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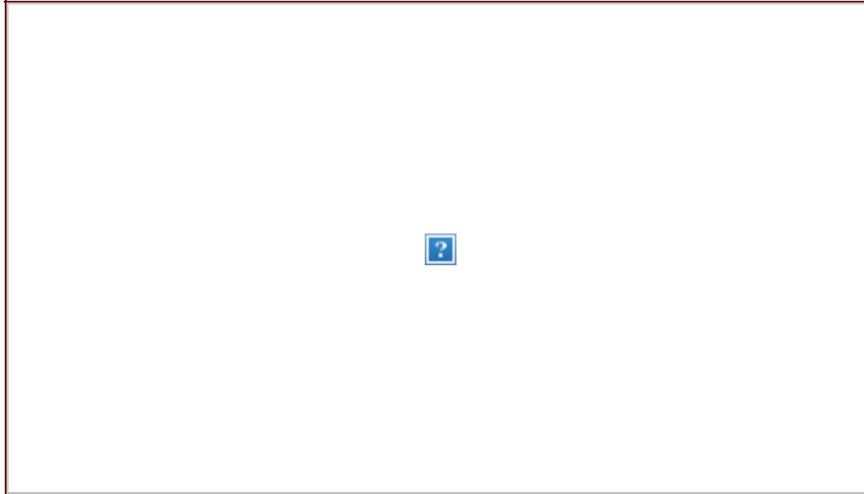


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## The Joy of Pure, Sincere Faith and Service

### Some reflections on living and working among Bahá'ís in England, Canada and Germany



*Sincerity is the foundation-stone of faith. That is, a religious individual must disregard his personal desires and seek in whatever way he can wholeheartedly to serve the public interest...*

'Abdu'l-Bahá:  
**Secrets of Divine Civilisation**, p.96

Hossein Dowlatshahi (left) with friends and family in Freiburg, 2003

TO TAKE up residence in different lands is so enriching for the Bahá'í traveller and so beneficial to the communities one visits. Experience has shown this for my family. Just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said "be as a leaf in the wind" freely subject to the Blessed Beauty's will, we saw its practical consequences and benefits during the last twenty years of international relocation.

When we moved from Loughborough to the West Island of Montreal in Quebec, Canada, we could share the insights gained from serving at the second Thomas Breakwell school in Loughborough. This was a completely new concept at the time initiated and guided by the National Spiritual Assembly of the UK. The children's classes on the West Island quickly developed into a flourishing school. One inspired believer visiting from Germany decided to contribute a piece of land and financial resources to the building of a custom-designed permanent institute, in Pierrefond on the West Island of Montreal. The design allowed for a lower floor dedicated to classrooms, and an upper with a large reception area, conference room and public library and bookstore.

In Loughborough, we also gained training in media publicity at a seminar by Philip Hainsworth, who provided tips that we applied effectively in different communities in the UK and Canada. One of Philip's tips was that newspapers require that an article describes the event and has a local angle, and does not attempt to "proclaim" but only to "inform". Quality pictures also provide leverage in gaining the editor's acceptance. With this simple formula we achieved significant success with newspaper publicity everywhere we lived!

Moving to Quebec meant improving our French and, we had the possibility of our children studying in French, so they did! When they returned to Europe after seven years we moved to Hamburg in Germany. Rather than putting them in a German school we put them into a French school and they



...of the part men into a French school and they continued their education in French right up to their Baccalaureate. They were able to do a lot of teaching work among French students, teachers and parents during this period. This is rather important when one considers that teaching goals in French-speaking localities can be difficult to achieve. At the Lycée in Hamburg many articles and quotations on Bahá'í themes were published and well received by students.



Youth class, Oakville, Ontario 1995

There were some rather interesting fund-raising events in Montreal during our time there – large and small, private and open. I recall one in which there was a play performed by a gifted amateur actor about Martha Root, the first Western person to respond to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Tablets of the Divine Plan”, which left me with a vivid impression of what she might have really been like. Martha Root serves as an outstanding exemplar of how we can be if we truly believe. She was a newspaper reporter and was not physically distinguished in any way at all. She was quite plain and rather frail and ill. However, her achievements during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the beloved Guardian were remarkable, the crowning feature of which was the open written declaration of faith by the grand daughter of both Queen Victoria and Czar Alexander II, Queen Marie of Rumania, in 1926.

In Toronto the regular programme of events at the Centre in the heart of the city (in one of the best locations, a former university medical library and museum) was wide ranging, with a Bahá'í Sunday School with numerous classes and teachers, deepenings, large “teaching dinners” attended by many seekers, coordinated through two Local Assemblies at a time in a rota system, and delightful spiritual holy day celebrations.



Members of the Local Assembly of Montrouge, Paris, 1973.

In this Toronto period, while serving on the National Counselling Committee, I had the privilege of meeting regularly in the counsel chambers of the National Spiritual Assembly. What a spirit prevailed there! This is located in the administrative Bahá'í centre in the suburbs, at the site of the future Mashriqu’l-Adhkár surrounded by attractive gardens and grounds. In these grounds regular delightful summer picnics were held. This committee of five souls was confronted with personal difficulties affecting individual believers and communities and had to find practical solutions based on Bahá'í principles and to advise the National Spiritual Assembly accordingly.

The work was trying on individual committee members and required a reverent and prayerful attitude as well as a sound analytical mind to solve the challenges and assist the friends.

When, several years ago, I moved to Tunbridge Wells in the UK, it was in the context of this personal experience that I realised how much responsibility my newly found friend, Foad Rizai, had had to bear on his shoulders, especially during the time of the Iranian revolution and crisis! He was completely uncompromising in the principles and laws. He had a penetrating perception and judgement. Both these aspects were necessary to fulfil his responsibilities.

The first entry point on our return to Europe was Hamburg, in far northern Germany. For years there was talk of establishing a Bahá'í centre there. The resources and enthusiasm were present among the friends and when four rooms of a basement floor were offered, the task was a practical one. We helped in applying the resources to the renovation of the building and in organising the programme of



and witnessed the unprecedented cooperation among five Local Assemblies to get the project off the ground. For four years the community benefited from a wide range of unifying activities at the new centre located in the consulate section of this large city.

Inauguration of the Bahá'í centre in Pierrfond, Quebec. Sheri Dowlatshahi is to the right of Rúhíyyih Khánúm

Finally, moving to the far south of the country to Freiburg, a small “green” city, the capital of the black forest, we found ourselves miraculously in a spiritual locality where the teaching opportunities are remarkable. Only the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty have so engaged us in the optimum situation for Bahá'í service, studies, and professional advancement. The language skills we acquired over the years can be applied to great effect in this area which is on the border with Switzerland and France. We are the only Persian family here, among German friends who are staunch, dedicated and loving.

Once the local Bahá'í friends welcomed us, we felt a true sense of world citizenship, that of not feeling a stranger in any land. This act of rapid assimilation is very surprising for non-Bahá'ís. In all our travels, we were often asked how we could adjust so well and quickly to the new environment (my children in their school, I at work and my wife at home and work). I think the Bahá'í teachings imply that we ourselves should not feel a stranger in any land.

We can integrate by adopting the language and customs of the country except where it diverges from the Bahá'í standards, and live among the people as equals. We can respect people wherever we go. Of course, those whom we meet may be prejudiced towards us but may have cause to wonder about our positive attitudes. As Bahá'ís we have the right attitude and unique advantage of feeling comfortable travelling anywhere and meeting and worshipping and serving with peoples everywhere.

To conclude, my family's wide experience has demonstrated that there is great nobility, beauty and strength in our Faith wherever one lives on earth, and gives us the realistic hope that the new world order is shaping. What a bounty it is to be a Bahá'í!

Dr Hossein Dowlatshahi

*Dedicated to the loving memory of Foad Rizai, a staunch British believer who served with dedication and devotion, and suffered with silent courage.*

