

Personal memories of Rúhiyyih Khánum - An encounter in Australia

The only time I met (as opposed to being in an audience when she spoke) Rúhiyyih Khánum was when she came unexpectedly and at very short notice to Australia at the end of 1977. She had been visiting Japan, had been taken ill, and came to Sydney for treatment and to recover. I was working in the National Office at the time and we got this urgent phone call to say she was on her way and to make arrangements! There was a lot to do in a very few hours. When she had regained some of her strength, she met with us several times and had a lot to say - mostly about the temple (I was a member of the National Assembly at the time and was responsible for the repairs which were then being made to it). She was very direct!

She was very critical of the state of the grounds - many of the friends thought it should be left as natural bushland, but she was adamant it should be properly landscaped. Coincidence or not, not long after her visit a bush fire swept through the whole area, burning out everything around the temple, but leaving it untouched. We landscaped the grounds.

But the thing I want to share is a comment she made to a memorable gathering of the Sydney friends, a few days before she left to resume her travels. She spoke about Bahá'í community life, and described an experience she had had somewhere else in the world. What she said was recorded and this is it:

".... as we walked into the Bahá'í Centre, to attend the Feast, one of the Bahá'í women said (to someone else): 'Oh! You! It's nice to see you, because we haven't seen your face for two years!'

"I don't know, maybe somebody thinks this is pleasing in the sight of God, that remarks like this would draw forth the praise of Bahá'u'lláh and the approval of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. But I can't picture anything more cruel, or tactless, or impolite. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of this amongst the Bahá'ís.

"I'm not talking about you. What do I know about how any of you live? I'm talking about things I do know about, and that I've seen.

"With that kind of attitude and those kind of believers, I don't care if you administer 100 per cent according to Bahá'í administration: if you haven't got the love and kindness and the warmth, and the forgiveness and the tact, how do you expect other people to feel happy when they are with you? ... To want to come to the meetings, or feel you are their family and they are dying to to see your faces again?"

Andrew Gash

Some significant dates in Bahá'í history - September

September 1867: Bahá'u'lláh, exiled in Adrianople (Edirne, Turkey), began the process of declaring His mission to the world at large. His Tablet to the Kings and Rulers, revealed about this time, was described by Shoghi Effendi as His "most momentous Tablet".

23rd September 1893: The Bahá'í Faith was mentioned publicly for the first time in North America, in a presentation at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago by a former Christian missionary who had served in Syria.

10th September 1919: The Hand of the Cause of God Martha Root brought her teaching efforts to a succession of Latin American countries that had never been visited by a Bahá'í: Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Panama and Cuba. She was followed almost exactly eight years later by the "Mother of south America", Leonora Holsapple (later Armstrong), who made the first recorded Bahá'í teaching trips to Venezuela, Colombia, Haiti, Curaçao,

Trinidad, the Guianas, Barbados and other Caribbean Islands.

28th September 1939: Martha Root passed away in Honolulu, Hawaii, The Guardian acclaimed her as the "foremost Hand raised by Bahá'u'lláh since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing".

16th-17th September 1961: The House of Worship in Sydney, Australia, was dedicated by the Hand of the Cause of God 'Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum in private and public ceremonies.

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Martha Root in Bombay, India, 19th October 1937.

The significance of the Six Year Plan

The year 2000 marks the Golden Jubilee of the Six Year Plan. Philip Hainsworth tells us in this account of the astonishing offer made by the Guardian in his last appeal, at the 11th hour - 30th March 1950 - and how the UK community's reaction to that offer reverberated around the Bahá'í world.

Fewer than a dozen believers in the British Isles are still alive who can remember the excitement of receiving the flood of messages from Shoghi Effendi which poured into these Islands during the four most critical years of 1946 to 1950 which witnessed the end of the Second World War and the response to those messages which won for this community, according to his staggering message to Convention, 1950, acclamation from The Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, the Master and the Concourse on High.

Surely it is a part of our history which should never be forgotten but be told again and again to our grandchildren and their grandchildren that they remain aware of the greatness of this Community and what the Guardian referred to as "its march on the highroad of its destiny".

Why was this Plan so important?

It was a Six Year Teaching Plan adopted by the delegates at the special Centenary Convention on 23rd May 1944, which asked the Guardian to set the goals. So great was the excitement at this small Convention meeting in a blacked-out basement room in the centre of London, that this historic decision was not even recorded in the Convention resolutions. The world outside was awaiting news of the impending invasion of Europe by the Western Allies. Of the nineteen delegates at that Convention only two are still alive at the time of writing, there were no more than 100 adult believers, forty of which lived in the London area and all in England, with Assemblies in London, Manchester, Bournemouth, Bradford and Torquay and the Goals given were "Nineteen Spiritual Assemblies spread over England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Eire".

In the first two years two pioneers went out and later returned but in the second two years the work began in earnest for ten new Assemblies had been formed including one in the "Pivotal Towns" of Edinburgh, Cardiff and Dublin and all the remaining goal areas had been opened.

In the last two years, known as the "Final Phase", the community, stretched to its limit, had still to maintain, "at all costs", the new Assemblies and establish yet another nine new ones.

5th November, 1948 "... Two brief years separate them from the hour destined to witness the total triumph of their first organised, nation-wide collective enterprise. Every minute of this interval is infinitely precious. The gloom overhanging the entire planet is deepening ominously every day ..."

For a deeper understanding of the importance of this most critical phase in the history of the Faith in the British Isles it is essential to study all these moving, appealing, exhorting, encouraging messages from Shoghi Effendi to be found in "Unfolding Destiny", pp171-252. Perhaps such a study would give the answers to many of the problems facing this community in these Islands more than fifty years on.

The Plan hung in the balance

As the Plan entered its final year the tasks appeared immense. On 8th July 1949, he cabled, "... as concluding year. rapidly ebbs away attention all members. already fully aroused action highly conscious glorious opportunity, unflinchingly determined attain goal should be unwaveringly focused, energies mustered, all available resources mobilised one last forward charge enabling them 'ere final hour strikes, seize laurels victory hanging within their reach... Plead afresh, directing particular appeal few remaining inactive participants who, through inexperience, timidity or overburdening circumstances, still hesitate fling themselves arena wherein struggling community being called upon this fateful hour display before eyes Bahá'í world its prowess, demonstrate the intrinsic worth its stewardship Faith Bahá'u'lláh ..."

The National Teaching Committee, centred in Oxford, was meeting frequently which, as the Plan drew to a close, became almost daily. Every believer was known to them and called upon to teach as never before, to travel teach or to pioneer. Heroic steps were taken, some pioneers moving to new goals once their own area would allow, one old lady in her mid seventies settled in no fewer than seven goal towns.

As if drawn by a magnet believers from other countries came to settle from Canada, Australia, Holland, Denmark and particularly youth from Iran helped to fan the flame.

At the Teaching Conference, 1949, representatives of the whole community, were overwhelmed with news from

the National Teaching Committee that with only fifteen weeks of the Plan still to run, 32 believers were needed in the eight Goal Towns plus fifteen in ten of those already won. While it was almost too much to expect that these would be gained by confirmations of new believers, the NTC was planning to fill gaps by pioneers.

In the middle of the Conference a cable from the Guardian was telephoned from London which galvanised everyone present -

"Feel moved address this eleventh hour my last fervent appeal ... seize opportunity arouse entire body followers Faith Bahá'u'lláh British Isles save fortunes Plan now hanging balance. ... One last supreme sacrificial sustained effort designed ensure total victory now within reach ..."

Before the Conference finally closed the NTC was already implementing decisions of the Conference, consulting on the pioneer offers.

Through January, February and March, 1950, messages were received from the Guardian and the National Spiritual Assembly cabled the Guardian on 28th March that 26 gaps remained. Then came his momentous offer:

30th March 1950 - "... appeal further sacrifice, greater heroism, firmer resolve, nobler consecration ensure total success Plan now hanging balance. ..." And then came his most astonishing offer: "For my part utmost can do is stretch period Plan to July ninth date commemoration Martyrdom".

This so shook the National Teaching Committee that they would have none of it. "We will get the plan by the due date of 20th April", they told the National Assembly, and they began to put into operation all their contingency plans.

The 72nd pioneer of the Plan, an old man in his 84th year in a nursing home in North Yorkshire moved to live with a Bahá'í in Norwich saying, "Victory will assuredly attend our efforts if we are faithful."

On 31st March the National Spiritual Assembly were able to cable: "Confirmations, pioneers reduced gaps to 14 straining utmost complete Plan by Ridván."

On 10th April they were able to send another cable: "Joyfully transmit Teaching Committee report arrangements made complete Plan by Ridván earnestly entreat prayers Bahá'u'lláh seal victory."

The Guardian replied, 12th April: "Rejoice evidences approaching victory praying with increasing fervour".

The National Assembly met on 15th-16th April and sent the following cable, "Total victory assured loving gratitude bounties beloved Guardian assistance whole Bahá'í world" and on the 19th April, "... Joyous Ridván greetings from National Assembly and 24 local assemblies British Isles".

On 21st April he replied: "Share joy reciprocate noble sentiments. Heartily congratulate national elected representatives triumphant community, indefatigable National Teaching Committee, all subsidiary agencies particularly self-sacrificing pioneers who so outstandingly contributed signal victory reverberating Bahá'í world."

Our greatest reward was, however, his cable to Convention when with a voice filled with emotion, Chairman Hassan Balyuzi read to the rejoicing friends:

"HEART FLOODED JOY STRIKING EVIDENCE BOUNTIFUL GRACE BAHA'U'LLAH ENABLING VALOROUS DEARLY LOVED BAHA'I COMMUNITY BRITISH ISLES TRIUMPHANTLY CONCLUDE FIRST HISTORIC PLAN HALF CENTURY BRITISH BAHA'I HISTORY.

HERALD, AUTHOR FAITH, CENTRE COVENANT, CONCOURSE ON HIGH ACCLAIM SUPERB COLLECTIVE ACHIEVEMENT IMMORTALISING OPENING DECADE SECOND BAHA'I CENTURY UNPRECEDENTED HISTORY FAITH BRITISH ISLES, UNRIVALLED ANNALS ANY BAHA'I COMMUNITY EUROPEAN CONTINENT.

UNPARALLELED PERCENTAGE MEMBERS COMMUNITY RESPONDING PIONEER CALL THROUGHOUT

BAHA'I WORLD SINCE TERMINATION APOSTOLIC AGE BAHA'I DISPENSATION.

HISTORIC PLEDGE BRITISH BAHA'I COMMUNITY NOBLY REDEEMED. TRIBUTE MEMORY MARTYR
PROPHET FAITH WORTHILY PAID. SPIRITUAL POTENTIALITIES PROSECUTE SUBSEQUENT STAGE
UNFOLDING MISSION FULLY ACQUIRED.

TRIUMPHANT COMMUNITY NOW STANDING THRESHOLD CATCHING FIRST GLIMPSE STILL DIMLY
OUTLINED FUTURE ENTERPRISES OVERSEAS..."



Summer School, Matlock, Bath, 1947. Bahá'í friends still alive today do you recognise them? Do you recognise any others? Philip Hainsworth, (kneeling front row, right), Hassan Sabri (kneeling front row, left), Lois Gregory (Lambert), child (kneeling front row, centre), Bridget Ferraby (Beales) in her father's arms (standing on left), Pauline Senior, third from Bridget, Bob Cheek, (middle 5th row), Ursula Newman (Samandari), (2nd left, rear Arnold Von Ogtropp (Holland) (middle, rear).