

Awakening: Chapter 15

The long road into captivity

As night receded, the outline of the shoulders, heads and backs of the prisoners emerged from the gloom. All around the stone yard and rooms of the caravansera, the silent mass trembled. Feeble cries of infants rose up into the cold air only to give up and fall back down into the morass of exhaustion and hunger.

Guards came into the yard and called the prisoners to attention. They lifted each other up against the protests of their weakened bodies. They were going to be led out of the madrisih to another location.

Outside a mob had gathered. The Bábí women took their torn clothing and tried to cover their faces and arms as best they could--faces and arms that had never been seen by strangers--and as they came out of the caravansera gate, feelings of shame engulfed them.

Stepping into the street, they saw the faces of their fellow townspeople contorted in anger, their mouths shouting insults, baring teeth. A volley of small stones, dirt and spit showered the prisoners. They placed their arms over their children to shield them.

They were led up the street battered on all sides by taunts and jeers until they arrived at a local school, the Madreseh Khán, which had been built earlier in 1815 by the governor of the city.ⁱ The cold day wore on, but no food was brought. The desperate prisoners used stagnant water in the schoolyard's pool to quench their thirst.

Elsewhere, the order had gone out from Mírzá Na'ím that the prisoners would be sent to Shíráz. A few kilograms of cornbread now appeared each day at the school. Some prisoners refused anything given to them from the hands of their oppressors, resorting instead to eating discarded pomegranate skins and date seeds off the ground.ⁱⁱ

Day after day, dry crumbling cornbread kept starvation at bay by a bare mouthful.ⁱⁱⁱ

One day, soldiers came for Shaykh 'Abdu'l-'Alí, Vahíd's father in law and one of the elders who had inspired the Bábís, and took him out with his two teenage sons. He was made to watch as his two boys were beheaded. Then the soldiers turned on him for his close association with Vahíd, and brutally killed him.^{iv} Left behind was his wife. Her relatives helped her escape that evening but her brother refused to take her in.^v She found shelter in the home of her servant but later that night she died traumatized by what she had seen.^{vi}

South of the school where the Bábí women were being held, soldiers roamed the streets of the Chinár-Súkhtih quarter, looking for more prisoners to take to Shíráz. As they searched the homes, Bábís were rounded up. The Gulpáyigání soldiers had been able to capture many who escaped after the last battle.

As the day to leave approached, the women prisoners in the school were brought out. An official looked them over to choose the ones who could survive the march to Shíráz.^{vii} He selected about half the women and sent the others back to their homes in the Chinár-Súkhtih quarter. Women and children waited in dread as he decided their fates. The sound of wailing filled the sky whenever his choice took mother from daughter, sister from sister, grandmother from grandchild, but nothing stopped the sorting.

A fifteen year old boy, the son of Qutb, ‘Alí Sardár’s close friend and one of the main Bábí leaders, and his mother were rescued by an uncle but, shunned by other family members, would quickly descend into poverty, living in a small dark dwelling with trash thrown at its entrance.^{viii}

The day of departure came, and the prisoners were assembled and readied.^{ix} The severed heads were piled into the baskets, the women were tied in pairs to ride on donkeys while their children had to keep up on foot. The men were bound together in groups of ten. When all was ready, the large contingent of hundreds of prisoners, of donkeys carrying gruesome loads, of frightened children, of soldiers, and of officers on horseback, lurched forward to the edge of town. There, a large group of Nayrízis waited to gawk at them and hurl a final insult.

So began many days for the captives of trudging down the road to Shíráz through the cold, fed only enough to keep walking, spending nights with villagers whom the soldiers paid to house them ...

... children, some motherless, who can not continue in the cold without food or warm clothing fall by the side of the road;^x so do several mothers who cannot go one more step^{xi} ...

... the young son of a woman named Fátimih, grandniece of the leading mullá of Shíráz, starves to death^{xii} ...

... an elderly man, Mullá Muhammad-Alí Qábid, grows too weak to walk and collapses by the side of the road. Soldiers beheaded him and throw the head into one of the baskets^{xiii} ...

... at another stop, the heart of one of the soldiers softens seeing the suffering of the prisoners. He gives them two pieces of sheepskin which they broil and eat. Mírzá Na’ím finds out about this and has the soldier beaten to warn soldiers not to help the prisoners...

... Mírzá Muhammad Abid dies from hunger and is beheaded.^{xiv} When the caravan of suffering moves on, his body is left discarded on the ground. Local tribesmen who come along later buried the corpse^{xv} ...

The prisoners finally reached the last stop--a village seventeen kilometers from Shíráz.^{xvi} Word was sent to the Prince in Shíráz that the procession had arrived. A reply came that there would be a city-wide celebration, and the procession could enter.^{xvii} In the morning, the women were put back on donkeys, the men were lined up, the heads were taken out of

the baskets, impaled on the tips of long spears which were then hoisted high in the air by the soldiers.^{xviii} Mírzá Na'ím rode to the front, and the procession moved down the road.

He was ready for his triumphal entry into Shíráz.



Behind the wall which circled Shíráz, the word had gone out from the Prince that this day would be one of celebration. Shírázis made their way excitedly through the narrow streets and alleys between the walls of the inward facing homes which made up the city's compact jumble of one and two story houses. Wealthy women in their homes and women in the public baths were staining their hands and fingernails in the dark orange toffee colored henna patterns.^{xix}

On any normal morning at the bazaar, boys would have been carrying cups of tea on trays and early morning shoppers would have been threading their way through the already crowded brick halls. Merchants would have been rushing in and out of their shops set into the walls every few feet, displaying eggplants, pomegranates, onions, sour pickles, nuts, and pouring out mountains of spices for chicken, fish, and stews, for passers-by to see. The aromas of cinnamon, peppermint, turmeric, lavender, cumin, pilau, would have blended in the air, and the voices of people bargaining would have echoed off the pointed stone arches above. The teahouses in the bazaar would already have had Shírázis taking a break or preparing for the day by sitting together and sipping steaming tea, hard sugar between their teeth.

But that would have been normal and this was not a normal day, so the long halls of the bazaar were dark and empty. The Prince had ordered all stores closed for a city-wide holiday.

Shírázis of all social classes came out into the main street to see the dreaded Bábís enter through the south-facing Sa'dí gate. It was 1850 all over again. They saw first a proud leader--this time Mírzá Na'ím--riding triumphant, his sword hanging by his side. They looked up and pointed excitedly at the severed heads moving aloft on spears. Below these, a large group of men struggled forward in front of more than a hundred donkeys carrying poorly clad women, and dirty, hungry children. Among them could be seen elderly men still able to move forward. The prisoners' faces showed the two months of struggle they had endured in the cold mountains. Shírázis vented their fear of the Bábís by shouting at them, though the sight of all the suffering hurt the hearts of some.^{xx}

The women and children were marched through town to the Sháh Mír-'Alí Hamzih caravanserai by the north facing Isfahán Gate on the outskirts of Shíráz. The men were led to a prison. In the darkness of the prison cells, they met Bábís from Nayríz who had been languishing there since the struggle at Fort Khájih, three years earlier.^{xxi} The severed heads were dumped in another location to be kept for the last leg of the journey to Tihrán.^{xxii}

At the caravanserai, bread rations arrived in the evening. The women immediately fed their starving children. At night, the dark of the caravanserai's stone rooms, the cold intensified. Women huddled with their children, hoping their body heat would help warm them. Their small teeth chattered as they drifted in and out of sleep.^{xxiii}

The next morning, the order came from the Prince that the Bábí men were to be brought to him. He asked a local tough from Nayríz, Jalál, whom Mírzá Na'ím had brought with him, to tell him who the different men were and what their part had been in the conflict. The first to be unbound and brought in was Mullá 'Abdu'l-Husayn, the elderly cleric who had been a respected guide to the Bábís for three years. Jalál immediately indicated him as the most troublesome of the Bábí leaders. Now, he stood before them, and though he appeared a physically wrecked and frail old man, an indomitable spirit lived on in him.

He was asked about his deeds. He responded:^{xxiv}

“We summoned people to the Glad Tidings of the Lord of the Age. This was our duty but you have done whatever you wanted.”

“How is it that you understood the Qá'im has come, and we did not?”

“The witnesses of the Ímáms and all these faithful believers are proof of this Truth. Aren't these prisoners and their suffering proof for you? You have cut off the heads of my sons in front of me and taken their wives as slaves--isn't that proof for you? These are the proofs of the Lord of the Age.”

The Prince ordered him to curse the Báb. He refused. The Prince called for others to be brought to him. He ordered them to recant. They refused. Five men were immediately taken out to the square close to the prison. Spears were driven into three of them, and two others were beheaded.^{xxv} The prominent clerics among the Bábís would be spared so they could be presented in Tíhrán.

An important tribal leader urged the Prince to be merciful towards these unfortunates. He had previously been critical of Mírzá Na'ím for recreating the famous scene of the killing of Ímám Husayn in Karbilá, revered by all Shi'a, a drama re-enacted every year and of deep emotional meaning. This time, though, it was the Bábís who appeared as the faithful and the Shi'a as the persecutors.^{xxvi}

For the women and children, these days were spent in public ridicule. With each cold night that passed, the children grew weaker. One mother tried to warm her infant son by cradling him in her bosom. Her two girls curled up to her as close as possible. She embraced them with her other arm and tried to cover them with whatever clothing she had. But their lives were ebbing away and there was nothing she could do to stop that. Hunger and the winter cold took her girls and the children of others.^{xxvii}

Every day, the Shírázis passed this scene of hungry ill-clad women and children being humiliated. The cruelty of what had happened became more apparent as the excitement at Mírzá Na'ím's triumphal entry faded. Gradually their hearts softened.^{xxviii}

But the ordeal for many Bábí women would never end. It was decided that the women would be given as rewards to soldiers and other authorities. The men came to the caravanserai, looked over the captives and claimed the ones who pleased them, forcing some to become their wives. All others were simply let go with their children into the streets to fend for themselves.^{xxix} In the months and years to come, some were able to make it back to Nayríz while others were reduced to begging.

In another part of town, Khadíjih Bagum, the widowed wife of the Báb, now living in her sister's house, heard of the tumult in the city and the suffering of the Bábís of Nayríz but could not go out to see them. Since the departure of her husband, she had lived in constant uncertainty, rarely receiving information of His whereabouts or condition; even the news of His Martyrdom and that of His uncle, in whose home she had played as a child, had been kept from her for a time. How she longed to see these Bábís of Nayríz who were the spiritual sons and daughters of her Husband, their sacrifice the signs of His Station! Soon, it became possible to have a few of the freed women come regularly to a friend's house and visit with her.^{xxx} A few of these women even became a part of her household.^{xxxi} She gave each a fine linen scarf. One of them, a young widow whose husband's head had been displayed on a pike, had given birth out in the fields on the journey to Shíráz.^{xxxii} Khadíjih Bagum gave the baby the name Humáyún, "blessed".^{xxxiii}

At the prison, the Bábí men were sorted. It was determined that sixty of the more prominent among them who had not fought in the conflict should be allowed to go free.^{xxxiv} Seventy-three men were bound and readied for the long march to the capital, to be presented to the King of Persia.



Bound together and accompanied by soldiers, the Bábís began their march to Tíhrán, the capital of the Kingdom of Persia, over nine hundred kilometers to the north. Donkeys carrying the severed heads followed. They left through Shíráz's northern Isfahán gate and headed into the dry rocky hills. It was mid-winter, a cold wind buffeted them as they walked. Left behind them were their loved ones, destitute or captive in other homes--if they had survived at all. What lay ahead for them was the unknown.

Soon the brown landscape with its flickers of greenery flattened out, the winter wind lashing them as they crossed the flat land. When a man could go no further, he fell by the wayside. Soldiers would behead each one who fell and leave the corpse on the side of the road.

One of them was the elderly and venerable cleric, Mullá 'Abdu'l Husayn, who had been the first injured in 1850, and lost a son in the Fort Khájih struggle and four sons in the mountain

battles. In his eighties, his body gave out three day's journey from Shíráz. He was decapitated and his body abandoned on the ground.^{xxxv}

After some days they arrived at the last major town in Fárs province, Ábádih, an important stop on the migratory route of the Qashqa'i tribe. Local people, urged by their clerics, came out to mock and heap abuse on the prisoners, assured that they would receive special blessings for doing so. The procession was met in Ábádih by a messenger from the court of the King of Persia who told them to leave the heads behind before continuing their journey to the capital. The local people refused to have the heads buried in their cemetery, for fear of its being desecrated by the presence of the Bábí remains. So an abandoned field outside town was selected. Soldiers dug large pits and dumped the heads of the Bábís into them.^{xxxvi} As the Bábí prisoners were forced to resume their journey, they left this field in Ábádih behind them.

This desolate field on the outskirts of Ábádih would remain untouched for ten years.

The One Whom God Shall make Manifest, promised by the Báb, would reveal Himself, new believers would settle in to Ábádih and a Bahá'í community would be born. Half a century after the burial of the martyrs' heads, Bahá'ís stood in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Holy Land, and he asked them the name they had given this field. "Garden of the Martyrs' Heads", they replied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stood up, and revealed a tablet of Visitation to be recited on his behalf by a believer:

"Glory be upon you! Blessed are you for what you have done. You offered up your possessions, your kindred and your souls in the path of the Glory of God for the love of His Most Exalted Beauty. Praised be Thy Most Glorious Lord as He hath created you, and hath called you into being and hath raised you up from the tombs of self and desire and hath enlisted you under the banner of the Praise of God at the hour when the Most Great Resurrection came to pass."^{xxxvii}

'Abdu'l-Bahá gave this place a new name; it would hence forward be called: "The Garden of the Merciful".



The prisoners continued the long march, at times barely able to put one foot before the other. They trudged through the former great capital, Isfahán. When a prisoner collapsed, his body would be left. Still they moved forward, through the clerical city of Qom with its evaporating lakes on the eastern side of the road. Some twenty-two prisoners fell by the wayside.^{xxxviii}

They finally saw the capital of the Kingdom. Entering it, they were brought into the presence of the King. His Royal Highness ordered fifteen of them to recant. They refused. They were executed.^{xxxix} In prison, twenty-three more died.^{xl}

After three years, thirteen were released but most died soon thereafter, their bodies simply giving out. Four were known to have made it all the way back to Nayríz.^{xli}

They would become part of the birth of the Nayríz Bahá'í community.

ⁱ Faizi 198.

ⁱⁱ Mázandarání V. 4, 50-54.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shafí' 31.

^{iv} The authors conjecture that this is the reason for his execution, as another prominent cleric--Mullá 'Abdu'l Husayn---was spared so he could be presented as a valuable prisoner to the Prince in Shíráz.

^v Rouhani v. 1, 192. Ahdieh (60) states that she went to her "brother's wife".

^{vi} Ahdieh 55. The servant's name was Karbalá'í Ridá.

^{vii} The authors conjecture that this was the reason as no other reason is given for this selection process, and, because once in Shíráz, the Bábí women were taken by soldiers and other officials--so they must have been physically healthy.

^{viii} Rouhani v. 1, 297. The boy's name was Mírzá Ja'far. He was given the surname Mírzá Jalal by Bahá'u'lláh whom he later met and from whom he received several tablets.

^{ix} The various sources state different numbers of male prisoners but all state that there were three-hundred women taken captive. The number of children is not specified anywhere. Rabbani (c. 11, 51, f. 73) states, that there were "several hundred" children but no source is given for this number. All the sources mention the presence of children but no estimates are given. Shafí' and Nayrízí, both eyewitnesses to these events, were themselves children at the time. There are different numbers given for the male prisoners as well as their identities. Shafí' has eighty going with Lutf 'Alí Khán, and sixty captured later in Nayríz by Mírzá Na'ím but gives no number of how many went to Shíráz. Mázandarání (v. 4, 52) states that there were eighty male prisoners, plus the Bábís who had escaped and were not 'well-known' individuals. Rabbani (c. 11, 51, f. 73) states that there were two hundred male captives in all, though he states that "several hundred more believers" were rounded up in a sweep of the Chinár-Súkhtih quarter. Rouhani (v. 2, 458) states that two hundred male prisoners, mostly elderly and ill, were

sent. The sources leave many questions to be answered—for example, some sources state that all men over twenty were beheaded but if this is the case, who were the men who were marched to Shíráz? A safe estimate for total prisoners given all the sources and information would be between four hundred and fifty and five hundred, men and women, with an unknown number of children.

^x Mázandarání (v. 4, 53) states that some children had been separated from their mothers.

^{xi} From the narrative of Mirzá Qábil Ábádi'í, quoted in Rabbani c. 13, 4.

^{xii} He would have been the older half brother of Khávar Sultán. He was Fátimih's son by her first marriage (Hussein Ahdieh, "Biography of Khávar Sultán", www.Nayríz.org)

^{xiii} Mullá Muhammad-Alí Qábid (Shafí' 33).

^{xiv} Mírzá Muhammad 'Abid (Shafí' 32).

^{xv} This was the Báyír tribe that raised cattle in the area (Shafí' 32). These last two anecdotes are taken from the section in Shafí''s diary which covers a procession to Shíráz led by Lutf 'Alí Khán but, as stated in an earlier footnote, the authors believe that the prisoners went in one group.

^{xvi} Shafí' (33) states that this stop was three fársangs from Shíráz. Each fársang is roughly five and a half kilometers.

^{xvii} Faizi (114) states that the governor in Shíráz asked that the heads be put on spears. Mázandarání (v. 4, 53) states that it was Lutf 'Alí Khán who ordered the heads to be mounted on spears.

^{xviii} According to Shafí' (32), the group led by Lutf 'Alí Khán came into Shíráz three hours after sunrise; Mázandarání (v.4, 53) states that it was two hours after sunrise. Since no other time is given for Mírzá Na'ím's group and since the authors conclude that there was only one group, this time frame is used in this narrative.

^{xix} Cartwright-Jones 43-44.

^{xx} Shafí' (33). Mirzá Qábil Ábádi'í (Ábádi'í, quoted in Rabbani c. 13, 5) states the procession avoided the bázár and went by a side path because it evoked too much sympathy from the people.

^{xxi} Mázandarání v. 4, 54.

^{xxii} Shafí' 33. According to Rouhani (v. 1, 197) the heads were kept at the caravansera and the women were kept next to a soldiers' barracks, but on this same page he has the version given here. The Shafí' version seems more likely and is corroborated by Mázandarání (v. 4, 54).

^{xxiii} Mázandarání, v. 4, 55.

^{xxiv} This transcription is a rough translation of what is found in Mázandarání (vol. 4, 54-55), which itself is an imagined conversation and not the actual words of the individuals, though these ideas may very well have been exchanged.

^{xxv} Shafí', 34. Faizi, 115. Rouhani, 117. The men were Hájí, the son of Ashghar, Alí Garmsiri; Husayn, the son of Hádí Khayrí; Sádiq, the son of Sálíh; Muhammad, the son of Mohsin. It is not clear from the Shafí' manuscript how the first two were killed. It states only that they were taken out to the public square and killed.

^{xxvi} Mázandarání v. 4, 55. Rouhani v. 1, 196. The tribal leader was Hájí 'Qavámu'l-Mulk. He was the appointed head of the Khamseh federation of five tribes, sometimes called the "Bahárlú", or "Arab" tribes. (Martin 52). This confederation had been put together by the central government as a way to counterbalance the large nomadic Qasqa'i tribe which, in the mid-19th century, could put 120,000 men into the field (Abrahamian 45-46).

^{xxvii} Mázandarání v. 4, 55.

^{xxviii} Ibid.

^{xxix} Momen, Bábí and Bahá'í religions 150-151. The source cited here is the report of the British agent in Shíráz who, earlier in the same report, states that back in Nayríz, three hundred women had been "violently compelled to become their (the soldiers) wives".

^{xxx} Balyuzi, Khadíjih Bagum 30.

^{xxxi} Rouhani v. 1, 276.

^{xxxii} Rabbani c. 15, 11.

^{xxxiii} Ma'ani 8.

^{xxxiv} Rabbani c. 11, 37. The number 73 is consistent in the sources. If we follow the Shafí' manuscript and put the number of captives from the two groups of male prisoners together, we get 140. Two died on the way, 60 were released in Shíráz, and 5 were killed

in Shíráz, reaching a total of 67 which leaves 73 to be transported to Tihrán. Mázandarání (v. 4, 56) states that there were 140 male prisoners in Shíráz, some who had languished there since 1850, and that 67 men died in Shíráz and were beheaded, leaving 73 to be taken to Tihrán.

^{xxxv} Rouhani v. 1, 193.

^{xxxvi} Ábádi'í (Ábádi'í, quoted in Rabbani c. 13, 5).

^{xxxvii} Provisional translation by Tahirih Ahdieh, Nabil Hanna, Abir Majid, Rosann Velnich.

^{xxxviii} Shafí' (34-35) lists these people as having perished on the road: "Mullá 'Abdu'l-Husayn died in Sídán; his head was cut off and added to others. 'Alí Karbalá'í Zamán and Akbar Karbalá'í Muhammad died in Ábádih; Hasan, the son of 'Abú'l-Vahíd, and Mullá 'Alí-Akbar, the brother of Jinab Amír, died in Isfahan. Karbalá'í Báqir, the son of Muhammad, and his brother Hasan; Dhu'l-Faqár Karbalá'í Taqí, the son of Farqi, and his son 'Alí; 'Alí Khán; Mullá Karím Akhúnd; Akbar Ra'ís; Ghulám-'Alí Pír-Muhammad, and Taqí and Muhammad 'Alí, the sons of Muhammad Jamál, all died on the way."

^{xxxix} Shafí' (35) remembers the following names: "'Áqá Siyyid 'Alí, the one who was badly injured in the mountains of Nayríz and was left unconscious. He had dreamt that he must go to Tihrán and be martyred there; Karbalá'í Rajab Salmání; Sífud-Din; Sulaymán Karbalá'í Salmán; Ja'far Fardí; Murád Khayrchí; Husayn Karbalá'í Báqir; Mírzá Abú'l-Hasan; Mírzá Taqí, who was beaten with clubs for becoming a Bábí by Hájí Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Vahhab to please Mírzá Na'ím; and Mullá Muhammad-'Alím, the son of Áqá Mihdí'".

^{xl} "One was 'Alí, the son of Mír-Shikár Báqi (Shafí' 35).

^{xli} Shafí' (35) remembers the following names: "One of them was Karbalá'í 'Alí-Yár who died in Daról Salam and was buried in Tall-i-Hamrá. Two others were Ustád 'Innáyát and Ibráhim, the son of Sharif, who are still alive. Also Áqá Siyyid Husayn and Ustád 'Alí, the son of Mashadí Safar, returned home ... Karbalá'í Zaynu'l-'Ábidín stayed in Tihrán and died after a while."