

Foreigner

From an Iranian village to New York City and the lights that led the way

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Dedicated to immigrants and refugees throughout the world

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Introduction

I decided to write down stories about my life to illuminate one corner of the experience of Iranian Baha'is in their home country and as immigrants in the United States. I was always a foreigner: a Baha'i in the Shi'a Muslim society of Iran whose religious leaders reviled the Baha'is and an immigrant in New York City where I eeked out a living while studying on the side, just one out of tens of thousands—and a Middle Easterner no less.

These episodes illustrate aspects of being foreign shared by many people. But this is not a story of complaint. I am grateful to the Baha'i Faith for being a constant source of inspiration, to the United States for ultimately having allowed me to exercise my talents, and even to the mean-spirited people of my small hometown for pushing me out into the broader world.

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Chapter 1

The Sad Society

I remember only darkness when the sun went down, except for a small kerosene lamp's hazy orange glow into which the occasional, indistinct figure would appear and then disappear.

I remember a torrent of refuse and mud running over the unpaved streets when it rained.

I remember women covered in dark chadors moving like shadows.

I remember mullahs in mosques exhorting the faithful to weep for the martyrs.

I remember Nayriz as a sad society of timeless routine permeated by ignorance.

Our small agricultural town probably hadn't changed much in its one thousand years of existence. Distinguished from many other small towns in Iran only by its centuries old Friday mosque, Nayriz had grown into a jumble of one and two-story mud-brick, stone, and wooden homes, separated by unpaved spaces and dark alleys through which moved townspeople and their donkeys with the occasional small animal scurrying around them. Some folks were going to the bazaar to buy and sell goods. If the call to prayer had sounded, they were going to the mosque. If it was dawn, farmers and shepherds were heading out to their orchards in the hills following in the ruts of their grandfathers and their grandfathers' grandfathers.

People went to and fro over the unpaved road outside our wooden door. Our two-story clay and brick house sat on the corner of a main road and a canal which swelled with water during the cold rainy season even to the point one year of flooding our house. When it was dry, the canal bed became our playground. The local boys and I used whatever sticks and stones happened to be laying around for our games. My two shiny marbles were my prized possessions, and to this day the sparkle of sunlight on the glass of a marble reminds me of boyhood.

The only windows in our house were small and on the second floor. The roof was bounded by a short crenellated wall that could be used for defense. We were Baha'is in a town of Muslims, many of whom were hostile toward us, and our house was at the beginning of the neighborhood where Baha'i families huddled together for protection. My father's small pharmacy in the bazaar had been torched so he had moved his remaining stock into the small space next to our house from which he could eke out a living selling curative powders and herbs.

When necessary, Baha'is ventured down the unpaved road outside of our door into the center of town to do business in the bazaar or get a document stamped in a government building. They only walked that road with pleasure on the day they were permitted to use the bathhouse (*hamam*). Until I was six-years old, I went along with my mother and loved those visits so much that, when I was an adult, I showered often because the water brought back such pleasant memories. We changed our clothes in the front area of the bath with the women wrapping their bodies and covering their

shoulders with colorful material brought from home, then we stopped at a pool in which we rinsed our feet, hands, and face. The main bathing area was kept very hot. Women would sit and chat, catch up on news and gossip, match make for future sons and daughters in law, eat sweets, wash themselves, and apply henna. I was scrubbed down pitilessly and vigorously by a strong-armed woman who worked there. During the visits, there was a barber present to shave male customers, trim their beards, and pull teeth if needed. When the necessary cleaning had been done, we would go to a pool in the corner to rinse ourselves off. The water in this pool was always foul because it had been used by numerous customers throughout week. I hated even going near it. In His Writings Baha'u'llah discouraged the use of these pools because of their lack of cleanliness. We left the bathhouse in an immaculate condition because we knew that the local Muslims would feel that their Islamic water was contaminated if it was mixed with our Baha'i water.

In the streets, we were vulnerable to the deeply-held prejudices of townspeople who had been taught by the mullahs to despise Baha'is. This reinforced their petty-mindedness. Their narrow horizons kept them content in their ignorance, and their hard scrabble lives blunted any sensitivity towards their neighbors. The mosque had long ceased to exercise a leavening effect on their hearts; many men escaped by smoking the opium grown on small plots of land. In fact, the mosque across our street blasted lengthy harangues from its rusty bullhorns to rile up the Muslims against Baha'is. This unrelenting meanness seeped through the walls behind which we lived and caused my family members to be much harsher with each other than they would have been had we all lived among generous and understanding people.

Our house faced inward as did our lives. Its interiors were sparse, malleable square spaces which opened into a large courtyard. There, a man-made pond into which we jumped occasionally had turned green with algae, and the apple trees we climbed bore fruit each season.

This was the same courtyard where friends and family came to witness my circumcision. A local man, Ali, was hired to perform this traditional Near Eastern ritual which continued to be performed among Baha'is though it was not required by Baha'i Law. He was our dentist as well. We went to his tiny shop and sat in a chair; in this same chair he would cut our hair, when we were sick he would place leeches on our skin, and on the days he was our dentist, he would pull out pliers and string to extract our teeth. On the day of my circumcision, our courtyard was filled with family and friends, and the mood was festive. I was placed on the lap of the man who chaired the Baha'i Assembly. Ali put his sharp knife in disinfectant and cut me. Blood gushed, I howled, and everyone cheered.

The main room of our house could be a sleeping area when bedding was rolled out or a dining room when the carpet was covered with a blanket onto which we sat to eat from the dishes of hot food placed in the middle. Household items such as a kettle and cups were kept on a deep shelf that was affixed to the wall. Chicken appeared only on special occasions, and there were periods of hunger when meals consisted of almonds and homemade flatbread with vinegar and grape syrup. We lifted the simple food up directly from the serving platters with our hands and washed it down with many cups of tea. The samovar in the corner was perpetually hot making tea always available. One day I

was climbing on a pile of pillows while my mother was out in the street watching a parade. I tipped a large kettle over and the boiling water in it spilled out all over me, leaving lifelong scars.

In the corners of the rooms, large clay containers protected dried fruit and foodstuffs from vermin so we could eat them during the coming winter; goat cheese hung in a cloth bundle from the ceiling out of reach of the clawing of the cats. The only dedicated space in our house was the room in which we honored respected guests, so our best rugs and furniture were there on display, and we always kept it sparkling clean.

With the onset of night, our house and all the life in our house was plunged into darkness. Small oil lamps gave off a faint orange light, and in its penumbra we couldn't do much. We feared the blackness of the night for the possible presence of a crawling scorpion and listened for the sound of the slither of a snake. The walls and doors were the only barrier to the wild that lurked outside in the dark. Once when I was very little I was sleeping bundled up in blankets when a wild dog came in looking for food and took the bundle in its teeth and went back out. My little body was found later sleeping outside in the corner of the courtyard.

At night, simple bedding was rolled out. Five aunts, parents, my grandmother, and children shared these spaces. If it was winter, all the doors were shut, and the room gradually filled with smoke from the charcoal fire which kept us warm. We all slept under blankets, and we even covered up our animals because they were essential to our survival. Only when absolutely necessary would I get up in the blackness, fill a can with water to clean myself, walk out into the courtyard, and cross to far side where the outhouse enclosed the deep pit into which we relieved ourselves. My fear was that with one small misstep, I would fall in. Crossing back through the courtyard, having survived another night journey to the outhouse, I scurried fearful that dogs might attack me and could hear our donkeys, roosters, and chickens rustling in their pens that lined one of the sidewalls.

Nature was at our doorstep threatening us but also beckoning us. Rising up to the south of this town of dusty streets and hardened people were slopes blooming with apricots, grapes, quince, walnuts, and almonds alongside fields of cantaloupe, watermelon, white flowers, and red roses for making rose water. The breezes that blew through the orchards carried the fresh scents of blossoms and the feeling of being free from the slow churning of the sad society below.

We collected almonds, which we cracked open to take out the seeds, and fruits from our trees, got them ready for market and then loaded them onto our donkeys. Almonds were especially valued, and everyone including women and children helped in their harvest. We were fortunate to own some land. Many families were tenant farmers who paid 6/7ths of their crops to landowners who treated them harshly, believing that routine beatings made them more obedient and productive. My maternal grandfather owned a lot of land and was a severe taskmaster, but he also had a reputation for fairness.

Underground canals built by the brilliant engineers from the distant age of Persian splendor still brought water from the interior of the mountain out to the fields and to the wells in town. I used to pack our donkeys with large clay containers, ride a mile out of town to a spring and collect water.

There was a well near our house but it required going down forty slippery steps, and the Muslim children would kick my water can.

Up on the mountain slopes, men could feel a measure of freedom. Hunters shot wild pigeons, quail, and deer, and shepherds sat with their flocks. With nightfall, hunters settled into 'yorts', makeshift stone huts covered by branches, while wolves and tigers stalked silently outside. Shepherds led their animals back by starlight into their owners' pens in the town below. The sheep's bleats announced their arrival.

Even up there on that beautiful mountain, the hatred of the local people had left its traces. In 1853 hundreds of Babi men climbed up the slopes with their swords and rifles and built makeshift defensive positions against hundreds and then thousands of advancing troops collected from villages in the region that had been called up by the governor in Shiraz to wipe out the Babis. Courageous wives, daughters, and sisters followed their men to help with the defense. The result was inevitable. After many captives were executed, often in appalling ways, a contingent of old male and female prisoners were marched back to the capitol of Shiraz along with the severed heads of the executed prisoners mounted on poles for the grand entrance into the city. Though Shiraz had been preparing for a grand celebration, many in the city found the gruesome sight to be too much and turned away. The echoes of this terrible violence continued to be felt in these mountains many decades later. On days off, our Baha'i families gathered at the locations where defensive positions had been taken up during the conflict, and offered prayers in remembrance of the dead, many of whom were our direct ancestors. We knew that, in the future, these places would be visited by Baha'i pilgrims from around the globe.

Back down in the confines of Nayriz, this same spirit of persecution was re-awakened annually during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year. On the tenth day of that month, we shut our wooden door and placed heavy objects behind it so it couldn't be broken down; one year, my beloved dog was still out in the street when the door was closed, and he was stoned to death out in the street. That was the day of Ashura when the Shi'a faithful commemorated the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn in a ritual of public wailing and blood-letting followed by attacks on their Baha'i neighbors. We would watch fearfully from behind the low wall on our roof as a crowd of men, dressed all in white, gathered outside the mosque in which they had been harangued since morning. Having been worked up into state of frenzy, the men began wailing and beating themselves. Then, some would slice their scalps with short swords. Trickle of blood streaked down their faces and dripped onto their clothing, creating large blotches of red on their white shirts while they shouted slogans and waved their arms. Others beat their backs with heavy chains until purple red welts appeared. Some fainted from the pain and exertion. Even women were swept up into the hysteria. We silently prayed that the crowd would forget us as its fervor reached a fever pitch.

We knew from the Baha'i Writings that this was not the Islam of Muhammad the Messenger of God and the Qur'an. The real religion of the people of Nayriz was superstition. Malevolent spirits, the evil eye, fatalism, the use of lines from the Qur'an as incantations, the wearing of miniature Qur'ans in pouches as talismans, home rituals to protect the residents from curses—there were the daily

religious practice of these townspeople handed down to them from centuries of tribal and Persian traditions that had degraded into a jumble of rituals and idols. Going to the mosque was a public duty from which most people derived no spiritual insight and which had little effect on their moral behavior. They endured sermons from a clergy that for a century or two had produced piles of lengthy treatises filled with minutiae on religious questions of the most literal and narrow sort but, when bound into multi-volume sets and placed on a bookshelf with a leather spine, produced a sense of awe in a culture that revered scholarship even if it could no longer recognize it. The people were barely literate and knew nothing of the broader world. The mullahs were the educated ones who told them all they thought they needed to know about the world beyond. The mullahs didn't tell them must not have been worth knowing and what contradicted or challenged the interpretations and dictates of the mullahs was sacrilegious and worthy of condemnation and, if necessary, violent correction. The Baha'i teachings were just such a challenge with ideas such as the progressive and ongoing nature of revelation, and the equality of women to men, among other blasphemies.

Baha'i gatherings were the joyful moments in our lives because we were free of the insults of the townspeople and could express ourselves openly. We could relax and laugh, drink tea and have easy conversation. We filled the air with the singing of Baha'i songs. Chanting the Writings filled us with hope about the brilliant future that we believed would emerge from spread of the Faith. We were energized to serve this Cause and be a part of making a new world free of the orthodoxies and prejudices of the past. In those gatherings we heard letters from Shoghi Effendi read out loud which were filled with thrilling news about the progress of the Baha'i community and which explained the changes the world was undergoing, thereby broadening our horizons beyond those of a small agricultural town. We heard about countries we would most likely never visit and that Baha'is from Iran were actually moving to those places to settle forever. All of this lifted us up above the drab two-story houses and dusty alleyways of our narrow world, helping us to become broader-minded people and aided us to withstand the torment we underwent at the hands and mouths of our townspeople.

The local Baha'i center was down the street from our house and reflected our care and dedication. Well-tended trees greeted visitors before they entered the large meeting hall, complete with a bookstore next to it—this in a town with high illiteracy. A spacious courtyard allowed the numerous Baha'is of Nayriz to gather together in the fresh air.

For me, the beauty of Baha'i gatherings was simple: I received constant affection from everyone and had many little friends with whom to run around. Fortunately, our home was also a center of Baha'i activities. Our father, a man of letters more than of business, served as the secretary of the local Baha'i assembly. His forefathers had been among the original Baha'is of Nayriz and were greatly respected.

I was nurtured by the women in our household including my mother, my aunts, and my grandmother. My mother's life—her name is Bushra—was one of constant toil. She had children when she was very young—she was unsure of her own age which may have been less than fifteen,

though she knew she was the youngest in her family. She complained that the age of other girls was declared to be older than they were so that they could be married while those of men were lowered so they could avoid the draft. Because of her pretty youthful appearance—she had big brown eyes—, many neighbors doubted that she was my mother but believed, rather, that she was my sister. Her daily routine was tending to young children and to the constant demands of housework in a home filled with members of our extended family. To discipline us—I was an especially active boy—she would threaten us with visits from frightening mythological creatures such as *lulu*, a green giant, or *div*, a monster who would skin and eat children. At night she leaned over us and sang laments about broken hearts and martyrs to lullaby us to sleep.

She had few friends outside the home. Though she knew from word of mouth the goings on in town, her world did not include much beyond the doorsill. Like most women, she had no opportunity to educate herself, to learn about the greater world, to develop her own interests, or to have a public life—these were all the exclusive prerogatives of men. Despite this, she had common sense and was often able to find clever solutions to problems

She struggled with having only relatives to interact with as her social life. The pressure from the outside and conflicts in the home affected her health. She had to move to Shiraz while I remained behind, upsetting her greatly. I was a sickly-looking child and in need of much care. We believed that my mother's TB could be passed on through mother's milk, so I was given to other women to be suckled. Some forty women sustained me through infancy with their breast milk.

Only with time have I realized how hard the lives of these women were, yet, in the middle of their struggles in this sad society, they carved out a loving place for me where I could experience a happy childhood.

Chapter 2

Save the Tablets

The emptiness of the abandoned windowless mudbrick room belied the greatness of the man who had once slept there. His heroic stand in this fort was the Genesis story that had given birth to my Baha'i family. By the time I was old enough to bicycle out to the fort and run my fingers along the rough surfaces of the now crumbling walls baked by the sun and hardened by the cold, only flies moved through its empty spaces. The shouts of its defenders, the wiz of buckshot, and the boom of the government cannons were now heard only in the legend of Fort Khajih that was told and re-told by my relatives.

The derelict old fort hunkered down in the undulations of rocky sand just outside of town not far from the streams and orchards where we picnicked and through which I loved to ramble around. In 1850, the great cleric Vahid and his companions entered the ruined fort and re-fortified it to defend themselves against the onslaught of local troops. The companions were mostly ordinary Nayrizis who had been transfigured into fervent followers of the Bab whose spiritual revolution was overturning the established order by proclaiming a new revelation from God. Vahid himself had been transformed. He had been known as Siyyid Yahya, one of the most distinguished clerics of Persia, and entrusted by the Shah to interview the Bab and write an assessment of His claims for the monarch. The interviews opened Siyyid Yaha's spiritual eyes, and the Bab re-named him 'Vahid', the 'Peerless One'. With his new name, Vahid decided to consecrate the rest of his life to the proclamation of the Bab's Station and His Teachings.

And so it was that he came to be in our town of Nayriz in the spring of 1850 and ascend the pulpit of the central Friday mosque where a great crowd gathered in anticipation of hearing from such a distinguished person. The Nayrizis were dumbfounded by what they heard: there was a new Revelation from God and the Bab was its Messenger. Vahid was calling them to action and warning them of the suffering they would endure if they accepted the new Message. A great excitement pulsed through the crowd and followed Vahid out into the street. Each day that he spoke in the mosque, the audience grew larger.

The gathering fervor became intolerable for the local governor. Fearing any possible challenge to his current position from which he profited handsomely by collecting rents from villages and large landholdings, he recruited local tribesmen who began sniping at Babis in town. Mulla Abdul-Husayn Nayrizi, my great-great-great grandfather, was the first to be injured by buckshot while on his rooftop, so Vahid later described him as "the First Martyr of Nayriz". Mulla Abdu'l-Husayn was a man of great piety. He walked forty miles to meet Vahid and became a believer straightaway after hearing his message. His training as an Islamic jurist and his important social position in Nayriz did not prevent him from wholeheartedly accepting the claims of the Bab and throwing in his lot with Vahid. His acceptance of the Bab's Message was the first seed of the Babi/Baha'i Faith in our family.

Vahid decided to relocate to the old unused fort outside of town and set up a proper defense against the mounting attacks from the governor's fighters. Meanwhile the governor hid in a nearby village and made pleas to the central authorities in Shiraz to come to his aid with troops. After making repeated requests and paying out bribes, the governor of Nayriz secured hundreds of government troops who arrived and surrounded the fort. Days of sorties by Babis and counter-fire by the soldiers followed. The poorly paid conscripts did their duty half-heartedly while the Babis were filled with a great sense of spiritual destiny.

The siege settled into a stalemate which was ended only by trickery on the part of the governor. Vahid explained to his companions that though the assurances of safety promised by the governor were insincere, they had been sworn on the Holy Qur'an, so they must show their deference to the Word of God and demonstrate their peaceful intentions by accepting the offer. Once Vahid walked out of the fort to the soldiers' camp he became, in effect, a prisoner. Soon the rest of the companions came out and were immediately surrounded and massacred. Mulla Abdu'l Husayn's own son, my great-great grandfather Mulla Taqi, was among those killed. Rather than grieve though, he rejoiced because his beloved son was the greatest sacrifice he could give to the Promised One of the Age.

Vahid's body was dragged through the streets and desecrated by mobs whose frenzy was fueled by ignorant and avaricious clerics glad to see this great man brought low and their positions protected. During the night, Vahid's remains were surreptitiously gathered up and buried.

Prisoners were marched to Shiraz, the provincial capital, in a gruesome procession that included the severed heads of Babis. The Babi families were broken up and dispersed.

Shoghi Effendi described the violent reprisals that followed the siege at Fort Khajih:

“It was marked, as it approached its conclusion, by a treachery as vile and shameful. It ended in a massacre even more revolting in the horrors it evoked and the miseries it engendered. It sealed the fate of Vahid who, by his green turban, the emblem of his proud lineage, was bound to a horse and dragged ignominiously through the streets, after which his head was cut off, was stuffed with straw, and sent as a trophy to the feasting Prince in Shiraz, while his body was abandoned to the mercy of the infuriated women of Nayriz, who, intoxicated with barbarous joy by the shouts of exultation raised by a triumphant enemy, danced, to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals, around it. And finally, it brought in its wake, with the aid of no less than five thousand men, specially commissioned for this purpose, a general and fierce onslaught on the defenseless Bábís, whose possessions were confiscated, whose houses were destroyed, whose stronghold was burned to the ground, whose women and children were captured, and some of whom, stripped almost naked, were mounted on donkeys, mules and camels, and led through rows of heads hewn from the lifeless bodies of their fathers, brothers, sons and husbands, who previously had been either branded, or had their nails torn out, or had been lashed to death, or had spikes hammered into their hands

and feet, or had incisions made in their noses through which strings were passed, and by which they were led through the streets before the gaze of an irate and derisive multitude.”

(Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 43)

Mulla Abdu'l Husayn managed to evade capture along with his four sons, three brothers, and their families, but everything the families owned was confiscated by the governor.

The governor of Nayriz profited handsomely from the resulting pillage. Greed was and would be a driving force in the persecution of Babis and, later, of Baha'is. Siyyid Ja'far Yazdi, the great-great-great-grandfather of my future wife Tahereh, was a high-ranking cleric who owned a large home in the bazaar and gave up his position to become a follower of the Bab. He had joined Vahid in Ft. Khajih but was kept alive after the siege for purposes of extortion. He was led to the entrance of a barn from which grain was distributed, and those entering were encouraged to spit on him for a share of grain. When he saw that people hesitated to commit such an insulting act, he encouraged them and accepted this humiliation as a sign of his devotion to the Bab and Vahid. His turban—the very symbol of his noble lineage from the Prophet Muhammad—was knocked off his head, and he was made to endure the torture of the bastinado. Soldiers led him forcibly to the homes of wealthy townspeople and beat him outside their front doors, only stopping when the residents or passers-by—ashamed of the sight—paid a bribe to them to stop. This brutality continued for months until his swollen legs could no longer carry him.

In his honor, Baha'u'llah revealed the lengthy Tablet of Nus'h which examines the rejection of all of the Messengers of God by the leaders of religion. He denounces the blindness and pride of these leaders and warns others not to follow them and forsake God's true Manifestation. He is leading the awakened and faithful believer to the Divine realms which lie beyond the knowledge of the learned. Whoever reaches these realms shall savor God's boundless favors. Whomever God guides to this shore shall be glorified.

There were Babis who managed to escape the conflict by fleeing into the caves and makeshift dwellings in the mountains or to neighboring villages where they had relatives or friends. But the violence also gave some Babis a thirst for revenge which could only be slaked by more violence despite the fact that the Bab's teachings forbade such aggression.

One Nayrizi and several other Babis went so far as to attack the Shah in August, 1852, while he was out on a ride receiving petitioners. Baha'u'llah had emphatically warned them not to follow such a course of action which was contrary to the teachings of the new Revelation, but the passion for revenge prevailed. The attack shook the young ruler to his core and alarmed his mother who was already deeply suspicious of Babis, and a nationwide frenzy of violence against the new Faith was unleashed that included the nighttime murder of Tahereh, one of the most prominent of the Babi teachers.

By the fall of 1852, the survivors of the 1850 conflict in Nayriz began to return to town, and a Babi community re-emerged, helped by the leadership of Ali Sardar, the great-great uncle of my grandmother and the scion of a prominent Nayrizi family who became a Babi after Vahid's arrival.

Conflict was inevitable between the governor and the newly constituted Babi community as each was suspicious of the other.

Mulla Abdu'l Husayn was in the first group of nineteen Babis who organized the community for possible resistance. The group decided that he and a few others would visit the Babi homes to educate the believers in the teachings of the Bab of which they knew little, while Sardar and another Babi scouted out locations in the mountains in the event that a refuge became necessary.

The governor did not want to see a renewed and re-invigorated Babi community in his town and took to surrounding himself with gunmen. Sardar, who knew him well, had lost respect for him knowing of his corruption and cruelty, and the Babis feared imminent persecution given the local mood and the nationwide reprisals against them. As the governor fomented hostility towards the Babis and made plans for an attack on them, a few Babis wanted to make a pre-emptive strike as well as seek revenge for the desecration of Vahid despite the Bab's teachings against such violence. Nevertheless on a Saturday morning, while the governor was attending his morning bath, they stabbed him to death.

When the authorities from Shiraz arrived with troops, the Babi leaders went to meet them in a gesture of goodwill hoping to avoid a repeat of the violence of 1850. But the situation deteriorated after the authorities used a ruse to capture Babi leaders by promising to hear their grievances regarding the loss of their properties after the previous conflict. When Babis heard of the arrival of more government troops, they expected the worst and so they armed themselves and made ready for battle.

The fighting moved from the orchards right outside of town up into the mountains. Simple stone defenses were quickly built at different elevations. Women came out to join their men, and soon the Babis numbered in the hundreds. The authorities drafted tribesmen and villagers from the whole regions until their fighting force numbered in the thousands.

The mountainside echoed with the sounds of crackling rifles, booming canons, and the impassioned chanting of the Babis. Winter set in. Then during one sortie, Ali Sardar was gunned down. Hundreds of new recruits kept arriving for the government's final onslaught on the Babis who had moved further up the mountain and consolidated all the women and children in one location for their protection. Food ran out, and water became scarce, so women made the dangerous trek to the springs where they were chased and beaten and targeted by enemy rifles.

After a final night huddled in the dark cold, the Babis made one last sortie at dawn and were all either shot or captured.

All of Mulla Abdu'l Husayn's sons and brothers—my great-great uncles and their fathers—were killed in the course of the fighting. The old man was brought before the victorious commander who asked him why, with all his knowledge and wisdom and after a life of hard work, had he allowed so much destruction to be visited on his family. Mulla Abdu'l Husayn did not have the strength to give a lengthy answer but asserted that the divine laws of the past had been abrogated, a heretical

statement to a Muslim and the core of Babi belief in the new Revelation. The commander was so outraged by this statement that he ordered soldiers to stuff fistfuls of dirt into his mouth because if he wasn't going to be contrite, he wasn't going to say anything at all.

What followed was an orgy of revenge. Many prisoners were decapitated, their heads skinned, and others were marched into town and beaten all along the way. Some women were given out as booty to soldiers.

Then began a trail of tears to Shiraz. Wounded and injured men, women on their own, and terrified children walked on foot the 135 miles from Nayriz to Shiraz. Food was scarce and old men who collapsed were left to die. The entry into Shiraz was complete with the severed heads mounted on spikes. The Babi women were given away, some men were interrogated and executed, and others were left to fend for themselves penniless on the city streets.

Mulla Abdu'l Husayn, then eighty years old, was brought before the prince in Shiraz filled with an indomitable spirit despite the intense suffering he had endured. The governor asked about his deeds and beliefs to which he replied that he had summoned people to the new Revelation and that the willingness of Babis to suffer so much was a sign of its truth. The governor ordered him to curse the Bab, which he refused.

A core group of Babis was put in chains and sent to Tihiran. During the long journey to the capitol, in the village of Seadat-u-Abad, Mulla Abdu'l Husayn lost all remaining strength and could go no further. He was decapitated there by the soldiers; his body was buried, but his head was taken with the others. When the sad procession reached the village of Abadih, a message was received from the court that the severed heads should not be brought into the capitol. The local people did not want the remains of heretics desecrating their graveyard, so the heads were buried in an abandoned field outside of the village. "Abdu'l-Baha, son of the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, named this precious and historic spot "The Garden of the Merciful". Once in Tihiran, most of the prisoners were either executed or perished in prison.

Mulla Muhammad Shafi', our great grandfather and Mulla Abdu'l Husayn's grandson, had been left in Shiraz under the watchful care of the Imam Jummih of that city who had been a protector of the Bab. The Imam Jummih saw great potential in Shafi' whom he had educated in religion, Arabic, logic, and poetry, so he appointed him as an administrator of the holdings of the Great Mosque in Nayriz which included issues of land and water rights.

In this position, Shafi was able to teach about the Bab and His Revelation and play an important role in helping the Baha'i community to grow after the devastation left by the conflict of 1853. He could also act as a defender of the Baha'is of Nayriz, feed the hungry, and give employment to returning Babis. He developed a business association with several Nayrizis and relatives of the Bab, the Afnans, which brought greater prosperity and jobs to Nayriz. Later in his life he wrote down his memoirs giving us a detailed look at the brutality of the events recounted here.

In 1859, Shafi and a companion made the journey to Baghdad to meet Baha'u'llah. One of their donkeys was stolen, but out of deference for each other, neither man would ride the remaining donkey. In Baghdad, Shafi recognized the true spiritual station of Baha'u'llah though He had yet to make His public declaration as the One promised by the Bab. Shafi asked Baha'u'llah to bless him and his family so that we would always keep the Covenant; 'Ahdieh', the family name we were later given, means 'to keep the Covenant'. To help them with the return trip, Baha'u'llah provided them with funds for another donkey, but these were used by Shafi and his friend to hold Babi gatherings.

In the following decades, Shafi fostered the development of good relations between Baha'is and Muslims. These reached such a point that the town governor—the son of the one assassinated by Babis in 1852—reached out to Baha'i leaders to make peace between the communities, hired Baha'is as his guards, and appointed two to administer certain lands under his control.

In a Tablet to Shafi, Baha'u'llah exhorted His followers in Nayriz to serve God by teaching His Cause. This could be done through the performance of pure and goodly deeds in a spirit of love and compassion.

Shafi also held regular study classes to educate believers in the Babi and Baha'i Writings, especially on the Covenant, to protect them from being misled by the Covenant-breakers who were active at the time. Baha'u'llah wrote to him that Baha'is had to be well-informed about the Faith so as to be steadfast and that whosoever remained so would be performing the greatest deed and be blessed. Shafi should educate the Baha'is in His Writings which would help them separate truth from falsehood and protect them from self and passion and vain imaginings and, instead, be illumined by the lamp of certitude. Shafi must to guide those who had gone astray with power of utterance and wisdom.

Later, 'Abdu'l-Baha asked Shafi to undertake travel teaching trips throughout the region to prevent Covenant-breaking including accompanying Agha Mirza Ahmad Ali on trips to Rafsanjan and Jahrom. He explained that the Will of God was for unity at all levels and between all groups in human society. In the Tablet of Visitation of Shafi, 'Abdu'l-Baha testified to his sincerity, his diligence in service to the Cause, and his struggle in the path of the Beloved.

After the passing of his first wife, Shafi married Khavar Sultan, the daughter of a beloved poet from Shiraz, Vafa, whose poetry the women of Shiraz loved to sing. Vafa's poetry came to express his love for Baha'u'llah as well. Vafa married one of the widows of Nayriz whom he met while visiting the prison in Shiraz that held the refugees from the conflict of 1853. He and his father subsequently moved to Nayriz to be away from the jealousy and intrigue of the mullahs of the provincial capital.

During his short life—he died while still in his '30's—Vafa became a passionate follower of Baha'u'llah and travelled to Baghdad to meet Him. He wrote to Baha'u'llah on certain mystical and theological questions about the Worlds of God, the Return, the Laws of God, and Paradise.

Baha'u'llah responded with a lengthy tablet in which He praised Vafa for being faithful in the face of others who were not:

“Blessed art thou O Vafá, inasmuch as thou hast been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament at a time when all men have violated it and have repudiated the One in Whom they had believed, and this notwithstanding that He hath appeared invested with every testimony, and hath dawned from the horizon of Revelation clothed with undoubted sovereignty.”¹

Baha’u’llah gave him the name ‘Vafa’ which means fidelity and urged him to become its embodiment:

“It behoveth thee, however, to exert thine utmost to attain the very essence of fidelity. ... And none can ever achieve this except he who hath purged his heart from whatsoever is created between heaven and earth, and hath entirely detached himself from all but God, the sovereign Lord, the Almighty, the Gracious.”²

Vafa’s short life was commemorated by these words on his headstone:

“This is the spot in which the gem of the mine of virtue has been put to rest. He was like unto a mountain of good character and a shining star. He left this mortal world of suffering and entered the horizon of eternal delight. He was like unto a shining moon on the horizon of knowledge. He was an enlightened and skillful poet. With his death great loss has been experienced and a void has been left behind. He was the son of the learned and wise father Mullah Muhammad Bagher ...his name is Sheik Hussein. May the blessings and forgiveness of God accompany Him.”³

Vafa’s daughter and my great-grandmother, Khavar Sultan, married Shafi and moved to Nayriz. Her family suffered during the 1853 conflict so ‘Abdu’l-Baha consoled her with the knowledge that these tests were Divine favors that God bestowed on His Handmaidens for whom he had decreed such things as would cause them to rejoice with gladness in the next world.

Several other family members were honored with correspondence from ‘Abdu’l-Baha. Mirza Ahmad Nayrizi, my maternal grandfather who adopted the last name ‘Vahidi’ after the great Babi martyr, was blessed with regular letters from “Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi. Vahidi descended from Mirza Ahmad Koshnevis, whose highly developed use of the elegant Naskhi style made him one of the most distinguished Persian calligraphers of the 18th century. Koshnevis’s life’s work was a prodigious output of some seventy major works and between ninety and one-hundred and twenty Qur’ans, some of which are found in major museums today.

Mirza Ahmad Vahidi rose from poverty to become an excellent businessman and conscientious landowner. He loved to tell the story of his conversion to the Baha’i Faith. One day, he was passing

1 Baha’u’llah, *Suriy-i-Vafa (Tablet to Vafa)* viewed at

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² Ibid

³ <http://nayriz.org/template.php?pageName=tablx113&menuStates=0000010010000000>

by the shop of Karbelai Husayn who invited him to come in and challenged him directly by asking if he knew the Hadith in which a believer is exhorted to search in the East and the West for the Promised One and investigate his claim and, if so, why had Ahmad not inquired about the Baha'i claims. Ahmad asked a mulla later about this hadith but the mulla reacted with surprise that Ahmad had even listened to a lowly shopkeeper. This only made Ahmad more curious, and he returned to the shop for a series of discussions and later accepted the Baha'i Faith and regretted that he, like many Nayrizis, had treated Baha'is with contempt.

So began an active life of service during which Ahmad accumulated great wealth and spent it on the affairs of the Faith. He believed that by giving of his wealth, he would accrue spiritual merit, and he was very steadfast in his obedience to Baha'i laws. Once Shoghi Effendi told him that having more than one wife—the common custom among Muslims—was no longer allowed in the new Dispensation, he immediately divorced one of his wives, though he supported her financially for the rest of her life.

In 1909, Ahmad had the great privilege of going on pilgrimage and meeting 'Abdu'l-Baha. On Nawruza day, he was among the witnesses to 'Abdu'l-Baha's nighttime burial of the Bab's Holy remains during which 'Abdu'l-Baha leaned over the vault, his long grey hair sweeping over the coffin as he wept for the Bab and His Divine Revelation. The following day while the Nayriz pilgrims rode with the Master, 'Abdu'l-Baha became somber. He told them that a storm was engulfing the Baha'is of their hometown and that they must return immediately.

By this time, Persia was careening into chaos as authority at the center weakened. The new King, son of the very long reigning Nasir al-Din Shah, was ill-equipped for the position, knowing nothing of statecraft and being more interested in personal pleasure and the accumulation of wealth. The government was bankrupt and dependent for money on concessions sold to the Russians and the British to whom the Persian government was deeply in debt. A vigorous movement challenged imperial authority by calling for a Constitution to be written and then used as the framework for governance. As the power of the central government weakened, regional rulers emerged who asserted control independently of the Court.

The province of Fars was taken over by one such self-proclaimed ruler. He put a local tough, Shaykh Zakariya, in charge of battling the central government throughout the Nayriz region. The wounds and destruction of the conflicts of 1850 and 1853 had begun to heal and now Zakariya was re-opening them. A few days before the New Year on March 21st, the Shaykh unleashed his men on Nayriz who then went through the bazaar pillaging goods and attacking the homes of Muslims. Several Muslim leaders hurriedly went to the Shaykh to convince him to call off the violence and suggested he concentrate instead on attacking Baha'i homes, Otherwise the local Muslim population would surely turn against him. The Shaykh's men went after Baha'is, even searching for them in the mountains into which many of their men had fled.

My wife, Tahereh's grandmother Nurijan's family's home was destroyed, and her properties were stolen, leaving the family—who was hiding in the caves outside of town—destitute; her husband, Haji Abdu'l-Husayn, was in Haifa on pilgrimage.

My grandfather, Shaykh Muhammad Husayn escaped to safety in Sarvestan after entrusting the women and children with Muslim friends. He was the son of Mulla Muhammad Shafi' and, like him, Muhammad Husayn had studied Arabic, religion, logic, and philosophy; one of his classmates was the leading cleric in Shiraz, a connection which later helped him protect Baha'is. As a young man, he was able to travel extensively, possibly to avoid a pre-arranged marriage. His pilgrimage to the Holy Land to meet 'Abdu'l-Baha cemented his faith and gave him great energy for service.

Shaykh Zakariya extorted money from Baha'is by terrorizing them and by using legal ruses to get them to sign over property documents to him. Baha'is hid in orchards, in caves, and in abandoned stone huts, while others struggled through mountain passes to get to villages where they could be safe. Still, the Shaykh's thugs were able to round up six prominent Baha'i men who were brought before the Shaykh and publically humiliated. In two cases, brother was made to watch brother being executed and a father was shown his son's bloody corpse on the ground just to torment him. Local people turned in two more Baha'i men for a reward who were hiding in the mountains, and both captives were shot in the public square. Near the bazaar, several townspeople, eager to ingratiate themselves with the Shaykh, pointed out the home of a blind elderly Baha'i man who was beloved by neighbors for his wonderful storytelling and warm sense of humor. He was then dragged out into the street, pushed to the ground, beaten, and shot. A few days after the Persian New Year, March 21st, two brothers parted ways. One went to hide in an orchard owned by a friend who then turned him after being threatened by the Shaykh's men. The other brother was too aged to make the trek up the mountainside, so he hid on the second floor of Vahid's home with his nephew and another Baha'i friend. During the house to house searches, the three were found and led through the streets as neighbors threw stones at them. They arrived bloodied in front of the Shaykh who then had one of the Baha'i men cut down by a sword. The other was taken back to his house to get money for a bribe. When they got there, he hid money instead so his wife could use it later. When the Shaykh's men realized this, he was taken out and shot.

Parijan, a young Baha'i who became my aunt's mother-in-law, witnessed the barbaric violence of 1909 and suffered the loss of her young husband and her beloved father, as well as the destruction of her family's home and orchards. She wrote an account of the events of 1909:

“Six years of happy marriage and good life was suddenly ended by the arrival of a brutal assailant named Shaykh Zakaria. ...

Our days and nights were spent in fear. Five days before Naw-Ruz we left our house and moved next to the Mosque of Jumih – the stronghold of the Bahá'ís and a defensive building of our district. Shortly after Shaykh Zakaria's army ransacked our homes and our district they began to attack the mosque. They destroyed the defence lines of the Bahá'ís.

On the night before Naw-Ruz we were frightened and trembling of the events unfolding in our city while we were hiding in the house close to the mosque. The next day I came out of hiding to find out what was going on in town. A woman, who was a neighbour of ours, approached me crying, I asked her “What has happened?” she told me “They have killed your husband, Mullá Hasan and your father, Mullá Muhammad Ali”. She told me that she has seen with her own eyes how they have killed my husband and my father. I had a six-month-old son and a five-year-old daughter. I left the younger one at home and began to run towards the bazaar district. I saw more than five thousand people running around and some were pulling the body of a naked man with a rope tied up to his feet. I asked “Who is he?” and they told me “He is Mullá Muhammad Ali, your father.”

Soon my mother joined me. There were a few friendly women in the crowd, who recognized us saying, “Are you out of your mind to be here? They are looking for you to kill you!” We had no choice but to run back to our district. We tried to hide in a neighbour's house, but they did not let us in. We tried a few other homes, but nobody would give us shelter. We had no choice, but to flee outside the town and hide in the field amongst the tall bushes. The owner of the field also kicked us out. Then we came across a wall, the two of us climbed over the wall. It was a large orchard and we hid in it. Nighttime fell and we were hungry and scared, it was dark and we were trembling. We could hear the mob screaming while they were hanging my father. Suddenly a friendly man, who was searching for us also climbed over the wall. He told us that he would help us. He gave us shelter that night and for fourteen days we were hiding in his house. Occasionally we would have some food to eat.

When my husband was killed, he was only thirty-three years old. He was a good man, a pure man, and a well-loved man by everyone. They tried so hard to make him recant, but he refused. He told them “I have lived thirty three years in this earthly life, if I recant I may live another thirty years. Do you think that I would deny my Lord for a few years of earthly living? Do you think that I would give up an eternal life for this few fleeting moments?” Three days after my father's death, a friend of his brought the lifeless body down from the tree and buried him next to a river. The way they killed my father was horrible. After they tortured him severely, they cut his body and then they hung him upside down in a tree next to the Mosque of Jumih. A fire was built and his body was burned. For three days his burnt body was left hanging on a tree.”⁴

‘Abdu’l-Baha must have sensed this terrible violence which is why he told my grandfather Mirza Ahmad Vahidi to return immediately from his pilgrimage in March of 1909. The martyrdoms of the eighteen Baha’is of Nayriz may also have been the sacrifice that inspired the group of American Baha’is who during those same days made the official decision to build the first Baha’i House of Worship in the West on the shores of Lake Michigan.

⁴ This account appears in Muhammad Ali Faizi, *Nayriz Mushkbiz*, (Tihran, Iran: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 129 B.E.) p. 162; also is re-printed at <http://nayriz.org/bioTemplatePopup.php?pageName=bioxPariJanKhanum>

When Mirza Ahmad Vahidi and Haji Abdu'l-Husayn returned to Nayriz, they found the Baha'i quarter devastated. Haji Abdu'l-Husayn's bountiful orchards had been reduced to cinders, and the plot on which his home once stood now was nothing but dirt—even the stones and bricks had been removed. He found his wife Nurijan, my great-aunt, and his children destitute, his properties expropriated, and his belongings stolen. Nurijan had refused the offer of free corn so as not to dishonor her husband by accepting aid.

The Baha'is were resilient and immediately began to rebuild. The Tablets and communications received through the years from Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi, to our family members were the great life force that sustained us. These were the bright lights of guidance and inspiration in our dark hours. They were the core of our spiritual lives, so much so that when there was flooding or an attack by a mob, my grandmother Saheb Jan's main concern was that we "save the tablets".

The year 1916 brought renewed suffering as a gang of toughs led by Shaykh Zakariya's brother came to Nayriz. He destroyed our crops and demanded payments. The brother made pretenses to being the Qa'im, the Islamic holy figure who would appear at the end of time. This time, though, the Baha'is and Muslims banded together for protection. Worse than this fanatic for Nayrizis was the lack of rainfall and the appearance of locusts which resulted in famine. Mirza Abdu'l-Husayn opened his storehouses to help alleviate the hunger, and other wealthy Baha'is helped the community as well. In 1916, Mirza Abdu'l-Husayn, this venerable Baha'i, passed away. At the time of his passing he was still being harassed by the authorities who were attempting to tax all of the assets he had been able to build up since the persecutions of 1909.

These years bore an important fruit: the formation for the first Spiritual Assembly of Nayriz, of which my grandfathers, Shaykh Muhammad Husayn and Mirza Ahmad Vahidi, were members. The first woman elected to this body was Mrs. Nusrat Missaqi. The Assembly became influential with a reputation for wisdom and fairness such that Muslims sought out its advice and guidance. The Assembly was of great material assistance in times of need. During the terrible flooding of 1924 when most Nayrizis fled to higher ground for safety, the Assembly appealed to Shoghi Effendi for funds. The Guardian asked the entire Baha'i world to lend material assistance to the Baha'is of Nayriz. These were used to build a bathhouse and a dam, which were greatly appreciated by all Nayrizis, and also to erect a Baha'i center and buy land for a cemetery. The significant sum of \$500 was sent by the Spiritual Assembly of New York City, a body on which I would later serve. Vahid's room in Fort Khajih was made into a shrine. With its renewed vigor and greater economic stability, the Baha'i community started two schools, one for boys and one for girls. Baha'i women played important roles as teachers and administrators, and the schools quickly became recognized by the authorities as the town's best.

The Baha'i community was nurtured by courageous women. Pari Jan, my aunt's mother-in-law, came to be known as the "angel of Nayriz". She had been greatly helped by the love expressed to her by 'Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and the Greatest Holy Leaf, during her pilgrimage, and the tablets she subsequently received from them. 'Abdu'l-Baha acknowledged the terrible afflictions she had

suffered at the hands of others while praising her courage and steadfastness. Her home became a place of hospitality and love to all who visited, and she was always ready to recount the events that she had witnessed. She knew from ‘Abdu’l-Baha that the sacrifice of the Nayrizis in 1909 had been for the internment of the remains of the Bab.

Saheb Jan, my grandmother, devoted herself entirely to raising her seven children. She was greatly concerned with both preserving and perpetuating our family’s spiritual legacy.

Khavar Sultan, wife of my great grandfather Mulla Muhammad Shafi, became a role model for other women in Nayriz. She used her education to teach other women basic skills, and she taught in the Baha’i school all while raising five children who later became devoted Baha’is. A trusted person, she was often called on to advise in matters of marriage.

All these positive developments helped the Baha’i community survive periodic persecutions. In 1928 and 1929 fanatical clerics again organized mobs to roam the streets of the Baha’i neighborhood, and frighten residents in an attempt to extort money. The loss of political stability in Iran caused by the conflict between Constitutionalists and Royalists emboldened provincial governors, tribal chiefs, and local clerics to assert their own authority. Shaykh Javad, the nephew of Shaykh Zakaria and the chief of the Kuhistani tribe, set his sights on taking Nayriz. He threatened to destroy all the homes of Baha’is unless a large ransom was paid. A list of the names of Baha’is was drawn up with a corresponding sum next to each name; next to Shaykh Muhammad Husayn was 1500 rials. My other grandfather Mirza Ahmad Vahidi went directly to Shaykh Javad and offered his life and wealth in return for the protection of the Baha’is. The Shaykh drew up an agreement by which Ahmad would collect monies from the Baha’is and, in return, they and their properties would not be harmed. Ahmad then called on his connections in Shiraz to have the authorities there send government troops to drive out the Shaykh’s men. Thanks to his efforts, the city of Nayriz was rid of the greedy Shaykh and his dangerous tribesmen.

Mirza Ahmad was privileged to be able to make two pilgrimages to the Holy Land and meet Shoghi Effendi. On the second visit he was instructed to pioneer to Arabia which he did immediately and helped to establish one of the first spiritual assemblies there. After being forced to return to Iran, he developed a painful illness with which he struggled during his last twenty years in Shiraz. His great business acumen and devoted service allowed him to purchase and give several beautiful carpets for use in the Shrines of the Bab and of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, where they beautify the interior to this day.

The suffering and service of my other grandfather, Shaykh Muhammad Husayn, continued for many years. In a tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Baha expressed the joy that the faithfulness of Baha’is such as my grandfather brought to Him:

A number of other incidents happened in Nayriz during which Shaykh Muhammad Husayn was able to protect the Baha’i community. For example, there was the arrival of ‘Abu’l Hasan Kohestani, brother of Shaykh Zakeria, and, later, of ‘Abdu’l Husayn Khan Baharlu, which were both times of heightened threat for Baha’is. My grandfather Husayn helped the community at large in Nayriz when

major flooding destroyed parts of town. He also wrote down the events of his life in a history book that was known to the whole family but was ultimately lost under mysterious circumstances.

The chronicle that memorialized the life of the Babi and Baha'i community of Nayriz was *Lamatul Anvar*, written by Mirza Muhammad Shafi Rouhani. He married Tuba, one of the daughters of my grandfather Mirza Ahmad Vahidi, survived the violence of 1909 and was blessed with seven children and a pilgrimage to Haifa. When the conditions became too dangerous for his family in Nayriz, he moved to Shiraz. Though he and his family would lose everything they owned during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, he left behind this important account of the stories of Nayriz that testified to the cruelty that the Baha'is there had suffered.

Even as a young boy, I can remember the hostile sermons blaring from the rusting horn speakers mounted high up on the mosque so that the whole neighborhood could hear the invectives against us. The streets we walked down were the same ones through which our family members in 1909 had been dragged and beaten. My grandmother Saheb Jan and my aunt's mother-in-law Pari Jan had born witness to this violence and had felt its terror as young people. During our Baha'i gatherings, the events of the past were recounted, and those who had suffered were remembered.

This past was always present in my daily life, reverberating off of every street, resurrected out of every mouth. This past was still alive in the constant threats that characterized my childhood. Even while I was going to sleep at home, my mother chanted a lament about a good-looking and strong son who had been beheaded. My two grandfathers were bulwarks against the hostility that always lay right beyond the boundaries of my immediate world. As I grew up, I came to greatly appreciate another great protector: my father, Shaykh Baha'i.

When I was tall enough to reach the pedals of a bicycle, I would go out and visit the old fort where Vahid and his followers made their stand against the threat of extermination from soldiers and locals pushed by fanatical mullas. I felt their presence. Once, I even thought I saw several angelic figures dancing around a fire, but as I approached, they disappeared. I roamed inside the fort's emptiness reliving its full meaning for my family and myself.

Though the violence had been terrible, here we were.

I could bicycle along the clear stream outside the mud walls and drink its waters and walk through the sweet-smelling fruit orchards owned by Baha'is.

Chapter 3: A Man of Letters

At the age of twenty, my father became both a father and the head of a family. I was born and his father, Shaykh Muhammad Husayn, passed away in his 50s in that year of 1942. All of a sudden, he had responsibility for two families—the one he'd been born into and the one he'd made.

In his heart, my father, Shaykh Baha'i, was a man of letter—the title 'Shaykh' denoted education. He committed many prayers and poems to memory and chanted excerpts regularly during the talks he gave. He studied the Qur'an, the Hadiths, and the Baha'i Writings and, as a result, became very knowledgeable about the Qur'anic traditions regarding the Qa'im and the Baha'i proofs demonstrating the Bab and Baha'u'llah's claims. Regular visits to our home by outstanding Baha'i teachers such as Tarazollah Samandari, Muhammad Ali Faizi, and Ali Akbar Furutan, also enriched his understanding of the Baha'i teachings and the mission of the Baha'i community. His understanding of theological questions along with his genial personality, oratorical skills, and compassionate nature, made him an effective teacher of the Faith. Though bookish, my father was not aloof—he had a great sense of humor and was always welcoming to our numerous guests. He was deeply spiritual, spending much time in prayer. When I asked him why he prayed so much, he answered, "For you", and, in the coming years, I often felt that I was being helped by the prayers that he had uttered for me.

While my father's orientation was towards books and learning, my mother, Bushra, came from a family with business acumen. Her father, Mirza Ahmad Vahidi, rose from poverty to wealth. My mother spent all of her time caring for the household in a perpetual cycle of cooking, cleaning, washing, and taking care of the kids. She had not had the benefit of much more than a rudimentary education. Her life unfolded within the walls of the home so she did not have an opportunity to make friends.

My father, on the other hand, spent most of his time engaged in public activity. His knowledge of the Baha'i Writings, his engaging manner, and his verbal abilities, made him a much loved public speaker. He served on the Spiritual Assembly as its secretary—as his father had before him—a role that allowed him to use his writing skills. Many years later I read a few of these letters and was struck by the poetic quality of his Persian. As secretary for one of the largest communities in Iran, he interacted with the general public because the Baha'i community of Nayriz numbered in the thousands, and its institution was much respected. Baha'is went to the Assembly for legal matters which Shoghi Effendi encouraged, rather than the court system. My father had to be involved in all the legal matters between Baha'is from marriages to business disputes which included legal nuances involving the protection of Baha'is in a hostile society. This interaction would bring great suffering to him when mullahs decided to incite mobs against Baha'is. Like most Persian men, he concealed his feelings, and this reserve may have helped him in dealing with these attacks.

My father owned a small family pharmacy which sold herbal remedies and other treatments such as belladonna, which was used as a sedative, phenergan for digestion, and turmeric, for a variety of

ailments like headaches and heartburn. He came to be much loved as a healer. The original shop in the bazaar owned by his father had been burned down, so my father had to set up the business in a much smaller location across from our house on a street that did not have nearly as much foot traffic as the bazaar, and, as a result, his income decreased considerably.

Mirza Jalal Missaghi, my future father-in-law, helped my father for a short time. Missaghi's roots in the Faith went back to the arrival of Vahid to Nayriz. On his mother's side, he was related to Mulla 'Abdul'-Husayn, the elderly Babi who had been beheaded during the forced march to Tihiran, and, on his father's side, to Siyyid Ja'far Yazdi, one of Vahid's close companions. He taught in the new Baha'i school and helped write a curriculum which included study of the Qur'an, the poems of Hafiz and Saadi, reading, composition, and arithmetic. To become a teacher, Missaghi had earned a teaching certificate, a highly-prized degree at that time. He married Rooha, the daughter of his uncle Shaykh Muhammad Husayn, who shared his devotion to the Faith. The young couple continued to serve the Faith in the city of Fasa, from which they fled after being attacked by local toughs. Settling in Shiraz, Missaghi went into the cotton business where he succeeded despite the anti-Baha'i prejudice of the company's owners. The fulfillment of the couple's life of service came when they relocated to India to serve the Faith there as pioneers. Today he lives in Shiraz, a centenarian whose mind is still sharp.

My father's public role as secretary of the Baha'i Assembly of Nayriz brought him into contact with military, political, and religious authorities, and this high profile activity made him a target. During the 1940s a cleric from a nearby village, Mullá Mohayadin Falli, arrived in Nayriz. A gifted, street smart agitator, he knew the people of Nayriz and how to sway them with words, and then how to profit materially from the unrest he fomented. He built a small mosque across the street from our house. The loud squawking of its mounted horn speakers was the soundtrack of my childhood. The invectives against Baha'is and the harangues bullying the Muslim faithful into some kind of action blared out into the street. By the time he arrived in Nayriz, our community had become both large and fairly prosperous with several Baha'is having connections to members of the provincial government in Shiraz, which made it politically impossible for Falli to engage in direct violence against Baha'is. So instead, he campaigned insidiously to undermine the community fabric that had developed between Baha'is and Muslims. He discouraged inter-marriage, the patronizing of Baha'i businesses, or any form of social association. As his psychological grip on the local people tightened, Baha'i marriages ceased being recognized, making all future Baha'i children illegitimate in the eyes of the law. He sent thugs to attend and breakup Baha'i gatherings and increased orchestrated attacks against Baha'i-owned properties. A local rebel leader who obeyed him frequently harassed Baha'is as they went back and forth to their farms. This form of intimidation allowed Falli to steal the property of others so as to enrich himself. He offered to buy Mirza Ali Akbar Rouhani's beautiful garden which was often used for Baha'i gatherings and youth activities at a very low buying price. Rouhani, of course, refused. At night, Falli's men came and cut down all the trees. Then Falli approached him and asked him if he would now accept his price. This kind of tactic was used repeatedly on Baha'is and, because of my father's public role as a Baha'i, he came into the crosshairs of Falli.

My father and Missaghi's experiences were tragically typical of those of other Baha'is in our troubled land of Iran whose conservative society was struggling to undergo great change. There was political turmoil with the rise of cries for a more democratic system. The conflict between the Iranian Parliamentary party and the Royalists re-emerged. Other political parties formed and genuinely competitive parliamentary elections were held. The leading figure of the parliamentarians, Mohammad Mossadeq, formed the National Front party which aimed to uphold the Constitution that had been passed in 1906 and to repossess Iran's oilfields from foreign companies and nationalize the oil industry, views which were increasingly popular in Iran. Even with these new political movements, Iran remained a fundamentally traditional. Society was dominated by the royal class and its dependents, as well as powerful religious leaders, high-level government officials, tribal chiefs, great landowners, and prosperous merchants.

The rise of an urban, westward leaning professional elite, a new nationalism that mythologized an Ancient pre-Islamic Persian past, fast-growing cities, and active left-wing political parties challenged this old social order's ruling elite. The religious class saw some of its traditional judicial and educational functions taken over by secular, governmental institutions, and several of its privileges such as the exemption from military service, taken away by the Shah. Mullahs continued to hold a great deal of influence over the population in rural areas, villages, and small towns and attacking the Baha'is became a way for them to re-assert their own power in a time of waning influence. Baha'is were also used as convenient targets by the political class as a way to enhance their own status and public profile. By the 1930s and 40s, Baha'i schools were being closed down despite their excellent track record in educating both boys and girls, Baha'i marriages were no longer recognized, and Baha'i literature was censored.

With the outbreak of World War Two, the Allies entered Iran to secure the oil fields and deposed Reza Shah who was seen to have friendly relations with the Axis powers and replaced him with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. A famine spread across Iran causing widespread suffering. The persecutions of Baha'is by the religious leaders resumed and, this time, it was with a national smear campaign in the press. In every town and city, local Islamic councils intrigued against the Baha'i residents. For example, an outbreak of mob violence in 1944 gripped the provincial capital of Shahrud, located in northeastern Iran midway between Tihiran and Mashhad. Baha'i families had coexisted peacefully for years with Muslim neighbors and relatives, and some even served as civic leaders. The persecution that year began with property crimes—stealing farm animals, burning doors, and pelting homes with rocks. The authorities ignored these incidents despite the pleas of the Baha'is, and, seeing no action from the police, the mullahs provoked local people further. Muslim children were taught obscene gestures with which to taunt Baha'is in the street. This escalated into mobs of fanatical Muslims attacking homes and assaulting Baha'is, including the elderly. The police did nothing and so, by the end of August, Shahrud descended into a frenzy of mob violence. In another incident in the peaceful town of Kashan, local Muslim leaders organized groups dedicated to preventing the growth of the Faith and to exterminating Baha'is. One result was the murder of a much-loved elderly Baha'i doctor who was stabbed more than eighty times.

In the early 1950s, the politically weak Mohammad Shah, hoping to curry favor with the clergy and divert the attention of the population from the country's economic woes, entered into a greater power sharing arrangement with influential clerics who organized a campaign against the Baha'is with the approval of the military and civil authorities. This campaign was launched in 1955 with broadcasts of the incendiary sermons of the populist Mullah Muhammad Taqi Falsafi at noon over national and army radio and in the mosques, as well as publishing them in print. Falsafi claimed to have the backing of the Shah. His sermons grew bolder in their lies including the warning that Baha'is were plotting a coup against the government. Other common false accusations were that Baha'is were Zionist and foreign agents. All these resulted in the attack on the Baha'i National Center, the destruction of its dome, and the killing of the gardener who served there. These baseless allegations—so obviously contrary to the Baha'i teachings—were also disseminated by the secretive anti-Baha'i Hojjatieh Society, formed in 1953, which had tentacles throughout the government and in many towns and cities across the country. The international attention brought by the efforts of Baha'i National Assemblies around the world on behalf of the Baha'is in Iran blunted some of the worst of these persecutions.

While Baha'i communities were resilient in the face of such national and local onslaughts, by the 1950s, the constant erosion of civil liberties, the bankrupting of businesses, the closing of schools, and the random acts of mob violence drove many Baha'is to the edge. Those who had the potential to lead broader lives considered emigrating. For some, the call of Shoghi Effendi to pioneer also gave them a strong spiritual impulse to leave their homeland to help propagate the Faith throughout the world. Such Baha'is were to leave the confines of Iran and step out into the global community where their lives flowered into a fullness of service to the Faith and of professional accomplishment.

But as a young boy in the '50s, I knew nothing of a broader world. The little I knew of the world beyond our Baha'i community was a petty and often cruel society. I remember my young aunt Eshraghie as the living embodiment of the kinds of suffering Baha'is endured in such a society. The other children in her school threw her books away, insulted her, and stole her lunch. A shy and sensitive girl, this treatment hurt her deeply. Eventually she left school and, in time, accepted a marriage proposal from a Muslim man who turned out to be flinty-hearted and merciless towards her as well. Her new relatives constantly abused her physically and mentally, haranguing her about her faith and wanting her to be denounced in the mosque while pressuring her to recant. She tried for fifteen years to repay their unkindness with kindness, washing their clothes, feeding their children, and taking care of their animal. Her in-laws prevented her praying and fasting and even her having any communication with other Baha'is. She contracted tuberculosis and developed an ulcer, but no one came to help her; instead she was sent to her sister's house in Shiraz where she died at the age of forty.

The fanatical Mullá Mohayadin Falli's machinations were fully operational in Nayriz by the mid-1950s, his illegal activities given cover by the anti-Baha'i propaganda being broadcast over the radio from Tihiran. Over the years, Falli's family prospered from his thievery. He had never earned any real religious degrees; rather, his religious chicanery may simply have been learned through repeated

practice and rhetorical talent. His ability to poison the minds of the townspeople was all too apparent.

My father was a frequent target of Falli but met the indignities with great courage. Despite being told by Falli to cease his correspondence with the authorities in Shiraz, my father confidently asserted that he would not. The breaking point came when my father organized a public debate on behalf of the Assembly between Falli and the visiting Baha'i teacher, Tarazollah Samandari. The governor of Nayriz was friendly to Baha'is and cancelled the debate because he suspected that Falli would use the outcome—whatever it was—as fodder with which to fire up his followers against the Baha'is. This angered Falli who felt humiliated. Soon afterwards, a few of his henchmen who lived up in the mountains kidnapped my father while he was on his way to his orchards. Our relatives and friends spread the word of this aggression, and several Muslim family members rode out to rescue him. My father was brought back greatly bruised and with a broken nose. The ring leader was killed a few days later.

Every man has his limits, and the kidnapping convinced my father that his family had no viable future if they stayed in a Nayriz controlled by Falli's fanaticism and greed. In fact, Falli's illegal activities and the lack of protection from the authorities brought to bear intense economic and psychological pressure on all Baha'i families. Falli's son went on to great prominence in Iran and would boast of his father's accomplishment in ridding Nayriz of Baha'is. The constant grinding away of sources of income, public dignity, family, and future plans left many Baha'i families with few options, and those families who had the means became part of the emigration out of Nayriz that eroded its large Baha'i community. We joined the exodus.

So it was that one day, my father and I boarded a truck headed out of Nayriz for Shiraz with our old suitcases, two blankets, and a bag of bread and feta cheese. Sitting on almond bags that had been loaded on top of the truck, I thought about my dog whom the mob had killed out in the street, the young Baha'i men who had gone up onto our roof with their rifles in case we needed protection during our father's kidnapping, and the constant petty harassments in the streets and alleys of this little town. That was the life I was leaving behind.

When my father was twenty, I was born into a large enclosed extended family of mutually-supportive aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—especially my beloved grandmother Saheb Jan who doted on me—who were all delighted by the birth of a boy. Now in 1948 at six years of age, I was being born into a broader world of the big, famous cities of Iran about which I had only heard, while my father was letting go of everything he had built up. The truck lurched forward and rocked side to side. The tires kicked up the dust, filling the air around us. We couldn't see the road ahead.

Chapter 4

Into the Larger World

We emerged out of the dust of the road into the monumental gate of the beautiful city of Shiraz, the Persian cultural heartland, the city of gardens and poets. But I only caught a few glimpses of it as we clambered off the truck and made our way to a poor neighborhood where my father's sister's already overcrowded home, took us in. There turned out to be no work for my father in Shiraz and within a few weeks, we were back on a bus headed for Tihran.

My Tihran family was a revelation to me. Here were people related to me who were educated and refined and showed none of the rough edges and work-worn skin of our Nayriz relatives. I saw relatives sitting on chairs, eating with knives and forks rather than being on the floor using their hands. When a dish of candies came around, I eagerly grabbed several handfuls, wanting to partake in this great bounty before my aunt took them away and schooled me in the etiquette of 'one at a time'. Fortunately, these relatives would prove to be a great support to us in the years to come.

The big city outside was just as strange for a provincial like me. Approaching a house with my father, I used the Nayriz way of letting someone know we were there—I picked up a few small stones and threw them at the door. My father stopped me, walked over, and pressed a button to the side of the door. As though by magic, the door opened and there was a person greeting us. Out in the street, I found a new toy—a lightbulb—and I took the mysterious object home to puzzle over. At the train station, loud horns blared and soon large coal-powered trains belching thick smoke emerged out of the black mouths of the tunnels. The fall of night in the big city did not mean darkness, staying indoors, and a vague feeling of hunger, like in the village. For the very first time I walked down a street illuminated by electric lights savoring ice-cream, peaches, and shish-kabob.

My brother Masood, experienced a real zoo for the first time in Tihran. The big cats and other fearsome animals loomed large over this little country boy. That night he had nightmares and screamed so loudly that the neighbors began screaming as well. The police arrived expecting to find a crime but instead found nothing but the remnants of a nightmare from a first time visit to the big-city zoo.

Tihran was a world on a size and scale such as I had never experienced. The snow-capped Alborz Mountains rose up above the skyline of a city in constant motion where all of Iran's contrasts seemed to have converged. Men in western-style suits bustled about while women in chadors made their way through the bazaar. Large garish posters silently proclaimed the benefits of beauty products to the pedestrians rushing by as the muezzin called the faithful to prayer from the minaret. Western-made cars and trucks with the Mercedes Benz ornament on their grills rolled down grand boulevards past Persian monuments and stern statues of heroes from the past. New buildings were being erected alongside grubby shops and grand 1930s style university buildings where the professionals of the future were being trained. Grandest of all was the Golestan palace complex, the seat of the former Qajar rulers, with its European and Persian synthesis, extraordinary tile work,

large clear pools and insistently opulent marble throne, now no longer used for anything since the construction of a new palace for a new dynasty.

This was also a period when a massive influx of villagers was coming into urban areas, bringing village ways to old cities attempting to break through into modernity. In the poorer areas of Tihiran where the migrants lived, small streets were choked with rickety cars, bicycles, pedestrians, donkeys, and the occasional camel train, all moving and bumping and swerving around one another to the constant accompaniment of horns and shouts. Old men in rough-hewn clothing sat crouched over in the midday heat next to their fruit stands, heads between their hands. Small shops were crammed with rugs, posters of famous historical figures, kitchenware, raw puffs of cotton, and food of all varieties for the evening meals.

My beautiful great aunt Akhtar Khanum was helping my father find work. He tried everything, including being a cashier in a public bath, but nothing worked out. When he came home, he'd often find me crying because I missed him. This must have frustrated him. Soon, our family was on the move again. We went to the polluted oil-town of Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan province in the South, searching for opportunities. After several nights staying in the bus station and not finding any work, we moved on, hoping for better economic luck to lift us out of our poverty. We took the train to Khorramshahr and were then ferried across the Karun River in a row boat to Abadan.

The port city of Abadan, on the Southwest coast of Iran, sits on an island in a low salty plain burned by unsparring heat throughout the summer and plagued by mosquitos swarming out of the broad, flat waterways. A disputed village for centuries in a largely Arab land, Abadan was my first encounter with the international world. It became a major city because of one product: oil. Its strong odor permeated the city. Near the Persian Gulf and the border of Iraq, Abadan was the terminus of pipelines that came from the north. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company had built one of the biggest refineries in the world there to process the crude before sending it out on tankers. Its acres of silver grey pipes spread across the island in a dense web of industrial activity into which poured thousands of workers who rode their bicycles through the large entrance gates. Men in western-style suits manned the squat yellow-brick administrative buildings. Such a huge enterprise attracted Iranian workers from all over the country and Arabs who had long been the majority in the province, as well as Indians, Pakistanis, Burmese, and Chinese. Arabs and Persians co-existed peacefully, although the executives in the oil company were usually Persian or British.

The society and town planning, however, reflected British colonial ideas; the British built their own neighborhood of bungalows, cricket clubs, and gardens on the end of the island where the wind blew and temperatures were a little cooler, while workers and their families lived in crowded areas on the other end of the island in recently erected, pre-fabricated houses. The nearby slum of Ahmadabad was little more than shanties and mud. These stark economic disparities contributed to tensions that fueled nationalist sentiments. Workers—many of whom were villagers—breathed in heavily polluted air which contributed to serious respiratory problems like asthma while nearby, they could see the chrome-lined, bright colored Western cars driven by foreigners, large gated homes with walled gardens lived in by foreigners, and private boat clubs with date-palm tree-lined walkways

at the end of which foreigners launched their paddleboats onto the calm flat water over which local fishermen cast their nets. The rich ethnic mix and European influence made Abadan a much more liberal and culturally dynamic city than the rest of Iran. Synagogues and churches functioned freely, including a gleaming white and blue Armenian Orthodox Church built next to a large mosque. But this mix could also be politically explosive.

In the early 1950s, Iran experienced a resurgence of nationalism under Premier Muhammad Mossadeq who considered British control over Iran's oil assets both immoral and illegal. After the Iranian government nationalized the nation's oil business and took over the oil facilities at Abadan, the British government retaliated with a naval blockade that was supported by other industrialized powers. In August of 1953, the British and American governments overthrew Mossadeq and a new oil agreement was drawn up. Nationalization of the Iranian oil business was very popular with average Iranians and especially in a city like Abadan whose workers were naturally drawn to both a nationalist ideology and left-leaning politics that asserted their rights against large capitalist forces.

Baha'is were buffeted by these political forces as well, but they respected for the most part the directive of Shoghi Effendi to "shun politics like the plague".⁵ My father was politically liberal and against British control of Iranian national assets. He listened to BBC broadcasts at work which actually provided Iranians with more accurate information than the regular national media which was controlled by the Shah whose authoritarian rule was buttressed by a secret police and censors. During the Abadan crisis with the British, my father got swept up in some of the intense national emotions. He and others taught me certain slogans, so that I could be used to show ordinary people that even children felt strongly about getting the British out. One day, I was placed on the roof of the central bank in front of the square filled with hundreds of demonstrators and a megaphone was held in front of me. I fired up the crowd by shouting out what I'd been taught to which it responded lustily, making me the poster boy for radical politics in Abadan.

My father's personal political views may have also been influenced by the reality that our family had been mired in poverty since leaving Nayriz. We lived in Karun, a poor section of Abadan, with Arab, Jewish, and Armenian neighbors. For security my father strung up several pots and pans which clanged if an intruder came in. One day a thief entered and stole his pants but went on to rob the house next door as well and dropped my father's pants there. Later, we moved to a small home in Ahmadab, a poor area near the river filled with pre-fab houses given by the oil company.

My father had great sweetness and was always well-groomed and dressed did his best, but all of his assets were back in Nayriz, and so he struggled to earn a living for his family. The salaries he could earn in Abadan were small so, to supplement his salary, my father worked in a clinic for patients with contagious diseases such as tuberculosis. The hospital's administrator was a Baha'i woman who, fearing that she might be seen as giving him preferential treatment, was especially tough on him. At the clinic, he noticed how those in charge were stealing medicines and blankets. When he reported

⁵ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, December 21, 1948, quoted in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, Sixth Edition, 1999, Bahá'í Publishing Trust: New Delhi. Citation #1453, p. 446.)

this, his life was threatened. As a result of these threats, my father arranged for a Baha'i military officer to come to stay with us for our protection. Though there were Baha'is in prominent positions, such as the head of the oil company, my father never sought favors from them. Instead he bought a car to lease to someone else as a taxi, but that old British car kept breaking down, and the driver would have to go and find help to push it. My job was to sit in the taxi so people wouldn't come along and steal it or the tires.

Despite our poverty, our family was proud. My mother tended to spend money we didn't have on items such as fancy clothing that we could not afford. This also led to a perception that we had a little money, and so people borrowed from us. My mother lacked education so she didn't understand money and spent it immediately on her children. She struggled with social loneliness as she missed her few personal friends who were back in Nayriz. Unfortunately, my father did not think to provide her with a basic education which would have helped her greatly. The reality of our family was that we lived crowded together in small rooms with no electricity or running water with my aunts, uncles, and blind grandmother, which led to tensions between the family members, all of whom were struggling.

My aunts were a powerful presence in my life. They taught themselves to read and write, became schoolteachers, and helped me with my education, and they were strict—once when I was misbehaving, a pencil was placed between my fingers and my hand was squeezed. I was a rowdy boy and needed their attention but this could be dangerous for them. One day while running around I accidentally closed a heavy iron door on my Aunt Eshraghie's fingers, almost severing them.

Every morning after I'd walked to school, the students lined up and sang the national anthem. One day, I was called down front having been singled out for poor behavior and was made to lie down in front of everyone, and the soles of my feet were beaten. Only later did the teachers realize that it was the other boys who had been acting out.

I was spared the inappropriate sexual advances made by a few teachers on the young male students. This was a sexually repressed society and such behavior by teachers was not uncommon. Such teachers may have known that I had a big mouth and was socially popular and would talk if approached.

In class, I was a top-notch student and loved history—my favorite subject—math, and physics, but couldn't do art at all and hated chemistry. The teacher put me in charge of attendance, and I was responsible for publishing the school magazine for which I received lots of recognition and praise. Despite my physical energy, I was not good in sports so the school made me the coach of the basketball team to keep me occupied. I was active in the boy scouts which was a great way for me to release my energy because we'd get up at 5:30 a.m., set up camp, and go on night duty patrols complete with fake rifles.

School could also be used as a way of attacking the Baha'i Faith. My religious studies teacher in high school was a sweet but fanatical man who knew I was a Baha'i. He still made me recite Muslim prayers in front of the class to try to break my faith. Later I learned he became a prominent leader

during the Revolution of 1979. During an engineers' strike in Abadan, he personally carried out many executions. Later, though, he was hanged.

Though I was rambunctious, I did well in school. I used to do my homework under the street light in the company of numerous black cockroaches because the house was too dark, small, and crowded. The curriculum was advanced and the demands of the school stringent. I later discovered that the average class load was substantially larger than in America which is why I excelled when I continued my education in the States. Farzam Arbab, later a member of the Universal House of Justice, was my public school classmate there, and I remembered those days fondly. In addition our Baha'i classes were very well-organized, and many of the other students became life-long friends.

Despite the poverty in which my family was engulfed, I came to love Abadan. Countless shops on the main streets displayed their wares on tables or dangled them from hooks. Businesses announced their services from brightly painted signs above the one and two story buildings. Sounds of the local Bandari music mixed with the voices of people haggling and shouting and the vroom of a Pontiac as it passed a woman in a chador carrying two bags of produce on her head or a man pushing a cart heavy with goods. I rode for the first in an automobile. Unlike the muddy paths in Nayriz which were plunged into darkness with nightfall and where I could be molested for being a Baha'i, the streets in Abadan were lit by electric light. I could walk down them free of worry and see the faces of pretty young women and well-groomed men out on the town. I could get on a bus to go distances instead of being relegated to walking or sitting on a slow-moving donkey. When I got thirsty I could drink from the public water faucet in the street instead of trudging a mile to a well. I walked among the palm trees by the river daydreaming and writing a novel by hand. In the homes of a rich family, I ate chicken and beef kabob which contrasted with the simple fare at home. The oil company set up a store that sold desirable goods from the West. By the mid-50s American products were in vogue with ads promoting a new materialistic culture and suburban lifestyle which also reflected the Shah's vision of a more Western and secular Iran. My aunts and father gave me their purchasing cards, and I bought lemonade, cookies, and butter, which I re-sold on the street for a profit. I also stole a few of my father's cigarettes to sell them, and so that he would smoke less. I went on a hunger strike to obtain a bicycle and a yellow rubber raincoat for the torrential rainy season. After my father had given in and bought me these, I was free to fly from our poor neighborhood to the wealthy one where I could see manicured gardens and swimming pools around which ladies lounged, then over to the palm tree groves, biking faster and faster to turn hot air of Abadan into a breeze. My dreams got bigger when I saw our Armenian neighbor pulling out on a motor scooter with his girlfriend seated on the back.

My main forms of escape, though, were movies and books. Inside the capacious art deco and brick Taj cinema, I was taken away to an imaginary world by American Westerns in which the good guys killed the bad guys in wooden cowboy towns. Being a young teenage boy, I was also enthralled by European actresses like Leslie Caron who danced her way through Parisian society in gaudy Technicolor. I always sat right in front of the screen to get the best possible view of the bare legs of the actresses and dancers. I spent entire days watching movies, sometimes the very same on over

and over again. Like many Iranians, I had a special taste for French culture. While most kids were out playing during the evenings, I was often ensconced in the British Officers' Club library reading Rousseau and Hugo, Sartre and Camus. Even more alluring were the female models I saw in the magazines. Thanks to family connections with an executive in the oil company, I was able to swim in the club pool where I saw pretty girls in the flesh. If it was time to show off, I would dive off the low or high dive into the rectangular pool of blue water. Other than swimming, though, I avoided the sun. People in Abadan had skin made dark by the hot sun under which they toiled, so it was considered more attractive and made one appear more prestigious to have lighter skin.

The Taj cinema was on the edge of the red light district where I spent many evenings, but not in that sense. I had an uncle who became addicted to opium, a common problem in Iran. Alcohol was forbidden by Islam—though it was used by some in private—whereas opium was much cheaper and more common. Men would retreat into the dark rooms of the red light district where they would be served opium and charcoal by women. Sitting on the floor, they vaporized opium balls on the end of long wooden pipes, and then leaned back and let the sense of euphoria come over them, often staying in there for hours. Soon the euphoric feeling led smokers into a dependence which turned them sickly and apathetic. They lounged endlessly in these filthy dark rooms and toked on the opium resin, desperately trying to recapture their initial highs but mostly just warding off sickness.

My uncle achieved some prominence as the mayor of a town, but his increased dependence on opium degraded his life and his potential. Sometimes he even used opium in his room in our house, and the smoke he exhaled drifted out the window and was inhaled by deer who would then stumble about the yard. When my mother or aunts tired of my rambunctiousness, they'd ask him to take me with him, and he'd bring me to the opium den in the red light district though I was only ten years old. I took my school books, notebook, and a pen, and sat by the doorway so that I could do my homework in the faint light coming in from the street. Eventually the reading, the gloom, and the smoke would put me to sleep. I'd awake hours later to find my uncle gone and would sleepily stumble out of the den and make my way to the front of the Taj cinema and sit on its steps waiting for the bus home. Years later, I became a heavy cigarette smoker, and I now wonder if those strange nights influenced my habit.

Meanwhile, no one would miss me at home, figuring I had gone with one or another relative and probably glad to have a break from my constant activity. Though I was surrounded by the love of my mother, my father, and my aunts, I made life difficult for them because I was both smart and restless. A decision was made when I was 11 years old in 1953 to send me to the Baha'i school in Tihiran to improve my behavior—the school's name was "The House of Good Manners" (*Darul-u-Tarbieah*). My father knew Mr. Furutan, the head of the school, because he had visited our home in Nayriz on numerous occasions as a travelling Baha'i teacher. My great aunt and her husband also worked at the Baha'i National Center with Mr. Furutan who was the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly. The school had been created by the National Assembly for Baha'i children whose parents had been martyred or had gone pioneering. It was located near the National Center which had a beautiful dome, extensive gardens, a guest house, and many employees. The upscale

neighborhood was home to many wealthy Baha'is, and the Nineteen Day Feasts were elaborate affairs, different from the humble gatherings in Nayriz.

To get to Tihiran, I took my first plane flight. Once I boarded it was discovered that my seat had been given to another passenger for cash, so I was brought up to the cockpit where I sat with the pilots. At the school, the boys and girls slept in separate dorms, attending a regular public school during the day and Baha'i classes afterwards. The schedule was regimented, and I chafed against the routine. I was frequently punished by not being given breakfast or being made to memorize passages from the Baha'i Writings and having to recite them in front of the class the following day. I alternated between great sadness at missing my family and anger at the strict limits placed on my freedom which had been limitless in Abadan. I expressed these feelings in letters home in which I included sad poems and insults against the school staff. Once, the gardener found an insulting note I had written and hidden in a tree about Mrs. Shamsi, the capable school administrator. He gave it to Mr. Furutan who was furious at me. This same gardener was later killed by local fanatics who shook the ladder he was standing on, plunging him to his death, though the official explanation was that the wind had knocked him off. Years later I met her again at the Green Acre Baha'i School and wanted to apologize profusely for my behavior at the school, but when she was walking up a few steps to greet me, she stumbled and broke her leg.

Mr. Furutan went out of his way to try and channel my energy. He gave me the job of taking correspondence around the National Center and this kept me busy though I glanced at the correspondence in transit. One day, I jumped into the fountain in the Center's courtyard. Mr. Furutan came out to try and get a hold of me, but I ran to the other side of the pool. Despite the best efforts of Mr. Furutan and Mrs. Shamsi, I continued to cause trouble and found myself back in Abadan for the next school year, which is what I wanted all along. Nevertheless, I learned a great deal about the Baha'i Faith from the reading I did at the Baha'i School; some of the other kids in the school went on to distinguish lives of service.

Back in Abadan, our family's material fortunes improved when the British were pushed out of Abadan and many beautiful homes became available. We moved out of our very cramped quarters when my father managed to rent a house in a better section of town. In this new place, we even had a garden complete with deer.

We also continued to be sustained by the wonderful Baha'i community of Abadan. Hundreds of Baha'is came to our spirit-filled Nineteen Day Feasts at which I looked forward to being with my teenage Baha'i friends. We picnicked along the river, held large celebratory Naw-Ruz gatherings and had lively, interesting children's classes. A distinguished Baha'i scholar, Mr. Saeed Razavi, was resident at the Baha'i center, a practice in all the major centers of Iran to help educate believers. The Baha'i Assembly was strong and respected.

Our home was blessed by outstanding travel teachers. Mr. Furutan came regularly from Tihiran. Mr. Fananapazir held study classes which I remember fondly and from which I got a deep appreciation for the Faith. Mr. Mazandarani who travelled throughout Iran compiling stories of the history of the

Faith in Iran, stayed with us. Mr. Avaregan gave firesides in our home. He became an expert on Marxism, a political philosophy very much in vogue at the time but not discussed much among Baha'is. My father invited Arabs to come to our home to hear about the Faith. He and Mr. Avaregan also travelled by boat across the Tigris River into the Arab tribal areas in Iraq to teach the Faith. We had so many visitors, we often had to climb over people in our house at night. My father spent much of his time in serving the Faith including giving firesides during which members of the Hojjatiyeh, an anti-Baha'i group, came to disrupt the peaceful gatherings. They would also show up randomly at the Feasts. One evening, my father was chairing a feast when members of the Hojjatiyeh barged in, so my father changed the subject of consultation to the Baha'i principle of obedience to government. I made the mistake of raising my hand and asking if it wasn't true that the teaching was obedience to a government that was "just" and treated citizens fairly. For that question, my father severely scolded me later.

Though it was customary among Baha'is in Iran for children in Baha'i families to declare their faith at age fifteen, I did not do so, even though I very was active in the community's life. Ordinarily, a fifteen year-old would be invited to meet with the Spiritual Assembly and given a gift, but I delayed to continue my own study as I was very independent-minded. The Assembly, concerned that I had not declared, sent some representatives to meet with my parents. A wonderful doctor, Dr. Javan Mardi, spoke with me about declaring and convinced me. He was of Zoroastrian background and would later pioneer to North Africa and then Montreal. My family was delighted when I finally declared.

By this time I was fifteen in 1957, and I was developing a life of my own including making my own money. I made the handsome sum of one-hundred tumans a month selling prescription drugs for a local doctor who was related to my family. Potential clients were very surprised to see such a young person come into their office for a sales meeting during which I described the benefits of the antibiotics in fighting sexually-transmitted diseases. In fact, I had only a dim idea of what I was talking about. Soon I began having materialistic daydreams of riding on my own motor scooter or driving a fancy European car.

Many Baha'is in our community had moved to Abadan from their villages to improve their material lives which swelled the size of the local Baha'i community, and the city was also used by the friends as a jumping off point for pioneering to the Gulf states and other countries which became the most important form of service in the international Baha'i community in the 1950s. My aunt Mahin planned to pioneer to Colombia in South America. I went with her to get visas and fingerprints, but most places wanted bribes which we refused to pay. As a result of our refusal, the visa process became long and drawn out and Aunt Mahin eventually accepted a marriage proposal. The head of the oil company, Mr. Foad Ashraf, was a Baha'i who set a powerful example by pioneering to North Africa, and Mr. Avaregan also went pioneering to Laos and Vietnam, where the Faith expanded rapidly.

The Baha'i World had embarked on the 'Ten-Year World Crusade' called for by Shoghi Effendi. Pioneers would during the course of the Crusade bring the Baha'i Faith across the world. Since

1937, Shoghi Effendi had been using the term 'conqueror' with the Persian Baha'is, which echoed a concept from the early period of Islam when a new area was opened to Islamic rule but, with American Baha'is, the Guardian used the term 'pioneer' because this term had more meaning in the context of the American experience.

The Iranian Baha'i community had already been preparing, in a sense, for this world crusade. As early as 1938, Shoghi Effendi called for Baha'is to migrate within Iran to establish Baha'i groups and in 1941, over one hundred and forty-five Baha'i families pioneered to Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Baluchistan (Pakistan), and Bahrain. Most had to settle in Iraq though they were later deported. A.Q. Faizi was one of the pioneers who was able to settle in Bahrain.

Iran had already carried out a forty-five month plan for Persia from October of 1946 to July of 1950. Its general objectives were to strengthen the Baha'i community of Iran, send out pioneers, and educate believers. Some of the more specific goals were to consolidate local Baha'i communities in Iran, to form twenty-two new groups and thirteen new centers, to establish local Assemblies in Kabul, Mecca, and Bahrain, to form four new groups in the Arabian peninsula, to send pioneers to India and to Iraq for the Women's Four-Year Plan, and to hold literacy classes for girls and adult women. This plan was followed by a two-year 'Africa Campaign' (1951-1953) coordinated with the British Baha'is and carried by the Baha'is in the U.K., Iran, the U.S., Egypt, and India, with the objective of opening up three African countries to the Baha'i Faith. The most fruitful teaching was in Uganda to which Musa Banani pioneered. He was later named a Hand of the Cause.

On November 30, 1951, Shoghi Effendi called for the holding of four intercontinental teaching conferences to inaugurate the inter-continental phase of the growth of the international Baha'i community. These were held in Kampala, Uganda, Wilmette, United States, Stockholm, Sweden, and New Delhi, India. In his Ridvan Message of 1952, Shoghi Effendi announced the launching of a Ten-Year World Crusade:

“The avowed, the primary aim of this Spiritual Crusade is none other than the conquest of the citadels of men's hearts. The theatre of its operations is the entire planet. Its duration a whole decade. Its commencement synchronizes with the centenary of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh's Mission. Its culmination will coincide with the centenary of the declaration of that same Mission. The agencies assisting in its conduct are the nascent administrative institutions of a steadily evolving divinely appointed order. Its driving force is the energizing influence generated by the Revelation heralded by the Báb and proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh. Its Marshal is none other than the Author of the Divine Plan. Its standard-bearers are the Hands of the Cause of God appointed in every continent of the globe. Its generals are the twelve national spiritual assemblies participating in the execution of its design. Its vanguard is the chief executors of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's master plan, their allies and associates. Its legions are the rank and file of believers standing behind these same twelve national assemblies and sharing in the global task embracing the American, the European, the

African, the Asiatic and Australian fronts. The charter directing its course is the immortal Tablets that have flowed from the pen of the Center of the Covenant Himself. The armour with which its onrushing hosts have been invested is the glad tidings of God's own message in this day, the principles underlying the order proclaimed by His Messenger, and the laws and ordinances governing His Dispensation. The battle cry animating its heroes and heroines is the cry of Yá-Bahá'u'l-Abhá, Yá 'Alíyyu'l-A`lá.”⁶

The Ten-Year Crusade had four major objectives: to develop the institutions at the Baha'i World Center, to consolidate local Baha'i communities in countries which were the administrative bases for the operation of the Plan, to consolidate local communities in territories already opened to the Faith, and to bring the Faith to the main remaining territories on the planet where no Baha'is resided.

Iran's direct responsibility in the Crusade was to open seven territories in Asia, six in Africa, and to help with the consolidation of Baha'i communities in twelve additional territories in Asia, as well as two in Africa. Shoghi Effendi explained that international pioneering was the most important form of Baha'i activity during the first phase of the Crusade; he stated that it embodied the prophecy in the Book of Daniel of the '1335 days' and of the prophet Habbakuk that the "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea".

Though the largest Baha'i community in the world at the time was that of Iran, the Baha'is there faced a very difficult challenge when attempting to fulfill the pioneering call because Iran did not have diplomatic relations with most countries. Obtaining visas was very difficult. Also, most Iranian Baha'is were not well-educated, making employment abroad almost impossible. Nevertheless, Iranian Baha'is contributed substantially to the Crusade. Forty-four of the 'Knights of Baha'u'llah' were of Iranian background. Several families with a connection to Nayriz pioneered—the Rouhanis, Taherzadehs, Erfans, Amjadihs, and the Khadems. My grandfather Mirza Ahmad took part in these efforts by moving to the Arabian Peninsula at the request of Shoghi Effendi. In a groundbreaking development within Iran, women began to serve on local and national Assemblies; nine other Muslim countries soon followed—Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Libya, Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

With the Ten-Year World Crusade, the Baha'i community became a world community. By the end of the plan in 1963, two-hundred and fifty-nine territories had been opened to the Faith and, especially important to Shoghi Effendi, the number of National Assemblies was quadrupled, which meant that the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963 would rest on a solid foundation.

⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World* (Wilmette, IL:US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) 152–153

But Shoghi Effendi didn't live to see the success of the Crusade he had launched nor the establishment of the Universal House of Justice called for in Baha'u'llah's Most Holy Book. He passed away November 4, 1957. Ruhyyih Khanum, his wife, informed the Baha'i world:

"Shoghi Effendi beloved of all hearts sacred trust given believers by Master passed away sudden heart attack in sleep following Asiatic flu. Urge believers remain steadfast cling institution Hands lovingly reared recently reinforced emphasized by beloved Guardian. Only oneness heart oneness purpose can befittingly testify loyalty all National Assemblies believers departed Guardian who sacrificed self utterly for service Faith."⁷

The Baha'i community emerged onto a world stage because Shoghi Effendi called for the Ten-Year Crusade, and the Baha'is around the world responded. In our corner of the world in Abadan, we felt his passing deeply; I spent hours with my teacher preparing a talk to eulogize him. The grief was intense. We could only catch glimpses of the future with each pioneer and each piece of news from the world outside Iran, but the road ahead laid out by Shoghi Effendi was clear.

⁷ Ruhyyih Khanum, *The Priceless Pearl*, (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1969) 447

Chapter 5

Postcards of Iran

My teenage years in 1956 and 1957 were my travelling years, my years of restlessness, my years of exploration, and they would lead to the biggest journey of my life.

We first had to escape Nayriz and make it to the coastal city of Abadan. From there I travelled during the summers for relief from Abadan's heat and humidity.

During one such summer my Aunt Mahin took me on a four-month trip to discover the history and beauty of Northern Iran and experience the sites associated with the dramatic origins of the Baha'i Faith.

Along the way, we stayed with Baha'i families or at local Baha'i centers which rented us rooms. Our itinerary started with a train ride from Tehran northwest up into the mountains bound for Qazvin.

After the arrival of Islam, Qazvin became a pulsing center of religious practice and thought, attracting mystics, legal scholars, and philosophers, who founded various schools and spurred the construction of mosques, some of which were built over the ancient fire temples of the Zoroastrians. Walking around Qazvin, we visited one of its outstanding buildings—the large congregational mosque, the earliest section of which, I learned, dated back to the 9th century. Its great double dome with rich blue tile crisscrossed by white curvy lines lorded over a vast courtyard bounded on each side by a vaulted space opening up into it, the largest one facing the holy city of Mecca. The interior of the dome was honeycombed with concave downward-facing shapes that seemed to dangle like fine stalactites.

In history books, I read that Qazvin had been the capital of Persia in the 16th century before the Safavid rulers decided to move it to Isfahan. Situated on the road from the Caspian Sea to the highland, the city's economy grew from trade. Its location also gave it a more diverse population and history that included the tombs of four Jewish saints, a large Azeri population, and the presence of Russian Cossacks who built St. Nicolas Orthodox Church, a hospital and a road connecting Qazvin to Tehran and Hamedan.

I knew from Baha'i school the spiritual significance of Qazvin: this was the home of three of the Bab's Letters of the Living, most notably the only female, Tahereh. In Qazvin she suffered greatly at the hands of her father-in-law and her husband who attempted to silence her by using their ecclesiastical authority. Their efforts were unsuccessful, though, against a woman of her profound faith and unflinching courage. Her devotion to the Bab transcended the violent reprisals against the Babis in Qazvin that followed her father-in-law's murder in 1847. After her departure, her memory was blotted out in Qazvin, but her poems of spiritual love and longing continued to circulate throughout Persia.

Many prominent Babis came to accept the new claims of Baha'u'llah. The Baha'i community included both established merchants and prominent citizens. The influence of Baha'u'llah reached

beyond the Muslims to some leaders of the Kurdish Mafi tribe in the area who may have been followers of the Ahl-i Haqq religious sect which emerged in the 14th century and accepted the concept of the continuity of Revelation, a fundamental teaching of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. Several Sufi dervishes—mystics who practiced asceticism and were often on the boundaries of what was considered correct Islamic belief and practice—also accepted the Faith. A Zoroastrian priest visiting Qazvin in 1920 noted that all the Zoroastrians he met had converted to the Baha'i Faith. With capable and committed new believers and a decrease in persecution, the Baha'i community of Qazvin regained its vigor by the turn of the century. Baha'is founded a modern school, the Tavakkul school, in 1908, and its sister school in 1910. A Baha'i began a program for children around the same time to teach them to save money and over many years this grew into the Nawnahalan Company, a national Baha'i organization.⁸ All of its assets, amounting to millions of dollars, were later appropriated illegally by the government

Our next stop, Zanjan, had been the scene of a great drama featuring one of my heroes of the Faith—Hujjat. Located a hundred or so miles northwest of Qazvin, Zanjan had a similar cold and dry climate and a mountain range on its horizon. A bloody conflict between the Babis and the authorities had taken place in this walled city known for its handicrafts and its manufacture of knives. Hujjat, a dynamic mullah who had become a Babi, took on the clerical establishment of Zanjan by decrying its immorality and abuse of power, and by issuing pointed legal decisions that were at variance with those of the other mullahs; because of his strength and independence of mind, he remained one of my favorite figures from Baha'i history. His position became more precarious as the Babi Faith spread. Tensions mounted between Muslims and Babis, especially after the siege at Fort Tabarsi, and a street fight in Zanjan that escalated into outright violence fueled by long-standing theological divisions and new political concerns. Hundreds of Babi men, aided by the women, took up position in a nearby fort, and a bloody siege followed lasting from July to December of 1850 when Hujjat was injured and died. Upon Hujjat's death, the discouraged Babis peacefully surrendered though only a hundred or so Babi men subsequently survived. Among those who had died was Zaynab, a woman who had joined the Babi men in the fight.

This violence left a long legacy of bitterness towards Babis and Baha'is. Baha'u'llah sent the future Baha'i chronicler, Nabil Zarandi, to Zanjan in 1865 to announce His Declaration. The Baha'i community was infused with new life when Varqa moved to Zanjan along with his young son Ruhullah; both were later martyred. 'Abdu'l-Baha also sent travel teachers there to increase the activity of the local community.⁹

Our next stop was Tabriz where the ultimate act of violence in the history of the Babi Faith took place known to every Baha'i child, like me: the execution of the Bab. Located on a fertile plain, Tabriz, one of the largest cities in Iran, was the capitol of the province of Azerbaijan, a province blessed by the Bab having spent “the saddest, the most dramatic, and in a sense the most pregnant

⁸ Moojan Momen, *Baha'i communities of Iran*, (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 2015) 480-494

⁹ *Ibid*, 453-456

phase of His six year ministry” but, also, “the theatre of His agony and martyrdom”.¹⁰ The province was home to five of His Letters of the Living as well. On his march north to the stone fortress of Maku near the border of Russia, the Bab spent several days in Tabriz “that were marked by such an intense excitement on the part of the populace that, except for a few persons, neither the public nor His followers were allowed to meet Him.”¹¹ By imprisoning the Bab in a remote stone citadel near the border, the authorities were hoping that His influence would wane. From His dark and cold cell, though, the Bab revealed His Holy Book, the Bayan, meaning ‘Utterance’, as well as an “an unprecedented effusion of His inspired writings”.¹²

In an attempt to stem the growth of the Bab’s Faith, the authorities brought him to Tabriz for a trial, “one of the chief landmarks of His dramatic career” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 20) but it was the petty-minded clerics themselves who were judged and condemned by the Bab’s powerful proclamation: ““I am," He exclaimed, "I am, I am the Promised One! I am the One Whose name you have for a thousand years invoked, at Whose mention you have risen, Whose advent you have longed to witness, and the hour of Whose Revelation you have prayed God to hasten. Verily, I say, it is incumbent upon the peoples of both the East and the West to obey My word, and to pledge allegiance to My person." (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 20)

Finally, it was in Tabriz that the final scene of the Bab’s holy life took place. Beset by grief because of the suffering of His followers, He was brought before a firing squad whose commander He absolved of responsibility. The great miracle story of the Bab’s life which I had heard recounted to me throughout my childhood then took place:

“Sam Khan accordingly set out to discharge his duty. A spike was driven into a pillar which separated two rooms of the barracks facing the square. Two ropes were fastened to it from which the Báb and one of his disciples, the youthful and devout Mirza Muhammad-'Ali-i-Zunuzi, surnamed Anis, who had previously flung himself at the feet of his Master and implored that under no circumstances he be sent away from Him, were separately suspended. The firing squad ranged itself in three files, each of two hundred and fifty men. Each file in turn opened fire until the whole detachment had discharged its bullets. So dense was the smoke from the seven hundred and fifty rifles that the sky was darkened. As soon as the smoke had cleared away the astounded multitude of about ten thousand souls, who had crowded onto the roof of the barracks, as well as the tops of the adjoining houses, beheld a scene which their eyes could scarcely believe.

The Báb had vanished from their sight!”¹³

¹⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, (Wilmette, IL: US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979) 17

¹¹ *Ibid*, 18

¹² Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 30

¹³ *Ibid*, 52

Bewilderment spread throughout the spectators. The commander remembered that the Bab had absolved him of responsibility and immediately took his soldiers out of the square. Only when the Bab was ready did the appointed hour come:

“On the same wall and in the same manner the Báb and His companion were again suspended, while the new regiment formed in line and opened fire upon them. This time, however, their breasts were riddled with bullets, and their bodies completely dissected, with the exception of their faces which were but little marred. "O wayward generation!" were the last words of the Báb to the gazing multitude, as the regiment prepared to fire its volley, "Had you believed in Me every one of you would have followed the example of this youth, who stood in rank above most of you, and would have willingly sacrificed himself in My path. The day will come when you will have recognized Me; that day I shall have ceased to be with you."¹⁴

All the witnesses that day were enveloped in “a gale of exceptional violence” such that, “from noon till night a whirlwind of dust obscured the light of the sun, and blinded the eyes of the people.”¹⁵ Tabriz, the city from which Shi’a Islam was declared the official religion of Persia became the place where the One who fulfilled its very prophecies was killed.

Baha’u’llah’s claims reached the city in the mid-1860s. Tabriz was located on the main road from Iran to Edirne, and Baha’i pilgrims passed through on their way to visiting Baha’u’llah in exile; as a result, most of the Babis as well as others from Tabriz’s diverse population of Azeri Turks, Armenians, and Assyrians became Baha’is.

Tabriz had been the capitol of Iran during several dynastic periods but became a center of the constitutional movement in 1905 and 1911. Modernization and westernization affected Tabriz first in Iran because it was the closest Iranian city to Europe and, consequently, more influenced by the West than the rest of the country. The French consul there was ALM Nicolas who wrote one of the earliest histories of the Bab as well as translated three of the Bab’s major Writings into French. Hippolyte and Laura Dreyfus-Barney, the first European Baha’is to visit Iran, came first to Tabriz in 1906. (Momen, 360-381). Hippolyte was the first French Baha’i. He studied Arabic and Persian expressly to be able to translate the Baha’i Writings into French and went on to write numerous books and articles on the Faith. His wife Laura was a devoted and active teacher of the Faith and will eternally be remembered as the person who interviewed ‘Abdu’l-Baha and compiled his answers into the book later titled *Some Answered Questions*.

Aunt Mahin and I travelled west to the city of Urmia, (‘Urumiyyih’ in Baha’i histories) through a flat brown landscape towards mountains on the horizon. In about fifty miles we arrived along the shores of Lake Urmia, where cars were parked on the sandy beach, and people get out and enjoyed wading through the lapping water frothing white from the high salt content. Flamingoes migrated by the thousands during the summer to the large flat islands in this eighty-mile long lake. Huge rock

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 52

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 53

formations stood tall in the sun, one a mushroom-shaped cloud detonating over the mud-colored water, and craggy peaks lined the horizon.

I saw a diverse population there: Iranians, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenian, and Nestorian Christians. Aunt Mahin told me that Urmia was the legendary home of the Prophet Zoroaster and the Three Magi from the Nativity story in the Bible; the Christian presence made the region a destination for missionaries from the Catholic and Orthodox Churches of which we saw several. We saw ruins that pre-dated Christianity, going back some 3,000 years.

In *The Dawn-Breakers* I had read that the Bab stopped for a few days in Urmia on his way to his trial in Tabriz. The population greeted Him as a holy man, and after He had used to the public bath, the water He had used was taken by local people who hoped to receive blessings from it. One of the miracle stories associated with the Bab unfolded there when the local ruler decided to put the Bab to the test by bringing out his wildest horse for Him to ride. The townspeople gathered around to see how this horse would react to the holy man and if he was really had spiritual power. The Bab approached the animal, calmly took the bridle up in his hand, stroked the horse, put his foot in the stirrup, and hoisted Himself up onto His munt. All the while the wild horse stood still.

The only portrait of the Bab was painted of him during his stay in Urmia. I met many Baha'i families there, including the owner of a large sugar factory that employed a number of Baha'is.

We drove back east around the lake through the dark mountains of Eastern Azerbaijan to Ardabil. Aunt Mahin explained that this ancient city, mentioned in the Zoroastrian scripture, was the spiritual home of the Safavid Dynasty, founded by Shah Abbas. The Sufi master who was the eponym of the dynasty is buried there; his school taught the 'Twelver Shi'ism' from which the Babi Faith emerged. His tomb became a spiritual retreat that included a mosque, library, school, and hospital. The architecture of the complex was designed to reflect Sufi ideas on the development of the soul, all wrapped in striking blue and green ornamentation. The gifted founder of the Safavid dynasty was born in Ardabil and went on to build one of the most extensive and well-administered empires of its time.

The main attraction of the area was the Sarein hot springs in the shadow of an inactive volcano. Tens of thousands of people came there each year, believing that the water had curative powers. I enjoyed swimming in the warmth of the indoor pools while old men lolled around in the water feeling the heat relaxing their bodies.

From Azerbaijan, we went to the province of Gilan. Its capitol, Rasht, sits on a plain where the steep slopes of the Alboorz range give way to the coast of the Caspian Sea. A lush forest covered this area of Iran where tigers once roamed and which was still populated by leopards, lynx, wolves, and wild boar. Rain brought by the sea winds fell copiously. Large palm trees stood in the middle of its spacious main square bordered by handsome white buildings topped by distinctive red roofs. Cars rolled down the broad four-lane roads, and the side streets and markets were packed with sellers.

After the Qajar dynasty lost two wars against Russia in the early 19th century, this region came under heavy Russian influence. During the Russian civil war and its aftermath in the early 20th century, many Russians on the ‘White Russian’ side of the conflict fled into Gilan. Russian language was an obligatory class to take in schools there until the mid-20th century. The Russian cultural and intellectual presence influenced the development of the Constitutional Movement in Iran. Frustrated by Qajar rule, the region operated autonomously for some years until after World War I when Tihran took back control of the province with the help of Russia.

Aunt Mahin and I made our way next to the port city Bandar Pahlavi, also known as Anzali, on the coast of the Caspian Sea. The Bolsheviks landed there after 1917 in pursuit of the fleeing White Russians and in support of the Jangali movement which was seeking independence for the province from the government in Tihran. A center for caviar making, this area was the most humid part of Iran. A lagoon divided in two this port city from which ships carried goods out into the Caspian Sea to Russia, formerly guided by a blue and white lighthouse that had been converted into a clock tower and symbolized the city’s mercantile life. We walked the promenade along the sea coast. On our first night there, I lingered a long time by the shore enthralled by the high waves kicked up a big storm, a sight I had never seen before.

We moved South around the Caspian to the town of Babol, located in Mazandaran province, a region of high mountain peaks and deep isolated valleys, which had been inhabited by human beings for thousands of years. I knew from *The Dawn-Breakers* that Baha’u’llah’s family had owned several villages in this dramatic setting. For two years, Tahereh hid there from the men of the Shah who were hunting her. During the time of the Bab’s imprisonment, Mullah Husayn led several hundred Babis carrying the black standard across Iran in fulfillment of Islamic prophecy, only to arrive at Babol and be pushed back by its people. The long siege at Fort Tabarsi ensued in which many of the Bab’s followers were killed, including Mulla Husayn and several of the Letters of the Living. Quddus, the Eighteenth Letter of the living was taken captive and brought to Babol (Barfurush in the Baha’i source) where a mob stripped him, chained him, dragged him through the streets, mutilated him with knives and axes, throwing the pieces of his flesh into a fire, and finally, killing him.

The Bab immortalized Quddus as the ‘Last Name of God’, and Baha’u’llah elevated him to “...a rank second to none except that of the Herald of His Revelation...”.¹⁶ We were blessed to visit the tomb of this great soul located in the back of a courtyard in Babol.

From Mazandaran, Aunt Mahin and I returned to Tihran and then back to Abadan. During this four-month trip, Aunt Mahin showed me the beauty of Northern Iran and the regions associated with spiritually powerful moments of the Bab’s life where He revealed his Holy Book and met His Martyrdom.

My understanding of the Faith itself was enhanced by my summers in Shiraz. I attended wonderful summer schools there along with several hundred youth from among whom I made life-long

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 49

friends, including girls at the age when I was becoming interested in them, and I got to know my relatives better as well.

One summer the teacher was Mr. Eshraq Khavari who discussed the Writings of Baha'u'llah. He was considered among the most learned of scholars on the Faith with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the Writings. He wrote poetry and did translations as well, including *The Dawnbreakers*, which Shoghi Effendi had assembled the narrative of this history of the early Baha'i Faith based on the notes and stories collected by Nabil-i-Zarandi and then translated into English. Khavari translated this original version in English into Persian. He told my father that he regretted that I had left Iran because he felt I was a promising student of the Faith, and he was hoping that I would stay so he could train me.

I loved learning and felt pride about my growing knowledge. I spent three to four hours a day at the Baha'i Center in Shiraz studying with Noshah Badi who appreciated my interest. He was kind to us and served as a scholar-in-residence at the Baha'i Center where we could come and ask him questions about the Faith. An avid reader, I searched for interesting books in an old bookstore at the Vakil Bazaar near the Bab's house. I had to be careful because I didn't want the manager to know I was a Baha'i; he was suspicious but that didn't stop him from wanting to make a sale. I was also teaching myself English by learning to type it, and I made an ill-fated attempt to learn Arabic.

Whenever I could, I attended talks by Mr. Chereh Negar, a tall and handsome photographer from Shiraz. He amassed a huge amount of information about the Nayriz upheavals. Enayatu'llah Fananapazir, another great teacher, explored the Qur'an and Islamic traditions with us in an engaging style filled with humor. Later, he taught the Faith internationally in India and several countries in Africa.

I was also privileged to hear a famed historian of the Baha'i Faith, Fadil Mazandarani. Born of a Shaykhi father, he had become a Baha'i in 1909. 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi asked him to make two trips to the United States; he also taught the Faith in India, Burma, Caucasia, and Turkmenistan, as well as many areas within Persia. During his travels in Iran, he compiled stories of Baha'i communities from all over the country which became a nine-volume history of the Faith.

Shiraz was the physical heartland of the Bab's Dispensation. He had grown up there in a merchant family that recognized his spiritual gifts early on. He was soon renowned for his piety and humility and his profound insight into the Qur'an and other Islamic texts. One night, his wife beheld him bathed in light. He'd become the recipient of Divine Revelation. After the sunset of May 22nd, 1844, Mulla Husayn, a follower of Shaykhism, came to meet the Bab. During the night hours, the Bab revealed a commentary on the Surih of Joseph which struck the learned Mulla Husayn like a thunderbolt. He instantly knew the Bab was the mouthpiece of God Himself. Emotions coursed through him. The knowledge that God was speaking through the Bab transformed him, galvanized him into action. He felt a courage such as he had never known before, and the whole world seemed as nothing now that he knew that the Promised One had come.

This spiritual light rose in Shiraz, an ancient city whose poets had illumined Iranian culture and whose works every Iranian boy like me read every year in school. Hafez, the world famous 14th century poet from Shiraz who was often quoted by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha, was buried in an alabaster sarcophagus in the middle of a garden of roses and orange trees crossed by streams of water which I visited many times. He wrote of ecstatic love:

“I caught the happy virus last night
When I was out singing beneath the stars
It is remarkably contagious-
So kiss me.”

(translation: Daniel Ladinsky)

And of metaphysical self-discovery:

“All the Hemispheres

Leave the familiar for a while.
Let your senses and bodies stretch out

Like a welcomed season
Onto the meadow and shores and hills.

Open up to the Roof.
Make a new watermark on your excitement

And love.

Like a blooming night flower,
Bestow your vital fragrance of happiness

And giving
Upon our intimate assembly.

Change rooms in your mind for a day.

All the hemispheres in existence
Lie beside an equator
In your heart.

Greet Yourself
In your thousand other forms
As you mount the hidden tide and travel
Back home.

All the hemispheres in heaven
Are sitting around a fire
Chatting

While stitching themselves together
Into the Great Circle inside of
You.”

(translation: Daniel Ladinsky)

Born a century before Hafez, the poet Saadi lived a storied life that took him throughout a near East that had just been ravaged by the Mongols. In his many interactions with common people who had suffered terribly at the hands of the Mongol invaders, Saadi developed an unusually modern humanistic concern for the suffering of people:

“All men and women are to each other
the limbs of a single body, each of us drawn
from life’s shimmering essence, God’s perfect pearl;
and when this life we share wounds one of us,
all share the hurt as if it were our own.

You, who will not feel another’s pain,
you forfeit the right to be called human.”

(Saadi, *Gulistan*, translation: Richard Newman)

Like its poets, Shiraz vibrated with life on its broad avenues and in its tree-lined streets, while its glorious past was present everywhere: the Eram gardens and its palace with inscriptions from the writings of Hafez, the ancient mud-brick Karim Khan Citadel, and the renovated stone city gates and walls from bygone ages in front of which families picnicked in the cool of the evening.

For me, there was nothing like the feeling of walking down the lively Zand Avenue, eating ice cream and polodeh, on my way to see The Hunchback of Notre Dame’s story of doomed love in Medieval Paris. During those summer days, I experienced the great kindness of the Missaghis in whose company I passed many pleasant hours discussing, arguing, and joking; later in my American life, I remembered them fondly and married their daughter, Tahereh. Her father, Mr. Missaghi, was such a devout Baha’i that he home front pioneered to the nearby town of Qasrudasht and commuted back into Shiraz for his work. He was an inspiration to other young Baha’is such as my English teacher Nasser Sabet and Hedaiatullah Ahmadiyah who joined him at his post. Later Dr. Ahmadiyah pioneered to Latin America and served with distinction as a Continental Counsellor. He passed away in the field of service when he had a heart attack crossing a foot bridge in the Mexican countryside and fell into a river that flowed into nearby Belize.

One summer, we made a trip from Abadan to Isfahan, the capital of Persia under the Safavids. To break the all-day trip and remember our ancestors, we stopped in the village of **Sead Atabad or Sa’adat Abad** near the town of Abadih. Centrally located to four regional capitols and sitting on a

fertile plain, Abadeh was the site of the gruesome burial of the severed heads of the Babi martyrs of Nayriz that had been carried in baskets towards Tihiran. After receiving word from the court that the heads should not be brought in on pikes as originally intended, the burial took place, but not in a proper cemetery. Instead the locals insisted that the heads of these Babi martyrs be left somewhere where they would not desecrate their own Shi'a dead. Open ground was found outside of town which 'Abdu'l-Baha later blessed by naming it "The Garden of the Merciful", and a proper wall and shrine were built and a garden planted to beautify the cemetery; these were destroyed following the 1979 revolution. A few miles from Abadeh, the forlorn group of Babis had continued their march to Tihiran but in the village of Sead Atabad, our great-great-grandfather, Mulla Abdul- Husayn, who had survived the brutality of the conflict in Nayriz and lost many of his male family members in its aftermath, who had been completely devoted and loyal to the Babi Faith, finally collapsed by the road, only to have his body dishonored by being beheaded.

The architecture, rivers, and parks of Isfahan provided us with welcome relief. The city had been completely re-done when Shah Abbas made Isfahan the capitol of his dynasty in the late 16th century. In the center of the city he built one of largest squares in the world. The pillars of power in his kingdom were represented there: the central mosque for the clergy, the palace for the king and the bazaar for the merchants. The vast space was neatly bounded by a continuous two-story structure with shops open on the bottom and lightly pointed arches on the story above them. At one end stood the blue minarets and graceful dome of the Jameh mosque with its complex interplay of seven-colored tiles and calligraphy. The Shah built his private mosque on the long side of the square. Its light colored dome bulged up over the two story building beneath it. The interior of the dome had bands of lemon-shaped patterns made in intricate yellow, blue, red, and green tiles, some glazed some unglazed, giving the whole dome a sense of constant motion, drawing the eye ever upwards towards the center. The bazaar's gate was a large mouth inviting people to come into its vast stone halls with arched ceilings.

Surrounded by this beauty, we enjoyed coffee and ice cream shops with my cousins, and we especially liked being outdoors because we were staying in a relative's house where his two wives argued constantly and cockroaches crawled throughout our bedroom with impunity. This was a typical living condition for us because of our straightened circumstances. When we stayed in Shiraz, Muslims would not rent to us so we had to live in a rough Jewish ghetto.

But it was when I travelled on my own to various towns that I experienced the rougher aspects of Iranian life. I was sent off by my parents on these trips to visit family so they could have peace at home as I was quite restless, especially during the hot Abadan summers.

I most often travelled on buses run by Iran Tours. One would have to get up before dawn and get in line for a seat, as there was no procedure by which to make a reservation. If I was fortunate enough to get a seat I could leave, but if not, I'd have to wait for the next day. Once I got on a bus, the ride was guaranteed to be bumpy because the roads were not real roads, they were often rut-filled, hard mud, broken cement tracks better suited for the travel of two-footed or four-footed transport. Not all buses were equal either—once I was on an old bus that was climbing a steep hill, and the male

passengers got out to help lighten its load so it could make it to the top. When it came to a stop, the assistant driver got out to put a block of wood behind the wheel to prevent it from rolling back when it stopped.

In mountainous regions like Mazindaran, the dramatic scenery was offset by the terror of the sheer drops on the side of the curving, two lane roads, whose curves the drivers took at high speeds. Another possible danger were highway robbers; overland travel had always been dangerous in Iran because of bands of nomads who would hold up caravans of all kinds which was one reason people travelled in groups.

A particular hazard for Baha'i travelers would be the harassment from Muslim passengers. On the bus to Nayriz, we were often insulted by Muslims who recognized us as Baha'is, probably because of our more hopeful and cheerful demeanor.

Sometimes, the passengers got a break when the bus stopped by a roadside teahouse next to a stream where local farmers sold food. For shorter routes, an inexpensive transportation option was to ride a donkey. I once rented a donkey from a local farmer to take me several miles to the bus stop, and the owner either came later to retrieve his donkey, or the animal would make its way back on its own. In cities like Tabriz and Isfahan, horse-drawn carriages were also still commonly used.

In many towns I stayed with relatives, but other times the only options for accommodations were a small hotel or a *cavanserai*, both of which were dangerous. The *caravanserais* were largely open rooms, often filled with insects, and in one cheap hotel I was so nervous at night that I pushed the bed against the door. When hotels or *caravanserais* were not available, I rented a bed in a courtyard or on the street and slept in it outside. Unsavory men would hang around the bus departure areas often drinking homemade alcohol and looking for boys. In one town I was saved from assault at the last minute by the appearance of a relative, and in another incident, the truck arrived at the last minute, and I paid my five *tumans*, and hopping on as it was pulling out while the drunken aggressors shouted at me to come down. While men seeking boys was a constant problem for me, I walked the streets more safely than had I been female. Girls were always subject to whistles, cat calls, pinching, and patting from young men in our sexually repressed society which drew such sharp boundaries between the sexes. To make myself feel safer, I carried under my shirt a knife with a golden handle that I had bought in the bazaar. The feel of this weapon gave me a false sense of protection because I never actually used it.

By bus, I visited the important industrial center of Arak, and then Gulpaygan, a town known for its artists and the hometown of the learned Baha'i, Mirza Abu Fadl. Abu Fadl first encountered the Baha'i Faith in Tehran where he met an illiterate Baha'i blacksmith who asked him a question: "Is it true that in the Traditions of Shi'ah Islam it is stated that each drop of rain is accompanied by an angel from heaven? And that this angel brings down the rain to the ground?" Abu Fazl agreed that this was true. The blacksmith followed up, "Is it true that if there is a dog in a house no angel will ever visit that house?" Again, Abu Fazl agreed. The blacksmith then concluded, "In that case no rain should ever fall in a house where a dog is kept." Abu Fazl was ashamed at falling into such an

easy logical trap; his companions told him that this blacksmith was a Baha'i. This innocent incident set Abu Fazl on a course of serious inquiry about the Faith during which he met with learned Baha'is and read from the Writings of Baha'u'llah after which he declared his belief. He went on to become an influential teacher of the Faith in Egypt and, at the request of 'Abdu'l-Baha, in the United States. His important written works in defense of the Faith are today the only books by a Baha'i from the early 20th century to remain in print. His *Baha'i Proofs* was the first major Baha'i book I read and, though I found the sections in Arabic challenging, it motivated me to want to learn more.

My next stop, Burujerd, one of the most ancient of the modern cities in Iran dating back to the 9th century, sat on a fertile plain with a view of the snow-covered Zagros Mountains. There I met a wonderful Baha'i family with whom I took a ride in a horse and carriage up the mountainside, though the horse struggled mightily on the steep incline. We climbed out of the carriage and had one of those beautiful afternoon picnics in the Persian countryside, drinking spring water, eating eggs, cheese, and yogurt. That day, for the first time, I shot a rifle. The city itself also held great interest. Jews had played a very prominent part in its development, and tribal minorities lived there who spoke Laki, a Kurdish dialect; because of this, the city tended to be more tolerant than most Iranian cities.

Then I went north to the town of Malayer, a rug-making center in the province of Hamadan, where I saw the movie 'Little Egypt', a big hit movie in 1951 about a belly dancer played by Rhonda Fleming who falls in love with a con man. Being a teenage boy, I was entranced by the sensuous dancing of this beautiful American pretending to be Egyptian. The lavish costumes and dances and the beautiful actors in the movie were an escape from the dirty cheap hotel in which I stayed that night with mosquitos that attacked me from all directions.

I went east to the edge of the central desert of Iran to another ancient city, Qum, that dates back to 4,000 BCE. The streets were a sea of black because of the thousands of religious students who wore black turbans and robes and studied in the dozens of seminary schools and libraries there. This was the major center for Shi'a studies. Qum was a little over a hundred miles from T'ihiran, and this proximity gave the clerics the opportunity to surveil the work of the government, something which would prove useful in the years of the Islamic Revolution.

Most of my summer trips were from Abadan to Nayriz through Shiraz because we had to go each year to take care of our almond orchards and properties; I looked forward to the countryside and eating from the abundance of watermelons, cucumbers, apricots, grapes, pomegranates, all of which were rare in Abadan. I also went back in time: I bathed in the river where the women washed clothes and carpets, dinner was cooked over a charcoal fire in a stone

When I was sixteen-years old, on just such a trip, my initiation into the real world of adults began when my grandfather Mirza Ahmad Vahidi, a towering figure in our lives and in the Baha'i community, passed away. He had risen from poverty because of his stubborn determination and talent for business, and became wealthy from agriculture and business. He owned orchards of

walnuts and almonds, land, livestock, and water rights which were very important in this dry land. Though tough on family members, his tenant farmers, and his employees, he was also loyal and dedicated to the Faith. He gave generously to the work of the Baha'i community, including sending high-quality carpets to the Holy shrines where they are still in use. Vahidi was devoted to 'Abdu'l-Baha, so much so that when the Master's brother spoke an unkind word about him, Vahidi slapped the brother. When he became gravely ill, Shoghi Effendi sent a message through Hand of the Cause Tarazu'llah Samandari that he was being prayed for, and my grandfather made a partial recovery.

My relatives, unbeknownst to me, had hoped to expropriate our mother's shares of the inheritance since we were no longer living in Nayriz. They were quite surprised to see this teenage boy arrive to claim these shares; in fact, a spurious rumor was even started that she had cancelled her power of attorney, but I ignored it. I offered my relatives the shares at a good price, but they wanted to trade them for banknotes which I suspected would not be redeemable. I sold the shares at a discount to a Muslim man instead. Even though they were Baha'is, some of my relatives wanted to follow the traditional Islamic way of disbursing assets in an inheritance which was to give two shares to a man for every one share to a woman. I tried insisting that we observe the Baha'i laws of inheritance, but I met with too much resistance.

I felt surrounded by people who suffered or who had questionable morals and motives. There was one person who was an addict and a gambler; one who was rich but vulgar and deceitful; one who went from being an addict to a drug dealer to getting killed; one who made pretenses of being a scholar but was simply pompous and grandiose; one who was wealthy but complained incessantly, one who not only complained constantly but cried a lot, and so on... Honesty, in general, seemed a rare commodity among the Nayrizis. Everyone lived simply, many were poor, and yet I had the sense that each person was out to cheat the other.

Even in this darkness, though, there were some relatives who stood out like shining stars. I had an uncle who was often sickly and suffered with poor eyesight and hearing but was totally devoted to the Faith. Once, local Muslims in his home front pioneering post brought him to the mosque and tried to force him to recant which he refused to do. As a punishment, he was hung by his shoulders in a well, and I had to rescue him. His spirit, though, was not broken. We rescued him at night when we came with donkeys, helped him out and rode him out of town. Deeply pious, he prayed for long periods of time, so much so that his new bride fell asleep on their wedding night due to the long duration of his prayers. He was known for his politeness as well; when waiting at a bus stop he deferred to others when it was time to board—even when he was first in line—and he sometimes lost his seat and had to take the next bus. He often travelled to teach the Faith in neighboring villages and was in constant need of funds; I helped him with the money I inherited. Several other relatives were filled with this same spirit of service and also pioneered to nearby localities.

In wealth, though, there lurks a hidden danger, and many of my relatives went after each other over my grandfather's estate. In addition, I was distressed to see this once great Baha'i community coming apart and Baha'i families leaving Nayriz with the renewed persecutions of the 1950s.

With the help of different agencies, I was able to sell my mother's shares and pocket 40,000 tumans from which I paid my mother's Huquq'u'llah. People were impressed to see this young man with so much money. The shares were spread out throughout the nearby villages, so I made many trips by truck and by donkey to collect them, often spending the night in the vehicle or in the open field.

But I noticed that the stress of the struggle over the inheritance was taking its toll.

I was often short-tempered with other people. One day I was in the office of a real estate agent. The men there that day knew I was a Baha'i, and we began a discussion about my grandfather's inheritance and the difference between Islamic and Baha'i laws. Being a big mouth and not especially humble, I aggravated the situation by escalating the argument. While the real estate agent remained friendly, the others did not. For several days, I felt that I was being followed by some threatening-looking men as I walked through the bazaar.

I took up smoking. After buying a pack of Marlboros, I lit up a cigarette and coughed hard but enjoyed the relaxing sensation so much that it led to years of heavy smoking. I developed the nervous habit of constantly running my fingers through my hair to try to keep it in place. I was succored, though, amidst all this turmoil by Mr. Abdu'l Husayn Sabihi who spent time teaching me about poetry.

I was a full-grown teenager by then and had received a massive dose of the realities of the world. But I was also filled with the daydreams of a teenager. On my walks through this miserable town of Nayriz with its wretched history towards Baha'is, I thought about writing a history of the area, or novels, or becoming a politician, or a lawyer, and setting things right. I wrote a will at age 16 in 1958, which I left with my uncle after my life was threatened. Though I was a voracious reader, I even tired of that as I was feeling mired in my circumstances.

I concluded that the best way forward was to leave this all behind and, with my money, make a bigger journey than any one of the ones that I had made before: I would go to America!

Chapter 6

The Promised Land

Everything that I knew about America I had learned from movies.

America had streets where Gene Kelly danced and sang in the rain, streets like Broadway lined with brightly-lit movie houses and theaters

American women were Marilyn Monroe being teased flirtatiously on a train by Tony Curtis.

American men were Gregory Peck wooing Audrey Hepburn.

America was beautiful people in colorful expensive clothing smiling happily in large chrome-trimmed cars going down a coastal highway in the sun, endlessly in love, casting their worries to the wind, insouciant ...

At this point in my life I should have taken the entrance exams for Iranian Universities and looked forward to a life in medicine, engineering, law, or agriculture, which would have led to a calmer more predictable future than the one that I was choosing.

But I was a nineteen-year old in 1961 and full of dreams, and I had just enough money to make them a possibility. Life in Iran under the welter of the mullah's hatred and the dictatorship of the Shah and his officers felt very restrictive. I was jealous of people who could pursue their ambitions. So, unbeknownst to my family, I made the decision to go to America. With money in my pocket from my mother's inheritance, I was ready to make my move.

Using the basic English I had learned, I went to the American consulate. The embassy staff paid little attention to me. I must have seemed to them like some crazy Persian kid when I uttered nonsense phrases like "Me America Einstein Von Braun", words which I knew from my lessons. They gave me a few college applications which I completed, opting to study nuclear engineering. Columbia University immediately rejected me, but Harvard sent me an acceptance letter!

I took this treasure to the consulate and got my visa. The agent seemed quite surprised. My family was so proud of me. The news that their favorite son was going to Harvard got out ...

My family gathered in Tehran to see me off. I was fulfilling the educational and professional aspirations that my father had wished for but not been able to realize having been born in Nayriz and trapped by its limitations. My mother anxiously warned me against the temptations of the flesh in the radically liberal West, especially the wild women and gambling. Most of my extended family were there because they were sure they would never see me again. After all, I was probably the first Nayrizi Baha'i to undertake this trip, and most of them were correct: I didn't see them ever again, though as I waved goodbye, I truly believed that one day I would send for them all.

The new jet age had begun so I could settle down into a powerful wide-bodied Boeing bound for Rome. I had never eaten food on an airplane before and had to follow the example of the passenger next to me to know how to do it. Looking down out of the window and watching my Iranian homeland slip away under the plane, I felt melancholic sensing I would never see it again and having no concrete idea of what lay ahead for me.

In my jacket, I had the phone number of Ugo Giachery given to me by an American Baha'i in Tihiran. Giachery was born into aristocracy in Palermo, Italy, and accepted the Faith in the United States after being wounded in World War I. He had even visited Iran after the war. Shoghi Effendi found in Giachery a reliable co-worker and put him in charge of procuring the marble for the Shrine of the Bab and the Archives Building at the Baha'i World Center. In 1951, Shoghi Effendi appointed him a Hand of the Cause and named one of the doors in the Shrine of the Bab after him in honor of his outstanding service.

At the Rome airport I found someone to help me call him. After finding a cab, I used my broken English to give the driver the address. Mr. Giachery greeted me at his front door. He was a tall and regal man whose every gesture reflected his aristocratic upbringing. He was very gracious towards me, so much so that I thought he must be mistaking me for the son of a wonderful pioneer in Africa who had the same name. That evening, Mr. Giachery patiently taught me how to handle spaghetti properly. To this day, when I sit down over a plate of pasta and twirl the spaghetti precisely so that it wraps around the fork, I think of this distinguished Baha'i; many years later, I met him again at a Conference in Sweden and, to my great surprise, he remembered me and the spaghetti education he had given me.

Everything and everyone in Rome turned my head. The women were all Sophia Lauren and the men, Marcello Mastroianni. Luscious odors spilled out of every pastry shop and restaurant. The city seemed to be all sun and enthusiasm. Even the salesman hummed a tune and smiled with unbounded joy as he sold me shoes. The streets were overflowing with history which I recognized from my books back home. I was also just a naïve first time tourist in Rome. While walking around Saint Peter's, a photographer approached me to take my photo. I gave him the money for the photo, and he gave me an address where I could go to pick it up, which, of course, was non-existent. But Rome also reminded me of Qum, the theological center of Shi'ism in Iran. Everywhere I looked were black clad priests except that, in Italy, they were cleaner and more polite.

I continued on to Germany to visit my distant cousins from Tihiran and then England where I was to catch an ocean liner bound for New York City. I rode in one of the famous four-door London black cabs with its large front lights like eyes lighting up the streets looking for passengers. The drivers had to pass a rigorous test to ply their trade on the streets of London. I gave the driver the address of a hotel that had been given to me in Iran, which was near Trafalgar Square, the large square in central London filled with pigeons where demonstrators often gathered around Lord Nelson's Column to air their grievances. When the taxi pulled up in front of the hotel's glitzy lobby that opened onto a corner of Strand Avenue, two tall well-dressed men rushed over to the cab, opened my door and picked up my bags; in Iran, tall, good-looking men were often government ministers, so I was confused as to why these two were taking my bags for me. I was worried that they were stealing my luggage, but they were carrying them for me. I was a long way from the dusty bus stops and mules of Nayriz. To get to my room, I rode in a glass elevator rising higher in it than I had ever risen without being accompanied by goats in the mountains around my small hometown. After walking around the huge bathroom in my hotel room a few times, I went to see the main

attractions of London as I knew them—the Parliament building, Soho, and Madame Tussauds wax museum. I tried the national dish—fish and chips. The food, though, like German food, seemed bland compared to Italy or Iran’s rich cuisine. Though I enjoyed the interesting sites of London, I could never get it out of my head that this country had done so much to appropriate the natural resources of Iran for its own benefit and couldn’t help but see the British as imperialists.

I had a few Baha’i friends in London whom I had known in Abadan. We went north out of London to the New Southgate Cemetery in New Southgate, to make a pilgrimage to the gravesite of our beloved Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi, whose sudden death while on a trip to London with his wife in 1957, still left a gaping hole in our hearts, and over whom I shed many tears that day. The gravesite reflected Shoghi Effendi’s majesty and his perfect sense of proportion. A single white Corinthian column was topped by a globe atop which a large, golden eagle seemed to be either taking off or landing. While travelling in Edinburgh, he had purchased the statue of an eagle in this same position which he loved so much he brought it back to Haifa and placed it in his bedroom which was also his office. He had expressed to his wife Ruhyyih Khanum the desire to have his own Corinthian column, which surprised her since she didn’t see how he could use just one column. After his funeral, Ruhyyih Khanum was leaving the burial site which was festooned with flowers from the funeral when the picture of a single Corinthian column with this eagle atop it came to her. Later her vision became a reality when the architect in Rome who had helped with the building of the Shrine of the Bab made the gravesite monument we saw that day. The original model of the eagle remains in the Archives building. To me, the eagle symbolized Shoghi Effendi’s majesty, and the globe reflected the fact that he had guided the spread of the Faith over the entire planet.

The day of my departure for America came rapidly, and I made my way to Southampton. This had been the home port of the Titanic whose sinking left hundreds of Southampton families bereft. I boarded the ocean liner, the Queen Mary, water lapping against the huge liner’s black and red hull from which rose floors of white cabins topped by three giant tilting chimneys. I was sure there were many more people on this boat than the total population of Nayriz. The crossing cost me \$50 and took six days. I shared a cabin with a roommate—he was a young British man with the personality of a playboy. Knowing no one on the ship, I went around with him. One evening he flirted with two Irish girls. I knew nothing about dating or girls but wound up holding the hand of one of them, repeating to her the few English words I knew. Another night, I won a costume contest with my traditional white furry flat-topped hat that leaned to the right on my head. At the dinner table I had no idea about correct silverware etiquette so I followed the lead of the others. This young man with whom I roomed on the Queen Mary went on to find fame and fortune as the television personality, Robin Leach.

After a stormy Atlantic crossing, the Queen Mary entered the port of New York. Seeing the Statue of Liberty coming into view, I thought about how far I had come, and I felt close to the millions of immigrants who had fled religious and political persecutions. Nayriz was long ago in a faraway universe—this was a new world.

How much more of a shock such a site must have been for Haji Sayyah, “The Traveller”, who had arrived in New York City in 1867 from Central Asia and then became the first Iranian to get American citizenship, even meeting President Ulysses S. Grant. After him, though, only a few thousand Iranians immigrated to the United States. That changed in the 1950s, when the government of Iran decided to industrialize the country and develop its infrastructure. This required technical expertise that the country’s universities did not have, so the government sponsored young Iranians to study in the west—especially the United States whose schools had the best engineering departments in the world.¹⁷

Baha’is had an even greater motive for immigrating when, in the mid-‘50s, Shaykh Falsafi, an early ally of Ayatollah Khomeini, took advantage of the politically weak Shah to launch a national campaign of persecution against the Baha’is. Falsafi had been rebuffed by the previous Prime Minister Mossadegh, who saw all Iranians, even Baha’is, as being equal under the law. After Mossadegh’s ouster, Falsafi took to the radio waves to rail against Baha’is and the Baha’i Faith and incite Muslims to take action against them. His sermons were especially virulent during the season of Ramadan, a season of supposed restraint and fasting. Widespread mob violence ensued. The Baha’i national center was occupied and its dome demolished. In the village of Hurmuzdak in the Province of Yazd, seven Baha’is—ages nineteen to eighty—were hacked to pieces with spades and axes by a mob of villagers. These persecutions were stopped by the government only when it feared that the mob violence would spiral out of control and bring unwanted international scrutiny.

Most Baha’is who emigrated from Iran during the 1950s went pioneering to fulfill the international plans of the Baha’i Faith, but after 1979, the 16,000 or more Iranian Baha’is who came to North America were fleeing the persecution unleashed by the Islamic Revolution. The town of Nayriz was virtually depopulated of Baha’is after ’79 with only a few impoverished Baha’i families remaining because they could not afford to leave.

After I arrived in the U.S. in 1961, my first shock was realizing that I had misunderstood my college application. The employees at the YMCA where I was staying pointed out to me that though I thought I had applied to ‘Harvard’, I had, in fact, applied to ‘Howard’, a name that sounded identical to my Persian ears. Howard, though, did not have a nuclear engineering program, a field I had chosen because it seemed so contemporary and cutting edge, even though I had no real idea what it meant.

Undeterred, I travelled north because I had already been accepted to the language program at Saint Michael’s College, a Jesuit school in Vermont, which I had planned to attend to improve my English in preparation for full time university study.

¹⁷ (“Iranian-Americans, Immigration and Assimilation”, Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, 2014, PAAIA p. 2) By 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution, more than 50,000 Iranians were studying in the United States. (“Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home” Shirin Hakimzadeh, Migration Policy Institute, 9/1/06)

Getting off the bus in Burlington and walking across the empty campus—the students for the program had not yet arrived—I began to have my first real misgiving about what I had done in coming to America. I crossed an empty campus and slept in an empty dorm. I knew nothing about Jesuit schools. Lying awake at night, I remembered that in one of my favorite novels *The Hunchback of Notre Dames*, the heroine is attacked by a priest, so I was gripped by a fear of the presence of priests all around the dark campus.

I missed my family terribly in this unfamiliar environment. The only other foreign students at Saint Michael's were 150 Hungarian refugees from the 1956 uprising. The cafeteria was the most foreign place of all to a boy from a town without even a streetlight. There was a spigot from which boundless amounts of fresh milk poured out when I depressed the handle. Delighted but confused, I walked out back to see where the cows were who were dispensing this copious amount of free milk. In Nayriz a small bucket of milk from a cow was a treat. Even more so was chicken, and here at this college in America, all I had to do to get some was walk up to the server and stick out my plate, whereupon a piece of hot fried chicken appeared. Students laughed at my foreign ways as they watched me pour tea into a saucer and then slurp it with sugar between my teeth, which is what we did as children in Iran because the hot tea cooled down quicker in the shallow saucer than in a cup. The college Dean had to inform me that I must not hold hands with a male friend on campus which, though a customary act of friendship in Iran, would be misinterpreted and not socially acceptable in a small, American town.

I learned passable English for three months at Saint Michael's College until I ran out of money for tuition. Back in New York City, I had to find a university to attend to keep my visa and my plans on track. Fortunately, a prominent Iranian statesman and activist, Prof. Nasrollah Fatemi, was the new chair of the department of social sciences of Fairleigh-Dickinson University and eager to recruit Iranian students to the school. An Iranian statesman who had been the Mayor of Shiraz, the Governor of the Province of Fars, a member of Parliament, and a representative to international conferences post-World War II, Fatemi was keen to stay involved in shaping Iranian politics along more leftist lines. Towards this end he worked to attract Iranian students to the large university in New Jersey, and I was soon one of those.

My education in Iran had prepared me remarkably well for what I found in American schools; I earned very good grades and made the Dean's List. My major concern was not school, though, but money. I could make about a dollar an hour at various odd jobs by my tuition was \$2,000 to \$3,000 a semester. My visa did not allow me to accept full-time work, which would have been better paid. The fear of running out of money stalked me and would do so for years to come. In this mindset, several years of low-wage job after low-wage job began.

I worked in a paint brush factory in Queens, where I stood on the assembly line, picking up a brush and attaching it to a handle and then putting it on the machine. If I didn't move quickly enough, a brush dropped into a basket. My efficiency could be easily checked by a glance into the basket. The others on the assembly line had experience at this and were able to assemble most of the brushes. I missed so many that I had to use my break to put together the brushes I'd missed. By 5:00 p.m., my

whole body ached. I was paid \$40 a week which covered my \$7 a week rent, leaving some money over for food. After fifteen days, I was fired for being unable to keep up with the pace.

I worked the counter at the Walgreens on the corner of Broadway and 72nd St., one block from the Ansonia Hotel where ‘Abdu’l-Baha resided during one of his stays in New York City. Walgreens made the world’s first milkshake—double rich ice cream with milk and chocolate syrup. The counter attracted many young people who would come in and sit and order in rapid fire. I had to hustle across the linoleum floor from customer to customer taking orders, going back to the soda jerk machine, then back to the counter, all while juggling large cold tumbler cups full of the delicious desert. The faster I went, the more tips I made. I loved this dynamic fun-filled and profitable job but had to leave it when I moved to Teaneck, New Jersey, to be closer to my university.

I looked with envy at these young Americans whose lives seemed carefree and full of romance. Boys sat with girls at the counter and laughed and canoodled over sweet creamy deserts. When I worked as an usher in a movie theater where I watched “West Side Story” dozens of time. I could see young lovers kissing in the dark of the theater. In moments of jealousy, I’d shine my flashlight on a young couple to break up their intimacy. My world from my arrival in 1961 through most of the 60’s was a lonely world of low-paying jobs and study.

I was fired from the bulk mailing company where we printed materials and stuffed them into envelopes which we labelled and sorted into huge bulk mail bags that had to then be transported to the post office. The weight of the bags was too much for me and, like the mail, I was sent away.

I was fired from a chemical factory where I moved large containers of paints that needed to be checked for quality control. Getting there required taking several buses so I was often late. The manager called me in and showed me my time card covered in red marks from the machine that stamped black for on time and red for late, and then he showed me the door.

I was fired from being a porter at a midtown hotel because I couldn’t always carry the heavy luggage, which I greatly regretted because of the excellent tips.

I attempted to sell Encyclopedia Britannicas which involved cold calling potential customers to try and get an appointment to present the massive multi-volume set and convince them that they needed it. I was not especially interested in sales, and my pitch was rendered even more ineffective by my thick accent and paucity of vocabulary. I tried working for a book distributor driving books to schools and fairs and setting up displays so that students and teachers could see the various books. On one run, I was driving distractedly and all the books flew out of my car and were distributed all along and over the highway, pages turning in the wind. I just heard that President Kennedy had been shot. I was shocked by the news, but even more shocked when the announcement was followed by an advertisement for ladies’ pantyhose. My boss called me after the incident and told me “Jimmy, I’ve been in business for years and have never lost so many books to a highway.”

I may have missed my true calling of being a stand-up comedian. Some friends and I ventured over to the Improv Comedy Club on the West Side where they proceeded to tell the manager that I was

from another country and could tell jokes. The manager got on stage and announced that 'Jose'—that was me—was going to come up next. I got up there, told a few stories, and got laughs. The manager wanted me to come back and do sets between the regular comics, but this was not a respectable job for a young Persian man.

I even considered becoming an undertaker—'\$4-\$5' an hour, no experience necessary. I called them immediately, and the man who answered said wonderful and come in on Monday. I told my landlady that I had good news, that I was getting a new job, and that I'd be making lots of money. When she heard what new job it was, she who responded that I would have to leave her premises immediately if I took up that kind of work.

Finally I swallowed the remainder of my pride and became a washer of dishes.

I worked in Greek and Italian restaurants. One establishment was a restaurant and inn on the east side that was run by an abusive woman who was friendly to customers but rough on the staff. She had two German shepherds which I had to look after. While I was cleaning the bathrooms and fixing up the beds, I thought with envy about the easy life those two dogs had.

To get restaurant temp work, I often went to the Roma agency which gave jobs for that same day or night. Immigrants seeking work sat in the agency's large midtown waiting room staring at each other, anxiously waiting for a restaurant to call for a busboy or dishwasher. When the agent called my name, I'd pay him a dollar, get the address of the short-staffed restaurant, and be on my way to work. Once, I was sent to an Italian restaurant. That night, the old man who usually worked the shift was absent. A large crowd was attending a big Italian wedding reception and hundreds of dishes were flooding into the kitchen covered with spaghetti and tomato sauce and salad. My apron was soaked. I was exhausted, so I took a short break. I peered through the window of the revolving door between the kitchen and the dining area to see the customers who were dancing the twist. The manager found me doing this and angrily threw me back into the kitchen. I fell to the floor slamming my head into the fridge. An ambulance had to be called to take me to the emergency room, where my injury required stitches. A few days later I went back to collect my money. The manager chased me out yelling about how much trouble I had given him. Some years later, I went to dinner with Borah Kavelin, then a member of the Universal House of Justice, and, ironically, wound up at that same restaurant, this time as a paying customer. My concept of the 'American Dream' was to be able to enter a restaurant and order any dish I wanted without having any concern about the price.

On one particular New Year's Eve I was working a big party in an upscale restaurant in New Jersey. Snow came down all evening and I had to clear it off the cars. The revelers were supposed to tip me 25 cents, but most of them were too inebriated from celebrating the New Year to remember this small gesture which I depended on. I left work that night at 3 a.m. and waited at a bus stop with holes in my shoes.

The one perk of working in restaurants was that there was always plenty of good food. The cook made leftover stew for us, and we'd eat in the corner of the kitchen. Sometimes I wrapped up leftovers from fancy dishes and took them home or ate them in a stall in the men's room.

I lived at the hotel for transients on 76th and Broadway for a dollar a night in a room with a single bed, a chair, and a shared bathroom with a tub used by eight people. There were prostitutes, drug dealers, and foreigners, including many Persians like me, and lonely elderly people sitting in the lobby staring blankly ahead waiting for someone to come. Nevertheless, I stayed there because I was terrified of becoming homeless. Sometimes I walked along the Hudson River which was nearby and contemplated the reality I had found in America. Had I stayed in Iran, I might have been a doctor with a loving wife and a family. Here I lived in a dirty small room, sometimes eating only bread and cheese. The only time I went out was to work or school.

Once I even got locked out of my room because I had not been able to pay my rent. I was forced to sleep on the bench on the median strip that separated the lanes on Broadway. Lying on the hard wood I saw how clearly I was not Gene Kelly singing in the rain or Tony Curtis flirting with a Marilyn Monroe, and I stood no chance of wooing an Audrey Hepburn. I was just a broke and struggling immigrant sleeping on a bench whose American Dream had been downsized to escaping the kitchen and becoming a waiter.

Chapter 7

Foreigner

From the moment I arrived in the United States, I had the feeling of being foreign. I was inside the country but outside the society. I had arrived with a few pairs of billowy, ‘Ali Baba’ style pants, canvas underwear made by my mother, an unsightly large black coat, pistachios, and hair gel because I feared not finding any in the new country. I even came to dislike my name. My father had named me Hussein because his name was ‘Baha’i’, a name that had caused him great difficulties when it came to employment in Iran where prejudice against Baha’is ran high. In the U.S., though, ‘Hussein’ sounded Arab and Muslim and marked me as different, so I often used American names like David Marg—‘marg’ in Persian meant death. Later, my marriage certificate listed me as ‘Jimmy Ahdieh’.

During my first Thanksgiving, I was invited to the home of an American family, whose daughter was a classmate. Following the Persian custom of *tarof*, I declined the offers of food though I was hungry. Persian politeness demanded that an offer be turned down a few times before being accepted so as not to appear greedy and disrespectful of the other person. But I was in the U.S., and my American hosts took my response at face value. They continued the meal without me while I sat and watched TV—so confused and so hungry that I ate the entire bowl of nuts on the table in front of me while the family ate a sumptuous Thanksgiving turkey dinner.

Even though I was a university student, my English remained at the level of a low wage restaurant worker, while I was gradually forgetting Persian, my mother tongue. My son would later say that I was illiterate in two languages. My friends and co-workers were all foreigners—Italian waiters, Greek cooks, Puerto Rican dishwashers, and Persian students. I had a Yugoslavian roommate who was happy just to be working as a busboy in the U.S. which saved him from the poverty he had experienced in his home country. He was enamored of American wealth; he often asked me what I thought Rockefeller was doing that day.

On the one hand, I wanted to be more like American young men; I saw them with young women always having fun, but my few English phrases were insufficient to communicate with young women in any way that I didn’t come across like an awkward outsider. On the other hand, I did not share the same values as many of the young American men. The Baha’i moral laws forbade sexual relations outside of marriage and the use of alcohol. I felt the pull of this new youth culture while sincerely believing in the Baha’i Faith.

In Iran, my social world had been mostly family. These casual and relaxed relationships between men and women in the U.S. were entirely foreign to me. Whenever I met an attractive woman my age like the young lady who sat across the table from me in the Hackensack public library where I was contemplating life or the girl with one glass eye which shone in the dark and who lived across the street from me and was very sweet, my words and manners and lack of means marked me as a poor foreign student. I knew that though I was outwardly fairly attractive, in private I was still wearing the canvas underwear my mother had sent me from home and which surprised my landlady when she saw them in the laundry room near my well-worn shoes whose soles were punctured by holes. In the U.S., my social world was school, kitchens, and the four book-lined walls of my rented room.

Being a foreigner also meant living in fear of deportation. The nights before I had to present myself at the immigration office with my school records to be able to extend my visa, were sleepless ones. The presence of a police cruiser always made me anxious. I had to buy a car when I moved to New Jersey because my school was three miles away on foot, so I bought a Chrysler for \$100. I rear-ended a car in the Holland tunnel, and the driver offered me \$80 before I could offer him any money—neither of us wanted to involve the police. I was already in trouble for not having paid a parking ticket, so I figured the other guy must have been worse off than me. My license was eventually suspended for sixty days, and a detective came to arrest me. I shared a cell that night with an Italian who told me he was in for rape. Fortunately, friends came to bail me out. Eventually I found myself in traffic court in front of a judge whom I called “Your Highness”. He answered that “Your Honor” would do. I pleaded with him not to suspend my license because I needed it to get to school. A lack of a license, I said, would ‘paralyze’ me. He clarified that he was not ‘paralyzing’ me, he was penalizing me. The next day the town paper had a small headline: “Hussein Ahdieh from Israel had a choice to come to court to pay his ticket earlier or take an exam, so he picked the lesser of two evils—he came to court but lost his license.”

My friends were aware of my precarious status. One evening while driving through Paterson, New Jersey, a police cruiser started to tail me and my friend. There was unrest due to demonstrations in town. My friend, being aware of my suspended license slid under me and took the wheel. By the time the officer came to the window, my friend realized too late that his own license was expired, and he got taken into custody. He looked frightened as he sat in the back of the cruiser next to a police dog. When I asked him if I could do anything for him, he answered that I could buy him cigarettes and get lost. I spent the night collecting money from friends to post his bail. When I arrived at the precinct the next morning, he was furious at me. Fortunately our friendship survived, and he later came to my wedding.

In another incident, the immigration service was actually called on me. I had gotten into a minor argument with a cashier at Macy’s who then called security. In the back office, the security officer called me a ‘commie’ and referred to ‘us’ as ‘you foreigners’. He called immigration—my worst fear—but in the days before computers, there was much less effective follow-up, and the whole incident went nowhere.

My anxiety was such that I even considered marrying an Italian woman for \$500 so that I could get a green card. I was concerned, though, that she might not divorce me so I didn’t go through with it.

I continued to struggle financially. I couldn’t ask for money from home because the exchange rate from tuman to dollars meant that my father’s entire salary would be the equivalent of \$30-\$40 a month. My funds from my mother’s inheritance were running out, and the jobs I worked barely covered tuition. Lack of funds caused checks to bounce for groceries at a supermarket in Teaneck and books for my classes to bounce. After the merchants contacted the University, I was bounced from the school. My studies were not amounting to much anyway. I was too tired to study hard and mostly got by on the excellent education I had received in Iran. My grades had been slipping, and I

even considered night school to get enough credit hours while increasing my work hours. My main goal was to stay in school so that I could keep my visa.

At Fairleigh-Dickinson University in the early 1960's, I had been studying electrical engineering, a traditional field for a Persian young man. My real interest, though, was in the humanities, especially history, philosophy, and literature. I applied to the New School in Manhattan which had been founded at the turn of the century to carry out research that could then be applied to the social problems of the day and to educate the average citizen in these issues. Its faculty had included some of the finest minds of the period including Franz Boas, John Maynard Keynes, and Margaret Mead. I wrote an essay on Thoreau's *On Walden Pond* for my application, but my impoverished English was evident in my writing, and I was not accepted. I was able to complete my BS in Electrical Engineering at the New York Institute of Technology by 1968, and did eventually get that degree in the humanities—a Master's Degree in European Intellectual history from Fordham University, a few years later.

The sense of humor which I had inherited from my grandfather and great-grandfather helped me put all these challenges and setbacks into perspective. This made me socially popular at school which gave me a psychological boost. I also found myself turning more to my faith.

My first encounter with the American Baha'i community was in New Jersey. I lived near the 'cabin' in Teaneck, a racially diverse suburban town a half an hour from Manhattan. Teaneck had voluntarily desegregated its public schools in the mid-60s. Roy Wilhelm, a Baha'i who was in the coffee business, owned a home there and a tree grove down the hill. Behind his house he built a rustic cabin roughly in the shape of a ship as he loved the sea. Every year, Baha'is gathered on the property to commemorate the unity feast and talk given there by 'Abdu'l-Baha during his visit in 1912. Louis Bourgeois, the architect of the Baha'i House of Worship in Wilmette, became so inspired while visiting the property, that he drew the design for the Wilmette temple there.

I was in for more of a shock when I visited the Baha'i center in New York City. I was used to the beautiful centers in Nayriz, Shiraz, and Abadan. The one in New York City, though, was off the lobby of a dingy hotel on 72nd St., and next to the restrooms, which meant that the unpleasant odors pervaded the meetings. On my first visit, I knocked apprehensively at the door, and a man opened it slightly. I greeted him with 'Allah-u-Abha' and he smiled and opened the door wide. This was Roy King. He and the other Baha'is, I soon learned, were less formal in their approach to Baha'i meetings and prayers than the Baha'is in Iran but very earnest in their devotion. Among of these Baha'is was Hooshmand Taraz who, like me, was born into a Persian Baha'i family of humble origins. He was handsome, kind-hearted, and totally devoted to the Faith. Over the years, he became like a brother to me as well as my dentist. Don Kinney whom 'Abdu'l-Baha had surnamed 'Vafa' was there, as well as Bill DeForge who had the character of a saint. The level of commitment and devotion to Faith of these Americans inspired me, especially when I considered the temptations that were everywhere in this liberal and fast-moving society.

This community was blessed during these years by the presence of Zikru'llah Khadem who was appointed a Hand of the Cause by Shoghi Effendi in 1952. He was the first Hand to reside in the West. During these years, he lived with his wife on Staten Island. On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, Mr. Khadem travelled to over fifty countries. He was extraordinarily sweet, and the friends loved him greatly.

Attending Baha'i meetings in my new country enriched my spiritual life; I even dreamed of the Faith. In one dream I was bicycling with Baha'u'llah, and whenever we came to a street light that was burned out, I replaced it. In another, 'Abdu'l-Baha and I were street teaching and came upon a big meeting hall. We entered and 'Abdu'l-Baha spoke to those assembled, but the whole time I was hoping he'd mention what a good job we'd done teaching the Faith. I dreamed of our beloved Shoghi Effendi as well. He was riding on a fancy motorcycle and came to a sickly boy with a skin infection around his head whom I had known in Nayriz. This unfortunate boy was very shy and tended to stay indoors. The Guardian stopped the motorbike, reached out his hand, and touched the boy's head, healing him instantly.

Maybe I had these dreams because the early sixties were such an exciting time to be a Baha'i. The worldwide Ten-Year Crusade launched by Shoghi Effendi was reaching its culmination in 1963 with the long-dreamed of election of the Universal House of Justice. The Crusade had aimed to establish the Faith on a strong international footing by strengthening twelve national communities and already-opened territories. The most exciting goal was the opening of new regions to the Faith. Baha'is who were the first to settle in a country or territory were honored with the title of 'Knights of Baha'u'llah,' and their names were written on a scroll that was buried under the entrance of the tomb of Baha'u'llah. We heard about Baha'is going to live in places we couldn't even locate on a world map and inspiring accounts of their sacrifices. Before his untimely death, Shoghi Effendi had provided for the election of the Universal House of Justice once there were sufficient national assemblies to provide a solid foundation. Baha'u'llah's vision of a Universal House of Justice came to fruition when members of fifty-six National Assemblies gathered in the house of 'Abdu'l-Baha in Haifa in April of 1963, and cast their ballots, bringing this most mighty of Baha'i Institutions into existence. This momentous act occurred six years after the death of Shoghi Effendi and a century after the public declaration of Baha'u'llah in the Garden of Ridvan. The whole Baha'i world was in awe.

In addition to my dreams and contact with the Baha'i community in the U.S., I had a personal interest in energizing my Baha'i life: I was considering marrying Tahereh Missaghi whom I had known in Shiraz.

Tahereh was an extraordinary young woman. My aunt Mahin was very keen on fixing us up. In Iran the custom was for parents to arrange marriages and if this did not happen, a matchmaker such as an aunt might get involved. Baha'is had an easier time with finding a spouse because boys and girls met and freely associated in Baha'i gatherings which gave them the opportunity to get to know one another. Tahereh's plan was to finish medical school and pioneer to Africa. Her devotion to the Faith was total, which caused me to work on increasing the level of my own Baha'i activity. She was

pure, kind-hearted, and compassionate. In our correspondence, I let her know that I was not at all the pioneering type. My plans were to further my education and settle down. As we became more serious, her family used the Baha'i network to help them make a decision regarding consent. At their request, Mr. Khadem, Dr. Taraz, and Tahereh's brother, Iraj—who came by bus from California because he could not afford the plane fare—met with me to assess my viability as a prospective husband. I even received a tie from them as a gift. I could not have been much an enticing prospect as I lived in a cheap hotel in midtown in a single room covered with posters of Marx, Freud, Einstein, and 'Abdu'l-Baha.

I should have gone to Iran to marry Tahereh, but my fear of not being able to return prevented me. Instead, Tahereh came over in 1968. There was a shortage of doctors in the U.S., so the sponsoring hospital provided her with a green card, a stipend, and an apartment, and I was fortunate to share in this benefit. The companionship I found in this marriage banished the loneliness in which I had lived since stepping off the Queen Mary, and Tahereh's straightforwardness and sincerity cleared the confusion that often plagued my mind.

Our marriage ceremony was in my friend Majid's apartment. Majid ran a garage and had a car which meant to us poor Persian students that he was rich. When Tahereh arrived in the States, Majid took us out for Middle Eastern food and belly dancing. I think the dancer knew Majid, and she got on top of the table and made some fancy dancing moves. Out of modesty, Tahereh, who had spent her whole life in a Baha'i family, kept her eyes closed.

Being a poor foreign student I had no savings with which to pay for a wedding. I borrowed \$200 and bought a \$10 fake diamond ring. We invited the members of the Spiritual Assembly and friends but could only spend \$40 on the whole event. The meal consisted of turkey and cookies. We ran out of everything. For our honeymoon Tahereh and I drove to Washington D.C. but ran out of money; on our way back, we spent the night in the rented car.

Her father sent us the gift of a rug from Iran. I dreamed of this big beautiful rug coming from my home country which would give distinction to our small studio though I feared the magnificent rug wouldn't fit in the tiny space. I asked Majid to bring his station wagon because a Persian rug could not fit into a small vehicle. We drove out to the airport after I got a notice from Iran Air that the rug had arrived. I walked up to the pick-up window, and the attendant went to get our big beautiful carpet but when she returned, she placed a small prayer rug in front of me that easily fit on the shallow counter. It was a personal prayer rug for our daily use.

I had peace of mind and stability in my life thanks to my marriage to Tahereh. But while my private world was now fulfilled and tranquil, the society all around me was in a state of great change and agitation. This was the late 60s, and a new generation was challenging many of the social norms of the past.

At the university, I listened to a guest speaker rail against the government. I was astonished that this was allowed to go on because I was from a country that did not permit any political opposition, much less in public. Left-leaning Iranian students pressured me into joining one of their political

groups but, being a Baha'i, I wanted to avoid partisan politics, in keeping with the tenets of our Baha'i teachings. Immigration was called on me. Down at the immigration office, I was cross-examined and asked if I was receiving material from East Germany. I replied that "I plead the Fifth Amendment", but the officer just laughed and told me I was watching too much television and that I had no rights in this country. After some time, I was able to convince him that I had nothing to do with East Germany and had not been involved in the political activities of Iranian students because I was a Baha'i and we did not participate in politics. Later we found out they were simply intimidating us to discourage us from staying in the country.

Universities were exciting places in those days. The Vietnam conflict had become a full-blown war after years of gradual military build-up. The public mood about Vietnam was souring as Americans saw the horrors of war in the jungle in living color on their televisions every night. The new generation was increasingly vocal about its antipathy to a war many young people had to come to see as immoral. Most famously, students occupied several buildings of Columbia University to protest the school's connection to the Department of Defense. After weeks of sit-ins, protests, and rising tensions, the NYPD had to be called in. Hundreds of students were arrested.

After that spring and the assassination of the leading political light of the antiwar movement, Robert Kennedy, the University took a decided turn to the left. Marxist ideas appealed to me and many other Persian and American students as well because of the long hours we had spent working hard in kitchens for low wages.

During those years, I worked shoulder-to-shoulder with black Americans and got a glimpse into their lives and struggles. I was a foreigner struggling in this new society and felt a sense of kinship with the difficulties of my black coworkers who, like me, were often viewed with suspicion and were more likely to be mistreated than white persons. The civil rights movement also appealed to us as young Persians who hoped to create a more open, democratic, and egalitarian society in Iran. I joined a group of Persian friends driving to Washington for the March on Washington in 1963. We had no money for a motel, so we slept in the car, but we wanted to be a part of this exciting moment in history. We witnessed what would later come to be seen as the iconic moment of the emerging civil rights movement.

The movement had started during the more conservative late 1950s when bus boycotts and sit-ins led by the charismatic and inspiring figure of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged the decades long Jim Crow laws. With his powerful persona out front, and a growing public awareness and acceptance among white people of the reality of racial injustice, the movement made substantial inroads resulting in the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. With success, a more radical strain emerged in the movement which used the phrase 'Black Power'. The outbreak of riots in American cities eroded some of the support for civil rights among white Americans who were shocked by the urban unrest. The murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ended the idealistic phase of the movement.

The excitement of the times and the stability of my marriage helped me to finally let go of my 'foreign-ness' and engage in the issues of the society around me. I joined a fledgling school organized by Catholic sisters, black ministers, and Baha'is, dedicated to social change: the Harlem Prep School.

Chapter 8

Harlem Prep

The streets of Harlem were a long way away from the dirt lanes of my small hometown in southern Iran and yet, Harlem was where I found myself in the late 1960s working as an administrator at the innovative Harlem Prep School.

Harlem Prep was a fruit of times that demanded social justice and change.

The post-World War II prosperity, the Kennedy administration, and the powerful civil rights movement provided the momentum for addressing long-standing social and economic woes. President Johnson proposed the creation of a Great Society through the active involvement of the Federal government. One of the largest legislative efforts in American history, the Great Society aimed to alleviate poverty and advance civil rights. The Federal Government now took part directly in civil rights, poverty, education, health, housing, voting rights, pollution, the arts, urban development, occupational safety, consumer protection, and mass transit.

The 'War on Poverty' created programs such as the Job Corps and Head Start which were intended to lift people out of poverty through work, training, and education. Efforts were made to engage people at the grass roots level through Community Action Agencies. The poverty rates dropped over the 1960s and the public mood, buoyed by prosperity, was willing to support these efforts, but the programs did not change the structural problems of the economy or of the society and tended to be hastily implemented.

Urban neighborhoods like Harlem were places of deep discontent with a wide spectrum of problems. In the summer of 1964, the worst riots since 1942 erupted after the killing of a young black man by a white police officer. Harlem had a young population and high population density. Half of Harlem's population was living in sub-standard but expensive housing, and most had low-paying jobs or no job at all. White employers in those days saved their low wage jobs for black Americans, and unemployment varied from 7% among adults all the way up to 30% for teenagers. Economic problems fed social problems. By the late 1950s drug use was ten times higher in Harlem than in the rest of the city and continued to increase throughout the 1960s. The homicide rate was at least six times the city average. Even a disease like TB, which was rare in other parts of the city, was present in Harlem. Like the housing, the schools in Harlem were substandard with deteriorating buildings, poor quality teachers, and decreasing student achievement. Of the freshman class of 1959, 50% would eventually drop out.

The behemoth that was the New York City public school system was being challenged. Children in low-income districts, most of whom were black and Puerto Rican, were not being adequately educated. Different schemes for integration, decentralization of the Board of Education, and community control of individual schools were in play as possible solutions. The principal players in the conflict over public education were the Board of Education, the Teachers' Union (UFTI),

antipoverty groups, integrationists, militant black leaders, and separatists. In broad strokes, the UFT wanted to protect the rights of its members and saw the activists as anti-semitic, while the activists were concerned about the persistent low performances of the schools. The Board of Education had wrestled with maintaining a centralized school system that had become bloated and inflexible and protected its own interests or changing to a decentralized structure that could potentially degenerate into numerous many tiny fiefdoms susceptible to local corruption. Integrationists—some of the most vocal of whom were white—aimed their efforts at addressing the neighborhood schools which were supported by local residents and located within a manageable distance from the homes of the students. Given the racial history of zoning, the schools were therefore segregated, if not by law then by fact. Some leaders, though, felt that pushing for integration implied that black people were not capable of raising the standards in schools in their neighborhoods. Others saw the old idea of ‘separate but equal’ as a fiction that could not be realized.

The legislation and successes of the civil rights movement brought rising expectations that the public schools could be improved quickly. When progress seemed too slow, anger between the constituents increased. The community action/neighborhood school approach suffered from low participation and patronage while the Board of Education seemed ineffective in addressing the disparity of outcomes in the city’s schools. Two flashpoints emerged in New York City. In East Harlem, a new school, IS 201, was opened and the local community leaders wanted control over it. They rejected integration and sought the promotion and affirmation of black culture. The parents distrusted the Board of Education so they opposed the appointment of a well-regarded principal of Jewish background. In Brooklyn, CORE (the Congress for Racial Equality) demanded that all principals submit their plans to it for improving schools. Teachers felt threatened but their Union was vulnerable to criticism because its membership was over 90% white/Jewish. Issues that were fought over included the right to suspend students who were deemed unruly, and the power to hire and fire teachers and administrators. In Ocean Hill, Brooklyn, an area with one of the highest rates of drug use in the country and where few residents had white collar jobs, the school district was designated by the Board of Education as an educational demonstration project, among several in the city. This effort suffered from a lack of clear guidelines and expectations regarding funding. The Board of Education responded slowly to community concerns, aggravating the sense among parents that it was the adversary. The Board of Ocean Hill asserted itself by firing teachers it thought were hurting the project and hiring its own instead. The Teachers Union pushed for a strike which shutdown the whole public system of New York City for two weeks. This led to opposition from the Board of Education and to splits between black and Jewish leaders.

In an attempt to address the broad range of challenges afflicting Harlem, a major effort, the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU), was launched, funded by the Great Society. For two years, plans were developed to empower the young people of Harlem and to give them the tools they needed to improve their lives.

Rev. Eugene Callender of the venerable and powerful Church of the Master in Morningside Heights was chairman of the Board of HARYOU. He opened street academies, informal storefront schools

to help at risk youth to re-enter the educational system. When he became the head of the New York Urban League, he brought the academy staff with him. The National Urban League had been revived under the dynamic leadership of Whitney Young, a charismatic leader whose parents had been educators and from whom he had learned the very important skills of interacting successfully with white people who were in positions of authority. He used these skills to help advance the socioeconomic fortunes of black Americans. Though less well known than other civil rights leaders, he was among the most productive in terms of effecting real progress. Under him the Urban League became a force to be reckoned with.

One of the glaring needs in central Harlem was for a college preparatory high school for at-risk youth. To remedy this, Rev. Callender partnered with Manhattanville College, a school run by the Order of the Sacred Heart. This collaboration followed in the League's tradition of inter-racial fellowship.

The Vatican II council had revolutionized the work of the Catholic Church and all its orders became more involved in the life of the societies around them. Manhattanville already had a long Christian tradition of student volunteerism which included breaking down racial barriers. For decades, its students had served in neighborhoods in need such as Harlem. Sister McCormack, the president of the college, knew the prominent leaders in Harlem and decided to work with Rev. Callender on developing a college preparatory school in Central Harlem for at risk youth. She put the implementation of the project in the capable hands of Sister Ruth Dowd who was excited though nervous about her new responsibility.

In June of 1967, Rev. Callender and Sister McCormack signed a memorandum of understanding:

“To establish, conduct, operate and maintain a non-sectarian, private college preparatory school for boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 21 who have dropped out of school and who, in the opinion of the administration of the school can be motivated to complete a secondary education, to provide such education for such boys and girls and to develop liaison with a number of colleges eager and willing to accept such graduates.”

So began an alternative to the troubled public school system, the Harlem Prep school.

The school opened in an old armory with forty-nine students—over 200 had applied—and by the end of the year the enrollment topped seventy students. The efforts of that first year bore fruit when all of its students were accepted to colleges: the State University of New York, Fordham University, Berkeley, New York University, Wesleyan University, Vassar College, Utica College, and Park College. With the help of funding from the Mosler Foundation, Union Carbide, the Urban League, the Astor Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Coca-Cola, the school took up its permanent home in a refurbished supermarket with new furniture donated by the designer Herman Miller. The new space would allow the school to substantially increase its student size. The interior had a large open layout with a huge skylight through which light flooded in. The curriculum had a flexible design which included student input. The schedule was modular with classes of varying lengths.

Most importantly the Board of Harlem Prep found a dynamic leader in Ed Carpenter who had the ability to inspire others with a vision of improving the lives of young people. He didn't see the students as 'dropouts' but rather as 'force-outs', kids who had been pushed out by the indifference and tedium of the public system. Along with Ed, his capable wife, Ann, was hired. She worked tirelessly organizing the tedious details of school administration such as schedules, teacher training/supervision, and materials.

I heard about the Prep because of my association with Ed and Ann who were both Baha'is and whom I liked and admired greatly. One couldn't help but feel that way about both of them and be inspired by their vision for young people. My experience as an immigrant trying to eke out a living in hot and crowded kitchens, and the vilification I had weathered as a Baha'i in a small Iranian Shi'a-Muslim town, made me open to trying to understand the struggle of black Americans against racism and the Jim Crow state. Several of my idealist Iranian college friends who went with me to the March on Washington during the summer of '63 became inspired to consider this same kind of movement in Iran.

I brought to Harlem Prep the fruits of the excellent education I had received in Iran which had been traditional and demanding, along with openness to the spirit of the times with its paradigm-breaking ideas and approaches. When it came to education, I was a pragmatist and willing to wholeheartedly support the philosophy of the Prep if it could advance the lives of young people.

My views were influenced by the Baha'i teachings which emphasized the innate goodness in all human beings and their potential which could be realized through education:

“Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom”

(Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baba'u'llah*, 346)

I was also inspired by distinguished Baha'i educators. Dr. Stanwood Cobb founded the Chevy Chase Country Day School in 1919 and served as president of the Progressive Education Association which emphasized experiential learning, critical thinking, collaboration, social responsibility, and a more personalized form of education. Dr. Daniel Jordan developed a wholly new educational model, ANISA, in the 1960s-70s which took a holistic approach to education that sought to transmit knowledge in a cohesive, forward-looking framework grounded in reality and experience.

I started out at the Prep as a math teacher but was soon appointed assistant headmaster with the responsibility of hiring faculty among others. My work at the Prep was to keep the place running by applying for funding, managing the facilities, organizing the visits of guests who wished to see this

experimental school first hand, and putting out the many fires that came up during the regular day of a start-up school in a rough area. Once, a young man with a gun came into the school, angry at a student who owed him \$20. I approached him in a friendly manner, and he responded with “you’re no director”. I gave him the \$20, and he left. Later, he came back to the Prep as a student!”

I worked well with the Carpenters; I preferred to stay in the background, especially given the racial sensitivities of those times. The school was blessed with many talented individuals who were dedicated to the mission of the school and sacrificed greatly to assure the success of the students.

One of these was George “Sandy” Campbell who had considered a life in the priesthood but found too many inconsistencies in the Christian faith. His life took a decisive direction when he was hired to teach English at the Prep. He had found a place that was his true calling. At the same time he also became a Baha’i. So began six fruitful years of teaching in the English department of the Prep. His courses opened the minds of many of his students.

The sisters of Manhattanville College were essential to the successful founding and launch of the school and provided essential human resources. Because Vatican II mandated that the church become more involved directly in the life of society, they did not live in a convent but rather in an apartment in Harlem. They drove to school in an old Dodge, arriving earlier than any other staff and leaving later. They worked selflessly, even sometimes going so far as to contribute their own pay to the school. The New York Times chose Sister Dowd as one of its ‘women of the year’ for her crucial role in establishing the school.

John Czerniejewski was a gentle giant who had come from a Polish family and later became a Baha’i along with the rest of his family. Though he was a complete stranger to Harlem, he acted like he belonged there. Once during a stick-up he simply walked confidently around the young man as though nothing was happening. Nothing could dissuade him from his commitment to the school. In addition to his hearty laugh, his humorous stories, and his imitation of the Three Stooges, students appreciated his dedication to creating interesting science experiments for them.

A very young Naledi Raspberry arrived at Harlem Prep in 1970, barely older than her students. Having grown up in a sheltered environment in Kansas City and Vassar College, she found the world of Harlem to be much rougher than anything she had known. She rose to the occasion by encouraging her English and drama students to include their own experiences in their work; one class wrote a play together based on their lives. She also introduced them to live theater by taking them regularly to the National Black Theater located nearby.

The Prep was also a place of dynamic interaction and discussion. For many students these interactions were the most important learning experiences of the school day. Ed Carpenter insisted on courteous exchanges, so while the debates between students could get heated, they were always respectful and finished with everyone still friends. The school’s flexibly configured open spaces allowed for maximum interaction among students and the holding of school-wide assemblies which were rich in discussion. Guests included the very conservative William F. Buckley who exposed

students to the conservative point of view; Julius Lester, a liberal writer, photographer, radio host, and teacher, who was challenged by some students who found him insufficiently militant; and Sen. Jacob Javits, a prominent liberal Republican who supported the civil rights movement and worked to create the National Endowment for the Arts.

This vibrant school came under great pressure when the American economy and, consequently, public goodwill took a downturn in the 1970's. Corporations and foundations began to drastically limit their charitable contributions, and the city slid into recession. Traditional manufacturing had disappeared, people with money were leaving the city for the suburbs, city revenues dropped, the subway system became unsafe and unreliable, homeless people appeared everywhere, buildings were abandoned, Central Park came to be seen as unsafe, and even Times Square was filled with the squalor of the drug and sex trade. President Ford was reported as having essentially told the city to 'drop dead' when the Mayor asked for federal assistance.

The informal schools which had been set-up to help integrate students back into school called 'street academies' were imperiled. The Prep had to find a permanent source of funding. Despite its success—2,000 students were on its waiting list in 1970—the Prep struggled to maintain its sources of funding as corporations became leery of the free-wheeling nature of these 'street academies' with their inexperienced financial management. We held large fundraisers with Sammy Davis Jr., Melba Moore, Dizzy Gillespie, the Isley Brothers, and Bill Cosby. The distinguished Judge Mangum, whom I admired and who had often been the first black American appointed to senior positions during his career, worked hard for the Prep. He and I met regularly with others at a restaurant near his house to try and figure out how to save the school. The looming solution was to have it incorporated into the public system, an option that no one wanted because we were sure that it would stifle its innovative spirit.

A frequent visitor and enthusiastic supporter of the school was Dr. Dwight Allen, the Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Massachusetts. In those years he was in the forefront of innovation in education. Under him, the Graduate Program at Massachusetts grew to ninety full-time faculty including a great increase in minorities and women. He had insisted on being able to hire new people from related professions such as lawyers, physicists, and sociologists, to broaden the perspective of the school. A retreat that became part of school lore was held for the faculty in 1968 during which the entire school went to Colorado to brainstorm and debate fundamental changes to every aspect of the graduate program. This tradition continues on campus as a yearly weeklong 'School of Education Marathon' held with faculty, students and alumni, where new ideas based on recent research are presented and debated.

Allen had introduced distance learning as an option for graduate study, the idea being that successful professionals shouldn't have to leave their positions to go to classes. A committee could be set up which could supervise the work of the graduate students who then would only have to make periodic visits to campus. Harlem Prep was exactly the kind of school that Allen was interested in so he invited Ed and me to do our doctoral theses at the University. During his tenure as Dean, Allen attracted many students—especially minorities—to the education program. I wrote my doctorate on

the background, successes, and challenges of the Harlem Prep school. Over the course of several years, I made regular trips to the campus in Massachusetts, completing my degree in 1974.

In addition to my young and growing family, the important work of the Harlem Prep school, and my pursuit of a doctorate, I also became more engaged in the New York Baha'i community thanks in great part to my marriage to Tahereh who was very active.

The New York City Baha'i community was racially and ethnically diverse. The Persian believers were hard-working immigrants—dentists, jewelers, car mechanics, architects, bookkeepers, and dental technicians. The new American culture in which they lived could be confusing. There was a very devoted Persian couple, for example, who always wanted to be of service. We asked them to attend a Baha'i funeral in a funeral home as the presence of Persians would help the Persian family of the deceased. When they arrived at the home, they went into the first room and sat down. Black people filed in and a preacher arose to deliver a powerful eulogy, during which he held the Bible aloft in one hand and banged the lectern with the other. His passion subsiding, he invited everyone to come up and walk around the casket. The Persian couple rose to pay their respects only to notice that the deceased in the casket was a black person. Still, they wanted to make their contribution, and the Persian Baha'i lady chanted aloud the prayer for the Departed to everyone's surprise and, perhaps, bewilderment. Another area where cultural difference could be especially challenging was marriage. A young Persian friend of ours was having difficulty finding a wife as he was wholly unfamiliar with the dating game yet too removed from Iranian tradition to have an arranged marriage. We took him to Germany, bought him several suave outfits, and put him on a plane to Iran where he met a lady to his liking at a Baha'i feast, and they were married.

Our children, Linda and Bobby, remained lifelong friends with the Baha'i kids in the New York City Baha'i community. The Green Acre Baha'i School in Maine became a second home for our family. This property was blessed by 'Abdu'l-Baha and began life as a hotel owned by a progressive thinker and activist, Sarah Farmer, who dreamed of creating a center for thought and spirituality. After meeting 'Abdu'l-Baha in the Holy Land, she made Green Acre a center for the promotion of the social teachings of the Faith, most notably those on world peace and amity. The Master visited Green Acre during his trip across the United States. We were inspired by the feeling that he was present when we offered prayers in the room in which he had slept at the inn, re-named after its founder, the Sarah Farmer Inn.

I first became active in the community by following in my father and grandfather's footsteps and giving classes on *The Dawn-breakers*. This great chronicle was a challenge for American believers because of the hundreds of Persian names of people and towns and the theological issues and cultural realities in Persia which were so foreign to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The classes I gave were therefore very well-attended as the friends wanted to know about the historical origins of their Faith. They especially loved hearing the stories of early Babis such as Tahereh, Quddus, Mulla Husayn, and Vahid. The average attendance at the sessions varied between fifty and sixty people.

I was elected to the Spiritual Assembly of New York City and served as its Treasurer. During community presentations on the Fund, I used humor to make the reports less dry and encourage the friends to heed the fund appeals and thereby to contribute more. Where I had come from in Iran, serving on an Assembly was considered a great honor, so my father was very proud of me. My grandfather, Muhammad Husayn, had been the first secretary of the Assembly of Nayriz, and my father, who was an especially good writer and speaker, later served in this capacity as well. Like both of them, I also officiated at numerous weddings and eulogized many friends at their funerals, which helped me to get to know the Baha'i families on a more personal level.

Among my wonderful colleagues on the Assembly was Viola Wood, the daughter of a Baha'i couple from Milwaukee. Her father had been a successful dentist, which was no small feat for a black man in a white-dominated society. He continued to serve an underserved population through his practice. We thought of her as our angel because of her selfless service. Al Burley had grown up in Harlem to be an amateur boxer and a friend of Malcolm X. On the streets of his neighborhood in Harlem he had previously been known as 'stick-up' Burley, but his life was transformed by becoming a Baha'i. He developed a successful career as a photographer and captured the portraits of many of Harlem's elites. Artis Williams grew up in the oppressive racial atmosphere of the red clay country in Georgia. She migrated north to New York City where she became a Baha'i after experiencing inter-racial fellowship in the home of a Baha'i of Jewish background. Mort Mondschein, a brilliant and successful lawyer, who gave generously of his time along with his able wife Nancy and who later served as the first CFO at the Baha'i World Center. Wilma Ellis was from a family of distinguished American Baha'is who made important contributions to the local and national communities. She went on to be the head of the Baha'i International Community offices at the United Nations and to serve on the Continental Board of Counsellors for the Americas. Frances Merle Des Isles grew up in French Algeria, the son of a high official. A deeply mystical man, he had spent some of his early years living as a hermit. At his mosque, his teacher had told him that the day of the fulfillment of Islam had come, that Francis must go on a search and if he found the promised one of the age, he must write back to him. When Frances first heard of the Faith, possibly in Europe, he thought it was his duty to kill Baha'is but, in a powerful conversion experience, he instead became a devout Baha'i. Dr. Hooshmand Taraz, who owned a successful dental practice in Queens, was my true brother and the Chair of the Spiritual Assembly. We seemed to be able to accomplish much by working together. Helene Steinhauer was a reliable and hardworking member of the Assembly who was successful in making her way in New York City's book publishing business.

I enjoyed helping with our external affairs efforts in which the Baha'i community engaged the public. We hosted a public discussion on science and religion with Dr. William Hatcher and Isaac Azimov. Dr. Hatcher was a mathematician and philosopher who dedicated much effort to developing an original proof of the existence of God based on logic and a system of ethics that could apply across cultural boundaries. Azimov was one of the fathers of science fiction who imagined future worlds with their own histories and the prevalence of robots in society, even coining the term 'robotics'. Immensely prolific, he wrote hundreds of stories, novels, and non-

fiction works popularizing science and was always interested in engaging others in discussion even though he suffered from a certain fear of open spaces and crowds.

The Assembly was also active in building relationships with the Native American community, especially through the efforts of Eliane Hopson and Nadema Agard, a Native American artist living in the city. Baha'is participated in powwows in Long Island and invited Native Americans to the Baha'i center to celebrate their culture. The visit of a descendant of the Lakota chief Sitting Bull delighted Mr. Khadem who remembered that 'Abdu'l-Baha had said that when Indians entered the Cause, a glorious phase in the progress of the Faith would begin.

I got involved with the Association of Baha'i Studies at its inception. My friends Dr. Hussein Danesh, who served on the National Assembly of Canada, and his colleague on the Assembly, Dr. Douglas Martin, who later served on the Universal House of Justice, founded this association "to stimulate scholarly study of the Faith and its teachings, to promote a sound understanding of the Cause in academic circles and to demonstrate its relevance to the study of social issues"; as well as "to stimulate an appetite for learning within the Bahá'í community generally" within the context of the overall goals of the current plan of the Universal House of Justice. While I gave several presentations including one on Tahereh during the Association's early conferences, my main involvement was in raising funds to purchase its offices along with building its membership.

I also assisted with the establishment of the Office of Public Information. The Universal House of Justice decided to establish a Public Information Office as a centralized outlet from which information regarding the persecution of Baha'is in Iran could be disseminated. Douglas Martin, who was serving on the National Assembly of Canada, was appointed as its first Director. Soon, he was brought to the World Center in Haifa, and the New York City office was headed by Mary Hardy from the National Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom. Our lack of funds and experience challenged us but we managed to establish a working office from which the Baha'i International Community could speak with a single voice about the Baha'is in Iran. Locally, I was frequently interviewed about the Baha'i situation in Iran, especially after the Revolution of 1979.

Among the most rewarding assignments I carried out for the Faith was serving on the National Black Teaching Committee alongside my Harlem Prep colleague, Dr. Ann Carpenter, Dr. Wilma Ellis, and Dr. William Smith, an educator and filmmaker who founded an alternative school in Massachusetts. We all lived in the Northeast, making it easier for us to meet. In the early 1970s there had been widespread mass teaching in the South, especially in South Carolina. After numerous enrolments, there was a great need to help consolidate all the new believers, but we had few means to do so at the time. So we met with Assemblies of large communities to set up workshops and developed a more systematic approach under the guidance of the National Assembly to follow-up with new declarants. The Louis Gregory Institute near Hemingway, South Carolina, one of the national community's permanent schools, was our main base of operations. Its director was the distinguished Baha'i, Caswell Ellis, Wilma's brother, who later was the director of the House of Worship in Wilmette.

My most lasting contribution as the treasurer of the Assembly was the purchasing of a Baha'i Center. For decades, the Baha'i community in the city had wandered from one inadequate location to another. The Assembly decided to look for a permanent home. Juliette and William Soderberg, who knew real estate in Manhattan, helped find possible locations, and then Hooshmand Taraz and I scouted them out, and Mort Mondschein helped with all of the legal matters. Obviously, such an undertaking required funds, so Baha'is rallied enthusiastically to the effort.

Every year we had large fundraising dinners for which people dressed elegantly. One fundraising dinner was especially memorable because it involved a wedding ring I gave to Tahereh. When we were first married, we had very little money, so all I could present her with was a \$10 fake diamond ring. Some years later when we were far better off financially, I bought a real wedding ring—this time worth several thousand dollars. One day, though, Tahereh was showing it to her parents in our son's room, and it slipped from her fingers. We looked everywhere for the ring but we could not find it. In the days before the fundraiser, my brother Masoud called to tell me that while moving an office chair we had given to him, the ring tumbled out. At the fundraiser, I gave an especially moving plea to sacrifice for the fund, not anticipating that Tahereh, in her devotion, would donate the wedding ring as an item for auction. The ring sold for thousands of dollars and was bought by my dear friend Hooshmand Taraz. The custom among Persians when buying a personal item is to return it to the owner. But Hooshmand was courting a woman from England at the time and presented her with our wedding ring so that every time I saw her—she later became his wife—I thought of Tahereh's wedding ring that slipped through our hands.

Along with Hooshmand and me, Baha'is at all income levels participated, with some even giving their social security checks. Al Burley, for example, gave a portion of his salary saying that Baha'u'llah was the better bookie.

Ruhiyyih Khanum joined in the spirit during one of her visits and gave a personal contribution. After hearing the tally at the end of the evening, she asked me how I could ever expect to buy a Baha'i center. Borah Khavelin, a member of the Universal House of Justice and a former New York real estate executive, encouraged us. He participated in our large fundraisers because there were also efforts underway at the time to build the Zunuzi Baha'i School in Haiti and the seat of the Universal House of Justice.

By 1976 and against all odds, we had a Baha'i Center. Hooshmand and I negotiated to purchase a three-story building from Grove Press that included an auditorium on the ground floor. The Press began as a publisher of avant-garde works from Europe and challenged the standards of the times by publishing erotica and left-wing revolutionaries' works. Never one to back down, Grove Press sued the U.S. Post Office when its complete edition of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned from being shipped by mail. The ensuing victory in a higher court brought it much publicity. The Press's fortunes grew over the next years and, eager to find a larger location, it sold us their building at 53 East 11th St. in Greenwich Village for an excellent price.

The Assembly and community settled into its new home and were greatly aided by loving and hardworking caretakers. The first were an Iranian couple who had been pioneers in Spain, the Barghasas, whose radiance and warmth greatly affected visitors to the center. In addition they were able to find volunteers and carry out needed renovations downstairs which included the removal of a room-length bar. Mehdi Rajabzadeh, the former owner of a successful carpet factory, one of the biggest in Iran, moved in later. He was deeply interested in the numerology of the Faith and spent long hours creating intricate charts of the relationships between events in Baha'i and world history. His friendly and gentle spirit was also a source of great attraction.

So there, above 11th St, a large green flag with the word 'Baha'i' on it fluttered in front of the Baha'i Faith's first permanent home in the heart of New York City, one of the great cities of the West. I had come all the way from the small rural town of Nayriz and emerged from the difficult struggle of so many immigrants to find my place amidst the exciting turbulence of the times and make my contribution with the Harlem Prep school and the work of the Baha'i community in my new country. How the Faith moves in such powerful yet hidden ways.

Chapter 9 Life is Beautiful

Over the course of my life, I've had the privilege of being around leading lights of the Baha'i Faith, including several Hands of the Cause.

This institution has existed since the time of Baha'u'llah but was greatly expanded during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi due to the ever increasing needs of the Faith. These highly esteemed individuals were to propagate and protect the Faith at all levels and to work collaboratively with the elected Assemblies.

Hand of the Cause Ruhyyih Khanum visited New York City several times, usually when she was in transit to somewhere else. I was often tasked with organizing meetings for the numerous believers who wanted to meet her and with shielding her from their enthusiasm when necessary. The first time I introduced her to a large gathering, I was very nervous. Fortunately, Borah Kavelin was there. By that time, he had been elected to the Universal House of Justice after having served the Faith in the United States for many years. Of Russian-Jewish background, Mr. Kavelin knew New York City well because he worked as a successful real estate developer in the city after giving up his career as an opera singer due to the Great Depression. He filled me in on the important details of Ruhyyih Khanum's life.

Ruhyyih Khanum was born to May Bolles, who had first met 'Abdu'l-Baha in the Holy Land in 1898. Phoebe Hearts, who knew the Bolles family, had planned the pilgrimage and when she passed through Paris, she found May Maxwell in a very low point in her life, so she decided that the change of air would help. Lua Getsinger explained to May Bolles, who was not yet a Baha'i, that the real purpose of the trip was to meet this great spiritual figure, 'Abdu'l-Baha. May Bolles returned to Paris a changed person, on fire with love for 'Abdu'l-Baha, and taught the Faith to several people including Thomas Breakwell, the first English Baha'i, and Juliet Thompson. She married and moved to Montreal where she opened the first Baha'i Center, the first Montessori school, and was active in children's organizations in the broader community. In 1927, she began serving on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada and the United States. Shoghi Effendi named her a martyr for the Cause when she passed away in 1940 while on a travel teaching trip.

Sutherland Maxwell, Ruhyyih Khanum's father, had studied architecture in Boston and Paris before returning to his native Canada to join a practice. He had heard of the Faith through Mason Remey and May Bolles's brother. After marrying May Bolles, he met 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1909 and became a devout Baha'i. The Maxwell home in Montreal had been blessed by having the Master as a guest. Following her death, he moved to Haifa where he became Shoghi Effendi's constant collaborator in designing stairs, walls, pillars, lights, and garden entrances, which culminated in the timeless design of the Shrine of the Bab with its echoes of the East and the West.

Her marriage with Shoghi Effendi was a uniting of the East and the West. Shoghi Effendi's mother wrote:

“Announce Assemblies celebration marriage beloved Guardian. Inestimable honour conferred upon handmaiden of Bahá’u’lláh Rúhiyyih Khánum Miss Mary Maxwell. Union of East and West proclaimed by Bahá’í faith cemented. Ziaiyyih mother of the Guardian”

Ruhiyyih Khanum was educated in Canada’s first Montessori school which her mother had founded to accommodate her daughter’s free spirit. She grew up into an active and dedicated Baha’i youth and met with Shoghi Effendi on her pilgrimages. After she became Shoghi Effendi’s consort, her life revolved around assisting him with the numerous vital tasks with which he was burdened as the Guardian of the Baha’i world, such as answering the constant stream of letters from believers, researching and proofreading *God Passes By*, hosting an ever-growing number of pilgrims, being a sounding board for ideas on a range of topics and a source of support, and helping with the household’s needs and chores, among many others. After the sudden passing of Shoghi Effendi and despite the tremendous heartbreak she felt, Ruhiyyih Khanum served as one of the Hands of the Cause who directed and coordinated the affairs of the Faith from Haifa during the interim period before the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963.

Some years later, I was far better equipped to introduce Ruhiyyih Khanum when she was passing through the city on another trip. This time, I prepared extensively, taking copious notes, and my introduction went on for ten minutes. When Ruhiyyih Khanum came up to speak she looked over the audience and told them that Hussein had not left her any time to speak, and that the only thing he had left out was "the name of my elementary school teacher". Her talk was full of humor and sweetness, and she deftly mixed in Persian, which she spoke well.

Far from being a remote figure, Ruhiyyih Khanum was delightful company and refreshingly genuine in her manner. She was a fascinating conversationalist. In 1976, over many meals in the rich company of her travelling companion and aide, Violette Nakhjavani, her cousin Mary Walker from Bermuda, and Mr. Kavelin, we discussed the Green Light Expedition. This film chronicled her travels by boat on the tributaries of the Amazon River and her treks across the high mountain ranges of Peru and Bolivia during which she encountered thirty-six tribal groups.

While she edited the footage into a final version, she stayed outside of New York City in the home of Mildred Mottahedeh. Mrs. Mottahedeh owned a porcelain reproduction company with her husband Rafi and did much to advance the Faith around the world, including starting schools in India. Ruhiyyih Khanum loved the city’s vibrant energy and wished that Baha’is would place greater importance on the Master’s time there.

She had a parrot with her on that visit which she had acquired in South America and wanted to have transported to Haifa. I found out that a young Baha’i was travelling to the Holy Land on pilgrimage and leaving from New York City so Ruhiyyih Khanum, Violet Nakjavani, and I hurried out to the airport, ran across the concourse to the departure area and found the young pilgrim. To his astonishment, here was Ruhiyyih Khanum—wife of the Guardian of the Faith—giving him a parrot

in a cage to take to the Holy Land and asking him to talk to the bird on the flight because otherwise it might become depressed.

Ruhiyyih Khanum contacted me on another occasion from Haifa. The World Center was preparing to host the Counsellors from around the world for their very first conclave and a large capacity coffee urn was needed. I found one and called Bob Harris who was serving as the Counsellor for our area. He took the large urn on the flight, but, while changing planes in Rome, the Israeli security agents pulled him into an interrogation room for several hours to question him about the large coffee urn which he was carrying to make sure it was not some sort of dangerous device, because, why would anyone be travelling with an urn.

Ruhiyyih Khanum was direct, a quality which I found refreshing even if sometimes surprising when it was directed at me. Once while on pilgrimage, some of our belongings were stolen out of our hotel room. We told Ruhiyyih Khanum later about it over tea who said that she had never heard of such a thing at that hotel in all the years she had lived in Haifa. Tahereh volunteered that I had not locked the door, at which point Ruhiyyih Khanum looked at me and asked, "Are you crazy?" Another time, we came up to a puddle in the street on a rainy day, and I proffered my arm to her out of politeness, but she pushed me aside and asked me where had I been when she was in Africa. At a dinner party, she listened to me tell a few jokes of which she did not approve and then told me to be quiet. One day I chauffeured her to a meeting with the Secretary General of the UN. I had put on my finest suit, even going so far as to don a tie. Once upstairs in the meeting room she told me to sit and wait, and they would come to get me when the meeting was over. Of course, I was no part of this official delegation, but I was crushed nevertheless.

Hand of the Cause Mr. Tarazu'llah Samandari was a distinguished Baha'i and elder statesman of the Cause whom I had known since my childhood in Nayriz. This great teacher of the Faith was the last person living to have seen Baha'u'llah in person. Over decades of travel teaching, he inspired believers by recounting his experiences of seeing the Manifestation of God in the Garden of Ridvan outside of Akka while He was revealing Tablets to the believers. He lived to be 93 years old.

We were at a meeting together once in Chicago, and I assisted him to the stage. He was exhausted due to his advanced age, but when he began speaking about the Faith, he came alive, speaking in a fluid Persian which was ably translated into English by Marzieh Gail. On another occasion we were at a meeting at the Baha'i Cabin in Teaneck, New Jersey, just a few months before he passed away. As he huffed and puffed to make it up the stairs, he turned to me and said, "Hussein jan, sometimes I wish God would just take me."

I had known Hand of the Cause Mr. Ali Akbar Furutan since my childhood when I caused him so much aggravation, and still he was always patient with me. A graduate of the University of Moscow, he founded the Baha'i school which I attended. By the 1930s, he was serving on the National Assembly of Iran and knew my father who attended the National Conventions as a delegate from Nayriz.

I drove Mr. Furutan once to a summer school. I was speeding down the highway when Hooshmand Taraz leaned over and told me to slow down or I would kill a Hand of the Cause, but Mr. Furutan interjected that I could go as fast as I wanted because he would go only when his time had come. Because of the jokes I was telling in the car, though, he laughed so hard that he choked so we pulled over and loosened his tie.

He was beloved by Persian believers throughout the world who knew him from his many years of service as the secretary of the National Assembly. Fortunately for me and my family, he graced our home at several dinner parties. His talks inspired the Baha'is in New York City, and his meetings with the local Assembly honored the institution. A humble man, he refused to be put up in first rate hotels despite our offers and entreaties, instead insisting on less expensive housing.

Among the first people to welcome me into the New York Baha'i community was Hand of the Cause Mr. Zikru'llah Khadem who had been serving as a Hand since the early '50s and was the first one to reside in the West. He loved Shoghi Effendi so much that whenever he spoke of him he teared up, and he travelled to dozens of countries—among the most of any Hand of the Cause—on the Guardian's behalf. He was much loved by the friends for his sweetness and deep spirituality.

Though I didn't know Hand of the Cause Mr. William Sears nearly as well as the Hands from Persia, I had the privilege of assisting him on several occasions. He had left a successful radio broadcasting career to heed the call of the Ten-Year Crusade and pioneer to Southern Africa. Mr. Sears greatly influenced American Baha'is. His book, *Thief in the Night*, which explained Biblical prophecy regarding the year 1844 in an easy narrative style, led many people to investigate the Faith. I was fortunate enough to be able to organize public talks for him at the local school down the street from the Baha'i Center. He spoke in a soothing almost grandfatherly voice, something he had honed during his years as a radio broadcaster. After his talks, which included appeals for funds for the renovation and expansion of the Louhelen Baha'i School in Michigan, we walked around the area to the sites associated with the Master.

On the rare occasions that Hand of the Cause Enoch Olinga came to New York City, I had the honor to act as one of his guides. After becoming a Baha'i during classes given by Ali Nakhjavani, Mr. Olinga became a driving force in the growth of the Faith in Cameroon and Uganda. So many people became Baha'is in the Cameroon and then pioneered to open other areas that Mr. Olinga was called "Father of Victories". The youngest person to be appointed a Hand of the Cause, he continued his service on an international scale. At the First Baha'i World Congress in 1963, he greeted all the Baha'is in the opening address of the first session. He then returned to East Africa and travel taught extensively. During his visit to New York City, he asked me if he could meet Dizzy Gillespie. I found out that Dizzy was playing at an upscale jazz club in Harlem. When we entered the smoky club, Dizzy saw Mr. Olinga and announced that here was the conqueror of Africa and that he had written a piece in his honor titled "Olinga" which he would now play. Most people looked around thinking Mr. Olinga was some head of state. After we sat down, bottles of alcohol appeared on the table, and I had to explain to the waiter that we wouldn't need them. The murder of

Mr. Olinga and members of his family in 1979 during Uganda's political turmoil broke my heart along with those of all who loved him around the world.

Hand of the Cause Dr. Muhajir visited New York City often. He travelled all over inspiring mass teaching efforts. During his four years of pioneering in Indonesia in the 1950s, numerous Assemblies were founded and thousands of people declared their belief in the Baha'i Faith. I was struck by Dr. Muhajir's humility and simplicity; for example, he could sleep anywhere. When he needed a rest, he took off his suit jacket, lay down on the couch, and folded his jacket to use it as a pillow. I had much to learn from such a holy soul because after his passing, I dreamed that there was a memorial for him and Mr. Olinga in the House of Worship. When I tried to enter, I was sent downstairs to the back entrance, and when I asked why, I was told that it was for my purification.

Hand of the Cause Mr. Varqa came to New York City to educate the friends about Huquq'u'llah. He was following in his father's footsteps who had also been a Hand of the Cause and a Trustee of Huquq'u'llah; his grandfather was named an Apostle of Baha'u'llah. Mr. Varqa was well-known to the Persian believers because he served in Iran for many years after earning his doctoral degree in Paris. He travelled widely for Shoghi Effendi including being present at first-time National Conventions of several Baha'i national communities.

Hand of the Cause Mr. Faizi was the closest of any Baha'i to what I imagined the Master to be like. He had great sweetness and chanted in a melodious voice. A graduate of the Tarbiyyat Baha'i School in Tihiran, he went on to study at the American University in Beirut where he met Shoghi Effendi. During his years of service in Iran, he was active in teaching children and youth, including preparing more than thirty youth to be Baha'i travel teachers and pioneers. I had the great fortune of meeting him several times, including while on pilgrimage. Linda was five at that time, and Mr. Faizi showed great kindness to her. He later left a handwritten Tablet in our hotel mailbox for her in his own beautiful calligraphy.

Hand of the Cause John Robarts came to New York and spoke with the Baha'is about the importance of the Long Obligatory Prayer, a prayer which was very dear to his heart. He was appointed a Hand in 1957 and subsequently travelled extensively to countries as disparate as Japan, Southern Rhodesia, Jamaica, and the New Hebrides, among many others.

Hand of the Cause Mr. Khazeh stayed with Hooshmand Taraz during his New York visits and graced our home at several dinners. This imposing man had been one of the highest ranking colonels in Iran before being appointed a Hand of the Cause by Shoghi Effendi in 1953. After his appointment, he underwent a complete change from being a powerful figure of authority who commanded people to a humble servant.

Hand of the Cause Mr. Collis Featherstone regaled us in a thick Australian accent with many stories during his stays in our home. As a young Baha'i he had corresponded frequently with Shoghi Effendi and went on to serve on the National Assembly of Australia. He had been a part-owner in an engineering firm which gave him the necessary flexibility to allow him to make frequent visits to Baha'i communities throughout Australasia and Asia in his role as a Hand of the Cause.

The 1970s became an ominous decade for the Baha'is of Iran as the Shi'a clerical establishment tightened the noose around the Peacock Throne. The Shah's grip on power was eroding fast though many in power could not see just how fast. By 1978, widespread strikes broke out and, at the beginning of 1979, much to the surprise of the world outside of Iran, the Shah was driven out of the country, and the new Islamic government took over. Years of murderous reprisals ensued against all people associated with the former regime and other perceived enemies. These included the Baha'is.

The government of Iran carried out a coordinated campaign to remove the Baha'i Faith completely from public life which included firing all Baha'is in governmental posts and debarring them from participation in the country's economic, cultural, and social life. Lacking any legal protections, attacks were carried out against individual Baha'is throughout the country. High-level officials of the new regime were directly linked to these efforts.

Baha'is were executed simply for being Baha'is. The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center documented 207 such cases between the years 1979 and 1987. Twenty-two Baha'is in Shiraz were detained, tried in secret in a prison without benefit of counsel, and executed in 1983. Bahman Samandari was tried and convicted of treason without any semblance of due process:

“...tried by an Islamic revolutionary court without the assistance of a lawyer, sentenced following summary proceedings and executed. Such a situation was completely contrary to the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which provides minimal due process standards]...It was not sufficient that there should be a judgment; a number of guarantees must also be met.”¹⁸

Baha'is were tortured just for being Baha'is. In Hamadan, the corpses of seven Baha'is who had been executed had broken bones and burn marks. In Shiraz, Baha'is underwent mock executions and lashings as the state attempted to extract information regarding the wider Baha'i community.

Baha'i Assemblies were targeted for elimination. In 1981, all nine members of the Baha'i National Assembly of Iran, and in 1984 and 1986, the majorities of the memberships of the National Assembly were executed. All forms of Baha'i administration were banned. In 2009, after a decades-long ban on regular Baha'i administration, the Attorney General of Iran announced that *any* affiliation with the Baha'i Faith was illegal, effectively dismantling recent attempts by Baha'is to organize their communities in the form of the 'Yaran'.¹⁹

Baha'is were systematically and arbitrarily imprisoned without being informed of the charges against them or receiving a timely trial with adequate legal representation. The usual charge was that of spying and Zionism, using the fact that the Baha'i World Center was located in Israel as the primary

¹⁸ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *Crimes against Humanity: The Islamic Republic's Attacks on the Baha'is*, 2008

¹⁹ <http://www.iranpresswatch.org/2009/03/najafabadi-moi/>

piece evidence. Numerous Baha'i youth in Shiraz, for example, were imprisoned for participating in a literacy campaign that the authorities considered to be anti-government propaganda.

Baha'i properties and businesses were plundered and stolen without any form of compensation.

Baha'i cemeteries were plowed under, including the ones in Nayriz and Shiraz that contained the remains of many of my relatives. Years later, I wrote an article for a New York newspaper decrying this:

“I lost a dear aunt, many years ago. Today, her burial site is at risk of being callously destroyed—bulldozed together with more than 900 graves. Although I knew of attacks on Baha'i cemeteries in Iran, at least 43 since 2005, I was stunned to learn that in April, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards in Iran began excavating the Baha'i cemeteries in Shiraz where five of my relatives are buried, including my aunt. ... The cemetery in Shiraz is the resting place of 950 members of this religious minority—some Baha'is were buried 160 years ago. Among them are 10 women hanged in 1983 for teaching children's classes. The youngest was 17-year old Mona Mahmudnizhad.

My aunt, Eshraghieh, is the most recent relative to be buried there. Despite living under a government that discriminates against Baha'is, she raised her children to welcome all people and taught me about selflessness and compassion.

I miss my aunt, who died at 39 while I was attending college in the United States. I still wish I could have attended her funeral. She was laid to rest next to her mother, brother and sister. I had hoped to visit their remains, but I can't: I have been outspoken about the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran and visiting there would be risky. According to media reports, remains have been removed from as many as 50 graves and placed in a canal. In June, the Revolutionary Guards made public their progress in clearing the site to build a cultural and sports complex.

...The destruction of the cemetery in Shiraz is emblematic of the cradle-to-grave persecution of the Baha'is, which continues despite last year's election of a self-proclaimed moderate to the presidency. What makes this destruction even more disturbing is the presence of empty land next to the cemetery that could be used for the same purpose for which the authorities claim the Baha'i cemetery land is needed: building a sports complex.

... I pray the remains of people everywhere, regardless of faith, will no longer be targets of fanatics and that those of my aunt, of Mona Mahmudnizhad, and all Baha'is buried in Shiraz are accorded the same respect due to every citizen.”²⁰

²⁰ Hussein Ahdieh, “Iran's cradle-to-grave persecution”, *Newsday*, August 8, 1914

These intensified and organized attacks on Baha'is, their institutions, their properties, and their livelihoods, the attempts to banish them from all Iranian civic and public life, and the political reprisals against other sectors of society resulted in a great brain drain for the nation as much of Iran's professional middle class fled for safety and opportunity mostly to the West and Australia..

The bloody Iran-Iraq war that broke out in 1980 caused many men of military age to leave the country. More than ten thousand were granted political asylum in the United States alone. By the late '80s, Iran was the tenth highest country as a source of refugees, many of whom were from religious minorities and unlike the previous wave of Iranian immigrants, saw themselves as settling permanently in their new countries.

Baha'is were part of the exodus from Iran. There was no established system in the Baha'i community at the time to help these new arrivals. New York City was one of the points of entry, so the Assembly there had to get involved. I interviewed numerous Iranians on behalf of the Assembly to ascertain the legitimacy of their claims. Usually if they showed some clear lack of knowledge regarding the basics of the Baha'i community, such as referring to the Universal of the Justice as 'their holiness', this was a sign that their claims to being Baha'is were false. Most, of course, were truly Baha'is. Thankfully, the New York community had Iranian Baha'is who had already been settled there for some time and who could give valuable assistance to their fellow Baha'i countrymen. Other communities in California and Texas were overwhelmed by all the new arrivals. The organization called Freedom House provided Baha'i refugees with much needed assistance. The regular visits of Mr. Khadem and Mr. Furutan gave the new arrivals from Iran hope and reassurance. Persian scholars of the Faith came to New York City to deepen them. A Persian language Baha'i magazine, Payyam-i-Badi, was begun for that same purpose. We organized a large gathering to draw attention to the plight of the Baha'is in Iran. A spacious hall at the Hilton was rented for a large memorial to honor the martyrs of Iran which was attended by over a thousand people. There were even rumors that agents of Khomeini would be there and cause harm, but we proceeded anyway, and the evening proved successful in bringing attention to the suffering of the friends in Iran.

There were Baha'i friends who missed their homeland and wanted to return, but I was not one of them—the memories of the harshness with which my family and I had been treated while growing up, the antagonism stoked by mullahs against Baha'is, and the oppressiveness of the political regime had been too much, and I was glad to make my way in the United States. One of my friends returned with his wife to Iran where he became an important government official. One day, I met his wife on the streets of New York City, and, surprised to see her there, I asked why she was not in Iran. She told me that while in Iran her husband had been involved in a minor car accident and the other driver got out of his car and beat her husband severely. She and her husband decided that if such violence simmered beneath the surface in everyday Iran, they were better off in New York City. In their new countries, Baha'is from Iran quickly entered the educated, professional class. My family was one such example.

Tahereh prepared for her medical boards in the early '70s by returning to the quiet of her home in Shiraz, Iran. She passed the exams and started work as a doctor at Mount Sinai Queens, a community hospital in New York, located in the Astoria section of Queens. We had two children, Bobby and Linda, who would go on to excel in school, attending the prestigious Hunter High School and Bronx Science respectively. I earned a PhD from the University of Massachusetts and worked at assistant Head of School at Harlem Prep and then as a Dean at Fordham University.

To truly enter the American middle class we needed to buy a house. I called my mother in Tihran to whom I had previously sent \$5,000 to buy land there as an investment. She went to the realtor and sold the land, but on her way out her purse, containing the cash, was stolen by two men on a motorcycle which greatly upset her. I ended up sending her another \$5,000 to help calm her down. Despite this setback, we were able to make the down payment on our first home, a Tudor style house in the decidedly middle to upper middle class neighborhood of Douglastown, Queens, on the border of Long Island. The neighborhood had sections that resembled the leafy suburbs more than the typical New York City neighborhood. In the backyard we had a small pool, and soon our suburban picture was complete with a Labrador and a Great Dane who were driven crazy by our cat. One afternoon during a backyard barbeque, the Great Dane went into the kitchen and ate through much of our food. I became a real American homeowner going so far as to walk these dogs during my evening strolls through the neighborhood. I always stopped to chat with neighbors who were always gracious and loving towards us even in 1979 when Iranians were very unpopular in the United States.

During these years I was also able to travel a good deal to conferences to give talks. My parents and in-laws would sit in the front row looking on proudly as I spoke though they could not understand the numerous jokes I told throughout my presentations.

Tahereh created a rhythm of Baha'i life in our home. In addition to taking our children out from school for Holy Days and going to their schools for Ayyam-i-Ha, she trained them in the practice of daily prayer, to give to the fund, and to attend feast, and she read stories to them about the Faith. The children regularly attended sessions for children at Green Acre Baha'i School in Eliot, Maine, which became like a second home to them. Bobby and Linda also benefitted greatly from having Tahereh's parents there to look after them with such love. We were fortunate enough also to make a pilgrimage as a family to the Baha'i Shrines in Israel.

Tahereh made sure that a photo of Abdul-Baha was visible in each room and that Baha'i books were placed all over the house. We welcomed many Baha'i guests and friends from diverse backgrounds. She also modelled Baha'i behavior to them by refraining from backbiting, carrying out her personal spiritual obligations, and being active in Baha'i community life.

We taught the Faith by opening our home to all people so our children experienced the oneness of humankind in practice. Our wonderful American neighbors visited with us often, and we with them; they swam with us in our pool and looked after our dogs when we were gone. Our block was a very supportive environment.

I was grateful during those years that we could provide a home for my father and give him the joy of spending afternoons on the playground with his grandchildren. Though only in his late 50s, the stress of having lived in Iran under the welter of the day-in and day-out harassment by Muslims had taken its toll. He had experienced a lifetime of frustration which showed on his face and his body. He seemed pre-occupied with the next world and often spoke about the glories of the Abha Kingdom.

I was also grateful in a sense that he had been spared seeing what the Islamic Revolution did to Iran and its Baha'is. Nightly he toiled on his memoirs of the history of the Faith in Nayriz and of his experiences there. He wrote the same way he chanted—in a Persian that flowed. One evening after attending feast, he reached the end of his written testimony, signed it and, later that night, passed away in his sleep.

Along with the Hands of the Cause, my father had been my leading light as a Baha'i who had demonstrated resilience in the face of tests, knowledge of the Teachings when confronted by ignorance, and dedication to the progress of the Cause despite persecution, and I was grateful that he passed away in comfort in my new home in my new country.

Epilogue

“.....Should they attempt to conceal its light on the continent, it will assuredly rear its head in the midmost heart of the ocean, and, raising its voice, proclaim: 'I am the life-giver of the world!' ”
(Baha’u’llah, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in ‘The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters’)

When the sun rose on Samoa in the midmost heart of the Pacific Ocean, the greenery scintillated from the rains that nourished it.

Women and men moved up the path laid out in diamond shaped patterns through the gardens planted with sixty different species of flowers, plants, and trees all native to Samoa, to the House of Worship, hundreds of meters above sea level.

Inside the nine-sided space of clean white walls and dark wooden benches, a dome made up of ribs through which the island sun lit the interior reached up into a nine-pointed star. The King of Samoa, Malietoa Tanumafili II, and the Hand of the Cause of God Amatu’l-Baha Ruhiiyyih Khanum, welcomed the people of Samoa and the Pacific to worship, the acoustics of the temple magnifying their human voices:

“Not only is the raising up of this House of Worship a further significant fulfillment of the Blessed Beauty's promise, it also presages a brilliant future in the Pacific for His Faith, whose quickening light is casting its rays on the peoples of this vast ocean.”

Reading about the opening of the new Baha’i House of Worship in Samoa, I—along with many Iranian-Baha’i emigrants and refugees—saw that Baha’u’llah, as He had promised, had raised up believers in the midmost heart of the ocean in a region completely dissimilar to our native Iran which had rejected Him, including the small agricultural town of Nayriz with its dirt streets and mean-spiritedness in which I had grown up. On that September 1st 1984, the King of Samoa and members of his family, Hand of the Cause Ruhiiyyih Khanum, representatives of 16 national assemblies, dignitaries from the Samoan government, representatives of the established churches on the island, and over a thousand Baha’is from forty-five countries, gathered to celebrate the opening of the first Baha’i House of Worship on a Polynesian island.

Two years later, Tahiri and I and thousands of other Baha’i pilgrims from all over the world travelled to New Delhi, India, for the opening of the mother temple of the Indian subcontinent. We streamed over red brick walkways through its gardens with ponds of water towards the temple with its lotus petals made out of gleaming white stone from Greece which had been the same building materials used for monuments in the ancient world. Inside, the 40-metre high central hall reverberated with classical Indian ragas combined into songs composed and performed by the Indian classical music master Ravi Shankar especially for this opening.

On a video we watched some years later, we saw Baha'i groups on the Pacific island of Vanuatu actively engaged in community-building activities with the result being a transformation of their local communities. We could see in the faces of the Baha'is a great joy which was the fruit of their spiritual labor and which contrasted to me so much with my memory of the sad society I had known in Nayriz.

Over these years, we could see clearly in so many examples how the tree of the Cause was growing all over the world, and we knew that it had been watered by the blood of the martyrs in Iran.

In the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the clergy consolidated its grip on power by attacking its enemies real and perceived which included kidnapping and killing the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran in the misguided hope that, by 'cutting off the head' of the Faith in Iran, the rest of the Baha'is would give up. Almost half of all Baha'is executed in those years were members of institutions.

Yusuf Sobhani, my friend, was executed on June 27, 1980. He was a manager at the Pepsi Cola company which brought him to the attention of the authorities. His death was witnessed by his sister. The only charge brought against him was being a Baha'i. Well-known to the Tehran Baha'is because of his service as the caretaker of the House of Baha'u'llah in that city, Yusuf's family members had become believers in the time of the Bab when several of His followers were passing through their hometown of Sangsar, a place where people had a reputation for bravery, on their way west to join Mullah Husayn and those riding under the black standard. Years later, Yusuf served on the Baha'i Assembly of Sangsar and was frequently asked by the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran because of his reliability to carry out important tasks. His family urged him to emigrate for his own safety but he felt he could be more useful in Iran where he met his martyrdom.

A physically strong and gutsy man who loved sports and wrestling, he exercised for one hour every morning and took a cold bath. The other prisoners and the guards had come to respect him, and on the day before his execution, family, and friends came to visit him but he showed no fear. He was happy. He told his wife not to wear a black dress once he was gone and to bring candies to prison and give them to the guards. His sister's husband, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, who later was imprisoned with a 20-year sentence for being a member of the Yaran, was trembling, so he asked him, my dear friend, it is me whom they are going to kill me, why are you the one shaking?

Rosita Eshraqi, my wife Tahirih's relative, visited her father who was in prison. He was happy for her because she had just gotten engaged and told her that even if he was not there for the celebration, that his love would always be with her. The next day as Rosita was busy with her engagements plans, guards came to get him and five other Baha'i prisoners for a court appearance, but the men knew there was no court scheduled for that day. Two days later, a few Baha'i friends came to Rosita's house looking very distressed, and she knew. "My father, my dear father" she wept, as she leaned on the wall and slid down to the floor.

At the morgue, her family was only allowed to see her father's body and that only after begging a guard whom they had known for years. Stepping in to the morgue's holding room, she saw seven bodies lying on the floor and recognized her father. She stepped towards him, eyes fixated, and tripped over a corpse. She leaned over to kiss her father's face which was cold to the touch of her lips, repeating through her tears, "Oh God, is this my father?" His body was so swollen that she could not see the rope marks on his neck. His arms, though, lay tranquilly by his side, and a smile had remained fixed on his face. Backing out of the room, she shivered uncontrollably.

Rosita went to give the news about her father's execution to her mother and sister who were also in prison. Before she had even picked up the phone in the prisoner meeting room, they knew something was wrong. Her sister's eyes filled with tears and then a smile spread across her face. Rosita was amazed at their strength. Her mother related a dream in which they were all reunited, and she told her to be strong, to be happy, and to go on and live her life. She was leaving Rosita in God's Hands now. Rosita could see light shining in the eyes of her sister and mother that she had never seen before.²¹ Both were later executed.

In 1982, the Universal House of Justice wrote about these executions and the suffering of the Iranian Baha'is:

"Every drop of blood shed by the valiant martyrs, every sigh heaved by the silent victims of oppression, every supplication for divine assistance offered by the faithful, has released, and will continue mysteriously to release, forces over which no antagonist of the Faith has any control, and which, as marshalled by an All-Watchful Providence, have served to noise abroad the name and fame of the Faith to the masses of humanity in all continents..."²²

The sacrifice of these Baha'is brought the Faith to worldwide attention, helping it to emerge out of obscurity. Iranian Baha'is migrated to every continent in the world, building Baha'i communities, attaining the highest levels of education, starting profitable businesses, and achieving excellence in a variety of professions. Families from my small, insignificant hometown of Nayriz achieved material and spiritual prosperity in their new countries; three members of the Universal House of Justice could trace some of their family lineages back there: Ali Nakhjavani, Adib Taherzadeh, and Ayman Rouhani.

These families included my own immediate one. Tahirih, my wife, developed a successful medical practice in New York City and served the Faith with great devotion and humility, for many years as an Auxiliary Board Member. Linda, my daughter, earned a PhD from John Hopkins University's School of Public Health and was offered a teaching position at that prestigious institution. She contributed to the development of the HPV vaccine. Like her mother, she was appointed an Auxiliary Board Member and served energetically. She married a Baha'i doctor, Gavin Grant, had two children, and pioneered to Ethiopia. Bobby, my son, graduated from Yale Law School, one of

²¹ Olya Roohizadegan, *Olya's Story*, (Oneworld Publications, November 1, 1994) 216-9

²² The Universal House of Justice, 26 January 1982 to the Bahá'is of the World

the highest rated in the United States. He wrote a book about the new Russian Constitution, and assisted both the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachov, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's former National Security Advisor. The State Department cited him as an example of a successful Iranian-American, the second American Baha'i to be so indicated. He married Krista Forsgren, and they are raising three children, one of whom is from China, while Bobby works as the Vice Dean at Emory Law School. Both Linda and Bobby were greatly encouraged in their spiritual lives by their mother and the two years of service they gave at the Baha'i World Center.

Over the course of my life, like those of many Baha'is of Iran, the Baha'i Faith had sustained our souls, the United States of America had given us the opportunity to realize our professional potentials, and the prayers of generations of our families had protected us:

“Ordain, O Lord, through Thy most exalted Pen, that which will immortalize our souls in the Realm of glory, will perpetuate our names in Thy Kingdom, and safeguard our lives in the treasuries of Thy protection and our bodies in the stronghold of Thy inviolable fastness.”²³

²³ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 301

Appendix

Life in Nayriz²⁴

Life in our town of Nayriz was permeated by the presence of the supernatural embodied in the sound of the muezzin's voice calling the faithful Muslims to prayer.

The call to prayer went out from this Great Friday mosque and could be heard through the jumble of mud-brick, stone and wood, one- and two-story houses that made up the neighborhoods of Nayriz. In the unpaved spaces and dark alleys between the homes, people walked along with donkeys, cows, or horses. This commotion kicked up a lot of dust during the dry season. During the rainy winter, the mud made walking quite difficult. Through all seasons, a traveling salesman made his way with his wares—clothes, soap, hats, pottery, makeup, string—in baskets swaying from side to side in the rhythm of the steps of his donkey, and beggars waited for the chance to carry a man's load and kiss his hand in hope of some reward. Men walked passed them dressed in a cloak or a heavy coat but always with a hat on, and women went about completely covered by a black chador under which they wore bright colors and a white veil over much of their faces.

The call to prayer could be heard in the bazaar—or market—district, the northern part of town. Here were found the government buildings, a major bathhouse, the caravanserai where travelers and traders could stop with their animals and stay overnight, and the Sadat neighborhood where the clerics lived. It could be heard in the Chinar-Sukhtih district in the southern part of town where one main street ran north-south and was lined with stores so the residents could shop in their own area. The northern and southern parts of Nayriz were divided by a canal that was dry most of the time. When it rained—and it could rain quite hard, especially in the cold winters—the canal would overflow, causing flooding, especially in Chinar Shahi, the neighborhood that bordered it.

The call to prayer could be heard in private walled gardens around the edge of town where apricots, grapes, quince, walnuts, and almonds grew. Walled villages and the old abandoned fort Khajih, an echo of a past conflict, lay about beyond the town.

The call to prayer called forth the water from under the ground of the southern mountains blessing this otherwise hard brown land with vineyards and orchards. This water then flowed through underground canals to several distribution points from which it was channeled into smaller canals above ground to irrigate individual properties. At dawn, Nayrizis would release the water. At the larger wells, a person would have to walk down slippery stone steps carrying a bucket to get to the water, which often had small worms or bacteria in it. If a person fetched water at the springs, which were further away, they would take large containers made of pottery and strap them to their donkeys. A low-lying mountain, known as the 'mountain of the Infidels,' rose up north of town. It was all dirt and rock except for the occasional scraggly bush.

²⁴ Adapted from Hussein Ahdieh, Hillary Chapman, *Awakening*, Chapter 1

The call to prayer echoed in the foothills of the mountains south of town where orchards of figs, almonds, walnuts, and pomegranate trees grew up alongside fields of cantaloupe, watermelon, white flowers, and pink roses for making rose water. The scent of blossoms and the freshness of the air could revive any weary soul. Fields of wheat and cotton fed and clothed people. Poppies grew and were smoked as opium and traded in small quantities.

The call to prayer could be heard by shepherds and their dogs going through town as they gathered the goats and other animals of their neighbors to take them out to pasture. Up in the mountains, hunters preyed on the wild pigeons, quail, and deer. Donkeys crisscrossed the slopes, carrying their owners out to orchards and vineyards or loads back into town. Stars filled the night skies with light that shone down on the makeshift stone huts covered by branches sheltering tired farmers and hunters and on the wolves and tigers stalking silently around the rocks. It lit the way for the shepherds bringing the animals back to their owners, the sheep bleating when they had reached their pen for their owner to let them in.

The call to prayer could be heard by a woman going through labor in her home as she struggled through birth pangs, hoping a boy would emerge. The midwife and other women assisted her. These early days were the most dangerous moments for newborns. Families feared the evil spirits that took the life of a newborn, so small rituals were performed for protection.

The call to prayer could be heard in the homes where the children of the wealthier citizens were being taught. There were no formal kindergartens here. Outside such a wealthy home, school was taught by a mulla or a teacher to whom students paid cash fees. Boys and girls learned together until they were ten years old. The girls' formal education almost always ended at that point. Students would have learned the alphabet, pronunciation, and basic math by rote; short passages from Qur'an were used to introduce the reading of scripture. Students of all ages worked in the same room—there were no grade levels—and came up to the instructor to show her what they could read or write. They sat on cushions or mats, and they got out by noon to go help their families. Only the more able or wealthier students would continue their education, which would consist of the same subjects but with more advanced literary texts. Any misbehavior by students was punished by caning or beating of the soles of their feet. Most boys in Nayriz would soon be learning their fathers' work, and the girls would be by the side of their mothers acquiring the skills to maintain a household and weaving carpets.

The call to prayer could be heard by the child who was ill lying near her mother. Eye and ear infections were very common. All children had lice, and the only way to get rid of them was to shave the child's head. There were no doctors with medical training. Herbs, made from local bushes and trees, and poultices were used. For poor people, these home remedies were all the medicine that was available to them; in the richer, bazaar district, there were a few more options. The only dental care was to rub charcoal on one's teeth; an infected tooth was pulled out manually by a person in town who had some experience at this. This same individual would bleed people by using leeches or pricking small holes in the patient's shoulder and sucking out the blood to remove infections, or so they believed. A flu infection would spread through town very quickly.

The call to prayer could be heard by healthy children playing outside. But they had to be careful. A scorpion might jump out at them from behind a stone or a snake slither suddenly forward from a hole in the ground. Wolves were always about and were known to feed on small children, even coming inside a home to do so.

The call to prayer could be heard by families negotiating a marriage for their children, who were often second or third cousins. The marriage partners may have been chosen by the families when they were still very young. The needs of the families and the economic and social advantages of the marriage played the major role in choosing a marriage partner. The marriage feast was an event lasting several days with religious ceremony, music, feasts of lamb kebab, sweet lemon juice and halva, and parties for the families to get to know one another. It lasted three days, and the abundant food and meat were shared with the poor.

The call to prayer could be heard by the nervous bride on the day of her marriage when she was being prepared for her appearance—she would have to be accepted by the groom and his family. She was made up with beautiful designs in henna—a dark orange dye—drawn on her hands. After dinner, the groom and family members, carrying torches and accompanied by music, came to get the bride who was now fully made-up but had her face covered. She was led to the groom's house, a Qur'an was displayed, and, sometimes, an animal slaughtered in her honor. A room had been prepared for her and the groom in his family home. In a town like Nayriz, a handkerchief might be used to determine the girl's virginity the night of the wedding.

The call to prayer could be heard by the newly married young woman settling into her husband's family home. She would have to find her place in the extended family home and carry out the chores of the household. Her family had provided her new husband with a dowry, and he controlled its use. She would be expected to obey him; she must not speak back to him. In the course of an argument, her new husband might hit her; since this was common, she would have to accept it. When her husband came home drunk, she would have to be especially careful. She could wield greater influence over the decisions that were made in the family once she got to know the other women in the household and the personality of her new husband with whom she could learn to interact and negotiate.

The call to prayer could be heard by the new husband watching his new wife enter his family home. He hoped she would get along well with the other women in the family, that she would provide him with sons, that she would be a good mother, that she would be pleased with him and eager to serve him. He hoped that she would try to maintain her appearance for him by using black eyeliner, make-up and perfume, if they could afford it. He knew that, in time, he could marry a second, younger, wife; he could also take a temporary wife for a few weeks or months if he could pay the fee to the mulla.

The call to prayer echoed in the courtyard of the new couple's home. Their home faced inward, with rooms around the courtyard and often a small barn or pen for animals. Rooms were used for multiple purposes. Some, though, were for the women and children who were expected to stay in

them if male company came over. There were no private bath rooms; the public Turkish-style bath had to be used to wash. A family would bring clean clothes, towels, brushes, soap, everything they would need for the public bath; rich families had servants bring all of this. Nor were there any toilets in the home. In the back of the house outside, there was a hole in the ground. At night, light could only be created by small oil burning lamps which filled the closed rooms in winter with smoke but did not give off much light. Richer families imported large lamps from Shiraz.

The call to prayer could be heard by a man receiving other male guests in the public rooms of the house. He poured water over his guests' hands and then served them black tea and offered them a water pipe with which to smoke tobacco or hashish; opium was smoked through a regular pipe with a long stem and small bowl at the end of it. The call to prayer could be heard by the dervish who came into town to perform. In the streets, he hung up large canvases with paintings of famous battles. Then he reenacted well-known stories to the delight of onlookers. He also recited poetry in praise of the Imam Ḥusayn and chanted prayers. The townspeople rewarded him with food, money, or shelter. The call to prayer could be heard by the men farming their land, tending their orchards and vineyards, and husbanding their animals. Some men worked as craftsmen and belonged to guilds. Bakers, butchers, grocers, foragesellers, coalsellers, and small shopkeepers and traders who worked in the bazaar also had their own guilds. A very industrious man would have gotten up well before sunrise, made his way through the dark lanes and stopped at the houses of his field hands to wake them up. They would have arrived at his property on the mountainside by sunrise. Out there they could still hear the call to prayer. After some hours of work, the industrious man would have gone to another field he owned and, on the way, stopped by a garden of his nearer to town to collect fruits. He might have finished the day by going to his small store in town where he sold fabric and shoes. After such a day, he might have sat by the fire in his home and sewn the shoes together with a piece of material on top and rubber on the bottom.

The call to prayer could be heard by educated men reading over a Qur'an or a legal document. They were local clerics or government and military men who worked for the central government in Shiraz. The city had a governor who was appointed from Shiraz, usually due to his family's influence and the wealth that paid for the position. There was also a military commander in charge of soldiers stationed there and an overall religious leader, the Shaykhu'l-Islam. The call to prayer could be heard by a woman lost in thought as she sat in the women and children's section of the house. A man who was not a family member had entered the home, and she had to stay in that area of the house. Her whole social and emotional life was lived within the home and the extended family, while men could express their emotions publicly, make friends, and socialize in a variety of ways. They gathered with other men and drank alcohol, smoked opium, or had young boys dance for them before selecting one. They enjoyed gambling with cards and backgammon, though they often got into fights as a result.

The call to prayer could be heard by the poorer women who were baking bread together in a large open oven. They had brought the wheat and corn to the mill where waterpower turned two large circular rocks that ground the grain into powder, which the women then mixed into flour. The

wealthy women had others do this for them. On festive occasions, sweet bread would be made. Much of a woman's time was spent preparing meals—stew with rice and chicken, if the family had money, cucumbers, watermelon, and homemade cookies. A samovar kept water hot all day for the black tea that was always offered to guests. They also wove cotton for clothes, using natural dyes for color. To wash the clothes—a difficult task—the poorer women and servants would go down to the stream or the springs and wash together; away from the men, their tongues would loosen, and they would laugh and share news. When the day's work was done or they could take a break, the women sat around together and ate watermelon seeds and raisins.

The call to prayer could be heard as neighbors visited one another. A person had to be very aware of another's social status and observe specific social rules. In a conversation, the person of lower social status should speak less and listen more; when giving a gift, the person would have to make sure that it was valuable enough for someone of higher status. All gifts had to be reciprocated.

The call to prayer could be heard on the greatest gift-giving day of the year, New Year's Day. Preparations for it began one month prior when people would clean their homes, gardens, and clothes, and make cookies and sweets. Then came the great day of celebration. This pre-Islamic festival included Zoroastrian aspects such as the use of fire. Bonfires would be lit and jumped over, feasts were prepared and eaten, eggs were painted, the elderly were paid respects by the young and gifts were given out—often coins. If the family had means, an entertainer could be hired, such as a man with a performing monkey. The visiting and gift-giving and celebrating went on for thirteen days. All of this display of friendship often eased tensions between neighbors and family. On the thirteenth day, it was considered a curse to stay in town, so people would head out to open fields.

The call to prayer could be heard by the elderly man who increasingly had to stay in the family home to be taken care of by those who were younger. The day of his death eventually came. It was announced from a rooftop accompanied by the beating of a drum. Visitors began walking to the house and entered already crying and wailing. The gravedigger came to wash the body, which was then placed in a casket, transported to the cemetery, and buried. Two sticks were sometimes put into the ground so the deceased man could lean on them to rise up and answer the questions put to him by angels. The mourners then returned to the family home, ate sweets, drank tea, and listened to verses read from the Qur'an. Food was shared with the poor. Forty days went by, and the bereaved family held a memorial. They went to the cemetery and asked a mulla to come with them. They offered prayers. Then the next day came. The call to prayer sounded. Life continued.

The call to prayer went out, and all Nayrizis responded to it. Many made their way faithfully to the mosques, washed their faces, entered, knelt, and followed the prayer leader with a series of movements—standing with palms uplifted, bending over with hands resting on the legs, kneeling and prostrating themselves, and touching their foreheads to the floor.

Few people, though, understood much about the Islam taught by the Prophet Muhammad. In their daily lives, they trusted in magic and spirits. They believed in ancient forms of telling the future. They threw pebbles on the ground to see which shapes were made. They counted rosary beads—

usually used for prayer—in special ways to determine the outcome of an undertaking. A Qur'an might be opened at a specific time to a random page and the verses read to make a decision. They saw signs in nature—such as the howling of dogs, the movement of smoke in the air, an involuntary sneeze—as harbingers of things to come. The sky held great meaning: an eclipse caused terror, comets were seen as omens of ill fortune, the phases of the moon could influence people. The zodiac was consulted before planting or deciding on a marriage. Throughout the calendar year, special days commemorated major events in the lives of the Imams of Islamic history, and people believed that certain days were better than others for taking trips, marrying, building a house, or hunting.

Healing could be obtained by sleeping near the tombs of holy men. A person might leave a strand of hair there to share in his sacred power. Trees could also have this power if associated with someone holy, and Nayrizis would tie a piece of cloth to it, each piece representing a wish.

Evil spirits were believed to be behind misfortunes such as mental illnesses and crazed animals. Some spirits were thought to dwell in particular locations, such as waterfalls, because they had been barred from heaven. There were specific verses from the Qur'an and acts of abstinence that could help a person gain control of such a spirit. There were good spirits as well that could be summoned for assistance.

And everyone dreaded the evil eye. People with the evil eye might bring about terrible events even if they didn't want to. Stories were common of the evil eye—given through a passing gaze—injuring or killing a person. Parents protected their children against this by having them wear talismans or by overcoming it by repeating specific Qur'anic verses. A ceremony took place in which a woman who worked magic against the evil eye came to an afflicted person's home. She put a tray in front of the accursed, covered it with a white kerchief, dipped her finger in a bottle of oil, and let a drop of the oil fall on the kerchief. With each drop, a curse would be removed. The names of those who had given the evil eye were said aloud. The kerchief was then picked up and thrown into water. The names were repeated, and the kerchief taken out of the water. The curses were gone.

People most often used the Qur'an in this way—as a book of charms and as a talisman. Few could actually read it. They owned miniature versions of the Qur'an worn around the neck in little pouches for protection against evil spirits.

Many of these magical beliefs claimed to be found in the volumes of hadiths, the accepted traditions from the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. Some hadiths were verifiable, but many were not, and all were interpreted and reinterpreted by local religious scholars, mullas, diviners, and elderly men. The beliefs of the people were really locally held folk beliefs that had been cast into a Muslim mold but that had no connection to Muhammad's Revelation.

Whatever a Nayrizi knew about Islam came from the mulla. The mulla was someone who could read and write and had studied the Qur'an. To the average believer, he was the authority on all spiritual and many legal matters. Many Nayrizis worked the land and felt themselves inferior to these robed

men who could read the holy text, and if a prominent cleric came to Nayriz and spoke to them, his word was absolute.

Nayrizis also learned stories about the history of Shi'a Islam from yearly public reenactments of famous events, especially the story of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. The constant use of this story reinforced the idea that martyrdom was the highest act of religious devotion. The belief in giving one's life for God and of defending true religion even with violence were deeply held in the hearts of the faithful masses. The most powerful release of their spiritual emotions came during Muharram, the month when the Third Imam had been martyred. From the pulpits, the mullas recounted stories about the Imam Husayn. The men crowding into mosques and women standing behind curtains and on the roofs were moved to begin their mourning. The faithful would come out of mosques with their emotions lit. Men then marched down the streets holding up signs and symbols honoring Husayn and began to beat themselves with their hand, with chains, and even with swords, making small cuts in their foreheads. As the march continued, the men would bleed more and more profusely. Red rivulets ran down their bare torsos, splattering their young sons who walked alongside them dressed in white, the color of martyrdom. On the sides, the women wailed and ululated. The whole community participated in this powerful and violent display meant to honor Husayn and share in his suffering.

These beliefs were reinforced by the mullas in the mosques built in the different neighborhoods of Nayriz. Several mullas served in each of these mosques. The most important mulla was the one who led the prayers on Friday; the principal, or "Great" Mosque of Nayriz was located in the Chinar-Sukhtih district. A leading mulla had real authority over people and access to wealth from the land owned by the mosque and monetary contributions from the faithful. The people of a town like Nayriz trusted their clerics completely and obeyed their decisions. But their clerics had little true understanding of Islam. So, when the faithful bent their knees at prayer, their minds were full of little understood teachings, unquestioned traditions, and ancient magical beliefs.