

Selected episodes from the early history of the Bahá'í Faith in Switzerland¹

John-Paul Vader

Abstract

Switzerland was among the first 20 countries to be opened to the Bahá'í religion, having celebrated in 2003 the centenary of the establishment of the first Bahá'í residents. 2011 will mark the centenary of the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Switzerland, where the first media coverage – albeit fragmentary – documented his trip to the West.

This paper will describe the pre-establishment connections between the Bahá'í Faith and Switzerland and then present a selection of episodes in the early history of the development of the Bahá'í community there.

The first documented link between the Bábí/Bahá'í religion and Switzerland can be found in the reports of the persecution of the Bábís following the attempt on the life of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh in 1852. The widely-published letter from Captain von Goumoens, a mercenary in the service of the Sháh, describing his revulsion at witnessing the appalling cruelty of the population and the executioners towards the Bábí victims, also found echoes in Swiss newspapers. Interestingly, von Goumens, who has been described as an “Austrian” mercenary, was actually Swiss, a patrician from the town bearing his name, Goumoens, where he was the last resident of the family chateau.

A further anecdotal but significant link between Switzerland and the Baha'í Faith is represented by Dr Josephina Fallscheer-Zürcher, a Swiss physician who lived in the Middle East for many years, including Haifa (1905-1912). Dr Fallscheer served as physician for the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and was a confidant of the women of the household of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Her memoirs of the time she spent in contact with the local Bahá'í community in Haifa are a unique resource.

The first settlement of a resident Bahá'í in Switzerland occurred in 1903, when Edith MacKaye, a French-American, moved from Paris to Sion in the Rhone Valley, marrying Dr Joseph de Bons, a local dentist, who also accepted this new religion. Edith MacKaye had been among the first to accept this religion in the year 1900 in the French capital through the teaching efforts of Miss May Bolles (later Maxwell). The MacKayes sojourned in Egypt for a few years, and met 'Abdu'l-Bahá there in 1911. It was there that Dr MacKaye received the medal of distinction of the Lion

¹ Prepared for presentation at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa, 27 October 2009.

and the Sun from the Consul General of Iran, for having treated Muzzafaru'd-Din Sháh during his stay in Switzerland some time previously. The grand-daughter of Edith MacKaye, Ariane Schaller from Basel, has recently completed a three-part, unpublished manuscript (in French) on the life of her mother, part two dedicated to her relation to the Bahá'í Faith.

It was in Switzerland in 1908, in his villa above Lake Geneva that Hippolyte Dreyfus, the first Frenchman to convert to the Bahá'í religion, completed his "Essai sur le béhaïsme". This was perhaps the first general presentation of the Bahá'í teachings in French, and even today remains remarkably up-to-date, despite the passing of a century.

Although the traces of the passage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Switzerland are fragmentary, it was in Switzerland in January 1912 that Sara Louisa Lady Blomfeld completed her documentation of the talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in the book known as "Paris Talk". It was also Lady Blomfield who took it upon herself, with the encouragement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to implant the Bahá'í teachings on the shores of Lake Geneva, notably in Geneva, Mount Pèlerin and Villeneuve. She was particularly active in the period surrounding World War I, where, in addition to her Bahá'í activities, which generated wide-spread interest, she was active in the Red Cross and the Save the Children Fund.

Among those who were touched by Bahá'í teaching activities in Geneva was Romain Rolland, Noble prize laureate for literature (1915), who has left a colorful description of what might be called a "fireside" meeting, a privileged medium of propagation of the Bahá'í teachings. He describes the presentation of the Bahá'í Faith in 1915 by a young Egyptian Bahá'í, Riadh Salim, who was at the time (1911 - 1915) studying medicine at the University of Lausanne.

Fragmentary also is the information on the various personal trips that Shoghi Effendi made to Switzerland to find retreat from the pressing and stressful burdens of his function as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith

In addition to Riadh Salem, another Bahá'í student from the Middle East played a significant role in the early development of the Bahá'í community in Switzerland. In the early 1920's, 'Abdu'l-Husayn Isfahání was in close contact with Professor August Forel, who had recently become a Bahá'í. The activities of Dr Forel represent a prolific chapter in the early Swiss Bahá'í history. These activities included transmitting by word of mouth and through correspondence the Bahá'í teachings, writing articles about the Bahá'í Faith, mentioning it in writings on other related (and unrelated) topics, and defending the Bahá'í community of Persia during the wave of persecutions there in the 1920's.

The 1930's represent a lull in Bahá'í activities in Switzerland, and it is this natural break that will serve as a cut-off for this brief and selective overview of early episodes in the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Switzerland.