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Irene Bennett (<http://bahaihistoryuk.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/irene-bennett-pilgrimage-1954/>)

It was approaching noon on Friday 18 February, 1954 and there I was, standing at the door of No 10 Persian Street in Haifa almost precisely four days after opening the telegram that read “Not too late, Shoghi.” Four days of whirlwind activity and confirmation in the power of the “Remover of Difficulties” had brought me to my goal, but at this point I felt so unworthy of having been singled out for this honour that I needed a minute or two to gather myself together before announcing my arrival by knocking upon the door of the building known at that time as the Western Pilgrim House.

Western Pilgrim House

There was no help for it but to take the necessary action, overcome my shyness and knock. The door was opened, to reveal the dearest little person reaching about up to my chin, who immediately kissed me and welcomed me in so lovingly without even knowing for certain whom she was greeting. This was dear Jessie Revell. Next, Sylvia Ioas added her welcome to that of Jessie, and Hand of the Cause Leroy Ioas followed suit. Already I felt at home. Then Jessie took me to my room leading into the small, cosy, circular sitting-room and overlooking the lower half of Mount Carmel on which this house was situated, and the blue Mediterranean Sea. Jessie chatted to me so naturally as if she were in the company of a well-known friend, and my heart responded with love for her.

I learnt that I had three fellow-pilgrims but they were away at Bahjí. Two had come from Wauwatosa, Wisconsin in the U.S.A., Al and Maud Reimholz, and the third, Joyce Lawrence, also American, had come from the Lofoten Islands, off the coast of Norway, where she had pioneered during the past year and thus become one of the “Knights of Bahá’u’lláh”. Jessie lamented that I had just missed Marion Hofman, for she had departed that very morning from the room which now was mine. My delayed arrival had thwarted the plan of the Guardian for us both to be there together, the Guardian thinking thereby to make me still happier on my pilgrimage. It was not far from lunch-time but dear Jessie, before leaving me to settle into my room, took me along to the larder to see what we might find available there in case I felt hungry. We came out each with

a piece of cheese to snack on meanwhile. When she came back she took my arm and guided me to the small dining-room telling me on the way that she had news for me, and this was that the Guardian had arranged for me to join the other pilgrims at Bahjí that very afternoon. He had thought that I would enjoy my visit at Bahjí more that way, as it was not known if any other pilgrim(s) would arrive during my stay. I was to be escorted there in the Guardian's car by Leroy and Sylvia Ioas.

At lunch I met for the first time dear Hand of the Cause, Amelia (Millie) Collins, whose contribution to the Fund had enabled the beautiful decorative wrought-iron gate to be fashioned and placed at the entrance to the gardens at Bahjí – the Collins Gate. Millie lived at the home of Shoghi Effendi and Rúhíyyih Khánúm – the House of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá – and she too then welcomed me and greeted me in her lovely inimitable fashion, adding still more to my feeling of being at home in the wonderful atmosphere of love that surrounded me. It was at lunch-time too that Jessie could introduce me to her sister, Ethel Revell, of a very unobtrusive and shy nature. Ethel took care of all the typing matters of the administration at the World Centre, while Jessie's role was that of accountant and book-keeper. I came to know of another visitor I had just missed, to my sorrow. Loulie Albie Matthews, author of the book *Not Every Sea Hath Pearls*, which I had read with such delight as a new Bahá'í. At that time she was a frail old lady who, while on a cruise, had spent two days during that week in Haifa. They told me that the Guardian had jokingly told her that she should now change the name of her book because every sea now had pearls and one pearl was lying at the bottom of the Mediterranean, a reference to our beloved Hand of the Cause, Dorothy Baker, my adored spiritual mother. In all ways, I was made to feel so much a welcome member of this family of the companion-helpers chosen by the Guardian, and the eagerness of everyone to have news of the Faith and the pioneers in East Africa drew me comfortably and happily into the conversation, and my imminent transfer to Bahjí, surprising to all, naturally provoked a topic of conversation in which most wanted to join with some comment, explanation or advice.

I was urged to take my warmest clothes, it being winter, and the buildings there had no form of heating. I had to confess, however, that I had no woollen clothes and in view of the fact that I had just landed from tropical Africa, all were concerned about my not catching a chill, which resulted in a search for suitable garments to add to my inadequate stock of wearing apparel. The Western Pilgrim House was also the seat of the International Bahá'í Council and the home of the Guardian's administrative staff. Sylvia reappeared shortly and presented me with woollen jumpers, ankle and knee-length socks and a pair of winceyette pyjamas, a selection from which I immediately put on or inside the overnight bag I was to take with me. Jessie came in and chatted to me all the while. Then at the appropriate moment, she took me to the balcony of my room overlooking ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's house across the road to give me my first glimpse of our beloved Guardian as he left the house, his home, to enter his chauffeur-driven car for his afternoon visit to the Shrine of the Báb and

succeeding promenade around it in conversation with the gentlemen pilgrims from Írán. All the pilgrims from Írán were lodged in the Eastern Pilgrim House, adjacent to the Shrine of the Báb, i.e. the building which has since become the meeting place for all pilgrims, who are nowadays responsible for selecting their own accommodation in hotels etc.

Later, that car with its chauffeur, Muḥammad Bahá'í, was at the disposal of Leroy and Sylvia Ioas for their taking me to Bahjí, and in the late afternoon we were on our way. Leroy pointed out to me the interesting features along our route, including the hill from where Napoleon tried to shell 'Akká, and the mosque in 'Akká where 'Abdu'l-Bahá used to pray. Then we turned off to Bahjí and alighted at the entrance to the new and lovely gardens designed and set out so recently by the beloved Guardian. Just as we arrived, Saleh the caretaker of the Mansion and the Shrine, switched on all the lights. These hung in groups of four lamps, spaced so lavishly that when lit they formed what the Guardian called a sea of light and brilliantly illumined every little corner of the gardens with breath-taking loveliness.

The gardens so far developed, stretched in just a quarter of the present circle, around the north and north-west of the Shrine, from which they radiated in long vistas, symbolic as Dorothy Baker had described them to us in Nairobi a year previously, of the way the Guardian's vision works – in long vistas. Leading to the door of the Shrine from the lovely Collins Gate is a broad pathway of Jordan Valley pebbles like sugared almonds, which Rúhíyyih Khánum said would be kept constantly free of weeds if every pilgrim plucked out nine on walking over them. All the Guardian's paths both at Bahjí and on Mount Carmel were made either of these pebbles or of broken pieces of red tiles so that, viewed from a distance, they made attractive patterns of red and white among the greens of the gardens. As well as peacocks (birds of paradise and symbols of immortality) Italian urns and vases, each pathway had marble steps leading to it and on pedestals two snow-white marble eagles, each feather carved to perfection. Growing in the gardens were baby cypress trees, a few artistically spaced off the original olive trees, and beds of flowers, of which the latest planted contained in circles nine rose-bushes. In the still undeveloped three quarters of the grounds stood five hundred and fifty olive trees. As we walked in the gardens we could see far away across the Bay of 'Akká the twinkling lights of Haifa on Mount Carmel, with our beautiful Shrine of the Báb, Queen of Carmel, surrounded by its terraced gardens all illumined and standing out resplendent as a cross of golden lights, the cross at its very centre.

Next we directed our steps to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. A crystal chandelier illuminated the porch-way and the gilded Greatest Name over the door in its centre of golden rays. At the beginning of the porch-way a yard or two from the steps to the door we took off our shoes so that we took a few paces on the pebbles in our stockinged feet "to make us feel kind of good" as Leroy said. A glorious and unexpected surprise greets the eyes as one steps over the threshold and faces the end of an interior brilliantly lit garden of cypresses, flowers and little

orange trees, which at that time of the year were loaded with fruit. We stepped over layers of most beautiful Persian carpets and found ourselves penetrated by a peace, a tranquillity almost tangible. We reverently walked a few yards, then turned to the right to face the doorway to the Inner Shrine. Taking my cue from Leroy and Saleh I too reverently bowed down to the ground, but unlike my guides I was unprepared with a prayer learnt by heart. On rising we slowly proceeded to the Sacred Threshold perfumed with a lavish spread of cut flowers scattered upon it, and again there in turns knelt down and bowed our heads to the step in prayerful attitude. A handful of the flowers from the Threshold were given to me to share with the friends in Nairobi. Over that Threshold pilgrims do not step but on looking within, the eyes are delighted by a vision of light and beauty. When we had all paid homage and silently prayed if so moved, Saleh at Leroy's request chanted the Tablet of Aḥmad in Arabic and we each read aloud a prayer from our prayer books. After once more reverencing that Holy Spot, we walked backwards round the garden so as not to turn our backs on the place where lie the sacred remains of Bahá'u'lláh. I wondered about the great spiritual power spoken of by pilgrims to that Shrine and whether that would have meant an experience of more than the happiness I felt if I had been more spiritually prepared. I could only marvel at my presence there in the heart of the Qiblih.

On leaving the Shrine we proceeded to the house contiguous with it where 'Abdu'l-Bahá used to stay when He went to Bahjí, and as soon as we opened the door Joyce Lawrence came forward to greet me and welcome me into the little group that had arrived the day before. Joyce was to become my dearest pilgrim friend during the rest of her pilgrimage. She led me into a small room where Al and Maud Reimholz were sitting beside an electric radiator with their two escorts from the Pilgrim House in Haifa, namely Hand of the Cause Mason Remey and the lovable Luṭfu'lláh Ḥakím. Before I knew it I was being hugged by Luṭfu'lláh and introduced to Al and Maud. At first Maud and I were just shaking hands unthinkingly but that would not do for Luṭfu'lláh who was not happy until we had properly embraced each other and then I had to be captured "in his little box" i.e. a Brownie box camera.

My fellow-pilgrims had just returned from their visit to Masra'ih and wanted first and foremost to enter again the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, so out we went, the four of us together, to first circumambulate the Shrine and then enter, to pay homage and offer prayers again. Joyce told me of the value of consecrating articles at the Holy Threshold, as a result of which I left my Bahá'í ring and prayer book there overnight and learnt afterwards that Salah had put them on the Inner Shrine.

Meanwhile, an evening meal was prepared for us and of this we partook at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's table in the dining-room where birds still fly in and out when the door is open, but it was too cold to allow the door to stand open at the first meal. It was followed by a glass of Persian tea and Persian sweetmeats and when we had warmed ourselves again by the electric fire we left 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

house and proceeded into the Mansion. There, after removing our shoes again, we entered that room, so light, airy, spotless, and beautiful in its simplicity, where Bahá'u'lláh passed away on the bed on the floor, left just as it was when He lived in that room.>

We went up to the divan at the far end of the room, where Bahá'u'lláh was sitting when Professor Browne from Cambridge, the only westerner to have attained His presence, was granted an interview, following which he wrote his famous memoir of the occasion, quoted in Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era. In turn we knelt and prayed at that spot where Bahá'u'lláh used to sit, then passed beside the bed again and prostrated ourselves in reverence at the foot. After we had all said a prayer aloud, Salah showed us Bahá'u'lláh's taj, His aba, His socks, His slippers, His winter sheepskin coat and His summer silken one.

We entered all the other rooms, one or two more that night and the rest the following morning, and saw many priceless treasures such as the originals of the Arabic Hidden Words, illuminated tablets, a tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the hand-writing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the bold hand-writing of Bahá'u'lláh before He was poisoned, and a script written by His shaking hand at a later date, the hand-writing of Bahá'u'lláh's father, and the whole of the Aqdas in Arabic written inside "The Greatest Name", which was solidly covered by this tiny hand-writing. We saw pictures of the early disciples from the east in the time of Bahá'u'lláh and others from the west in the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the immortal Badi', who carried the Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh to the King of Persia and died a martyr as a result, a photograph of the captain of the firing squad that martyred the Báb and, placed by the Guardian in the corridor opposite to his photograph, those of Spiritual Assemblies around the world so that "the executioner should constantly gaze upon the results of his work." We went into the room of Abu'l-Faql and saw there a portrait of him, his library, and charts of progressive revelation, and then entered the Esslemont room where John Esslemont's book Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era was found translated into all the languages in which translation work had by that time been done. We saw shelves of books and pamphlets in Braille, photographs of May Maxwell and Martha Root, and the coffin in which the wife of Bahá'u'lláh was buried in 'Akká prior to being removed to Mount Carmel. Another room contained miniatures of all the popes from St. Peter to the present day. That of St. Peter was circled in blue, the two who lived in the time of Muḥammad in green, and the one who received a tablet from Bahá'u'lláh, in red.

In the central hall were illumined models of the Shrine of the Báb, the Temple at Wilmette and that of one which in the fullness of time will be built on Mount Carmel. On another table there were framed photostat copies of all the registrations and incorporations of Spiritual Assemblies, including our Kenya certificate of exemption from registration. In the central hall and in all the rooms were beautiful Persian carpets gifted by the believers, and some bearing symbolic patterns were hanging on the walls of the Guardian's room in the Mansion. After we had seen much that night we were allocated rooms in which

to sleep and to me fell the room whose walls were lined with the pictures of the popes and the kings.

Before breakfast the next morning, when we did have the birds flying in and out of the room, we paid one more visit to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and I saw the beautiful gardens for the first time in daylight. Shortly afterwards Muḥammad Bahá'í arrived in a station-wagon to take us on our next visit to 'Akká. He took us first to the "Most Great Prison" where Bahá'u'lláh was incarcerated for over two years and in His prison cell we bowed our heads to the floor and prayed. We saw the place where the "Purest Branch" fell through the roof and met his death, and the spot on the city wall outside, from which the first pilgrims, who had walked all the way from Persia, could stand and wave to Bahá'u'lláh, and then, content to have seen only His waving hand in response, had to set off again on their six months' walk back to Persia with the news that their Beloved was still alive.

We were next taken to the House of Abbúd, where Bahá'u'lláh lived for the ensuing seven years after His release from the prison cell. First we visited the eastern section, which was all of the house that His family first occupied and where the Aqdas was revealed, and then proceeded to the western section, which the owner later also put at the disposal of Bahá'u'lláh, enabling the marriage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to take place, and we were able to enter that room in which He was married to Muníreh Khánum. At the end of this visit we left 'Akká via the old city gate through which Bahá'u'lláh and his family were brought into the prison city. On the way home we all consumed delicious Jaffa oranges, bought for us in 'Akká by Muḥammad Bahá'í.

Back in the pilgrim house in Haifa I spent the early part of the afternoon pressing the flowers given to me for the Nairobi friends. It was the custom of Rúḥíyyih Khánum to receive the ladies on pilgrimage from both the east and the west in her home for tea during the afternoons, but at that time she had been suffering from bronchitis and was still not well. Thus when no call came at the usual time for us to visit with her, tea was prepared for us in our pilgrim house. After we had drunk our tea, everyone agreed on my questioning, that it would be quite safe for me to go and have a bath, since we would be free for the next hour or two. However, while so engaged in the bathroom I heard much chortling outside the bathroom door and thought I was being teased, until it became clear to me that I was in truth being interrupted because Rúḥíyyih Khánum had felt that she could, after all, entertain us for tea and conversation at her home. I supposed I would have to forgo the pleasure as I was quite unready and my hair was wet, but Jessie told me not to worry, to hurry up and she would take me over to join the others who had already gone over to the Guardian's house. When I was dressed Jessie wrapped my hair in a towel, turban-fashion and off we went across the road.

When we reached Rúḥíyyih Khánum's reception room, Jessie opened the door, gently pushed me forward, then closed the door and disappeared. I was at first bewildered at the sight of so many new faces of Persian ladies, as well as

the already familiar ones and only discovered Rúhíyyih Khánum from a voice coming from the corner addressing me and welcoming me forward. This was followed by the observation that “by a process of deduction, you must be Irene Bennett.” Rúhíyyih Khánum was sitting on the sofa, wrapped in a shawl and looking very tired. However, she talked to us in English and to the Persian ladies in Persian and then translated. She explained to the Persian ladies what a very new baby Bahá’í I was and added that as they say in Persia, the milk is not yet dry in the mouth. This added further embarrassment to my late arrival and unpropitious turban-headed appearance with all eyes focussed upon me and I would have been grateful if the floor had opened and let me drop out of the limelight. This was not at all the feeling I had hoped to experience on coming into the presence of the beloved one talked of by Dorothy Baker and the author of *Prescription for Living* that I admired so much. My imagined beautiful experience was instead a sad disillusionment at this stage.

This was the day of the moment to be most looked forward to, when I should be meeting with the beloved Guardian, but my afternoon’s sobering experience had repressed my feeling of joy in anticipation. I thought I was perhaps not spiritual enough and offered up a silent prayer that at least I should not feel unmoved when I came into his presence. This would occur at the dinner table that evening when Shoghi Effendi and Rúhíyyih Khánum would come, as on every evening, to the dining room of the Western Pilgrim House for the main meal of the day in the company of its residents and the pilgrims staying there.

To give due attention and welcome to any newly arrived pilgrim Shoghi Effendi had set up a custom, whereby any such newcomer should lead the way to the dining-table. All the Pilgrim House participants would gather together in the little sitting room to await the call, “Dinner is served” indicating the arrival at table of Shoghi Effendi and Rúhíyyih Khánum. Before 7 p.m. we were all there, Millie Collins, Mason Remey, Leroy Ioas and Sylvia, Jessie and Ethel Revell, Joyce Lawrence, Al and Maud Reimholz and myself. Jessie had already assured me that I need have no fear for the Guardian would make me feel truly welcome and at home, and everyone agreed that the Guardian was master of the art of putting the pilgrims at ease. When the signal was heard, I had to set off first, very bashfully, so Jessie took my arm in her loving way to give me confidence, and together we descended the flight of steps to the door of the dining hall on the ground floor. Through the hall to the table laid at the far end by the front window. I had to proceed alone with the Hands of the Cause and all the others following behind.

Behind two chairs facing the oncomers stood Shoghi Effendi and Rúhíyyih Khánum. As I came into view, Shoghi Effendi moved forward to greet me. While shaking my hand he assured me that I was welcome, indeed I was very welcome, for I had come from Africa. Every feeling of unworthiness and anxiety that I had been earlier entertaining was immediately dispelled, for looking at me with shining eyes and a smiling face, he astonished me by adding that I was a fine Bahá’í, I was active, I was determined and even that I was consecrated!

He recalled that I was the secretary of the first Spiritual Assembly of Nairobi and said that that was a great bounty and privilege for me. Then he said I was to take the chair facing him at the table, and leaving me overwhelmed with such loving attention, he next proceeded to shake hands with each and everyone behind me and ask how they were before they moved to their places at table. (He did this every evening.) When all had been individually greeted and taken their seats he sat down in his own place at the table, an end seat on the long side facing down the hall. At the head, i.e. between himself and me was the “seat of honour” occupied by Joyce, she being the Knight of Bahá’u’lláh. The chair at the opposite end, facing Joyce, was the place of Mason Remey, the Chairman at that time of the International Bahá’í Council, appointed by the Guardian as forerunner to the Universal House of Justice to be elected in the future. The remaining seats along the two longer sides of the table were occupied by the remaining residents of the Western Pilgrim House (the Guardian’s staff) and the other two pilgrims.

That night the Guardian addressed the majority of his remarks and questions to me. Pilgrims seemed to become to the beloved Guardian more than representatives from the country in which they served the Cause, indeed their very personification. He addressed any remarks about a particular area to the person associated with it and in so doing it seemed as if he concentrated himself entirely on that person. So vividly could I experience this feeling that on one particular occasion all assembled at dinner seemed to have melted away leaving just the Guardian leading me heavenwards. He had the most wonderful fascinating countenance constantly changing and radiating light, so that when sitting opposite to him I never wanted to take my eyes from his face. Furthermore, I was in the distinguished position of having a double identity. I was both Africa and Britain. While I was there he recalled outstanding services of British Bahá’ís, such as their record of sixty per cent who left their homes to pioneer during the Teaching Plan requested by the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles immediately upon the conclusion of the Second World War. (Jessie and Ethel said afterwards that he so often extolled the British when talking to the pilgrims at this table). As he was also very happy with the progress of the work in Africa I was constantly being showered with his radiant smiles. To have dinner with our beloved Guardian was the event to look forward to and work up to each day.

Then at the close of the meal, following the departure of our host and hostess, we used to make straight for our sitting room upstairs to put down everything that we could remember of what the Guardian had said, Jessie coming along with us to help our memories. As we left the dining-room together on my first night in the Pilgrim House, “Look what the Guardian said to you”, were the first words addressed to me by my fellow-pilgrims, spoken in kindly tones of envy and awe, and Joyce said I must write down what he had said to me, for even if I did not think these words of eulogy were true now (as I said) they would be in the future, for the Guardian would not have said so otherwise, and I must recall them in times of tests. I determined there and then to try to live

up to that standard and make them true, but alas, any success I might have had has certainly not been consistent!

At the dinner-table we often heard news arrived in the mail that Leroy Ioas communicated to the Guardian, with ensuing questions and replies. I remember how impressed I was at the speed with which Shoghi Effendi could marshal all relevant facts and come to a decision. This occurred when the National Spiritual Assembly of Panama was requesting advice on the choice to be made between two alternative sites for the future Temple of Panama. Sometimes there was conversation with architect Mason Remey over the finishing details in the design of the Archives Building. And one evening after the table was cleared Shoghi Effendi unrolled his map showing the progress of the Faith in East Africa and this he left with me for additions to bring it up to date after the enthusiastic session we had had regarding it. So beautifully were we made to feel part of that wonderful Bahá'í family at our World Centre!

One evening, on the Wednesday of my pilgrimage, we missed the presence of our beloved Guardian, for our usual intimate gathering together for the evening meal was replaced by a social dinner party, and although the Guardian lovingly devoted himself each evening to his pilgrim visitors, he did not appear at all when the guests were local dignitaries. Such an occasion was a rare occurrence but it took place on that particular evening, which was by chance the date of the first anniversary of my Bahá'í declaration, because one of the Israeli government officials who had been associated with developments in our Faith was about to leave the country to serve elsewhere.

We pilgrims were invited guests at the banquet and to avoid looking embarrassingly conspicuous at the occasion, which called for evening dress, with which I was totally unprovided, I once again needed fitting out in borrowed apparel to suit the occasion. Ethel Revell stood much taller than little Jessie but was of equally slim build, so they looked around Ethel's wardrobe to see what they might be able to adapt for me to wear. They thus dressed me in one of her long evening dresses, bloused over at the waist by a belt to deal with excessive length and finished off with an evening shawl. The three Americans, as one could expect I suppose, had come suitably prepared for whatever necessity might arise.

Rúhíyyih Khánum was the delightful hostess, playing her part to perfection, although she had been in bed all day still in a state of convalescence. On the dinner table was a fine evidence of her originality, for with fruit cans and fresh produce all around her bed she had created an individual side salad for each of us, a "girl" salad set beside the places for the gentlemen and a "boy" salad beside those allocated to the ladies. Dresses for the former were arrangements of lettuce with frills of pineapple, shirts for the latter were also of lettuce, with trousers of peach slices. The faces of the girls were cut from peaches and of the boys from pears, each having shredded carrot for hair, raisins for eyes, clove for a nose, cherry for lips, and the cheeks were made rosy with a touch of something resembling rouge. Legs and arms were made from small pieces of pineapple, and

shoes from cherries. They looked just lovely, too attractive to be dismantled by cutlery, but alas we could not save them and take them home for souvenirs.

In those days arrangements for the pilgrims were made on a day-to-day basis. We would often retire for the night quite unaware of what would be planned for us the following day. But before going to bed one night we were informed that Shoghi Effendi had arranged for us to be taken round the archives – the minor archives the next day and the major archives on the following one. There was, of course, no beautiful Archives Building at that time on Mount Carmel. The relics of the Greatest Holy Leaf (sister of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,) the Purest Branch (brother of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) together with some beautifully illuminated Tablets constituted the Minor Archives and were housed in a small building situated in the Monument Gardens.

The temporary home of the Major Archives, being the relics of the three Central Figures, was the third set of rooms in the building of the Shrine of the Báb. The relics there consisted of a wonderfully rich collection of their clothes and articles of everyday use, even locks of hair, finger nails and dried blood. Everything belonging to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was so simple and plain compared with the more ornate and more lavishly aristocratic appurtenances of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. We also saw, in frames of intricate silver and gold work, a photograph of Bahá’u’lláh, paintings of Him in the form of a triptych, and a portrait of the Báb. On one whole wall was a painting of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, executed by a Polish artist who never saw Him but painted from a series of dreams without knowing whom he was portraying. It was so wonderfully ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, with eyes that looked at one wherever one happened to be standing. Again there were countless illuminated Tablets, copies of the original letters written to each of the eighteen “Letters of the Living”, the whole of the Íqán written again in the tiniest scripts inside the second verse of the Tablet of Visitation. (We had seen this at Bahjí written inside the Greatest Holy Name).

We could visit in perfect peace the Shrine of the Báb whenever we were free, except on the morning of Saturday, the Sabbath, when it was open to Israeli visitors, who flocked there in great numbers, and we were needed to help Lutfallah Ḥakím to take them around, keep them in order and away from the paths forbidden to them. Sometimes I went alone and sometimes with Joyce, my dearest companion amongst my fellow-pilgrims. I found it was most rewarding to go up to the Shrine before breakfast, at about sunrise. On each visit I loved it more and was ready to stay ever longer, reading prayers in the shrines of both the Báb and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. How beautiful it was in its garden setting, its golden dome glittering in the sunshine beneath a sky of azure blue and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, reflecting the blue of the sky!

The unexpectedness with which events could crop up for us during that unique and exciting first pilgrimage of mine was illustrated on one of the days when I thought we were going to be free to plan our own activities. I was going to use the time to give my attention to the Guardian’s map of East Africa and the translation for Rúhíyyih Khánum of a letter she had received in Spanish, and

eventually, if the time remained propitious, to get my hair washed. However, on that day unexpected news had arrived informing of the imminent arrival of a Japanese pilgrim, whose journey to the World Centre had occurred in advance of the date he had indicated. This meant that immediately after lunch I had to be hastily transferred out of my bedroom and into Joyce's for this, the last day of her pilgrimage, for the message had said he was already on his way over to the Pilgrim House. All hands got busy helping to effect the transfer and the maid came in and made up the bed.

When all that commotion was over I then proceeded with the plan for my hair. This was accomplished: it was washed, set, and tied up in a scarf to dry while I busied myself with tasks indoors. Such had been my intention until, lo and behold, if we did not receive a summons from Rúhíyyih Khánúm that she was ready to receive the ladies for her afternoon chat and tea with them. Such a possible eventuality had not crossed my mind, for this had not happened during the past two days, in fact since my first experience of this privilege. No wonder Joyce commented on the courage I had in deciding to wash my hair, for, as she said, we never knew from one minute to the next what might be in store for us. Once again, therefore, I had caused myself to feel embarrassed at tea in the home of Rúhíyyih Khánúm, and again could not find anything to say!

That night at dinner we pilgrims represented the four compass points on the globe.

Fellow pilgrims: Joyce Lawrence, Maud and Albert Reimholz, Hiroyasu

Hiroyasu, whom we called Hero for short, was returning to his home in the Far East, en route in Haifa from a year of study in the USA, where he had declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh; Al and Maud were from the Western Hemisphere, the Middle West of the USA; Joyce had established her pioneer home in the far north of Europe beyond the Arctic Circle; while I was from due south close to the mid-most heart of Africa. This was the night when I was moved one place down the table and we all got acquainted with the Bahá'í situation in the Far East and the work to be done there. The whole of my pilgrimage was a time when events and incoming news all contributed to the happiness of our beloved Guardian and our representative gathering at dinner on this particular evening certainly played its uplifting part.

The pilgrimage of Hiroyasu coincided with that of the American trio on just that one day of his arrival. On their last morning Joyce and I went into the Monument Gardens and sat on the steps at the highest point getting our notes straightened out and discussing our experiences.

Joyce Lawrence in the Monument Gardens, Haifa

The surprising fact then came to light that whereas I was telling Joyce that I believed she was gaining more from her pilgrimage by experiencing spirituality more vividly, both in the presence of the Guardian and when communing with the Central Figures in the Shrines, she told me how strange it was that I could

say that, because she had been feeling envious of me and thinking just the reverse! We circumambulated the monument shrines and said the special prayer for the Greatest Holy Leaf. Joyce and I had become very much attached to each other. You would hardly believe how sorrowful we were to part after such short acquaintance. I still have the memento she gave me – a lovely embroidered Norwegian belt.

Joyce Lawrence with fellow pioneer, Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Mildred Clark – Lofoten Islands (August 1953)

The coming of Hiroyasu created a second occasion for me to visit 'Akká and Bahjí, when the dear Revell sisters were to be our escorts.

Irene Bennett with Jessie and Ethel Revell outside the Collins Gate, Bahjí

This time I did not miss the visit to Masra'ih, the home of Bahá'u'lláh for four years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá had gained His release from the Prison City of 'Akká. We saw the lovely view of orange orchards and the pretty garden, walked up the long flight of stone steps trodden so often by Bahá'u'lláh, and entered His room left just as it was when He used it. As at the Shrine, we all said prayers – two in Arabic, one in Japanese and the others in English. When our visit was over, Mrs Gerah had tea waiting for us with delicious Persian cookies and oranges and tangerines from the garden. We were also given little nosegays of violets which had been in Bahá'u'lláh's room. An extra gift of a whole spray of tangerines was also given to me.

From Masra'ih we continued to Bahjí where the great bounty and privilege of being in those sacred precincts and the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh were repeated for me all over again. Once more I slept in what I now looked upon as “my” room in the Mansion, and there in that very room Jessie found, as one among three photographs already framed but not yet hung, the one of myself with the Teso Bahá'ís that the Guardian had said in a letter to Nairobi that he would place in the Mansion at Bahjí. This time as we walked along the main path to the Shrine I plucked about ninety-nine weeds from among the smooth pebbles to make up for not having picked “my nine” on the last occasion. We had hoped to be able to go to the Garden of Ridván, but heavy rain had made the access road impassable.

Our diminished number after the departure of Joyce, Al and Maud brought about a change in arrangements at the dinner-table. I found that I had then been allocated the seat at the head of the table, with Shoghi Effendi at right-angles on my right. I had thus been moved closer to him but I preferred my first position when we faced each other directly.

One morning Hiro and I climbed up the rocky path above the Shrine of the Báb, to the top of Mount Carmel from where we could look down upon our beautiful golden-domed edifice from above to the bottom of the mountain, along Ben Gurion Avenue with its residences of the Knights Templar who in the time of Bahá'u'lláh established themselves there to await the return of Jesus Christ,

and to the coast line and Mediterranean Sea beyond.

On another occasion Sylvia Ioas hired a taxi and took us to the top of Mount Carmel further over to the south, to visit the spot destined to become the site of the future Mashriqu'l-Adhkár on Mount Carmel. Leroy Ioas was at that time engaged in negotiations for the purchase of that piece of land which the Guardian called the head of the mountain. Speaking about this matter one evening at dinner he had said that we already have the heart of the mountain and soon we shall have the head. After that the Jews can keep the tail. The situation is really ideal dominating the bay and the town of Haifa over to the right of it as one faces the seat. It was a heavenly spot, where wild red anemones were growing in profusion, symbols according to Abu'l-Faḍl, of the blood of the martyrs, so I picked a few and later pressed them.

Jessie was always my dearest sweetest Bahá'í sister from the Pilgrim House who looked after me like a mother and surrounded me with love and little gifts – a small bottle of perfume, a piece of the golden tiles left over from the dome of the shrine and a photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá taken at the Revell home in Philadelphia on his journey across the U.S.A. in 1912.

'Abdu'l-Bahá at the home of the Revell family in Philadelphia (June 1912)

She would put roses from the garden in my room, some new little posy almost every day, even if she could find only one budding blossom. On the eighth day she had the joyous news to impart to me that I was not to be saying goodbye to them all on the following day because our beloved Guardian had granted me an extra day of pilgrimage so that I would not have to leave on "dead" day (Saturday) when Israel became paralysed, and have to stay two days in Tel Aviv waiting for my return flight. This extension was more than a privilege and evidence of loving care: it was to bestow a very special blessing upon me, such as I could never have imagined.

Prior to that I was also to be favoured and able to get to know more intimately that dear Hand of the Cause Millie Collins. On what would have been the afternoon of my departure I had instead dear Millie's company. She first escorted me over to the house of the Guardian, also her home as I have already said, and took me to the room where 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away. There, after having made me a present of the newest American prayer book which had been consecrated at the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, together with a sweet little handkerchief, she left me to stay for as long as I wished. She next took me into the room of the Greatest Holy Leaf, after which visit we then went out arm in arm to take a walk together. Millie was so lovely, so spiritual and devoted to the Cause, and had been so close to my beloved Dorothy Baker. We thus felt linked by this special bond of love for Dorothy. Millie said I had been an inspiration to her, coming as a pilgrim from Africa and being such a young Bahá'í. (All others there were at least middle-aged, Rúhíyyih Khánúm, ten years my senior being the next in age). In the course of our little outing we called upon a Jewish friend of Millie's, who prepared tea for us.

Also towards the end of my pilgrimage I was suddenly captured by Muḥammad Tabrizi, an uncle of Jalál and ‘Alí Nakhjavani, who presented me with four little bottles of very precious water to be taken back to East Africa – one for Jalál, one for ‘Alí, one for ‘Azíz Yazdí, and one for myself. They contained some of the water used by the Guardian to wash his hands when he came safely down from performing a task high up inside the dome of the Shrine of the Báb. He had climbed up to that height to place a piece of plaster from the prison cell of the Báb in Mah-ku beneath one of the golden tiles of the dome, while all waiting below prayed and watched in anguish lest their dearly loved Guardian might fall from his precious position.

Finally the culminating happiness of my pilgrimage was reserved for the tenth and last day. The group of poor Persian ladies who had arrived at the Oriental Pilgrim House on the same day as I had made my appearance at the Western Pilgrim House had to leave without seeing Rúḥíyyih Khánúm for several days, owing to her not being fit to host the afternoon tea parties, and they were thereby so disappointed, whereas the extra day allocated to me was destined to fill in the missing link between the idealised Rúḥíyyih Khánúm I had carried to Haifa in my mind and the actual disappointing experiences that being informally in her presence had proved. This happened in the following way.

Towards mid-day, suddenly came bursting into our little sitting room Muḥammad Bahá’í, the Guardian’s chauffeur, in search of me, with a message from Rúḥíyyih Khánúm. He had just brought her back from a visit to her doctor and she wanted to see me to say goodbye before my departure. He was to take me over to her right away. The sun was shining, the morning was warm and there across the road she was sitting on the low wall beside the path leading to the door, and she called me to go up and sit beside her. Then she began chatting to me as if in the company of a close old-time friend, in whom it was natural to confide, sitting relaxed upon a wall. In total contrast to the stiff silent awkwardness I had manifested while drinking tea in the gatherings, in her sitting-room I felt so natural and so much at home perched beside her on the wall, and was no longer tongue-tied, as we laughed and talked together. I realised that she had been holding audience in her sitting-room, getting up for weeks when she should have been in bed, because she could not bear to miss the pilgrims who had come so far, and especially the Persian ladies who met her only at those times. Her adorable soul that I had so eagerly hoped to recognise on this special pilgrimage was fully revealed to me. I felt her love and loved her in return. She told me how pleased she was that I had been able to come and continued by adding. “When we heard here in Haifa that you had become a Bahá’í I said to myself that this new Bahá’í must be a little old lady and that was how I imagined you until you came here. I am so glad to find how wrong I was and to know now that you are so young with many years ahead for service to the Cause”. Among other topics of our delightful conversation was one relating to the official dinner-party held a few nights previously. She expressed sorrow that because of it we had been deprived of the company of Shoghi Effendi and explained that it was a rare occasion for such an event to

take place but sometimes it was necessary to invite Israeli officials to dinner on account of the standing of the Faith in Israel. She rated the social intercourse of the occasion as utterly worthless, "all froth" she called it. She had a gift to give me, a lovely white jumper that a Persian believer had lovingly knitted for her but in a size a good deal too small, but perfect for me. I was so happy that when I shortly had to part company from all the loved ones who had made me such a happy member of the family for the past ten days, I could savour this last heavenly encounter to alleviate the sadness of transition to the busy, noisy world of self-seeking, and rejoice too in memory of my last contact with the beloved Guardian as he bade me farewell. He said he would pray for my spiritual growth and that I would be victorious always and he invited me to come back again to Haifa.