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The Story of my First Pilgrimage

Ethna S. Archibald USBNA

1955

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The memories of my pilgrimage at the end of January 1955 and the effect of my meeting with the beloved Guardian have been treasured and, for the most part, kept safely locked away in the recesses of my mind, to be shared only with the closest friends who were prepared to understand their significance and uniqueness to me.

One of those friends and his lovely wife, whom I met in New Zealand during the time I was there from 1973 to 1976, wrote to me some two years ago from Lillouet where they now live, asking me in the strongest terms to write the story of that experience as his children had little opportunity to meet anyone who could describe Shoghi Effendi and what it was like to be in his presence. Then, very recently, a group of young fellow staff members at the Bahá'í World Centre, having learned that I had met the Guardian, asked me to share with them the fragrance of those nine days. Their heart-warming enthusiasm for what they heard, and the memory of my promise to Ken and Joanne Oakes, brought me to a realization that I should put the memories on paper, before I got too old to do so with any degree of accuracy.

I have hesitated to do this because in the recounting, I cannot avoid showing my warts. Perhaps that is healthy. For background - I first heard of the Faith in the course of an all-night train journey from Melbourne to Adelaide on 214 April 1945 and became convinced of its truth during the ensuing three months, but did not declare my allegiance until May 1947 after my return to New Zealand. Shortly after this I moved to Tauranga where I was an isolated believer and the nature of my work left me no time for any Bahá'í activities. twenty—seven months later I returned to Auckland where there was a very small community, so that I was elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly the following Ridván. This is mentioned only to include a vivid lesson I learned at the first Assebly meeting

I attended. I developed a cold and telephoned the chairman to say I would not be there and gave the reason. The reply was calm and unhesitating: "This is the Bahá'í Faith; don't you realize that Bahá'u'lláh will see that you come to no harm?" From that day, I had to be bedridden to miss an LSA meeting. But my administrative experience at that time was brief as in 1952 I went to London where I spent the next three-and-a-half years.

In those days the Bahá'í Centre was in a below-ground set of rooms in Earls Court and on Thursday nights there was a public meeting. What a training ground! One week the speaker would be Mr. Ḥasan Balyuzi, another it would be Mr. John Ferraby, another it would be Mr. Ian Semple! At a special meeting I witnessed the spellbinding effect 'Mrs. Meherangiz Munsiff had on those who heard her tell of her pilgrimage, on another occasion Dr. John Mitchell was unable to describe his reactions to meeting the Guardian and visiting the Shrines and Holy Places. He ended by saying: "You must go and see for yourself!" So the desire was born and when I was considering returning to New Zealand I came up with the absolutely naive idea of writing to Shoghi Effendi saying that I would be going 'through the Suez Canal en route: could I leave the ship at Cairo and come on pilgrimage') I received a reply (to my disgrace I did not keep it) that this would not be possible, but that perhaps I would come at some future date. As, in answer to a question I had raised, the letter stated that believers were badly needed in England, I remained there, but did not think to communicate this decision to the Holy Land.

Late in December 1954, I received a letter from Haifa inviting me to go on pilgrimage in mid-January 1955. . The letter had gone to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australasia - it had been sent on to New Zealand and by the time it could be re-directed there were only three weeks for preparation. My first was "impossible". How could I raise the funds, how could I get vs as I had just been ill and had been granted three months' sick leave. Fortunately I discussed the situation with Mrs. Backwell, the backbone of the London community. She said unequivocally: "Do everything you can to go, if you do not, you will regret it all your life." Such was my confidence in her, who herself at that time had not been on pilgrimage, that I did just that. Through the immediate response of my spiritual parents in Australia, the money was provided (by the grace of God a small legacy I had been awaiting arrived the day their funds were received, so that the debt could be promptly settled), my employers gave me leave, an air booking was made, and then...

The Hand of the Cause Leroy Ioas was in London for the dedication and opening of the new 1:Ī;iratu'l-Quds at Rutland Gate and there was great excitement and activity. At the first session the chairman announced that all those who were going on pilgrimage in the near future should speak with him. We were told that all pilgrimages were cancelled!! I duly cancelled all my arrangements, wrote a terse note to the Guardian confirming what I had done, only to find out two weeks later that I was expected in Haifa. The cancelation cable had referred to one particular pilgrimage. not all. In the bustle at the Ḥazíratu'l-Quds no

one thought to advise me. So finally I arrived at the airport in Tel Aviv where I stayed the rest of the night and in the morning set out for Haifa.

I was waiting for a sherut, but when a bus came along, packed with people, goats (on top) and bicycles, I got on and had a most unusual and leisurely trip to Haifa, arriving just after 11 o'clock. It was like coming home - the Revell sisters took me in and immediately said "There is just time for you to go to the Shrine of the Báb, the beloved Guardian will be glad you have had your first visit there before you meet him this evening". So Ethel literally ran me up the slopes of Mt. Carmel and I had the great bounty of being alone with her for that first magical experience. I remember I tried to read a prayer for forgiveness through the tightest throat I had ever experienced. We strolled back down to the Pilgrim House, Ethel filling me in with badly needed advice, and I told her my Bahá'í life story.

The Cause Mason Remey and the two other Western pilgrims, one an older woman from the United States, the other from Canada who had just returned from a brief visit, at Shoghi Effendi's direction, to Nazareth which, in those days was very much like the pictures Dorothy had seen in the back of her childhood Bible, camels in the street, children everywhere, and the flies!! Our lunch was hilarious as she described in shocked accents the things she had seen - nothing like that happened in Canada!! This luncheon table set the pattern for many more intimate gatherings - there was warmth, laughter and a wonderful sense of togetherness as the three of us got to know our very special hostess and the staff.

But the moment we had all been waiting for came at the hour for dinner. We had assembled in the breezeway ready when Rúhíyyih ílgénúm came to tell us that Shoghi Effendi had arrived from the Master's House across the road and led us down the stairs to the dining room. At the entrance stood the beloved Guardian to whom we were in turn presented. His beautiful eyes danced as he heard my name and I am sure he was aware of my apprehension as I went last of the group down the stairs - I had recollected that the note I had written about my cancelled pilgrimage had been formal, even brusque. What would he say to me? He greeted me with a smile that would melt any heart and did not then, or at any later time, refer to it. He was only glad that I had arrived in time to 'visit the Shrine of the Báb. During the afternoons it was reserved to the male Persian pilgrims who had the great privilege of visiting it with the Guardian.

This was the start of nine blissful days. Each evening we would listen as the Guardian told of the progress of the Faith - stirring messages were coming in of victories in Africa, and these and other news he shared with us. At that time he was busy with plans for the possible building of a Mashriqu'l-Adhka'r in Tíhrán and we all examined the various parts of entries that had been sent in by architects world-wide. Would that I could remember what was said round that table - all I can recall is the exhilaration of it. One night Shoghi Effendi spoke about deep and stirring matters and we were all alert to its importance and after the Guardian left to return to his home we went upstairs to the breezeway,

Amatu'l-Bahá, Mr. Ioas, Jessie and Ethel, Amy, Dorothy and I, and discussed what had been said. Each of us had heard something different. Rđhiyyih ganum undertook to ask the beloved Guardian and next day we found that not one of us had grasped the salient point!! So much for instantaneous pilgrim notes!

Also each evening we would be told where we would go the next day, and we were driven to 'Akkzi, to visit the House of Abud and have lunch, to go to the Prison. Another day we went to the Ridvén Garden and were welcomed by the gardener, the grandfather of today's Head Gardener, Firuz Behbahani. It was violet time, and' he gave us each a fragrant posy. We also had the inestimable bounty of spending the night in the Mansion at Bahjí, after we had sat in the room where 'Abdu'l-Bahá used to entertain pilgrims, it was open to the sky and the birds flew in and out, the whirring of their wings making a fitting accompaniment to the stories Mr. Remey told about incidents related to the Master's visit to the United States. In the cool of the afternoon we circumambulated the segment of the Haram-i-Aqdas that was then available, and entered the Most Great Shrine.

For me this was peace upon peace, joy upon joy.

One evening Amatu'l-Bahá and Mr. Remey had to fulfil a dinner engagement and we three pilgrims had dinner with the Guardian. He had told us with great happiness that we were going to have pomegranate stew - a first for the three of us. when we went into the dining room, he dismissed the maid and served us himself. The stew, to our surprise, was delicious despite its purple hue and when we were offered another helping and eagerly accepted, once more Shoghi Effendi served us. There was a very special atmosphere of happiness that I carried away from the table and I wondered at the cause. Twenty-five years later I read some articles written by Mr. Faizi and one of them told the story of two Persians who planned to walk to the Holy Land in the hope of seeing Bahá'u'llah. They were poor farmers who had nothing to bring as a gift - except a large watermelon from which they scooped the seeds and planted in the flesh 144 pomegranate seeds. They carried this on their shoulders (in turns) and each evening would attend to the seeds before they saw to their own comfort. After a while the seeds sprouted, some grew, others withered and died. But when they reached 'Akita they had 24 healthy plants. I have recently heard that in the time of Bahá'u'lláh the pomegranate population in 'Make had become diseased and was destroyed. The pilgrims knew that the Blessed Beauty loved pomegranates and it was through the efforts of these pilgrims and others like them that the groves were re-established and the farmers from round about sought seeds to plant in their farms. In my heart, but this is definitely a pilgrim note, I am sure that the joy of the Guardian was in remembrance and recognition of the love and sacrifice of the pilgrims.

My recollections of this pilgrimage are of warmth and "home" and pure love. We had many examples of Shoghi Effendi's insight and understanding. If there was ever a hint that anyone's feelings could have been hurt, there was an immediate and gentle balm. One evening one of the pilgrims repeated to the Guardian what she had told us all earlier. She was a grandmother, but she was so enthralled by

her pilgrimage -that she told him that when she got home she was going to see to it that she and her husband had a Bahá'í wedding. This idea had amused us all so when she made this announcement at table, we all smiled a superior little smile. Shoghi Effendi looked solemnly round the table at all of us, reprovingly, and said "Such is her love for the Faith that she would do this thing."

Each afternoon we were in Haifa we would go over to the Master's House to be with Amatu'l-Bahá and the Persian lady pilgrims. I recall sitting in the mandar room often in tears at the stories that were translated of the sufferings they had endured. They were busy in and out of the kitchen making Persian delicacies for the household. I also had my turn at making enough dessert for thirty people out of a packet with no instructions on it. More by luck than anything else it set! I also gaily offered to make a cake for the visit of a United Nations VIP the day after I left. I had to remember the recipe which called for rose essence (easy) and cochineal (not easy).

They sent me to a nearby store where I had a most hilarious time trying to make myself understood. But one man realized what I wanted and I ran back in great glee and the cake was duly made and came out just the right degree of pinkness and light as a feather. There must have been a cordon bleu among the Concourse on duty that day!

After lunch on our final day, Amatu'l-Bahé asked me what I was going to do when I got back to England. I didn't know, and said so, adding that I had wondered whether I should go to Africa - everyone was going to Africa, but I had always imagined that one day I would go to India (no doubt because of my Presbyterian missionary background). She said, "Well, the decision is yours. All I can tell you is that if you don't want to go to Africa, don't let Shoghi Effendi hear you mention it."

The afternoon was very busy (remember the pink cake?) and I gave no further thought to the matter. Dinner that night was a festive affair. Mr. and Mrs. Ioas had returned from their trip to Europe and the joy with which the beloved Guardian greeted them, especially Mr. Ioas, and the love that obviously existed between them, was something that I will never forget. Conversation was eager and sparkling as Mr. Ioas gave an enthusiastic report of the dedication of the Ḥazíratu'l-Quds in London, his visit to Ireland and so on. In the general excitement I took heart - no one would notice me at the end of the table, I would not have to make a commitment. Then why did I allow Shoghi Effendi to catch my eye and call to me "And what are YOU going to do?" I heard a squeaky voice say "I wondered if I should go to Africa". My reward was to see his lovely eyes light up and his face become wreathed in smiles. He said, "Wonderful. You must not go to Kenya, Uganda or Tanganyika. There are enough pioneers there already. To go to an island would be good - but anywhere where there is great need. When you get home, write to Mr. Banání and ask his advice." So I did and very soon I had a reply written by Mr. 'Alí Naghjavéni, as Mr. Banání spoke no English. I was told to consult the Africa Committee in London, which I did and they advised me to apply to the Crown Agents for a Civil Service post

in one of the British colonies. Very soon I was interviewed and appointed to a secretarial post in Nyasaland (now Malawi). The Committee was delighted – my efforts at Seychelles had not been successful and I was not brave enough for St. Helena. Then I received word that the job in Nyasaland was cancelled as the Government did not have sufficient funds. Would I ‘consider Kenya? It was Mau Mau time and I feared they would think my refusal meant I was lily»livered. Finally I was offered a secretarial post in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and on 6 October 1955 landed shakily at Lusaka’s Nissan hut airport to begin 19 years of pioneer service.