



THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD

AN INTERNATIONAL RECORD

*Prepared under the supervision of
The Universal House of Justice*

VOLUME XIX

140, 141 AND 142 OF THE BAHÁ'Í ERA
21 APRIL 1983–20 APRIL 1986 A.D.

BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE
HAIFA
1994

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2. MEMORIES OF SHOGHI EFFENDI

ADAPTED FROM AN ORAL ACCOUNT BY 'ALÍ M. YAZDÍ*

I FIRST met Shoghi Effendi in 1910 when he came to Ramlih, Egypt shortly after the Master arrived there. He was thirteen, and I was eleven. I had heard about him but had never seen him before. Now, in Ramlih, we attended the French Brothers' School. We started to become acquainted, slowly, as children do, and then we came to know each other better. I would see him at the house occupied by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and gradually we became friends. Even as a child, Shoghi Effendi was always dignified, but he was friendly. Although I was his junior he almost always addressed me as *Shaykh* 'Alí, but in writing he used the untranslated form 'Sheikh Aly'. He was always full of zest, always energetic, eager, always full of life.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was making plans to visit the United States, He wanted to take with Him Shoghi Effendi, as well as a few other believers. Shoghi Effendi was in the seventh heaven: he had heard so much about America, and he looked forward to accompanying the Master as he travelled all over that land giving the Message.

Shoghi Effendi was very close to the Master; 'Abdu'l-Bahá always treated him somewhat differently from other people, even when Shoghi Effendi was a child. He himself was devoted to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was dedicated to the Bahá'í Cause from his earliest childhood; from the very beginning it was at the centre of his life.

On 24 March 1912, the day before their scheduled departure, Shoghi Effendi invited me to visit the ship and see his cabin. Accompanied by some other believers, we took the electric train to Alexandria, and then to the harbour. There stood the *Cedric*, a White Star liner. It was a beautiful ship, one of two that plied regularly between Alexandria and New York, stopping only at Naples. Shoghi Effendi and I went

aboard and he took me upstairs and showed me his cabin, the dining room, and all that was available to our enthusiastic inspection. He was extremely happy, and I was happy on his account. I made him promise to write to me when he got to America, and he said he would.

At Naples, Shoghi Effendi was told that the doctors who tested his eyes had discovered that he had trachoma and insisted that he must leave the ship, although he had never had trouble with his eyes and displayed no symptoms of infection. Italy was at that time at war with Turkey and it might be inferred that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's party was thought to be Turkish, or that other political considerations came into play; but for whatever reason, Shoghi Effendi was sent back. He was heartbroken. Medical examiners at Ramlih confirmed that he did not have trachoma. Denied the opportunity to be with his beloved Grandfather and to witness the teachings of the Faith he loved proclaimed across America, I saw him lose weight, grow despondent, and actually become ill. It was some time before he regained his health and natural ebullience.

After 'Abdu'l-Bahá had travelled in the United States and Europe, He returned to Ramlih for five months. Shoghi Effendi, who had been in Haifa part of the time, came to be with Him. On 2 December 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá left Alexandria to return to the Holy Land.

I did not see Shoghi Effendi again until a few years later when we were fellow students at the American University of Beirut, then known as the Syrian Protestant College, where we were part of a circle of Bahá'í students who, as an extracurricular activity, would gather together and discuss the Teachings. A number of these students were Persians who were, in effect, marooned there, unable to go home because of the war and the blockade; so they were invited to spend their summer vacations in the Holy Land. There was an ante-room to the Shrine of the Báb which was assigned to them, and they spent very happy summers there. When I

* A later version of this memoir appears in *Blessings Beyond Measure, Recollections of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi*. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.)

was in Haifa in the summer of 1917 I also greatly enjoyed being with Shoghi Effendi and with them.

At the university, Shoghi Effendi was always jolly, optimistic and hopeful. He had a really wonderful personality. Sometimes, spontaneously, a smile would light up his face, or he would suddenly break into hearty and infectious laughter. He had a well-shaped small mouth, beautiful expressive eyes, and very regular handsome features. He had a buoyant nature, exuberant and resilient.

At college, Shoghi Effendi and I were in the same building; his room was directly across the hall from mine. From time to time, he would receive parcels from Haifa containing good brown home-baked bread, honey, dried fruits and nuts. He would invite me to his room to share his gifts, and the two of us would sit together there, feasting and talking. He was always generous.

Our relationship was that of two young men, personal friends, just beginning their independent lives, and we had much to share. Although he was of holy lineage and I was a member of a family of early pioneers, we forgot all that and were just two young men, happy together, enjoying ourselves. That was what our relationship was like at that time and in later years. We both had logical minds, and we both enjoyed analytical discussion, especially if it reflected some degree of creativity and vision.

As students, we often spoke about the future. Even then, Shoghi Effendi had a vision of the Faith's having been established around the world, with communities everywhere, actively serving. That was his principal ambition. A common goal we shared was that of personal service to the Faith. He did not appear to know that he was going to be the Guardian of the Bahá'í Cause; even later, at Oxford, he never gave any indication that he knew he was to be the Guardian.

Shoghi Effendi and I graduated on 15 May 1918. He went to Haifa; I went to Damascus. Later on, when the way was opened for communication and travel, Shoghi Effendi was exceedingly happy. His letters and diary of that time are a truly remarkable record of what the Bahá'ís were doing, as well as of his own feelings. After the long period of silence and isolation, mail was now flooding into the Holy Land from the United States, Germany, France,

India, Burma and other centres. Letters came with news of the progress of the Faith; telegrams arrived expressing the joy of the believers in being able to again communicate with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Shoghi Effendi, serving as amanuensis to his beloved Grandfather, was thrilled by these developments. The doors of pilgrimage were opened again; my father received permission to come to Haifa, and Shoghi Effendi described the visit in a letter of 13 February 1919.

'Abdu'l-Bahá worked all hours. One morning, Shoghi Effendi was sleeping when the Master summoned him to begin his work. Later that day, in a letter addressed to 'Ahmad', this tender description was written: 'Early this morning I was awakened by a gentle knock on my door, followed by the sweet voice of the Beloved calling me to rise from my sleep, to shake off my drowsiness and to attend to my work.'

It was evident that the Faith was Shoghi Effendi's life; his joy, service to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was happy in this period and intent on the future of the Faith. He also recognized that all the Persian students of our group were now going their separate ways, some to Persia, some to Europe, some to America. In his diary on 24 August 1919 he recorded that I was coming from Damascus to Haifa to take my leave of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 'Sad has been the farewell,' he wrote, 'but the idea that these young men, enlightened and active as they are, may one day each in his own sphere render a service to the Cause, affords sufficient consolation for the hearts that remain behind.'

I left Haifa by train for Port Said where I was to board a ship that would take me to Switzerland and Germany to pursue my studies. Shoghi Effendi came to the station in Haifa to see me off. He sat in the compartment until the train was ready to leave; then he said goodbye, and he asked me to write to him. It was the end of August. I did not visit Haifa again until 1928.

There were three other young Bahá'ís, one older than the others, who had been students at Beirut and who were now being sent by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Stuttgart to contact the believers. We travelled together by ship and had a beautiful trip along the Adriatic by the Dalmatian coast, with its sunny little hamlets and islands, to Trieste.

So all Shoghi Effendi's friends had gone and he was left behind. But he was happy in his

work. He was busy translating into Persian the incoming mail written in French and English, and translating the Tablets revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in reply to His petitioners. I corresponded with Shoghi Effendi now and then; we have all his beautiful letters.

After I arrived in Germany, I received this letter from him, written on 9 December 1919: 'For a long time have I awaited your letters as I was in the dark as to your whereabouts. But now that your father has come for a few days from Damascus, I secured your address and am sending you herein some news of the Holy Land.

'The Beloved is in the best of health and so are the friends and pilgrims. Your dear and devoted father is as ever warm-hearted, loving, rosy-cheeked and in full bloom. Your brother ['Abdu'l-Rahím Yazdí] is studying at the S.P.C. [Syrian Protestant College] and all runs smoothly. I was told last night that he is growing wonderfully in height and his studies above par.

'As to myself, the same work and the same room.

'So please write me and forget me not as I do not and cannot forget the dear Sheikh.

'Yours affectionately, Shoghi.'

Eight days later he wrote that fifty pilgrims had arrived from many parts of the world. He enclosed a Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá commending me to the believers in Germany and said, 'I trust you have received my letter to you dated December 8 which I sent to the Technische Hochschule and in which I enclosed some diary letters of mine which I thought might interest you.'

The time came when Shoghi Effendi, too, had to leave the Holy Land. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wanted him to continue his studies, but his health had broken. The Master sent him to a sanatorium on the outskirts of Paris, there to rest, undergo treatment and recuperate. He was commanded not to open a book while he was there. I received a postcard from him, written on 8 May 1920, describing his condition, giving me news of my father, and saying, 'Be sure dear friend that your place in my heart is ever reserved and warm! I wish, when recovered, I could come to see you. But I am afraid this is not possible . . . The Master is in splendid health. Fourteen American pilgrims have arrived. The Holy Land is astir!'

On 28 June 1920 he wrote to say that he had almost recovered and was awaiting instructions from the Master concerning whether he would resume his work in Haifa or go to England for further study. He expressed his impatience to 'plunge again' into 'valuable, profitable work'.

Shoghi Effendi then proceeded to England. He was happy with the Bahá'ís there. He saw Dr. John Esslemont, whom he had met the previous winter in Haifa, and they struck up a friendship. Shoghi Effendi used to visit his private sanatorium in Bournemouth; they had meals together, and they enjoyed talking. Then Shoghi Effendi went to Oxford to resume his studies. He wrote to me from Balliol College on 5 October 1920 saying that although 'immersed heart and soul' in preparations for entrance at Balliol College and 'fearfully anxious and occupied' he was glad to have received my letter. I was experiencing financial difficulties at the time and he expressed deep sympathy although he had already taken measures to assist. His problems were of a different order, he said: 'My field of study is so vast, I have to acquire, master and digest so many facts, courses and books—all essential, all indispensable to my future career in the Cause. The very extent of this immense field is enough to discourage, excite and overwhelm such a young and inexperienced beginner as myself.' He wrote of his need to acquire a knowledge of economics, social conditions, the histories and principles of the great religions, and 'for translation purposes' a sound and literary ability in English. 'Prayer, faith, perseverance and effort will alone do it,' he concluded.

On my way to the United States from Germany in the Fall of 1920, at the invitation of Shoghi Effendi, I spent a couple of nights with him in his rooms at Oxford. He took me through the university, showed me the sights and unburdened his soul. In this situation, again, we were two young men, one of holy lineage and the other from a family that had long been in the service of the Faith, and we talked about the future of the Cause, and our part in it, and the opportunities that lay ahead.

After my visit, I received a card from Shoghi Effendi dated 6 November 1920 expressing concern about my financial circumstances and, a few days later, shortly before I sailed for America, there came from his hand further evidence of his tender heart, loving-kindness and

generosity. At a time when his own problems were almost overwhelming, Shoghi Effendi sent me five English pounds with the admonition, 'For heaven's sake think not of sending me back anything. I flatly refuse and decline. Let your mind be at rest.' The note was dated 10 November.

A year later, in Berkeley, California news of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá reached me. It is strange, but we had never considered that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would die. Though He Himself alluded to His passing, our minds had not, could not have, accepted the responsibility. Now, I wrote to my father—I did not want to bother Shoghi Effendi—and I pledged my loyalty to the beloved young Guardian. Shoghi Effendi answered anyway.

The unexpected news of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá almost broke Shoghi Effendi's spirit. Coming suddenly, without warning, it was too much to bear. Committing to the hands of the Greatest Holy Leaf the affairs of the Faith, he withdrew to recover from the shock and regain his strength. His answer to my letter to my father, which he wrote on 23 January 1922, gives a glimpse of how he felt at the time:

'My dearest brother:—

'The touching letter you have written to your dear father has been such a relief and comfort to me and to those who have perused it. In the midst of our sorrows, one ray of hope gives us

the solace and peace that the world can not give—namely His sure and repeated promise that He will send souls that shall gloriously promote His Cause after Him. My dear brother! The pure faith, the ardour and the services of your father, I am sure, as well as your own, will make of you an efficient and energetic servant in His Cause and I assure you of my prayers at His hallowed Shrine, that whatever you do, whatever you acquire may in the near future be wholly and directly put to the service of His Cause.

'I am too overwhelmed to write more fully but I assure you of my prayers for you, my attachment to you and my fervent hope that we shall both co-operate to the very last, in our servitude at His Holy Threshold.

'The bereaved Holy Leaves remember you with tenderness and hope and wish you a bright future wherever you may be.

'Yours in His Love and Service, Shoghi.'

An envelope was enclosed on which he had written, 'Rose petals that have been laid upon His Sacred Threshold.'

When I think of our brilliant, devoted, purposeful Guardian and his unbelievable accomplishment through his own efforts, unaided except at the end, I think of the majestic legacy he left us. Yet my mind keeps going back to that lively, handsome, happy young man who looked ahead so eagerly to the future.