecuador gained independence, and when Josef Stalin was appointed general secretary of the Communist Party.

A lesser-known story that also unfolded in 1922 — yet one with huge historical import — involved a woman from rural Nova Scotia and the fate of over 5,000 Armenian orphans.

Meet Sara Corning.

Corning was born in Chegoggin, Yarmouth County, in 1872. After finishing high school, she went to New Hampshire to study nursing — a plucky thing for a young woman to do back then.

In December 1917, she heard about the Halifax Explosion and immediately went there to help.

Shortly after, Corning joined the American Red Cross and was eventually assigned to the Near East Relief, which was providing humanitarian services to the Armenians who were being massacred by the Ottoman Turks.

In 1922, Corning travelled to Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) where the Near East Relief was headquartered. From there, the 50-year-old was sent to the Armenian capital to be in charge of an orphanage. She also worked in refugee camps.

By year's end, she was stationed on the coast in Smyrna (now Izmir) — a city characterized by disaster and chaos.

Corning later recounted in the Kimball Union Alumni Bulletin that “the Turkish army was just taking the city as we arrived.”

“The place was crowded with many sick refugees and we opened a clinic to take care of them as best we could, but it was soon closed by the soldiers.”

She wrote about looting, the city being set afire and how many of the refugees jumped into the harbour and drowned rather than be burned alive.

Under great peril, Corning gathered the children from the orphanage there and led them through the burning city to safety aboard an American ship, where they were taken to Constantinople. She later established an orphanage for them on the island of Syros in Greece.

In June 1923, Corning was invited to Athens, where King George II of Greece presented her with the Order of the Knights of St. Xavier for her courage and bravery.

The following year, Corning returned to Turkey, where she continued to work and care for orphans. She also adopted five children. Although they did not always live with her, she provided for their well-being and education.

Fast-forward to April 21, 2004, when the Canadian Parliament passed Bill M-380 recognizing the deaths of over 1.5 million Armenians from 1915 to 1923 as a genocide.

Earlier that month, His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, issued a statement titled Message of Blessing, which included a tribute to Corning.

It said in part: “The name of the late philanthropist Sara Corning is very cordial and precious to Armenians living around the world. (We) acknowledge with deep gratitude her efforts to salvage several thousands of their compatriots living in Turkey ... they were saved thanks to the unwavering humanitarian works of Sara Corning.”

Local historian Susie Sweeney was recently commissioned by the Yarmouth Waterfront Development Corp. to write content about Corning for an interpretive panel that the town intends to install in Frost Park.

Sweeney said that in the past, older people in Chegoggin knew about Corning’s story, but no one made a fuss. Nor did Corning ever bring attention to herself; hence, very few people in Yarmouth know her story.

Sweeney added that “Sara was strong in her faith and dedicated her life to serving humanity.”

“Her attitude seemed to be that she had a job to do and simply got on with it.”

The Yarmouth County Museum and Archives has a large display that houses the heroine’s nursing uniform and other items such as her passport and the medal she was awarded from the King of Greece.

Jennifer Rodney-Chown, a native of Yarmouth now living in Fall River, has had a lifelong interest in the characteristics of peacemakers and humanitarians.

Captivated by Corning’s story, Rodney-Chown and her husband, David, left on a Mediterranean journey this past summer in hope of learning more.

There were many highlights, including a week's stay in Syros.

"It was an emotional experience for me after researching about Sara these past years," she said.

Rodney-Chown learned from their hosts at Hotel Ploes about an Armenian woman in town who might be a relation to an orphan from Smyrna and could be found selling loukoumi and nougat (sweet confections) in a shop adjacent to the town's square.

It didn't take the Rodney-Chowns long to find the shop and its owner, Constantina Sykutri.

"Behind her on the wall were black and white historical photos of Smyrna!" said Jennifer Rodney-Chown. "Her father was one of the Armenian orphans. She belongs to an Armenian group who keep the traditions and the memories alive."

Another highlight was to visit the area where the orphans were relocated. Although the red-roofed buildings are still standing, they are used as military barracks.

Because it was a weekend, no one was available to authorize entrance. So their driver took them to a location overlooking the buildings to take photos.

"This is where Sara gathered all the children together to form with their bodies the scripture verse: Second Corinthians 1:8-11, where they were photographed from a plane," said Rodney-Chown. "The verse expressed the suffering they experienced and the miracle of their survival through God's help and those who cared for them."

Rodney-Chown has huge admiration for her distant cousin and hopes that the town of Yarmouth will not only install the interpretive panel Sweeney worked on, but will also erect a statue in her honour.

"Sara showed through her life that no matter what history lay before (us), the extended hands of understanding, friendship and assistance are powerful and healing wherever mutual openness exists. Sara gave all that and more: in Halifax, in Turkey, in Greece... when a door opened, she walked in and gave her best, truly helping others to survive and thrive."

Although Sara Corning is not a household name in Nova Scotia, she is well-known to the Armenian community in Canada. In September 2012, the Sara Corning Centre for Genocide Education opened in Toronto.

After her retirement, Corning moved back to her childhood home; she died in 1967. Her headstone in the Chegoggin Baptist Church Cemetery reads: She Lived To Serve.

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