

## IN MEMORIAN

### ISABEL CAMACHO DE SÁNCHEZ (1931-2013)

by Boris Handal and Enrique Sanchez

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*Isabel de Sánchez, 2013*

Isabel was born in San Nicolás, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 3 March 1931, daughter of Leonardo Camacho and Isabel Jaime and the youngest of three sisters. Her father passed away when she was three years old. She grew up in Rosario, the second largest city, three and a half hours' travel from Buenos Aires.

The Bahá'í community of Rosario at the time was a small handful of believers. Although the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Argentina had been formed in Buenos Aires in 1940, it took nearly two decades of intense work to form the Local Assembly of Rosario. The *Bahá'í News*, in November 1973, suggested that "Rosario was a hard city in which to proclaim the Bahá'í Faith". Defying that description, Isabel eventually became a brilliant soul reflecting unique, special qualities both in administration and as a Bahá'í teacher.

She learned of the Bahá'í Faith through a schoolmate, Rosita Aguirre, who at age 16 was attending Bahá'í meetings in Buenos Aires. In 1948, Rosita Aguirre went to Rosario for school vacation and told Isabel she had learned of the Bahá'í Faith and was even considering accepting that religion. Rosita was surprised when Isabel, after hearing a brief explanation about the Faith, said: "That is for me" and ever since then she never had any doubts. Later, Isabel visited Buenos Aires, and Rosita introduced her to Haik Kevorkian (1916-1970) who gave her the book

*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era.* Isabel began attending meetings and accessing more Bahá'í literature, which she took back to Rosario. By this reading, Isabel learned more about the Teachings and embraced the Bahá'í Faith in December 1952, influenced by Rosita, who had already taken this first step. Some time later, Isabel moved to Buenos Aires, where an enthusiastic group of young Bahá'ís had already formed, with Athos Costas, Haik Kevorkian and Rosita Aguirre. This group was soon joined by Manuel Caballero and César Tozo. Both Isabel and Rosita were registered as Bahá'ís when they turned 21. Some inaccurate medical advice led her to quit studying Architecture. Her friendship with Rosita and later with Margot Miesler of Brazil and their enormous enthusiasm about the Faith led them to undertake a long trip to Peru.

In April 1953, although they were not delegates, the three young ladies attended a Convention to elect the Regional Bahá'í National Assembly for South America, held in Lima. At that time, they already had Bahá'í credentials Mercedes Sánchez hosted them after an exhausting trip, 5,500 km overland, crossing the Andes and falling ill. That was how she met Enrique Sánchez, a young physician, Mercedes' younger brother. Enrique was not yet a Bahá'í, but did belong to the Bahá'í Reception Committee for the Convention and had been called upon to treat the new arrivals, who were still ill.

After getting to know each other better, Enrique traveled the next year to propose, and they were married in Lima, in December 1954 (the same year Enrique signed his enrolment card) in a simple Bahá'í ceremony held in a small rented locale that was being used as the Lima Bahá'í Center downtown.



*Isabel and Enrique Sánchez*

As in Argentina, she plunged into Bahá'í activities immediately, with her abundant vigor and enthusiasm. Soon, she was appointed to Bahá'í agencies and elected to Bahá'í institutions. By then, her sister-in-law, Mercedes Sánchez, was a member of the Regional National Assembly for South America and the house where they lived was a center for Bahá'í activities. This house,

in the district of Lince, was where she and Enrique lived. Later they moved to Santiago de Surco, Lima. Both homes hosted countless meetings and many visiting friends, both from other parts of Peru and from abroad. These included Hands of the Cause, Counselors, Auxiliary Board Members, Bahá'í speakers and traveling teachers, enjoying their home's hospitality. It was an exemplary Bahá'í home.

Isabel, Enrique, and their children (Enrique, Nicolás and Mónica) did plenty of travel-teaching. She served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Peru since 1964, many years as secretary, almost un-interruptedly until she was appointed to the Continental Board of Counselors for Protection and Propagation of the Bahá'í Faith in the Americas in 1991. Her efficiency and vision as national secretary were highly appreciated, although she would humbly say that they elected her "because she was the one who had time". A believer who served with her on the National Assembly of Peru recalled that "What made her special was her smile ... she was very calm, and they encouraged others to take a similar position..." During her able management for almost 26 years as national secretary, she shaped new processes regarding establishment, evolution and consolidation of the Bahá'í administrative order in Peru, including external affairs, procuring properties, producing literature, strengthening local spiritual assemblies, growing and following up on the teaching work, communicating and coordinating with the World Center, maturing the summer and winter schools, preserving the national archives and relics, collaborating closely with the institution of the Counselors and national assemblies of neighboring countries, promoting socio-economic development projects, among other important processes. She took innumerable trips around Peru, supporting the goals of national teaching plans, enlightened by guidance from the World Center.

Isabel had the blessing of participating as a delegate to the 1968 election of the Universal House of Justice in the Holy Land. As a Continental Counselor, in which capacity she served until 2001, Isabel traveled extensively around the entire continent, visiting local and national communities. She would say, regarding her international experiences as a continental counselor, that she felt she was "working on something very great, and sometimes one cannot conceive of that greatness". Isabel's affectionate attitude was always overflowing with her contagious optimism and radiance as well as by her extreme dedication to sustaining the Faith's administrative structure. When she left the Continental Board of Counselors, Isabel was once again elected to Peru's National Spiritual Assembly.

As a wife, she was a loving, faithful companion to Enrique. They lived like tender newlyweds for almost 46 years of marriage. She accompanied and assisted her husband with that same tenderness during his long illness. After Enrique's passing, Isabel once again turned her energies toward service, with spiritual radiance, accompanied by the strong spiritual bond that she maintained with her beloved Enrique.

Although 80 years old, Isabel rose up as a home-front pioneer for some months in the city of Chiclayo, in northern Peru, to help that cluster develop. On her return to Lima, she moved, with her grand-daughter, to the local community of Lince, Lima to continue playing her part in the Faith's growth under the Five-Year Plan. In this new community, she served as a member of the Local Assembly and continued offering her home as the venue for all kinds of

Bahá'í activities and gatherings. At the same time, she was serving as a member of the External Affairs Department.

Until her last breath, she remained steadfast in her service to the Cause. Her enthusiasm and energy never succumbed to any difficulties. She demonstrated, in every sphere of her life, her passion for serving and helping others. She would listen patiently and lovingly to all friends, Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, who turned to her for advice, or simply to be heard.

On her passing, one believer wrote the following: Bahá'u'lláh's love builds a spiritual bond among His servants, which unites us more strongly than bloodlines or family ties. Some members of the community, by their love and example, become part of our lives, of our education – they live in our hearts. Isabel gave us her all, for all of her life; she lived her love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith every day of her life, with total devotion, dedication and personal sacrifice. Her time was never for her own use – if she had to, she was off, driving herself, or in a taxi, an airplane, a bus, a truck, on horseback, aboard a ship, in a canoe, or on a raft. She never let rivers, seas, deserts, jungles or mountains stop her, if she was intent on delivering some good advice, encouraging a believer, strengthening some institution – she would always find a way to get there, no matter how far. Her home was always home to all the Bahá'ís, from her old house in Lince, and later in Surco, her home was a center for meetings, institutes, 19-Day Feasts, receptions, and gatherings of all kinds. So, many of us, from childhood on, literally grew up in her home. That is where we studied, prayed, fasted, slept, laughed, played, cried, danced, celebrated and some of us even got married there. She never rested. I remember her reading letters, reports, books, papers, each new Bahá'í book, each new communication from the World Center, she would study with genuine dedication, with academic passion, and shared them with everyone. When necessary, she would translate them, typed them up, made a mimeograph stencil to copy them, and later on her computer, printing them, photocopying them and sending them to the believers. She was always planning, making projects, organizing something, concerned about everything and everyone, just because of her love, and her great desire to serve, to give and share with the community, to which she gave her all. Isabel was an exemplary maidservant, who knew how to fill her life in the Faith with actions, much more than with words.

On 28 February 2013, the Universal House of Justice wrote the following affectionate message to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Peru:

*"We were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of our very beloved Isabel de Sánchez, consecrated maidservant of the Blessed Beauty and tireless promoter of His Cause. Her firmness in the Covenant, cheerful disposition, innate enthusiasm and her years of service as a member of the Continental Board of Counselors for the Americas and of your National Spiritual Assembly are remembered with profound admiration. Please convey our most heartfelt condolences to her children and other family members and assure them of our fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her illumined soul, now reunited with her beloved husband, Enrique, in the Abhá Kingdom."*

The following links share two videos of an interview in which she recounts some episodes of her life:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9z2xa4IsLs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfHpSWUOnho>