



SCERIMAN FAMILY

SCERIMAN FAMILY (ŠAHREMĀNIĀN, SHAHREMANEAN, SERIMAN), a wealthy Persian-Armenian merchant family. With origins in early 17th-century New Julfa, the family had branches going as far west as Italy (especially Venice) and as far east as Madras (modern Chennai in India) and Pegu (Burma), and it was active up until the 19th century. In addition to merchants, the Sceriman family included high-ranking state, military, and religious officials and counts. The Scerimans were among *Shah 'Abbās I's* (r. 1588-1629) deportees, who settled in New Julfa in the early 17th century and played a significant role in the domestic and international commerce of Iran by taking advantage of their contacts within and outside the country.

The Sceriman family was the most influential and the wealthiest family of Catholic Armenians in New Julfa. The patriarch of the family, Agha Murat (Āqā Morād), was among those deported from Old Julfa by Shah 'Abbās I. The family continued through one of his sons, Shahrیمان (Šahremān), and bore the latter's name (Khachikian, p. 70). Shahrیمان's son Sarhat was responsible for expanding the family's wealth and influence in the mid-17th century. Evidence suggests that, unlike most Armenian merchants from Julfa who specialized in the silk trade with Europe, the Scerimans were originally and primarily diamond and gem merchants (Aslanian, p. 329). Sarhat's eldest son Zachariah was a royal merchant for Shah Solaymān I (reigned as Šafi II in 1666-68, reenthroned as Solaymān I in 1668 and reigned under this name until 1694; see Bournoutian, p. 9). Zachariah's numerous gifts to the Russian Court, including a golden throne decorated with thousands of diamonds and precious stones



and presented in 1659, paved the way to Tsar Alexei's (r. 1645-76) granting of special privileges to Julfan merchants to use the Russian route to export their silk to Europe (Sceriman, fol. 2; Anonymous, pp. 13-14; Matthee, pp. 170-71). At the same time, the Sceriman family began exploring other avenues for expansion.

Already in 1613, the family owned a house in Venice, which was used as a temporary residence for their agents and family members (Sceriman, fols. 1-2; Bonardi, 1990b, pp. 230-31). In the 1650s and 1660s, Gaspar, the fourth son of Sarhat, was spending long periods in Venice, Livorno, and Rome. In the 1690s, Nazar and Shahrman, the sons of Murat di Sceriman (another son of Sarhat), invested about 720,000 Ducats in various Venetian banks, by opening interest-bearing accounts, and offered other substantial loans to the republic to help finance its wars against the Ottomans. The family's orientation towards the Italian city-states had a cultural component as well.

In 1646 K^vāja Sarhat converted to Catholicism (Chick, II, p. 1358). Several decades later, in 1684, eleven members of the family formally abjured loyalty to the Armenian Church and embraced Catholicism in Julfa (Archives of the Propaganda Fide in the Vatican, vol. 495, fols. 247r-261v). From then on, they became the pillars of Catholicism in Julfa and great supporters of the Vatican. Similar to what had happened in Russia, numerous favors for the Vatican starting in 1680s, while the family was still in Julfa, resulted in a papal bull of 1696, granting the family full citizenship of Rome and trading privileges in Rome and other cities (White, pp. 10-12; Sceriman, fols. 2-4, 7).

In 1699, the recommendation of the Papacy and similar favors by the family to the Austro-Hungarian Empire resulted in granting to them the titles of Counts in Hungary by the Emperor Leopold I (r. 1658-1705; see Sceriman, fol. 8; *Resultato del Processo...*, no pagination). Similarly, following the more than 720,000 Ducat loan mentioned above, they received numerous privileges by the Venetian Senate (White, p. 12). They were also made members of the nobility in a string of Italian city-states in the middle of the 18th century (Chick, II, p. 1358). However, the family's concerted efforts as of the early 18th century to join the Venetian patriciate did not succeed, although they were well integrated into Venice's ruling class through marriage alliances with several noble Venetian families. The Scerimans were also well incorporated into the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which further increased their prestige as foreigners in Venice. For instance, Basilio, the son of Gaspar Sceriman, was ordained a Monsignor and later became governor of a number



of regions, while Stefano Domenico Sceriman was elected bishop. Another prominent Sceriman from Venice was Zaccaria di Seriman, who became a celebrated writer and satirist in Venice in the 1760s (White, p. 19).

Privileges abroad came at a heavy price at home and alienated the Scerimans from the Armenian Church hierarchy in Julfa. In 1694, when tensions between Catholic missionaries in Julfa and the Armenian Church came to a head, the Scerimans bore the brunt of anti-Catholic fervor in Isfahan fuelled by increasing pressure by Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722). As a result, the family migrated and settled in Venice in 1698 (White, p. 12; Chick, II, p. 1358; a lengthy will of Sarhat Shahrman's son Marcara in Armenian, dated 1700, is reproduced in Ter Hovhaneants, I, pp. 124-42).

The Scerimans traveled and worked in many continents. Junior members of the Sceriman family were sent out by their older siblings to various parts of the Julfan network, where the family saw the need to maintain permanent representatives drawn from their ranks, e.g., India, Persia, Russia, the Netherlands, Spain, Burma, Malacca, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (letter to Ohanis Sceriman from Pegu [Burma] dated 1676 in *Archivo di Stato di Venezia, Documenti Armeni*, Busta 2; Aslanian, p. 335).

The family, however, maintained a continued presence in its ancestral suburb of Julfa, where other branches of the Scerimans continued to reside. From the 1690s, the family firm's headquarters appear to have shifted along with some members of the family to Venice and Livorno, from where the Sceriman firm continued to operate for about another century until late 1790s, when their business fortunes declined. In the first half of the 18th century, when the Sceriman family firm was still experiencing a rise in its financial fortune, the head office in Venice frequently communicated with the branch in Julfa to coordinate its overall activities (Aslanian, pp. 332-34). The Julfa branch was integral to the smooth functioning of the firm and was, therefore, maintained as long as possible for at least two reasons. First, the traditional capital-generating markets for the firm were in India and southeastern Asia, which meant that having a regional office in Julfa was strategically useful in linking the Mediterranean sphere of Sceriman activities with those of the diamond and gem markets in the Indian Ocean. The second reason could have to do with the fact that despite their Catholicism and eagerness to integrate, assimilate, and succeed in their host society in Venice, the Scerimans still remained Julfan Armenians, at least as far as their trading habits were concerned (Aslanian, p. 342).



In all, the picture of the family that emerges from these events is that of a shrewd and strategizing group of individuals, who seem to have always had not only its future commercial interests in mind, but also its survival and staying in power in new lands and homes they made their own, while still being bound to the original home in one way or another—whether through language, personal relationships, or otherwise.

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