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Keith Ransom-Kehler

Keith Ransom-Kehler, a wealthy member of the Baha'i faith in the United States, was the first woman to be named Hand of the Cause of God. She is considered the first Baha'i martyr from the United States.

Keith Ransom-Kehler, born in 1876, grew up in Kentucky and Michigan. In 1898, she graduated from Vassar College and decided to pursue graduate studies. She attended several colleges, eventually earning a master's degree. She married her first husband in 1901. They had two children, but only one lived. Ransom-Kehler taught French and English literature at Albion College. Widowed, she moved to Chicago and married a second time in 1910. The family moved to New York City, and through her husband she entered the world of socialites. In 1911, Ransom-Kehler met Abdul-Baha in London, an event that was pivotal in her spiritual transformation.

Trained as a Christian minister, Ransom-Kehler became a leader in the Chicago liberal Christian community and was active in social reform movements. She affiliated herself as a Baha'i in 1921. Again widowed in 1923, she was able to dedicate more time to her new religion and rapidly became a leading figure in the U.S. Baha'i community. She met the guardian, Shoghi Effendi, during her two pilgrimages to the Baha'i holy shrines in Palestine in 1926 and 1932. Her work to propagate and consolidate Baha'i communities greatly expanded in 1929. She traveled to the West Indies and visited almost all the Baha'i communities with Spiritual Assemblies in the United States. Following this, she left to pursue international missions, never returning to her homeland.

Ransom-Kehler visited and spread the Baha'i message in Japan, China, New Zealand, Australia, and India. While she was in India, Shoghi Effendi called her to Haifa, Palestine, the Baha'i World Center, to propose a special mission to Iran. He personally prepared her for the arduous task of trying to convince the Iranian government to allow the Baha'is to publish and distribute Baha'i books in their country. Ransom-Kehler spent the last year of her life in an exhausting but futile series of meetings with government officials as she attempted to accomplish what turned out to be an impossible goal. At the same time, she traveled around Iran to meet with Baha'i communities, extend support from their Baha'i brothers and sisters in the United States, and help them propagate Baha'i teachings. Her efforts weakened her and in 1933 she succumbed to smallpox in Isfahan, where she is buried. The title "Hand of the Cause of God" was bestowed upon her shortly after her death. Shoghi Effendi, in a rare act, requested that a delegation of Persian Baha'is from different cities in Iran go on a pilgrimage to her gravesite on his behalf. The tomb constructed for her serves as a shrine. The year following her death, Shoghi Effendi again asked a delegation of Persian Baha'is to perform a pilgrimage to her shrine on his behalf.

Loni Bramson

Further Reading

Harper, Barron. *Lights of Fortitude, Glimpses into the Lives of the Hands of the Cause of God*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1997; Ruhe-Schoen, Janet. *A Love Which Does Not Wait*. Riviera Beach, FL: Palabra, 1998.

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