

Highly Significant Celebrations at the World Center

The entire last week of May 1992 saw some most significant events occurring in the Holy Land. In ascending order they were:-

1. The placing of the scroll, listing the names of the Knights of Baha'u'llah, under the floor at the entrance to the shrine of Baha'u'llah.
2. The commemoration of the Centenary of the ascension of Baha'u'llah on May 29th 1892.
3. The procession of 3,400 Baha'is from all over the world up the Avenue of the Kings on Mt.Carmel, circumambulating the shrine of the Bab and then climbing up to the seat of the Universal House of Justice to view a near life sized portrait of the Blessed Beauty.

The beloved Guardian once said to a pilgrim "... the bounty of making a pilgrimage is that you may become spiritually strong to go out and do great service for the Faith. Thus this mass pilgrimage will doubtless become the cause of great new capacity amongst the friends.

Towards the end of May planes began delivering pilgrims from all over the world to the Holy Land. National Spiritual Assemblies from 175 countries had each been asked to send nineteen Baha'is to take part in this celebration. As they arrived

at the World Center, a whole day was given to registration and for meeting long parted friends. Many were the joyful greetings between Baha'is who had long been serving the Faith in far way places. Try to imagine the pilgrim house near the shrine of the Bab, accustomed to accomodating a group of 100 pilgrims, now being used to welcome 3,400 on this day. So packed was it with old friends that one could hardly walk a yard without being hailed and embraced. We had been previously asked not to telephone to the hotels in town to find special friends, for if everyone did this it would jam the telephone system. It was pointed out to us that the social side of this celebration must take strictly second place to the main events themselves and their spiritual significance. Further, television crews from Europe would be recording everything so we were asked not to run around taking pictures ourselves. The World Center staff would cover everything.

On May 27th, the second day, a reception was held by the Universal House of Justice for those Knights of Baha'u'llah who were still alive. (about 109 out of 257). Fortunately our group arrived at the House of Justice building about an hour early and so we were able to walk around the beautiful gardens. We were told that at this time of the year the grass would normally have been be dead through summer heat and lack of rain, but that fortuitously there had been a massive downpour. Grass and

flowers were at their peak condition as a result. However, it was not all progress, for the rain had washed great numbers of the famous geraniums out of the ground and the storm had blown down some of the tall ornamental trees. The hard pressed ground staff had been forced to go out into the town and buy more plants and to remove downed trees. On this day there was no sign of the damage anywhere.

The gathering took place in the main hall. Short addresses were given by the Chairman of the House of Justice and by Hand of the Cause Ruhuiyyih Khanum. The latter gave a very warm welcome to the Knights. Then she drew our attention to the great importance of taking advantage of world conditions to use the spiritual power now at our disposal to make real progress in awakening mankind to the Divine outpouring. She said, from memory, that she hoped we would not go back to our countries and just say things like "Oh we had a wonderful time and everyone was uplifted and Ruhuiyyih Khanum was looking younger than we expected." (laughter). But that we should go back and arouse the friends everywhere to the tremendous spiritual opportunities now open for teaching the Faith in this Holy Year.

There followed refreshments and the opportunity for the Knights, many of whom had not seen each other for very many years, to greet each other, discuss old times and see the scroll,

which was laid out on a long table. Later it would be rolled up and inserted into a metal cylinder, vacuumed and helium gas inserted before sealing. Each name on the scroll had its own ornamented place, and was coupled with the name of the territory opened and the date it was opened.

At 10 a.m the next morning, buses collected all 3,400 attendees from their hotels and brought us, in carefully organised sequence, to Bahji where a large hayfield had been rented to park the 60 buses with great precision. Everyone would be able to relocate their own bus after the ceremony of placing the cylinder at the entrance to the Shrine.

Rows of chairs accommodated all the pilgrims around the outer perimeter and on the mound. Prayers were read and explanations given; then the House members, Hands, Counselors and all the Knights went forward to the shrine entrance and watched while Ruhiyyih Kahnum, with help, laid the cylinder in an open trench just inside the Shrine door, filled around it with sand and replaced the flagstone and carpet. Television cameras recorded the whole operation and it will no doubt soon be transmitted to Baha'i communities all over the world, and probably to public channels also.

The following day, May 29th 1992 we celebrated the ascension

of Baha'u'llah which had taken place exactly 100 years earlier. All pilgrims were picked up at their hotels at staggered times, starting at 1.30 a.m., and taken to Bahji where, in the dark of the night an astounding sight met our eyes, setting a deeply moving atmosphere. As we left our buses and walked down the road in a steady stream towards the Shrine, we saw that from the Collins gate right up to the entrance of the holiest Shrine, there were twin rows of flame in the night, one on each side of the path. On closer approach we found that they were formed by twin rows of candles sheltered in glass. Later we were to discover that all paths in these holy precincts had been treated in the same manner. In the darkness of the night, six thousand candle-lights, together with all the brilliant electric lamp standards produced an atmosphere of great beauty in those perfectly arranged gardens surrounding the most holy shrine. It was strongly reminiscent of Nabil's narrative where he described the arrival of the Blessed Beauty at Bahji in 1880 to the accompaniment of banners of light from the Abha Kingdom.

As the two hour session might grow cool, blankets had been issue at the hotel. I much appreciated this, for as we took our seats there was a night fog and all the seats were wet with dew. The organisers had thoughtfully left a paper towel on each seat. As the crowd of pilgrims slowly filed into their seats I managed to make my way up onto the large elevated terrace

which Shoghi Effendi had created on the left of the entrance; from here there was a wide view of the entire illuminated gardens, while at my feet ran a line of candles joyously flickering in the night.

We watched, as the members of the Universal House of Justice and the Hands of the Cause went into the mansion itself and mounted to the bedroom where the Blessed Beauty had passed on. Here they said prayers and then returned to the gardens for the devotional program relayed through many speakers. It was a precious experience to listen to those heavenly words in this illuminated haven, surrounded on all sides by impenetrable night.

At the end of the readings we all filed back onto the circular path and began our circumambulation of the Shrine. When laying out the gardens, occasional trees had been left to grow in the middle of the path, and each of these had its overhanging branches which were lit by a flashlight held by an attendant, lest we bump into them in the dark.

It was 6 a.m. when we arrived back at our hotel and we were all looking forward to a healthy breakfast, but the dining room was not open, so most people went to bed and slept soundly. Two hours later I awoke and had a good breakfast before returning to

bed till noon.

At 1 p.m. we were once more loaded into our bus. We were transported to the foot of Mt. Carmel where we were to climb the avenue of the Kings. A number of people were too old or in wheel-chairs and could not make it up the mountain, so the buses took them by road up to the Shrine. Most of us climbed upwards, passing through large areas of bulldozed terrain where construction of the nine new terraces was being laid out. At the top we walked around the shrine of the Bab and went on to the House of Justice building. Since we had to cross a major trunk road, the police held up traffic periodically and let us cross in batches of fifty, to continue on up the Arc.

We were now to view a specially prepared portrait of Baha'u'llah. Ahead of on the path we could see several other groups waiting for their turn to enter the building. By viewing the portrait in small groups, all would have a close view.

When our turn came, we saw that the entire end of the hall had been blocked off with elaborate paneling, while in the center of this and at about seven feet from the floor was a back-lit projection screen. As we gathered, the lights gradually went out and we stood silent in the total darkness for a few moments; then slowly there appeared before us a life-size

picture of the Blessed Beauty. He seemed to be looking directly into our eyes with all the wisdom of the ages, and to be including us and all creation in a deep and understanding love.

We hardly dared to breath or move. After about a minute only, the portrait slowly disappeared to leave us once more in darkness. The lights came gently on again and we passed silently out of a side door and down the mountain side to our waiting bus, each occupied with his own thoughts and deeply aware of the infinite bounty bestowed upon us.

The next morning was departure day, and most people left, but due to a mistake in booking, I had one more day before my flight back to U.S.A. I joyfully went down town and found a bus back to Bahji for uninterrupted prayers, and meditation. Then also, I was able to get some new photographs of those holy precincts.

I recalled wistfully how in 1952 I had made my first pilgrimage and each evening was able to bask in the uplifting presence of Shoghi Effendi. When it had come to departure time he saw how downcast I was. "Don't be sad" he had said, "You will come back!" I accepted this but wondered how I would ever again find the funds. So blind are we to the workings of destiny - this present visit in 1992, 40 years later was infact my ninth visit to these holy Shrines! I meditated on the vastdevelopments

of the Faith during those years. In 1963 there were 135 delegates in Haifa to elect the first Universal House of Justice. In 1968 there were about 500 delegates present. On this Celebration there were 3,400 Baha'is gathered on the mountain of God!

The World Order of Baha'u'llah is in fact appearing before our very eyes daily. For example, in Africa, giant strides have been made. In 1953, there were only three Baha'is in all of that vast continent, (if one did not count Egypt and the Sudan which was conquered in the days of Abdu'l Baha). Now there are now nearly 100,000 Baha'is in Kenya alone. The same kind of picture must exist all over Africa today!

Tears filled my eyes, for Shoghi Effendi had longed to see this day. Soon however, I realised that he must be joining in with the great rejoicings in the Abha Kingdom. This 100 th anniversary of the ascension of the Blessed Beauty celebrates this enormous development of God's Kingdom on earth. It also marks the centenary of the acceptance by the followers of Baha'u'llah, of His appointment of Abdu'l Baha as the infallible interpreter of His Revelation. Thus man has fulfilled at long last, the Eternal Covenant of God with man. The above developments are surely just a part of the Divine response promised to mankind when we should finally fulfill that Covenant.

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