

In Memoriam

Alenush Terian: The Iranian Solar Mother

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We present a biographical sketch of Alenush Terian, the first Iranian woman physicist, who was known as the Iranian Solar Mother, since she founded the first solar telescopic observatory in Iran. She taught and carried out astronomical research for three decades with inadequate resources but with unflinching devotion, motivated by a strong desire to propagate scientific education and research in her country.

Key words: Alenush Terian; University of Tehran; Institute of Geophysics; astronomy; physics; history of astronomy and physics.

In Iran more than 60% of the undergraduate university students in science, mostly in physics, are women.¹ Their representation in postgraduate studies is lower, but it does not include many women who go abroad to continue their studies. Today some women physicists in Iran are professors in universities and other institutions, such as the famous Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (formerly the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics) in Tehran.

Alenush Terian (figure 1) was born to an Armenian family in Tehran on November 9, 1920. Her mother had studied in Switzerland, and both her mother and father spoke French, English, and Armenian. She and her brother spoke Persian and Armenian as children, and they learned French, catching their parents by surprise. She also learned English and Turkish,² and she received her early education in an Armenian school and her secondary education at Anoshirvan Dadgar.

Alenush Terian graduated from the Science Department of the University of Tehran in June 1947 and then began working in the university's physics laboratories.³ She could not convince her teacher, Professor Mahmoud Hessabi, to pay for her further studies abroad, so she had to support herself, receiving her doctorate in Atmospheric Physics at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne) in 1956. She then decided not to remain in Paris, but because of her love for her country and desire to serve it she returned to Iran where she was appointed as an Assistant

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Fig. 1. Alenush Terian (1920–2011), the first Iranian woman professor of physics. *Courtesy of:* Photograph by Mehr/Majid Asgaripur.

Professor of Thermodynamics at the University of Tehran. A friend of her father suggested that instead she should work for his company, which would pay her ten times as much as her university salary, but she declined his offer. A few years later, she received a scholarship from the Federal Republic of Germany to study solar observatories there for four months.

In 1964 Alenush Terian became the first woman Professor of Physics in Iran. Two years later, she became a member of the Geophysics Committee of the University of Tehran, and in yet another three years, in 1969, she was elected as Head of Solar Physics Studies. She became one of the founders of the first solar telescopic observatory in the Institute of Geophysics of the University of Tehran, where she worked with her devoted students. She loved teaching, believing that teachers must study continuously to keep themselves up to date. She took great pleasure in the success of her students, telling them that she “would do the same thing” again if she were to begin her life anew. In 1979, at the age of 50, the Rector of the University of Tehran approved her request to retire.

In the last years of her life, Alenush Terian lived in the house of Tohid, because she had left her house to Jolfa’s Armenian community and to university students who did not have a suitable place to live.⁴ Her best memories were of her thirty years of teaching—she loved her students and they loved her—and the founding and construction of the solar observatory, for which she was called the Iranian Solar Mother. She was one of those lucky ones whose contributions were

recognized by high-ranking Iranian and Armenian statesmen, and by the Armenian community of Iran.⁵ She believed that her success in life stemmed from her human attitude. She never married because of her complete dedication to promoting the study of physical science in Iran. She died on March 5, 2011, at the age of 91.

References

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- ² See website <<http://www.payvand.com/news/07/dec/1183.html>>.
- ³ See website <<http://armeniansworld.com/?tag=mother-of-iran>>.
- ⁴ See website <<http://iranahay.blogspot.com/> blog by ARMEN SARVARIAN, 5 March 2011>.
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