

“Arab American Leader Ann Zarick, 1930s,” Arab Indianapolis, December 31, 2020, ArabIndianapolis.Com.

By Edward E. Curtis IV

Ann Kurker Zarick was ready when she received the call to become a leader in Indianapolis’ Arab American community.

Born in 1897 to Jabren and Sophia Kurker, both of whom had immigrated from Syria, Ann was raised in an Arabic-speaking household. Her father was a carpenter, and hard work was a family value. Ann trained to be a stenographer. In 1918, she worked at Kahn Tailoring Company, which made uniforms for the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I. Kurker was one of 917 employees who donated to the war chest, which provided aid to members of the military, their families, and wartime refugees.

In 1926, Ann Kurker married Waheeb S. Zarick, who had almost finished his degree in medicine at Indiana University. The couple settled at 1362 North Ewing in a modest, two-story wood-framed house just south of Brookside Park on the city’s east side. Ann gave birth to her son Joseph in 1928.

Like many Syrian and Lebanese women in Indianapolis, Ann Zarick became involved in her community. In 1932, for example, she served on the Woman’s Auxiliary for the Indianapolis Medical Society. In 1934, she was in charge of publicity for the Brookside Mothers Club, which ran activities such as children’s Valentine Day parties. Using her connections to the Indiana Society of Magicians, of which her husband served as president, she also organized a magic show for the kindergartners. All proceeds benefited the Indianapolis Free Kindergarten fund.

Ann Zarick lived in a world that was not only segregated by race but also by gender. Separate social clubs and religious groups for women were the norm. In these female spaces, women often determined the rules by which they governed themselves. They competed with one another for power, but they also enjoyed each other’s company and had fun without worrying constantly about the male gaze or male chauvinism.

These groups gave women the opportunity to develop leadership skills that could also be used in mixed-gender settings. This is what happened to Ann Zarick, when in 1939, after her husband passed away prematurely, she stepped into a major leadership role in the Arab American community. That year Mrs. Zarick led a delegation of at least nineteen Arab American men and women from Indianapolis to the annual meeting of the Midwest Federation of Syrian and Lebanese Clubs in Omaha, Nebraska. During the meeting, she was elected secretary of this regional organization.

In 1940, she once again led Indianapolis’ delegation to the Midwest Federation annual convention, held this time at the Pere Marquette in Peoria, Illinois. Three thousand delegates

were expected at the meeting, where discussions were held on the formation of a national federation of Syrian and Lebanese clubs.

The Marott Hotel was a premier venue for Indianapolis' white society gatherings in the 1920s and 1930s; it was the favorite spot of world-famous celebrities and dignitaries who dined or lodged there during visits to Indianapolis. Credit: Wiki Commons.

Ann Zarick was a respected figure in the Indianapolis community. For example, in 1939 she was one of the featured speakers at the Syrian So-Fra (Sorority-Fraternity) Club annual dinner, which was attended by out-of-town VIPs. The next year, when the Syrian So-Fra Club installed its new leaders at the Hunters Lodge in the Marott Hotel, she was the only honored guest mentioned in the Indianapolis News.

Mrs. Zarick also advised the Wits Sub-Debs and Squires Club that was established in 1946. The label "sub-debs" was an abbreviation of sub-debutantes, a term referring to girls who had not yet "come out" in society. The squires were the boys. "Sub-Deb Clubs are particularly popular in the Middle West," wrote Life magazine in 1945. "In Indianapolis they are epidemic." Over 6,000 young people were members of 700 different clubs, which staged skits, held dinners, and sponsored other youth-oriented activities. Ann Zarick was the adviser for the Syrian sub-debs and squires, which was formally associated with the Midwest Federation of Syrian and Lebanese Clubs. Her son was vice president.

Though Ann Zarick's leadership in a regional federation set her apart from many others—male or female—she was only one of many local woman leaders. Helen Freije was president of Binette L'Yom (Women of Today). Florence Freije was president of Lamba Kappa Psi sorority. Sarah Mikesell was leader of the Ladies Goodwill Society, associated with the Syrian American Brotherhood.

The establishment of social clubs made it possible for Arab American women in the first half of the 1900s to build local networks, participate in Indianapolis' charitable sector, discuss their duties as citizens, carve out time for leisure, and celebrate both Arab and American dancing, music, and food. The making of clubs geared specifically to Syrian and Lebanese people, which constituted most of the Arab American community at the time, was not a way to separate themselves from the rest of Indianapolis society. It was a way to become equal participants in it.