

*Moths*  
*Turned*  
**EAGLES**



**THE SPIRITUAL CONQUESTS  
OF SABRÍ & RAISSA ELIAS**

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THE NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF ETHIOPIA

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MOTHS  
TURNED EAGLES

**The Spiritual Conquests  
Of Sabrí & Raissa Elias**

Gamal Hassan

*To Mr. Gila Michael Bahta*

*O God! O God! ...*

*Make me victorious through the armies of  
Thy Supreme Kingdom and encircle me with  
Thy confirmations, which shall make the moth  
the eagle, the drop the river and the seas, and  
the scintillas the suns and the moons!*

*'Abdu'l-Bahá*



## Acknowledgements

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With these tapes available, the writer could identify some historical gaps and certain points that needed further clarification. Fortunately, at first this was during the precious earthly life-time of Mr. Sabrí Elias who immediately came to his support with a precious recording in August 1995 that filled most of these gaps. With further clarifications proving inevitable over the past few years, it was necessary to get in touch with Mrs. Raissa Elias through her dear children, because of her busy itinerary, in spite of advancing age and ill-health. These contacts enriched the material at the writer's hand with more detail and clarifications. Here the writer owes all the dear members of the Elias Family a favour that words cannot describe.

A comprehensive history of the early days of the Faith in Ethiopia could not be written without appropriate coverage of the stalwart and sincere labours of Mr Gila Bahta. This valuable historical information was so lovingly and enthusiastically sent quickly to the writer by Mr. Bata, in spite of untold sufferings that became his lot, such as the premature loss of his dear wife and other hardships of life and ailments as he retires now in Asmara, Eritrea. No wonder then that this book is befittingly dedicated to him.

The writer's original idea of the project was that of a mere transcription and translation of the audiobiographical tapes. However, in October 2008, he received a more appropriate idea from Ethiopia's Bahá'í Diamond Jubilee Committee to compile these transcripts into a book. Hence, he owes this wonderful idea to this Committee, notably Ms. Dagmawit Eshetu for her relentless efforts to make the book a reality in such a short span of time, including referring the correction of names to her dear father Mr. Eshetu Habtemariam.

As this book is the author's first attempt at writing a book, and this attempt being made to the best of his ability in a foreign language, a word of deep gratitude is due to Mrs. Lois Hainsworth for taking up the task of putting the writer's poor grammar and vocabulary into correct English and writing an introduction for the book. Given the burden of those

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

'Moths Turned Eagles' is principally the inspiring story of the introduction of the Bahá'í Faith into Ethiopia and Djibouti in the last century by Sabrí Elias, a remarkable young Egyptian from Alexandria, and his wife Raissa. Also contributing to the growth of the Faith in these two countries were a number of believers to whom they introduced the Faith, prominent amongst them being Gila Michael Bahta, an Addis Ababa lawyer who later rose to international renown.

Ethiopia and Djibouti are part of a beautiful and fascinating region whose ancient civilisation had already welcomed new religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This book outlines the two countries' acceptance of the world's newest religion – the Bahá'í Faith, which came into being in 1844.

Sabrí's early life was difficult and unhappy and makes heart-rending reading and, except for some training in tailoring, which he put to good effect during his modest life, he had no formal education. Raissa's childhood was happy, and her education was as a seamstress. During the early days of their marriage the poverty in which they lived was dire. Yet this was not to be a deterrent to their spiritual achievements which were spurred on by a passion to share the Teachings of a Faith that they loved and served. Their devotion and tenacity are a shining example for generations to come. Here the author's selection of this book's title finds justification: Moths Turned Eagles. Although the trials and tribulations of these two eagles were many, some events in their lives recorded in this book may be regarded as nothing less than miraculous.

Shining through the story is evidence of their devout love for Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 until 1957, to whom they turned constantly for advice and whose recommendations and suggestions they followed without question.

A large proportion of this history is derived from audio tapes made by Sabrí and Raissa at different times. The importance of this information, recorded usually soon after the events described, cannot be underestimated, nor can the value of their transposition and translation from Arabic, made over several years by the Gamal Hassan, for whom this has been a labour of love. The author was also an eye witness to the latter part of Sabrí and Raissa's long life of service and, therefore, is keen on sharing their story in ample detail.

## 2. Prologue

History tells us that today's Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and part of Somalia used to constitute the historical African dominion of the Kingdom of Abyssinia. The region is believed by anthropologists to be the cradle of mankind, as evidenced by their discoveries of four-million-year old fossils of the human species *Homo sapiens*. However, recorded history of Abyssinia starts only from 1000 BC. In a fabulous intertwining of religion and legendary tradition, Abyssinian mythology presents the birth of the empire as a love story between the wisest and most renowned among the prophet-kings of Judaism, King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Sabea (Sheba), whom some scholars also refer to as Yemen's Queen Bilqais of Saba' – since her vast dominion included Yemen as well. This legend speaks of an intimate relationship that developed between the two monarchs when the Queen ventured into the Jewish Kingdom at its apex. The Queen's encounter with the King and her conversion to 'the faith of God' is recorded in the Qur'án<sup>2</sup>, and their relationship has been metaphorically alluded to in the Bahá'í Writings<sup>3</sup> as love in its noble mystical form. According to the legend, Makeda bore Solomon a son, Menelik (a name that literally means 'the son of the King'), who succeeded his mother to establish what is known as Abyssinia's Solomonic Dynasty.

As a matter of fact, Ethiopia's contact with God's Message to the children of Abraham (or Ibrahim) extends to earlier biblical times: Kush and Kushites are the names of Ethiopia and its people in more than thirty biblical references. The Old Testament explicitly mentions that Moses wed an 'Ethiopian' woman<sup>4</sup> and, above all, King David sang praises to the country, "Ethiopia shall hasten to stretch out her hands unto God".<sup>5</sup> In general, the Old Testament contains some thirty references to Ethiopia.

Down through the ages, Ethiopia continued to receive each of God's Messages at a very early stage in its history and development. Exactly the same year Christianity changed from an underground faith to a state-religion with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Message of the Gospel came to Ethiopia: in 333 AD, two Orthodox monks, Frumentius and Aedissius came from Egypt to Ethiopia and met its reigning King, Ezana of Axum (Aksum), who converted to Christianity together with many of his subjects. Frumentius, journeyed briefly afterwards to his base in Alexandria, where

2 Sura 27 verses 16-44

3 The Hidden Words, from Persian, No. 1

4 Numbers 12:1

5 Psalms 68:32



he was consecrated and ordered to return back to Ethiopia as the Founder of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its first bishop.

Islam came to Ethiopia in a record short time, even before Prophet Muhammad made his historical move (Hijra)<sup>6</sup> from Mecca to Medina. In 615 AD, Prophet Muhammad allowed a hundred of his devoted followers, including one of his cousins and a son-in-law, to move away from the wrath and persecution meted out to the early converts to Islam by the infidels of Mecca. With Ethiopia being then the only hospitable place known to them and with a ruler who was reputed for his fairness – Negus Armah, these émigrés sought refuge in the Ethiopian Kingdom of Axum. When emissaries were sent to the Negus by the Meccan enemies of this nascent Faith, with allegations that they were renegades and mischief-makers, he called the refugees to a hearing. After listening, over two days, to the refugees, who appointed the cousin of Muhammad to respond, who gave an eloquent refutation of these allegations with an irrefutable vindication of the verities of Islam and its deep reverence for both Jesus and the Virgin Mary. The Negus sent the Meccan emissaries home empty-handed, and allowed the refugees to remain henceforth in his Kingdom as long as they wished. While the majority of these immigrants returned to Arabia afterwards, when Muhammad established his rule in Medina and defeated the enemies of Mecca, some of them settled permanently in Ethiopia, enjoying a freedom of faith that was quite unique at the time.

It is in the light of this unique historical significance and perspective that the most recent of such spiritual 'conquests', as related in the following chapters, must be viewed and appreciated.

In sheer contrast to the numerous military expeditions that attempted to conquer or subdue Ethiopia in its long recorded history, the spiritual campaigns that opened it to the Divine Messages did not involve a costly and sophisticated mobilisation of armaments and troops. Each spiritual conquest was invariably accomplished by the peaceful and unassuming faithful, with the Bahá'í Faith presenting no exception to this rule. It was in an even more subtle and humble manner than any previous mission that the Bahá'í Faith was introduced to this historical land. This most recent of missions was entrusted to a Bahá'í faithful from Alexandria, Egypt, who came to Ethiopia solely for this noble purpose – first alone in 1933, and later in 1944 accompanied by his small family of a young wife and two infant children.

<sup>6</sup> The Muslim calendar, also known as Hijri, starts from the year Prophet Muhammad emigrated, under duress and a life-threatening chase that were orchestrated by a ferocious enemy, to a welcoming Medina for the remaining 15 years of his life – never to return again to his former residence in Mecca even after he headed the army of his faithful followers that vanquished the Meccan idolaters who then had to seek shelter in great fear within the confines of their own homes.

Starting his journey from Port Said to Djibouti via Aden by ship with an on-deck ticket that was upgraded through the charity of sympathetic friends to third-class, Mr. Sabrí Elias arrived into Addis Ababa by train on the early evening of 25 November 1933. Sitting soon after his arrival in front of the roof-top shack which was the hotel room he could afford to hire for the night, Sabrí, then aged 27, was in a state of great confusion. While in Djibouti he had very kindly given most of the little sum of money that he brought along for his initial settlement to a needy young Armenian traveller, whom he casually met during this arduous long journey but now could not find.

Deprived of any formal education due to harsh childhood circumstances and armed only with tailoring skills, this lonely soul accomplished the mission that was entrusted to him by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith: to bring God's Message for today to a land that is destined to '*hasten to stretch out her hands unto*' Him.

While the accounts of bringing Ethiopia in touch with the three previous Messages (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are enveloped in mythology, incomplete, or sketchy, we are privileged to have a quite precise and comprehensive story when it comes to Ethiopia's first encounter with the Bahá'í Faith – thanks to the technology of our modern times! In captivating tape-recordings that they started in 1975 and ended as late as end 1995 – a few months before the passing of Sabrí – the couple left to posterity a detailed account of their four pioneering episodes to Ethiopia and Djibouti, their humble beginnings and other important events of their lives.

Spoken in the Egyptian dialect of the only language that the couple knew well – Arabic, a part of these recordings represented the recollections of Sabrí on events that he alone had witnessed, such as memories of his early childhood, his first encounter with the Bahá'í Faith to which he dedicated his whole being, or his audience with Shoghi Effendi and subsequent first term in Ethiopia before his marriage to Raissa. By the same token, another part of the tapes contained the recollections of Raissa of that period in her life that preceded her marriage, and events that she solely encountered afterwards. But, for the most part, the recording sessions were the work of a contended couple who seemed to be taking short breaks from the painful daily chores of life as they would huddle and coo like two loving doves sharing their experiences. Their episodes are more captivating than the most thrilling of thrillers, and their words conveyed their innermost feelings as they seem to relive the cherished memories of a glorious life: when listening to each of two separate recordings that Sabrí had taped several years apart of the first meeting of that estranged young Armenian traveller with his mother at Addis train station, one would hear him re-enact the story and weep bitterly at it! He even discovered another reference in the



Old Testament to Ethiopia, as will be later related in Chapter 7.

In order to prepare the core-material of this book, the tapes were transcribed *ad verbatim* in Arabic and then translated into English. While the vividness, spontaneity, and heart-rending nature of this audio autobiography are not to be found in the transcript, their unassuming spirit and matchless genuineness never fade. It is to such a great advantage that most of the stories told in this book are taken straight from this matchless source.

Currently preserved among the most cherished treasures of the Ethiopian National Bahá'í Archives, it is hoped that these tapes will be widely circulated in future in their genuine phonetic form, in order to avail a chance of a journey back in time with Sabrí and Raissa to future generations. It is also hoped that, within the shortest possible time, their Arabic transcript will be published as-is, so that the compatriots of this illustrious couple, the Bahá'ís of Egypt, may derive added inspiration and courage from them during the eventful years that lay immediately ahead.

No account of the annals of the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Ethiopia would be complete without a befitting mention of the first convert to understand the real significance of embracing of God's Message for this Day, to hold fast to its life-giving Teachings under the days of extremely difficult and inhuman circumstances that were to become his lot in years to come, and to make its promulgation the dominant passion of his long life. Better known by his professional title 'Kegnazmatch', i.e. 'Master' or 'Maitre', by which a high ranking professional would be called, Mr. Gila Michael Bahta, was, in the words of Mr. and Mrs. Elias, the one who 'saw himself created as a Bahá'í, and 'was the kind of person who instantly recognizes the Truth'; and whose 'faith was unique and life was like a plaque of honour'. In spite of not being chronologically the first person to declare, Mr. and Mrs. Elias regard Kegnazmatch Gila as 'the first person to embrace the Faith' in Ethiopia.

When Sabrí went to Ethiopia in 1933 for his first pioneering term, a youth of Eritrean descent had been sent by his father to school in Khartoum, Sudan, two years earlier: first at a Catholic Mission secondary school, and then at the Faculty of Law of Khartoum University. By the time young Gila completed his studies in 1941, he was destined to be among the enthusiastic and excited Eritrean and Ethiopian youth that marched on foot, all the way from Khartoum to Addis Ababa, with Emperor Haile Selassie at the heels of the combined army of British troops and resistance guerrillas who liberated their land from colonial occupation. Returning to Addis Ababa as a young and highly gifted lawyer who was armed by the mastery of Amharic and many other indigenous Ethiopian dialects, in addition to fluency in English, French, Italian and Arabic languages, Kegnazmatch Gila's star was soon to

rise by taking on a legal case that was the focus of national attention at the time. It was during the proceedings of this case that he was yet to win a higher acclaim of a spiritual nature: meeting Sabrí and Raissa in 1944 and embracing the Faith almost instantly when they found a suitable chance to teach him.

In 2005, some ten years after Kegnazmatch Gila's dear wife's passing and burial in Addis Ababa, and his relocation to Asmara after Eritrea's option for secession, he managed to write a brief, yet quite inspiring and informative historical account of his memories of Mr. and Mrs. Elias, his conversion to the Bahá'í Faith, his marriage in Egypt, and Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum's historic audience with Emperor Haile Selassie I in Addis Ababa, 16 October 1969. The reader is also fortunate to find extensive quotations from this valuable material over the following pages, notably the special appendix that the book befittingly earmarks to this audience, which was possible in large part because of Kegnazmatch Gila's unusual nearness to the Emperor.

### 3. God's New Message to Mankind<sup>7</sup>

The Faith established by Bahá'u'lláh was born in Persia about the middle of the nineteenth century and has, as a result of the successive banishments of its Founder, culminating in His exile to the Turkish penal colony of 'Akká, and His subsequent death and burial in its vicinity, fixed its permanent spiritual centre in the Holy Land, and is now in the process of laying the foundations of its world administrative centre in the city of Haifa.

Alike in the claims unequivocally asserted by its author and the general character of the growth of the Bahá'í community in every continent of the globe, it can be regarded in no other light than a world religion, destined to evolve in the course of time into a world-embracing commonwealth, whose advent must signalize the Golden Age of mankind, the age in which the unity of the human race will have been unassailably established, its maturity attained, and its glorious destiny unfolded through the birth and efflorescence of a world-encompassing civilization.

#### Restatement of Eternal Verities

Though sprung from Shi'ih Islam, and regarded, in the early stages of its development, by the followers of both the Muslim and Christian Faiths, as an obscure sect, an Asiatic cult or an offshoot of the Muhammadan religion, this Faith is now increasingly demonstrating its right to be recognized, not as one more religious system superimposed on the conflicting creeds which for so many generations have divided mankind and darkened its fortunes, but rather as a restatement of the eternal verities underlying all the religions of the past, as a unifying force instilling into the adherents of these religions a new spiritual vigour, infusing them with a new hope and love for mankind, firing them with a new vision of fundamental unity of their religious doctrines, and unfolding to their eyes the glorious destiny that awaits the human race.

The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, the followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that Religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.

<sup>7</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *A Summary Statement to the Special UN Committee on Palestine, 1947*

### To Reconcile Conflicting Creeds

The aim of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet of this new and great age which humanity has entered upon -- He whose advent fulfils the prophecies of the Old and New Testaments as well as those of the Qur'án regarding the coming of the Promised One in the end of time, on the Day of Judgment -- is not to destroy but to fulfil the Revelations of the past, to reconcile rather than accentuate the divergences of the conflicting creeds which disrupt present-day society.

His purpose, far from belittling the station of the Prophets gone before Him or of whittling down their teachings, is to restate the basic truths which these teachings enshrine in a manner that would conform to the needs, and be in consonance with the capacity, and be applicable to the problems, the ills and perplexities, of the age in which we live. His mission is to proclaim that the ages of the infancy and of the childhood of the human race are past, that the convulsions associated with the present stage of its adolescence are slowly and painfully preparing it to attain the stage of manhood, and are heralding the approach of that Age of Ages when swords will be beaten into ploughshares, when the Kingdom promised by Jesus Christ will have been established, and the peace of the planet definitely and permanently ensured. Nor does Bahá'u'lláh claim finality for His own Revelation, but rather stipulates that a fuller measure of the truth He has been commissioned by the Almighty to vouchsafe to humanity, at so critical a juncture in its fortunes, must needs be disclosed at future stages in the constant and limitless evolution of mankind.

#### Oneness of the Human Race

The Bahá'í Faith upholds the unity of God, recognizes the unity of His Prophets, and inculcates the principle of the oneness and wholeness of the entire human race. It proclaims the necessity and the inevitability of the unification of mankind, asserts that it is gradually approaching, and claims that nothing short of the transmuting spirit of God, working through His chosen Mouthpiece in this day, can ultimately succeed in bringing it about. It, moreover, enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all manner of prejudice and superstition, declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and the orderly progress of human society. It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy and



monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorce, emphasize the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, exalts any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or selection of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind.

### The Herald

The Bahá'í Faith revolves around three central Figures, the first of whom was a youth, a native of Shiraz, named Mirza Ali-Muhammad, known as the Báb (Gate), who in May, 1844, at the age of twenty-five, advanced the claim of being the Herald Who, according to the sacred Scriptures of previous Dispensations, must needs announce and prepare the way for the advent of One greater than Himself, Whose mission would be according to those same Scriptures, to inaugurate an era of righteousness and peace, an era that would be hailed as the consummation of all previous Dispensations, and initiate a new cycle in the religious history of mankind. Swift and severe persecution, launched by the organized forces of Church and State in His native land, precipitated successively His arrest, His exile to the mountains of Adhirbayjan, His imprisonment in the fortresses of Máh-Ku and Chihriq and His execution, in July, 1850, by a firing squad in the public square of Tabríz. No less than twenty thousand of his followers were put to death with such barbarous cruelty as to evoke the warm sympathy and the unqualified admiration of a number of Western writers, diplomats, travellers and scholars, some of whom were witnesses of these abominable outrages, and were moved to record them in their books and diaries.

### Bahá'u'lláh

Mirza Husayn-Ali, surnamed Bahá'u'lláh (the Glory of God), a native of Mazindaran, Whose advent the Báb had foretold, was assailed by those same forces of ignorance and fanaticism, was imprisoned in Tíhrán, was banished, in 1852, from His native land to Baghdad, and thence to Constantinople and Adrianople, and finally to the prison city of 'Akká, where He remained incarcerated for no less than twenty-four years, and in whose neighbourhood He passed away in 1892. In the course of His banishment, and particularly in Adrianople and 'Akká, He formulated the laws and ordinances of His Dispensation, expounded, in over a hundred volumes, the principles of His Faith, proclaimed His Message to the kings and rulers of both the East and the West, both Christian and Muslim, addressed the Pope, the Caliph of Islam, the Chief Magistrates of the Republics of the American continent, the entire Christian sacerdotal order, the leaders of Shi'ih and Sunni Islam, and the high priests of the Zoroastrian religion. In these writings He proclaimed

His Revelation, summoned those whom He addressed to heed His call and espouse His Faith, warned them of the consequences of their refusal, and denounced, in some cases, their arrogance and tyranny.

### 'Abdu'l-Bahá

His eldest son, Abbas Effendi, known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the Servant of Bahá), appointed by Him as the successor and the authorized interpreter of His teachings, who since early childhood had been closely associated with His Father, and shared His exile and tribulations, remained a prisoner until 1908, when as a result of the Young Turk Revolution, He was released from His confinement. Establishing His residence in Haifa, He embarked soon after on His three-year journey to Egypt, Europe and North America, in the course of which He expounded before vast audiences, the teachings of His Father and predicted the approach of that catastrophe that was soon to befall mankind. He returned to His home on the eve of the first World War, in the course of which He was exposed to constant danger, until liberation of Palestine by the forces under the command of General Allenby, who extended the utmost consideration to Him and the small band of His fellow-exiles in 'Akká and Haifa. In 1921 He passed away, and was buried in a vault in the mausoleum erected on Mount Carmel, at the express instruction of Bahá'u'lláh for the remains of the Báb which had previously been transferred from Tabríz to the Holy Land after having been preserved and concealed for no less than sixty years.

### Administrative Order

The passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá marked the termination of the first and Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Faith and signaled the opening of the Formative Age destined to witness the gradual emergence of its Administrative Order, whose establishment had been foretold by the Báb, whose laws were revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, whose outlines were delineated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament, and whose foundations are now being laid by the national and local councils which are elected by the professed adherents of the Faith, and which are paving the way for the constitution of the World Council, to be designated as the Universal House of Justice, which in conjunction with me, as its appointed Head and authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í teachings, must coordinate and direct the affairs of the Bahá'í community, and whose seat will be permanently established in the Holy Land, in close proximity to its world spiritual centre, the resting-places of its Founders.

The Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh which is destined to evolve into the Bahá'í World Commonwealth, and has already survived



the assaults launched against its institutions by such formidable foes as the kings of the Qajar dynasty, the Caliphs of Islam, the ecclesiastical leaders of Egypt, and the Nazi regime in Germany, has already extended its ramifications to every continent of the globe, stretching from Iceland to the extremity of Chile, has established in no less than eighty-eight countries of the world, has gathered within its pale representatives of no less than thirty-one races, numbers among its supporters Christians of various denominations, Muslims of both Sunni and Shi'ih sects, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Buddhists. It has published and disseminated, through its appointed agencies, Bahá'í literature in forty-eight languages; Has already consolidated its structure through the incorporation of five National Assemblies and seventy-seven local Assemblies, in lands as far apart as South America, India and the Antipodes -- incorporations that legally empower its elected representatives to hold property as trustees of the Bahá'í community. It disposes of international, national and local endowments, estimated at several million pounds, and spread over every continent of the globe, enjoys in several countries the privilege of official recognition by the civil authorities, enabling it to secure exemption from taxation for its endowments and to solemnize Bahá'í marriage, and numbers among its stately edifices, two temples, the one erected in Russian Turkistan and the other on the shore of Lake Michigan at Wilmette, on the outskirts of Chicago.

This Administrative Order, unlike the systems evolved after the death of the Founders of the various religions, is divine in origin, rests securely on the laws, the precepts, the ordinances and institutions which the Founder of the Faith has Himself specifically laid down and unequivocally established, and functions in strict accordance with the interpretations of the authorized Interpreters of its holy scriptures. Though fiercely assailed, ever since its inception, it has by virtue of its character, unique in the annals of the world's religious history, succeeded in maintaining unity of the diversified and far-flung body of its supporters, and enabled them to launch, unitedly and systematically, enterprises in both Hemispheres, designed to extend its limits and consolidate its administrative institutions.

The Faith which this order serves, safeguards and promotes, is, it should be noted in this connection, essentially supernatural, supranational, entirely non-political, non-partisan, and diametrically opposed to any policy or school of thought that seeks to exalt any particular race, class or nation. It is free from any form of ecclesiasticism, has neither priesthood nor rituals, and is supported exclusively by voluntary contributions mad by its avowed adherents. Though loyal to their respective governments, though imbued with the love of their own country, and anxious to promote, at all times, its best interests, the followers of the Bahá'í Faith, nevertheless, viewing mankind as one entity, and profoundly attached to its vital interests, will not

hesitate to subordinate every particular interest, be it personal, regional or national, to the over-riding interests of the generality of mankind, knowing full well that in a world of interdependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no lasting result can be achieved by any of the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are neglected.

Nor should the fact be overlooked that the Faith has already asserted and demonstrated its independent religious character, has been emancipated from fetters of orthodoxy in certain Islamic countries, has obtained in one of them an unsolicited testimony to its independent religious status, and succeeded in winning the allegiance of royalty to its cause.

#### 4. The Moths: Sabrí & Raissa

##### Sabré - the Orphaned Moth

While in Ethiopia, probably during the years 1933-5, Sabré was in communication with a world renowned Bahá'í teacher and educator: Mrs Victoria Badikian. She was an early American Bahá'í – better known as 'Auntie Victoria' in view of her keen interest and dedicated labours in the field of child education over several decades. Auntie Victoria was in constant correspondence with virtually all Bahá'í localities that were listed in the "Bahá'í Directory" of the biennial record, *The Bahá'í World*. In one of her letters to Sabré, she related to him a quite astonishing story that Sabré seemed to have decided not to record in his, otherwise, well-detailed autobiography. Fortunately, it was in a rare relaxation of his firm grip on total humility and self-denial that he confided it verbally and off-the-record to this writer. According to Auntie Victoria, she once requested permission from the Master to allow her to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to Ethiopia. It is not clear whether this request was made verbally during one of her pilgrimages to the Holy Land during the lifetime of Abdu'l-Bahá or through written correspondence. The Master's reply was that Ethiopia will be opened to the Faith by a Bahá'í from Egypt. Up to this point, the story is quite an eye opener. But what was quite extraordinary is the fact that she made this request in 1906 – the very year that witnessed the birth of a father-orphaned child, named Sabré Elias, to a Coptic Orthodox family, in an obscure village in the heart of Nile Delta in the North of Egypt.

In a heart-rending account of the early childhood of his brother and himself, Sabré's story runs as follows:

"My first memory of my childhood starts with the first time that I met my brother, which might have been during the year 1911 when I was 4 or 5 years old. Before that time I lived in a village that was quite remote from that where my brother lived. This separation was because of family reasons: Our father died at 26 years of age. He was born in 1880 and his death occurred in 1906, two months before my birth. My brother was 4 years old at the loss of our father. Having been widowed, my mother moved away from the home of my father and took me with her as a suckling baby, since I was born on 2 November 1906. So, I was raised up in a village that is far from my father's, where my brother remained. I did not know my brother or, rather, I did not know that I had a brother named Subhí Elias until circumstances allowed our reunion. That is because while Subhí remained under the care of his paternal grandfather in the family village, I remained under the care of my mother since I was still a suckling child. Thus days went by until I became six years of age when I met my brother for the first time in our grandfather's village; for he demanded that I be brought back to be raised in the family's home. When I met Subhí he was a slender boy who was four years my senior. He was then receiving education

at a church tutorial school that taught reading and writing with the Bible as the only textbook. Parallel to this, our grandfather was tutoring him in mathematics, a subject that he mastered during his auditing career in the Domain<sup>8</sup>. It was also that tradition of the time that Copts were good at mathematics. Subhí was a brilliant and quite perceptive child. When I met him, as I said, I conveyed to him his mother's greetings. That is, I repeated to him the same words that I was entrusted by my mother to say, 'Your mother greets you!' I also kissed him as I said this, as she exactly requested. But Subhí was quite astonished to find a brother that he never knew existed. Yet, he was more startled that he also had a mother. 'Mother!' he reacted, 'I don't have a mother. Where is she?' In other words, he didn't have any idea that she existed.

"In brief, I came to be raised up with Subhí at our grandfather's home for the following two years. Personally, I was not a favoured child – in contrast to Subhí, who had always been under the care of his grandfather. Since I was sent by my mother, whom this family disliked, I was consequently disliked, unlike Subhí who had his position. The only women in my grandfather's household were some aunts. We had two uncles, the younger of whom was Mr. Ibrahim Abdu'l-Masih, who introduced us to the Bahá'í Faith in later years, as he was a capable teacher. The older uncle, named Isaac, was well-cultured and educated, and spoke French fluently. However, he had some unfavourable traits such as drinking and the like. Two years after my return, my grandfather suffered a stroke that left him half-paralyzed. Hence, Subhí and I started to encounter serious difficulties: our older uncle ruled over the household, on the pretext that he became the head of the family in place of his indisposed father. He began to squander money and property.

"But Subhí and I had our special trouble. Some villagers advised Subhí to approach our grandfather for our right of inheritance, in view of the prevailing Christian law (on inheritance)<sup>9</sup>, which stipulated that the children of a deceased father do not inherit their grandfather<sup>10</sup>,

8 The Domain was the name of the Egyptian Government's Real Estate Commission

9 Christianity does not have a specific law on inheritance. Therefore, it was customary in Egypt, in matters of inheritance, to apply the Islamic Shari'a Law to Christians as well.

10 In past ages, people used to live together in big families, with each family inhabiting a single building or a number of inter-connected structures, under the headship of the eldest male. All members of the family would manage family property as an indivisible unit, generation after generation. Out of respect and reverence, the tradition of such families would not put the generation of children at par with the generation of fathers. Therefore, children could not share their uncles in the property of their grandfather if their own father dies earlier. In return, these uncles were given the duty to take care of the children of their deceased brother with equity and conscientiousness as if they were their own children. The Islamic (Shari'a) Law took into consideration this social tradition. Yet, and with the virtual disappearance of big 'extended' families and the tendency of people in modern times to live in small 'direct' families, the Bahá'í Law on Intestacy – which is set for present and future generations – safeguards the right of orphaned children in their grandfather's estate. Kitáb-i-Aqdas reads (Paragraph 27): *Should the son of the deceased have passed away in the days of his father and have left children, they will inherit their father's share, as prescribed in the Book of God. Divide ye their share amongst them with perfect justice.* In response to the injustice that started to be meted to orphans by their uncles, the Egyptian legislators amended the law to protect the right of orphans such as Subhí and Sabré in their grandfather's estate. However, this amendment took place in 1948 – some thirty-five years after this tragic deprivation of Subhí and Sabré.



unless there is a specific will, bequeathing, or sale from the grandfather to them. The villagers would say to Subhí, 'your grandfather is about to die, and you should now ask him to secure your right of inheritance.' Our grandfather heeded Subhí's request and, because he was unable to write due to his paralysis, he summoned his brother, whom I personally detested very much to his bedside. There he dictated a will in our favour, and then signed it and gave it to us. On seeing the will, the villagers remarked that it lacks signatures of witnesses. 'As such', they warned us, 'you will not be able to claim any inheritance and would become wretched.' These villagers, with the majority of them being Muslims, were quite sympathetic. They advised us to go to the village priest and request him to sign the document as a witness. Subhí was too scared to see this priest face to face. I was even more scared than Subhí. However, he brought me to the priest's door and asked me to have him sign the will as a witness. The priest was a friend and drinking companion of my (older) uncle. I do not mean to defame but, rather relate the truth. Instead of signing the document as I went into the house to request, the priest confiscated it, vilified and threatened me, and ordered me to go away. He would not heed my pleadings to give me back the will, but went to the extent of wagging his stick at me and I was forced to flee. So, he took the will and handed it over to his friend, my uncle, on the pretext that my brother and I were plotting secretly.

"This incident was enough to infuriate the whole village, including some sympathising distant relatives. It happened also at the time that my grandfather saw a dream that he related to us. He saw a white sheet of paper that had a dark spot. He was told by someone that this white page was his deeds in life, yet that dark spot in it was the children of your deceased son, whom you will leave behind without any source of income. This prompted my grandfather to rewrite the will in a serious manner. My younger uncle was invited to this occasion, and the older one was also obliged to attend. The village elders were invited to the church as dignitaries on behalf of both Muslim and Christian population. Thus my grandfather was carried to this venue on a chair, where a proper will was written and then attested by a great number of those present, before it was entrusted to our father's cousin.

"However, there was a shortcoming in the way that will was written: it did not specify which part of our grandfather's estate was passed on to us. It only stated that we were to inherit what our father would have had. No sooner was the new will concluded than our older uncle began to persecute us. Often he would manhandle Subhí, hang him by his feet on ropes and bastinado him cruelly. He would also falsely accuse us of committing certain crimes and then torture us into confessions. Eventually, he spread a rumour among the household that we stole jewellery from the house that we gave to our mother. Of course these were all baseless accusations that ultimately forced Subhí to flee. He was then around 13 years old, and I did not know where he went.

"Two months following Subhí's disappearance, I discovered that he had gone to Cairo and got employment as a labourer in a cigarette factory. One day, Subhí sneaked into the village at a time when I was dragged into a great state of abasement and maltreatment of which I knew no reason. I was still young, slow in comprehension, and did not know what was happening. On that day, someone whispered to me that Subhí has returned, and wishes to see me in the churchyard by our father's graveside. There I rushed, and the church was closed as it was not a Sunday. I found him there, standing by the grave and weeping. He hugged me and said 'Let us

leave this village!' This village was next to the Town of Minúf and I do not want to mention its name.<sup>11</sup> The nearest train station to the village was Kamshúsh, and from there we walked<sup>12</sup> to El-Batanon station, where our mother used to live. Upon reaching it I was overjoyed because I was about to see my mother once again. I loved her so much! I was also happy at the thought of being reunited with my childhood friends with whom I used to play two years before. So, here I am back in the village where I spent the first six years of my life! Therefore, I was surprised when Subhí stopped at the train station instead of going straight to our mother's home. 'Why stop here?' I exclaimed. 'We must wait here until darkness falls, then we will go there,' he explained, 'for if we enter the village in these shabby and dirty clothes we will cause great embarrassment to our mother among her neighbours.' Thus, when I reminisce about the days that I spent with Subhí I remember his wit and proper conduct at all times.

'After reaching my mother's home, Subhí left me there and departed. We became separated again as he went away for a job with the Egyptian Railways (as a casual labourer). As to myself, I was sent to Tanta (the main city of the neighbouring province) to work as a utility boy in a printing press. In Tanta, I was under the guardianship of one of my mother's relatives. There, I would also see Subhí once in a few months when he would come to visit me. Anyway, what happened was that, after undergoing untold suffering and pain under the custody of my father's relatives, I started to receive more unpleasant treatment at the hands of my mother's folks. I was handled with an abasement that would not be even accorded to domestic servants – who used to receive slave-like treatment and were not yet accorded the workers' rights of the present time. I was in great pain and my tears would not stop, and I would often run away on foot following train tracks to my mother's home in order to seek refuge. However, those custodians would come and drag me back. My torment was boundless.

"This misery continued until Subhí obtained a permanent job in Suez. When he came to visit me I wept. He tried to reconcile me with that guardian, who was husband of my maternal aunt, but it was not possible. This time, Subhí had to take me to live with him. From that moment onward we lived together in Suez and were never again to be separated. There I started to learn my tailoring profession, while he was a low-ranking employee in the Egyptian Railways."

Eventually, Sabrí moved to work and live in Alexandria, first on his own, and later with Subhí when he came to settle in this City – never to leave it until his passing sixty years later in 1980, at the age of seventy eight. In contrast, Sabrí would travel extensively for the next seventy years and outlive his dear brother by sixteen years.

### Raissa

As was the case with Sabrí, Raissa was also destined to be born to a non-Bahá'í family, but fourteen years later. Her parents were devout Muslims who lived in the City of Alexandria. Two more things in common between

11 When once pressed for the name of this village, Sabri mentioned it: *Sudúd*, literally 'barriers' in Arabic.

12 At those early days of transport, the railroad tracks were the most passable and direct roads between villages and towns; travellers on foot would also follow the tracks.



her and Sabrí were that Raissa never went to school, but she was trained for sewing and needlework skills in place of regular schooling.

However, her hardships as a child were not because she lacked the loving kindness of two living parents, since she was blessed with an exemplary father and mother. Her tests came from distant relatives and social traditions. She tells of this in yet another captivating narrative.

"My birth was on 12 April 1920, in the modest suburb of Baccus, Alexandria, Egypt, and a family of average means. My father, Mr. Yáqút Ahmad, was a dealer of sanitary supplies and liked by all. He was careful to perform (Islamic) prayers in time. My mother, Mrs. Gháá Saláma Shams, was known for the kindness of heart, and was loved by all neighbours and relatives. [I was the last-born to my parents after four sons and four daughters.]

"I used to complain ... about the state of fear that took command of me. It was because of the stories of evil spirits and ghosts that we used to hear from relatives. 'Don't believe the superstition' a close niece would comfort me, 'all these are fancy things that are the product of the minds of our folks.' Although she was a niece, yet she was older than me. She was a role model for me when it came to courage and audacity. In spite of my sincere love for her, those fanciful matters continued to command my thoughts. One day, a cousin came to visit us, and rushed to tell him a story. 'Yesterday,' I said, 'I saw a ghost, but I got rid of it by hurrying to my bed and putting the blanket over my face. It looked awful!' He chuckled and said 'It was me. I was the ghost that you saw me. Your mother asked me to put a sieve on my face and a black cover on my head so that you would rush to your bed and sleep!' After this incident I started to understand the reality of what was going on around me, and began to take courage. What I understood, indeed, was that imagination was playing a disproportionate role in our life. People used to believe what they heard until myth became reality. This incident also proved to me that ghosts exist only in our imagination.

"[During those days I used to have unusual dreams that would come true.] One day my eldest sister Ni'mat came to visit us. I told her of a disturbing dream that I had the night before: I saw her daughter (and my role-model) Su'ád die after sustaining burns in her body. It was late in the evening: that same day Su'ád died after being burned by the explosion of a pressure kerosene stove in the kitchen, and my dream came true. It was also during that period that I used to have many dreams; most of them would be realized. At that stage of my life I used to wonder about this power that was showing me things before they happen.

"I was eight years old when my youngest brother Muhammad sent me to a shop that taught tailoring to young girls, which was named after its owner 'Sheikh Muhammad'. I was happy because it was near to the home of my favourite paternal aunt, and allowed me to spend with her most of my time after my daily training sessions. I was careful to perform my [Muslim obligatory] prayers with her. During my apprenticeship I was taught some verses from the Qur'án. I remember that one day the villager teacher came to the workshop and taught us to sing a song in his funny way and rural dialect. This made us laugh aloud, yet we each received ten strokes as punishment. We were also made to stand up for one hour with raised-up hands

and faces to the wall. The following day, I decided never to return to that workshop. However, nobody asked me why. A brother-in-law then suggested that I would be moved to a primary school, but I did not stay there for long: I was sent to another workshop ... where I learned embroidery and needlework, in addition to the Arabic language and elementary mathematics."

### Sabrí embraces the Faith:

While yet oceans apart from each other, the mysterious process of preparing these two helpless and humble souls for a quite challenging future was well underway: first with Sabrí in the early 1920's when Raissa was still a suckling child. Now a young man of 15 who was no longer at the mercy of cruel relatives and with a profession that enabled him to both care for himself and serve others, Sabrí was to be introduced to the Bahá'í Faith through the tender-care and wisdom of his only succour, mentor and brother Subhí. Speaking more of his dear brother's conversion than of his own, Sabrí's left us a glowing account of this great transformation in his life.

"While Subhí and I were living together in Suez, correspondence started to come to Subhí from our younger uncle Ibrahim. His letters were replete of sublime meanings and words that described another way of life – something much more exalted than food, drink, sleep and shelter. His words were full of guidance that was higher than we could comprehend. However, I could not understand the inference of these letters, but Subhí would explain them to me. My ability to read and write was quite limited at the time, and I needed Subhí's literacy skill to help me. In response to our uncle's letters, Subhí would send letters [of inquiry] to which he would receive answers. Eventually, Subhí confided to me 'Your Uncle harbours a secret that he does not wish to reveal to us. He is trying to open my eyes to something that he does not wish to tell!'

"After a few years of such correspondence, Subhí went to meet Uncle Ibrahim, who was employed at the Telegraph Service at a town called Itáy-el-Bárúd, south-east of Alexandria. At that time, Uncle Ibrahim, may God bless his soul, embraced the Faith and became dedicated to It through that great believer Mr. Abdu'l-Rahmán Rushdie. It was at this same town [literally 'place of gunpowder' in Arabic] that a large number of souls were also attracted to the Faith.<sup>13</sup> The new believers would submit their declaration of faith to His Eminence Abdu'l-Bahá, to which he would respond with 'letters' that were known to the Bahá'ís as 'tablets'. In those tablets, Abdu'l-Bahá used to call this town 'Itáy-el-Núr' [meaning 'place of light'], in recognition of the great number of those who embraced the Faith in it. So, Subhí met Uncle Ibrahim under a bridge by the shore of River Nile. Subhí started a frank talk with his uncle. 'Give me a clear direction!' Subhí requested, 'What do you have that you want to tell me about? All your letters infer to a concept and a cause that is higher than our day-to-day interests. What is it?'

<sup>13</sup> Including Mr. Muhammad Mustapha, later Knight of Bahá'u'lláh and Counsellor, who became in charge of the administrative affairs of the Bahá'í Community of Egypt from 1966 until his passing in August 1981.



"At first, Uncle Ibrahim was reluctant to explain, yet he eventually told Subhí that the Second Advent of Jesus Christ had taken place: now the world is about to begin a new phase, the very face of the Earth will change, religions will agree, the world will adopt one language and the like. Subhí sat there listening to what his Uncle was saying, like an arid desert that was receiving early showers. He imbibed every word that was said, because he was spiritually susceptible ... There, as they were seated by the River Nile, Subhí asked his uncle in eagerness, 'Do you have a photograph of this new Manifestation of God?' 'What I have is only a small cutting from a picture.' Uncle Ibrahim replied as he took a small piece of what must have been a transparency. As soon as Subhí raised it towards the sun in front of his eyes<sup>14</sup> – This was a picture of Abdu'l-Bahá, and what happened to Subhí at that time is what happened to me now. He burst into tears. Indeed our family is passionate, in other words we are ruled by passion rather than reason. Having seen this picture and heard this talk from his uncle, Subhí became a Bahá'í ... I believe that Subhí was eighteen years old [and] this could have taken place towards the end of 1920. [Immediately] he started to teach [the Faith] non-stop to whomsoever he would meet. There seemed to be no power on earth that could stop him from talking about the Faith. His enthusiasm was extreme, not only to the degree of burning or to that of being on fire but to that of being consumed by fire ...

"If I am to tell you my condition at that time: I was a Bahá'í and, at the same time I was not a Bahá'í. That was because I was not fully aware of what was going on, and could not comprehend the reality of the Faith. My upbringing was modest, and my education was limited to what Christians used to tutor to their children at home. As to schooling, I did not attend more than six months in an English medium school. In contrast, Subhí was schooled to the end of the primary level in a school that was headed by an English teacher called Mr. Cash. In other words, he attained a certain degree of education, yet his brilliance and wit were much higher than the certificates that he obtained. Notwithstanding what I said – being a Bahá'í and a non-Bahá'í at the same time, I was somewhat moved. I felt that I was a Bahá'í, at least for being a partner of my brother in his emotions and passions.

"Following the passing of His Eminence Abdu'l-Bahá ... I spotted an issue of a famous magazine of those times ... that had a large and very impressive portrait of Abdu'l-Bahá at its front page. Inside the issue there was a description of the funeral and a listing of the relatives and the notables (of the Family of Abdu'l-Bahá), and a number of articles on the history of Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. So, I bought the magazine and framed its cover photo and had it hung in my home, in the same manner as the Christians who would hang the portrait of Jesus in their homes. Afterwards, Subhí came to me in Alexandria and took me to a place in which the Bahá'ís of the city used to meet – the house of the Late Mr. Abdu'l-Rahmán Rushdie. Alexandria's Bahá'í Community at the time numbered some fifteen persons ... One day during this very visit of Subhí, he summoned me 'Go to the house of Mr. Abdu'l-Rahmán Rushdie, and he will give you a book that you will bring to me. I will be seated at the coffee shop next to the railway station until you do so. But, beware of opening this book or attempt to read it. It is *The Hidden Words!* Do you know what this means?' Since I did not understand what he said he explained 'It is the concealed words.' Thus I went to Mr. Abdu'l-Rahmán Rushdie who

<sup>14</sup> At this point of the story, Sabrí wept vehemently and the recording paused until he became composed enough to continue.

gave me the book. On the way back I was overcome by an eager desire to open it, since 'what is forbidden is desired'. But I was afraid that my brother would know. So, I would read a few lines, and then close the book, and so on. Eventually I came to my brother with the book."

In spite of his many hours of recording, Sabrí stopped short of relating how his quest for the truth continued after this point. Fortunately, his brother Subhí related it.<sup>15</sup>

[Having read the Hidden Words, against my *intentional* explicit instructions] Sabrí's questions started and answers followed until his perceptions matured. Eventually, he loved the Faith or, rather, adored it above anything else. Indeed, to say that 'he loved the Faith' does not accurately describe it. I also remember that when we rented a house for both of us, in a suburb of Alexandria that was inhabited by a majority of Christian, a Christian neighbour had a grocery shop that was immediately opposite our residence where we would send Sabrí to shop. When he knew that Sabrí was a Bahá'í, this man's curiosity grew intense. Each time Sabrí would go to the shop, the grocer would engage Sabrí in inquiries and discussions. Neighbours, bystanders and shoppers alike would stand in a ring around Sabrí at such sessions. Because Sabrí's height as a young boy did not allow everybody to see or hear him clearly, the grocer would place him on a stool to give a better view. When Sabrí was challenged by a question to which he did not have an answer, he would spend the entire night by the dim light of our kerosene lamp, squinting into the Bible in search for answers. Later, when he got in touch with Muslims ... he would do the same from the Qur'án. Thus Sabrí's quest for spiritual knowledge continued until he perfected the art of teaching. Seeking and finding information from its genuine sources was another skill that he mastered ... He even excelled me! Nay, he excelled those who were older than him and came to the Faith much earlier! His teaching conquests [during those early years in Alexandria] were numerous and successful, bringing many steadfast believers into the Faith. Of those believers, some joined the concourse-on-high, others suffered in the Path of Service in the same manner that Sabrí did, and the rest are those many families that remained faithful to the Cause of God until today in Egypt – these were all the spiritual children of Sabrí."

### Raissa's Spiritual Quest:

At the time when Sabrí's first 'spiritual expedition' in Ethiopia had to be abruptly delayed due to the Italian invasion of the country, Raissa's own spiritual quest had just started. Strikingly, she was at the age of 15, just like Sabrí.

It was towards 1935 that Raissa lost the dearest of her three sisters to an untimely death. She was Hikmat who had just become a Bahá'í at the hands of their youngest brother Muhammad, who was taught the Faith by a Persian-origin Bahá'í of Alexandria. Speaking emotionally of those days,

<sup>15</sup> This account was part of some tape-recorded recollections of Mr. Subhí Elias on the history of the Faith in Egypt. Subhí made these recordings more or less at a time when Sabrí and Raissa embarked on their second Djibouti term (1976-1977).



Raissa's vivid recollection never faded with time. As late as August 200 she gave us the following account.

"... Hikmat won the great blessing of accepting the Faith of God. Yet, it was His Will that s would contract a fever and die soon afterwards at hospital early one sad morning. Mome before her passing, a physician wanted to call her family and asked her 'What is your ho address?' Her answer was 'Doctor! I want you to know that I am a Bahá'í: my religion is t Bahá'í Faith.' Then she gave him her address and closed her eyes for ever. The first fam member who rushed to the hospital was my brother Muhammad. "'Do you have a book tha may read about the Bahá'í Faith?' The physician asked my brother. 'How did you know abo the Faith?' exclaimed Muhammad. 'In her dying moments, your sister told me of her fait replied the deeply touched physician.

"That same night, I woke up before dawn and cried aloud. My mother rushed to my bedsi and I told her 'Mother! Hikmat has just died! She came and bade me farewell!' And it w a few minutes later that the news of Hikmat's passing reached us from the hospital. "M separation from Hikmat saddened me grievously, yet it was a means for me to meditate o the world of spirit and wonder about the bond that binds the material and spiritual worlds. started to feel much nearer to God than before. One night, I wept too much and supplicated th God may show me a vision that confirms to me the truth of this Faith – if it was the truth. M prayers were answered: In the world of vision, I saw myself at the Day of Resurrection amid multitudes of people who were in a state of agitation and turmoil. 'What is this?' I exclaimed 'This is the Day of Resurrection' answered a resonant voice. 'But where is God?' I wondered 'And where are the People of the Right Hand and the People of the Left Hand?' Here I sa a mighty hand stretch out from heaven. 'This is the Hand of God.' Explained a person whos face I could not see. 'And where is the Messenger?' I shouted. 'He is Bahá'u'lláh!' replied th voice. As I gazed into heaven, that Hand of Divine Power held a rod that split the multitudes i two groups: the People of the Right Hand and the People of the Left Hand. I walked toward the People of the Right Hand and saw them in great happiness and dressed in luminous robes with my brother Muhammad among them. 'I am not yet sure!' I said to myself. So, I walk to the People of the Left Hand, who looked awful with unkempt hair and filthy robes, with m parental aunt among them. 'Come and join us!' My aunt beckoned me. 'No! I am scared!' I replied in anguish. I remained standing between the two camps and shouted 'O God! Show m the Right Path!' And a woman, who was very beautiful and clad in spotless white attire, came out of the Right Hand camp and held my hand. 'Why are you in this state of wonderment?' As I wept and kissed her hand, I pleaded, 'Please guide me to the True Path!' She then escorted me to a chamber that was full of light and brought a register book. 'Write your name here!' She told me, and I heeded her. She gave me a very beautiful candle and a bottle of green coloured oil. 'This candle is the light that will illuminate your life: the light of faith' she explained, 'and this is your life-giving oil. From now on, you will never live in darkness but, rather, in the light of certitude.' A great joy overtook me as I woke from my dream. After I related this vision to my mother, I yelled 'Mother! The Bahá'í Faith is the Truth from God.'"

While young Sabrí embarked immediately on teaching his newly espoused Faith to whomsoever he met and succeeded in inviting many others to follow suit, social tradition played a factor in delaying Raissa's teaching

conquests. It was impossible for an unmarried young girl in her teens to have the same open field as that of a man of her age. Notwithstanding this delay, Raissa already had all the qualities that she would need in her daring future of teaching in a field that would not know any geographic boundaries. As distant future events evolved, that field included no less than a dozen countries in Africa, Europe, and Asia. In recognition of her unique qualities, her parents, who also embraced the Faith at the hands of their benevolent young son, Muhammad, gave her the title by which she would be known: *Raissa*, literally the 'she-chief'!

### Two Eagles:

*I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.*<sup>16</sup>

[Bahá'u'lláh]

Embracing the Faith transformed Sabrí and Raissa from moths to young eagles. As young eagles with short and fluffy feathers, they were not yet capable of soaring in horizons away from the vicinity of their humble nests. Growing up and with the unfoldment of their drooping wings was a process that was yet to take place during their pilgrimage to Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh & the Báb and other Bahá'í Holy Places in Palestine; twice by Sabrí alone at the beginning of end his first pioneering visit to Ethiopia, and a third visit as a couple with their first-born child just before their return. There they were also blessed to meet at length with the young Guardian of their beloved Faith, Shoghi Effendi Rabbání and his wife Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum Rabbání, who showered them with abundant love, guidance, and encouragement – an experience that started them on their glorious flight; first with Sabrí in 1933, and then Raissa ten years later. From these points of time onwards, the two youthful eagles were hardened, day after day, by ceaseless and unavoidable trials and tribulations of a pioneering career that spanned more than half a century.

<sup>16</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 169





Sabri in Egypt after Ethiopia 1 - with the black fez - ca 1938



Young Sabri at his sewing machine with brother Sobhy ca. 1922

### 5. Arising to the Challenge

*"If they arise to teach My Cause ... It behoveth them to choose as the best provision for their journey reliance upon God, and to clothe themselves with the love of their Lord, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious. If they do so, their words shall influence their hearers."* Bahá'u'lláh<sup>17</sup>

*"Sabri was the first Bahá'í to visit Abyssinia, a stranger without proper knowledge of the country. He had neither a friend nor a helper, relying only on the Guidance of Bahá'u'lláh."* Gila Bahta

#### Time now Ripe for Ethiopia

As it entered the second decade of the twentieth century, Ethiopia (still better known to the world as Abyssinia) was emerging from some seventy turbulent years of a costly struggle to regain its place in the world as the unified nation it once was, and seemed to have achieved the degree of stability needed for its desired modernisation and advancement. In spite of a looming colonial attempt at the country's age-long independence, Shoghi Effendi's vision for Ethiopia's encounter with the new Faith of God was that the time was then ripe.

There is no doubt that this young Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, who was then in the early years of his glorious ministry of 36 years, was well aware of the agitations that were still in store for a nation that had barely recovered from the sufferings of its birth pangs. Warning the lonely marshal who arose to the challenge of this solo spiritual conquest, Shoghi Effendi's last words to Sabrí Elias were: "You will be forced by certain circumstances to leave the capital of Abyssinia. At such a time you would rest for a while and then return to Abyssinia once more".

In other words, Shoghi Effendi's plan was that there is no time to lose; even if it were to be three years that barely separated the first arrival of a Bahá'í pioneer from the years of war.

Shoghi Effendi felt urged to send a pioneer without delay for another reason: he was encouraged by some correspondence that started to reach him from a group in Addis Ababa that was headed by certain Muhammad Darwish Táha and claimed to be genuinely attracted to the Bahá'í Faith. However, he wanted this claim of faith to be ascertained in the first place. Therefore, he requested Sabrí to meet these people and, if they were sincere in their claim of faith, to join hands with them and together invite more people to

<sup>17</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 200

join the Faith, otherwise he would shun them and do the work alone. But how did Sabrí come to arise to this challenge?

### Spiritual Destiny of a City

Alexandria was the capital of Egypt under Greek and Roman rulers since it was founded in 332 BC by Alexander the Great and made the literary, scientific, and commercial centre of the Greek world. In what is more than a divine plan than mere coincidence, Alexandria was the base from which both Orthodox Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith would travel to Ethiopia. This spiritual destiny of the city is confirmed further by the realisation that it was the only part of African soil to have been blessed, though very briefly, by the presence of Bahá'u'lláh: on 26-27 August 1868 when He and His entourage of exiles changed ships en route to their confinement to the Fortress of Akká by edict of the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Alexandria was also the scene of probably what was the first conversion to the Bahá'í Faith in Egypt when Fares Effendi, a Syrian physician, embraced the Faith at the hand of Nabíl, the renowned apostle and historian of Bahá'u'lláh, and sent a petition from their prison to Bahá'u'lláh as His ship berthed in the city's harbour.

In what seems to be its preparation for a revival of its past spiritual fortunes, Alexandria received the first contingent of Persian pioneers sent by Bahá'u'lláh to spread the Faith in Egypt barely one or two years after His Declaration in 1863. This process continued during the Ministry of Abdu'l-Bahá when he and other members of his family, including young Shoghi Effendi the future Guardian of the Faith, blessed Alexandria with their extended intermittent visits during 1910-1913, when the Master made his historical journeys to Europe and America.

Starting with a handful of very devoted and faithful early Egyptian believers in the few years that followed the sojourn of Abdu'l-Bahá, the Bahá'í community of Alexandria grew soon afterwards in both number and devotion. At the time when Sabrí embraced the Faith in 1921, he counted some 15 adult believers in the city. By the time Sabrí and Raissa married and had their first two children, and as evidenced by one of the community group pictures (C. 1942), a count of Alexandria's Bahá'ís averaged 150 adult, youth and children.

An indication of the spiritual resolve and drive of this community in years to come is that fact that, during Shoghi Effendi's worldwide Ten Year Crusade that took the Bahá'í Faith to almost a hundred new countries and territories, Alexandria's share of the Knights of Bahá'u'lláh<sup>18</sup> who arose from Egypt to

<sup>18</sup> A title that Shoghi Effendi gave to each believer who was first to settle in a 'virgin' territory targeted by this Ten Year Crusade. Sabrí and Raissa would not win this title for having opened Ethiopia to the Faith.

meet this challenge was four out of eight, even two of the remaining four were either former residents of the city, or close family relatives of some of its believers.<sup>19</sup>

### Reluctant Moth

When the National Assembly of Egypt and Sudan received Shoghi Effendi's request to send a pioneer from Egypt to Ethiopia, Sabrí was immediately considered as a suitable candidate. However, Sabrí viewed himself differently, as evidenced by his following recollection.

In 1933 I was on a visit to Mr. Iskander Hanna, the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly. I asked him if he had any news. He said, 'Oh yes! This evening we had a very important Assembly meeting as we were discussing a request from His Eminence Shoghi Effendi to nominate an Egyptian Bahá'í to pioneer to Abyssinia and teach the Cause of God in that good country. I was delighted to hear this news, because since I have reached the age of 14 and embraced the Faith I became so fond of teaching It and wished very much that the Message could reach the ears and touch the hearts of all the good souls. I said, 'This is great news, my dear, great news! It means that the Teachings of God will be spread throughout Abyssinia.'

Indeed!' He replied, 'But we were looking for a person that would be sent to Abyssinia. Whom do you recommend?' 'I know someone who may be the right person,' I replied, 'That is Sheikh Muhieddín Al-Kurdi. He is one of the most steadfast and capable believers. He is also of very high morals, presentable, and has a good influence on everyone he meets. For these reasons he is the one whom I recommend to pioneer to Abyssinia.'

In fact,' Iskander said, 'We discussed him as a possible candidate, but he does not have a location or a profession that could earn him a living there. There are also other barriers to him going there.' So, I mentioned few other names to him, but to each name I mentioned he would reply: 'We took notice of him at the meeting, but we found that he is not suitable'.

Our discussion ended at that point, because I always thought that only Bahá'ís of an advanced age would be suitable to teach religion. I got this idea from what I used to see in the churches, and from the stories I heard about the disciples of Jesus Christ and other Prophets. They were all of an advanced age, bearded and charismatic. Since I exhausted all the names that I knew, I could not think of anyone else. 'Still, Sabrí,' He ended the conversation, 'If you have reached a suitable candidate, please come to us tomorrow morning to tell us.' I parted with a feeling of great joy to the idea that the Faith of God will eventually reach Abyssinia. Before I went to bed that same night, I was wondering what to do [to find a suitable candidate to pioneer to Abyssinia].

<sup>19</sup> ten years earlier, but have inadvertently earned it when they heeded a call to move to Djibouti in 1954. The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh who hailed from Egypt: From Alexandria, Mr. Sabrí Elias, Mrs. Raissa Elias, Mr. Shawqí Riáz Rúhaní, and Mrs. Bahiyyih Zain; from Cairo, Mr. Muhammad Mustapha, Mr. Muhsin Enáyat, Mr. Amín Battáh (formerly a resident of Alexandria), and Mr. Fawzi Zain (husband of Bahiyyih).



"Then during my sleep that night, I had a very strange dream: I saw myself, together with a friend of mine, in the presence of His Eminence Shoghi Effendi the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith who spoke to both of us: 'I want to send a person to Russia to serve as an editor for the Light newspaper.' This request from His Eminence the Guardian took us aback. As I was wondering and dumbfounded, the other person responded without hesitation: 'My Master, let that person be me!' And His Eminence told him, 'OK! Let it be you!' At this moment, I left the place of this meeting and went to a nearby bedroom that was assigned to me. There, I lay on my bed and wept bitterly. As I was in this desperate condition, still in my dream, a Bahá'í who appeared to be a Persian passed by me and inquired why I was weeping. I replied, 'I am crying because His Eminence appointed a person other than me for that mission. I know that person and I believe that he is not worthy of this assignment.' 'If it were you who said 'Let it be me,' this Persian Bahá'í replied, 'His Eminence would have appointed you instead. But you remained silent while the other person spoke out!' When I woke up from my sleep, I started to think about myself. 'I,' I pondered, 'Who am I? Indeed, I am an inexperienced and uneducated youth!'<sup>20</sup>

The dream, as it seems, was a good reason for Sabrí to reconsider his idea of his own person. It also made him see difficulties and challenges and chances that must be grabbed rather than avoided. The story continued as follows.

"In the morning, I went immediately to the house of Iskander and told him: 'My dear friend, I do not know who I am, nor do I have the knowledge that qualifies me as a candidate for the mighty task of pioneering to Abyssinia. However, you know me better, since I was brought up in the same Bahá'í community to which you belong. If you find me qualified to say 'Let it be me' then I am willing to say it.' 'This is great news! This is great news!' Iskander replied, 'This is exactly what we [the members of the Assembly] were thinking of. However, we did not wish to force it on you, but rather wanted you to rise spontaneously and from your heart. Now that you have accepted, I would like to congratulate you on it. This was our exact plan at the Assembly.' Then Iskander told me to break the news to Dr. Muhammad Sálíh, the Assembly Chairman, who became very much overjoyed to hear it and said: 'This is the news that we were waiting for, because you are a youth of an upright conduct. On the other hand, you have a profession that can earn you a living, which will make you financially self-sufficient. The qualities make you a capable candidate. If this is the case, you can now prepare yourself for the journey!'"

<sup>20</sup> Elaborating further in this tape-recording on being unworthy for this undertaking, Sabrí says: "The only education that I ever had was for 5 or 6 months in an English-media school during my early childhood. The classes that I attended at that time were those of informal pre-school at which the children were introduced to the alphabet before learning how to read. By the time I finished these classes, the [tragic] events that befell my brother and I took place and both of us were distanced from our family."

### Unexpected Reward: Meeting Shoghi Effendi

To prepare himself for the journey, Sabrí only needed a passport and a visa. But there was no Ethiopian diplomatic representation or a consulate in Egypt at that time and the nearest such facility was in Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine. A visit to Jerusalem was more than welcome news to Sabrí, since it meant that he could also make it to the Bahá'í Holy Places in Akká and Haifa and be able to meet Shoghi Effendi – all for the first time! Therefore, he wrote to Shoghi Effendi for permission to make this pilgrimage and permission was granted.

When he reached the House of Abdu'l-Bahá in Haifa, where Shoghi Effendi also resided, Sabrí was met at the door by a person whom he mistook for Shoghi Effendi, judging by the photographs that he saw earlier of the Guardian. As this encounter did not impart to him the spiritual feeling that he expected from meeting the spiritual head of his Faith, Sabrí slipped into a state of spiritual anguish as this person beckoned the attendant of the nearby pilgrim house:

"... There came an old man, of a long hair and beard, a thin frame and, as I later found out, a very kind heart, came forward in response and was told, 'Mirza Ali Asghar! Escort this guest!'"

"As I followed Mirzá Ali to the nearby pilgrim house, my mental confusion grew worse. In this person I did not find the spiritual acquiescence that I was so eager to see. This was in spite of the fact that the features of this person were very similar to those of His Eminence Shoghi Effendi as I judged from the photographs that I had seen earlier. My perplexity continued as Mirzá Ali served me some tea. While I was sipping my tea in this condition, Mirzá Ali surprised me, 'When do you wish to have the honour of a meeting with Shoghi Effendi?'"

"'A meeting,' I exclaimed, 'Haven't we met already?' Yet my host persisted, 'When do you wish to have the honour of an audience?'"

"In a state of great excitement I shouted, 'Right now, if possible, right now!'"

"Mirzá Ali brushed the dust off this attire, put on his coat, and went away. A few minutes later, he came back and broke the news: 'Glad tidings my beloved friend! His Eminence agreed that you would meet him now!'"

"I immediately stood up and he took me back to the Holy House. There I was ushered into the sitting room. Still in my state of confusion, I walked straight to the middle of the room and got seated, while my old escort sat on a chair next to the door in a state of visible reverence and humbleness. Looking around me I saw a large colour portrait of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. As I love 'Abdu'l-Bahá and no other person had ever commanded my entire being as the Master did, a feeling of assurance and calm overcame me. A few minutes later, I felt the footsteps of



someone entering the room! When I raised my eyes, I saw a person other than the individual whom I met earlier, yet with some resemblance. But when my eyes met his, I could not control myself and fell down at those feet! He lifted me up by both arms and embraced me. There were many things that I felt at that moment that I cannot describe in words. Anyway, His Eminence bade me to sit down with a gentle gesture, and said, 'Be comforted!'

"As I sat there spellbound, His Eminence surprised me by a question about the friends of Port Said, in spite of the fact that I presented myself upon arrival as a Bahá'í from Alexandria without mentioning that I have, indeed, spent a week in Port Said on the way.

"Wondering if I had met a certain Bahá'í of Port Said, His Eminence said: 'I hope that he is not busy with political matters, but rather occupied with the Cause of God. This time is the time for spreading and teaching the Cause. One should not busy himself with politics and other [worldly] things.' He continued, 'The friends must set their minds and hearts to this purpose, serving and teaching the Cause of God.'

"Then he asked me about my plans for Abyssinia. I mentioned that I came to obtain a visa from the Abyssinian Representation in Jerusalem.

"I will send a person to accompany you [to Jerusalem]' He said.

### Logistical Preparation – Visa to Ethiopia

As promised by Shoghi Effendi, Sabrí was given a companion for the trip to Jerusalem to obtain his visa to Ethiopia. One would think of that companion as a knowledgeable native believer who would take Sabrí around and facilitate his visa. But, in what seemed to be part of Shoghi Effendi's spiritual preparation of the young eagle, this escort was exactly the opposite.

That person did not speak Arabic, while I could not communicate in any language other than the Arabic tongue. However, we managed to understand each other. If he spoke to me in Persian or English, I would understand him. And if he spoke to me in my Arabic language, he would capture what I meant. An onlooker would think that we were two brothers coming from the same family. However, that person was a Persian of a Zoroastrian descent, who became a Bahá'í. He occupied a consular position with the Government of Iran in some European countries. Since the Zoroastrians do not believe in Jesus, Moses, or other Biblical Prophets, he had an inclination to obtain the blessing of visiting the Holy Places that neither he nor his ancestral co-religionists were familiar with. It was for this reason that His Eminence told me that this person would join me. The purpose was that I would take him around to see the Holy Places in Jerusalem, which I did.

In what had practically demonstrated to Sabrí the bankruptcy of the old order of things and the importance and urgency of the mission ahead, the visit to Jerusalem went as follows.

We went to the Aqsá Mosque in Jerusalem. There we found some [Muslim] clergymen, who greeted us and started to speak about the holy persons whom they alleged to be historically linked to this monument. 'This place belongs to Imam Husáyn<sup>21</sup>' They would say. 'Join us in reciting Al-Fátiha [the Opening Chapter of Qur'án] for Imam Husáyn.' And we would join them in this [forced] recitation. Then they ask for their *gift*, which meant a tip. To this request, my Persian companion would take money out of his pocket and tip them – right where Al-Fátiha would be recited. However, they would take the money from him and throw it away contemptuously to show us that the tip was too little compared to the high station of Imam Husáyn. Such abased was the greed of those clergy! Given the instructions of His Eminence Shoghi Effendi that I would take care of my companion in my mind, I became very angry. 'Honourable Sheikhs,' I shouted at those clergymen, 'There are written instructions on the walls of this Mosque: *'Giving tips to Mosque attendants is forbidden'*. But this man is oppressing you and, still, you are throwing away the money. This is not decent! We did not come here to pay money but for the blessing of visiting the Aqsá Mosque and the holy remnants it holds.' Anyway, that is what happened and we were told to leave the place, but not before my companion had paid them large sums of money to keep them quiet."

The situation was not different with Christian holy places, and at the end of this interesting tour, and as instructed by Shoghi Effendi, Sabrí met a notable Bahá'í who was based in Hebron at that time, Mr. Hussein Rúhi, and went with him to the Abyssinian Consulate in Jerusalem. In Sabrí's words:

"It was very easy for me to obtain the visa – it required only the payment of a token fee of 50 cents or one Pound, as far as I can remember. With this visa I became eligible to travel to Abyssinia. Then I returned back to Haifa to break the news to His Eminence Shoghi Effendi."

### Spiritual Preparation - Unfolding the Drooping Wings:

Every believer who met Shoghi Effendi, Oriental and Occidental alike, spoke of a very unusual spiritual experience. Given Sabrí's high spiritual susceptibility, his description of this experience was quite unique:

"I would like to say very sincerely that His Eminence Shoghi Effendi was not an ordinary person. Like the Prophets of God, he belonged to the human race and was born to a father and a mother, and had a family. However, the station and qualities of the Manifestations of God and His Trustees are of a different nature. It is this different nature that I have found in His Eminence Shoghi Effendi!

<sup>21</sup> Imám Husayn, the Third Imám of Shi'í Islam, the second son of Imám Ali from Fatimih, the eldest daughter of Prophet Muhammad. Imám Husayn lived in Mecca and Medina most of his life with no news of him ever visiting Jerusalem. However, he was martyred, together with almost all the members of his family near Karbilá, Iraq, by the army of the Umayyads, who forcefully installed themselves as the rulers of the Islamic Empire. History tells that his body was buried in Karbilá, while his severed head was taken by his murderers on spearhead to Damascus, Syria. The head is narrated to have been later taken by his bereaved sister Záyab to Cairo, Egypt, where it was buried and a shrine was later built on this spot.



"As a matter of fact, I can never, ever forget my meeting with His Eminence Shoghi Effendi was very much blessed by meeting him during those early years of my life.

"During my last audience with His Eminence Shoghi Effendi and for a reason in my heart, I asked him, 'My Master! Are you content with me?' 'Yes!' he replied. 'I am content with you because you are faithful. Faithfulness to the Cause of God comes in the first place, and the knowledge and understanding follow.'

"When time came for my departure, His Eminence Shoghi Effendi directed that 'both the believers that are resident [in Haifa] and the pilgrims should see Sabri Effendi off' at the train station of Haifa."

## 6. The First Expedition

*For one of the greatest divine wisdoms regarding the appearance of the Holy Manifestations is this: The souls may come to know each other and become intimate with each other; the power of the love of God may make all of them the waves of one sea, the flowers of one rose garden and the stars of one heaven."*  
Abdu'l-Bahá<sup>22</sup>

*"By mid-August 1867, [Field-Marshal Lord] Napier was able to give the [British] government [in London] his estimate of what was required [for the expedition to Ethiopia]: about 12,000 fighting men with roughly twice as many followers, at least 20,000 mules and other transport animals, artillery of all kinds including heavy mountain guns, and a fleet of 280 ships, both sail and steam, to carry the force to its destination ... Then there was the question of the Maria Theresa dollars, the only general currency in Ethiopia ... and a search of the banks and money lenders in Marseilles, Cairo and Vienna revealed that not nearly enough were available. A contract therefore had to be signed with the imperial mint in Vienna for a new issue of 500,000 coins"*<sup>23</sup>

*"[At the onset of my journey] it happened that I had, more or less, the sum of twenty Pounds. I remember at that time that one of the Bahá'ís in Egypt ... advised me to keep that sum of money in the innermost pocket of my undercoat. 'Being a stranger in that country,' he said, 'you would die of hunger if you were careless with this sum of money by spending or losing it. Given your condition, a stranger that does not own money for his food would be in great trouble!'"*  
Sabri Elias

The writer reluctantly makes this comparison between the colossal cost of the first colonial expedition that was sent briefly to Ethiopia, and the scanty material resources that Sabri Elias had when he travelled unobtrusively into the country seventy five years later. *The Blue Nile's* description of the withdrawal of the British troops at the end of this expedition was that ... hardly anything remained to show that the British had ever been in Ethiopia.<sup>24</sup> Today, in contrast, there is a Bahá'í community in Ethiopia that celebrates that day in history when Sabri, a sole and insignificant stranger, stepped out of the train at Addis Ababa Railway Station on his first arrival into their land. The comparison here is, therefore, between two forces: the 'power of man' and the 'power of the love of God'.

<sup>22</sup> Bahá'í World Faith - Abdu'l-Bahá Section, p. 426

<sup>23</sup> Alan Moorehead, *The Blue Nile*, pp. 260-2, describing the army needed by General Napier for the British military expedition that he led into Ethiopia to rescue a handful of Western prisoners in 1867-68

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* p. 307

## The Solo March

The first leg of Sabrí's journey was by sea to Djibouti on board a French steamer from Port-Said. His extremely tight finances catered only for 'on deck' ticket that would not allow him the basic comfort of a bed in a modest cabin. This meant also that, at meal times, he would take his plate to the kitchen and then wash it and keep it with him until the next meal. However this was not to be the case, as he recalls.

"It happened that, when I was about to board the ship, two Bahá'í friends came unexpectedly to the docks to bid me farewell. One of them was Mr. Ali Sa'id El-Din, a native of Jaffa, Palestine, whom I met during my pilgrimage to Haifa and Akká and got to know him well enough to realize his high spiritual qualities. These two friends asked me to show them my ticket; under the pretext that they wanted to make sure that it had no mistakes. When I showed them the ticket they said: 'Indeed! This ticket has an error.' They went away with the ticket for some time and came back with another ticket – a third class one, with Mr. Sa'id El-Din paying the difference of fare. The new ticket allowed me to stay in a cabin that I shared with two other passengers'."

Hardly anything of significance took place at the beginning of the voyage except that Sabrí and his two cabin companions, who were two Muslim men from Singapore, were served poor quality food in comparison to that which other third class passengers received. Afraid to be served pork, these two passengers specified 'Islamic food' in their particulars without informing Sabrí – yet the two were happily grabbing the gratis bottles of wine that were placed on the dining table which Sabrí would leave untouched. This situation was immediately rectified by offering Sabrí the 'standard menu' that, however, did not include pork as it was then a delicacy served only to first class passengers! This incident distanced Sabrí from his cabin-mates but it brought him into a close friendship with another passenger.

"During the voyage, I used to walk up and down the aisles of the ship ... One day I met a very handsome young man of about twenty years of age. I tried to communicate with him in Arabic but I found that he could not understand it. He happened to be fluent in Turkish and English – two languages that I do not know. However, I started to develop a friendship with him and he reciprocated my feelings. Fortunately, and during an attempt to communicate with each other, he spoke a Greek word. Since I lived for fifteen years with some Greeks in Alexandria in the course of practising my tailoring profession and could communicate with them in that language, I started to speak with him in Greek and he would answer me in a Greek vocabulary that was richer than mine. This ability to communicate deepened our friendship and we began to understand each other. He told me that his name was Diran<sup>25</sup>, and that he belonged to an Armenian family that had once lived in Turkey. At the outbreak of the Armenian massacre in Turkey during World War I, his parents had to run for their lives. Before their departure

<sup>25</sup> Mr. Gila Bahta once remarked that 'Dikran' is a common Armenian name and could have been the young man's name. However, our story will use the name that Sabrí lovingly remembered him.

they placed the infant Diran in the care of a friendly Turkish family who took care of him and raised him until he reached the age of twenty. His parents eventually settled in Abyssinia and, eventually, became wealthy businessmen and real-estate owners. In the meantime, they were in close correspondence with their son, and now they found it suitable for him to come and live with them in Abyssinia. Diran was very happy because he was going to see his parents face-to-face for the first time. His joy was great during a trip that was drawing him nearer and nearer to his dear parents."

## The Forgotten Advice

Finally, the Ship reached Djibouti Port where Sabrí and this newfound Armenian friend disembarked and stayed in a low price hotel in preparation for the next leg of the journey: by train to Addis Ababa. Again, there was not much for Sabrí to recall about this stay in Djibouti except the following.

"It happened that Diran needed to obtain an entry visa to Abyssinia and he went to collect it. He returned after a while in a state of great sadness as he needed to pay a high sum of money that he did not have. There were some Armenian passengers who were seeking the same visa. However, when Diran approached them for financial help they, instead of giving him a cash loan to pay for his visa, offered to give personal assurance to the Abyssinian Consulate in Djibouti that Diran will pay the fee upon his arrival into Addis. Finding that the upfront payment of the fee was inevitable, those Armenians turned away leaving Diran to his means. Now Diran returned to the hotel in this condition and started to weep bitterly. 'Do not cry, Diran!' I comforted him, 'I have the money that you need for the visa.'

"At that time I had, more or less, a sum of twenty Pounds, which was all that would be left me after meeting the cost of my land journey to Addis Ababa. I remember at that time that one of the Bahá'ís in Egypt, who was a member of its National Spiritual Assembly, advised me to keep my money in the most concealed pocket of my undercoat so that I would not lose it.

"'Being a stranger in that country, you would die of hunger if you were careless with this sum of money by spending or losing it.' He explained why: 'Given your condition, a stranger that does not have money for his food would be in great trouble!'

"I was then quite upset to hear such material advice although it came from a friend whom I held in great regard. That was Mr. Muhammad Taqí Isfahání<sup>26</sup>, whom I revered so much because he was the very embodiment of sanctity and godliness. His looks and features commanded my heart. 'Why,' I wondered, 'would he speak to me about material things instead of spiritual matters that would prepare me better for the spiritual task ahead?' While I used to look down upon both material matters and the people who would busy themselves with them, I accepted his advice and kept that sum of money in the manner he recommended.

<sup>26</sup> Mr. Muhammad Taqí Isfahání was one of the early Persian Bahá'ís who were blessed by meeting Bahá'u'lláh. He settled in Egypt and lived there for a long period of time serving at the National Spiritual Assembly until his passing in 1948 at an age that exceeded 90 years. Shoghi Effendi posthumously elevated him to the rank of Hand of the Cause of God.



"Nevertheless, when I saw Diran crying in Djibouti for lack of visa money ... I immediately gave him the required sum of money, which was almost all that I had in my pocket, and rushed immediately to get his visa.

"Eventually, we boarded the train to Addis Ababa, and the journey was very long. For two days the train ploughed its way and finally arrived Addis Ababa on the third day."

### City Gates Flung-Open

When the train entered the station, there was a great crowd of people of all sorts waiting for their relatives and friends; foremost among them was a large group of Armenians headed by their Orthodox priest. As soon as Diran came out of the train, the Armenian group rushed towards him with his parents in their midst. As soon as Diran's mother laid eyes upon him she shouted his name and collapsed, losing consciousness for a moment. When she recovered, as Sabrí noticed, 'she hugged her long-departed son with the passion that only a mother can show'.

Watching Diran being reunited, at long last, with his mother, Sabrí was overwhelmed with the scene that he forgot completely that Diran owed him all the money that he had brought for his mission. He immediately left the station and found his way to a 'hotel' that was recommended to him by the hotelier of Djibouti. Then what?

"There I found that what I thought to be a hotel was a number of wooden shacks on the roof of a one-story building that housed a coffee shop. I was taken to one of these shacks that were available at a very cheap rate. I entered my room to rest but, instead, my worries took hold of me!

"Mr. Muhammad Taqí Isfahání was right when he told me 'guard your money well', but I gave all I had to Diran! Only God knows whether I would ever see him again."

Indeed, Sabrí's total reliance of God was the hallmark of all his acts and pursuits. As Shoghi Effendi explained why he was contented with him Sabrí possessed a 'pure, kindly and radiant heart'<sup>28</sup>. It is that quality of the 'spiritual conqueror' that flung-open the fortified doors of people's hearts in Addis Ababa on the evening of his arrival:

"But as I was deeply absorbed in my worrying thoughts, I went out of my shack and began to pace the roof of the building. Looking around in the dark surroundings, I noticed an apartme

27 In his tape-recordings, Sabrí spoke in a very vivid and passionate manner that makes the listener live those moments of history. At this point of the story, Sabrí broke into tears as he described the reunion of Diran's mother with her son.

28 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, No 1 from the Arabic

building that was separated from the hotel by another parallel street. The top apartment of that building was brightly lit and noisy the entire Armenian crowd that I saw at the train station was there, with Diran in the midst – right in front of my eyes! 'Diran!' I shouted desperately. 'Yes, Sabrí!' the relieving answer came.

Soon, a delegation of those Armenians came to me at the hotel and took me to the apartment with a warm welcoming spirit. The priest had some knowledge of Arabic, yet his vocabulary was very simple. In his broken Arabic he said, 'This young man is Egyptian. The Egyptians are all kind-hearted and would never fail anyone who may be in trouble.' Thus, he continued to praise me as if I was the chieftain of the Egyptians, and I suddenly became the recipient of such hospitality, and got my money back!"

Sabrí did not leave to us a description of his feelings when he went to bed that night. But he must have been comforted enough at the end of such a long journey to allow his tired body to rest in that wooden shack.

### Assayers of Mankind'

In *The Hidden Words*, there are two interesting references that might have been applied to the first task entrusted by Shoghi Effendi to Sabrí when he sent him on this mission.

*O Son Of Being! Busy not thyself with this world, for with fire We test the gold, and with gold We test Our servants.*<sup>29</sup>

*O My Friends! Quench ye the lamp of error, and kindle within your hearts the everlasting torch of divine guidance. For ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored, accept naught but purest virtue and deeds of stainless holiness.*<sup>30</sup>

While still a resident of that rooftop shack, Sabrí met Muhammad Darwish Táha and his followers. In earlier correspondence to the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Táha humbly introduced himself as the inspector of education of all Muslim schools in Ethiopia, and claimed that he had resigned this post to spread the Bahai Faith in all parts of the country. Speaking of his first impression of them and the unusual experience that followed, Sabrí tells us:

"I met some people whose company any Bahá'í would certainly avoid. The group was headed by someone called Muhammad Darwish Táha, a person who pretended to be a Bahá'í. He wanted to manipulate me when we first met. For this reason I tried to keep away from him. However, he and his followers told me that, unless I shared with them whatever money I had,

29 No 55 from the Arabic

30 No. 35 from the Persian

they would write a petition to His Eminence Shoghi Effendi telling him of my 'misbehavior'. This was because they thought I came with a lot of money.

"Finally I moved from the hotel to a rented place. I furnished it with a table and two chairs which were a repayment in kind of a cash loan that I once gave to this Muhammad Dar Táha. Incidentally, this place was in the same area where this man and his followers lived. At night, these people would throw stones at the tin roof of my house. The stones created a noise as they fell. I was very much disturbed, yet unable to fend off their harassment. This did not even give me a chance to get in touch with any people with whom I could speak about the Faith. I found myself at a loss. I became saddened and scared at their threat to come to Shoghi Effendi. Since I was still a naïve and inexperienced youth, I thought that they could really do me a great harm.

"Such was my desperate condition when a Yemeni youth with whom I developed a friendship came to visit me. He was a witty and cheerful person who loved to sing. "Allow me to sing for you!" he offered. In my state of deep grief, I accepted. What he sang was an ode by a Yemeni poet that went as follows:

'How countless were the slanders  
That they falsely said to you!  
God forbid my heart's desire!  
That the words they utter  
Would have an effect on you!'<sup>31</sup>

"Upon hearing the song, I felt as if Bahá'u'lláh wanted to give me a message: '*Rest assured Sabrí! Nothing bad will happen to you. However false or seditious their allegations might be, they will all come to naught.*'

"I was wondering at that time how I could earn a living. My wish was to acquire a sewing machine and open a tailoring shop, since it was my profession. However, I did not know how to raise the money needed for such an ambitious project. Instead, I began to serve tea at my house, which was near the General Post Office at that time. I found a nearby bakery where I could buy some cakes and the like, which I would serve with tea. Some Yemenis became used to coming for tea. The money that they gave me in return was very little. My project turned into that of a low class coffee shop. In order to obtain more income, I would cook an additional quantity of food at lunchtime, which I used to serve to two or three other persons beside me in return for money. Thus, my business affairs slowly started to push ahead."

### The Teaching Work Begins:

The unexpected harassment that Sabrí experienced from this group temporarily disturbed him and prevented him for some time from proceeding to the second and more important task entrusted to him by Shoghi Effendi.

31 In Arabic, this poem reads as follows:

teaching the Faith of God. However, it proved to be a great blessing in disguise. On the other hand, Sabrí clearly understood that the Faith of God is quite immune from the malice of opponents and does not depend upon any human support in order to grow or prosper. His comment on this point at the time in his mission reads:

"At this point, I would like to make it clear that the Faith of God is a self-serving Cause. The believers who serve the Faith of God do not, in fact, serve It, but, rather, pave the way for Its forward march.

Today, we have access to parts of the Bahá'í Writings that clearly explain this point such as the following, but one wonders at Sabrí's sharp spiritual perception at a time when Bahá'í literature was lacking.

*It is for the sake of God alone that My tongue counselleth you and that My pen moveth to make mention of you, for neither can the malice and denial of all who dwell on earth harm Me, nor the allegiance of the entire creation profit Me.*<sup>32</sup>

The time eventually arrived which Sabrí considered was 'the beginning of the Faith of God in Abyssinia'.

One day two people came to me. They were two distinguished and respected residents. They had rich black beards and long hair, traditional head caps, and were clad in splendid traditional attire. One of them had a large gold button that held his cloak about him, while the other was a little younger in age, yet both were of a dignified appearance. They asked, 'Can we have tea here?' and I instantly welcomed them with great pleasure. I offered them tea with some toast or biscuits. Sipping their tea, they started to chat with me in a sympathetic manner. They learned that I am an Egyptian who hails from the city of Alexandria. They told me that they themselves had studied for sometime in Saint Mark College of Alexandria. However, they did not give me much information about themselves at this initial encounter. For me, it was a great sense of relief to see such respectable persons beginning to come to me. [Later I learned that] they were instantly related to the Royal Family, i.e. the [extended] family of Emperor Haile Selassie.

On another visit, they wondered why people threw stones at my house or did similar unpleasant things to me. I replied that it is true that some people do this to me but I do not pay them much attention.

'No!' They said. 'This place is not suitable for you.'

'I am a tailor,' I explained. 'This is my profession, and I wish to find a place in which I could make a living as a tailor.'

'We will see to it!' They promised me as they left.

Their visits for morning tea continued. Eventually they did what they promised and arranged

32 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, paragraph 166, pp. 86-87



for my relocation to a place along Haile Selassie Avenue. Thus I moved from my first residence to this new place with my table, two chairs, bedding, and other belongings. The new place was at the end of Haile Selassie Avenue in the area where it joins another road leading to Gorgais, near the bridge of Ras Mukannan Wolde. There, they rented in my name a house which consisted of one large room. In order to prepare it for my residence and work, I bought a length of rough cloth, which was locally known as 'Abú-Jedíd', and had a carpenter make two partitions out of wooden frames with this fabric stretched with nails around them. I placed one of these two partitions to separate the tailoring shop from my sleeping place, allowing an opening that served as a door. The other partition separated my sleeping place from an interior section where I used to keep my provisions and the like. In other words, I divided the place into three compartments. While the façade of my house was located on the classy Haile Selassie Avenue, the back hung over the edge of a steep channel that led to a deep gorge, where rainwater flowed torrentially during the wet season. In brief, this is an account of how the place looked.

"Thus I started my tailoring profession. The Armenian colleagues of Diran came to me for sewing 40 school uniforms. I was paid for this job and my financial situation began to improve. My life started to assume a regular pattern and, since I rented a postal box, my brother Subhí began to correspond with me. My Post Office Box number was 102, Addis Ababa, which, whether as a token or for another reason, is still maintained by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia in addition to the other mail boxes that were obtained later. In this manner I managed to lead a life and earn a living."

### The First Ethiopian Converts and 'Sabrí Presentation'

The introduction of Ruhi Courses in recent years put Bahá'ís worldwide in touch with what is known as Anna's Presentation<sup>33</sup>, which they have enthusiastically used as a means to teach the Faith directly to their relatives, friends and acquaintances. In contrast to the teaching approach of earlier days, with Sabrí offering no exception, Anna's Presentation avoided the repetition of the proofs with which the Scriptures of past great religions were replete and presents, instead, the Person of the Manifestation of God, His Words, and His Teachings<sup>34</sup>.

However, unlike our contemporaries, the seekers of those early days were well versed in their own Scriptures and deeply rooted in their religious traditions. Such being the case, they needed both 'traditional proofs' from their own sacred books alongside the spiritual and logical proofs that were offered by the Bahá'í Writings. Bereft of the wealth of translated and printed Bahá'í Writings that we have today – except for books like *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *Some Answered Questions*, and *Bahá'u'lláh and The New*

<sup>33</sup> *Book 6 – Teaching the Cause*, pp. 93-114

<sup>34</sup> *The Proofs of Bahá'u'lláh's Mission*, Paul Lample, Palabra Publications, is an excellent and comprehensive compilation from Bahá'í writings on these three proofs.

Sabrí and other early successful Bahá'í teachers were quite capable of finding the only evidences that were readily available: traditional proofs. By combining traditional proofs with whatever logical and spiritual proofs at their disposal, they easily attracted people to the Faith aided by the most effective tool: carefully reflecting the Bahá'í Teachings in all aspects of their own personal lives.

Today, traditional proofs are viewed as advanced scholastic comparative religion research. It was for people of such academic pursuits that Sabrí used this approach to attract the first converts in Ethiopia, or what the writer likes to call 'Sabrí's Presentation'.

I began to speak about the Bahá'í Faith to these two brothers: Ato Siyoum Gibril Salama and Ato Haile Gibril. During my discussions with them I explained to them the true meaning of 'the return of Jesus Christ'. In other words, would the return of Jesus Christ after two thousand years of His Ascension to Heaven be in that physical, blood and flesh form that He had as a 34-year old Youth Who was crucified? I made them understand that this is quite impossible! For a person in the physical form must grow old, be he on Earth or Heaven.

On the other hand, as I explained to the two brothers, we read in the Bible that Jesus Christ will assume 'a new name'. The Book of Revelation speaks of 'my new name'<sup>35</sup>. Also we read in the Bible that the Christians will distance themselves from Him or, rather He will distance himself from them. This is according to the following verses of the Bible.

*Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*<sup>36</sup>

The Bible tells us that, at the 'time of the end' Jesus will also say to them, i.e. the Christians who went astray 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire ... for I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not ... Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.'<sup>37</sup>

I explained to them that this means that at the time of the end when those wayward Christians would proudly speak to the returned Jesus Christ of their 'wonderful works' He would refuse to accept them, and would label them as those who 'work iniquity'. This means that there will be a severance of the 'New Order' from the 'Old Order', and that the 'new' that will come would be such a totally different thing that no human being could have imagined.

The mystic meanings and the Divine Messages, I further explained to them, were revealed in

<sup>35</sup> *Revelation 3: 12*

<sup>36</sup> *Matthew 7: 22-23.*

<sup>37</sup> *Matthew 25: 41-45*



a language that is uncommon among the kindreds of man. As such, Jesus Christ was speaking to them in a symbolic language. Those who could not comprehend the speech cannot, by the same token, reach to Divine Reality, since the Divine Reality is a mystic matter. In like manner, all that relates to the Day of Resurrection, the Day of Judgment, the Balance, and similar terms, are of mystic significance.

"For the 'stars to fall', for instance, when He, i.e. Jesus, says that before His coming the 'stars shall fall from heaven'<sup>38</sup>, means something else. If one single star fell on Planet Earth it would mean the end of life on earth. But Jesus Christ said, 'Nevertheless when the Son of man comes shall he find faith on the earth?'<sup>39</sup> In other words, the divine realities are totally different from the literary meanings of the Scriptures. For this reason, the souls went astray and were lost.

"Divine Guidance, I went on, is dependent upon the soul and heart of the seeker. The one who would possess a 'soul' and a 'heart' understands the real meanings.

"In the course of those discussions I would refer to my Arabic copy of the Bible, while the others of them would be consulting their own Amharic version to follow my points and ponder what I said. In this manner they reached a very high degree of knowledge and understanding.

"One of the two brothers once told me that a certain priest or monk travelled to Jerusalem and lived there for few years. When he returned, they questioned him regarding Jesus Christ. His reply was that he had heard very strange news about Him: Some people said that Jesus Christ is in Palestine, yet confined to a prison. That is, Jesus is currently a prisoner in the Holy Land. When I heard this account, I confirmed that He i.e. Bahá'u'lláh was a prisoner – not because of some wrongdoings of His, but in the path of God as it had been the case with Jesus and the Prophets of the past. I asked them who among the Prophets of God appeared and could manage to live a prosperous, carefree, trouble-free, and easy, life. All of Them tasted pain, bitterness, and torture! This fact was the evidence of the truth of their claims. The one who speaks the truth endures sufferings, not the one who puts a crown on his head and sits on a throne. It is the contrary! What is meant by the Majesty and Grandeur of the Manifestation of God is the Grandeur of His Spirit, the Might of His Spirit and the Eternity of His Teachings – for the Teachings of the Manifestations of God are imperishable and will never die.

"It was in this manner that I spoke to Siyoum Gibril and Haile-Gibril. I also introduced them to the calculations mentioned in the Scriptures regarding the time of Christ's return, i.e. 1844 AD which is same year 1260 AH according to the Islamic Calendar. The Bible speaks of 1260 AD in 1844 in the Book of Jeremiah and the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 24.<sup>40</sup> I explained to them

38 *Matthew 24: 29*

39 *Luke 18:8*

40 In *Matthew 24*, Jesus Christ refers to the abomination of desolation spoken by Daniel, (in his Chapter 8), the prophecy that would last for 2300 days, i.e. 2300 years in Biblical calculation, starting after the year 457 BC in which the Persian King Artaxerxes issued an edict to rebuild the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. Cf. William Sears, *Thief in the Night*, for a full treatise on Biblical prophecies that refer to the year 1844AD.

to the direct relevance of the Teachings of the Faith to the current conditions of the world.

"Of course, I cannot repeat now all that I said to them ... [but] they were listening to me with great interest. At the end, both of them declared their faith, and became firm and steadfast. To my great relief and joy, they continued to visit me more than ever before."

### The Spiritual and the Material

Bahá'u'lláh said, 'only by improving spiritually as well as materially can we make any real progress'<sup>41</sup> Sabrí's renunciation of wealth and material comfort was only when they would bar him from his spiritual mission in Ethiopia. He always subordinated the material to the spiritual and regarded material resources as a means of service to the spiritual. In his words, what followed afterwards was a period of relative material comfort.

With my feeling of happiness, even my own personal business flourished. One day, a person came to me saying that the wife of the Crown Prince, Algawrash, had a son who was about to travel to France or another European country. For this reason she wanted to have a coat and other clothes tailored for him. The person asked me how much money I would take. I gave him a figure, to which he added a figure that he wanted to take as a commission or a tip. I did not know what name was given to this commission! I agreed to his request, and he took me to the tailor's place. There, I took the measurements of the child, who was five or six years old. I tailored the required garments to their satisfaction. The coins that I received were in Silver Birr, which was at that time called *Maria Theresa* – according to a certain engraving that was embossed on that coin, as far as I can remember. In brief, I earned a large sum of money from that job that I kept for a long time in the drawer where I kept the cash in my shop. It was as if that sum of money could not be spent, especially as the cost of living was extremely cheap at those days. Allow me to give the following example on how cheap was the cost of living. Some hawkers would slay a lamb, skin it, and go around with it looking for customers. They were in fact killing the lambs for their skins, which they would export to foreign countries. For this reason, the mutton was redundant and would be offered for a maximum sum of about five Piasters or cents. In fact, the meat of a whole lamb was offered for 2 Piasters – a very small coin then known as a quarter Birr or, if I remember a coin of that time, 'Andalat'. Such was the low cost of living, and such was the ease and simplicity of my life."

### The Two Inseparables – Progress and Opposition:

One of the typical characteristics of every new Message from God to mankind is that as soon as its progress is noticed, it faces fierce opposition, notably from the leaders of earlier religions, i.e. the clergy. Typical of a religion that has earned a befitting place in history for its religious tolerance and receptivity, opposition to the Bahá'í Faith in Ethiopia was, with one or two negligible exceptions, spearheaded by non-indigenous elements. Also,

<sup>41</sup> *Paris Talks*, p. 63



thanks to Divine intervention, opposition was quite short-lived and, in some cases, would invoke more interest in the Faith among the natives of the country. We have seen how the opposition of Muhammad Darwīsh and his entourage generated the sympathy of these Ethiopian nobles who extended their kindness and loving support to Sabrī and, eventually, enlisted them into the ranks of God's new Faith. Speaking first of the progress that was soon to be achieved in the span of less than one year, Sabrī gives the following glowing account.

"The progress of the Faith continued! An old man, whose name I do not now remember, came into the Faith. There was also another person, a youth with the name of Kal-Gabr-Abb, who became a believer. Later, when I rented a house for my residence other than that of my work, many young people would come. They would knock the door and, when I opened it, would say in Amharic 'Addis ha imanu talla?' They wanted to ask, 'Is this the house of the new faith?' I would reply 'Yes', and they would come into the house and I would communicate with them to the best of my ability.

"Among those new believers was an Egyptian youth, a pharmacist by profession, who was called Edward Goubran. Edward had a brother called Yacoub Gobran who was employed at Ras Kassa – the most favoured Ras, or Nobleman, of Emperor Haile Selassie. It happened that Edward came to me to investigate the Faith. He read the Arabic edition of 'Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era' and later declared his faith as a Bahá'í. His faith was so strong that, once he had a way to visit his brother, Yacoub and his family in an area called Antotto where Ras Kassa was based, he met a native monk who was holding to a large stick with the emblem of the Cross and was heading the same way. During their casual conversation uphill, Edward spoke to the monk of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, and then asked him how he found this Message. 'I believe in what you have just said' the monk replied, 'I am ready to join you and attest to the truth of this Message. But how much money would you give me?' Being a hot-tempered person Edward – who happened to be holding a walking stick for the journey – responded by levelling a heavy stroke of his cane at the back of the monk. 'I will give you this, and more!' Edward said, as the monk took to his heels. Edward soon joined the front ranks of the Faith and became a Secretary to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa.

"It was also at that time that I swiftly printed the Bahá'í Principles in a pamphlet form. I did not give it the same title, i.e. *Bahá'í Principles*. Rather, I gave it the title of 'The Book of Principles of the Bahá'í Religion'. The person who translated this pamphlet was Abul-Qasim Sherif: I was not aware, until the very last day of my presence in Ethiopia that he was the son of Hajji Sherif Al-Harari. The father was the Judge of the Muslim Tribunal who came to confront me, thinking that the Bahá'is were Christian missionaries preaching against Islam. When he visited me for the first time at my tailoring shop, he wished to show me one or two verses in the Bible that referred to the Prophet Muhammad – those of the Chapter of St. Matthew's Revelation that spoke of a cavalier called the faithful and true.<sup>42</sup> But I shared with him

<sup>42</sup> The 'Faithful' and 'True' were two titles by which Prophet Muhammad was called, long before he declared his Mission. What Hajji Sherif might have shared with Sabri was the verse: 'And the heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True'

...cies and signs that are in the Old and New Testaments on the Prophet Muhammad, and to them the prophecies and signs mentioned in the Bible, the Qur'an and the Hadith Tradition on the Advent of Bahá'u'lláh. Eventually, he declared his Faith<sup>43</sup>, in writing to His Eminence the Guardian requesting to receive Bahá'í literature. His Eminence sent him a copy with some Bahá'í books as he requested. It was a great blessing for those new believers that they were able to receive a letter from His Eminence the Guardian in response to their petitions of conversion.

...the number of the believers in Addis Ababa increased until it reached about 15 or 16 persons, including one Egyptian and two Yemenis, one of whom was Siyyid Mansúr [Bin-Abi-Rahman Bá-Faqih], the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Addis Ababa."

...ng enlisted among its early converts, though discreetly, notables from the ranks and file of weighty Muslim clergy, it is not difficult to guess from the quarters the Bahá'í Faith, or rather Sabrī, would experience the most of opposition. The fact that Sabrī was naturally more at home with those who spoke Arabic inevitably brought him into close contact with the relatively large Arab-origin Muslim population. Word must have spread in their midst of Sabrī's mission and untiring exposition of the verities of the Faith. As Sabrī was an Egyptian resident of Ethiopia, the leadership of the Muslim community, the Head of the Muslims of Abyssinia and their Chief Qadí, prompted his expulsion through the Egyptian Consul in Ethiopia. After first consulting Sabrī initially to fine-tune their tactics, they lost no time to write a petition to the Consult asking for Sabrī's expulsion from Ethiopia. In a spontaneously vivid account that takes the listener to the streets of Addis Ababa in the 1930's, Sabrī recorded this incident as follows.

...e Consul, whose name was Faraj Músá, used to employ an attendant who served him as a messenger. The duties of Consul's messenger, who travelled on horseback, were to collect the consulate's mail from the Post Office and perform other errands. One day, this messenger came and said to me, 'The Consul ordered me to search your home and bring to him all the Bahá'í books that I might find here.' Therefore, it was in such a manner that the Consul summoned me in response to the complaints that he received from these two persons, who opposed me because of the traditional belief that any new religion would pose a challenge to Islam. Had they appreciated, however, that the Bahá'í Faith took root in the Islamic World, and that it was brought by a descendant of the Prophet of Islam, since His Holiness the Báb came from the Family of Muhammad, i.e. a Noble Siyyid; and had they known that any new revelation from God deals, in the first place, with the world of spirit rather than the material world, as I repeatedly explained to them earlier, they would have not complained of me. However, I wrote this complaint and the Consul sent for me.

...ome people said', the Consul started, 'that you 'set your tongue loose' against Islam. I have written in righteousness he doth judge and make war.' Revelation 19: 11.

This is another evidence on how Sabrī's mastery of 'traditional proofs' won those early converts to the Faith in Ethiopia and elsewhere.



received a report that you are attacking Islam. This is in spite of the fact that, as you know, it is the official Religion of Egypt. Our Government is an Islamic Authority, and King is a Muslim Monarch!

"As I knew that the Consul was Christian by religion, I replied by asking him a question: 'You a Christian, Your Highness?' When he answered to the affirmative, I continued, 'I am of a Christian background. But, I would like to make the statement that I 'testify that there is no God other than Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah',<sup>44</sup> which means that I believe in the truth of Islam. If those people said that I have attacked Islam or that Bahá'í Faith is against Islam, this would mean that I am attacking the Bahá'í Faith itself. This is because the Bahá'í Faith sprang from Islam in the same way that Christianity from Judaism. Neither is a Christian an enemy to the Jews, nor is Jesus Christ against the Torah. Likewise, neither Bahá'u'lláh opposed the Qur'án, nor are the Bahá'ís enemies of Islam. On the contrary, we Bahá'ís believe that the Qur'án is a Book of God and Islam is a Religion from God.'

"To prove what I say,' I concluded, 'allow me to share with you some of the books and literature that I brought with me!' And I gave the Consul a good supply of the Bahá'í literature that shows how the Bahá'í Faith holds Islam in high regard. After going quickly through some of the items that I placed on his desk, he said, 'That is sufficient, but I advise you now to limit your pursuits to your business and do not bring any more trouble on yourself.'

"Indeed, the Consul sympathised with me and I learned afterwards that he replied in writing to the Grand Imam and his Qádí. His letter mentioned: 'I summoned that young man, investigated his case, and found that he believes in Islam and does not set his tongue loose against the Religion. It stated also that he obtained a solemn promise from me that I would never attack Islam or even talk about it. With this assurance he quietened them, albeit temporarily!

"Unhappy yet at this outcome, the two petitioners sent an article to the editors of *Al-Fa'á* [literally: the Conquest – a magazine that was published in Egypt under the auspices of Azhar<sup>45</sup>, complaining that 'instead of sending people who would spread Islam in Abyssinia, Egypt sent us a certain Sabrí Elias'. The letter reiterated the allegation that I set my tongue loose against Islam, and attributed to me many other wrongdoings. In short, they made of me an enemy of Islam. The Magazine published this letter<sup>46</sup> with the following editorial comment:

*'And we advise our Muslim brethren in Abyssinia to shun this Satan, in the same manner that they should avoid a leper or a person afflicted with tuberculosis, etc.'*

"The editorial comment continued to warn the *Muslim brethren* of Abyssinia against talking or associating with me in any form or fashion – and the result was a total boycott from the Muslim community!"

44 This statement is known as the 'two testimonies', which a convert would normally say publicly to declare his new belief in Islam.

45 The foremost institute of learning in Sunni Islam that was established in Cairo in the Ninth Century AD during the Fátimid Dynasty, paradoxically as a Shiite centre of learning

46 Issue No. 399, published ca. 1934-5

## The Most Outstanding Accomplishment

What might have been the most outstanding accomplishment of Sabrí's first pioneering term in Ethiopia was securing the first Amharic translation and printing of *Bahá'u'lláh & New Era*, which he did at the behest of Shoghi Effendi. For a man of Sabrí's modest literary ability, it was a feat even to entrust him with securing an Arabic translation of such an important Bahá'í reference book – not to mention that of a puzzle strange language, as far as he was concerned. However, Shoghi Effendi knew very well what kind of a soldier Sabrí was. Nevertheless, the assignment proved to be more difficult than the wildest of imaginations. While the picture published in that period's volume of the biennial Bahá'í reference book, *The Bahá'í World*, which shows a proud and happy Sabrí shaking hands with 'the Amharic translator' of Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era against the decorative settings of an Addis Ababa studio, yet the reality was that of a harrowing experience!

I wondered who would translate the book, and started to search for a translator. Through a contact, I found a civil servant who was working at the Post Office who said he would translate the book. I arranged with him to start by translating certain chapters. I also gave him a blank notebook, in which he should write the script, together with pages of the selected chapters. He inquired about payment, and we agreed on a certain amount that I would pay him after doing his job. After a while, this person came and said 'Here is your exercise notebook with the translation written into it! Now you have to give me the agreed amount right away.' To this I objected, 'Isn't it proper procedure that the work is first checked?' Unexpectedly, his response was that of verbal abuse and sheer impolite comment. Since I was a stranger in his country, while he was a citizen, I did not wish to engage in a protracted argument. I immediately handed him the money to end what, otherwise, would have been a confrontation. As soon as I met Ato Siyoum Gibril, I informed him of what happened. He requested to see the manuscript, and was surprised to find that what that man wrote had written was nothing other than abuse, insults, and attacks on my person and Faith. 'That man is insulting you, and all what is written in this notebook is nothing but insults!' Ato Siyoum said. 'Never mind,' I replied sadly, 'He insulted me and earned money for it!'

The question remained: What shall I do? Soon thereafter, I met a youth who had just returned from higher studies in France. He was a nephew of Qádí Ahmad, the Chief Magistrate of the Muslim Court of Addis Ababa, who once attempted to expel me from Ethiopia. When I spoke to this nephew about the subject of this translation, I found him receptive. Since he was fresh from his secular studies in France, he had an independent mind. He expressed his willingness to do the translation.

"To my great joy at this turn of events, I wished to share the news that I had found the translator with the Bahá'ís abroad. I took him to a photo studio, and had a picture of the two of us shaking hands together, with the emblem of the Greatest Name hanging high in the background of the picture. I sent a letter with this photograph to Haifa and wrote that this is the picture of the person who will translate '*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*'.



"However, and to my great sorrow, it happened that after starting the translation, his Uncle Qádí Ahmad, heard of the project and decided to stop his nephew. It seemed also that Uncle locked him up in his home – a practice that was very common at that time. It is customary in those days that a creditor would obtain a court order to lock-up his debtor in i.e. the creditor's home.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the young man's relatives, headed by Qádí Ahmad, managed indeed to stop this translator from doing the work.

"When the translator did not appear for a long time and I was not yet aware of his Uncle's action, I went to the family's home to find out what had happened. I followed the direction to the family house that the translator had once described to me and reached the gate. As soon as I mentioned his name to the first person I met, I found watermelon peelings and other kitchen refuse falling on my hat like rain. I immediately withdrew, with the sad realization that that person could no longer help and that my second attempt to find a translator had been as fruitless as the first. Afterwards, I learnt that what happened to the translator and to me when I went to see him was by order of Qádí Ahmad.

"And the question remained: 'What shall I do?' I did not have any alternative other than to refer the matter to Ato Siyoum and his brother Haile Gibril. It never occurred to me at that time to assign the task of translating the book to Ato Siyoum Gibril himself. This was in view of his demanding high ranking job, and the fact that I did not wish to add to his heavy responsibilities.

"'Sabrí,' they told me, 'We are ready to translate the book, and we do not want any fee or assistance of any kind. We will translate the book as Bahá'ís and for the sake of God. It is because of reading this book that we entered the Faith. Let translating the book into Amharic be the token of our gratitude!'

"Thus these two believers took a copy of the book and started the translation work and, in a short time, it was completed. Then we received instructions from His Eminence the Guardian to print the book, after I revised it. In other words, I compared the Arabic edition to the manuscript translation made by these two brothers. I discovered later that I have accidentally deleted a paragraph, that is the point where His Eminence Abdu'l-Bahá says that a person may call himself a Bahá'í for fifty years, yet if he does not behave in a Bahá'í manner, he would not be a Bahá'í.<sup>48</sup> This means that the Bahá'í Faith is not mere words and preaching, but it is putting the Writings into practice. *When this book was revised in later years it was found that only one point was missing from the translation, and it was inserted in the new edition.*

"In response to the instructions of His Eminence the Guardian, I gave the manuscript to

47 It seems that this uncle was able to lock-up his nephew by virtue of his authority as a Magistrate unless there was some other reason other than the translation project.

48 Mr. Sabrí refers to the fourth paragraph of the book's Chapter V, which quotes the following from a talk by Abdu'l-Bahá in London: "The man who lives the life according to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is already a Bahá'í. On the other hand, a man may call himself a Bahá'í for fifty years, and if he does not live the life he is not a Bahá'í..."

printing press named Majestic, Artistic, or the like.<sup>49</sup> It was owned by two Europeans, Greek or Armenians, I do not recall. They were two handsome youths, and their printing business was doing very well. We also secured a special permit to print the book from the Government's Committee or Department of Publications. Having secured this permit, the book was eventually produced. Before receiving the book from the printers, I asked them for a certificate showing their printing charges [i.e. a pro-forma invoice], which I mailed to His Eminence the Guardian. His Eminence sent us a cheque in settlement of these printing charges.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, I came to know a prominent person whose name was Ar'aya Selassie, as far as I can remember. He was a man of a great capacity and stature, and a philosopher. When he talked he would speak in a very low voice. He seemed to forget that he was not alone when speaking to others, and would give the impression that he was thinking aloud rather than talking. In contrast this man, when he would be in audience with Emperor Haile Selassie at his palace on certain days, would respond to the Emperor's remarks in a high voice, not realizing that this is contrary to the protocol of addressing an Emperor. In other words, this man used to behave in a simple and spontaneous manner. When he heard the news of printing the book would remind me that the first copy that came out of the printing press should be his – a request that I fulfilled as soon as the book was printed.

As mentioned earlier, and before publishing *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, I produced the Amharic edition of *The Bahá'í Principles* pamphlet. Thus, my house had two large wooden crates full of books, with one crate of each title."

### Foiled Attempt and Divine Retribution

It happened that Sabrí was invited by a family of two Yemeni pupils with whom he used to chat in simple Arabic to come over to a social gathering of the Yemeni community in Addis Ababa. Sabrí was surprised to find there the two Muslim leaders who had tried in vain to dismiss him from Ethiopia: Siyyid Ibrahim Al-Mahdjúz and Qádí Ahmad. There was also a friend of Sabrí, a Turkish man called Ibráhim Rásim, who used to own a bookshop called Baytu'l-Kitáb. Every person in this gathering was seated on the floor on carpets and chewing Qatt, a narcotic plant to which millions of people in the Horn of Africa are addicted. Some of this weed was then placed on a plate in front of Sabrí who thought it to be a kind of green salad, from which he ate two or three stalks!

Al-Mahdjúz took advantage of the presence of a young man who was, like Sabrí, dressed in western attire to remind the gathering that Sabrí is someone whose company every Muslim must avoid. He rebuked the poor young man for dressing like Europeans and labelled him a 'Catholic' – a real

49 In a 1975-6 recording, Mr. Sabrí stated that it was the 'Artistic Printing Press'

50 In a 1975-6 recording, Mr. Sabrí said that he could not afford to pay for the printing costs on his own. For this reason, Shoghi Effendi remitted the money.



insult in such an exclusively Muslim gathering! Sabrí felt that the message was directed at him and, in response, he reminded Al- Mahdjúz that the jacket that he wore on top of his Arab robe was 'western attire' and the yarn of his robe was made in Europe. Likewise, an angry Sabrí argued that Al- Mahdjúz himself would be also a 'Catholic'. To this remark, Al- Mahdjúz screamed twice at Sabrí as he violently grabbed his own long garb in great outrage, "This is the attire of the Arabs!"

Yet Sabrí continued defiantly to remind the chief Muslim cleric that his wrist-watch and spectacles were also imported from Europe and, as such, he might be also called a Catholic. The confrontation went on, in Sabrí's graphic narration:

"His outrage and anger became so extreme that it seemed his next move was to jump on me. 'Let me ask you a question!' I ignored his outrage and continued with my arguments, 'Who is the greatest public figure in Egypt today?'

"'Zaghlúl Pasha' He replied in reference to Saad Zaghlúl the famous politician and Egyptian Prime Minister at the time. 'Saad Zaghlúl puts on the same attire that I wear' I mused, 'Is he also a Catholic?'

"The situation became a standoff ... 'Stop talking, my son!' Shouted Ibráhím Rásim, the Tutor as he stood between us and clasped my hand strongly. 'Enough, Sabrí! Enough!'

"Thus my argument ended as Ibráhím led me towards my sitting place. A few minutes later while Al-Mahdjúz was still rumbling and mumbling, I took my leave, and left the place. As I left, Ibráhím Rásim caught up with me to explain the dangers of this unexpected standoff.

"'Do you know who this person is?' Ibráhím warned me, 'He has authority over all the Muslims of Abyssinia, in the same way that Emperor Haile Selassie has over his subjects. How dare you label him a Catholic?'

"'I did not insult him.' I explained, 'I have simply responded to the abuse that he himself levelled against that youth and me'

"'Then wait for what will certainly happen to you at the hand of that man!' Ibráhím pointed his finger at me as we parted, 'Be on your guard!'"

This warning was quite justified: hardly a week had passed when the following serious incident took place.

"About one week after this incident, I finished the day's work at my workshop and began to retire for the evening. I found that my assistant, Ahmad Qadrí was too sick to walk home. I asked to stay with me for the night and I accepted. I arranged a place for him in the room that I used as a workshop, while I slept in the inner room as usual. I do not recall whether a

person also slept at the house that night. In the early hours of the night, I woke up to Ahmad's voice. 'Uncle Sabrí,' Ahmad requested, 'Give me a candle or a match for light, because I want to go to the latrine.'

'I am very sorry, Ahmad,' I replied, 'I do not have a candle, a match, or anything that I can use for light. You have to wait until daylight, I am afraid.' Thus we went back to sleep, but after a while I heard Ahmad protest in real anger, 'Uncle Sabrí! In spite of the light that fills the house at this moment, you deny that you have a match?'

'Which light are you talking about?' I exclaimed as I tried to open my eyes. To my surprise, I saw what looked like a lit candle moving about in my room. I screamed in astonishment, but the candle and bearer melted away.

Immediately I rose from my bed and started to look around. I discovered that a number of people who were sent by Al-Mahdjúz had managed to come into my bedroom by digging a tunnel under the house from the left side. They had dug a tunnel from the side of the valley straight under the house and up into the interior room where I was sleeping. As I was tracing the source of the light I found a hole in the floor, which was large enough to allow anyone through. It seems that they were planning to kill me, drag me out of the house and toss my body into the deep valley behind. As he woke up and saw the tunnel, Ahmad remarked, 'Had I not woken up because of my bad tummy and sickness, you would not have escaped death tonight!'

In the morning we reported this incident to the Police. They came and saw what happened and made their report. Yet their investigations did not lead to any concrete result. However, it was the conclusion of Ibráhím Rasim when he came and saw the tunnel that it was a retaliatory act by Al-Mahdjúz.

Soon afterwards, I heard that Al-Mahdjúz had become seriously ill – bedridden by a fever. Within two weeks he died ... and another person was installed as the leader of the Muslim community in Abyssinia. Also, Qadí Ahmad was dismissed and replaced by Al-Hajj Sherif – the believer whose conversion I related earlier."

### An Abrupt end to a Glorious Chapter

The demise of this arch-enemy and deposing the other gave Sabrí the respite that he needed to concentrate on the work in hand. This period witnessed the spread of the Faith to all corners of the country.

Around that time, some individuals who had embraced the Faith moved to an area, the name of which I cannot remember, and established a Bahá'í locality. On the other hand, there was a Christian person, who was a man of prominence, short in height, whose sons were educated and equally prominent. He lived in an area the people of which, in spite of being Abyssinians, were pagans who did not believe in Jesus or Muhammad. He used to take the Bahá'í books from me and present them to these communities in order to bring them near to God through



Bahá'í Writings."

However, this glorious chapter drew quickly to a close and our victorious soldier had to make a temporary retreat from his fertile field to his home-base, Alexandria: Italy had declared war on Ethiopia!

"When the Italian army attacked Abyssinia, there was a great upheaval. Emperor Menelik II instructed Siyoum Gibril to proceed to a certain area to mobilize defence operations and instructed his brother Haile Gibril to go to another distant area. The Abyssinians flocked to Addis Ababa dressed in their national attire and carrying their primitive arms, such as muskets, swords, and clubs. There they received modern weapons from their King, and proceeded to the front to defend their country. The Italians were, of course, a more advanced European nation and fully prepared for this war. They had settled in Asmara forty years earlier as Eritrean colonial rulers. Although Eritrea was nominally under the dominion of Abyssinia, yet it was ruled by Italy as an Italian colony.

"Because of these difficulties, our affairs went out of hand, and I was overcome by exhaustion. It happened that I went to visit a certain Yusuf who was living nearby. He was an Egyptian Copt, not a Bahá'í, with whom I used to exchange views and ideas. He told me that people started to molest him in the street, tossing away his hat and inflicting various insults upon him. This reflected a growing animosity towards the white race. I was told then that people were determined to repulse the Italians and did not want any white people to remain in their country.

"Thus our difficulties were compounded. A state of utter confusion took hold of me, and I did not know where to keep safe my stockpile of books. I thought of digging a vault in the ground in which I could place the crates of books and cover it with mud and earth until the war was ended. Then my brother Subhí Elias, may God bless his soul, sent me a letter saying:

*'... According to what is being published in the Egyptian newspapers here, I understand that the conditions are very dangerous where you are. You should obtain permission from His Eminence the Guardian to return to Egypt....'*

"I wrote back to Subhí saying 'You can write to His Eminence the Guardian if you want to. I am here as a pioneer under His command. If he bids me to return, I will. If he does not, I will not return.' I could not really request to return, because I came here to serve the Faith. Soon after, the few Bahá'ís near me became scattered, with everyone going in a different direction. Finally, I received the following cablegram from His Eminence the Guardian:

**'RETURN EGYPT IF NECESSARY PRAYING YOUR SAFETY. SHOGHI'**

"Before I leave Ethiopia, the question remained as to where should I store the Bahá'í books. I consulted those around me. Some friends suggested that I could have the books stored in the Customs Bonded House, which was located within the premises of the Railway Station in Addis Ababa. There I found a very large Bonded House. I gave this task to the owner of the printing press which had produced the books, who arranged for a truck to move the two crates

of the cases was large, and the other was smaller since it contained the *Bahá'í Principles* pamphlets. The large crate contained, in addition to the unsold copies of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, the printing plates. That is because I added to the Amharic Edition of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* with some 20 illustrations, each of which were inserted near the relative text. I did this to make the book more attractive to the average reader. Thus the books were deposited in the Customs Bonded House of Addis Ababa Railway Station. I paid the charge for a storage period of three months, but cannot remember how much it was. I obtained a document from the Customs that the books were on consignment, and that storage will attract the same charge every three months until our return at the end of the war."

### Inceremonious Ride to Safety

The rigours of Sabrí's journey from Egypt to Ethiopia, some three years earlier, were to be dwarfed by the misery of a perilous and difficult return trip.

Having completed this daunting task I stood there unarmed and not knowing where to go next. At that time I was assisted and closely supported by the Bahá'í friend who was a Qadí at the Islamic Court, Hajji Sherif Al-Harari. When he learned that there was an Amharic Edition of the *Bahá'í Principles* in one of the two crates, he asked musingly 'Who translated this book for you?'

'Someone called Abú-Bakr Sherif,' I replied. 'This is my son!' He told me. It was comforting for me to know that it was the son who had earlier translated *Bahá'í Principles* and now here was his father – helping me out of danger!

There was no means of transport – by aircraft, steamer or train – to rescue me or anybody else. Hundreds of people were desperately looking for escape – including myself. Soon, however, Hajji Sherif escorted me hurriedly into Addis Ababa Railway Station through an unfrequented entrance. There he put me onto a freight train that was about to leave. On the same train, I found some Indians and Somalis who also sought escape to Djibouti whom I joined. As he was bidding me farewell, Hajji Sherif tried to comfort me.

'Take courage! I know that this will be a very tiring trip for you.'

'This will be too difficult for me!' I exclaimed, having noticed that if I closed the nearby small window-shutter of the freight wagon I would suffocate, and if I opened it I would be suffocated by dust.

'When I first came here to Addis Ababa from Harar' he said, 'I was riding a mule. By the time my journey ended, the skin was stripped from around my legs. As I was totally unable to dismount from my mule, the people who met me had to lift me off its back. In comparison, you should be grateful to God that you found a faster means that will now take you to safety!'

In this way I reached Djibouti, and from there, in a primitive small boat, I travelled to the Port of Aden, where I boarded an oil tanker which was on its way to Egypt. At that time, Egypt

obtained its oil from Aden since Egypt did not yet produce oil. I managed to get on board a steamer, even though it did not have any place for passengers and reached Post Said. "I would like to mention that, when I reached Aden, I was wearing my big western hat which exposed me to the risk of being killed if I were mistaken for an Italian. As a reaction to the war that they waged on Abyssinia, the Italians were hated by the Arabs and other races in the Red Sea region. For this reason, I threw away this hat and decided to buy a fez. In the market of the town of Aden I found a black fez that I bought without hesitation. 'If I put a black fez on my head, even that is black rather than red in colour' I thought, 'still I would look very much like the Arabs, and would not be mistaken as an Italian.' In this headgear I took the steamer to Port Said."

## 7. Healing during Pilgrimage and Matrimony in Wartime

### Second Pilgrimage

As the first expedition started and ended at Port Said, it also started and ended with a pilgrimage during which Sabrí was 'showered with Shoghi Effendi's graceful praise'.

Sabrí landed at the docks of Port Said in a very pathetic condition, and dragged his weary feet towards 'the shop of the Bahá'ís which was owned by Hajji Ahmad Yazdi<sup>51</sup>' but could locate it only after repeated attempts because of his ill health. Suffering from the rigours of an exceptionally arduous journey and lack of nutritious food and basic hygiene, Sabrí, to speak of the least of his afflictions, contracted very acute dysentery that was literally draining his system.

Returning to the hospitable Bahá'í community of Port Said must have been to Sabrí like arriving at an oasis after a long and perilous desert journey under the scorching heat of the sun. The friends there noticed his bad physical condition and looked after his needs at once. Having found respite for three days or so, he felt a great longing to see Shoghi Effendi. This would usually mean sending a written request for permission to the Guardian and waiting for some weeks until permission was granted. However, what was in store for Sabrí was indicative of reciprocated feelings between the commander and our lonely soldier.

"After I had rested for three days, I met Mr. Mahmúd Nushughátí<sup>52</sup> to seek permission to travel to Haifa in order to meet His Eminence the Guardian, and find out whether he had any instructions for me. He told me that he had already received my permission for pilgrimage."

Sabrí's description of what he was carrying among his luggage gives an idea of the deep affection and reverence that he harboured in his untiring heart for Shoghi Effendi. In situations of great peril, an escapee would

<sup>51</sup> The shop that was owned by Haji Ahmad Yazdi who, with his brother Haji Muhammad Yazdi, were among the early Persian pioneers who settled in Egypt at the time of Bahá'u'lláh.

<sup>52</sup> Later to become father-in-law of Mr. Gila Bahta - Mr. Nushughati" was very devoted Bahá'í and successful businessman of Port Said. From the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and later during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, this believer was the contact point for Bahá'í pilgrims to the Holy Land. He was also an Honorary Consul to the Netherlands in Port Said.



normally think of his own safety and would carry only provisions he would need most. Yet, Sabrí's luggage showed that he was carefully preparing for his second audience with his beloved Guardian.

"I set off to Haifa from Port Said by train carrying 18 copies of the Amharic Edition of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, and a gorilla skin<sup>53</sup> that I brought with me from Addis Ababa as a gift to His Eminence Shoghi Effendi. I thought that he would accept my request to place the skin under his desk to keep his feet warm while working late at night in the winter."

Unlike his first meeting with Shoghi Effendi, Sabrí did not leave us an elaborate account of his feelings as his tired and sick being stood before the piercing yet compassionate eyes of the object of his adoration. It is now left to our imagination to read Sabrí's innermost emotions between the following lines.

"When I reached Haifa and met His Eminence Shoghi Effendi, His Eminence welcomed me. 'You have returned victorious and triumphant – because you were the cause of linking the north of Africa to its south!' He also told me, 'At the beginning, your service was simple, but it assumed great proportions and will remain engraved on the annals of history.' He also spoke many other words of praise. In brief, His Eminence showered me with his graceful praise."

### A Present unto the Lord of Hosts

Going back a month or so in time with Sabrí before his unnoticed exit from Addis Ababa, the question that comes to one's mind is whether he was aware that, by the mere act of buying a monkey hide from an Addis Ababa market, he was in fact fulfilling a 2,700-year old Biblical prophecy. This is exactly the question that Sabrí answered, when he sat down in 1994, a month or so before the end of his earthly life, to reminisce on that glorious point in his history.

"When I presented to His Eminence Shoghi Effendi the gift that I brought specially for him from Abyssinia, he did not accept it to be a personal gift. He instructed that 'Sabrí Elias should place this gift with his own hands in the Bahá'í Archives'<sup>54</sup>. And it was in the presence of all resident and pilgrim Bahá'ís in Haifa that I performed what the Guardian instructed. He explained that this was in view of the fact that 'it is a gift from the Land of Abyssinia'. As everyone understood, this was a kind gesture in honour of Abyssinia."

"I used to read in the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament a verse that says, 'In that time shall the present be brought unto the Lord of hosts of a people scattered and peeled, and from every people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden under foot, who

<sup>53</sup> A hide of a rare species of black-and-white monkey that are found only in the southern Sidamo region of Ethiopia

<sup>54</sup> The Bahá'í Archives were then located in one of the rooms in the southern side of the Shrine of the Báb.

shall the rivers have spoiled to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, the mount Zion'<sup>55</sup> As I placed the gift in the Archives, and read those verses. Until that point of time, I had never thought that the Bible referred to the skin that I had brought with me."

Ethiopia had just been overrun by the Italian army when Sabrí arrived in Haifa with his carefully wrapped gift: indeed it was 'a nation meted out and trodden under foot',<sup>56</sup> and indeed, no country on earth is a 'land spoiled by rivers'<sup>57</sup> such as Ethiopia.

However, the manner in which Sabrí carried his gift is in great contrast to the mighty dominion of Ethiopia as it was, one day, under Queen Makeda of Sheba (Sheba) when she rode in pomp in a great caravan laden with costly gifts of gold, ivory, slaves, and much else, to the Jewish Kingdom of King Solomon in Jerusalem. By the same token, nothing remains today of those costly offerings of Sheba – which is in turn a fact that represents a contrast to the modest gift of Sabrí, now on display at the Bahá'í Archives on Mount Carmel for hundreds of years to come.

### Pilgrimage extended for Healing

What Sabrí did not mention, simply because he might not have been aware of it, was Shoghi Effendi's plan to heal the illness of a soldier fresh from battle. However, the plan becomes clear as Sabrí spoke of what followed.

"I spent a whole month in Haifa after my arrival: usually pilgrims stay for seven or nine days and as time passed I began to wonder whether I could stay longer. 'As long as His Eminence did not direct you to leave' the friends would say, 'you can do nothing except wait!'"

At this time Sabrí was very ill and it seems that the beloved Guardian was aware of his condition. It happened that several friends from the Bahá'í village of Adasiyyih, which is near the River Jordan, came on pilgrimage

<sup>55</sup> Isaiah, 18:7

<sup>56</sup> 'The Italians invaded Ethiopia on 3 October 1935, with no declaration of war ... Despite heroic efforts which significantly delayed the enemy advance, the [Ethiopian] troops were overwhelmed by the Italians, who made early use, even against the civilian population, of poison gas, flame throwers and other weapons outlawed by international treaties.' Courtesy: Imperial Ethiopia Website

<sup>57</sup> Speaking only of one of the rivers that 'spoil' the land of Ethiopia, Alan Moorehead gives this fascinating description of the Blue Nile: 'The Tisisat Falls are the end of all peace on the Blue Nile. The river now begins to make its great gash through the Ethiopian plateau. For nearly four hundred miles it continues in an immense curve, at first in a southerly direction, then west, then north, until it pours itself out of the mountains into the hot plains of southern Sudan. The further it goes the deeper it cuts; by the time it reaches central Ethiopia the gorge is a mile deep and at places fifteen miles wide, yet still even at the height of the dry season, it tears and boils along too fast for any boat to survive upon the surface. No one has ever made the boat journey down the Blue Nile from Lake Tana to the Sudan, no one as yet has managed to walk or take a mule along the full length of its precipitous banks.' *The Blue Nile*, pp. 6-7



and Shoghi Effendi asked them to take Sabrí back with them to their village, saying to them "He is sent to you by me. Welcome him in my name"

They all invited him back to their homes with great happiness and offered wonderful hospitality, but due to his stomach condition he could not accept any food despite being asked what would please him. He was so obviously happy to be with them that they wondered why he would not eat and told them that he was 'too sick to eat'.

Finally these friends realised what was his problem and took him to a nearby village called Al-Himma, where there were springs of sulphur water. Upon reaching the springs they requested him to fill a glass of water and drink. He protested: 'This is sulphur!', but they assured him that 'His Eminence Abdu'l-Bahá had told them that if any sick person came to them they should make him drink that water. As this was a directive from Abdu'l-Bahá, Sabrí drank the water.

After drinking the water the group took him to the main large bath where two or three people were bathing. When this group saw a band of two or thirty people approaching they were frightened and immediately jumped from the bath, hurriedly putting on their clothes as they ran away.

Firstly. His Bahá'í friends threw into the water a large quantity of oranges that they had brought with them for this purpose. As the fruit floated around on the surface of this sulphuric water, they took him into the spring to bathe. This treatment was successful; Sabrí was cured and slowly regained his health. He stayed with the friends in Adasiyyih for another week before returning to Haifa in a totally different state of health. Sabrí then tells:

"Having regained my health, His Eminence the Guardian granted me permission to return to Egypt, and bade me farewell with these words, 'May you be confirmed and made victorious, God willing!'"

### Back to Base

With such spiritual comfort and physical healing Sabrí rode in the train from Haifa to his own base: Alexandria and its Bahá'í community. There he met his brother and soul-mate, Subhí, who had had only two children when they last met, was now a father of four. This must have given Sabrí a large number of younger friends with whom he would relate in preparation for the day when he, himself, would interact with his own children. Other than being happily reunited with his dear brother and community, we do not have any other account of those few years that preceded the outbreak of World War II, which was soon to knock perilously upon the doors of Alexandria itself. Having left Addis Ababa to avoid being entangled in

the bloody conflict between the country and the invading Italian Army, the last thing that Sabrí wished to see was another, yet more protracted and gigantic, armed conflict. In spite of all Sabrí's inevitable challenges of social readjustment and earning a living in wartime, his memoirs are, with the exception of his marriage, void of any mention of the seven or eight years that preceded his 'second expedition'.

As to the account of Sabrí's marriage, we still need to rely mainly on the memoirs of the girl who was hardly two or three years past the age of physical maturity and conversion to the Bahá'í Faith.

In her memoirs, Raissa noted that Sabrí first wrote a letter to Shoghi Effendi seeking his permission to marry a girl from the community that showered him with abundant love and cured his ills upon his return from Ethiopia: the Bahá'ís of Adasiyyih. Reminiscent of Abdu'l-Bahá's turning down a request for pioneering to Ethiopia from someone who was not from Egypt, Shoghi Effendi also turned down this request, also in favour of a wife from Egypt. In Raissa's words:

"Shoghi Effendi replied to Sabrí, 'You will be united and married to one of the handmaidens of God in Egypt, so that you may proceed together to Ethiopia in perfect unison and harmony to teach the Cause of God.'"

Speaking of her own spiritual preparations that preceded her first meeting with Sabrí, young Raissa gave the following account.

"By the time I was 18 years old, I was very happy and assured by the sense of faith that sank deep into my heart. What happened to me to reach this stage may be found in the verse: *'And worship thy Lord until certainty come to thee.'*<sup>58</sup> It was during those days that I became acquainted with some of the Bahá'ís (of Alexandria), noting that my father died a few years after embracing the Faith. My mother was a believer like him, and suffered a lot at the hands of fanatic relatives and neighbours ... One night I dreamt that Abdu'l-Bahá came into my room to visit me. It was a wonderful dream as it was the first time ever I had seen His Eminence in a dream. I prostrated myself at his feet, wept, and greeted him 'Alláh-u-Abhá, my Master!' He smiled and took a green silk shawl out of his pocket and placed it on my shoulder. 'This is a gift from me!' he said. Then he placed his hand on my back and said 'Always be assured! You will have a great future in this Faith.' As he left the room I kept repeating 'Alláh-u-Abhá, my Master!' During the dream I was talking so loudly that my mother, who slept in the same room, woke up. 'What is wrong Raissa?' Mom wondered, 'Why are you seated on the floor instead of being in bed?' I was astonished to wake up and find that I had actually risen from my bed in this dream to receive His Eminence!"

58 Qur'an: Súrá 15 - Verse 99



## Matrimony

With this spiritual preparation through a dream, eighteen-year old Raissa did not need to wait long for the next step in her eventful life.

"The following morning, my brother Muhammad told me that he was going to visit a family and wondered whether I wished to join him. This was the family of Mr. Subhí and his brother Sabrí who pioneered to Ethiopia for a few years and returned at that time to Alexandria. 'Of course,' I replied, 'I wish to ask that person how his pioneering was.' I went with my brother and ... Mr. Sabrí spoke to us of his pioneering experience in Ethiopia, and I spoke to two audiences with Shoghi Effendi. I was surprised when Mr. Sabrí offered us a gift that was a box that contained a green shawl in which the picture of the Master was wrapped. The picture was strikingly similar to the appearance of Abdu'l-Bahá in the dream that I saw the night before, and the green shawl was exactly the same. My heart shook with joy and wonderment. 'This is the shawl that Abdu'l-Bahá gave me during the dream!' I exclaimed and told my family about it. It was a beautiful get-together with this family of believers, and the spiritual matters that we discussed were quite interesting."

Working out from Raissa's chronology of events, they must have first met about late 1938 or early 1939. However, it took Sabrí a year or so to make his decision.

"In early 1940, Mr. Sabrí asked for my hand from my brother Muhammad, who asked whether I agreed. At that time I had to choose between Mr. Sabrí, who was then of a modest profession and income, and another person who had a high ranking job. 'I want the person who is more profound in his convictions, and more committed to the Faith.' I responded to my brother, and this was Mr. Sabrí. Thus our engagement was celebrated ... and the marriage took place during the same year."

Inadvertently, Raissa gave us here the interesting fact that, during the eight-year interlude between two of Sabrí's spiritual conquests and in spite of sharpening his business wits in a foreign field, he was not much occupied with material pursuits. Other than earning a basic living, Sabrí must have been more engaged with his dominating passion: teaching the Faith of God. It is this same passion that was soon to take hold of Raissa, still known by her birth-name 'Fahima'. In what seemed to be an early preparation for her long future of teaching, Raissa's power of faith and logic were put to the test – even before her honeymoon ended.

"After I got married, I went to visit my family at their home. While there, two security officers knocked at the door. My mother opened it; she knew that they came to see me for an important matter. As my mother started to cry, one of the officers asked 'Are you Fahima?' When she confirmed this, he asked: 'Are you really married to a Christian man?' I replied, 'No, I am married to a Bahá'í and so is he. Both of us have attained the age of maturity and thus we are free to choose our partner.' 'Yet,' he argued 'you are from Islamic origin and your husband is from a Christian

background!' My answer was 'Should you have existed at the time of Prophet Muhammad and converted to Islam, could anyone then question your former background?' As this officer was speaking, his colleague was recording my response when he, eventually, raised his head from his papers and asked 'Then, what is the Bahá'í Faith?' 'It is' I replied, 'a Religion that has been foretold by all Divine Scriptures. It is a religion that calls for universal peace, the unity of mankind, and does not discriminate among religions but, rather, attests to the truth of all religions.' 'So,' he inquired, 'what is the difference between the Bahá'í Faith and Islam?' I answered with one sentence, 'Islam awaits the appearance of the Mihdí, but we Bahá'ís believe that He has already come: that is His Eminence Bahá'u'lláh!' Eventually they asked me 'Do you have enemies?' and I assure them, 'No, we do not have any enemies, whatsoever'. When the officer requested Bahá'í literature to read, so I gave him a book. He thanked me and said 'There are people who wish you evil. God may save you from them!'

Later, we discovered that this visit was instigated by a neighbour: a girl of my age who went around spreading a rumour that I had married a Christian. As a result of these rumours, a neighbour approached us. His name was Subhí Danial – an engineer who was known for his wisdom and poise ... It happened that the same envious neighbour had told him that I had married a Christian. In disbelief, he asked her to produce evidence. So she went to my mother and borrowed my wedding portrait. It was of Sabrí and me standing with the Greatest Name in her hands and the portrait of Abdu'l-Bahá in the background. Examining the 'evidence', Subhí Danial pointed to the portrait of Abdu'l-Bahá and asked her, 'Who is he?' She explained, 'That is the priest that conducted their ceremony'

This picture is not of a priest.' He demanded, 'Tell me where they live!'

Sabrí was away at work when Mr. Subhí Danial and his wife, Ne'mat, called at our house without any previous acquaintance. 'We are neighbours of your mother and are tenants in the house that is owned by the parents of a girl who told us that you married a Christian.' They introduced themselves. Indicating that he came to investigate the truth about our marriage, Subhí asked 'Are you Muslims?' When I mentioned the Bahá'í Faith he asked what it was. Thinking at first that he was a Muslim, I started to quote from the Qur'án some of the proofs of the validity of the Faith as a world-redeeming Message. More questions were asked and answers made ... Our two families have never parted since then<sup>59</sup> – more visits ensued and our friendship grew stronger. Eventually, Mr. Subhí Danial embraced the faith and became a Bahá'í. He managed to convert his parents, sister, wife, and children, as well as many of his friends. After his sister Afifa embraced the Faith – formerly a hard-line Christian who could not bear even to hear the word 'Islam' – she readily agreed to marry Mr. Mustapha Sálím, a Bahá'í of Muslim background."

<sup>59</sup> The Danial and Elias families were united through the marriage of Miss Sonya, daughter of Mr. Subhí Danial, to Safa in 1969

<sup>60</sup> Mr. Subhí Danial was later to play a great teaching role in Egypt until his passing on 4 January 1968 soon after a six-month period of detention for his faith. See 'In Memoriam', *The Bahá'í World*, 1967-72.



### The War Years in Alexandria

As far as Sabrí was concerned, what he sought as a safe haven, his hometown, Alexandria, became the base of the Allies in World War II. Paradoxically, the notorious Italian commander General Graziani finished his atrocious Ethiopian assignment and was now ordered to lead a mightier army from Libya into Egypt. It was when the union of Sabrí and Raissa was giving them the chance for their initial spiritual conquest that Graziani marched across the Libyan Desert towards Alexandria in September 1940, to be pushed back into Libya by the advancing British troops in early 1941. It was at the time of Graziani's retreat from Egypt that the British troops advanced from Sudan and joined Ethiopia's resistance forces to dislodge the Italians from Ethiopia and, hence, from the Horn of Africa altogether.

When the German troops joined the Italians in Libya, however, the British army was defeated in Tobruk, a base just inside Libya from its border with Egypt, and fell back to the hamlet of El 'Alamayn in July 1942, about 90 kilometres to the west of Alexandria, and dug in face-to-face with German/Italian foes that closed in from the west. This stand-off persisted until October 1942, when the Allied troops won the historic battle named after El Alamayn.

Neither Sabrí nor Raissa left us any memories of those difficult years of desert battles in the vicinity of Alexandria, although this was during the three years of their engagement and marriage. But those were, generally, years of uncertainty, air-raids, naval torpedo skirmishes, being virtually cut-off from the outside world and, above all, soaring costs and scarcity of basic necessities. If Sabrí was a 'man of modest ... income' when he asked for Raissa's hand, his situation must have been that of a dire want by early 1943: then with a wife and two young children, Hussein and Safa.

However, the eyes of our two 'eagles' were set all along on the highland Ethiopia! As soon as the British machine of war moved west of Alexandria in pursuit of retreating German and Italian troops a relative calm and peace fell on the East Mediterranean and the Red Sea. The sky was now clear for the two Eagles, first to gain a final glimpse of Shoghi Effendi, himself now married, and then to embark on their first joint expedition.

### Material and Emotional Preparations Start

In preparation for the return journey to Ethiopia, Mr. Sabri visited the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo to obtain entry and resident visas. It was the wish of Shoghi Effendi that the residence visa should be for a period of three

years at least. The Ethiopian Embassy official was Mr. Yohannes Endom.<sup>61</sup> At first, Mr. Yohannes refused to grant Mr. Sabri any visa. However, after the personal intervention of Mr. Muhammad Reza Gullestaneh<sup>62</sup>, Mr. Yohannes issued a visa for a period of three months.<sup>63</sup>

The writer wishes here to assert that our 'eagles' were quite modest and down-to-earth human beings, as opposed to the impression of two self-assuming heroes that this description might infer. To correct this impression, let us live that period of time in their own words, starting first with Raissa, then Sabrí:

*Raissa:*

As for our separation from our families, it was extremely difficult, notably for my mother. She was very faithful and kind-hearted, yet our separation was very difficult for her. Before our departure we lived at Sidi Bishr [a suburb Alexandria], and she would, sometimes, come to visit us. She would then weep bitterly at the thought of our approaching separation. In order to comfort her, I would say to her: 'Do you wish me to remain here rather than travel?' To this my Sabrí would add: 'Indeed, I am prepared for this arrangement.'

'Never!' My mother would reply firmly, 'I cannot prevent you from serving the Faith. Remain by the side of your husband, Raissa! Here in Alexandria, I have God to strengthen me.'

Soon after we departed, my mother died while I was away in Ethiopia.

At that time, 1943, the effects of World War II were still being felt. It was difficult for anyone to travel from Egypt to Palestine, which was then the Arab State of Palestine. Finally, we had the blessing of pilgrimage, after waiting for about one year during which we sold all our property and sought to obtain a visa to Ethiopia. The proceeds of this sale were no more than thirty Pounds. While en route to Ethiopia, my husband would tell me: 'This sum will not be sufficient for our settlement!' Yet, inwardly, we had a strong assurance that this amount would do. This feeling was

<sup>61</sup> Yohannes Endom was one of the three Endom brothers who spent their early school years with Mr. Gila Bahta in Sudan and came to be among his closest friends. The other two were: Aman, who later led the coup against Haile Selassie in 1976 and became Ethiopia's first President before being assassinated by his fellow revolutionaries; and Mallas, who was Ethiopia's Ambassador to Egypt when President Aman was assassinated. It was only Yohannes who, through Mr. Bahta, accepted the Faith and was elected to the Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa, serving as its Secretary. Strictly observing the Bahá'í principle of non-interference in politics, both Yohannes and Gila were protected from the political turmoil that was to engulf Ethiopia in years to come.

<sup>62</sup> A devoted Persian Bahá'í who was serving the Embassy of Iran in Cairo, and father of many pioneers who left Egypt during the Ten-Year Crusade to settle in neighbouring countries. Among them was his daughter Tahirih 'Abdu'l-Samad who, with her husband Hibatu'llah, pioneered to Sudan and remained there until their earthly remains were buried in the Bahá'í Cemeteries in Khartoum North.

<sup>63</sup> After their arrival in Addis and by virtue of serving a prominent employer, Sabrí obtained a visa that enabled him to remain in Ethiopia indefinitely.



unbelievable, although we were going to a strange country where my husband had not lived almost ten years. This time because he was returning with a wife and children, it was like there for the first time. We were not certain of what would happen to us there. However, we were fully supported by our faith in Bahá'u'lláh. We were confident that He would not abandon us, that all our problems would be solved; and that God's Bounty would be embodied in that sum of money. Thus, we did not have any backing except prayer and the assurance we had from the Lord that our Beloved Guardian put into our hearts before our departure from Haifa."

*Sabri:*

"Indeed, our financial resources were very modest. After meeting the travel expenses that would take us by land to Addis Ababa, we had only some 30 Pounds left. We did not know how we were going to use this small amount. I was older than my wife, and I had already been to Ethiopia before. For this reason I would, from time to time, show her my fear. I would say: 'O Raissa! We are going to a country where living conditions are difficult. By the time we reach there, our money will be spent. Even, if we try with this amount of thirty Pounds to open a tailoring workshop – to buy a used sewing machine, work supplies, a table, and a chair – this amount will not be enough. If we manage to economize and establish our business within this financial limit, where will we sleep? If we thought of using this amount to buy a bedroom – a bed for us, a bed for the children, two chairs and a table, and other household items – again, it will not be enough. Even, if this amount is enough for this purpose, then how would we acquire a workplace? Then if we decide to work as labourers at a tailoring shop, it will mean we will not be free to serve the Cause.' To all these worries Raissa would reply: 'I am very hopeful!'... 'I am very much assured.' This was a statement that she was always repeating: 'I am very much assured.' Whenever I would speak to her about the difficulty of obtaining a suitable home and the like, she would reply: 'Even if we need to live in a hut, I will be happy as long as it is in the path of God!'"



Baha'is of Alexandria ca. 1942



Sabri with Newborn Hussein ca 1941 in Alexandria

## 8. The Second Expedition

*They that have forsaken their country for the purpose of teaching Our Cause these shall the Faithful Spirit strengthen through its power. A company of Our chosen angels shall go forth with them, as bidden by Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Wise." Bahá'u'lláh<sup>64</sup>*

*When he first arrived into Ethiopia, Sabri was single without a wife and children. When he returned again to Ethiopia, after an absence that was dictated by the Italian-Ethiopian war and World War II, he was already married and had two young boys. This made him a more audacious promoter and defender of the Faith. In Ethiopia, he had a larger family by having two more daughters. His wife, Raissa, was a very spiritual woman and handled Sabri's house affairs perfectly. She was capable of talking very openly about the Faith, and spared Sabri more time for his teaching work" Gila Bahta*

### The Holy Land during the War

In her biography of Shoghi Effendi, *The Priceless Pearl*, which was published in 1969, Rúhiyyih Khánum described the effects that the six-year duration of World War II had upon the previously youthful figure of the beloved Guardian as she wrote about the post-war years.

*Shoghi Effendi was exhausted from the strain of the war years ... He was now approaching fifty, his hair whitening with age at the temples, his shoulders bent from so much stooping over his desk, his heart not only saddened by all he had gone through but, I firmly believe, wearing out because of it."<sup>65</sup>*

However, and far from being a period of limbo in waiting for peace, she gives us the following assessment of what constituted a sample of the ocean of Shoghi Effendi's achievements that Shoghi Effendi made during those perilous years of uncertainty and anxiety:

*... [the war] years were] years during which he had not only written *The Promised Day is Come* and *God Passes By*, but during which he had prosecuted – for who can deny that his was the ceaseless output of enthusiasm, encouragement and energy that galvanized the Bahá'is into action? – five years of the Seven Year Plan, during which he had comforted, inspired and held the Bahá'í world together, during which he had steadily enlarged the periphery of the Cause and deepened and expanded the life of its national communities, during which the unique project of building the superstructure of the Báb's Shrine had been initiated ..."*

<sup>64</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 334

<sup>65</sup> Rúhiyyih Rabbáni, *The Priceless Pearl* p. 186



One might think that Palestine was remote from the battlefields of World War II, but the fact is that the situation in Haifa was almost the same as it had been in Alexandria.

"Although World War II did not actually reach the Holy Land, for years we lived in the immediate danger that it might do so at any time. We, like so many other countries of the world, had a constant blackout. As the buildings that comprise the Master's house [*House of Abdu'l-Bahá in Haifa*] almost one hundred windows this alone created quite a problem; of course it was not necessarily possible to black them all out, but it meant a great deal of wandering around in the dark and frequent calls from irate air-raid wardens. Haifa, being a major port with a large oil refinery, was an important point strategically. The city had various anti-aircraft guns protecting it, two of which were about a mile from the Guardian's home. There were a few bombs dropped but the damage was negligible – indeed the protection miraculous – but we often had air raids, and shrapnel from the big anti-aircraft guns would be sprinkled about. This was an added worry to Shoghi Effendi because a piece of shrapnel the size of a grape would easily have irreparably damaged one of the beautiful marble monuments marking the resting-places of the Master's family; large pieces of shrapnel are often found near them, but never actually fell on them. We had to build an air-raid shelter but the Guardian and I never went into it. Sometimes when the alert came at night Shoghi Effendi would get up and look out of the window, but usually he did not even do that. The greatest activity was when the British invaded [neighbouring] Lebanon and then for a week we could hear heavy gunfire and the port, half a mile from our house, was frequently dive-bombed by the [German-contrary] Vichy [French] forces."<sup>66</sup>

It was immediately after this period that our two young Eagles came to obtain the blessing of another audience with Shoghi Effendi, an audience that was to become their last in this earthly life.

### The Spiritual Preparation: Pilgrimage

During Sabrí's past two pilgrimages, the House of Abdu'l-Bahá in Haifa had only one Occupant: Shoghi Effendi. When the Guardian was married in 1933, shortly after Sabrí's second pilgrimage, Sabrí and Raissa were to have the blessing of being hosted by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum. They wrote to Shoghi Effendi, sometime in 1943 wondering if the time was ripe to return to Ethiopia and asking permission for pilgrimage before the journey.

#### Raissa

"In fact, our life became replete with joy and happiness when we received the Beloved Guardian's directives that we would be allowed to obtain the blessing of pilgrimage. It took place in November 1943, and the weather there was cold."

#### Sabrí

"Our journey to obtain the blessings of pilgrimage was, as explained by the Beloved Guardian,

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 183

myself, an 'exceptional visit'. It happened that Mr. Hussein Ruhi<sup>67</sup> requested permission for pilgrimage. We brought this request to His Eminence's kind attention, but he said 'your pilgrimage is an exceptional one, because you are about to pioneer to Ethiopia to serve the Cause of God. If Hussein Ruhi is willing to pioneer to Ethiopia as well, then he is allowed to come for pilgrimage.' Then he laughed, because he knew that Mr. Ruhi was not the one!"

The meticulously organized affairs of the Bahá'í World Centre under Shoghi Effendi, even at times of war, can be glimpsed from the following account of the daily afternoon programme that Sabrí and Raissa enjoyed throughout the even full days of this memorable and last pilgrimage of theirs, together with their firstborn Hussein. This was invariably the case with all pilgrims of those days, in spite of the myriad tasks that Shoghi Effendi shouldered at the helm of the far-flung affairs of a World Faith.

#### Sabrí

Raissa would take Hussein with her when she would go from the Oriental Pilgrim house (on Mount Carmel, next to the Shrine of the Báb) to the House of Abdu'l-Bahá in town at 4:00 or 4:30 in the afternoon, when a car would be sent from the Blessed House to take them. I would then stay at the Pilgrim House or look forward to the arrival of the Beloved Guardian to the Shrine of the Báb. At that time, there would be a number of labourers working in the gardens or on the construction and beautification work that was then in progress at the Shrines. There I would wait for his visit. I remember that there was, then, only one more pilgrim, that is Mr. Nadim Bashád, who was from Iraq. He was an old man and both of us ... would receive the blessing of meeting the Beloved Guardian and circumambulate the Shrine of the Báb with him ... Then we would enter the Shrine and His Eminence chant the Tablet of Visitation 'The praise which hath dawned from Thy most august Self.' This was the manner in which we [Mr. Nadim and I] would enter first to prostrate ourselves, and then withdraw. His Eminence would then come forward, prostrate himself and stand inside to chant the Tablet of Visitation. At the end we would prostrate ourselves for a second time, and then His Eminence would exit first while we followed. Many times he would sprinkle attar of roses in our palms, to refresh our souls and minds. At the end of our visit to the Shrines, the Beloved Guardian would leave the place and descend the stairs immediately in front of the Shrine of Báb and walk towards the Blessed House. Then I would return to the Pilgrim House and wait for Raissa and Hussein's return."

We have seen Sabrí's first impression of Shoghi Effendi in Chapter 5. Since this was young Raissa's only audience with him, her feelings at it must be equally interesting.

"I felt, at that moment, that he was a person of great perception – of course he was a human being, yet ... was undoubtedly distinguished above other humans ... The moment he came into the [Master's] house, when I would be in the presence of Rúhiyyih Khánum, everything in the house

<sup>67</sup> Mr. Hussein Ruhi was working in Palestine when Sabrí went there in 1933 in order to obtain his first visa to Ethiopia and was assisted by him. During the war years, however, Mr. Ruhi moved to Egypt to manage a school that he owned in Cairo, hence the restrictions of pilgrimage during war years were not applicable to him.



would seem to vibrate! I would even feel the very furniture of the house shaking. An overwhelming sense of veneration would then possess me. Even Rúhiyyih Khánum herself would stand-up her arms around her bosom in reverence, as he would be passing. He would pass by the door of the room where we sat on his way to the room where he granted us the honour of an audience. Then I would enter the room, greeting him with 'Allah-u-Abhá, my Master!' and he would talk to me. Sometimes, I would be able to reply to His questions and sometimes I would not be able to. Once, I felt the need to talk to His Eminence and I tried to look into his eyes but I could not! I am unable to describe how he looked. Of course He was a human being, yet he was a distinguished figure whom God chose. I would, though, when he passed by, feel that his body was ethereal rather than flesh. His illumination and power were marvellous!"

Reminiscing upon those precious moments of her audience with the Guardian, Raissa's narration was equally glowing.

"Once Shoghi Effendi said, 'you will establish many [spiritual] assemblies in Abyssinia and a National Assembly in its capital, through your resolve and that of Sabri Effendi.' But, in what I felt to be an overstepping of the boundary of wisdom, I found myself responding, 'we are ready to give our lives in the path of the Cause of God.' To this he gracefully replied: 'I know your motive!'

"Speaking on the status of women he once said: 'Women in the West have excelled men in service of the Cause of God. In other words, they are not content with equality.' This is a point I remember, and the Beloved Guardian smiled as he was saying that.

"[Seemingly concerned over our ability to communicate in a different land] His Eminence asked me 'Do you know French?' 'No my Master' was my reply. Again, he would ask, 'Do you know English?' 'No my Master,' I answered with regret, 'but it is the intention of Sabri Effendi and myself to learn it.' 'Well,' he remarked, 'this pleases me.' I regret to say that we hardly learned English or communicated well in English. We could have mastered English had we cared enough to learn it from that time. However, our circumstances and material worries played a big part. The same was true of our negligence. I remember also that I told him that Arabic was the language I knew. 'Arabic,' he comforted me, 'is the *Fus'há* [the Most 'eloquent language' while Persian is the *Nawrá* [the luminous language], as it was the [native] language of Bahá'u'lláh."

Sabri and Raissa's keenness on making the pilgrimage before the difficulties of their times ahead were well rewarded. Since they were not destined to make another pilgrimage, it was a source of spiritual nourishment for the rest of their exceptionally long pioneering career.

#### Sabri

"How wonderful were the utterances, which His Eminence would address to us and which would sink deeply into one's heart and mind! He would then give us many counsels and directives and would relate to us many historical events, which we did not know. He would also make numerous comments on subjects such as Bahá'í Administration and the current progress of the Faith worldwide."

Our countenances during this pilgrimage were quite different, compared to when we were in the past. Our faces were illumined and beaming with joy. At times when Sabri I would meet at the audience, we would share stories that we had heard from the Beloved Guardian. That was due to the fact that each of us would meet him separately."

Our audiences with Shoghi Effendi offered a wonderful opportunity for the Guardian to support the Eagles to listen to his recommendations, and his plan to support them in their continued prayers for their success as well as sending other pioneers to Ethiopia to help.

"You will pioneer to Abyssinia. There, do not teach the Faith hastily, for 'safety is in carefulness, and sorrow is in haste'"

"I will send you pioneers from three countries – from Egypt, Iran, and [the United States of] America."

"Rest assured! I will pray always at the Holy Shrines for your confirmation and guidance."

Raissa, in particular, was privileged to spend a long time with Rúhiyyih Khánum especially as she was the only woman pilgrim at the time. Their talks were quite informal and intimate.

Every afternoon, Khánum would invite me for tea at the house of Abdu'l-Bahá. At one time she invited me to the cakes that were served to me and asked, 'Can you make cakes of this quality?' 'No,' I replied laughingly, 'but my mother does.' 'Oh, but your mother will not be with you in Ethiopia!' she exclaimed."

The presence of young Hussein with his mother was a great source of gladness to Rúhiyyih Khánum's heart since she had a great affinity towards children, while she herself was not to have a child of her own.

Hussein was like any other two-year-old child. He was energetic and wished to move around constantly. For this reason I left him with Sabri when I went once for afternoon tea with Rúhiyyih Khánum. But, when I went there without Hussein, she wondered, 'Where is Hussein?' I replied that because he was extremely uncontrollable, I had left him with his father. To this she said smilingly: 'No, tomorrow you must bring him along!' The next day, I returned bringing Hussein with me – yet he remained as uncontrollable as ever!"

Hussein also captured the attention of Shoghi Effendi and was a recipient of his blessing, as Sabri narrated the time of their departure, with both Sabri and Raissa weeping at their separation from their beloved Guardian.

"Because both of us were sobbing aloud, the boy should have been affected by this, but we were

astonished to see Hussein fold his arms, bow his head and talk to Shoghi Effendi in his vocals, 'Allah-u-Abhá, Your Eminence the Guardian!' The Beloved Guardian placed his Hussein's head and said: 'God willing, he would be brought up in a Bahá'í manner.'"

Thus the final day of pilgrimage arrived! The sadness of Sabrí and Raissa boundless. In remembrance of those unforgettable farewell moments addressed the following words to Raissa in their audiobiography.

"Both you and I were crying fervently – crying at our separation from the Beloved and departure from the Holy Shrines. The happiness that we felt, throughout the week we spent there, was that of being in Heaven. Upon our departure, we felt as if we were like Adam and Eve who were being expelled from the Garden of Eden. It was, indeed, an extremely separation."

In an unusually emotional farewell, Shoghi Effendi walked with the farthest steps of the Master's house. In his last words of encouragement to Hussein he conferred upon him the title that was to be associated with Sabrí's for eternity.

"Mussolini did not conquer Abyssinia!" asserted Shoghi Effendi, "You are a [spiritual] conqueror of Abyssinia!"

And, to Raissa, he spoke words that kept resonating in her ears for years to come.

"Rest assured, Rest assured, O handmaiden of God! I am always with you, pray for your success and confirmation!"

As had been the case when Sabrí set off from Haifa for the first expedition. "His Eminence Shoghi Effendi requested all the resident and visiting believers to go to the station in Haifa to bid us farewell. The number of the escort was large, as we departed from Haifa Sabrí noted.

### Journey of Miseries and Miracles

The memoirs that Sabrí and Raissa left us about their journey by land from Alexandria all the way to Addis Ababa can only adequately be described as a journey of miseries and miracles! Of all the sufferings of their long pioneering career, this journey stands out as a testimony to the unmatched endurance and heroic fortitude of the conquerors. In view of this fact and that the couple related this part of their history in the most moving and captivating of narrations, the writer prefers to give it as is: unedited and in full. In order to help the readers know at which part of the journey they are, this long description has been divided into sub-headings. Because it had been recorded by Sabrí and Raissa in a pilot/co-pilot manner, the narrator's

indicated.

### The Journey Started – Raissa

Our land journey across Sudan took one complete month, because we were travelling in the midst of the war. At that time, there were German air raids on both Alexandria and Cairo, and the conditions were really difficult. It was the last days of the war, but we did not have the financial means for air-travel, nor were steamers available. It was therefore inevitable that the entire journey would be by road.

We began our journey to Ethiopia in February 1944, accompanied by our two sons Hussein and Safa; Hussein was just over two years, while Safa was less than one year old. Both of them suffered a lot, because we went second class by train from Cairo to Aswan and to the extreme south of Egypt, and from there by a Nile-steamer from the Egyptian Port of Al-Shallal (*the Sixth Cataract, just south of Aswan*) to the northern Sudanese Port of Wadi Halfa. Then we took the train to Khartoum and Kassala, Sudan, and from there we continued by bus to Tassanei and Adigrat.

Our children suffered immensely. Safa was a very young baby who was still dependent on milk, which was not available in transit. There was also no means to boil or sterilize the feeding bottle. Even that feeding bottle was lost through a crack in the wooden floor of the train coach and was lost between the tracks. Safa was then screaming from hunger. Hussein, who was also very young, surrendered himself and accepted the situation, but Safa was crying continuously.

### Passionate Farewell by Egypt and Warm Welcome by Sudan – Sabrí

When we were travelling by train to Aswan en route to Ethiopia, the train stopped at many stations on the way. In a number of these stations, such as Súháj, the friends were waiting for us to bid us farewell, in spite of the fact that we were passing their stations before dawn. They would call in a loud voice 'Sabrí Effendi!' Then they would come to our window to bid us farewell in a very warm manner. Other passengers in the train would wonder how could our 'relatives' come to see us at such an early hour of the morning. I swear by God that even if they were our closest of relatives, they would not have come to see us at such an awkward time. Those kind gestures gave us a great push forward.

We ultimately reached Sudan, and we stayed in Khartoum North for a few days. There, we met a number of Bahá'ís and were fortunate to meet two seekers who inquired about the Faith, from among the Sudanese Civil Service. During the evening, which we spent with them until two o'clock in the morning, they would ask questions very lovingly and amicably. The citizens of Sudan – those tolerant people – are far removed from prejudice. In reality they are the true embodiment of the saying of the Prophet Mohammed, when he described His followers, 'He is not of my followers who have lived with prejudice and bias, and it is not one of my followers who have died with prejudice and bias.' The Sudanese are people who have distanced themselves from prejudice, yet they uphold religion, and have the good qualities of tolerance and high morals. Two Sudanese seekers came to us and at the end of the meeting they, to the delight of the Sudanese Bahá'ís present, declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. I regret, because of my old age, that I do not



remember the names of those who declared their Faith at that time.”

*Ride if You Can and the Good Samaritan – Sabri*

“I have spoken of the high moral standard of the Sudanese people and their kindness for a... For, when we reached the train station, booked our tickets, and boarded the train, the stationmaster asked us: ‘What is your destination?’ ‘Addis Ababa,’ we said. To this he struck his head with his hand and said: ‘My God! This is quite a long journey, especially since you have children.’”

“It was early morning and we looked very pitiful – each of us was carrying a child in addition to the luggage. The moment we boarded the train, we could not even find space. In fact, our seats were third class, and the third class coaches were incredibly crowded. The crowd was such that if someone wished just to stand up, he could not find a place. We were at a loss, exactly like someone who drowned. We did not know where to place the luggage, or even, where to stand in the midst of this crowd. Gallantly, that Sudanese stationmaster fought his way inside the train. He went towards a small cabin located in the first wagon of the train. In Egypt, we call this a ‘*sebensa*’, [a small utility coach assigned to train service staff]. This cabin was in third class and it had only two seats. In other words, it seated only two or three persons. Yet, it had a shelf for luggage, and a door. When he entered this cabin, the stationmaster found some passengers. They were respectful Sudanese passengers with the cabin’s door closed, in order to be away from the crowd. The stationmaster addressed them saying: ‘My folks! We have an Egyptian family travelling to Ethiopia. It is quite a long journey, and they are accompanied by their children. Is it possible that you could give up your seats for them?’ Immediately these people, so kindly and gracefully, while it is seldom that a foreigner receives such treatment, vacated the cabin. The stationmaster ushered us into the cabin and saw to our comfort. Thus was the Divine Provision that made it possible for us to breathe and continue to live. After we seated ourselves inside the cabin, the stationmaster came back to us, this time from the platform outside the train. ‘Are you comfortable?’ He asked. ‘Thank you very much! Thank you a thousand times! May God grant you everything good!’ we replied gratefully. Then the stationmaster went away suddenly for a moment that we did not understand when the train began to move while we were overcome by a sense of great relief. As the train was about to gain speed out of the station, we were surprised to find the stationmaster back at our window. ‘There is another passenger, riding in first class, who is heading to Addis Ababa. I have requested him to take good care of you.’ Again, we thanked him. When we asked him about this passenger’s name he shouted back, ‘His name is Subhi Gurunfuli.’ Thus, this kind-hearted man bade us farewell. May God redouble his good deeds!”

*Employment Interview on the Train and Musical Reception in Asmara – Sabri*

“Now, we were on the train. Although we did not expect any help, we felt somewhat assured. We know about this passenger – we could, at least, seek his guidance during the trip. In the cabin, we became separated from the crowd and relieved to a great extent. This was due to our remoteness from the choking and horrible crowd. Sometime later, as the train gathered speed, we were surprised to see a first class waiter in uniform enter our cabin. He asked our names. When we answered, he said ‘Mr. Subhi Gurunfuli wants to know what food you would like to eat.’ As a matter of fact, we did not know how we were feeling at that time. Were we hungry? Were we satisfied? How

We did not know – not to mention this Subhi Gurunfuli, a person whom we had not yet met to face and was riding in first class – was offering us food! It was the care of Bahá’u’lláh that we felt strongly.

After this person served us and brought what we ordered, we asked him to take us to Mr. Subhi Gurunfuli in order to thank him. There, we found a person who had the appearance of a rich man, also on his way to Ethiopia.

‘Are you going to Ethiopia for a teacher’s job?’ he asked. ‘No.’ I replied. ‘So, you are coming to do business!’ he exclaimed. ‘No.’ I replied again. ‘Then, what are you going to do?’ he asked. ‘Tailoring,’ I replied. To this statement his wonderment was great. ‘Are you really a master of the tailoring profession?’ he exclaimed. I replied: ‘Yes, of course!’ He said ‘what I mean is: can you manage a (tailoring) shop or business?’ ‘Yes!’ I affirmed. Mr. Gurunfuli reached into his pocket and brought forth a document – it was a letter from Addis Ababa. I realized this person was the manager of the leading hotel in Addis Ababa. It was Otilia Hotel, which we learned later, was the property of Empress Manan [one of the wives of Emperor Haile Selassie]. We knew also that within the hotel’s premises, there was a large tailoring workshop. This workshop employed many workers and it contained some machines and equipment that were ‘the property of the enemy’ – these had once belonged to some Italians. Since the Italians were the former colonial rulers of Ethiopia, this property was confiscated [after their defeat in World War II] and used to equip this tailoring workshop. The purpose of this project was to provide practical training for tailoring. In brief, this workshop was in working condition and was under the management of a certain Greek named Mavirillis. However, it seemed Mavirillis was a gambler who did not take proper care of the business. For this reason, Mr. Gurunfuli received a letter about the poor condition of the workshop. The letter indicated also that the workshop’s customers and staff had started to complain, and there was no other person to manage it properly.

So, Mr. Gurunfuli took that letter out of his pocket and said: ‘This letter came to me at the last moment, but I could not find a candidate for the job.’ ‘It seems to me,’ he continued, ‘that God sent you to take over this workshop, provided that you can really handle it.’

Naturally, this gave us hope. If we could find such employment, then we could use our thirty pounds to furnish a living room. Somehow, then, we would have managed to obtain both a home and employment. The train took all of us to the Sudanese border with Eritrea. From there we took the Eritrean rail to the capital, Asmara and disembarked. Of course Mr. Gurunfuli went to a first class hotel that we could not afford. Therefore, we started to look for a hotel within our limited resources. We found a hotel that belonged to some Arabs. Or, perhaps, it belonged to an Eritrean but had an Arabic name – ‘the Pearl of the Red Sea’, as far as I remember. That was the modest hotel where we stayed. In no time, our son Hussein found some friends who lavished him with biscuits and chocolate. Soon, we became the object of the love of all the people around us. They even went to the extent of organising a musical party one evening. They invited both of us to attend it. At that party, most of the songs performed were Egyptian songs and played on the *Oud*.

<sup>68</sup> In other words, we had good evenings during our stay in the hotel. In spite of its modest rate, we were actually worried about the cost. Our worry was because we did not want to spend all of

<sup>68</sup> A traditional oriental string instrument



our money on accommodation. Our wish was to leave Asmara as soon as possible. There went to the bus station."

### *Booking on the Bus of Death – Raissa*

"We went to the bus station to book seats from Asmara to Addis Ababa. Mr. Gurunfuli, who had sent to us, travelled to Asmara by plane. But due to our limited resources we were to go. When we went for the booking, we were surprised to find the ticketing master full of regret over the unavailability of seats on the bus that was going to depart the next morning. This bus was only one trip per week. We felt deeply anxious and begged him to find any place for us. The staying in the hotel was, for us, an unexpected expense and we did not have enough money for an additional week. The ticketing master repeated his regrets and said that his bus, unlike an airplane, used the reservation system. He told us that he could not place us in any part other than its regular seats, and we had to accept this situation.

"We returned to the hotel overwhelmed with great sadness, because we had missed the chance to take the first bus to Asmara. What happened afterwards is very important. It was God's help. After one or two days, we went again to the bus station in order to book seats for the next trip. As he saw us, the booking master exclaimed: 'Oh! Are you the persons who came to book for the previous trip? I do not know what to say! Good gracious! It seems that God loves you! You have been lost, had you taken that bus!'

"What happened?" we asked him eagerly. 'I swear by God that you are good people,' he said. 'The bus which you missed and were distressed not to be able to take suffered an accident. It was attacked by armed bandits.'

"It happened that, by the end of the Italian/Ethiopian War, many people became jobless, and others became fugitives and displaced from their homes. These people would go out by night on any bus or a passing vehicle, and rob everyone.

"The bandits took everything that the passengers possessed,' the ticketing master continued. 'They even took the passengers' clothes and left them naked and bereft of any possessions. They also killed some passengers who tried to resist. See how God loves you?'

"Sabri and I immediately felt that this was also part of the work of Bahá'u'lláh – our Prophet. This was His arrangement – not ours.

"What followed was that we stayed at the hotel. Our worry was what to do and how to live. We spent the additional seven days being very careful not to touch our thirty Pounds. For, if we failed to do so, we would suffer a serious shortage of resources. At that time we were not one-hundred percent sure that the man whom we met [Subhi Gurunfuli] would really rescue us. He might forsake us or, perhaps, would not come to meet us in Addis Ababa as promised. So, we decided not to touch that money. We happened to have a small sum of money (besides our capital). We decided that one meal per day was enough for us, the noonday meal. Even for that meal we would have only a cup of 'irbu' [sour milk] for each of us plus two spoons of sugar and a loaf of bread.

This was our lunch. The days went by and, finally, we boarded the bus that was to take us to Addis Ababa."

### *Appalling Bus Ride and Horrifying 'Road Services' – Raissa*

The journey by bus from Asmara to Addis Ababa took three full days, and it was quite an unusual journey. First of all, the bus took us non-stop for a distance of three days. We could not get off the bus except for half-an-hour each day, whenever we reached a place where food was available. The passengers would then have some food and move about a little bit. It was an extremely tiring journey for us – not to mention our children! We had to remain seated on the narrow benches of the bus for many very long hours. Those benches were unlike those of airplanes, where passengers could sleep or relax. In addition to this ordeal, we were carrying our children on our laps. We felt also uncomfortable because of sitting in the midst of our luggage, and our food was scanty. Our budget only afforded a can of sardines and some bread for the whole journey. By that time the bread became stiff and unpalatable.

During part of this journey, since we became quite tired from long hours of sitting, the bus stopped at a certain village. At that time, we did not have any food for Safa, who was crying all the time. Hussein would eat any food we gave him with contentment, but Safa was a suckling baby whose stomach could not stand hunger. The situation was such that I cannot describe. The point is that it was quite natural for Safa to suffer gastroenteritis and severe diarrhoea. We did not have enough nappies for him, and I found myself at a great loss. I did not know what to do with Safa's mess. We felt very ashamed among the passengers because of the inconvenience of our sick baby. On the other hand, we did not know what to do about clothing our children in view of passing through various climatic areas. Our bus was very huge and was travelling on snaky roads. It was driven by two Italian drivers who were taking turns driving and sleeping. The drivers were also carrying arms in the expectation of possible bandit attacks during any of the journey's three nights.

We stopped at a village one night and Sabri noticed that I was very tired. He also felt very tired, poor fellow! So were the children. Passengers started to get off the bus saying that there was a hotel in this village. Such hotels, we thought, would be suitable for passengers who would like to rest for an hour or so. We also learned that the journey would not continue at night, because there was a light in the distance. They suspected that the light could be coming from a place where the bandits were waiting. Since there was a hotel, we thought we might be able to take a little rest. We coveted such a rest, even if it was for an hour. The passengers got off the bus, and we did like them. Some passengers unfolded their bedding on the road and went to sleep, while we and some other passengers walked towards a dim light that was barely visible. The question was: how is that hotel? It was a totally dark place except for a small wick-lamp that hardly gave any light. The place was silent except for the sound of wild animals crying in the distance. In addition to the crying of wolves, one could hear the noise of crickets and insects of varying sizes. That was the reality of the place!

"We went inside hardly finding our way in the darkness. The owner told us that there was a vacant room for anyone who would like to rest. Sabri told me to go inside with the children for rest. Immediately I went inside with the children to lie down and nap. No sooner had we put down our



heads than something like the ten woes the Prophet Moses started. The insects attacked us fiercely stinging us. I began scratching my body frenziedly everywhere, in what looked like a fight! It was a huge swarm of insects of all sorts – fleas, bedbugs, and cockroaches – all in the midst of the cries of wolves coming from the outside! It was a dreadful experience! I took the children and rushed out of the room. Hussein and Safa started to scream and scratch while I was taking them out. When Sabri saw us he said: 'Why didn't you rest?' I replied: 'I had enough rest!' Happily, Sabri said to me as he headed towards the room, 'If you do not desire to rest, I do!' It was not very long before he came out, scratching all over and not knowing what to say. 'You were right!' He shouted. Then we took to dusting the insects off the only blanket that we had. Immediately, we returned to the bus where we spent the rest of the night seated on our benches. Such was the only night at which the bus stopped for the passengers to rest. The other two nights our travel continued non-stop. Even that night, the bus resumed the journey at 4 o'clock in the morning."

### *Travel Sickness and the Bandits – Raissa*

"As I explained earlier, I was sitting in the bus next to Sabri while each of us was carrying one of our two children. The bus would be, some parts of the journey, running on a road that would take us to a very high altitude. It would seem as if we were in an airplane, for we would see the clouds below our level or immediately above the bus. That was a reason for astonishment for us! The road was as coiled as a snake. At one time, I glanced at Sabri and saw that his face was becoming paler and paler. His face looked like a glass of water that was getting empty quickly. He started to wheeze and gasp as if he wanted to vomit. I shouted for help using my little English: 'Help me my husband!' The passengers of various backgrounds – Italians, Ethiopians, Arabs, and French – rushed to help us. Someone provided perfume to resuscitate Sabri from his deep coma. Soon, he vomited and recovered. It happened also, during this journey, that we stopped at a small town at a time when we were hungry. Someone showed us the way to a restaurant. There we went and asked for some water to prepare some food for Safa. They gave us contaminated water that was full of living insects. We started the task of straining the water and got some biscuits and soaked them in it. Then we served this meal to Safa after adding some sugar to it! Thus, Safa's intestines became overwhelmingly infected. We found that this restaurant was offering chicken prepared in hot chili soup. [Most of the Egyptians are not used to hot food and find it very irritating]. Hussein and the two of us had no option but to eat this food and continue the journey.

"During one of the nights of the journey, the bus stopped suddenly. Some passengers said they had spotted bandits. Everybody on board panicked and those few, who had arms, wielded their pistols, daggers, name it! A Christian woman that was sitting next to me vomited, out of her horror and soiled my clothes with filth. Finding that she had passed out, I held her head towards my chest and closed my eyes in order not to see the confusion that was seizing everybody on the bus. Many passengers were ready with their pistols and daggers, while the two drivers and an army officer who was among the passengers began shooting in the air to scare off any assailants.

"At that time I was in my prime but, still, I was very frightened. I wondered: 'How could I be so scared while I am going to serve the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh!' In order to overcome my fear I closed my eyes and imagined that I was still in the presence of His Eminence the Guardian of the Cause of God. At that moment, his glorious and gentle words would ring in my ears. 'Rest assured

rest assured, O handmaiden of God! I am always with you! I am praying for your success and confirmation!' Upon bringing these words to my mind, I assured myself, 'Fear has no place!' And a deep sense of serenity filled my heart.

"At long last, we reached Addis Ababa!"

### **Guests of the Divine Providence**

As was the case with Sabri's first arrival in Addis a decade earlier, Divine Providence took good care of the family from the first moment of this second arrival, late one evening of March 1944. The travellers who barely made it from Khartoum to Addis through such a perilous trip were to be the recipients of God's bountiful favours, described here in Sabri's words:

"I became very worried upon our arrival. Our two children were asleep and we wished to get off the bus, yet it was dark. However, we were wondering where to go if we were to leave the bus at such a time. Then, we heard someone shouting my name. I wondered with astonishment, 'could it be that one of the [old Ethiopian] Bahá'ís who is still around? And even if this is the case, who would know that we were coming on this bus?'"

It seems that, at that moment, Sabri had forgotten all about the kind man who met them on the train from Khartoum, Mr. Subhí Gurunfuli. The person who shouted Sabri's name was one of the attendants of Otilia Hotel, who dutifully took care of the luggage of a family that was totally exhausted by a one-month journey, and guided them to a waiting vehicle! In such ease and comfort the family was taken to a hotel that was quite magnificent by the standards of those days. There, they were received by the hotel manager who apologised for the fact that Mr. Gurunfuli was not present to receive them in person. At such a reception accorded only to VIP's, the unbelieving and weary Sabri and Raissa, now carrying their sleeping children on their shoulders, were ushered into their room. It was a large room with a bath and hot water!

At this moment Raissa was struck down by the dysentery that she has contracted on the journey, while suckling Safa had been critically ill some days earlier. This left Sabri, who was still standing on his feet with young Hussein, to deal with the emergency. He informed the hotel management of the medical situation and they promptly sent for an Italian physician, Dr. Ribaudi, who prescribed the necessary treatment. The management also brought a very nourishing supper to the room, finding that their guests were unable to walk to the hotel's splendid restaurant. Sabri and Raissa's impressions of their first arrival into Addis put the record straight!

Sabri

"Many miracles took place and this is one of them. It would never have entered my head that we



would stay in such a hotel; or that a doctor of such calibre would treat Raissa and the baby; or of a bathroom with running hot water! Our first evening in Addis Ababa ended by eating a rich supper and sleeping in comfortable beds."

*Raissa:*

"During our journey, Sabrí sent a letter to His Eminence the Guardian of the Cause of God from every place we passed. When we arrived in this hotel I was very sick and exhausted. In response to a letter from Sabrí Effendi that spoke of the difficulties that we suffered during our journey, His Eminence cabled back: 'PRAYING YOUR SPEEDY RECOVERY BE ASSURED.' By the time we received this cable our illnesses were suddenly gone!"

Equally miraculous was the work that was arranged for them, even before they arrived – an arrangement that greatly eased their first settlement.

*Raissa:*

"What was more phenomenal is that Sabrí was put in charge of their tailoring shop. In this new work, he became very successful and excelled those who preceded him. It was a dignified position. The employers provided Sabrí Effendi with a highly skilled labour force. However, we had no money other than the thirty pounds which was quite a small amount, by post-war standards. Luckily, the employer requested me to work with Sabrí in the evenings. Our evening duty was to make some furnishings for the hotel, such as curtains, napkins, staff uniforms, bed sheets, etc. Sabrí and I would do this extra work as a separate contract. So, every day after seven o'clock in the evening we would start this additional assignment. Sabrí would finish his regular work and we would have our supper in the workshop. We then arranged for Hussein and Safa to sleep under the worktable and covered them with a smooth woollen spread that we bought to protect them from cold. Then each of us would sit at a sewing machine and stitch the hotel's furnishings until midnight or later. Thus we received Sabrí's regular salary, in addition to an extra income in return for this late-night work."

*Sabrí*

"At the end of our first full month of employment, the employers calculated our monthly salary as 30 pounds. To this basic salary they also added thirty percent of the workshop's net income proceeds after deduction of all expenses. When we inquired about what we should pay for our hotel accommodation, we found that the income earned by Raissa for the extra work was enough to cover our hotel bill. Therefore, we did not need even to spend our main income, which we deposited in the bank together with the 30 pounds that we brought from Egypt!"

Before the lapse of a few months, the thoughts of our Eagles were focused on how to establish a home of their own, in which they would enjoy the privacy to achieve their one and only goal of coming to Ethiopia: teaching the Bahá'í Faith.

## Teaching Rewarded by a Big Prize

Upon returning to Ethiopia this time, Mr. Sabrí Elias discovered that all the believers of the first period, except for Siyyid Mansúr, were completely displaced by the two wars that swept the country during his absence. Siyyid Mansúr<sup>69</sup>, an immigrant from Yemen, was the only believer still there, and he became a member of the re-elected Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa. However he left the Faith in the mid-1950's, after Sabrí and Raissa had moved on to Djibouti. Therefore, Mr. Gila Bahta, who was already a client and neighbour of Sabrí and Raissa when they spoke to him of the Faith, is regarded by them as 'the first Bahá'í of Ethiopia', and Sabrí gives the following brief account of how he was introduced to the Faith.

"At a time when I was tailoring a suit for Ato Gila, his father died in Asmara. So, he travelled to Asmara to attend the funeral. Upon his return to Addis, he came to receive the suit and he liked it very much. Our friendship became closer and we started to visit each other's homes, especially because we were neighbours. He would call on us each time he passed, and we would spend the time discussing the Bahá'í Faith. When we explained to him the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, he said that they were very much like his father's ideals. He considered himself to be created as a Bahá'í. During these sessions of his early inquiry, a friend of his named Tisfa Sion would accompany him but, unfortunately, Tisfa never became a Baha'i. Ato Gila did not ask too many questions, for he was the kind of person who instantly recognizes the truth. His faith was unique and his life was like a tablet of honour. Since he embraced the Faith, he did not show a single instance of non-conformity to Its Teachings."

We are fortunate to have Mr. Gila's version of this story – the story of how he became Bahá'í, which he wrote recently<sup>70</sup> in his home in Asmara, Eritrea, in his fascinating straightforward and simple style.

"My first meeting with Sabrí happened in a hotel in Addis Ababa, shortly after his second return to Ethiopia. Sabrí was speaking with the hotel clerk in Arabic, which the clerk did not know. I came forward and talked to Sabrí, in Arabic as I had lived and studied in Sudan for more than 10 years, 'Can I help?' Sabrí was happy to find someone who spoke his tongue, and since that time we started visiting each other and became good friends.

"One day, I was summoned by the Court, and requested to stand as a lawyer for a defendant. The accused was once married to one of the daughters of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie. Unfortunately, this daughter passed away while giving birth to the defendant's first child. His Majesty was so angry with him for not arranging better medical care for her in Addis Ababa, rather than leaving her to give birth at home. This man was Governor of a province in Tigray, a region of Ethiopia that is adjacent to Eritrea but quite far from Addis Ababa. Therefore,

<sup>69</sup> His full name was Siyyid Mansúr Bin Abdu'l-Rahmán Bá-Faqih

<sup>70</sup> Mr. Gila wrote his memoirs around 2004



he could not have guessed this problem beforehand and send her to Addis Ababa ahead of childbirth. His Majesty suspected that her death was an intentional calculation by the son-in-law; hence he was accused at the Court.

"When the Court asked this man, whose name was Dejazmach HaileSelassie Gugsu, whether he had a lawyer he named me but said that he had no money to hire me, and he pleaded the Court to engage me. Therefore, I was asked by the Court to defend him. One evening after the trial began, I sat down to study the case but was too exhausted and felt a need for fresh air. I went to walk up and down the street outside my house. Mr. Sabri's home happened to be nearby, and he saw me walking by. 'Gila, come and have tea with us!' He invited me, and I responded.

"While seated with Sabri and his family in the front garden of their house for tea, I looked towards the early evening sky, which was then very clear and blue. The clarity was such that one could easily count the stars. "This magnificent scene reminded me of the signs that are mentioned in the Bible for the second coming of Christ.

"Sabri,' I remarked after meditating briefly on the idea, 'There are many things in the Bible that I do not agree with.'

"Like what?' he exclaimed with a sign of great happiness on his face.

"It is mentioned in the Bible,' I replied, 'that upon the second coming of Christ the stars will fall on the surface of the Earth, the sun will have no power and the moon no light.'

"Science tells us' I continued to Sabri's delight, 'that the stars are much bigger than Earth. If one of the stars falls on Earth, it would disappear. And if this happens, where would the rest of the stars fall?'

"In our Faith, there is explanation to all of this.' Replied Sabri to my astonishment, as I knew that his full name is Sabri Elias Abdu'l-Masih, and he cannot be anything but Christian. 'Aren't you a Christian?' I asked.

"Yes, I was a Christian' He replied, 'but I later moved forward.' He then mentioned the Twelve Principles of the Bahá'í Faith that he now embraces. My comment was that my father used to believe in these same principles, and wondered if Sabri had any books that I could read on the subject. Immediately he gave me *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, which I read in no time. Asking for more, I was given *Paris Talks*, and thus I became a Bahá'í."

In a matter of a few months other people became in touch with the faith and declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, Shoghi Effendi's advice was *not to teach the Faith hastily. Be careful, ...*, and they heeded it. However, Sabri and Raissa noticed that those who initially came into the Faith were not up to their expectations. One of them, for example, could not give up his drinking habit, while another was of limited perceptions that did not enable

him to grasp the Faith properly. Rather than being discouraged, Sabri and Raissa continued to pray that God might bring in souls who would become the nucleus of a strong Bahá'í community. Their prayers were answered before long, as related here by Raissa:

"One day we asked a believer who could not fully comprehend the Bahá'í Faith, 'Do you have a relative such as your father or your brother, to whom you would teach the Faith?' He replied: 'Yes, I have a friend who is the Head of the Security Department.' Both Sabri and I laughed and said: 'The Head of the Security Department! How could he be your friend?' 'Indeed,' he assured us, 'he is my childhood friend as we went together to the same school. Leave it to me to handle this matter!'

"It happened that this believer took the *Bahá'í Principles* pamphlet that day, and on his next visit to us said: 'I visited my friend Ato Alfred Shafi, the Head of the Security Department, and purposely left the pamphlet at his home and I know what will happen next!' One week later he went to see his friend, who exclaimed: 'Where did you get this publication, and what do you know about these *Principles*? Take me immediately to these people!' When Alfred came, he brought his wife along – a very nice and kind-hearted lady. Indeed, Alfred was a true seeker who wanted to investigate the truth. To us he said, 'I have studied all religions and sects, yet none of them convinced me. I want something that conforms to my reason and comforts my heart!' Gradually, he began to study the Faith and, finally, declared. Our memories of dear Alfred are imperishable! For instance, and immediately after he embraced the Faith, he took advantage of his son's birthday party and invited Sabri Effendi and me along with his work colleagues. In the midst of the assembled guests, Alfred publicly declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Every one of those guests wanted a glass of wine, for drinking was a social custom at such parties. Thus, wine was served to them. Then they asked Alfred: 'Where is your glass?' To this Alfred stood in their midst and said. 'My brothers, I would like to tell you that, from now on, I am a Bahá'í. What I mean is that my religion is 'Bahá'í', and my Faith does not allow me to drink wine.'

"This gesture of dear Alfred overwhelmed Sabri and me with a feeling of great happiness, but shocked the others! 'Bahá'í – what is Bahá'í?' They exclaimed. Thus, questions and answers began. Some of them started to be quite antagonistic towards Alfred. Afterwards some of them intrigued against him fiercely and mercilessly until he was removed from his position. Both his tests and endurance were great! While Ato Alfred became a Bahá'í and was among the members of the newly elected Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa, that believer who brought him to us disappeared without a trace!

"By the same token, the believer that was an incurably alcoholic led us to teach the son of Ras Adifus. This nobleman was yet of a very modest nature. His love for the Bahá'í Faith, and trust of Bahá'ís would be great. Sometimes, he would be in possession of large sums of money that he carried to a certain tribe as its monthly budget. But he would come by our house and say, 'Tomorrow I will go to a certain village. Please keep this sum of money for me until tomorrow.' Sabri would react, 'We must count this sum of money first!' But he would refuse, 'Never! You are Bahá'ís and I trust you.' Thus, he would refuse any counting and would come and take this trust in the following day, again without counting!"



## Trials & Tribulations

As Sabri and Raissa were achieving such great successes in teaching the Faith, severe sufferings and tests came their way. The record is replete with many trials and tribulations, but the following three incidents are selected. They involved Hussein, Safa, and Raissa, respectively and are all related by Raissa.

### *Hussein's Love for Animals Turned Sour:*

"The first serious test was that Hussein used to love animals and play with them. Once, there was a dog by the gate of our house. Hussein started to play with it, but suddenly the dog charged Hussein and bit his thigh! The dog was rabid and had had bitten away a piece of Hussein's flesh. Hussein fainted from this shock. His condition was very critical and he had to be rushed to the hospital. There, the wound was stitched and it was necessary to give him anti-rabies injections. Sabri took him to the hospital every day, where he received an injection in his belly – twelve injections in total.

"One day I said to Sabri: 'You are tired and have had enough. Let me take over and carry Hussein to the hospital from now on!' He agreed, but it happened later that one night I had an inner feeling that something terrible was going to happen. The next morning, I was crying and said to Sabri: 'To tell the truth, I do not want to take Hussein to the hospital today!' He replied, 'Didn't we agree that you will take over this task?' I said, 'I have an intuition that an accident is going to happen to me. I am so scared about Hussein as well.' He replied: 'Mind you, nothing will happen!' However, after he went out of the house and walked away for some distance he came back. He said: 'Do not be afraid! Just Go! No harm will befall you.' I stood, with Hussein's hand in mine by the gate. Each time a horse cart would pass-by; I would hesitate to stop it. A second coach would come – and I would still refuse, and so on. My hesitation was so clear that it attracted my neighbour's attention. She was an Armenian woman who lived in the upper floor of our house. She came down and asked me: 'Why are you reluctant to take a coach? I have been watching you from the balcony and saw you turn away three carts.' I replied: 'I do not know why, but my heart is filled with fear.' She said to assure me: 'Hussein must have his injection. Don't be afraid! I will stay beside you until you take a coach.'

"Finally, a fourth coach came and I took it with Hussein beside me. At one stage of the trip, the coachman swerved to the middle of the road. Suddenly a private automobile came from behind at a very high speed. It collided forcibly with the right side of our coach and tossed us in the air. Hussein and I landed on the pavement on the left hand side of the road. The force of the collision was extremely severe. I fell on my chest and I could not breathe. The severe pain made me feel that my chest was crushed flat and I was choking. I wanted to cry out and say 'my son!', because Hussein was making no sound. I was certain that he was dead. 'Mmm...' was the only sound that came from my choked throat. I wanted to shout 'my son' but I couldn't. Suddenly someone came to our rescue. First he picked Hussein up from the ground. At this moment I cried out 'my son!', and Hussein miraculously replied 'Mama, Mama!' A sense of great relief came to me when I heard his voice. I looked at his face to find that it was very swollen. Since he could cry out 'Mama', I was

assured that Hussein was still alive. Gradually, my breathing slowed but I started to realize my own injuries. Eventually, some people took us to the hospital and sent for Sabri.

"When Sabri came he said: 'Since this morning I was worried. While I was working with the scissors, my hand was trembling. I became really scared, because your words alarmed me. I had a strong feeling that something would happen. Now it has happened!' It took me more than one month to recover from my injuries, since I was not even able to raise my arm. But Hussein's wounds healed within one week.

"The driver of the other vehicle came to us to apologize. He was a driver from Emperor Haile Selassie's Palace. The man expressed his regret and offered to pay compensation. Of course, Sabri told him that we were not after any compensation and most important of all we were safe. And this was one of our tests!"

### *Safa's Life Saved by a New Wonder Drug*

"There was also a serious accident that Safa suffered. One day, while he was playing with Hussein in the sitting room beside me, they removed a drawer from a table in the living room and used it as a toy car. While Safa was 'riding' the drawer a rusty nail went through Safa's knee, right into the nerves, and Safa screamed and passed out. When I checked Safa's injury I found that it was not deep. I removed him from inside the drawer and applied some tincture of iodide to the injury. Sometime later he started to shiver and his temperature started to rise. So we went to the doctor who said that it was a very simple wound, and prescribed a disinfectant. However, it happened that the nail poisoned Safa. At night, he had fits of vomiting, diarrhoea, convulsions, and stiffness in the arms. Early in the morning we went back to the same doctor. He was an Italian physician named Umberto. Dr. Umberto checked Safa and said: 'It is poisoning! The infection is spreading to the heart and there is not much hope that he will survive.' When he said this I became like a mad person. I could not believe it, 'What? My son ...?' Safa was then a very beautiful and sweet four-year old child. 'This is impossible, Bahá'u'lláh, impossible!' I went into what was more of a hallucination than prayer. 'It is impossible to take him from me! No! No! Impossible! You must heal him!' I continued to utter these words amidst my tears and screams.

"At this time Safa's temperature shot high. The doctor said that the boy will certainly die, and tried to calm me down. 'Look!' He said, 'Ultimately we will all die!' Yet, no words seemed to help. Suddenly he said: 'If you are lucky, there is a new drug called 'penicillin'. If the shipment of this drug arrives, it will be possible for us to treat this poisoning'.<sup>71</sup> The doctor's last statement made me scream even more frenziedly. I started to invoke Bahá'u'lláh, more and more, to heal Safa for me. Sabri, who had been with me beside Safa, was in the same anguish. As Dr. Umberto was still trying to comfort us, his medical assistant came into the room. The assistant said: 'Dr. Umberto,

<sup>71</sup> Penicillin was discovered in the course of World War II by the American scientist Dr. Fleming. Before the discovery of antibiotics, poisoning was the general term used to describe an overwhelming microbial infection, which is by today's term septicaemia. If not treated by antibiotics it would ultimately lead to the patient's death. This incident, probably, took place one year after the family's arrival into Ethiopia, i.e., in 1946-47



a parcel has arrived from America!' Excitedly, the doctor said, 'That could be the medicine that can save your son!' He rushed out of the room and returned a few minutes later to say: 'Bring the boy quickly!'

"So, the penicillin drug arrived! It was the first time that penicillin had come to Addis Ababa, and it was a real miracle! They started to give Safa one injection of penicillin every three hours. It was a racing against time! Safa reacted adversely to the first dose and his condition worsened. The Doctor said: 'The boy will either die or live. It is a matter of luck!' Sabrí and I had nothing to help us except our prayers and invocations to Bahá'u'lláh. Gradually afterwards, life started to return to Safa. His chance of survival had been gradually increasing – five percent, then ten, then twenty. By the next morning, his chance of recovery became fifty percent. The treatment continued for some fifteen days, during which we were staying at the hospital. Thus, this accident passed safely and Safa survived!"

### *Raissa Refuses to Die*

"One day I became ill with typhus fever. When I was admitted into the hospital, the physician Dr. Anderson did not know that I had typhus. He thought I had malaria. On the same day, a strong young man was also hospitalised. He had the same symptoms, but the doctor diagnosed it correctly as typhus. That patient died almost the same day. In comparison, I was physically very weak and responded very badly to the fever. They told me that it was malaria and started to give me the wrong medication. My condition deteriorated to the extent that the pain began to give me screaming fits, after which I would collapse on the hospital floor. While in a coma, the nurses would put me back in bed. In my rare moments of consciousness, I was told to eat well in order to recover. Yet, it was typhus and I should not have eaten the kind of food that they were serving me – black lentil porridge! They would even pour this food by force down my throat. The food irritated my stomach so much, yet they continued to feed me in this manner. In short, every thing they did was wrong: I continued to throw up and my fever worsened. Eventually the doctor came to check me and said, 'This patient will die.' Incidentally, I was also pregnant at that time and started to suffer a haemorrhage as well. In other words, my case became that of acute fever and bleeding. My condition was declared as critical and a curtain was drawn around my bed. When I heard the doctor say that I will die, I shouted back at him and said: 'No! I will not die!' When the doctor saw my reluctance he smiled and said, 'Since you said that you will not die, you will live!' Indeed, I survived that fatal disease, and the years went by."

### **Re-electing the Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa**

More people started to come into the Faith, in addition they found two early believers still in Addis Ababa: Siyyid Mansúr and Ato Ar'aya Anton<sup>72</sup>. Each new believer would submit a petition to His Eminence, and each of them would invariably receive a welcoming and blessing letter from Shoghi Effendi.

By 1947, after less than three years from the arrival of Sabrí and Raissa in Ethiopia, Sabrí and Raissa received the following cable from Haifa.

<sup>72</sup> An Eritrean who was 'very gentle and peaceful', and died unexpectedly because of illness

'ESTABLISH ASSEMBLY WITHOUT DELAY. SHOGHI'

Incidentally the number of new believers had reached five when this cable arrived, which brought the total membership of the Bahá'í community of the capital to nine, including Sabrí and Raissa. Commenting on the recommendation of the Guardian to them to exercise care in teaching, Sabrí gives an explanation of why it took them almost three years to teach five new believers.

"In reality, we did not slow down our teaching work. Rather, this was because of mere circumstances."

Therefore it was possible, at this point of history, to re-establish the Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa, with the following membership as cited by Raissa.

"Eventually we became nine in number, and we established the Assembly. That was in 1947. The members of the first Assembly were: [Ato] Gila Michael Bahta, [Ato] Alfred [Shafi], [Ato] Ar'aya Anton, [Ato] Tisfa Sion, [Mr.] Sabri Elias; [Mrs.] Raissa Elias; Siyyid Mansúr, [Mr.] Robert Bensilian<sup>73</sup>, and [Ato] Alazar Woldemichael."

There was a precious gift in waiting for each of the members of the Assembly as, again, related by Raissa.

"It happened that, when we were last on pilgrimage, His Eminence Shoghi Effendi gave us nine ring stones engraved with the Most Great Name. He said: 'Two ring stones for the two of you. An Assembly will be established in Addis Ababa. The remaining seven ring stones are for the first seven members who will join in future.' Indeed, on the day of establishing the Spiritual Assembly, each one of the first seven believers who embraced the Faith and consequently became members of the Assembly received that gift from Shoghi Effendi that was kept for more than two years in store for him!"

<sup>73</sup> An Armenian; who was described by Sabrí and Raissa as 'a man of extremely good qualities, who studied the Bahá'í Writings and embraced the Faith ignoring his wife's fierce opposition'.



Raissa Last Years in Addis



The Family in Addis After the Birth of Carmel



Raissa with Safa & Hussein ca 1951



Sabri Last Years In Addis

## 9. Mission Accomplished: The Bahá'í Community of Ethiopia

It was quite amazing how the Bahá'í Faith became firmly established in Ethiopia in the short span of a few years. Soon after Sabrí and Raissa succeeded in teaching enough souls to form the Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa for the second time in history, several important milestones were covered towards the maturation of both the Bahá'í community of Ethiopia and the Spiritual Assembly of its capital. Among these milestones, the following might be cited in view of their great future significance.

### Marriage with Imperial and Spiritual Blessings

We read in books of ancient history stories of diligent and just monarchs who would walk among their subjects to investigate their conditions and tend to their needs. However, one would not expect such personal encounters between a king and his subject have continued as late as the middle of the twentieth century. But this was exactly the case in Ethiopia, especially during the decades that immediately followed its liberation in 1941. In those days, the Ethiopian Sovereign not only knew many of his subjects by name, but was also aware of their private lives and circumstances. One day, I heard the following story being told by Mr. Gila Bahta to some western Bahá'ís and one of them appropriately exclaimed: "What a Monarch!" In what may be regarded as laying one of the early bedrocks in the firm foundation of the Ethiopian Bahá'í community, Mr. Gila Bahta took the bold decision to establish his own 'Bahá'í home'.

Being 'an important' subject, he informed his sovereign of this intention and was careful to bring him up to date with all related developments, as and when they happened. Here, the reader is ushered into Gila's account of this important episode in the Bahá'í history of Ethiopia, which is also a description of the path of devotion to his Faith that his feet trod so firmly and confidently throughout his long and eventful life.

"A few years after becoming a Bahá'í, I consulted Mr. Sabrí about having a Bahá'í home of my own, but this cannot happen until I have a Bahá'í wife, and they were non-existent in Ethiopia at that time. 'In this case' Mr. Sabrí said, 'there are many Bahá'í girls in Egypt. Why don't you go there and choose a wife yourself?'"

"I thought Mr. Sabrí's idea possible. However, this would carry some kind of risk. At that time, people of some importance were expected to marry Ethiopians. To surmount this hurdle,



I decided to seek permission from the Emperor. When the Emperor heard my request for his permission to marry someone from Egypt, he was astonished and wondered why I would not marry an Ethiopian. To give a reasonable excuse, I said that the Ethiopian women from whom I would have wished to choose a wife were already married, while those available now did not suit me. The Emperor asked me to stay in the waiting room for a while, and then recalled me after about ten minutes.

“So, you have decided to marry an Egyptian woman to care for your children, look after you, and mind your house?” The Emperor said to me as he seemed to have understood that I had other reasons. However, and in order to make me happy, he granted me permission.

“Therefore I travelled to Egypt and started the visit by meeting with its National Spiritual Assembly. At the meeting I tried to hide my real reason for coming, but I discovered that Mr. Sabri had already written to them in detail. He even requested the Assembly to assist me. So the members came directly to the matter. I was told that the Assembly have already appointed a lady to escort me in my search for a wife. I thanked them for the time and care they had taken to consider my case seriously. The appointed lady was an elderly woman, yet beautiful and wise. She took me around to many homes in Cairo and Tanta in the north, but none of their girls met my expectations. My escort became very upset, and exclaimed ‘What type of girl you want?’ I replied ‘I want someone who is exactly like you but younger.’ ‘I am sorry,’ she replied in despair, ‘these are the girls that I know’.

“Having parted from my escort, I decided to visit the seaside city of Alexandria. There, I discovered that every Bahá’í in Egypt was very much concerned and willing to give me a helping hand. One of the friends suggested that I should go to Port-Said, where there were a number of suitable Bahá’í girls. Again, the Assembly took the trouble of notifying a notable Bahá’í of Port-Said, requesting him to assist me. There was a Nineteen Day Feast ... but I did not find there any girl who me. My companion ... invited me to go home with him for a cup of tea. At his home ... he suddenly remembered, ‘You know, I am a tenant in this house. It is the property of the family of a wonderful young Bahá’í girl called Ni’mát, but I forgot to tell you that she was not at the Feast this evening ... He invited me upstairs for this unexpected meeting, and introduced me to both mother and daughter who welcomed me with another serving of tea. My companion immediately noticed that I found my choice at long last! Later in the evening I was introduced to the father who agreed that I marry his daughter, but on one condition that Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith would himself agree also to the marriage.<sup>74</sup>

“Thus, the father cabled for the Guardian’s consent, while I returned to Cairo in anticipation of the reply. In Cairo, I was the guest of Hussein Bicar and his wife Qásimah, the sister of Ni’mát. Mr. Bicar enquired about my travel plans, and I told him that I have few days left. ‘If they agree to the marriage,’ I remarked, ‘well and good or otherwise I will go home.’ Mr. Bicar decided to interfere. He contacted Mr. Nushúghátí and convinced him to refer the marital consent to

<sup>74</sup> It was the habit of the early Oriental believers to seek the unerring opinion of the living Head of their Faith on important matters of life, such as marriage, naming a newborn child or, even, major business decisions.

the National Spiritual Assembly. The Assembly met and unanimously agreed to the marriage and invited the father to the meeting chamber, which was located on the upper floor of the National Hazíratu’l-Quds, and informed him of the decision. After some hesitation, the father half-heartedly agreed. As Mr. Nushúghátí was going downstairs in this mood of uncertainty to rejoin us, we heard the Postman shout at the gate, ‘Mahmúd Effendi, Mahmúd Effendi! You have a telegram.’ Unbelievably, Mr. Nushúghátí reached out for the cablegram, unsealed it, and read:

‘MARRIAGE BLESSED. SHOGHI’

### The Faith and the Emperor

Another important milestone in the progress of the Bahá’í Faith in Ethiopia was also destined to be achieved by Mr. Gila Bahta: This was nothing other than bringing the Faith to the attention of Emperor Haile Selassie I, though inadvertently and only through the curiosity of a Monarch that was intent on minute details, when it came to the affairs of his important subjects. Let us read it from Gila’s interesting notes!

“Sometime after having returned to Addis Ababa with my bride, I happened to be at a hospital at the same time that the Emperor was there to visit an important patient. He noticed my presence and immediately sent one of the royal attendants to summon me to his presence. I appeared before the Emperor, who enquired whether I had married. When I answered in the affirmative he asked ‘Why didn’t you bring your bride to see me?’

“I did not wish to impose on your precious time, Your Majesty.’ I replied respectfully.

“‘Bring her to the Palace tomorrow!’ was the Imperial Command.

“Early next morning, Ne’mát and I went to the Palace. His Majesty immediately received us.

“‘What language does she speak?’ The Emperor enquired.

“‘She speaks Arabic, English, and French, Your Majesty.’ I replied.

“As the Sovereign spoke fluent French, he addressed Ni’mát musingly, ‘Today, We will allow you to speak in French. But next time, you have to speak in Amharic!’ Then, addressing me, he asked, ‘What is her religion?’

“I was shocked: my Monarch knew that I am Christian, and he should have taken it for granted that she is also a Christian. I started to contemplate, should I reply that she is a Muslim or a Christian. I gathered resolve and said, ‘She is a Bahá’í, like myself.’

“‘What! What is Bahá’í?’ The Emperor demanded in astonishment.



"Given the time allowed for an Imperial audience, I explained the Faith briefly, mentioning the twelve principles. 'Well,' was the Emperor's reaction, 'have you any books?'"

"'Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!' I replied. 'Bring me a book!' He ordered.

"Thus Ni'mát's first audience with the Emperor ended. The following day, I came to the Palace with a Bahá'í book and requested an audience with His Majesty. He thanked me and said, 'If We need you, you will be summoned.'

"A year or so later, my wife gave birth to our first child, a son I named Birhání, but Ni'mát would call him Hání – a common name in Arabic. On this occasion, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa advised me to take advantage of this opportunity and give more Bahá'í books to His Majesty, while giving him the good news of Birhání's birth. I took a collection of some Bahá'í books and met the Emperor to give him the good news of the birth of our son. 'God bless him!' was the Emperor's response to the news, and then he said, 'Were you entangled into this Religion by your wife?'"

"'No, Your Imperial Majesty,' I replied, 'I was a Bahá'í for two years before I got married.'

"'Your Leader is in Baghdad, isn't He?' He continued with his questions. 'We have no leader,' I replied, 'We have a Guardian, who is in the Holy Land.'

"'Your Leader was in Iran, as I understand,' He insisted, 'then He was brought to Baghdad, Constantinople, Adrianople, Gallipoli, Haifa, and then to Akká. Isn't it?'"

"'Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.' I affirmed in bewilderment. To this, my Monarch remarked laughingly, 'You do not know your Religion!'"

"In this relaxed and intimate mood, the Emperor ended the meeting and said, 'We will call you when We need you.' From that time on he would receive me every now and then to discuss the Faith further. The meetings would last from five to ten minutes and, sometimes, a quarter of an hour."

Viewed in hindsight, it is evident that this open and bold assertion of the verities of the Bahá'í Faith to the ruler of the land, almost immediately after its introduction into his dominion, has shaped the policy and attitude of the Bahá'í Administration in Ethiopia towards all sovereign governments of the land. It is such policy and attitudes that won the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia fame and respect as loyal serving citizens of their country under all circumstances. This salient characteristic of the Bahá'í Administration in Ethiopia was acknowledged and commended at the Bahá'í International Convention of 1983, when the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia managed to attend the Convention against all odds, and at a

time that marked lowest ebb of the fortunes of their country.<sup>75</sup>

Last but not least, the most important single result of Gila's ability to relate so frankly and intimately to Emperor Haile Selassie took place when Gila managed to arrange for the historical meeting of 16 October 1969, between the Emperor and Rúhiyyih Khánúm.<sup>76</sup>

### More Souls Join

The relentless teaching efforts of Sabrí and Raissa gathered momentum as the years went by. Over the three years that followed the reinstatement of the Spiritual Assembly of Addis Ababa, and before the arrival of other Bahá'í pioneers to support them at the behest of Shoghi Effendi, the couple attracted many souls to the Faith, including people of prominence and capacity. The following account by Raissa explains.

"It happened one day that we were concerned by a slowing-down in our teaching efforts. Then we decided to place a Bahá'í book on the counter of our Workshop. The idea was that someone may pick it up and show interest. We hoped that God might open a door. Eventually, someone called Fassaha Mangisto, an employee of the Central Bank, came to us for a private matter that took him few minutes to discuss. While talking to us, he caught sight of the book, picked it up and started to read it. He was so absorbed in reading the book that when he became aware of the time he exclaimed, 'My God, I forgot myself. I came here only for five minutes! Would you allow me to borrow this book?' His request was answered, and after two weeks he came [and] told us that some five young colleagues of his have read it, and that all of them were touched by it. Among them was an educated youth named Katha, who was employed in the Department of Civil Aviation. From that time on, these youth continued to visit us regularly.

"At that time, a Sudanese youth, named Azmi Ibrahim Samara, embraced the Faith. The same was true of Mr. Kidani Mariam, who was a teacher of our son, Hussein, and was attracted to the Faith through Hussein himself, although Hussein was eight or nine years old at that time.

"In brief, quite a large number of people embraced the Faith ... [including] Mr. Talbot, an African-American, and Dr. Wright who was from Eastern Europe and in a prominent position."

### First International Bahá'í Visitors to Ethiopia: Participants of the

<sup>75</sup> Mr. Gila Bahta once related the following to the writer: In the course of her speech at the Convention, Hand of the Cause of God Rúhiyyih Khánúm spoke of the wisdom and resolve of the National Spiritual Assembly of Ethiopia under tumultuous and dire circumstances as an example to be emulated. When the time came for the Ethiopian delegates to come to the stage to cast their ballots, the Convention gave them a standing ovation that continued until they returned to their seats.

<sup>76</sup> For a detailed account of this meeting, see Appendix III



## 1953 Kampala Conference

Time came in February 1953 when the first African Bahá'í conference was held in Kampala, Uganda. This conference as well as the other three conferences held in Willamette, U.S.A.; Sweden and New Delhi, India were convened at the request of by Shoghi Effendi, in preparation for the Ten Year Plan that took the Bahá'í Faith to all corners of the Globe. These conferences were widely attended by Bahá'ís from many countries. Being a hub of air transport at the time, Addis Ababa was an inevitable stop-over for Bahá'ís travelling to Kampala Conference in Uganda, a number of them being prominent people and teachers of the Faith. The exposure of the indigenous Bahá'ís of Addis Ababa to such spiritual international visitors gave them first-hand experience on the universal character of their newly espoused Faith and further deepened their understanding of its tenets. Wondering why Kampala, and not Addis Ababa, was chosen as venue for this first African Bahá'í conference, Sabrí and Raissa aptly put this first international exposure of their spiritual children into its historical perspective:

"As pioneers to Ethiopia, we lived alone in Addis Ababa and the affairs of the Faith went well. The time came in 1953 when the first African Conference was held, and we wondered why Kampala had been chosen instead of Addis Ababa. My opinion was that Ethiopia embraced the Faith earlier than that country [Uganda]<sup>77</sup>. So I wondered why the Conference was held there and not here? But, after holding that wonderful Conference in 1953 which was attended by thousands (of participants), we were surprised to see many visitors coming to us in Addis Ababa. Among them were Hands of the Cause of God<sup>78</sup> Mr. Musá Banání and Mr. Dhikru'lla Khádím and their wives. Another prominent visitor was Mr. Jalál Kházi', prior to his elevation to the rank of Hand of the Cause of God, Mr. Mason Remy, who was still occupying a rank in the Faith, and Mrs. Mildred Muttahideh. Also came the dearest among our Egyptian Bahá'í friends [Knight of Bahá'u'lláh, Auxiliary Board Member, and later Counsellor] Mr. Mohammed Mustafá. Among them also was [Auxiliary Board Member] Mr. Abd'ul-Rahím Yazdi. It was a great contingent of visitors! We used to receive these friends upon their arrival at Addis Ababa airport and on their way back from the Kampala Conference. This [influx of Bahá'í transit visitors] continued for about one week. We used to exchange the greeting 'Allah-u-Abhá'

<sup>77</sup> Uganda was opened to the Faith on 31 August 1951, when a car carrying the following first Bahá'í pioneers set their foot there crossed the border from Kenya: Mr. Musa Banání and his wife Samihé; Mr. Ali Nakhjavání, his wife Violette, and their young daughter Bahiyyih; and Mr. Philip Hainsworth. In a span of four years Uganda was destined to witness the first entry by troops ever experienced in the Bahá'í world, and Kampala became the site of the first Bahá'í temple built on African soil known as The Bahá'í Mother Temple of Africa.

<sup>78</sup> Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, appointed some prominent promoters and teachers as Hands of the Cause, in order to assist him in propagating and protecting the Bahá'í Faith. These Hands, in turn, would appoint Auxiliary Board Members to assist them. Today, the functions of the Hands of the Cause of God have been extended into the future by the Universal House of Justice appointing such Bahá'ís as Counsellors, again assisted in their work by Auxiliary Board Members.

with these guests so frequently that the airport taxi drivers started to greet each other [saying] 'Allah-u-Abhá!' ... These days were wonderful, quite wonderful! For many nights we did not sleep. Many pictures [of our meetings with these guests] were taken. One of such meetings took place at the home of Dr. Talbot, and a picture of that meeting was taken ... During those days, the Bahá'ís of Addis Ababa were very happy. They heard a great deal of news and many talks. For a decade heretofore, the Ethiopian Bahá'ís did hear anyone speak about the Bahá'í Faith except the two of us. Now they heard others! "

## Shoghi Effendi's Promise: More Pioneers Join the Eagles

Shoghi Effendi's Ten Year Crusade call for Bahá'í pioneers to arise for service in foreign lands was not limited to those who opened virgin countries and territories to the Faith. Many more went to consolidate the Faith in countries that were already opened, such as Ethiopia. The happiness and great sense of relief of Sabrí and Raissa was such that they spent a long time in their tape-recorded memoirs explaining how this rich influx of Bahá'í pioneers came to their support. Starting with their memory of the promise that Shoghi Effendi made to them promising such support, the following excerpts of that lengthy account may be savoured.

### The Promise:

"Some of the words of His Eminence the Guardian to us [during our last pilgrimage] were 'I will send you pioneers from Egypt, America and Iran as well, in order to help both you and Sabri Effendi.'"

### The Time:

"Almost nine years passed until more pioneers joined us ... this was after February 1953 (Kampala Conference) ... it means that the arrival of other pioneers to Ethiopia started [later] in 1953."

### Those Who Came:

"The first one to show the desire to come was Mrs. Shumais and (her husband) Dr. Afnán. However, she came (to Addis Ababa) first; at the request of His Eminence Shoghi Effendi ... Mrs. Shumais Afnán was a physician. Likewise was her husband, Mr. Abbas Afnán. The two were among the first pioneers who joined us in Ethiopia. The first of these pioneers was Dr. Hishmat Farhumand, who was a dentist ... then Mr. and Mrs. Ashraf,<sup>79</sup> and Mr. [Jamshid] Munajjim and his family ... Mr. Munajjim was quite dynamic and energetic.<sup>80</sup> Then, one day,

<sup>79</sup> Sabrí and Raissa's memories of Mr. Ashraf went as follows:

"Mr. Ashraf was a very prominent man in his own country, Iran ... he was a manager in the National Oil Company in Abadan ... He came with his wife and accepted the job of a school teacher. He was really a great man of perfect morals and staunch faith. The people of Ethiopia showed a great respect to him. Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís alike."

<sup>80</sup> Sabri gave the following glimpse of the sacrificial services of Mr. Jamshid Munajjim in Ethiopia:

"I shall never forget the sight of Mr. Munajjim when he visited the homes of all the friends, in his automobile, in order to bring them (to Bahá'í meetings). Sometimes, his car would suffer a mechani-



we received a cable from an American youth, named Frederick Schicter, asking us to meet him at Addis Airport. He was 26 years old. When we met him we saw that skin of his forehead and nose was blistered due to [his exposure to the extremely hot sun during] his stay in Djibouti for a few months after he arrived there as a pioneer from America.<sup>81</sup> ... There was another [American] pioneer [who came to us] called Hassan Hulls ... He was an American youth born to a Bahá'í family, for this reason they gave him the name Hassan ... and he was very much like Mr. Alfred Schicter [in spirit]. Then Mr. Gamal Rushdy and his wife Hoda came from Egypt."

#### *A Self-Styled Hurdle Removed!*

"There was an idea at that time, that some Bahá'í pioneers [from among those who were doctors] would come [to Ethiopia] and either open their own clinics or get employment with the Ministry of Health. It was necessary for each of them to obtain a permit from the Ministry of Health. It was for this purpose that Mr. Gila went to an officer [called Ato Membari] ... When Mr. Gila asked for that permit, the officer responded to the effect that, as long as he remained in his capacity at the Ministry of Health, he would never agree to the admission of a single Bahá'í into the country. Mr. Gila [who seemed to have known this officer for a long time] replied: "God willing, the Bahá'ís will come in spite of your reluctance". More astounding than Gila's reply was that a member of the Ministry of Health staff called Omar Abd'ul-Nabi, to whom we taught the Faith, came to us and said that he usually receives a copy of the official orders of key-staff transfers in the Ministry of Health. Omar saw a copy of an official instruction that ordered the transfer of Ato Membari from Addis Ababa to Djibouti. Upon hearing the news of this transfer, Mr. Gila went to Ato Membari the following day. There he found him sitting sadly on his desk and holding his head with his hands. As soon as he became aware of the presence of Mr. Gila in the room he shouted: "Can you believe it, Gila? They have ordered my transfer to that very hot country [i.e. Djibouti]. I cannot bear its climate. There I will certainly become

*cal fault. Since the climate of Addis Ababa is usually cold, the use of a suit (and tie) is common. Mr. Munajjim would take off his jacket and kneel on the ground under his automobile to fix it. He would then proceed to his destination with the friends on board. Such was the spirit that animated him and his wife!"*

81 In later years, Mr. Fred Schicter was appointed by the Universal Houser of Justice to the International Teaching Center, where he served for many years. In their memories, Sabrí and Raissa lovingly remembered Fred in the following words.

*"In response to Shoghi Effendi's (1953) call for pioneers to settle in countries where no Bahá'ís existed ... that youth [Fred] volunteered to pioneer to Djibouti. He was not then aware of the extremely hot climate of that country. After spending sometime there, he could not endure the heat and suffered from serious health problems. On the other hand, the French Authorities [that were then in charge of Djibouti] denied him permanent employment on the pretext that he could neither speak Arabic nor French. He was a librarian by profession. Eventually, he moved from Djibouti and resettled with us in Ethiopia, and [thus] his pioneering post at Djibouti became vacant. In spite of being a 26 year old youth from the West — a German origin immigrant to the United States — and having not inherited the Faith from his parents ... yet his knowledge of the Faith was quite unique. For instance, he learned many parts of the Holy Writings that he would recite in their original Arabic, such as 'Remover of difficulties', some of the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, in addition to some verses of the Qur'án! ... He used to ... get up at dawn to do his ablution and obligatory prayer. It happened that, after the arrival of Frederick Schicter in Ethiopia that he obtained employment as a librarian, and everything went well with him afterwards."*

ill." Mr. Gila commented, "This happened because you threatened that you will never allow the entry of any Bahá'í into Ethiopia. You are the one who invoked your own transfer!"

#### **Maturity of Community and Administration**

As they completed ten years together in Ethiopia, Sabrí and Raissa's description of the status of the Faith and its Administration in Ethiopia goes as follows.

"The [Bahá'í Spiritual] Assembly [of Addis Ababa] became very strong. The [Bahá'í] Administration was well-organized to such a degree that a special 'Pioneer Committee' was formed in order to facilitate their entry and tend to their settlement ... we used to have a room that we rented, on the next floor of the same building where Mr. Gila's office was located. On the door of that room we placed the sign *Bahá'í Centre*. The room was equipped with a telephone, a bookshelf and good quality furniture. Yet, we did not have anyone who could run this office on a full time basis ... The pioneers who joined us later had first underestimated the degree of the progress of the Faith in Ethiopia. [For example,] when Mr. Munajjim came, he visited our Bahá'í Centre and attended a meeting of the Pioneer Committee on which a number of capable Bahá'ís served. The matter tabled on the agenda was what could be done to help new pioneers ... Sometime afterwards, I heard Mr. Munajjim say, 'When I first came, I thought that I came to help. As soon as I arrived, I felt ashamed of myself; because I found that the affairs of the Faith were well-administered'.

"As to the condition of the Bahá'ís [of Addis Ababa] at that time: Indeed, all of them became fully engaged in service to the Faith of God. It was not just one, or two, or three among them — it was all of them who toiled and laboured for the Faith in absolute loyalty and detachment!"

#### **Sense of Relief, then Redundancy**

Sabrí and Raissa were happy to see other Bahá'í pioneers come and join them in such a vast field of service. However, the sense of relief was to be gradually replaced by a sense of redundancy. When they first came, their contacts and converts were those who could communicate with them in Arabic, or the broken Amharic that they managed to pick up over the years. The new pioneers could open new doors and reach new contacts, both through the field of their work and ability to communicate in English — a language more widely spoken in Ethiopia than Arabic. We leave it to our two Eagles, now with two more daughters, Carmel and Malakout, to describe how they felt then and what they decided to do about it.

"Many servants and labourers of the Faith became available at that time... a number of strong pioneers who were endowed with great capacity, spoke very good English, and were mostly professors, arrived and joined the Ethiopian believers who also spoke good English in addition to Amharic ... [while] we would only speak in broken Amharic, or Arabic. Upon their arrival,



the new pioneers filled this vacuum (i.e. the need for English-speaking Bahá'ís of capacity) ... [and] our presence or absence became more or less unimportant ... we found that to remain (in Ethiopia) would produce no more fruit and we realised that the Faith could continue without us.

"At that time, nothing seemed to us more important than pioneering ... [and] we were very happy to continue as pioneers [elsewhere] in the path of God as it was our habit ... we wrote to His Eminence the Guardian ... that we are ready to pioneer to Djibouti [in response to his appeal that a family from Addis Ababa would move there to fill the vacancy left by Fred Schecter's inability to secure permanent residence in Djibouti]."

Thus, Sabrí and Raissa with young daughters Carmel and Malakout (barely aged 4 and 2), left Ethiopia to arrive Djibouti in the shocking summer heat of 6 May 1954, this time separated from Hussein and Safa who had to remain Addis Ababa for their education.

### The Bahá'í Community of Ethiopia today

Fifty four years have now passed since our two Eagles winged it away from the rainy temperate Ethiopian highlands to the steaming-hot arid lowlands of Djibouti – seventy five years since Sabrí had inconspicuously set his feet for the first time on the platform of Addis Ababa train station one evening. As the Bahá'í Community of Ethiopia is poised for the festive celebrations of its Diamond Jubilee in January 2009, those spiritual seeds and saplings that Sabrí and Raissa had so patiently and tenaciously, yet tenderly and lovingly, sown and raised in the fertile soil of hearts have produced an abundant crop, both in Ethiopia and the country that was once part of it: Eritrea. Today, both Ethiopia and Eritrea have National Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies of their own. In its Diamond Jubilee publication, *Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith in Ethiopia*, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia takes stock of a myriad of staggering leaps and bounds of progress achieved since the Bahá'í Faith came to the country. To give the reader a glimpse of the transformation of the fortunes of the Bahá'í Faith in Ethiopia after the departure of the two Eagles who brought It, the writer selects the following.

"... as the Faith started to grow, [Ethiopia] has produced, starting from the 1960's, international pioneers. To mention some: Ato Angosom Ar'aya to Monrovia, Liberia and Ato Melake Meharezghi to Djibouti and Ato Girmay Techie to Zambia. At present we have a group of Ethiopian and Eritrean families pioneering from Ethiopia to Zambia, Namibia and Uganda. Another significant contribution by Ethiopian Bahá'ís to the Bahá'í world was when Mr. Eduardo Durante Vieira who later became the first African to be persecuted [and martyred, in his country Guinea Bissau] because of his Faith, was first introduced to the Bahá'í Faith in Portugal by an Ethiopian Bahá'í named Mr. Girma Beshah ...

"After 1975, owing to the 1974 Revolution in Ethiopia and of the civil war, which ended only recently, the Bahá'í pioneers left the country and all members of the National Assembly were/are Ethiopians. In 1979 there were 10,000 Bahá'ís and some 480 localities of which 260 had local assemblies. There have been both qualitative and quantitative changes in the Bahá'í membership such as greater participation of women and the enrichment of Bahá'í literature, both in Amharic and in the languages of the mass teaching areas ...

"The Bahá'í community of Ethiopia has been involved in the process of social and economic development since it was established some 70 years ago ... starting in April 1993, the Bahá'í World

Community launched the Three Year Plan (1993-1996) and the Bahá'í community of Ethiopia was active in this plan. One of the major objectives of this plan was of the implementation of socio-economic developments, taking into account the spiritual dimension of man. The challenges and achievement of those three years provided the lesson that contributed to the establishment of a development institute in Ethiopia in 1996 which was later named the Sabrí Development Institute. The Sabrí Development Institute is, therefore, an educational institute 'dedicated to the development of human response for the positive spiritual, social, economic and cultural transformation of the peoples of Ethiopia.' A Board of Directors appointed and guided by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia supervises its activities. Although its head office is in Addis Ababa, its area of influence is to all corners of the country."



Family - passport photo ca 1954



Kampala Conference visitors in Addis 1954

## 10. Djibouti I

*"The tribes of Somalia are kind-hearted and we could never forget their love for us."*

Raissa Elias

### The Challenges

To illustrate the magnitude of the challenges that our two Eagles had to face in the course of their spiritual conquests of Djibouti [then French Somalia], only three out of the eleven cassette tapes that they recorded for the National Bahá'í Archives of Ethiopia deal with the ten years they spent together in Ethiopia, with the remaining eight tapes dedicated to their first five-year term in Djibouti. This should not be a surprise since such a relatively small country, both in population and size, needed three Knights of Bahá'u'lláh to be brought by the Divine Call during the Bahá'í Ten Year Plan – first, Fredrick Schicter, and then Sabrí and Raissa Elias. Nevertheless, such a succession of Knights was not enough to guarantee success at first attempt – because Sabrí and Raissa needed to return to Djibouti, twenty years afterwards, for another consolidation term that spanned the last decade of their exceptionally long and toilsome pioneering career.

It is the opinion of the writer that the couple's spiritual conquests of Djibouti merit a book on its own, perhaps twice the size of this book. Here, we are fortunate to have a summary of Djibouti's 1954-1959 years that was provided in 2007 by Raissa, in amazing clarity and ample detail, in spite of being written fifty years afterwards.

Since the two Djibouti episodes are twenty years apart, they will be handled here in two parts, first this Chapter, which covers the first term mostly as summarized by Raissa, and the second part (Chapter 12) that will relate the ten-year term (1977-1987) which is based on another captivating audio narration that the two Eagles managed to record a few months before Sabrí's passing in October 1995.

### Shoghi Effendi's Appeal

Soon after Fred Schicter had unwillingly left Djibouti to resettle in Ethiopia, Shoghi Effendi sent a special letter to the Bahá'í community of Addis Ababa urging them to send a Bahá'í family to settle in Djibouti. In what was reminiscent of Sabrí's 1933 initial reluctance to arise in response to the



Shoghi Effendi's call for a pioneer to Ethiopia, our two Eagles took even more time to respond.

### Sabri

"The blessed letter of the Guardian to the Bahá'í community of Addis Ababa to send a pioneer family to Djibouti was read, over and over, at every Nineteen-Day Feast, that is: at intervals of nineteen days ... for several months in row. It became clear then that no Ethiopian Bahá'í family would move from Addis Ababa, the city of abundance, prosperity and temperate climate, to Djibouti<sup>82</sup> ... As the days went by [with nobody heeding this call, Raissa and I took counsel together ... and reached the conclusion that it seemed to be impossible for any one to volunteer for Djibouti, whether a pioneer family that had just arrived from Iran ... or any Ethiopian family from Addis Ababa. Therefore, we were targeted by this appeal ... and we were happy at this conclusion!

"Throughout the history of the Faith since the advent of Bahá'u'lláh, none of the central figures of the Faith or the Universal House of Justice imposed a duty upon any of the believers. That would be pressure or coercion. The affairs of the Cause of God were conducted in a spirit of absolute free will. Such instructions might take the form of an enticement, at the most, and in the form of a statement such as 'it is commendable if someone would do this, or that.' Simply we felt that it was we who were intended to go. His Eminence the Guardian would not impose this upon us, because we were already pioneers. Therefore, we decided that we would pioneer to Djibouti, and we wrote to His Eminence the Guardian that we were ready to go."

### Raissa

"We forgot that we had children who were studying at Ethiopian schools. We forgot that it was impossible to transfer the children from Addis Ababa - after six years of study in English and Amharic - to Djibouti where the Schools teach only in French. Our rush forward was just like our departure from Egypt to Ethiopia in 1944. This was how we always served the Faith: prompted by a feeling that it was a duty for us to achieve."

### Flight in Contrary Winds

Even after heeding the call, it was quite painful for Sabri and Raissa as well as the community that they had so lovingly raised over the past ten years to separate. Equally agonizing was their separation from their sons, Hussein and Safa, who had to remain in Addis to continue their schooling. The Eagles had to fly to Djibouti in contrary winds that were blowing both from within and without their beloved Bahá'í community of Addis Ababa, and their relatives in Egypt. Raissa's sadness about those times pervaded her recollections of them many years later:

### Sabri

82 This audacious move was eventually made by a devoted Ethiopian Bahá'í pioneer, Mr. Gebremedhen Asghedom who served in Djibouti for a few years in the late 1990's - almost a decade after the second Djibouti term of Sabri and Raissa Elias had ended.

"Many of the friends in Ethiopia and Egypt blamed us strongly because for this action... We sold all our property at a very cheap price, including our house furniture and workshop equipment. We sold everything without the slightest hesitation or regret. If some friends in Egypt thought then that we were after wealth, the fact was that moving to Djibouti, as far as our profession was concerned - i.e. tailoring - was sheer madness. What financial benefit could there be as tailors in an extremely hot country where most of the people walked around in shorts?"

### Raissa<sup>83</sup>

"The friends in Addis Ababa were in a state of grief and torment. They used to say: 'You are already pioneers in Addis Ababa. Why do you pioneer again to another country? Stay with us here!'

"There were also objections from non-Baha'is: we had a next-door neighbour, a Syrian lady, who was also blaming us. She would say: 'You are a mother! How can you go away leaving your children behind? How can your husband abandon his successful job?'

"We needed to place Hussein and Safa in a boarding school, but the school hostel would not be open before a month or two at that time. Where were we going to leave them then? We managed to find someone willing to look after them: he was the Egyptian school teacher of our sons. He was indeed a faithful friend and a highly respected man. To tell the truth: as a mother who had forsaken her children, I returned to our home that last night of our stay in Addis with my heart torn out. In the evening, some people came to bid us farewell and reiterated the same thing: 'You are mistaken. Why did you do that?' To this I wept and said to my husband: 'It seems that I am mistaken indeed. Could it be that everyone else was mistaken and I was the only person who was right? It might be the other way around!'

"O God,' Fervently I prayed that night and wondered, 'if, in my haste, I have erred, please guide me to the right thing! Guide me! Tell me the right thing! Tell me what to do and what to decide! Is it the right thing that we hear now from other people?'

"Among the things that were said to us, was that the Government of Djibouti would dismiss us within one month of our arrival. 'First,' they would say. 'You are Egyptians. Egyptians are forbidden to stay in Djibouti. You will not be allowed to remain here!'

"The other thing that was told us was that it was extremely difficult to find a house for rent. Those who lived in Djibouti told of the extremely difficult living conditions of that country. 'Neither you nor your children will be able to endure its climate!' they said.

"At that time we had our two daughters with us: Carmel and Malakout, who were respectively four and two years of age. All such talk created a wave of questions in my mind. 'My children, do I leave them behind? Could it be that what the others say is correct?' I would recall their remarks: 'Suppose you were to return to Ethiopia after your failure to resettle in Djibouti! Wouldn't you realize then that you took a hasty decision?' - I cried at all these remarks!"

83 From this point to the end of this chapter, quotes were taken solely from Raissa's summary.



## The Assurance

"That night, I prayed from the bottom of my heart that Bahá'u'lláh may guide me to what was good. Firmly I took an oath between me and Him: 'My Lord! I do always see dreams that would come true. I do fully believe in the world of spirit and the mystic inspiration that often comes to sincere believers. Please guide me unto what is right!'"

"What I dreaded above all else was my apprehension that, as I was told by the friends, the Authorities of Djibouti would deny us residence. What would we do then?"

"On the last night, I had the following dream:

"I saw myself in tearful prayer. During my prayer I asked the same questions, not knowing what to do. Then someone came to me requesting me to follow him in order to meet His Eminence the Most Exalted One, the Báb. I became so happy and excited. I hastened forward to see the Báb standing by the door of our house. His appearance was so beautiful! He was clad in spotless white attire. When he beckoned me I threw myself at His feet all the while weeping. 'My Lord,' I pleaded, 'save me! Is it true that I am mistaken?'"

"I seemed to bemoan my inner chagrin and fear. At this He placed His hand upon my shoulder and said: 'Rest assured! Do not grieve! You will pioneer and settle. You will obtain the residence permit within one month— thirty days to be exact!'"

"As soon as I woke up, I related the dream to my husband. 'Rest assured Sabrí!' I cried. 'Everything will be OK.'

"May God comfort your heart, since you have now comforted mine!" Sabrí responded with a great sense of relief."

## Arrival

"We arrived in Djibouti 6 May 1954. The heat was unbearable. Sabrí took off the heavy clothing that he wore at the beginning of the journey from Ethiopia. The climate in Ethiopia is very cold and, in comparison, Djibouti's weather by noon time when we arrived was unbelievably hot.

"We hired a room in an hotel that was owned by a Somali named Ali Hussein. The temperature was very high even inside. We had brought our elder daughter Carmel, who was then four years and few months old, and Malakout, her younger sister who was three. In view of the intense heat, Carmel and Malakout would spread pieces of ice on the floor and place their heads and bodies against them. Once, Malakout said to Carmel, 'Carmel! I am about to go to God,' and Carmel replied, 'Alright! Please give Him my regards.' Because of this intense heat, Sabrí and my daughter Malakout developed painful skin sores, something that tormented them very much.

"Sabrí and I started to wonder who would help us in a country where our only acquaintance was the hotel owner. However, we shared our worries with him and he promised to help and kept this promise. He first assisted us to find a place to live after some twenty days. This place was a store room that had only one window opposite its flimsy door, which any child could pry open and enter. However, when we moved to this place later, we set up a small shop in the foreground. During those early days in Djibouti, we lived on the most inexpensive canned food, and would seldom eat vegetables or pasta in view of the very high cost. We also slept on the bare, uneven floor of the room.

"Thus we spent the first 25 days, with only five days left of the one month visa that we had upon first entry. We never knew whether we were to obtain a residence permit or would be sent back. It was at this time that Sabrí travelled to Aden and bought us some clothes that were more suitable for this hot climate, such as shorts and light shirts.

"Days went by and, on the last day of our residence ... we asked the person whom we had requested to help us with the visa, and he said, 'I have done everything that I can. You must now rely on your luck!'"

## 'Where is your dream, Raissa?'

"Where is your dream?' Sabrí wondered. But I could not find any words, and became consumed in prayers.

"It was 10.00am that day when an officer knocked at our door and told us to go to the Department of Interior. There we were surprised to learn that we had been granted residence in Djibouti!

"Then we woke up to the fact that the room that we rented was bare of any furniture. It did not even have a single fan. Furthermore, whatever money that remained with us was barely enough to settle the hotel bill that we still owed. When we discussed this problem, I comforted Sabrí: 'Do not feel sad about it, dear! We do have money.'

"Money, which money?' he wondered. 'Remember,' I replied, 'we own a house in Alexandria<sup>84</sup>. It is a property that Bahá'u'lláh gave us, and now unto Him it returns!'"

"But we cannot sell it since the Egyptian Government has banned any money transfer out of Egypt' He reminded me.

"It was around 12.00 noon when a stranger knocked our hotel room door. He said that he had been sent by people from Egypt who wished to meet us. Sabrí thought that they must be

<sup>84</sup> In the detailed memoirs on Ethiopia, Raissa noted the following: "When we first came, we had only a sum of thirty Pounds. We were then at a loss as to what those thirty Pounds could buy: house furniture or workshop equipment? However, God opened for us a door through our business. We were able to buy a house in Alexandria. In other words, we acquired a house of our own in Alexandria -- a house at an excellent location. Undoubtedly, that was a sign that we became well off during our stay in Ethiopia."



Bahá'is who had arrived from the airport. The owner of the hotel assured us, 'Go with him. Do not be afraid. I know this man very well.' We went with this stranger to a home where we found an Egyptian family who already knew us in Addis. The lady of the house welcomed us at the door, 'I am sorry' she said, 'You have arrived here in Djibouti at a time when we must travel to Alexandria to buy a house there'.

"'We own a house in Alexandria!' We exclaimed. We went on to describe the property to them, and it was exactly what they wanted. Immediately, the husband, Mr. Habashí Ibrahim, told his wife, Mukhtara, 'Bring the money that we have in the safe'. With lightening-speed we sat down to write the initial contract of sale! Habashi asked us whether we had a home and furniture [in Djibouti]. We told him that we stayed in a very uncomfortable place that was bare of any furniture. 'I am an engineer' he said. 'I will furnish your home since I have all that you need.' After inviting us to lunch, Habashi came over to our home and installed fans, provided us with a refrigerator, beds, and all that we needed.. He also assured us, 'We will deduct the cost of this furniture from the balance of the house transaction that we owe you.'

"The miracle did actually happen! After being in that dire situation we managed, through the Grace of God, to obtain a permanent resident visa and get the capital that we needed. Our affairs were thus transformed.. I cannot describe the happiness that filled my heart at such a miracle. The vision that I saw came true exactly as His Eminence the Báb told me 'You will travel, resettle, and get a permanent visa.'"

### No Time Lost

"Soon afterwards, the teaching work started in Djibouti: An educated man, Mohammad Al-Asbahí , came to us. Later we knew that he was sent by the French Administration in the country to investigate our intentions. Those days were most difficult [from the political point of view] as it was the time of the 1956 'Tri-partite Aggression' [by Britain, France, and Israel] on Egypt. The anti-Egyptian sentiments of the French Administration in Djibouti were such that when I once became ill at that time and went to seek help from a French doctor, he refused to treat me. Therefore, I had to travel all the way to Addis Ababa for treatment, which was fortunately combined with meeting Hussein and Safa to tend to their needs.

"As far as Mr. Muhammad Al-Asbahí was concerned, he took some [Bahá'í] books from us and gave them to the French. Yet, the power of God came to action, and the pervading influence of the Faith took control of his heart. Thus Al-Asbahí became a believer who was full the desire to teach the Cause. During those early Djibouti days, Mr. Habashí Ibrahim and his wife Mukhtára, who bought our Alexandria property, embraced the Faith as well."

### The Inevitable

"After he joined the Faith, Mr. al-Asbahí was unwise to the extent that he triggered a persecution so intense that it placed all the Bahá'is of Djibouti in great danger. On a daily basis the fanatic mobs would hurl insults at us and pelt us with stones. We requested Al-Asbahí to keep calm for a while but he would say, 'No! I cannot.' Soon afterwards, we learned that he had suffered

a stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to speak. We felt very sad at this, and he did not live longer after the stroke. After a while, the mob actions died out and the situation returned to calm.

"In 1955 we received a cablegram that His Eminence Shoghi Effendi addressed to all Spiritual Assemblies, including the Local Spiritual Assembly of Djibouti. In his cable the Guardian requested all Assemblies to cable protests to the Shah of Iran in an appeal to stop the persecution that was directed to the Persian Bahá'í Community. As delegates of the Spiritual Assembly of Djibouti, we complied. At the Post Office, there were questions and answers between the Postmaster and us that centred on the Bahá'í Faith and the persecution of its followers in Iran. After this incident we were summoned by the Town Clerk, and Sabrí went to see him accompanied by one of Djibouti's believers. After questioning, the officials requested some literature to study and understand the nature of the Bahá'í Faith. A month or so afterwards, an officer came to return the books and said: 'Your Religion is immaculate because Bahá'is absolutely do not interfere in political matters.' This incident aroused further interest in the Bahá'í Faith, and the door to teaching was flung open and new believers came in.

"At a later date, the friends came to us in a state of agitation and fear. They told us that they could not visit us any more since they had received news that some fanatic clans were considering murdering us. They begged us to flee to Ethiopia or any other country. As for themselves, they decided to stay away from us until the situation cleared.

"'Fear not about us!' was our response 'God will protect us, if this is His wish.'

"We bade them farewell and assured them that we came to their country fully prepared to endure any hardship in the Path of God. We told them also that we were not afraid of death since we embraced a Divine Message that had been foretold by all the Prophets of the past, and that God will protect us as long as we remained steadfast in a Faith that bids us to love humankind – a Faith that says 'Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship'<sup>85</sup>. We also quoted to them from Qur'án; the verse: 'Say, 'Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us'.<sup>86</sup>

"Soon afterwards, the mobs would throw threw stones at us. Since we were virtually unmoved and showed extreme calmness by this, the matter passed safely. One day as I was walking in the street, some ruffians hurled stones at me and shouted: 'You infidel, you follower of the Bahiyya Religion!' – meaning 'the Bahá'í Religion'. As I reached home I was in a state of great happiness and joy. 'What is the matter with you today?' Sabrí wondered. 'Today, it is 'tuba'<sup>87</sup> for me!' I replied amidst laughter and related to him what had just happened. 'You are

85 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 87

86 Súra 9:51

87 There are two Arabic words that are pronounced the same, yet each of them has a different meaning and are also written differently:

(1) Túbá ٲبوط which means a blessing

(2) Túbah ٲبوط which means a brick or a rock



hurt and your back is bleeding!' He exclaimed. Yet, I was not feeling any pain at all.

"Then some bystanders saw what was going on and asked me to inform the police. 'They are just children!' I told them. 'No! They are grownup!' They commented.

"When Sabrí walked in the streets the mobs would shout, 'Infidel!'"

### The Defender

"During the first two years of our stay in Djibouti, we tried to meet a very prominent person, Mr. Mahmúd Harbí, and seek his help since we learned that he was a good-hearted man who served people with sincere love. Unfortunately, we were unable to meet him during this period.

"It happened that on the same night as our Bahá'í friends warned us of approaching danger, we went into a deep and peaceful sleep. Suddenly, we woke up as someone was knocking at the door; it was 6.00 o'clock in the morning, and there was the very person whom we had always wished to see: Mahmúd Harbí! We were very happy at such an unexpected call, and he said, 'I came to visit you today, because you are good people.' Then he continued to relate the following story.

'Yesterday after midnight, I was returning from the Parliament when I found a number of armed clansmen gathered around your home with the intent of murdering you. They told me that there is a family of disbelievers who desire to destroy Islam who live in this house. 'Why don't you kill the Jews,' I told those armed men, 'or those followers of other faiths that kidnap your young children and christen them. These people, [the Bahá'ís], in contrast, approach only wise and rational adults'. Then I continued to argue with them, 'Do they believe in God?' and they answered 'Yes!' 'Don't you know that they are Egyptians,' I continued, 'and that [the Egyptian President] Gamal Abdu'l-Nasser has adopted the case of Somalia's [independence]? And now you want to kill the Egyptian family that is here among us – people who did not do us any harm!'

"From that point of time onwards, Mahmúd Harbí became the man whom God had sent to defend us. He went on to investigate the reason for these allegations and learned the identity of its instigators. One day afterwards, this dear Mahmúd Harbí came to us with an Arab called Abdu'l-Karím Dúrání, whom we later discovered to be the Uncle of our Bahá'í friend Omar Dúrání who was among the first Djiboutians to embrace the Faith together with Pascal<sup>88</sup>, Ali Sheikhash, Uthmán and Abdu'l-Azíz.

Here Mrs. Raissa wanted to express what happened using the similar phonetic pronunciation indicating that she had both a rock and a blessing.

88 Pascal was a Frenchman who lived in Djibouti and embraced the Faith during the first term of Mr. & Mrs. Elias. According to Dr. Chowghi Rouhani – a veteran pioneer with his wife Amal to the [Italian] Somalia during the same period – Pascal was able to teach the Faith to many souls in Somalia as well, including a certain Hussein Omar.

"I came to see you with my brother Abdu'l-Karím in order to introduce him to you.' Mr. Harbí told us. 'I am going to travel to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage and I want you to seek Abdu'l-Karím's help when necessary.' And, addressing this man, he said: 'As to you, Abdu'l-Karím, I want you to protect this family because they are my brothers. Should any harm befall them, I will hold you responsible.'

"On many occasions, Mahmúd would also come to us in his car to take us around and introduce us to some clan chiefs. He would then put us under their protection during his absence. In turn, those chiefs would give us presents such as a young lamb or a goat, which we would leave for Mahmúd to give them to the needy, for it was too much for us to see a slaughter."

### Miracle in Mecca

"Upon returning from one of these tours among clan chiefs, Mahmúd told us that he would be travelling to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage by plane in two days' time. I told him that he will travel by ship instead. He replied 'No, the ticket is here in my pocket!'

"On the following day he came to our home and spoke to me wondering, 'How did you know that I was to travel by ship? Today, I was requested to take a gift to the King of Saudi Arabia from the State of Djibouti. The gift is two lions. For this reason I had to change my ticket from air to sea.' Then he requested us to come (to the port) to bid him farewell so that people would know how close we were. We gave him a 'prayer for protection' by Bahá'u'lláh and told him, 'We want you to turn fervently to God during your visit to the Shrine of His Messenger Muhammad, so that He might show you a miracle or a sign that reveals to you the truth of the New Faith of God.'

"When he returned from Mecca, three months later, Mahmúd came to us almost immediately after he arrived home, and related to us the following unusual incident.

'During the pilgrimage rituals, I lost the wallet in which I kept the prayer that you gave to me as well as all my money. I did not feel sad about losing the money but, rather, about losing the prayers which became my blessing. I tried to find it but what I found instead was *the miracle!*'

"He told us in excitement that, instead of finding his wallet, he found a ring with the *Greatest Name* engraving on it. Sabrí remarked that this was an unusual thing [to find in Mecca], and perhaps it was a ring with Hindi engravings. But Mahmúd returned to us the following day with the ring. It was of pure gold and, indeed, with the *Greatest Name* engraved on it! He even tried it on and it was exactly the size of his ring finger.

"Now," he said 'I am a believer! I could hardly sleep last night, as *I was contemplating my situation*'.

"He mentioned this because he was a politician, while the Bahá'í Faith forbids its followers from engaging in politics in any way.



"Soon afterwards Sabrí wrote a letter to his dear brother Mr. Subhí Elias and told him the story of the ring. Subhí wrote back that when he received this letter he was with a group of Bahá'í visitors from Saudi Arabia. One of the visitors was visibly sad and explained that he was not sad because he was expelled from his job as an engineer there because he was a Bahá'í. Rather he was sorry to lose his Greatest Name ring! When Subhí read him the letter that he had just received from Sabrí, this Bahá'í<sup>89</sup> broke into tears and said; 'Now I know! It was an act of God!'

"The miracle here is how a *Greatest Name* ring could be lost by this pioneer in Saudi Arabia's Muslim Holy Places during the pilgrimage season, where millions of people mill around and only Mahmúd would find it – the very person whom we requested to pray for a miracle!"

### Last Directive from Shoghi Effendi to the Eagles

"After about two years living in Djibouti, we received a visit from Mr. Azíz Yazdí<sup>90</sup> He told us that His Eminence the Guardian would be pleased if we could establish [Djibouti's first] Spiritual Assembly that same year, that is Ridván 1956. We had only seven believers in the country at that time, namely: Omar Duraní, Abdu'l-Azíz, Ali Shekhash, Habashí Ibrahim, Mukhtára, my husband [Sabrí Elias], and I. This visit was in February 1956, with barely two months before the desired date].

"Sabrí and I were arranging at that time for my niece Miss Fawziyya [Subhí]<sup>91</sup> to join us from Cairo. News then came that she was due to come to Djibouti, yet the process became so protracted that we almost lost hope.

"On the other hand, the teaching work came to a standstill; even our business was boycotted, because of the unabated persecution that made people shun our company. We had nothing other than praying and beseeching God to render us successful in establishing the Spiritual Assembly that Ridván, as the Beloved Guardian wanted.

### 'My Calamity is My Providence'

"One day we received a letter from a classmate of Safa that he had an injury that made him unable to move his arm. Immediately, I took a train to Addis Ababa to see my son. Throughout this 24-hour train journey all my thoughts were centred on how I could teach two souls so that

89 This was Mr. Kamál Khádím Shírazí, a pioneer to Arabia and Sudan during the Ten Year Crusade. Kamál later resettled and married in Canary Islands, Spain.

90 Then a travel teacher and later a pioneer to Kenya: Mr. Yazdí was elected onto the first NSA of Central and East Africa in 1956 where he served for several years. He then served on the first Continental Board of Counsellors in Africa until he was called to serve on the International Teaching Centre in Haifa from 1983 until his retirement fifteen years later. He passed away at his home in Vancouver, Canada..

91 Later: Mrs. Fawziyya El-Masry, currently a resident of Alexandria, Egypt.

the Assembly may be formed within two months. On the train I looked at those passengers who were with me in the same carriage – who were of various nationalities and races, yet mostly spoke in Arabic. Their conversation dealt with political matters or the issues of the time. I felt urged to speak out and draw the attention of these people to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. I found myself spontaneously addressing them loudly: 'My brothers! Have you heard about the new Message that has been brought by God's Messenger for today, Bahá'u'lláh – the Message that calls for the unity of mankind, universal love and peace, and that considers the Earth as one country and mankind its citizens?' All the passengers gazed at me but not a single one of them spoke back. But finally one of them enquired, 'What is the name of the Messenger?' And I repeated, 'Bahá'u'lláh!'

"I am of the opinion that, if people do not heed this summons, they would deserve that God burns them by the atomic bomb,' was the surprising response of this man, who was of Greek nationality. I felt that God had answered my prayers notwithstanding my weakness and lack of capacity. Therefore I decided immediately to talk to the passenger about the verities of the Faith. There was a vacant seat next to him, so I sat by his side and started to talk. He would ask questions and I answered them. I told myself that we need a new member for our own Bahá'í Community of Djibouti, but this man is on his way to Ethiopia. 'Do you live in Addis Ababa?' was my anxious question. 'No! I used to live there. But now I am travelling to Addis to bring my belongings, since I have found a job in Djibouti.' He replied.

I became extremely happy at the plan of God that had sent this man my way to hear the Divine Call. At the end of my talk, he said to me in his Greek dialect 'I am Baha'i!' Thus, we parted on a promise that he and his sister would visit us in Djibouti and that I would give him a Bahá'í book in the Greek language.

"Upon my arrival Addis Ababa, I found Safa in hospital suffering from a paralyzed arm. As soon as Safa saw me, he reached out to me with his injured arm and shouted, 'Mama!' To this, the doctor's observation was that Safa's post-traumatic arm paralysis was indeed psychological rather than physical. I found it possible to bring Safa back with me to Djibouti, where he fully recovered and later rejoined Hussein in Addis to continue with his studies.

"When I returned to Djibouti I related the events of my journey to Sabrí and told him about teaching the Faith to Nicola, the passenger in the train to whom I had been teaching the Faith. His face beamed with joy at this news. After a week, Mr. Nicola and his sister came to our home in Djibouti and met my husband Sabrí. Nicola became devoted to the Cause of God, yet his sister did not grasp the truth. Later, Nicola became a Bahá'í and was a member of this Spiritual Assembly for several years. His faith was such that he one day took our children Carmel, Safa and Hussein with him to the cinema. There they were spotted by those who were antagonistic towards us because of the Faith – those who were pelting us with stones every day. They started to hurl stones at Nicola and the children with such intensity that Carmel, who was a young child, fainted when she was hit. Hussein and Safa were injured as well. Seeing what happened, one of the believers said to Nicola 'Why don't you go with the children to the Police?' 'My friend,' Nicola replied, 'I am a Bahá'í and Bahá'ís complain only to Bahá'u'lláh!'"



## Bahá'ís of Djibouti and Ethiopia meet

"Shortly before the formation of the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Djibouti, we received the news that a Bahá'í summer school would be held in Asmara, then part of Ethiopia, to which we were personally invited. It was a great opportunity for recuperation as far as we were concerned. Rather, we found it to be a real opportunity to send some of the new Djibouti believers. They needed to see their Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Asmara and they would benefit from such an encounter. Thus, four Djibouti believers went: Ali Sheikhash, Omar Dúraní, Othman, and Pascal. The spiritual benefits that they gained from this experience were great. They returned to us in Djibouti with added zeal and courage."

## The Guardian's Directive Fulfilled

"Time went by, and only a few days remained to Ridván (21 April 1956). We were absorbed in thoughts: 'What could we do to achieve this sacred task – a task that we beseeched God to help us accomplish – the establishment of the first Spiritual Assembly in Djibouti?' We had even lost all hope that my niece Fawziyya might join us. It was on 19 April that Sabrí and I were praying fervently that we may be able to establish the Assembly. 'There is nothing that we can do now,' remarked Sabrí, 'even if the wind blows someone in our direction, we would not have enough time to teach him!'

"After we retired to sleep in this sad state of mind, I saw in a dream that Shoghi Effendi was addressing me 'Rest assured! The Spiritual Assembly will be established this Ridván!' And His Eminence repeated this statement thrice. I woke from my sleep and cried out what I had seen to Sabrí.

"'Insha'allah!' Sabrí responded with a smile of sympathy.

"By 2.00am in the early morning of 20 April 1956, we heard a knock at the door: the unexpected visitor was Fawziyya! Thus the Assembly was formed later in the evening of that day – thanks to the All-pervasive Will of God. 'He doeth as He doeth, and what recourse have we?'<sup>92</sup>"

## Conquest extends to British Somalia

"Fawziyya stayed with us in Djibouti for more than a year without being able to find a job as a teacher. Therefore, she considered travelling [to British Somalia in search of employment]. It happened also that Mr. Mahmúd Harbí put us in touch with someone named Muhammad Adam, a friend of the Minister of Education in Hargeisa [the capital of British Somalia], and discussed with him Fawziyya's employment chances there. It was then necessary for Fawziyya to meet this Minister, and I accompanied her to Hargeisa with a [Djiboutian Bahá'í] escort whose name was Ali Sheikhash. [As the journey started] I prayed that Bahá'u'lláh may help Fawziyya to find a job, and also enable me to teach one or two souls during this trip. The journey was a 24-hours non-stop overland trip. In spite of the rigours of this long trip we

92 Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 51

were extremely happy ... I brought along three Bahá'í books that I might use in teaching. At last, we reached Hargeisa, but we could not find a vacant room in any hotel in town and we needed shelter for the night. Luckily we met a good-mannered Somali youth, a friend of our escort Ali, named Ahmad who guided us to an inn located in a remote corner of the town. I sensed a susceptibility to the Faith in Ahmad and wished instantly to give him the Bahá'í Principles pamphlet [which I brought along for teaching], but I decided rather to wait for a suitable chance. Upon reaching this inn, we discovered that it was also fully booked except for a very small room. Notwithstanding the size of this room, we were thrilled to find it, as we were completely exhausted. Ali and Ahmad were still there to take us to our room, but before settling in we found a man seated nearby. Having noticed our arrival he stood up and welcomed us with the traditional Arabic greeting 'Ahlan wa sahan!' We thanked him for this gesture as he enquired, 'Are you Egyptians?'

"'Yes, we are Egyptians' we responded and asked him, 'and how about you?'

"'I am from Haifa.' He replied. 'Then you know something about the Bahá'í Faith. Don't you?' I asked hopefully.

"'Yes!' he replied, 'I was an attendant to His Eminence 'Abdu'l-Bahá. To entertain His guests he would bid me 'Basili, Offer fruits to these guests!' 'Abdu'l-Bahá', Basili continued, 'was not an ordinary man. Rather, He was a majestic king. When He looked at us, His eyes would penetrate deep into our souls!'

"How wonderful was Basili's talk as he described His Eminence Abdu'l-Bahá in a manner that revealed to the listener the Majesty of the Faith. His description to Fawziyya and me of the beauty and grandeur of the Master brought tears to our eyes as he seemed to offer up his heart out in the process.

"Such was Basili's account that Ahmad wondered, 'Who is Abdu'l-Bahá?'

"This was the opportunity for which I had been waiting to speak to this youth about the Faith and give him the pamphlet. My prayers were thus answered! After taking our luggage into the room and after we were settled, Ali and his friend bade us good night.

"It was almost 9.00pm when I returned to talk with this man, Mr. Basili Matta. I asked him a lot about Abdu'l-Bahá, Whom he adored so much. However, he was not aware of the spiritual reality of the Master. For this reason, and before explaining to him the station of the Faith of God, I asked him to relate to me anything that might have opened his eyes to the spiritual power of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

"'Yes! I had a friend who happened to be doing some repairs at the house of Abdu'l-Bahá. I was speaking to this friend about the supernatural powers of Abdu'l-Bahá, but he would tell me that He was just a human being like us. So, I dared him to attempt to look straight at Abdu'l-Bahá, and I made a bet on it with him. As my friend was standing on a ladder to paint one of the walls, His Eminence came in. Upon seeing the Master he tried to make eye contact with



Him yet he could not and, instead, fell from the ladder. Here, His Eminence took off his cloak and placed it over his body, arranged for him to be taken to hospital, and later took care of him until he recovered.<sup>93</sup>

"Hence, I began to speak about the Faith to Mr. Basili, who was a very respectful man and a good listener. I learned also that he was the manager of a company in British Somalia. He was also quite grateful at this God-sent opportunity for him to understand the truth of the Bahá'í Faith. As we were talking in this manner, another man came into the hotel and greeted Mr. Basili.

"Welcome George!" Mr. Basili beckoned to this man, 'Come and listen to this talk! Have you ever seen Abdu'l-Bahá?'

"Unfortunately I did not! But I was honoured to see Shoghi Effendi.' George replied.

"Thus, George joined us to listen to a talk about the Faith from his friend Basili. Oblivious of the time, it was 2.00 am when we finally retired to our rooms.

"Next morning, our escort Ali came and we went to meet the Minister of Education. Also Miss Fawziyya's application for employment as a teacher was accepted. She was posted to a school for girls in a town called Burá'ú

"Before our return to Djibouti Mr. Basili came to bid us farewell and said 'Now, I am a Bahá'í!' I presented a book to him '*Talks of Abdu'l-Bahá*', which was the second book that I had brought along for teaching, and he requested me to write a dedication on its cover. Later, in Djibouti, we received a letter from him, in which he told us that he will be returning to Haifa. He also requested that Sabrí and I would pray for him so that he would become more confirmed in the Faith. Before his return to Haifa he visited us in Djibouti.

"As to the third book that I brought along, Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán*: when we were about to leave Hargeisa we met someone called Mr. Mahmúd Erdáhi, a brother of a contact whom we met in Djibouti and who had embraced the Faith named Ahmad.<sup>94</sup> He felt sad about his brother's political activities, and was very much concerned about him. He welcomed us warmly, especially Miss Fawziyya who had just come to teach the children of his country. Here, I presented to him the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, which he received with great reverence. After our return to Djibouti he and the other Ahmad, the friend of our Bahá'í escort Ali Sheikhash, wrote

93 In a television interview with the Bahá'ís of Honolulu, during his visit to Hawaii following the end of his services in the Bahá'í World Centre in 1993, Mr. Aziz Yazdi related this same story as he reminisced about his childhood days in Haifa at the time Abdu'l-Bahá.

94 Raissa told the following story about this Ahmad:

"After his declaration, Ahmad came to bid us farewell before going to Mecca on pilgrimage and told us that he regretted that he did not deserve the Faith. He explained that, in spite of declaring his faith and promising not to engage in political matters, he could not refrain from politics. He also related to us a dream that he had the preceding night: that Abdu'l-Bahá appeared to him and said 'You are not a Bahá'í. Had you been a true believer, you would not have returned to politics!'"

to us expressing their gratitude.

"After Fawziyya's move to Burá'ú, I visited her twice when staying in Hargeisa at the home of Mr. Yusuf Iman and his family. This Yusuf used also to stay at our home when he came to Djibouti, and thus he became fully informed of the Faith.

"Fawziyya continued to work in British Somalia for a period of two years. Afterwards, she returned permanently to Egypt to live with her family<sup>95</sup>. It was in May 1957 that I paid my last visit to Fawziyya [in Burá'ú] before her return to Egypt.

### The Passing of Shoghi Effendi

"During the period that preceded the passing of Shoghi Effendi, I had strange dreams. One night, I dreamt that His Eminence Abdu'l-Bahá came to our home. In the dream, Sabrí and I invited the Master to have dinner with us. Yet, He said 'I have already cooked the food myself.' He then placed the food that he brought on the table. It was Persian rice. He scooped a little of it first, but put it back in the platter and said 'Although I cooked it myself, but it cannot be served anymore.' To this, Sabrí and I remarked to the Master that the friends would then serve a new food that they brought from the World Above. And here a procession of the souls that winged their way to the Abhá Kingdom came along carrying food, with my sister Hikmat, who passed away shortly after embracing the Faith about 1935<sup>96</sup>, flying in the forefront.

"Another dream was that of a rod that stretched from the Earth to the moon and struck the moon so strongly that it was split. At this sight we, the Bahá'ís, were crying and wailing but the enemies of the Faith were laughing merrily. Yet some sort of gravity started to exert a force that made the moon return to its place, not as the one sphere that it once was, but rather in the form of thousands of stellar bodies that became gradually attracted to each other until fused into a single large body, and began to give the same light as the moon. Here, the Bahá'ís cheered happily at the return of this light, while the enemies of the Faith began to wail and throw dust on their heads. And this dream was the very last one that I had during a visit to Hargeisa. It made me feel then that something quite painful would happen before things changed for the better.

"On the day after having this dream, I returned to Djibouti. There, Sabrí and our two daughters Carmel and Malakout were waiting for me. As I looked into Sabrí's face he was obviously very sad. I asked 'What happened?' He tried to conceal the reason, but I insisted until he told me that His Eminence Shoghi Effendi had passed to the Abhá Kingdom.

"In the evening, the friends came to us and were weeping with us. Present also was a keen

95 Miss Fawziyya were married in 1958 to Mr. Ahmad El-Masry, and both lived first in Tanta, Egypt – the town which was the scene of the Bahá'í persecution of 1972, [see Appendix IV.] Later, the couple moved to Alexandria where their children (Yasser, Nisrene and Wa'il) obtained their higher education before immigrating to live and marry in Canada and the United States. The writer is indebted to the Bahá'í artist Mrs. Marwa Farag-Elmasry, the wife of Mr. Wa'il Elmasry for making the beautiful cover design of this book.

96 Hikmat's moving story is related by Raissa in Chapter 4



seeker named Abdu'l-Rahmán, who was about to declare his faith.

"Sabrí and I felt that we were failing in our duty and that our state of grief might weaken the friends, especially as Bahá'u'lláh tells us, *'I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendour. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom?'*"<sup>97</sup>

"Soon we turned our faces to the power of God, which is the power of faith that He infused into our hearts. Unknowingly, we began to fill this gathering with a spirituality that was sensed by all present. This prompted Abdu'l-Rahmán to decide to become a Bahá'í before the meeting ended."

### Foe turned Friend

Living the Bahá'í life was undisputedly the key element in the successful spiritual conquests of the Eagles<sup>98</sup>. Raissa relates the following story.

"One day, I was on my way to buy bread with the shopping bag on my shoulder when street children came by and started to pelt me with stones. They yelled that usual, "You infidel! You, the Bahiyya religion!" Since Sabrí and I had become accustomed to this treatment, a feeling of contentment overcame me. I went on to the bakery and bought bread some. The bread was fresh from the oven and had a savoury smell. As soon as I placed it in my basket, a number of children surrounded me and pleaded "Give us some bread! We are hungry!" I took the bread, that I had just bought out of the basket and divided it among them. Then I counted whatever money that was left in my purse and found that it was enough to buy two more loaves that I bought for our own use. I reached home and, as he opened the door for me, Sabrí spotted a stranger standing right behind me. "Who are you?" Sabrí exclaimed.

"Let me in first, and then I will tell you." The stranger pleaded. When we let him into our house, the stranger continued "My name is Jámi', the brother of Muhammad and Ahmad Núr, who became Bahá'ís. In fact, I was thinking of killing you, because you turned my brothers into infidels. However, I have been following this woman when she showed such kindness to those hungry children. I now feel that such an act of charity could not come out of infidels, as I once thought you to be." Then he offered his sincere apology and, later, became a faithful friend and eventually embraced the Faith, like his two brothers.

97 The Arabic Hidden Words

98 "Whoso ariseth among you to teach the Cause of his Lord, let him, before all else, teach his own self, that his speech may attract the hearts of them that hear him. Unless he teacheth his own self, the words of his mouth will not influence the heart of the seeker." [Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 277]

### The Power of Prayer

Sabrí and Raissa relied very much on the power of prayers throughout their life, especially when offered for the sake of success in bringing more souls in touch with God's Message for this Age.

"Among those whom we taught the Faith was a kind-hearted friend who belonged to the Dankali Tribe. He used to visit us regularly on weekly basis for almost a year. At each visit we tried to teach him the Faith but he would not listen because his mind was focused on politics. He would also speak of nothing but politics. This annoyed us as we avoided political matters as instructed by the Teachings. Yet this man was a great admirer of Sabrí. One day Sabrí requested, 'Raissa, pray that this man may perceive what the Bahá'í Faith is all about and would forget politics!'

"I remembered Sabrí's request when this man returned to our house: I prayed so fervently that I literally broke into tears. Then I went straight to him and said sternly, 'You should rather listen to what Bahá'u'lláh says!' Then I continued to tell him that Bahá'u'lláh said so and so, etc. Suddenly the man came to his senses and started to pay attention to what I was saying. 'How is it that I have been visiting you for almost a year, and you never told me about Bahá'u'lláh,' he protested. Having eventually comprehended what we were telling him, and after serious investigation, this man embraced the Faith – thanks to the power of prayer!"

### Persecutions Unlimited!

Persecutions continued to be meted out to the new believers at the hands of strangers and relatives alike, and the following sad story is one of several examples.

"The father of Ali Shekhash deprived this son from inheritance. He even took property that belonged to Ali on the pretext that he became an infidel by embracing the Faith. This father would often come to our home to knock at the door violently, shouting at the top of his voice, and insulting us 'You infidels! You have taken my son away from me.' Thinking that his son was hiding in our house, he would also cry: 'Get out, Ali!'

"We would plead with him to keep calm and assure him that we had neither seen his son for a long time, nor knew his whereabouts. Afterwards, it became clear that Ali left the Faith in view of the fierce persecution that he suffered at the hands of his own father. He eventually left Djibouti and went to another country and became involved in politics. Having received this news about his son, the father came to us and cried in remorse, and admitted that because of his mistreatment Ali was forced to leave his country and abandon his work."

A few shining examples of steadfastness, however, stood out as far as the Bahá'í community of Djibouti was concerned. Sabrí and Raissa always singled-out Mr. Omar Dúraní for his spiritual strength and fortitude in the face of severe persecutions that continued relentlessly over several decades.



“Mr. Omar Duráni suffered a lot in turn, but remained a steadfast believer throughout his life, in spite of the tribulations that became his lot.”<sup>99</sup>”

### Djibouti's First Episode comes to an End

When the Eagles first set foot on Ethiopian soil in 1944, their son Hussein was a child of three and Safa was a suckling infant. They had two more children, their daughters Carmel and Malakout, before they pioneered again to Djibouti ten years later. By 1959, Hussein needed university education, and Safa followed suit in 1960. Sabrí and Raissa were then faced with the difficult task of choosing between two options: to tend to the needs of their spiritual children or those of their own children.<sup>100</sup> Raissa explains here the weighty factors of the latter.

“As we mentioned earlier, we left Hussein and Safa behind in Ethiopia when we moved to Djibouti in 1954. They endured a great deal, but Divine Providence shielded them from all dangers that came their way<sup>101</sup>. Of particular note is that when they were adolescents they met

99 Over many years, Omar endured a special measure of persecution since he became a Bahá'í, such as his wife's divorcing him in compliance with a theological judgment [fatwa] of a Muslim cleric that, since Omar became a disbeliever, she cannot remain to be his wife. However, Omar remained faithfully committed to his obligations towards his children and his divorcee, and took great care to educate all his children at the best schools and universities in Egypt and France. In contrast to his mother's behaviour, Omar's eldest son, Salah, consented as a witness, in years to come, to the marriage of a cousin of his to a Rwandese Christian. The writer knew of this fact when he met this Rwandese Christian in-law of the Dúranis in 1990 in Nairobi, Kenya.

100 The Bahá'í Faith accords a paramount importance to the interest of one's family. In a similar situation as this, the following directives were written on 6 July 1938, on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer:

“As regards your plans: the Guardian fully approves indeed of your view that no matter how urgent and vital the requirements of the teaching work may be you should under no circumstances neglect the education of your children, as towards them you have an obligation no less sacred than towards the Cause. Any plan or arrangement you may arrive at which would combine your twofold duties towards your family and the Cause, and would permit you to resume active work in the field of pioneer teaching, and also to take good care of your children so as to not jeopardize their future in the Cause would meet with the whole-hearted approval of the Guardian.” [The Compilation of Compilations, Volume 1, p. 401]

101 Illustrative of such dangers is the following incident: In spite of being placed in a boarding school and whose parents were a thousand miles away, Hussein and Safa were keen to attend all activities of the Addis Ababa Bahá'í community, irrespective of their awkward timing. Returning late one night from a Bahá'í event, some friends there found that it was too late for the young boys to return to their school alone. Obliging they gave them a lift in their vehicle. Inadvertently, Hussein and Safa were dropped off from the vehicle at the main road rather than in front of the school gate. It was quite dark when Hussein and Safa were trying to find their way cautiously into the expanse of forest that separated the School from the main road. With the escort vehicle long gone, they were horrified, after some distance, to find several pairs of red eyes glaring at them from the dark bush. During the days

unusual circumstances. By 1960, Hussein and Safa completed their secondary education in Ethiopia. Now they needed to go for further studies in Egypt.”

Finally, Sabrí and Raissa returned once more to their base in Alexandria. For almost two decades, they will now be tending to the sacred duty of raising and educating their children. It was not solely, though, a period of material cares and concerns, as the next chapter illustrates.

### The Bahá'í Community of Djibouti by the End of the First Episode

The Bahá'í community that Sabrí and Raissa had left behind in Djibouti by 1959 was unlike that which they had left in Ethiopia five years before.

The tests that were soon to become the lot of every new believer in Djibouti had no parallel in Ethiopia. They were so fierce and, with very few exceptions, most of the new believers could not stand the vehement family and clan opposition that was fuelled by sentiments of intolerance and anchored in age-long tradition of clan uniformity and adherence. Furthermore, there was another unfavourable factor in the 1950's-1960's cauldron of Djibouti and, indeed, many other nascent African nations; that is, the lure of engagement in politics!

As of the late 1950's, most of the African countries that were still under colonial rule were legitimately seeking independence. In many cases, this took the form of protracted armed struggle that cost the Continent dearly in terms of lives and property, and deprived millions of its inhabitants of social peace and advancement for many years. Coinciding with the highest point in the 'cold war' between the world's superpowers and their ideologies, African independence movements were inevitably caught up in this political polarization process. Worse still was the fact that opportunities for education and employment were contingent on one or another affiliation and, with no other available alternatives, the desperate youth of those times needed to identify themselves with these affiliations if they were to have a viable future.<sup>102</sup>

In comparison, Ethiopia was an exception: an island of stability and a country of clear national identity in the midst of other African countries' painful independence birth-bangs. Ethiopian urban youth were keen to

when hyenas were commonplace in the suburbs of Addis Ababa, Hussein was the first to sense the danger and, spontaneously, ran at top speed towards the school building, leaving his less experienced and more perplexed brother Safa to trail behind in a state of great horror, until both reached safely!

102 During his high school years in Egypt (1958-1961), the writer was a classmate of many Somali students and, in the course of working for their own higher education, they also needed to engage in the 'cultural' activities of certain foreign missions, sometimes inviting other schoolmates, including the writer, to prove to their prospective sponsors that they had wholeheartedly espoused this ideology or that.



share in the modernization process that was resumed as soon as the 1935-1941 war ended, and their keenness was readily appreciated and rewarded without the need to look elsewhere for education and employment. With their concerns over careers and social roles thus met, and being raised under age-long traditions of religious tolerance and openness, there was no barrier between them and the new Faith of God. This is why droves of professional youth joined the Bahá'í Faith, both when Sabrí and Raissa were still there and afterwards at the hands of other Bahá'í pioneers.

In contrast, Djibouti was in the midst of Africa's pre-independence socio-political problems and agitations when Sabrí and Raissa arrived. Under immense pressure and persuasion to engage in politics or profess a given foreign ideology, not to mention fierce family and clan opposition, the new Bahá'ís in Djibouti were severely tested; and the casualties were deplorable! Many were the souls that came into the Faith but many could not stand the tests.<sup>103</sup> The same was true of those who were already engaged in politics and came to realise that, to become Bahá'ís of good standing, they had to abandon their political careers. The most outstanding case of the time was that Mr. Mahmúd Harbí chose, instead, to continue with his political career. Initially his success was great, as he became Djibouti's Minister of the Port and Deputy Prime Minister in 1956. But, regrettably, this material achievement proved quite ephemeral in a span of only two years.<sup>104</sup>

Evaluating their first five years in Djibouti, Sabrí made the following analysis.

103 Embracing a new Faith of God had always brought severe tests to converts. Compare the following:

- *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: 7:14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. [Matthew 7:13-14]*
- *'Do men imagine that they will be left (at ease) because they say, We believe, and will not be tested with affliction?' [Qur'án 29:1]*
- *Know ye that trials and tribulations have, from time immemorial, been the lot of the chosen Ones of God and His beloved ... Such is God's method carried into effect of old, and such will it remain in the future. Blessed are the steadfastly enduring, they that are patient under ills and hardships, who lament not over anything that befalleth them, and who tread the path of resignation. [Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 129]*

104 In September 1958, Mr. Mahmúd Harbí disagreed with the result of a referendum that favoured the continuation of French rule in Djibouti and moved afterwards to Mogadishu, capital of the recently united Somalia and then to Cairo, Egypt to lead a movement for Djibouti's independence and integration into greater Somalia. Sadly, Mahmúd died prematurely in October 1961, in a tragic passenger airplane crash near Cairo airport, upon returning to his base in Egypt from one of his political missions in Geneva. Here, the example of close adherence to the Bahá'í principle of non-involvement in politics that was set by Mr. Gila Bahta in neighbouring Ethiopia stands out!

"The spread of the Faith of God is conditioned upon two requirements: the first of which is for the believer to serve the Cause faithfully, while the second is for mankind to respond to God's call of salvation. I do not mean that the progress of the Faith would stop. Rather, I mean that it would be delayed, if the friends are not faithful or if mankind is not willing to accept the Teachings."



A Family Reunion ca. 1956



Aboard the Addis-Djibouti Train ca 1956



Djibouti Spiritual Assembly ca. 1984





In a park with Bahai children ca. 1985



In a park with the community ca. 1984



ISabri & Raissa towards end of Djibouti ca. 1986

## 11. Reluctant Return to Base

*"Every time we prepared to leave, a persecution or harassment of some sort would befall the Bahá'ís of Egypt and delay us."*

*Sabri Elias*

### Sense of Transition

Sabri and Raissa never considered their return to Egypt in late 1959 as permanent but, rather, a break to take care of their children's education and future. They always set their eyes on another pioneering career in another country. Serving the Cause was the dominating passion of their life. During those years of transition Sabri would remind his children:

*"Your mother and I are seated on four-cornered stools that have only three legs, thus making it quite-difficult for us to relax. We did not come to Egypt in order to settle down. We are here to regularize your affairs and ours so that we may be able to pioneer once more."*

As early as the first few months of their return to Egypt, certain correspondence took place between Sabri and the Bahá'í administration of the time, in which Sabri and Raissa were urged to pioneer again. However, the task of tending to their children was still a prime concern.

Quite reluctantly, the Eagles remained in Egypt, yet their desire to pioneer was paramount-

*"Having started our life as pioneers," Sabri once said, "it was also our wish to remain pioneers until its close. In other words, we did not wish our death to be like that of ordinary people who die peacefully at home."*

However, as Sabri explained, it was at every instance of preparing themselves to leave that a persecution or harassment of some sort would befall the Bahá'ís of Egypt and delay them.

### Bahá'ís of Egypt undergo Persecution

The persecution of the Bahá'í community of Egypt today takes root in events that took place in an obscure village in Upper Egypt and culminated in a Muslim court issuing a ruling that villagers who converted to the Bahá'í Faith would be divorced from their Muslim wives. Inadvertently this same court ruling declared the Bahá'í Faith to be a new religion that is independent

from Islam.<sup>105</sup> Finding that they have thus committed an irrevocable mistake, the Muslim clergy of Egypt continued to seek an opportunity, over the next forty years, to ban the Faith from their country altogether. Taking advantage of post World War II political unrest and the two Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1956, the clergy started to brand the Bahá'ís as 'agents of Zionism and the newly-founded Jewish State'. Finally, their allegations found a sympathetic ear: the Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies were disbanded and proscribed in 1960 by virtue of Presidential Decree. With Cairo being then the seat of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of North Africa, it was necessary to relocate it to another capital in the Region and, hence, its seat became Addis Ababa. Abiding by the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government and laws, the Bahá'í community of Egypt has not elected Spiritual Assemblies nor pursued any of their activities from 1960 to date. However, the persecution took another turn when its perpetrators interpreted the law as a virtual ban of the Faith itself. A series of arrests and allegations arraigned known Bahá'ís before the courts, with the first of such cases in 1965. Totalling five in number, these attempts ended in vain with the last case referred to the courts being in 1985.<sup>106</sup> It was after the hearing of this last case that this legal ambiguity was clarified by an historical court: today the Bahá'ís of Egypt can, among other privileges, own Bahá'í books, meet together for prayers, celebrate Bahá'í Holy Days, and fulfil the Bahá'í law on observing the beginning of every Bahá'í month.<sup>107</sup>

### Eagles in a Cage

Used to daring spiritual conquests in various lands, our Eagles were confined to the new limitations on Bahá'í activities. It is not hard to see them like two eagles for which the sky was once their limit but were now confined to a cage. Although their share of persecution was that of being arrested and arraigned in court once in 1972, that of their immediate relatives, notably Sabrí's brother Mr. Subhí Elias<sup>108</sup>, was abundant. On the other hand, they

105 For further reading on this subject Cf.: Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes Bye*, Chapter XXIV, Emancipation and Recognition of the Faith.

106 For a more detailed account of the persecutions that took place in Egypt based on the issuance of this Decree, see *Appendix IV - the 1972 Case of Tanta*.

107 However, and as of 2004, the persecution of the Egyptian Bahá'í Community has been revived in the form of denying its members obtaining official documents such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, as well as identity cards. The attempt to impose such conditions of 'civil death' on the Bahá'ís of Egypt is, again, based on misinterpretation of the law, by alleging that the freedom of belief is restricted only to "divine religions", which are construed by Egyptian Muslim ecclesiastic institutions to be only three: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This time, Bahá'ís took their grievances to the courts and they hope to be able to obtain their basic civil rights through this currently ongoing legal process.

108 Subhí was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of North East Africa when

always lacked valid passports and visas to go elsewhere.

It was around 1968, however, that Sabrí and Raissa managed to travel and settle in neighbouring Libya for a few years. This time they went with Carmel and Malakout only, since Safa and Hussein had already graduated and carried on with their own careers and families. It was in Libya that Carmel met her future husband, Abdu'l-Karím Isfahání, and remained there while the family returned to Alexandria with Malakout for her university education around 1971.

As soon as Malakout finished her education, the Eagles became restless and started to look around for a chance to fly high as they ever did before.

### Anywhere but Djibouti

When the chance came for them to resume their pioneering career, Sabrí and, to a certain degree, Raissa had second thoughts about returning to Djibouti. Given their extreme patience and high endurance, there is every reason for the reader to wonder why. But Sabrí gave the following clarification.

"In Djibouti (1954-1959) we suffered such great hardships that our very life was in jeopardy. And upon our departure from Djibouti that time, I vowed not to return. Rather, my wish was to pioneer to any country other than Djibouti. This decision was not because of the hardships that we met but in view of the fact that, during those five years, I did not see the same constancy and resolve that I found in other countries. That is, those who embraced the Faith in Djibouti did not give me the impression that I expected."

However, the Eagles were not to get what they wished. The tasks that were once handled solely by Shoghi Effendi during the days when the two Eagles went on their first maiden flight as a pioneer-couple were later entrusted to Continental Pioneer Committees under guidance of the Hands of the Cause and Counsellors. Sabrí and Raissa found an opportunity in an invitation from their daughter Carmel to join her at the Bahá'í Continental Conference that was to be held 1976 in Nairobi, Kenya. With the passport and visa difficulties of the time, they began their travel formalities: Raissa got hers in time for the Conference. Sabrí was left behind, after telling Raissa what to say on his behalf in Nairobi: related here in Sabrí's words

"I gave Raissa an application that I wrote in my name expressing my readiness to pioneer to any country - except Djibouti. However, Raissa refused saying 'I do not accept to hand-carry a letter from you like a postman. Instead, you may give me a verbal message to speak on your behalf' So, I gave her my verbal message: 'Say that we are willing to pioneer to any country on

disbanded. For this reason he remained at the top of the list of the Bahá'ís that were targeted by all the persecutions that followed, including putting him under remand together with 26 other Bahá'ís without trial for six months in 1967.



condition that such a country should have a temperate climate. This is because our profession – tailoring, from which we earn our living, requires a mild climate. As to Djibouti, I do not wish to return to it for many reasons.’ Thus, Raissa agreed to take my verbal message, and I repeated to her that she should not accept any hint that we might re-pioneer to Djibouti.”

### Nowhere but Djibouti

What transpired in Nairobi was not as Sabrí wished!

“What happened then was that I went to the Conference, where I met Mr. Omar Dúráni – one of the early believers in Djibouti. When he saw me, it was a great reunion that followed a separation of some twenty years. He instantly shouted ‘I want you to return to us!’ I replied ‘Please, forget this matter because Sabrí will never agree to a return to Djibouti’.

“‘No,’ Omar insisted ‘I came to this Conference with the sole aim of asking you to return.’

“There I met also the late Hand of the Cause of God Mr. Enoch Olinga, and the late Mr. Hasan Sabrí<sup>109</sup>, who happened to stand between the two of us, translating what I was saying. ‘Sabrí’ I said while Hasan translated, ‘first wished to entrust me with a letter expressing his desire not to return to Djibouti. However, I refused to bring his letter but promised him to convey his wish to you verbally. Therefore, please ignore this idea of us returning to Djibouti.’ But Hasan asserted flatly, ‘No one will go to Djibouti except the two of you!’<sup>110</sup>

“Mr. Olinga then commented, ‘What Hasan says is true. Look at what Omar Dúráni says, no one is capable of serving in Djibouti like you!’

“These statements were so powerful and moving. Had Sabrí been there with me at the time, he would have also accepted. I am saying this because I found my self agreeing to our return to Djibouti without hesitation. Yet, I was at a loss because they would not believe that Sabrí is reluctant to return. They even told me that it was I who was the one who was refusing, not Sabrí.

“Hasan even said to me, ‘Sabrí would not say this; you must be the one!’

“I eventually agreed that we would return to Djibouti with complete contentment. I was also sure that Sabrí would be content as I was, because the Faith is the undisputedly dominant force in our life.”

109 Then Secretary of the Continental Pioneer Committee for Africa, which was based in Nairobi, Kenya

110 Usually Bahá’í institutions concerned with pioneering urge individual believers to arise and serve in goal posts and leave the rest to their personal desire. However, and because of Hasan’s friendship with Sabrí and Raissa while living in Egypt before 1935, what Hasan meant by such assertion was to draw their attention to the fact that the Bahá’í Community of Djibouti desperately needed their return. He was also quite confident that Sabrí would unquestionably respect the wishes of the Bahá’í institutions.

Now, to the reaction of Sabrí, who must have been counting the days for Raissa to return to Alexandria with the news!

“I was greatly shocked when Raissa returned to tell me that our pioneering will be to Djibouti. My initial reaction was that of resentment and protest, but there was no way out! A few days after Raissa’s return, we noticed someone at our door hesitating to come in. The features of this person were unmistakably Ethiopian. When we asked him what he wanted, he said: ‘I came to see Mr. Sabrí Elias!’ The visitor was Captain Asras Ar’aya, a member of the dear Bahá’í Community of Addis Ababa. Captain Asras became our guest for that night and gave us something that he had brought with him: a letter from the Universal House of Justice blessing our return to Djibouti!”



A family reunion in Alexandria ca 1971



A summer vacation in Cairo with Safa & his family 29 Aug 1981



Dining in Cairo upon return to Egypt  
ca. 1959



Family Picture in Alexandria - in  
the early 1990's



Last Naw-Ruz together, March  
1995



Mr. Sabri with Hussein in late  
1980's



Sabri & Raissa in Alexandria ca.  
1976



Sabri in a last picture with brother  
Sobhy in Alex - ca 1980

## 12. Djibouti II

In what was destined to be their last major joint spiritual enterprise, Sabrí and Raissa returned to Djibouti for a second term, in order to help the select few Bahá'ís who remained steadfast in the face of untold tests and help them to invite other receptive souls to their fold.

At the onset of their first and second spiritual expeditions, the young people were invigorated in those early days by meeting Shoghi Effendi and receiving his encouragement, advice and blessing. At the start of this second spiritual expedition to Djibouti, many changes took place in the world of material existence: the Eagles could no longer visit the Bahá'í Holy places in Haifa and Akká, and more than two decades had elapsed since the passing of Shoghi Effendi in November 1957. This time, our veteran experienced Eagles were spurred on in their mission by a spiritual bounty that they had received earlier in Alexandria: the written blessing of the Universal House of Justice – the supreme institution designated by Bahá'u'lláh to administer the affairs of the Faith, which came into being after the passing of its Guardian.

By the same token, and in contrast to the socio-economic polarity and instability of the 1950's and 1960's, the social climate of Djibouti changed gradually into that of stability, with many of the country's educated youth returning home to participate in its development and progress. The social environment that once helped the Eagles to fulfil their Ethiopia missions successfully was now in place for similar success in Djibouti.

Before realising these new favourable developments, Sabrí's resentment of Djibouti was prevalent when the weary feet of our 72 year old Eagle touched the tarmac of Djibouti International Airport on 17 May 1977, as explained in this comment that he tape-recorded a year or so afterwards.

"My return to Djibouti was enveloped in the same feeling that I had harboured towards it for the past twenty-five years. I did not feel that I was happy to return, but rather that it was my duty. In other words, I was using my utmost strength to cope with the situation. As to Raissa, she was always an audacious being who would accept anything in the path of service."<sup>111</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Sabri was soon to change his mind about Djibouti, because a change of fortune was destined to develop within less than six months. In a 1978-1979 recording of their second term in Djibouti, the following dialogue took place between the two Eagles:

Sabri: *'Now we do now know whether we shall remain in Djibouti to be buried in its soil, or have another fate...'*

Raissa: *'Let us not leave Djibouti this time!'*



## Two Days in Heaven

In an extremely sensible and kind gesture that remained indelibly in the hearts and minds of Sabrí and Raissa, the Bahá'í Community of Ethiopia invited them for a two-day stop-over in Addis Ababa on their way to Djibouti.

"It was such a wonderful and warm reunion when we found a great multitude of believers gathered to welcome us, men, women, youth and children. It was a reception befitting royalty: garlands, music and songs. It was such an unprecedented experience that I, being then seventy years old, was overcome with emotion that rendered me incapable of coping with the feelings that overcame me on this occasion. My feelings were greater because of our return after so many years to Ethiopia – the country where Raissa and I toiled for so many years ... there was also a large well designed Arabic banner: 'WELCOME, OUR DEAR PARENTS!'<sup>112</sup>

"There, at the National Bahá'í Centre of Addis Ababa, we sat in front this large audience of believers. Between Raissa and I sat our distinguished friend Mr. Gila Bahta, who speaks Arabic like any Arab or Egyptian, who interpreted for us the questions that were asked by the audience, and our answers .<sup>113</sup>"

## Arrival and Readjustment

It was in the same appalling heat of May – twenty-three years later and in the relative comfort of air travel – that the two Eagles returned to Djibouti. Unlike their touch down arrival two days earlier in Addis Ababa, nobody was there to receive them at this airport! But Divine Providence was at work, easing their passage, and gradually giving them the strength to cope, as Sabrí related:

"During our flight from Addis Ababa to Djibouti we were seated next to Djiboutian passengers who happened to be friends of Mr. Birhání, the son of Mr. Gila. So, when we arrived they obligingly drove us to the Continental Hotel. There we stayed for a few days, but we were not comfortable with the exorbitant charges of this hotel. Eventually, Mr. Omar Dúráni ... rented a place for us ... it was very unpleasant residence – a house full of insects, rodents, and geckoes – difficult for anyone who had lived in Alexandria to cope with. The house had a single room that opened directly onto a street and had one window. Although it was spacious the heat was formidable ...

"Two or three days after our arrival, our youngest daughter Malakout joined us. Since she was delayed due to passport or other travel requirements, we decided to travel ahead of her.

112

113 Typical of Gila's great sense of humour, Sabrí musingly related the following incident of this visit: "When Ato Gila came to escort Raissa and me from the hotel to the Bahá'í Centre for this audience, he rang our room from the reception and shouted, 'You lazy people! Did you come here to sleep?'"

Malakout's presence was both a solace and mercy, as she was a companion for her mother. She possessed qualities that are not usually found in her peers.

"We used to leave our house every evening around 6.00pm to walk around an area called Al-Ishkál, which is a road that separates the City from the seashore. There, we would walk as far as we could and then sit on the rocks to say prayers ... persistently and fervently so that His Eminence Bahá'u'lláh may open the door to teaching and service ... on our return to the house would give us the feeling of a prisoner who has just left prison and was then brought back to it!"

## Joy and Pain at Reunion

When Sabrí and Raissa left two decades earlier, there were more than twenty adult Bahá'ís in Djibouti, a regularly elected Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly that the community applied to the authorities to have officially registered. This time, everything had to be restarted, yet not quite from scratch.

"We found two old-time believers when we returned. Mr. Omar Dúráni, who had been a Bahá'í for twenty two years ... and had remained steadfast and firm in faith, in spite of what he had suffered. We also found a second spiritual son of ours to whom we had taught the Faith earlier, Mr. Uthmán Adam. Regrettably, we found that Uthmán's health had become extremely poor although he was only 55 years old."

It was a cause of great happiness to the Eagles – instead of finding only one old believer when they reached Addis Ababa in 1944, they were now starting with five adult Bahá'ís, since Malakout is now an adult Bahá'í, as Sabrí took stock of the community and counted how many remained for re-election of the Assembly.

"Therefore, we were very happy that these two Bahá'í friends were around. We said to ourselves 'With us being three and them two, now if we teach the faith to four more persons we would have an Assembly!'"

Having settled down and put their house in, the family invited these two olden days' believers for a happy reunion at their modest home on 10 June 1977. However the reunion was to be a mixture of joy and pain, at least for Raissa – as related here in her words.<sup>114</sup>

"On the day set for the five of us to meet for the first time, I was extremely happy and elated. It was very hot by mid-June, and I very carefully cleaned the house and put it in order as the five

114 From this point onwards, the events of Djibouti's second term are taken from the last recording that Sabrí and Raissa specially taped in 1995 upon request of the writer to fill a historical gap. The recordings that are currently kept at the National Bahá'í Archives in Addis Ababa abruptly end without telling what happened on 10 June 1977, and then jump to the events of Raissa's surgery of May 1979 in Liverpool, England.



of us were about to meet and pray together as we used to do in past years. Unfortunately, I fell down and suffered a compounded hip-joint fracture in my thigh."

When the two Djiboutian friends arrived, they were faced with the duty of taking their hostess to hospital.

### A Blessing in Disguise

In the confines of this modest home, the family would certainly not have come into contact with Djibouti's group of interest: the young educated generation that, like their peers in Ethiopia, would wholeheartedly embrace God's Faith for this age and share it with others. It was because of this seemingly unfortunate accident that they were able to meet with this segment of Djibouti's enlightened society. With the wisdom of hindsight, Raissa put the incident into the right perspective in the course of her last joint audiobiography with Sabrí in 1995:

"It was a test in which a great blessing was concealed. It was as Bahá'u'lláh said: *'My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy.'*<sup>115</sup> And again, *'Say: Adversity is the oil which feedeth the flame of this Lamp and by which its light is increased, did ye but know.'*<sup>116</sup>

"Mr. Omar Dúráni took me to the French Hospital. However, my dominating passion was to teach the Faith! While in hospital I used to pray often, in spite of my pain, that two souls may embrace the Faith in that same hospital, so that I might hear in it the invocation 'Yá Bahá'ul-Abhá, or the greeting 'Allah-u-Abhá'. This was my sole wish – a wish as strong as the pain!

"At this French Hospital I had an operation, but it was unsuccessful from the very beginning despite the surgeon's hopes. It included the insertion of three surgical pins into the joint. Soon afterwards the pins began to loosen, one after the other!

"It happened then that an X-ray specialist named Hummad Muhammad Hassan worked at this hospital. We spoke to him about the Faith and he responded favourably. In brief, he said that he would become a Bahá'í, and continued to visit us at home after my discharge from the hospital. Yet we did not feel completely sure of the sincerity of his faith as his acceptance was unusually quick. One day, he requested a photograph of Abdu'l-Bahá. As a token, we gave him one – a beautiful colour portrait.

"Later, and because one of the pins was rejected by my body and was pushing the flesh outwards, I felt great pain that warranted my return to the hospital for immediate surgery. But I needed first to have an X-ray at Hummad's office. There, Sabrí and I we were very surprised to

115 Hidden Words, No. 51 from the Arabic

116 Súriy-i-Ra'ís, The Summons Of The Lord Of Hosts, p. 147

find that he had fitted that picture of Abdu'l-Bahá into a beautiful frame that he placed in front of him – certainly not to please us, because he did not expect us to come into his office! We found that he placed also a number of Bahá'í books on his desk for others to see and read."

"That day in hospital and after the X-ray, I returned to the surgeon to extract the pin. However, he said "I am sorry! I cannot do the operation because the anaesthetist is absent." Since I was still thrilled by the realization that Hammad had become a devoted believer, I requested the surgeon to do the operation without anaesthetic. 'Impossible!' he exclaimed 'No matter how brave you may be, it cannot be done.' However, I insisted on having the surgery in this manner, and promised him to endure the pain. Eventually, he did the operation and was amazed that I held up until he had extracted the pin and stitched the incision satisfactorily. He recommended that I spend that evening in a hospital bed, but I told him that I must leave the hospital within one hour. "You will not be able to walk", he warned. But, indeed, I was able to walk out of the hospital and return home within an hour.

### Jewels to Dearest of Friends

The pain that Raissa suffered by insisting on surgery without anaesthesia and her insistence on walking home soon afterwards was for a purpose that, in her words, was a means of obtaining unexpected spiritual comfort that same evening.

"The Reason for my insistence on returning home almost immediately after this surgery was that a French Bahá'í of Persian origin, Dr. Murshidzádeh, was on a visit to Djibouti and was going to meet our small Bahá'í community at our house. When we returned the community was only five believers, and then another early believer, a cousin of Uthman, came forward. Now with Hummad we became seven in total!

"Thus, it was a wonderful evening for me to return to the company of the friends during Dr. Murshidzádeh's visit! At this gathering, Sabrí related the story of my accident to the guest. So, Dr. Murshidzádeh gave me a card with a beautiful Persian calligraphy of the following paraphrased words of Bahá'u'lláh *'I have a treasure that is full of jewels. These jewels are but the afflictions that I bestow upon the dearest among My friends.'* This inscription was like balm to my heart."

### Djibouti Regains its Spiritual Assembly

Hummad was one of the two souls that Raissa prayed to be able to convert in the course of her medical treatment at Djibouti's French Hospital. Inviting another educated and enlightened youth from among the same hospital staff was soon to follow.

"The next day, the surgeon summoned me to the hospital to have some blood tests. This was needed because the second pin was working its way out. So I went to have these tests done. As



I was leaving the hospital afterwards, the haematologist saw me as I walked on crutches with Sabrí. 'Are you going home without transport in this heat?' He exclaimed. 'We do not have a car.' We replied. 'Let me, then, drive you home!' he insisted. The haematologist was to become the second new believer, Abdu'l-Rahmán. As soon as we sat in his car, we started to introduce him to the Faith. Now, there were two believers in this hospital and I realised without doubt that my accident was the means by which the Faith had spread. My pain was lessened by this divine victory and we were so grateful that the Bahá'í Community of Djibouti now numbered eight. Soon afterwards, the ninth member came: Mr. Djamíl, who was Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. Once again, Djibouti became a seat for a Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly.<sup>117</sup>

### Malakout Makes Her Own Nest

After the re-establishment of the Local Spiritual Assembly the family travelled to Alexandria, for a rest from Djibouti's steaming hot summer. Unfortunately, Malakout's passport was confiscated upon the family's arrival into Cairo 'on grounds of my being a Bahá'í' as Malakout later explained. The passports of Sabrí and Raissa, however, were not confiscated, perhaps in view of their old age. This incident saddened the family very much because all attempts to reclaim her passport before their return to Djibouti were futile. Thus, Sabrí and Raissa had sadly to be separated from Malakout for the first time. Malakout's grief was even greater. What must have been a solace to Sabrí and Raissa, that they returned to Djibouti with another stop-over in Addis Ababa, at the request of their dear Bahá'í friends of Ethiopia.

Malakout spent the following few months in Alexandria as some correspondence took place between her parents in Djibouti and a youth from Morocco, Mr. Muhammad Walil, who wanted to marry her. At the request of the author, Malakout gave the following brief account of what took place after this forced separation from her parents.

"It was during these few months (May-September 1978) that I was employed by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, in Alexandria, as it has been the national policy on employment of university graduates – a position that I accepted. There I worked for several months, all along struggling to regain my passport to return to Djibouti, still without success. Mr. Muhammad Walil came to Alexandria around mid-July 1978, for our engagement and I laid my affairs in the hands of God as I was engaged to a Bahá'í from Morocco, yet without a passport to leave the country. In view of the fact that the obstacles that prevented regaining my passport were made by the Immigration Office in Alexandria, my brother Hussein decided to take the matter to Cairo Headquarters. There he was able to regain my passport quite easily when he mentioned that I was to leave the country for marriage and settlement in Morocco. The consent and blessings of my parents at this marriage were also received, and the engagement was celebrated at the home of my Uncle Subhi Elias in Alexandria around the end of July 1978.

117 As of Ridván (April) 1979, never to lapse again, this time!

After the engagement, I travelled to Morocco with Walil. There, I was the guest of the family of Mr. Nabil Isfahání, the brother of my sister's husband while I completed the legal period of residence that was required before my marriage. The ceremony was eventually conducted by our Moroccan Bahá'í friends on 1 October 1978."

Back in Djibouti, Sabrí and Raissa patiently continued with their persistent teaching work assisted and encouraged by the newfound zeal, steadfastness and dedication of the new members of the Bahá'í community. However, Raissa's condition deteriorated and she needed a major operation at the hands of a competent orthopaedic surgeon in England.

### Raissa's Healing Journey

Raissa flew alone for her operation leaving Sabrí alone in Djibouti to count the days until their reunion; we know that she departed 10.30pm on 8 May 1979. However, he was not to remain lonely for long as Carmel and her family came to keep him company and support exactly a month later. Of her healing journey, Raissa gave the following dramatic account.

"Due to the failure of the leg surgery that I had in Djibouti, I went to England for another operation. I was then accompanied by the prayers of the Universal House of justice – prayers that I was certain would give me true assurance and a speedy recovery. This was the major surgery that was to meet with success. I travelled alone from Djibouti to Paris, with a stop-over in Tunis where I was the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Rowshan Mustapha. I was unable to walk and had to be helped by people holding both my arms. I had booked a journey that ended in Liverpool, England, but when I reached Paris, one of the two sons of the Late Mr. Aziz Isfahání, who had lived in Port Said some forty years earlier, was waiting for me. This was arranged by Mr. Rowshan Mustapha who telephoned him during my stop-over in Tunis. From Orley Airport, Paris, I departed to London.<sup>118</sup>

"Very unusual events took place during this leg of the trip (Paris/London). In order to take the next flight from London to Liverpool, where Dr. Nabil Mustapha would be waiting for me, I had to collect my luggage at London Airport and put it on the next plane. I was at a loss, because of my inability to communicate with the airline crew. But, there was an Englishman, aged about 50 years, on the same flight to London. The airplane was very small and crowded. This Englishman stood up, for his seat was occupied by a French lady who was seated by my side and placed her luggage on it. At this moment, a bag fell from the luggage rack and was about to hit my injured leg. The Englishman caught this bag as it was about to land on my leg. I thanked him for saving me, and requested the lady to vacate his seat and invited him to sit down. Thus the journey from London to Paris began, and we started to talk. 'Why did you come to England?' he asked. My replies were in broken English, yet this man could understand my limited English. He asked me about my destination and I said that I was going to Liverpool for an operation. As it has been always my habit, I spoke to him about the Faith. 'I have heard

118 13 May 1979.



about the Bahá'í Faith, although I am a devout Catholic I see that the Bahá'í Faith teaches the same as Catholicism.'

"This Englishman helped me a great deal and acted as my escort. I told him that my luggage will be dropped in London while I was going on to Liverpool. I told him also of my need for a wheelchair in London Airport in view of my handicap. This he arranged for me. He also stood by me when it was time to check in at London Airport Immigration Control. There they found that I did not have an entry visa to the UK. This was a real problem, as they were determined to send me back on the same plane to Djibouti. I could not convince them to let me in. However, this Englishman understood my problem and spoke on my behalf. 'Where would she go?' he asked, 'She is a sick woman who came here for treatment and you should not do this to her.' He pleaded. So they asked me to provide evidence that I came for treatment. I showed them a letter from Dr. Badu who was going to operate me, and another from Dr. Nabil Mustapha, who had arranged for the operation. I wept at this moment and asked them to telephone these two medical doctors, and which they did immediately. Eventually, they verified the truth of my story as both Dr. Badu and Dr. Nabil had beseeched them and asked that the mistake of failing to obtain a visa be overlooked. They were told that everything was arranged for an operation the following day [14 May 1979]. This was the great favour that this Englishman did for me, as he stood by my side for more than an hour until this problem was solved and bade me farewell as I boarded my flight to Liverpool.

"Eventually, I arrived at Liverpool Airport where Dr. Nabil Mustapha and his wife Laila were to meet me. I was operated upon the following day.<sup>119</sup> This time the operation was successful and Bahá'u'lláh was by my side throughout.

### Recuperation and Teaching in Morocco

The British surgeon who operated on Raissa's hip-joint recommended a two-month recuperation period in another hospital that was a cheaper than the one where she had the operation. However Raissa could not afford to stay for more than one month and, against a strong recommendation from the surgeon, accepted Sabrí's suggestion that she travel to nearby Morocco to rest in the company of Malakout and her family and that Sabrí would come from Djibouti to join them.<sup>120</sup> What was meant to be a recuperation period for Raissa became a period of intense activity, as told here by Raissa.

119 In a letter from Raissa to Sabrí immediately after the operation she related that, as she was about to go into the coma of anaesthesia, she fixed her gaze on the face of the Bahá'í who was by her side, that was Dr. Nabil Mustapha, until she lost consciousness. She also wrote that, as she started to regain consciousness after the operation, she was calling out the name of her eldest son, "Hussein!" The nurses were wondering as there was no such person around. Shortly afterwards, Hussein arrived from Egypt and asked for directions to his mother's bed. The nurses were amazed at the timing of this coincidence. Hussein stayed with his mother for a few days to keep her company and look after her needs.

120 This was the first time for Sabrí and Raissa to meet their son-in-law Walil.

"Upon my departure from the Liverpool hospital to Morocco, I met that surgeon and thanked him with the assurance that God is with me and that He would not forsake me. When I reached Morocco's airport, I was assisted and driven to Malakout's home by a Bahá'í physician whom I shall never forget: Dr. Fu'ád Púr may God bless his noble soul! On the way and as I sat next to him in the car, we had a glowing talk about the Faith. 'As of tomorrow morning' he promised me, 'I will bring you a number of youth to discuss the Faith with them. You seem to be a true teacher of the Faith, and this is a real opportunity for us here.' It was the most joyful thing at that time to see Dr. Fu'ád Púr come over, on a daily basis, with droves of Bahá'ís and their friends for such discussions.<sup>121</sup>

"This fervour speeded my healing. Instead of spending two more months in UK hospitals to recuperate my leg healed quickly in the span of one month – thanks to the tender care of Malakout and her husband Muhammad Walil. I improved even further when Sabrí came to join me in Morocco at the end of the month.<sup>122</sup>

"Following this Morocco visit, we travelled to Egypt for a reunion with our sons Hussein and Safa and their families. Eventually Sabrí and I returned to Djibouti after this long absence."

### Back on Track

What happened during the seven years that remained was for the Eagles to complete their Djibouti conquest with a period of total transformation and new-found vigour, so far as the Bahá'í community of that country was concerned. The following remarks made by them as they lovingly recalled this period in later years tell us the story.

#### Raissa

Back in Djibouti, the teaching continued and a considerable number of people embraced the Faith, including Muhammad Seif, and Muhammad Khiarí.

#### Sabrí

Among them was a recently declared Somali: Jan Du Misse. In spite of belonging to the Somali Christian minority, he understood the verities of the Faith. When we were teaching him, he would ask questions based on the Bible. Most of the proofs that we showed him would focus on the validity of Islam, and that it was a Message that added to Christianity. Hence, we took him to the validity of the Bahá'í Faith. This man, afterwards, taught the Faith to a presenter

121 This devoted Bahá'í, Dr. Fu'ád Púr, passed away shortly afterwards while Mr. and Mrs. Elias were still in Morocco. His passing was deplored by Bahá'ís and others alike for his philanthropic ways and the sincere love that he showed to everyone who came his way – notably the poor and needy.

122 Sabrí and Raissa toured most of the cities of Morocco in a series of very successful teaching visits to Bahá'ís, encouraging them and their contacts in Tétouan, Fais, Mekhnès, Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier. In Tangier they were reunited for the first time in some 35 years with Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Mr. Riaz Rouhání who had left his last year of university education in Alexandria 1953 to go to Morocco at the onset of the Ten Year Crusade. Sooner after his settlement in Morocco, Mr. Rouhání was joined by all the members of his family. Currently he resides in France.



of Djibouti TV Broadcasting Service named Christopher Fárih. Thus, there was an influx of believers. Another convert to the Faith was a police officer, who would energetically talk and gesture at every meeting "I wish to tell all the people of Djibouti to turn to this new Divine Message. This man's name was Mahdí. In other words, there was a wonderful renaissance in Djibouti.

#### *Raissa*

The names that you have mentioned, dear Sabri, are correct: Du Misse embraced the Faith in a very short time, and he taught the Faith to Christopher Fárih. Seif also became a Bahá'í, and he became Secretary of Djibouti's Spiritual Assembly. Other believers who joined the Faith were one of Uthmán's maternal cousins and his son, Muhammad, who was still a youth. The number was quite heartening those days, and all were on fire.

### **A Solid-Rock Community**

The Bahá'í Community of Djibouti gradually reached the expectations of Sabri and Raissa – a cohesive and united constellation of souls who stood firm in the face of tests and opposition. The following incident, as related by Raissa, illustrates this.

"Among the new faithful believers was Ahmad Ali. He had two sons who were in a missionary school and encountered some difficulties there because they were Bahá'ís, like their father. The school teacher, a Catholic nun, opposed them. As soon as she heard them mention their religion, she requested them to bring their parents to school. Having been thus summoned, Ahmad Ali confirmed that he is a Bahá'í. 'Then why should your children be Bahá'ís like you?' the teacher demanded. As she wanted to know more about the Faith, he gave her Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era in French to read. Then she asked him to be introduced to other Bahá'ís for more discussion.

"One day Ahmad came to us with this teacher. She argued with us, using the Bible, saying that what we claim is baseless and there was a discussion. Also present during this meeting was Ahmad's wife who was not yet a believer in spite of her husbands' previous attempts to introduce her to the Faith. The Catholic teacher went on to say that Muhammad can never be a Messenger from God. So, we proved the opposite using both the Old and New Testaments. Eventually, she could not speak anymore. But it was the wife of Ahmad who was touched very much by the discussion. 'This is the first time,' she said 'that I have heard you prove the validity of the Mission of Muhammad so fervently to this nun. You have really rendered her speechless. It is only now that I can say that I believe in Bahá'u'lláh.'

"As this Catholic nun was leaving our house, she met another Bahá'í who had come to see us. That was Mr. Hummad, the X-ray specialist whom we mentioned earlier. Obliging, he decided to drive her back to her school. Then he returned to us to relate that, as they were on the way to school, she asked whether he is also a Bahá'í.

"'Yes!' Hummad replied. And she asked again 'Are there other Bahá'ís in Djibouti like you?'

He replied to the affirmative.

"'Are you an Afari?'"<sup>123</sup> She asked. 'Yes.' He answered.

'How come,' she exclaimed, 'that we have been here in this country preaching Christianity for many years, yet we could not influence even a single one of your race?'

Hummad explained, 'that is because you came to us with an old Message that no longer applies to this age, but the Bahá'í Faith is the religion of the future – a religion that has been anticipated by all mankind, a religion of peace, and so on ...'

"However, the outcome of this investigation by this missionary teacher was the dismissal of Mr. Ahmad Ali's children from the school immediately afterwards. Therefore their father sent them to a Bahá'í school in India.<sup>124</sup> He even accompanied them there to arrange for their admission, and made the acquaintance of the Bahá'í teachers there. Thanks to God! These children have grown up and, by the time we left Djibouti, they had become wonderful Bahá'í youth. While studying in India they invigorated their parents by relating all that they were experiencing. Of particular note was the story of the inauguration of the Mother Temple of India. They shared the events with their parents in a tape-recorded message, including the inaugural speech of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum. The children were elated during that event. Such was the strength of these parents' faith, steadfastness and loyalty, when we departed."

### **Mission Accomplished**

By 1986, with Sabri already an old man of 82 and Raissa's frequent use of a walking stick because of her hip-injury, the Bahá'í situation in Djibouti was a true reflection of what the Eagles experienced in 1954 in Ethiopia. Many other pioneers came to lend support to an already strong community of Djiboutian believers, in the Eagles' words:

#### *Sabri*

The Faith progressed in Djibouti. True feelings and sincere conversion were there on the part of the Djiboutian believers. Such was their steadfastness and strength that those pioneers who followed us from other countries were posted to other parts outside the capital, which no longer needed pioneers.

The degree of advancement and activeness of Bahá'í children, for example, was such that they would organize a Bahá'í school themselves: They used to meet at the Bahá'í Centre to study the Faith and arrange other activities. That is to say, there were very heartening advances at that time, and more people came into the Faith.

<sup>123</sup> See Appendix II *Ethiopia & Djibouti - History, Land and People* for the ethnic make-up of Djibouti.

<sup>124</sup> The New Era School in Panchigani, Maharashtra

## Raissa

Among the wonderful events of our second Djibouti term was that we had a Bahá'í pioneer from Sudan: Mr. Mubarak Hassan<sup>125</sup>, who was a faithful youth. To earn a living, he taught at a private school. During his stay in Djibouti he met a lady from Mauritius whom he found to be unique. He wished to speak to her about the Faith, but she told him that she was already a Bahá'í. Thus, he came to know this Bahá'í pioneer, Rashida, who came from a Bahá'í family and, as soon as she met the Bahá'í Community, she opened her home for Bahá'í activities. She worked for the United Nations in Djibouti and gave excellent service to the Faith, including serving on the Local Spiritual Assembly for many years as its Secretary. These events coincided with the beginning of an influx of pioneers to Djibouti, which included Ibrahim and his family as well as his brother, Abdalla. One of them came over from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, while the other came from another country.

In 1954, when the Eagles felt they should leave Ethiopia, they had the strength and vigour to move on for the more challenging mission of Djibouti. Now, the situation was different: upon the recommendation from Mr. Gial Bahta, then a Bahá'í Counsellor<sup>126</sup> in charge of North East Africa, the Universal House of Justice advised the Eagles to leave Djibouti in view of their advancing age and their need to be cared for by their own children.

## A Chapter Hard to Close

The Eagle's memories of their last few days in Djibouti give the impression that it was a hard chapter for them to close. In fact, the closing of this chapter represented also the conclusion of no less than four eventful spiritual missions that spanned more than half a century. The reader may be left here to enjoy Raissa's last recollections.

"During the few days that preceded our bidding Djibouti a final farewell, many wonderful events took place. During a visit of Jan Du Misse to us, we asked him 'Don't you bring someone into the Faith, in order to cheer our hearts before our departure?' 'Yes', he assured us 'I do have a friend who studied in France named Hassan. He will be returning to his home Djibouti during this month, since he has completed his studies. As we are very close friends I intend to teach him the Faith.' This incident was about one week prior to our departure. Afterwards, he came to us with his friend Hassan and a big smile on his face. 'Imagine!' He exclaimed, 'When I met Hassan at the airport I started to give him a hint of Bahá'í principles on the way home. He startled me by saying: 'you are talking about the Bahá'í Faith!' I asked him how he knew and he told me that he was already a Bahá'í, explaining that he had been taught the Faith in France by an immigrant Algerian physician.' That youth, Hassan, could quote from

125 Mr. Mubarak Hassan remained in Djibouti for a few more years after the return of Mr. and Mrs. Elias to Egypt. He returned eventually to his home in Khartoum, and was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Sudan until his passing a few years afterwards.

126 At the age of 67, Mr. Gila Bahta was appointed Counsellor in 1983 and assumed the demanding duties of this position for fifteen years to come.

the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that he learned by heart. Among these were the Hidden Words, the mystical meanings of which he also knew. This was like a gift from Bahá'u'lláh to please our feeble hearts and gladden our spirits with such glad-tidings. Hassan, the new believer, continued to be a steadfast and distinguished Bahá'í.

"It happened also on the very day of our departure that I was shopping for the trip. Upon coming out of the shop on my way home, my eyes met those of a French lady. We looked at each other as if we were old friends. She noticed that I was waiting for a taxi, but there were no vehicles in sight. 'Are you waiting for a taxi?' she asked me. When I said 'yes' she offered to drive me home. I joined her gratefully. Her mother was also in the car. She asked me from which country I came. 'I am Egyptian' I replied and added, 'but I am also a Bahá'í.' She exclaimed 'I am also a Bahá'í, and I have two sons who study at a Bahá'í school.' It was as if I had found a treasure, and I was overjoyed. Sadly, only three hours separated us at that time from the hour of our final departure from Djibouti, and she apologized at being unable to come into our house due to other pressing duties. Thus we embraced each other in farewell!"



### 13. Looking Back in Contentment

After their final departure from Djibouti in 1986, Sabrí and Raissa first went to Morocco for a few months before eventually settling in Alexandria. Their wisdom and wealth of spiritual experience was a great value to the Bahá'ís there and elsewhere in Egypt, especially the younger generation. Invariably time was allowed at every Bahá'í meeting for the friends to listen to the captivating talks of these two veteran teachers of the Faith. Their home became a point of spiritual attraction to Alexandrian and visiting Bahá'ís alike, and there was no greater happiness for them than sharing their rich experience with everyone who knocked at their door.

Another great source of happiness for Sabrí and Raissa was the proximity of their children, and grandchildren, especially Hussein who had not left Alexandria since 1959. On certain occasions, all would converge on Alexandria for a wonderful reunion.

The writer was greatly blessed to have met them, though briefly, during the few years that preceded Sabrí's passing. In the course of a lovely and gracious response to a request from the writer to fill some gaps that were found in their audiobiography, Sabrí gave a beautiful summary of his spiritual experiences and a captivating overview of his role as a devoted servant of God's Cause for this Age. As Sabrí had made these comments only two months before his passing, his remarks were those of someone who was giving everything he had. The following excerpts show how he and his life companion, Raissa, looked back upon their rich spiritual legacy in great contentment. Sensing that the day of his passing was not far, Sabrí's following words are those of writing a will more than anything else.

#### *On the Irresistible Progress of the Faith of God*

The Faith is the Truth. Since it is the Truth from God, and even if it is faced with opposition—difficulties, opposition, resistance, and repudiation—such may persist only for a limited period of time until eventually dissipated. God fulfils His Cause and nobody can obstruct the spread of His Cause. When I say "His Cause" I do not only mean the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, but also every Divine Cause championed by the Prophets of the past. Every Divine Message is always supported and protected by God. It may only require the pursuit of gentle persuasion, wisdom, and good conduct. Yet it is the Cause of God that is the ultimately pervasive and prevailing Power. Nobody can prevail over the Cause of God.

#### *On their Spiritual Identity*

We were believers who have embraced the Cause of God, and sacrificed our very lives in its path. This was such that there was no joy or ecstasy that could surpass that of seeing the Faith of God spread. Together, Raissa and I served the Faith within the limitations of our

circumstances, resources, and capabilities. However, there was sometimes a sort of struggle and persistence on our part to attain success in service. This struggle and persistence was far greater than our resources. We cannot proudly claim that we have fulfilled an important task. We may rather claim that we were faithful, that is: faithful to God and that we have persevered in His Path. Furthermore, without engagement in such work, our life would have had no any taste or meaning.

#### *On the Secret of Success in Service*

We never expected to have personal renown or fame, nor to have people say "he is the one who did this" or "she is the one who did that". Rather, our entire aim was to render the Cause victorious within our capacity. If the entire community of the believers -- among them we are certainly their lowest and most insignificant -- arises, with one resolve and one heart, to render the Cause victorious, His Eminence Bahá'u'lláh will undoubtedly render them victorious. We did nothing more than any believer would do. As to our resolve and ability, these came from the Divine Power.

#### *On their Family*

Our children are four: Hussein and Safa who live in Egypt; Carmel who married Abdu'l-Karím Isfahání and lives with him now in Syria; Malakout who married and resided in Morocco. Thus, our family that started out of nothingness<sup>127</sup>, grew in number [by 1995] into nine grandchildren: three children of Hussein<sup>128</sup>, two of Safa<sup>129</sup>, two of Carmel<sup>130</sup>, and two of Malakout<sup>131</sup>. If we conduct an overall family count that includes the spouses, we are 19 individuals.

#### *On their Life as a Whole*

Thank God that we fulfilled the mission that was placed upon our shoulders. I do not believe that we failed it but we were doing our best. In spite of spending most of our pioneering years in tribulation and difficulty, we were happy because it was in the Path of God. We did not cherish any hope of acquiring fame or prominence, nor did we do anything for our material future or that of our children. Along this path, my earthly life is now drawing to a close.

#### *On Raissa's Past and Future Services*

You, Raissa, are recording a history that you have the full right to tell. It is a history that gives pride. It is worthy of being followed by other believers from among the women. It is worthy of pride because you have dedicated your entire life to it. From the age of about 20 until now you have continuously serviced the Cause of God. You have never fallen short of your duties, on the contrary: you have, on several occasions urged me to do what was seemingly difficult. Being younger than me, Raissa will have, God willing, a longer future to serve the Faith.

<sup>127</sup> This is a reference to Sabrí's own childhood, when he lost his father two months before his birth and was later deprived from living with his mother.

<sup>128</sup> Ashraf, Hishám and Shirín

<sup>129</sup> Ulá, and Haní

<sup>130</sup> Imád and Hind

<sup>131</sup> Hussein (or Houcain), and Hudá



## 14. Sabrí Wings Away

On 29 July 1995, Mr. Sabrí Elias poured out his heart in the following verbal message to the Bahá'í Community of Ethiopia, which he entrusted to a friend of who was on his way to Addis Ababa.

*"Convey to them my loving-greetings. Tell them that my heart is burning at my remoteness from them. For it is the circumstances of life that have separated us! I always wonder: how they are getting on. I pray that God may render them victorious, and be their helper and companion!"*

In a tape-recording that Sabrí and Raissa made two months later, Sabrí's voice could be heard ringing vigorously and his mental faculties were evidently as intact as ever. However, he became seriously ill soon afterwards to such a degree that both family and friends in Egypt beseeched prayers on his behalf at the Bahá'í Holy Shrines. In response to this appeal, the following cable was received.

15 October 1995

ASSURE THE BAHÁ'Í FRIENDS IN EGYPT THAT OUR LOVING PRAYERS AT THE HOLY SHRINES ARE BEING OFFERED ON BEHALF OF MR. SABRÍ ELIAS

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

With only one month to his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday, Sabrí was preparing for a final flight, this time to eternity. By the morning of 22 October, he slipped into a coma, and Raissa sat by his bedside, consumed in prayers and overcome with the sad realisation that their physical separation was inevitable. The memories of their last hours together remain so vividly in Raissa heart and mind that she related them many months later in the following minute detail.<sup>132</sup>

"I remember his last day in this material world; a day that I indeed felt would be his last. I tried to make him talk to me but he went into what seemed to be a deep sleep. I sat by his side and, as I held his hand, I read him prayers as we used to do everyday. Then I talked to him in an audible voice: "Sabrí, we agreed that both of us will meet each other in the world of spirit. Whether you and I would go first is not important but, rather, it is the fact that we will certainly meet there. Whosoever goes first will recount there that which we experienced: sweet memories and dignified instances of serving the Faith. Both of us have a lot to tell, and there will we find true spiritual happiness.

<sup>132</sup> In a letter by Raissa dated 17 July 1996.

"How much do I yearn to see the world beyond," I continued to say to Sabrí, "the world of which Bahá'u'lláh said 'should the station destined for a true believer in the world beyond be revealed to the extent of a needle's eye, every soul would expire in ecstasy.'"

"Then, he regained consciousness for a moment, looked at me and wept. At that moment I felt that he was with me following every word that I said. I recited more prayers for him, as he slipped back into a deep coma. It was shortly after sunset [of 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1995] that his soul winged away."

Thus a glorious chapter of unique historical significance in the realm of faith was brought to a physical close. A life of humility that was combined with audacity; simplicity that enveloped deep insight; extreme kindness mingled with high resolve – to mention but a few of the seemingly irreconcilable qualities that Sabrí so demonstrably mustered, then ended in this world to give way to an exceedingly wondrous afterlife.

The news of Sabrí's passing soon spread worldwide like lightening. As his noble body was being laid to rest the following morning in the Bahá'í Cemetery of Cairo, near the grave of his dear brother, Subhí, the Universal House of Justice cabled its sincere condolences to Raissa and the rest of the family.

OUR HEARTS ARE GRIEVED AT THE PASSING OF THE KNIGHT OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH, DEVOTED SPIRITUAL CONQUEROR OF ETHIOPIA, AND CONSECRATED INDEFATIGABLE PROMOTER AND PIONEER OF HIS CAUSE SABRÍ ELIAS. EXTEND OUR LOVING SYMPATHY TO HIS DEAR WIFE AND MEMBERS OF HIS FAMILY. ASSURE THEM OF OUR FERVENT PRAYERS FOR THE PROGRESS OF HIS RADIANT SOUL IN THE ABHÁ KINGDOM

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

On the following day, on behalf of Sabrí's spiritual children in Ethiopia, the following letter was faxed to the family by the National spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia.

Beloved Sabrí Elias Family

Dearest Fahíma Raissa Sabrí, and all the beloved members of the family,

We are deeply grieved by the passing of our precious spiritual father, the conquering hero of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith.

National Bahá'í community of Ethiopia supplicating Bahá'u'lláh accord



befitting reception his departed soul.

Generations yet unborn, in times yet to come, throughout the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh will remember his name with gratitude.

Those of us who have been blessed with meeting him will cherish his memory throughout our lives.

Although the separation of someone so precious and whose presence amongst us was a source of spiritual joy, we cannot grieve despondently because Sabrí Elias lives in all of us, in our memories, and in the lives of Bahá'í generations yet to be born.

We in this country will continue to feel his presence amongst us and we assure you all of our fervent and most sincere prayers. We are holding nationwide memorial services in his honour on Sunday October 29, 1995.

On behalf of your Ethiopian family,  
The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia

Equally saddened were Sabrí's spiritual children in Djibouti and the many other countries where he had so sacrificially laboured to share the jewel of faith in his heart with other fellow human beings of all races, class, and creed.

### **Raissa without Sabrí**

Speaking of her life with Sabrí, Raissa summed it up in one captivating sentence.

*"We lived the years of our life together and they were mostly swimming in a sea of spiritual fervour for 54 years that passed swiftly, yet embossing their deep impression on our heart."*

Raissa's grief was initially inconsolable, but she gradually found solace and comfort in the same work that she had always done with Sabrí: teaching the Faith to every receptive soul that came her way. Her teaching itinerary during the year that immediately followed Sabrí's passing included spending six months with Malakout in Morocco; three months in Syria with Carmel; and a brief return to Alexandria that was followed by a few days in Beirut, Lebanon to speak a Bahá'í summer school.

For 13 years to the present day, Raissa continues to move between Egypt, Morocco, and Syria, with stopovers in neighbouring countries – all along being commanded by her passion to teach the Faith, and driven by the same spirit that animated Sabrí and herself over several decades.

In her presence, nothing could be heard except the glad tidings that Bahá'u'lláh brought for humanity in this Age, and her glowing spirit remains as captivating as ever. To give just one example of her spiritual insight and influence, I would like to share the following experience of my latest meeting with dear Raissa in March 2006.

My son in law, Mr. Matthew (Matt) Milne, was on a visit to Egypt and I came over from Uganda specially to meet him for the first time. Matt and my daughter Neda were married in the UK eight months earlier but, while my wife Somaya and daughter Manar were there for the occasion, I could not attend. I was happy at Neda and Matt's union, because I had been in earlier correspondence with Matt and had become aware of his high spiritual qualities. At that point in time, Matt was still studying the Bahá'í Faith and this visit was his first close association with the Bahá'í community of Egypt. We heard then of a funeral at the Bahá'í Cemetery in Cairo and Matt asked if he could join me. I was so happy to find that Raissa was among the large crowd of mourners: she had come all the way from Alexandria to pay her condolences. When she saw Matt and knew who he was, she was overjoyed to see the soul-mate of Neda, a girl that she had loved dearly since her birth. Holding Matt's hands firmly and looking straight into his eyes, she asked me to interpret what came to her heart at that moment.

"Matt," she told him, "there is a jewel in your heart that I can see in your face! You are truly a spiritual being, and you should realise this fact in order to know the Truth."

Personally, I did not readily realise the spiritual influence of those few words on Matt. A few days later, Matt and Neda returned to the UK and I went back to Uganda. In a telephone conversation with Neda immediately after the trip, she spoke of the great impact of Raissa's few words on Matt. A few days later Matt declared his belief in Bahá'u'lláh at the Nineteen-Day Feast of 9 April 2006, amid the happiness of the Bahá'í community of Gloucestershire, England!

## 15. Epilogue

Having described Europe's elaborate Nineteenth Century conquests in the countries of the Nile Basin, the author of *The Blue Nile* came to the following conclusion at the end of his book.

It might have been thought that the western Christian influence would have been very great in this troubled scene, since it was backed by western arms. But such was not the case; none of the western invaders from Bonaparte's time to this have been able to fix their faith on the river. The Moslem imam [in the Moslem-dominated desert and lowlands] and the Coptic priest [in the Ethiopian highlands] are still today as firmly entrenched as they ever were. In this sense at least the inhabitants of the Nile have never been conquered.<sup>133</sup>

This is an indisputable fact, since spiritual conquests were not, and never will be, achieved by armies. Some might argue differently, but the fact remains that, no matter how formidable an armed crusade might be, pockets of resistance and old traditions remain.<sup>134</sup> Speaking of Ethiopia, it was Queen Makeda of Sabea (Sheba) who sought Judaic enlightenment and wisdom of her own free will; two unarmed souls who won over the hearts of Ezana of Axum (Aksum) to Orthodox Christianity; and the helpless fugitive relatives and followers of Muhammad who evoked the sympathy and protection of Negus Armah.

The Bahá'í conquest of Ethiopia was no exception to this spiritual rule: Today, there is a Bahá'í community in Ethiopia that identifies its beginning with the day when a lonely and penniless Bahá'í pioneer from Alexandria arrived unnoticed in Addis Ababa.

Such being the case, our book is of a story that has neither a beginning nor an end. Bahá'u'lláh said that his Faith is a link in the endless chain of God's revelations to mankind – a principle known to Bahá'ís as *progressive revelation*. Makeda, Frumentius, Ja'far<sup>135</sup>, and Sabrí had, in fact, written consecutive episodes of an endless drama series on the spiritual destiny of the Horn of Africa. In each of these episodes the time and actors were different, yet the theme was invariably the same: *the invincible power of God's Faith!*

With very few particulars available in historical records regarding the three earlier episodes, we realise how lucky we are to have at our fingertips the

133 Alan Moorehead, *The Blue Nile*, pp. 310-1

134 As in the Balkans, known today as former Yugoslavia

135 Ja'far Ibn Abi-Tálib, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, who led the Muslim émigrés to Ethiopia. Cf. H. M. Balyuzi, *Muhammad and the Course of Islam*, pp. 32-4

minute details of the fourth and latest one – thanks to the technology of this age, such as photography and audio equipment.<sup>136</sup> The technology that will help to preserve the minutiae of the next episode, in a thousand or so years' time<sup>137</sup>, is left to our wildest imagination.

Each of these episodes also remained open until the beginning of the next. In other words, it is re-enacted over and over, each time a believer passes the jewel of faith to another waiting soul. No wonder then that, in a clear reference to the geometrical progression through which the word of God is passed from one soul to another and from one generation to the next, Bahá'u'lláh stated the following:

*"Whosoever quickens one soul in this Cause is like unto one quickening all the servants ..."*<sup>138</sup>

Indeed, as these lines were being written, news came from Syria that Raissa is writing yet another glorious chapter in the Elias legacy, and it is the ardent hope of the writer that he will be able to give a more comprehensive account of Raissa's conquests in a future revised of this book.

Furthermore, there is a unique feature in the Bahá'í Faith, which is the principle that the *material* goes hand-in-hand with the *spiritual*. According to this principle, and as the Faith spreads, its followers are entrusted with a duty to translate the spiritual Bahá'í teachings that they learn into tangible deeds. Here, Sabrí will always be remembered as the Spiritual Conqueror of Ethiopia, since the Bahá'í Community of Ethiopia has decided to name after him one of the institutions that will translate the spiritual teachings of their Faith into beneficial philanthropic endeavours: *The Sabrí Development Institute*.<sup>139</sup>

136 As this book was being drafted in Uganda, its missing components were filled via emails by contacts in Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Syria, its contents were emailed England for editing, and its cover design was simultaneously elaborated in Canada, Egypt, and the United States. It all took a record time of two months to complete.

137 Bahá'u'lláh said that his Dispensation is for, at least, 'a full thousand years'. Cf. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 1, 12, 14, 32, 195 & 196.

138 The Tablet of the Branch, Bahá'í World Faith

139 The writer was greatly blessed to receive a letter dated 7 October 1996 from the esteemed National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ethiopia that bore the following news: "... we have fascinating news to share with you ... the Universal House of Justice has approved to name our National Training Institute in the name of our beloved spiritual father Mr. Sabrí Elias. We are sharing this great news even before the family members have heard of it, because it takes an indirect route to reach them. Nevertheless because of your affinity and great interest to become an instrument for the compilation of the historical achievements of beloved Sabrí Elias' pioneering services in the horn of Africa, you deserve to be equally one of the first interested groups who should be kept abreast of the developments of the Sabrí affairs."



Finally, one of the promises made by Shoghi Effendi to Sabrí and Raissa during their last pilgrimage in 1943 might seem never to have been fulfilled: mentioned here by Sabrí.

This pilgrimage of 1943 was the last, as far as we were concerned. It was the third and last pilgrimage for me. I remember that we asked whether we would be able to visit the Holy Shrines in future. To this request His Eminence said: "Yes. But after you complete your service in Addis Ababa, then pioneer to another country. After you fulfil your service there, you will obtain the honour of another pilgrimage."

However, this promise was also fulfilled: the two Eagles were never able to return together to the Bahá'í Holy Places: Sabrí and Raissa became Knights of Bahá'u'lláh for opening Djibouti to the Faith in 1954. On May 29, 1992, on the occasion of the Centenary of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, a 'scroll of honour' containing the names of the Knights of Bahá'u'lláh was placed under the threshold of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. In effect, this was the couple's last pilgrimage, thus fulfilling the Guardian's promise.



Mama Raissa with Carmel, Emad & Hind in Damscus ca 2000

**Appendix I**

**Timeline: the Faith and the Land**

Bahá'í History	Ethiopian History <sup>1</sup>
1817 - Birth of Bahá'u'lláh in Takúr, near Tehran, Iran	
1819 - Birth of the Báb in Shiraz, Iran	1818 - Birth of Kasa, later Emperor Tewodros
1844 The Bab declares His Mission in Shiráz	1844 - Birth of Menelik II
1850 - Martyrdom of the Báb in Tabriz, Iran	
1853 - Exile of Baha'u'llah to Baghdad	
1855-1862 - While in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh reveals the bulk of his mystical Writings	1855 - Kasa becomes Emperor Tewodros II.
1863 - Baha'u'llah declares His Mission to Mankind on the eve of His second exile to Constantinople and Adrianople	
1867 Bahá'u'lláh addresses letters to prominent kings and rulers and religious leaders of the world	
1868 Bahá'u'lláh imprisoned in the fortress city of Akká in Palestine	1868 - Tewodros defeated by a British expeditionary force and commits suicide to avoid capture.
	1872 - Tigrayan chieftain becomes Yohannes IV.
1873 Bahá'u'lláh reveals His Book of Laws Kitáb-i-Aqdas	

1889 Bahau'llah visits Mount Carmel in Haifa and directs His eldest son Abdu'l-Baha to the spot where the remains of the Báb are to be laid to eternal rest and the location of future Bahá'í World Center	1889 - Yohannes IV killed while fighting Mahdist forces and is succeeded by the king of Shoa, who becomes Emperor Menelik II.
	1889 - Menelik signs a bilateral friendship treaty with Italy at Wuchale which Italy interprets as giving it a protectorate over Ethiopia. Ethiopia rejects this interpretation, later renounces the treaty and repays a loan.
	1889 - Addis Ababa becomes Ethiopia's capital.
1892 Baha'u'llah dies at the age of 75 and is buried in the garden of His mansion in Bahjí, outside Akká. His eldest son Abdu'l-Baha succeeds Him as the Center of His Covenant and Exemplar of His Faith	1892 - Tafari Makonnen, later Emperor Haile Selassie I, was born at Ejarsa Goro, near Harer.
1894 First mention of the Bahá'í Faith in the West in Chicago USA at a gathering that later became the World Parliament of Religions	
	1895 - Italy invades thiofia.
1896 Arrival of the first Bahá'í pilgrims from the West into Akka.	1896 - Italian forces defeated by the Ethiopians at Adwa; treaty of Wuchale annulled; Italy recognises Ethiopia's independence but retains control over Eritrea.
1906 Birth of Sabry Elias	
1908 Abdu'l-Bahá released from prison by the Young Turks revolution and lays the remains of the Báb to rest finally in their Shrine on Mount Carmel	
1910-13 Abdu'l-Bahá journeys to Egypt, Europe and America to spread the Message of His Father	
	1913 - Menelik dies and is succeeded by his grandson, Lij Iyasu.
1914-17 World War I breaks, with Abdu'l-Bahá re-incarcerated until the defeat of the Turks by the British troops that entered Palestine in 1917	

	1916 - Lij Iyasu deposed and is succeeded by Menelik's daughter, Zawditu, who rules through a regent: Ras Tafari Makonnen.
1920 Birth of Raissa	
1921 - Passing of Abdu'l-Bahá. His eldest grandson Shoghi Effendi succeeds him as the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith	
1921-23 Sabri Elias is introduced to the Bahá'í Faith by his bother and embraces It	
	1930 - Zawditu dies and is succeeded by Ras Tafari Makonnen, who becomes Emperor Haile Selassie I.
1933 - Sabri Elias arrives into Addis Ababa, after his first pilgrimage to Bahá'í Holy places in Palestine and meeting with Shoghi Effendi	
1935 - Sabri leaves Addis Ababa to Port Said because of war, goes for his second pilgrimage and meeting with Shoghi Effendi, before resettling in Alexandria in preparation for his second return to Ethiopia. Raissa embraces the Bahá'í Faith through her sibilings	1935 - Italy invades Ethiopia.
	1936 - Italians capture Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie flees, king of Italy made emperor of Ethiopia; Ethiopia combined with Eritrea and Italian Somaliland to become Italian East Africa.
1940 Sabri and Raissa are married	
	1941 - British and Commonwealth troops, greatly aided by the Ethiopian resistance - the arbegnoch - defeat the Italians, and restore Haile Selassie to his throne.
1943-44 Sabri, Raissa, and their two children proceed to Addis Ababa by an arduous land journey via Sudan, after a last pilgrimage and meeting with Shoghi Effendi	



## Appendix II – Ethiopia & Djibouti: History, Land and People<sup>140</sup>

### Ethiopia

Ethiopia is credited with being the origin of mankind. Bones discovered in eastern Ethiopia date back 3.2 million years. There is no doubt that humans have inhabited Ethiopia since the dawn of recorded history, as indicated in early cave drawings. It is the only sub-Saharan African nation with clear historical and cultural ties to the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean. Perhaps based on their naval explorations of "Punt" (probably a coastal city on the Red Sea), the Egyptians themselves believed that their forebears were Ethiopian, and an Ethiopian dynasty was established in Egypt in 720 BC. Various inscriptions and other records indicate that the earliest Egyptians clearly knew of Ethiopia's existence, but at that time the latter was little more than a loosely allied network of kingdoms. No wonder, then, that this book relates a modern time story of close spiritual ties between Ethiopia and Egypt.

**Ancient History:** According to tradition, the Ethiopian nation was founded by Etiopik, great grandson of Noah, and Axum (Aksum) was founded by Etiopik's son, Aksumai. Queen Makeda of Sabea (Sheba) would have been a member of this dynasty; she ruled a vast area that included Yemen, and in her reign Ethiopians traded with peoples as far as Palestine and India. Makeda ventured to Jerusalem to visit King Solomon, by whom she bore a son, Menelik (from Ibn-al-Malik, Son of the King). Thus was established the Solomonic dynasty, which tradition identifies with various lines amalgamated into the dynasty that ruled until 1974. The Old Testament of the Bible records the Queen of Sheba's visit to Jerusalem. According to legend, Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, founded the Ethiopian Empire. It is believed that Menelik visited his father in Jerusalem for three years as a young adult, learning the Mosaic law, and returned to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant. There is, however, no conclusive evidence of this, or of the Jewish Felasha peoples being descended from Jews of Solomon's time, and some scholars identify Queen Makeda with Queen Bilkis of Sabea (Yemen). The kingdom known to the ancient Greeks and Romans as Ethiopia, however, was in fact centered in

<sup>140</sup> The material in this Chapter is synthesized from various sources on the Internet such as Microsoft Encarta, Imperial Ethiopia, Wikipedia, Everyculture, and others. Being alien to the region's history and culture, the writer apologizes on what might seem in this Chapter as incorrect or contrary to someone's beliefs. Most important, however, is the fact that, in view of the Bahá'í Faith being a non-political religion that sees 'the world as one country and mankind its citizens', no part of this Chapter shall be considered as bias towards or against a given regime, political system, ideology, race, or belief.

what is now Sudan. Its capitals were Napata and, later, Meroë. The ancient Aksum (Axum) Kingdom, ancestor of modern Ethiopia, was founded by Semitic-speaking immigrants from southern Arabia who landed in about 1000 bc on the northeastern African coast. They established bases on the northern highlands of the Ethiopian Plateau and from there expanded southward. Axum town (Aksum), in the northern Tigray region near Adwa, was founded around 500 BC. Its economic importance, based on trade, was born during the Ptolemaic period of Egypt (330 BC) and flourished with the expansion of the Roman Empire. Roman civilization outshone Greek culture for a time, but with the rise to prominence of the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire and the arrival of Christianity, the Greeks again made their influence felt. King Ezana was famous for Christianizing Axum Kingdom. The Axumite Empire is described in the Greek chronicle *Periplus of the Ancient Sea*, written in the first century, and by the Persian author Manni, who two centuries later considered it one of the world's great empires. The Empire traded with Arabia, India, Rome and Persia, and its people spoke a language called Ge'ez, written with the Sabaeen alphabet. Their greatest architectural legacy is their distinctive monolithic granite towers. Though Greek influences were certainly evident, Axum gradually developed into a civilization in its own right. With the support of the Patriarch of Alexandria, the Axumite emperor Caleb fought a war against Jewish traders and colonists in Yemen in AD 523 (523 CE) in response to the persecution of Christians there, imposing Ethiopian administration for a time. By the eighth century, with Muslim influence growing, Ethiopian political influence on the Arabian Peninsula gradually diminished, though Ethiopian traders continued to reside there. The Axumite Empire itself spread southward into the Agew region and then to Lasta, and this led to squabbles with the peoples of these areas.

**Medieval History:** The Ethiopian culture we know today may be said to date from between the ninth and eleventh centuries, coinciding with Axum's political decline. Judaism and Islam grew to be powerful forces in Ethiopia. The Felasha (Jewish) queen Yodit, daughter of the quasi-legendary Gideon, led a destructive expedition against Axum around 980. It is believed that following Yodit's death, a Christian king, Anbessa Wudim, returned to Axum to restore Christian control. The Zagwe dynasty, first based in Lasta, emerged around this time. Many of Ethiopia's rock churches at Roha (now Lalibela) date from the reign of the Zagwe king Lalibela. A number of fortresses were also erected during this era. King Yekuno Amlak ascended the throne in 1270. His origins are uncertain. The *Kebre Negest* (The Glory of the Kings), one of Ethiopia's most important histories, describes his line's Solomonic descent. The story of Prester John, a legendary Christian ruler of Ethiopia, added luster to the Solomonic monarchs' rule. In the fourteenth century, Emperor Amda Siyon made a serious effort at expansion, annexing territories and consolidating these



into an Ethiopia which more or less conformed to the boundaries of today. To do so, he suppressed ethnic movements and firmly established Ethiopia as an Amharic and Christian nation. He granted a form of autonomy to regional rulers as his feudal vassals with authority over gulfs, or fiefs, and accommodated Islam. Zara Yakob, born in 1434, was one of Ethiopia's most remarkable rulers. Renowned for his intelligence, he further developed what had already become two fundamental institutions of the Ethiopian state --Christianity and feudalism. He also instituted a new capital, at Debre Birhan in northern Shewa. Zara Yakob expanded his realm into Eritrea and established tenuous diplomatic ties with several European monarchs. With Portuguese help, the Muslims, led by Ahmed Gragn, were again suppressed in 1543. This didn't bring an end to the hostilities, but it certainly limited serious uprisings. Portuguese and Catholic influence became greater. In 1632, the Emperor Fasil banished most foreigners and placed the Orthodox Church in its position of primacy. Fasil resided at Gonder, which he made Ethiopia's capital in 1636. It remained so for two centuries, and a period of prosperity began.

**Recent History:** In Ethiopia, the title of "emperor" literally means "king of kings." By the nineteenth century, this role was essentially symbolic. Kasa Hayla, crowned Emperor Tewodros II in 1855, sought to change this situation. Though widely respected, Tewodros was a ruthless and eccentric ruler whose policies were not universally embraced in Ethiopia. As the consequence of a two-year delay by Queen Victoria of Great Britain in replying to a letter Tewodros had sent, the Emperor imprisoned several British officials at Makdela (Magdalla). All diplomatic efforts failed to secure their release. In July 1867 a military force under Sir Robert Napier was dispatched to Ethiopia to force the release of the British prisoners. Landing 3,000 men at Mulkutto on Annesley Bay on January 7, 1868, Napier led his army on a march of 650 km (400 mi) across the mountains, aided by dissatisfied elements of the population, especially in Tigray. Tewodros, his power waning and his army dwindling, set out for Makdela to meet the British. The mountain fortress was captured by Napier's force on April 13, 1868, and Tewodros committed suicide to avoid capture. The British then withdrew from the country. A war of succession followed. In 1871, Emperor Takla Giorgis was defeated by the ruler of Tigray, Kasa Mercha, who happened to be his brother-in-law. Kasa Mercha was crowned Johannis IV in 1872, but his authority was challenged by certain regional leaders, such as Menelik of Shewa. In 1878, he signed the Leche Agreement in an attempt to regularize the political relationship between emperor and princes. Unfortunately, this didn't prevent the attempts of outside forces to "divide and conquer" Ethiopia by negotiating with the various princes. Ethiopia's role in European politics resulted from French and British influence in the region. Ethiopia was one of the few territories which had not become a European colony, and Italy, a newcomer in the colonial bonanza, soon made

its designs known. Unlike France and the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Italy, formed by the forcible annexation of several Italian monarchies in the 1860s, was not a particularly free or democratic nation. Despite a shadowy constitutional structure, control of the government was in the hands of a king who appointed senators and most ministers, and even determined foreign policy. The Italian nation's army and navy left much to be desired in terms of leadership and general battle readiness, a situation that changed little with the passing decades. Nevertheless, the other powers found it economically convenient to allow Italy to act as their unofficial surrogate, especially if this served to curtail France's occupation of British territories or vice versa. Italy received Massawa from the British in 1885 and occupied several Red Sea ports in 1886. Italy defended its acquisition of these coastal territories on the basis of securing these for trade. Johannis was allied with the British in their war against Mahdist forces in Sudan, but attacked several of the Italian garrisons during a series of battles in 1887, and usually won. His troops were repulsed at Saati in January, but destroyed a force of 500 Italian troops at Dogali the next day. In March 1888, when he led a force of around 80,000 Ethiopians to besiege the Italian fort at Saati, the occupiers refused even to leave their refuge to engage the attackers. In March of the following year, Johannis died as a result of wounds inflicted during a battle against Mahdist forces and Menelik II, negus of Shewa, succeeded him as emperor. Born in 1844 as Sahle Miriam, Menelik II is often considered the founder of the Ethiopian nation as it exists today, having successfully united what were previously several disparate regions and peoples. This resulted from conquest as well as appeasement. He was king (negus) of Shewa from 1865 until 1889, when he became Emperor. The rapid modernisation of his nation was Menelik's greatest domestic achievement. Menelik II had moved his capital to what was to become Addis Ababa. A rinderpest epidemic spread by cattle imported by the Italians broke out in 1888. In combination with a severe drought and an increase in the locust population, a famine developed that was to last four years. Continued feuding among Ethiopian princes did little to help matters. In October 1889, Italy unilaterally declared Ethiopia a protectorate on the basis of the Treaty of Wechale, into which Italy had inserted a clause not present in the Amharic version of the document. (This seems incredible in the annals of diplomacy, but in fact Italian foreign policy of the period owed much to such tactics.) In the event, Italy had already secured control of Eritrea, to which Ethiopia's own claims were less than absolute. But Menelik had to unite his people if he was to confront the Italian threat successfully. This was a gradual process involving extensive technological modernization as much as political maneuvering, but he was eventually able to raise a large, well-armed multiethnic army of 100,000. Outside Adwa (or Adowa) on 2 March 1896, Menelik II personally led his army to defeat an Italian and Eritrean force of around 15,000 troops, of which a third were actually Italian troops. The Crispi government fell and the Italians retreated to



Eritrea. Menelik continued the modernization of his country. There was much to be done. Wider introduction of electricity, railways, telephones, schools, hospitals and paved roads were a few of his achievements. Though its ruler was Amharic and Christian, Ethiopia boasted absolute religious freedom. Upon his death in 1913, Menelik was succeeded by his grandson, Iyasu, who reigned only briefly. Iyasu was overthrown with the support of the Crown Council in 1916. Menelik's daughter, Zawditu, was crowned Empress in 1917, the same year in which the railroad from the port of Djibouti to Addis Ababa was completed, with the young Tafari Makonnen as regent and heir apparent. Kin to Menelik, Tafari was the son of Makonnen, cousin and advisor to the late Emperor. Makonnen was to have succeeded the Emperor but predeceased him. Tafari Makonnen, born at Ejarsa Goro, near Harer, in 1892, exercised considerable influence at court. He became King of Shewa in 1928. Following the death of Empress Zawditu in 1930, Tafari Makonnen was confirmed as Emperor by the Imperial Crown Council and ascended the Throne as Haile Selassie I, a name which means "Might of the Trinity." Like Menelik, Haile Selassie was known as a reformer and modernizer. He revised the constitution and sought to bring Ethiopia closer to the European style of monarchy and government, introducing various social welfare programs and attempting greater unification of Ethiopia's diverse peoples. It was at his urging that Ethiopia joined the League of Nations in 1923, having outlawed slavery.

**World War II:** It was Ethiopia's role in the Second World War that defined the nation's identity internationally for the second half of the twentieth century. The Italians invaded Ethiopia on 3 October 1935. Just prior to the fall of Addis Ababa in early May, the emperor, his staff, and part of what remained of his army, retreated into exile, stopping briefly to pray at one of Ethiopia's famous rock churches. The emperor addressed the League of Nations on 30 June. His impassioned plea for the liberation of his people is now famous, and resulted in limited trade sanctions against Italy, but it was several years before the world responded in an effective way. Meanwhile, Italian-backed forces murdered the monks of the Debre Libanos Monastery, and executed Archbishop Petros, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. From the seat of his government in exile in Bath, England, the Emperor sought international support, with no immediate results. However, Italy's declaration of war on the Allies in June 1940 and its subsequent seizure of British Somaliland two months later, paved the way for Allied military assistance. In early 1941, Haile Selassie and his troops arrived in Ethiopia with the British. The emperor re-entered Addis Ababa on 5 May, five years to the day after the capital's capture by the Italian troops. One of Haile Selassie's first acts was to ensure the protection of Italian prisoners and civilians in his dominions. In a 1947 treaty, Italy acknowledged its wrongdoing in Ethiopia and pledged to pay reparations.

**Ethiopia today:** The post-war years witnessed the emergence of enlightened and educated Ethiopian generations that brought modernity to the country's urban areas, and put Ethiopia in the forefront of Africa's post-independence leadership. Addis Ababa rivalled other African business and political capitals such as Cairo, Nairobi and Johannesburg as home to pan-African and international organizations and an air transport hub. Yet, and as it is the case with Third World countries, rural Ethiopia remained largely untouched by the country's urban modernisation and development. In February 1974 students, workers, and soldiers began a series of strikes and demonstrations that culminated on September 12, 1974, with the deposition of Haile Selassie by members of the armed forces. Placed under house arrest, Haile Selassie died the following year in mysterious circumstances. Much of the post-war progress was wasted in the 25 years of ideological and ethnic civil that followed: a strife that is believed to have tolled 100,000 in lost lives. During the same period, Ethiopia's socio-economic problems were further exacerbated by a decade of drought that culminated into the 1984 great African famine, and the exodus of the majority of most of the country's educated and professional population to the West and other African countries for greener pastures. In May 1991 the military regime was deposed and a national transitional government was set up in Addis Ababa, and a provisional government was established in Eritrea – a region that had been fighting for independence from Ethiopia for more than three decades earlier. After a referendum in 1993, Eritrea declared its independence, and Ethiopia recognized the new Eritrean government. In June 1994 Ethiopian voters elected representatives to a Constituent Assembly, charged with writing a new democratic constitution. A new constitution granting special rights to different ethnic groups in Ethiopia was ratified in December, and became effective in August 1995. In May 1995 a new legislative body, the House of People's Representatives, was elected, and in August the Constituent Assembly officially transferred power to the new legislature. The country was renamed the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, with a figurehead Presidency and executive Premiership. The federation of Ethiopia is currently composed of eleven states.

### Land

Ethiopia is the tenth largest country in Africa, covering 439,580 square miles (1,138,512 square kilometers) and is the major constituent of the landmass known as the Horn of Africa. It is bordered on the north and northeast by Eritrea, on the east by Djibouti and Somalia, on the south by Kenya, and on the west and southwest by Sudan.

The central plateau, known as the highlands, is surrounded on three sides by desert with a significantly lower elevation. The plateau is between six thousand and ten thousand feet above sea level, with the highest peak



being Ras Deshan, the fourth-tallest mountain in Africa. Addis Ababa is the third-highest capital city in the world.

The Great Rift Valley bisects the central plateau. The valley extends southwest through the country and includes the Danakil Depression, a desert containing the lowest dry point on the earth. In the highlands is Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, which supplies the great majority of water to the Nile River Valley in Egypt.

## People

While Ethiopians are predominantly Negroid, the more modern Ethiopians are not a single racial or ethnic group, a fact reflected in the diversity of their languages. In the year 2000, the population was approximately 61 million, with over eighty different ethnic groups. The Oromo, Amhara, and Tigreans account for more than 75 percent of the population, (35 %, 30 %, and 10 % respectively). Smaller ethnic groups include the Somali, Gurage, Afar, Awi, Welamo, Sidamo, and Beja. The urban population is estimated to be 11 % of the total population. The rural lowland population is composed of many nomadic and semi nomadic peoples. The nomadic peoples seasonally graze livestock, while the semi nomadic peoples are subsistence farmers. The rural highlands economy is based on agriculture and livestock-raising.

There are eighty-six known indigenous languages in Ethiopia: eighty-two spoken and four extinct. The vast majority of the languages spoken in the country can be classified within three families of the Afro-Asiatic super language family: the Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic. Semitic-language speakers predominantly live in the highlands in the center and north. Cushitic-language speakers live in the highlands and lowlands of the south-central region as well as in the north-central area. Omotic speakers live predominantly in the south. The Nilo-Saharan super language family accounts for about 2 percent of the population, and these languages are spoken near the Sudanese border. Amharic has been the dominant and official language for the last 150 years. The spread of Amharic has been strongly linked to Ethiopian nationalism. English is the most widely spoken foreign language and the language in which secondary school and university classes are taught. French is heard occasionally in parts of the country near Djibouti, formerly French Somaliland. Italian can be heard on occasion, particularly among the elderly in the Tigre region.

There has been religious freedom for centuries in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the oldest sub-Saharan African church, and the first mosque in Africa was built in the Tigre province. Christianity and Islam have coexisted peacefully for hundreds of years, and the Christian kings of

Ethiopia gave refuge to early Muslims in the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad during their persecution in southern Arabia. It is not uncommon for Christians and Muslims to visit each other's house of worship to seek health or prosperity.

## Djibouti

Djibouti is in northeast Africa, on the Red Sea coast, bordered by Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. As it is known today, Djibouti was created by France in the late nineteenth century during the colonial scramble for Africa. In 1977, it became independent after having been a protectorate and colony for more than a century.

## History

Djibouti's history has been shaped by the intricate relations between the Issa-Somali and the Afar. Before the colonial era, they were nomadic pastoralists and traders and were politically highly organized but had no state-forming tradition. The Afar had chiefdoms and four sultanates. When the French arrived, about 75 percent of the territory was inhabited by Afar nomads. The Issa had a decentralized political organization based on clan loyalty, although the ruler of Zeila, a trading center on the Somali coast, had great influence over them.

France created Djibouti as a colony and super-imposed a centralist state structure on local pastoral societies. Djibouti as a nation derives its identity from its strategic location and the economic importance of the port, as well as the aspirations of its two main ethnic communities that have created a social contract within the context of the state that allows them to maintain their independence.

## Land

Djibouti lies in a hot, arid area of the Horn of Africa. Its area is 8,960 square miles (23,200 square kilometers). The soil is rocky and sandy and lies on volcanic layers. In the hot and humid climate, rainfall is very low. Most of the soil is not suitable for agriculture, and only about 10 percent is used as pasture. The vegetation consists mainly of desert shrubs and acacia trees. There are only a few patches of perennial forest. The traditional mode of life was nomadic pastoralism, in which state borders were not recognized. Fishing in the Red Sea provides a limited source of income; horticulture is possible only on a small scale. The Bay of Tadjoura cuts into the country from the Gulf of Aden. The terrain is mainly a desertlike plain with some intermediate mountain ranges near Arta and the eastern border. There is one active volcano. There are seasonal streams that flow toward the sea or into the two salt lakes. Apart from Djibouti City, the capital and large urban



center, there are a few small towns: Tadjoura, Obock, Dikhil, Ali Sabieh, and Yoboki.

Although the government holds most of the land, urban land can be owned privately. Nomadic pastoralists control their traditional pasture areas through customary rights.

**State and People:**

The majority of Djibouti's population is formed by the country's two main ethnic groups, the Issa-Somali and the Afar, which developed shared identity and national consciousness based on social and cultural similarities between originally nomadic-pastoral populations that speak related languages, adhere to Islam, and share a way of life. The wealth brought by Djibouti's seaports unites the inhabitants, who share the idea of being an island of relative stability in a volatile region. The number of Issa and Gadabursi (the third largest group, also Somali) grew steadily in the twentieth century because of immigration from Somalia. The Isaak Somali (about 13 percent of the population) also originated in Somalia.

The country did not experience any prolonged civil war, and compromise has shaped the life of its people.

Djibouti's 1999 census sets the population at about 640,000 of ethnically diverse inhabitants, including Europeans (mainly French) and Arabs (mainly Yemenis). There is a sizable community of Ethiopians and refugees from Eritrea and Somalia. More than half the population lives in Djibouti City.

The main indigenous languages are Afar and Issa-Somali, both of which belong to the Cushitic language group. The official national languages are French, which is used in education and administration, and Arabic, which is spoken by Yemeni and other Arab immigrants.

In the urban culture, traditional social and cultural features of the indigenous populations tend to fuse and create new forms. In the countryside, the herders' seasonal migrations and trans-border crossings of Afar, Issa, and Gadabursi pastoralists show the mobility and free use of space necessary for the survival of humans and herds. These people have huts and furniture that can be easily packed and moved.

Descent and family and ethnic group membership remain important in the conclusion of marriages and in family life, especially in the countryside, where rituals around marriage and kinship are still widely observed. Afar have a traditional preference for patrilineal cross-cousin marriage; the Issa

and other Somalis are less strict. There is some Afar-Issa intermarriage.

In cities, members of extended families often live together and provide mutual support. Pastoralists among the Issa, Afar, and Gadabursi live and move together in extended kin groups, accompanied by allies and adopted members.

A notable social feature in Djibouti is the consumption of the light narcotic leaf *qat*, which is imported from Ethiopia. Qat is consumed recreationally by virtually all men, preferably after lunch, when government offices and work come to a standstill in the midday heat. The weed is also used in religious services, allegedly because it enhances concentration, delays sleep, and mutes the appetite.



### Appendix III

#### Rúhiyyih Khánum's Audience with Emperor Haile Selassie I at the Grand Palace in Addis Ababa, 16 October 1969

"On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1969," wrote Mrs. Violette Nakhjavání, the companion and chronicler of Rúhiyyih Khánum's long and extensive travels in Africa and Asia,<sup>141</sup> "Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum left her home in Haifa and did not return there until April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973". Landing on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1969 at Entebbe Airport in Uganda, Rúhiyyih Khánum started the 'Great African Safari' that took her, through arduous travels and mostly in her 1968-model Land Rover, from the extreme East of the Continent to its West and from its centre to the most southern country. At the onset of the actual time of "two years, three months and fourteen days"<sup>142</sup> that she spent on African soil, after touring the three countries of East Africa, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, she landed at Addis Ababa's Airport on 15 October 1969, for a memorable visit to Ethiopia where she stayed for 33 days that "had been packed with the most wonderful events"; during which "she had visited 13 towns, cities and villages and met with over 2,500 people... [and] had had several press conferences and her visit to the members of Ethiopian royalty had been broadcast over the radio."<sup>143</sup>

In what Mrs. Nakhjavání considers as not only the apogee of her trip to Ethiopia, but also 'the high point of ... [her] visit to the continent of Africa', Rúhiyyih Khánum had her audience with Emperor Haile Selassie I, on the day after her arrival in the country. While Rúhiyyih Khánum did not leave us an account of this audience, we are fortunate to have the story narrated by two very reliable and careful sources: Mrs. Violette Nakhjavání and Mr. Gila Bahta. Reading of the two versions immediately gives the fact that the two narrators did not compare notes, simply because Mr. Gila Bahta wrote his recollection as late as 2004. However, a comparison by the reader is quite interesting.

Having been in charge of arranging the meeting, Gila's focus was on the unexpected circumstances of the event (which he seems to have kept to himself), the equally unexpected near-royal treatment of the guest, his feelings as a subject who was made to sit in the presence of his Monarch in violation of a strict Royal protocol, and, in particular, Rúhiyyih Khánum's decision to invite herself as a guest at his home.

141 *The Great African Safari, Preface, p ix*

142 *Ibid*

143 *Ibid, p 57*

Violette, on the other hand, was fascinated by the series of gates that they had to pass through to reach to the inner chambers of the Emperor; the small royal dog that sniffed at them and ascertained their eligibility to make the audience; the imperial lions that Rúhiyyih Khánum declined to pat; the furniture and settings of the meeting chamber and, of course, her personal impressions of the Emperor whom she saw for the first time – all being matters that were commonplace to Gila

Both of them, however, spoke of the unusual gesture of the Emperor when he bade Gila to sit down in his Royal Presence. In their similarities and differences the two sides of the story serve as the two facets of a golden coin, each one of them complementing the other. It is now left to the reader to delve into the two versions and judge for him/herself.

#### (1) The audience as narrated by Mr. Gila Bahta<sup>144</sup>

I reported [my regular and intimate] meetings [with Emperor Haile Selassie] to the Universal House of Justice. The Supreme Body responded by asking me to request an audience for Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum with His Imperial Majesty.

I contacted the Minister of the Palace for an appointment, but he told me that appointments are granted only to heads of state.

"Rúhiyyih Khánum is the Head of the Bahá'í World Community that enlists about five million believers." I elaborated, "She is also a notable writer."

"Let me then report your request to His Imperial Majesty!" He told me, while I prayerfully remained in the waiting lounge for the outcome.

"His Imperial Majesty response is: "Let her come! We will receive her." The Minister broke the exciting news.

Finally, the long-awaited visit of Amatu'l-Bahá to Ethiopia came. At Addis Ababa Airport, arrangements were made for her reception at the VIP Lounge, and without the need to pass through the arrival formalities. However, she preferred to meet us on the tarmac near the airplane, but we made sure that she did not undergo any formality.

When she was about to arrive into Addis Ababa, the National Spiritual Assembly of the country had decided that Amatu'l-Bahá be accommodated at a first class hotel. This was because most of the Bahá'í homes in Addis pressed the NSA for the honour of hosting her. So it went that Amatu'l-Bahá and her all-time travel companion, Mrs. Violette Nakhjavání, spent their first day in the hotel as planned. Next morning, I drove Amatu'l-Bahá and her companion, in my vehicle, to the Palace. Upon reaching the gates, the guards stopped me from driving to the

144 From a manuscript that Mr. Gila Bahta mailed to the writer sometime in 2004.

Palace Courtyard.

I got out of the vehicle, with Amatu'l-Bahá and Mrs. Nakhjavání still seated there, and went to see the Minister of the Palace. I informed the Minister that the guest is in the car and that the guards refused her to proceed with the vehicle to the Palace Courtyard for the meeting. I requested him to give orders to the guards to permit the vehicle's entrance.

"Let her come into the Palace on foot" He told me.

"If she is not allowed to enter the Place while riding her vehicle," I replied, "I will take her back."

Faced with my insistence, he said "Let me then inform His Majesty."

His Majesty did not only agree that Amatu'l-Bahá should be allowed to enter the Palace with the vehicle, but also he questioned whether the Minister had spread the red carpet – a treatment offered only to a visiting head of state. When the Minister answered "No", His Majesty instructed "Do it!" And thus all those that were in the Palace geared themselves up to receive an important personality.

The Palace gates were flung opened and I drove the vehicle to the edge of the red carpet, and came down to open the door for her. It was a sight to see and remember for ever! Amatu'l-Bahá came down like a queen, dressed in white from head to toes with a beauty and elegance that struck everybody around.

She, while being followed by Violette and myself, walked over the red carpet into the Court where His Majesty was waiting. He arranged the seats in a manner that she would sit very near to him.

Having greeted the Emperor and introduced her companion, Amatu'l-Bahá got seated<sup>145</sup> and started the discussion by thanking the Emperor for meeting her almost immediately after she came to the Palace.

"Your Imperial Majesty" she said, "I have always been admiring of your greatness, both as Emperor and a man."

Then she started explaining the Bahá'í Faith so eloquently and beautifully that His Majesty was happy and satisfied with her elucidations. Then the Emperor started placing his questions.

"How many Bahá'ís do you have in Ethiopia?" His Majesty enquired.

"We have some." Amatu'l-Bahá replied in her usual wisdom and humility.

<sup>145</sup> While Amatu'l-Bahá and her companion could shake hands with the Emperor and sit face to face with him, Mr. Gila Bahta, being a subject would customarily prostrate himself upon sighting his Monarch then stand up in great reverence throughout the meeting. In fact, not a single Ethiopian subject, including the Primer Minister, ever sat in the presence of the Emperor.

Although the protocol demands that the Monarch speaks His language in official meetings, yet he was so pleased and informal that he reacted to this statement in English.

"Why some!" he exclaimed.

"Taking into consideration the Christians and Muslims" she continued, "we are some. But there are many Bahá'ís in the country."

At the end of the meeting, the Emperor thanked her for coming to Ethiopia and paying Him this visit, and allowed us to withdraw.

I drove Amatu'l-Bahá in the same dignified manner to the hotel, while a sense of great happiness prevailed.

"Gila," Amatu'l-Bahá surprised me, "You have no house?"

"I do have a house." I answered, "I have even prepared rooms for you and Violette. However, the NSA decided for you to stay in the Hotel, as many others were eager to host you in their homes."

"The Assembly cannot order me." She responded in a jubilant mood, "Take me to your house!"

I was thrilled to this sudden decision, and took Amatu'l-Bahá and Mrs. Nakhjavání to my house. Thus my family and I spent one week in Heaven.

During Amatu'l-Bahá's visit to Addis Ababa, she had intensive teaching talks at many important places.<sup>146</sup> There was a tremendous response to her talks about the Faith, and many newspapers wrote about her.

I was also blessed to have arranged for her visit to Asmara, which was then the capital of the Region of Eritrea. The Governor of Asmara, being a good friend of mine and a man of great courage, gave Amatu'l-Bahá full freedom to teach the Faith in his city. The citizens and officials of Asmara were quite interested in the Faith and a good deal of teaching took place.

In contrast, the Governor of Gondar, who was also a good friend of mine, agreed that she would come and teach the Faith there freely but was not as daring as his peer in Asmara. As he could not face Gondar's fanatical clergy, he hid himself during the visit and would not meet her. However, the opposition created by the clergy helped to spread the Faith in Gondar. Sometime later a certain number of Gondar's prominent people embraced the Faith.

<sup>146</sup> In her diary of Ruhyyih Khanum's African travels, Mrs. Violette Nakhjavání gave a well detailed account of her itinerary both in Addis Ababa and the rest of Ethiopia, cf. *The Great African Safari*, pp. 26-58



At the end of this historical visit, Amatu'l-Bahá expressed her great happiness at meeting the Emperor.

"Now I have the key to all of Africa!" She noted, "This man has his weight." She also requested us to pray for him.

This historic visit of Amatu'l-Bahá generated a wave of favourable activities for the Faith, which continued for a long time afterwards in all the places of Ethiopia and Eritrea that she had been to.

It happened that, several years later<sup>147</sup>, I went to the Holy Land and had the blessing of meeting Amatu'l-Bahá there.

"What happened to that man?" She immediately asked.

"I am sorry he did not embrace the Faith." I replied, "He lost the good chance of having the blessing of Bahá'u'lláh.

"The King of Samoa" I continued "grasped the opportunity, while my Monarch missed it."

"The King of Samoa is just a king," She remarked, "but this man had his weight on the world. Had he embraced the Faith he would have made a big change. During his reign, the clergy in Ethiopia wielded a tremendous influence on the masses."

## (2) The audience as narrated by Mrs. Violette Nakhjavání<sup>148</sup>

The high point of Amatu'l-Bahá's visit to Ethiopia, in fact to the continent of Africa, was her audience with His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I on 16 October. The Chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly, Gila Bahta, a well-known lawyer in the city, had asked for this audience and the actual confirmation of it only arrived shortly before we left our hotel for the Palace. The Grand Palace was the official residence of the Emperor and also where he received his special guests. We had to go through several gates and gatekeepers, and wait for a while until Gila received the go-ahead from the Minister of the Court.

At last we entered the Palace itself and again waited for some time in a small antechamber. It was while we were here that a small dog was ushered ceremoniously into the room by an attendant. It looked us up and down, sniffed at us and then quietly left. Soon after, Mr. Tzehafi Tezaz Teferra Worque Kidane Wolde, the Officer of the Court and also the Minister of the Pen, the private secretary of the Emperor, escorted us into a spacious drawing room. It was furnished much in the tradition of a comfortable, tasteful, European parlour, and was evidently

<sup>147</sup> Most probably, this visit took place in April 1983 during the International Convention and the appointment of Mr. Gila Bahta to the Continental Board of Counsellors. By this time the Emperor had lost his throne and died in mysterious circumstances.

<sup>148</sup> *The Great African Safari*, pp 27-32

used more as an information reception room and office than as a Chamber of State.

The Emperor was seated before us, Amatu'l-Bahá bowed very low according to the Ethiopian tradition, and we followed suit. The Minister of the Pen told us to come forward and shake hands with the Emperor – this invitation was directed to Rúhiyyih Khánum and me only. Gila, who was an Ethiopian and the subject of the Emperor, was not called forward and did not shake his hand. When Rúhiyyih Khánum took the Emperor's hand, all she said was "Your Majesty", in a reverent voice. He motioned her to be seated in one of the two armchairs placed to the right of his armchair, hardly six feet away from him, and I sat next to her. He instructed Gila Bahta to sit opposite him on one of a row of chairs against the wall, the farthest from his seat. This, we later learned, was quite contrary to Ethiopian custom as the subjects do not generally sit in the presence of the ruler.

It was evidently to be a European interview. His Imperial Majesty was such a familiar figure that a description is scarcely called for. Short and slight in built, he was a commanding figure when one was in his presence. Although his hair and beard were streaked with grey, his eyes were brilliant and not only full of life and a keen intelligence, but at times reflecting a surprising degree of warmth and kindness in them that showed the soul of this great man.

When we were seated, the Emperor said something in Amharic to his Secretary or Chamberlain, who did all the translating and was the other person in the room with us. The only additional creature there was the little dog that we had seen earlier in the waiting room, the Emperor's dog, which was seated on its own cushion. They told us later that the dog feels the sincerity of the guests, and if he barks, the audience is cancelled!

The Secretary turned to Rúhiyyih Khánum and said, "Proceed". She afterwards told us how much this directive disconcerted her, as it sounded as if she had come with a petition of some kind. But at the time she showed no sign of being disturbed. Instead she asked if she might express what was really in her heart, naturally and openly, for she wanted to tell His Majesty how deeply she was honoured and moved by being received by him. She had so long admired him, she said, "as a King and as a man" because of the way he had conducted himself in the face of the many trials and hardships of his life, and by the way he had overcome them.

Throughout the entire interview, which lasted a full half-hour, the sincerity and true depth of her feelings for this King were very apparent. Even her voice was affected a times, for one could hear the emotion in it, and this was in no way lost on the Emperor, who, whatever else he had expected, had certainly not expected such sincerity. I think it moved him too. Gila Bahta said he had never seen the Emperor so informal, that he seemed to be enjoying the meeting with Amatu'l-Bahá very much. Indeed the length of time he accorded us would seem to confirm this, as his antechamber was full of people who no doubt had urgent matters for his attention.

Although the Emperor knew English quite well, for the most part he addressed Rúhiyyih Khánum in Amharic, through his Secretary, who would then translate, prefixing his remarks with "His Imperial Majesty says". Every now and then the Emperor would speak a few words

to her himself in English, but finding discussion on philosophical matters too complicated, would fall back into Amharic. One of the first things he said was, "Do you have many Bahá'ís in my country?" to which Rúhiyyih Khánum replied, "Some, Your Majesty," and added, "Under the protection of Your Majesty's wing."

There were certain points that she was able to explain clearly, as the Emperor asked her questions, and listened attentively to her answers. All in all, it was quite a remarkable conversation. In the course of this interview – and no attempt is made here to give either a verbatim account or follow the sequence of these remarks – she said she wished him to know that, since obedience to government was one of the cardinal teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, he would find not more loyal and obedient subject in his Kingdom than the Bahá'ís. When she had mentioned the non-political characteristics of the Bahá'ís, His Majesty stated that in his country there was complete freedom of religion, that it was comprised of both Muslims and Christians, and that even the pagan who worshipped a tree was free to do so in his land, as he was worshipping the spirit of God behind the tree, so to speak. Indeed, he spoke so beautifully and with such tolerance that it was a revelation to us. He also deplored the divisive spirit among religious leaders, and said that he constantly strove to promote unity and cooperation amongst them.

Then he turned to Rúhiyyih Khánum and asked, "Why do you think the leaders of the churches don't want to unite?" She was slightly taken aback, but answered with instinctive simplicity and wisdom. "Your Majesty," she said, "I think there may be two reasons for this. One arises from a deep belief that their ideas are the only true ones and therefore must at all costs be defended. The second may arise from the desire of personal gain, for if the different sects and churches were to unite, these leaders might all lose their jobs." It was her honesty and candour that impressed him, I think.

Rúhiyyih Khánum was able to set forth in lucid language the Bahá'í concept that religion is a natural phenomenon in this world, a life principle that will always unfold as man matures on this planet, that all Revelations are from God, that Bahá'u'lláh is the Revealer of God's Faith for this Day, and that there will always be, in the future, further unfoldments of this divine truth. She also stressed the point that she felt we must all be on our guard against the prejudice of the educated against the illiterate.

When we rose to take our leave, Amatu'l-Bahá asked if she might present a gift to His Imperial Majesty, though it was only a modest token of her esteem. She then took from me the silver box she had wrapped in silk, saying this was the workmanship of her husband's native land, Persia, and handed it to the Secretary. To our surprise, he unwrapped it and presented it to the Emperor to survey. We then bowed low, the Emperor again shook hands, and we backed respectfully towards the door.

Just as we reached it His Majesty said something to his Secretary, who approached Rúhiyyih Khánum and asked her to wait a moment. As we stood there, he opened a cabinet against a wall, took out a box and handed it to the Emperor, who asked Rúhiyyih Khánum to approach. Opening the small case, he showed her the gold medal of his Coronation, saying that he wished to give this to her, not because of any intrinsic value it might have but as a token of his esteem.

Rúhiyyih Khánum accepted it graciously, thanked him, and we departed.

Thus ended what must be considered a historic interview in every way. When we left the room, the Secretary accompanied us to the outside door. Rúhiyyih Khánum told him, "Today my deep desire and a wish of over thirty years has been fulfilled. I have never had any desire to meet the Kings and Presidents," she added, "but this King I have always wished to meet."

Outside in the garden just as we were passing beside a large enclosure which housed the Imperial lions, someone asked Rúhiyyih Khánum if she wished to pat the creatures, as they were pretty tame. She looked at those fierce yellow eyes levelled at her and said, "No, thank you, I have just had a most wonderful interview with His Imperial Majesty; I don't want to be eaten by his lions!"

That afternoon a distinguished Bahá'í of Addis Ababa, Mr. Gayem Belay, came to the hotel to see Rúhiyyih Khánum and expressed his sentiments, which I felt were those of the entire Bahá'í community of Ethiopia. These were his words: "I have come to thank you on behalf of all the Bahá'ís. Today you have entered the heavy iron gates which are now wide open before us. Today, though there are no signs of any clouds, the rain of God's grace and the bounties of Bahá'u'lláh have been showered upon us and have refreshed and revived us."



## APPENDIX IV

## The 1972 Case of Tanta, Egypt

During the long pioneering career of Mr. Sabrí Elias (1933 – 1987), he returned to Egypt intermittently for pressing family and other reasons. By 1959 after more than five years of untold hardships in Djibouti, it was necessary for the family to return to Egypt in order for the children to attend the university in Egypt. This was barely three years before the start of a long period of oppression of the Bahá'ís in Mr. Sabrí's own country. The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Egypt took the form of disbanding their spiritual assemblies, confiscating all Bahá'í endowments (except Bahá'í cemeteries) and proscribing all Bahá'í activities, by virtue of Presidential Decree 263 for the year 1960. A few years later, the opposition assumed greater and more serious dimensions. On several occasions, a number Bahá'ís who were mostly former members of the disbanded assemblies were arrested and taken to courts on various false accusations.

Because of Mr. Sabrí's prolonged absence from Egypt, he was neither a member of its spiritual assemblies nor was he on the list of Bahá'ís known to the authorities. This kept him and his wife safe from the first three waves of persecution that took place in 1965, 1967, and 1970 respectively. However, after their 1970-71 pioneering trip to Libya and various encounters with the authorities for visas and passport extensions, Mr. and Mrs. Elias were on top of the list of well-known Bahá'ís. When the fourth and most spectacular of all persecutions took place towards the end of February 1972, Mr. and Mrs. Sabrí Elias, as well as their children and many other close and distant Bahá'í relatives, were included.

The platform for these events was the Town of Tanta, a provincial capital located exactly at the centre of the Nile delta, 80 km to the north of Cairo. The crackdown was masterminded by a senior security officer who came into seemingly favourable contact with the Bahá'ís at the beginning of his career, but proved afterwards to be a dedicated enemy of the Faith. Having failed in a previous attempt to inflict the desired damage on the Bahá'í Community (in the Town of Súháj, Upper Egypt, 1970), he decided to deal another blow. His dates of preference on starting each of his attempts was the Bahá'í Intercalary Days, known as Ayyám-i-Há, which fall every year from 26 February to 1 March, just before the beginning of the month of fasting. Having been transferred to Tanta as its Provincial Security Chief<sup>149</sup>,

149 This Officer was subsequently promoted to the highest position of Egypt's State Security Department. Again, he wanted use his position to orchestrate a third attempt on the Bahá'ís of Egypt, this time at the national level in 1985 but, again, on Ayyám-i-Há! Rounding up 42 renowned Bahá'ís from

he sent his informers in Tanta and the neighbouring towns to find the Bahá'ís and list their names and addresses. Since he had already failed to prove that the 'Bahá'ís were enemies of the State and agents of Zionism', he tried this time to label them as 'heretics, apostates, and enemies of Islam'. To obtain the arrest warrants, which were given by an equally fanatic public prosecutor, this chief officer did not need to find Bahá'ís who were actually engaged in teaching their Faith. He simply was asked to provide the names of Bahá'ís who did not deny their Faith upon their arrest. Several other officers and prison officials joined the mastermind of this plot, gladly offering their full support and well conceived ideas.

After arresting the entire adult Bahá'í population in Tanta and the neighbouring towns, the plotters obtained the names of the Bahá'í relatives of the prisoner, who might be living in other parts of Egypt. The arrests went on for almost one month. Eventually the number of Bahá'í prisoners became ninety-three in total. They were brought in chains by trains from all over Egypt: from Alexandria on the shores of the Mediterranean to Aswan, near the border with Sudan. They ranged from teenager boys and girls to aged men and women. While some of the defendants were arrested in their homes, others were simply the relatives of prisoners, who were, in turn, picked up from the streets of Tanta when they came to investigate the matter and see to the comfort of their incarcerated kin. The number of prisoners was brought to the welcome number of 95<sup>150</sup>, two mothers were allowed to bring along their suckling babies.

Mr. Sabrí Elias was among those arrested during the second week of rounding up. His brother, Mr. Subhí Elias, who was better known to the authorities for his long record of service on the National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt and Sudan, and that of North East Africa.<sup>151</sup> Mr. Subhí was incidentally in Cairo and could not be arrested. Mr. Sabrí was arrested alone while at his home in Alexandria (120 km North-west of Tanta) and brought in chains and in severe winter weather to Tanta security headquarters pending preliminary interrogation. On Saturday, 11 March (1972), both Mrs. Raissa and her eldest son Hussein came to Tanta to inquire about Mr. Sabrí and see to the possibility of easing his hardship and appointing

various parts of Egypt, starting with the leader of the Community at the time, Mr. Hussein Bicar (a relative of Mr. Gila Bahta, as mentioned in Chapter 8, under 'Marriage of Mr. Gila Bahta'). Instead of inflicting the damage he wished, the ensuing lawsuit gave the Bahá'ís the legal right to own their literature and celebrate their holy days, and hold their Nineteen Day Feasts. In 1987 there was a mutiny in the paramilitary police barracks that he could not contain. Consequently he was sacked from his job. Ironically, the mutiny and sacking were on Ayyám-i-Há!

150 Bahá'ís recite the Greatest Name (Allah-u-Abhá) 95 times as part of their daily obligatory prayer.

151 On disbanding the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of East Africa in 1961, its domicile was transferred to Addis Ababa.



a lawyer to defend him. Outside the security headquarters, they spotted a large police truck packed with several Bahá'ís who were then escorted, under heavy guards to the Public Prosecutor's Office. Mrs. Raissa saw Mr. Sabrí among the passengers and, spontaneously, walked towards the truck, called Mr. Sabrí's name and greeted him. She was immediately surrounded by security plainclothesmen and pushed into the truck to join Mr. Sabrí. Hussein was watching from a safe distance, but it was only a matter of a few days before he was arrested in a similar manner when he was trying to do something for his imprisoned parents.

Since the aim of the plotters was to collect as many Bahá'ís as possible, it was easy for them to get the names of other family members and bring them, in chains, to Tanta Prison. Safa, the second son, was then serving in the Navy as a conscript. He was brought from the Navy barracks in Alexandria to Tanta in a very spectacular and rough manner. Carmel, the eldest daughter, had been a resident of Libya with her husband since her marriage the year before. However, Malakout, the last born, was a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria and was arrested and brought under escort in a no less inhuman fashion. A few days later, Mr. Subhí Elias walked into the security headquarters and offered himself for arrest to the bewilderment of the officials.

While no mention was ever made in the press of the three previous waves of persecution against Bahá'ís, the plotters of Tanta started a massive campaign in almost all the Egyptian newspapers and magazines. The campaign even spread to all the Arab countries without exception. Incidentally, some newspapers of the neighbouring Arab countries published excellent reports in favour of the Faith and went further to wonder at the steadfastness of the Bahá'í prisoners and the strength of their faith throughout this episode. At first, the news of the arrests appeared briefly in the semi-official Egyptian newspapers, with a summary of the initial allegations released to the press by the plotters. Accusations such as 'the intention of the Bahá'ís to change the well-established traditions of the Egyptian society', 'to undermine the authority of Islam and belittle the high station of revealed religions', and 'their close relationship with the Zionist State' were enough to instigate the public opinion and prepare the masses for the next phase. Later, pictures of the main defendants and a distorted version of their verbal statements were published at length, almost on a daily basis.

Inside the prison, the plan was to make the conditions as hard as possible for the Bahá'ís, in an effort to destroy their will and hasten the time of recanting of their Faith. No food or money was allowed to come to the prisoners from whatever relatives remained outside. The meals offered to the Bahá'í prisoners were those offered to convicted criminals. The

heads of the male prisoners, irrespective of their age, was clipped bare and they were not allowed to shave during the entire period of incarceration. All prisoners were given worn-out and dirty cheap-linen uniforms. Except for two old and flimsy blankets placed on a bare asphalt floor, no other bedding was allowed. The men were confined to isolated cells, one cell for each prisoner, but the women were all crammed in one large room with hardly enough space to lie down for rest.

In sheer violation of the Egyptian prison regulations, the Bahá'í prisoners were allowed to leave their cells only for about ten minutes every twenty-four hours, while the regulations stated that prisoners were to leave their cells for two one-hour recreation periods every day. Such privileges were accorded to the Bahá'í inmates on paper only. The jailer in charge was instructed to record in his books that the Bahá'ís were taken out of their cells for the customary recreation, while they were, in reality, confined to their dark and cold cells. The cells, which were fitted with one door and two opposite windows that were too high to reach, lacked window-shutters and electricity and were barren of any furniture except a hard asphalt floor and two buckets, one for drinking water and the other for sanitary use. The Egyptian winter of 1972 was of a record severity and the prisoners could hardly keep themselves warm in the constant draft of wind that would flow into their cells by day and night. One morning during the ten-minute 'recreation period' which was spent in the bathrooms, Mr. Sabrí complained to his fellow-prisoners that he had to spend the whole night pacing his cell in the darkness, in order to keep warm.

To add to the plight of the Bahá'í prisoners, the other prisoners, who were imprisoned for crimes such as murder, robbery, and drug-peddling, were ordered to ill-treat them. To incite the prisoners further, the prison officials circulated various false allegations against the Bahá'ís and warned against associating with them. In return for untold insults the Bahá'ís showed extreme love and respect to everyone. After weeks of close observation and bewilderment, the guards ignored the recommendation of the jailers and showed extreme friendship and affection towards the Bahá'ís.

After a few weeks passed the impatient chief-officer and his followers saw no sign of a concession from their dauntless prisoners. Someone came with the idea of enlisting the help of the knowledgeable Muslim clergy. A notable Muslim clergyman and a reluctant Christian bishop and a group of press reporters and cameramen were invited for a face-to-face encounter with the Bahá'ís. At this meeting - which took place in the hospital ward of Tanta prison, watched over by the chief prosecutor, the Prison Commander, and several security officials - the real strength of the prisoners and the compelling validity of their proofs became evident. The



questions addressed to the defendants by the clergy were quite superficial: Mr. and Mrs. Elias were at the forefront of the Bahá'ís and they started to overwhelm the audience with their mastery of Bahá'í proofs from both the Bible and the Qur'án. Mrs. Raissa went further and quoted many passages that she knew by heart from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>152</sup> The meeting yielded no fruit except a ceremonial under-camera pose by the Muslim debater shaking hands with the reluctant Bishop who did not say a single word throughout the debate.

To avoid any embarrassment of the same sort, the plotters brought further Muslim and Christian<sup>153</sup> clergymen for several more debates, this time in the absence of the press. Given the chance to speak more freely, the Bahá'ís were able to end every debate victoriously. At one debate, which was attended by the Prison Commander, the Muslim clergy mentioned some of the physical miracles attributed to Prophet Mohammed and asked the Bahá'ís whether Bahá'u'lláh did such supernatural things. The Bahá'ís replied that one miracle of Bahá'u'lláh is that he was able to unite both Christian and Muslim believers under one new Faith. To this statement, the Prison Commander said that the true miracle would be if these Bahá'í prisoners were able to leave the Prison, since in his opinion they would not regain their freedom as long as they continued to uphold their Faith.

A few days later, the day of the trial came. On the 14th of April 1972, in a court packed with pressmen, officials and other prominent people, the defence lawyers managed to refute the allegations of the prosecution and the security officials and obtained the release of all the Bahá'í prisoners. At the time of implementing the decision of the court, the Prison Commander preferred to leave the action of release to his subordinates and remained at his residence. He did not have the courage to declare that the 'miracle' that he described was fulfilled!

<sup>152</sup> During her speech, Mrs. Raissa quoted the following passage from Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to the Shah of Persia.

"This is but a leaf which the winds of the will of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised, have stirred. Can it be still when the tempestuous winds are blowing? Nay, by Him Who is the Lord of all Names and Attributes! They move it as they list." [Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh, p 57]

In order to distract the attention of the listeners from the powerful flow of the Word of God, the Muslim debater criticized the linguistic style of the Tablet. He alleged that Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor that He was "a leaf" violates the sound rules of Arabic. To give a good example of his own mastery of Arabic, the clergyman quoted the common metaphor that 'death clinches its claws'. A few weeks after this debate, this clergyman died!

<sup>153</sup> The aim was to win the Muslim-origin Bahá'ís back to Islam, and those of Christian background to Christianity. Such debates would normally put Muslim background Bahá'ís face-to-face with Muslim clergymen, and Christian-origin converts with priests.



In Tanta to attend the first hearing of the case after release from prison mid-1972



## APPENDIX V

## Sabrí the Poet

The fact that Mr. Sabrí Elias, in spite of having had no formal education, was a gifted poet, is in itself an example of the creative power of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. For him, faith was a love affair. The moment he learned about the Bahá'í Faith from his uncle, the late Mr. Ibráhím Abdu'l-Masíh, and his brother, the late Mr. Subhí Elias, he became instantly and permanently immersed in the ocean of its love. At first, he loved the Faith because of the magical spiritual transformation it had for his two mentors. Later, this love took the form of a deep immersion that grew more and more as he dived deep into the ocean of the Bahai Writings and discovered the peerless pearls of the words of God.

Sabré began to express his ecstasy at his new found treasure in poetry. For this reason, most of his poetry dwells upon the praise of God as well as his adoration of the Central Figures of the Faith. In one of his most moving odes addressed to Persia, he extols the boundless Bounties of God's Manifestation for this Age and laments the heedlessness and cruelty of the people of Iran. Another favourite poetical subject was the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, which Mr. Elias portrayed in a very simple and spontaneous, yet eloquent, style.

At the time of the passing of Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, Sabré was a youth of fifteen who was still investigating the Cause of God. Later he had the bounty of meeting Shoghi Effendi for the first time in 1933, when Sabré was a 'ball of fire' embarking on a glorious pioneering career that lasted throughout his entire lifetime. He was to have the same privilege on two occasions afterwards: in 1937 upon his abrupt return from Ethiopia because of the Italian invasion, and in 1942 with his wife Raissa and their first born child before returning to Ethiopia for a second pioneering term. In the majestic, yet kind, person of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of his Beloved Faith, Sabré found the object of his adoration.

Mr. Sabré missed the bounty of setting his eyes upon the peerless figure of the Centre of the Covenant, Abdu'l-Bahá. Now, here he was, face to face with the living Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith! At long last, he had achieved his long sought-after spiritual union with the beloved Guardian! In his taped memoirs, Mr. Sabré spoke of his three pilgrimages. He spoke of how Shoghi Effendi had lovingly prepared him for the task ahead. He related the counsels of the Beloved Guardian on how he should teach, endure countless tests, establish spiritual assemblies, and choose a life partner.

Sabré told us, too, of the promises he received from Shoghi Effendi of the great future ahead, and that he would always pray for him at the Holy Shrines. He described the joy and gladness that filled the heart of Shoghi Effendi when Sabré returned to him victoriously from the first pioneering mission to 'Abyssinia' and the praise that the Guardian showered upon him.

What Mr. Sabré did not tape was the special bond that tied him to his master and the object of his adoration. He was either hesitant to speak of a very intimate and special relationship that tied him to Shoghi Effendi or, perhaps, could not find adequate words best to describe it. Fortunately, apparently during a state of a great emotional surge and a longing to see his Beloved Guardian for another time, Mr. Sabré left to posterity a very moving and most able description of his love for Shoghi Effendi in poetry!

In a poem dedicated to Shoghi Effendi, Mr. Sabré expresses what he declined to tape in his memoirs. Here, Mr. Sabré - who did not see his father whom he lost when he was still a suckling baby, and later suffered the painful separation from his mother - considers Shoghi Effendi as his real father. The poem explains how Sabré, betrayed and attacked by his eldest uncle who was at the same time his legal guardian, found refuge and shelter in the person of his spiritual Guardian.

His devoted wife, Mrs. Raissa Elias, was the subject of two unique poems. He composed the lengthiest and most descriptive of these poems in May 1978 in Djibouti: It happened that Mrs. Raissa suffered a serious accident, breaking her hip joint and pelvis and risking permanent disability. He remained in Djibouti while Raissa went to England for major and delicate surgery that was arranged for by the Bahá'í surgeon Dr. Nabil Mustafa. Alone and desperately waiting for news of her, Mr. Sabré composed this poem. The inspiration for this poem came at midnight and during the early hours of the morning: he taped his verses as they came into his mind. With unique eloquence and spontaneous simplicity, in the span of thirty verses, Mr. Sabré summed up Raissa's entire life and described his matchless love and deep appreciation for her.

As it is the case with poetry, it is better appreciated if read in the original language - Arabic. On the following pages some of Sabré's poems are presented to readers who understand this language.

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## (Footnotes)

1 Courtesy BBC "Timeline: Ethiopia"

## نبذة من أشعار الحبيب الراحل صبري الياس

## 1. قصيدة الشكر لحضرة ولي الأمر

ومحننا فيضا من لدنك أحاطنا	جدد الروح وأحيا مواتنا
وظللنا غمامك من حر اللظى	وأحيانا نسيمك من بعد الفنا
أنا من أحرقتني الجفا والصـ	د والزجر وطول العنا
حرمت مياه الود لم أذق لقطرة	فجف عودي في صبايا وانحنى
رزنت في أب عيناى لم تره	كذلك أمة فرق الدهر بيننا
وعشيت في دنيا الهوان بحضرة	أشاهد الحقد في الناس لامنا
رأيت ذنبا ترتدى م الشاة جلدها	وأقسم القوم أن الذنب محمنا
لكن نداء الله أيقظ باطني	فرحت بأمر الله مؤمنا
أنادى من في الشر عاشوا وما اهتموا	ما ضر لو جربوا الخير ما هنا
وفي سبيل الله لم اخش معتد	وبين وحوش الأرض سرت آمنة
فيا ليتنى ألقى حياتي لأجلكم	فإن الفدا في رضاك هو المنى
وإني لمشتاق إلى الكأس التي	فاز بها السابقون قبلنا
نالها الأحباب في عصر مضى	يا ليتنا فزنا بما يا ليتنا
تركوا الجسوم وطاروا لعليانهم	وبقينا نحن كالأسرى بألقاصنا

## 2. ذكرى صعود حضرة عبد البهاء

ناح الحمام فهل رنى لبلاي	أم مرت الذكرى على الورقاء
ماذا دهى الأطياف حتى أفا	قد بدلت تغريدها ببكاء
هل ذكرى غصن الله قد مرت بما	فبكت على ذكرى الحبيب الثاني



ذكري الصعود لاج في أحشائي  
 بل شئت أبناءها بجفاء  
 وتورطت في فتنة الفقهاء  
 تفدين أنت لأجله بدماء  
 فغدوت مثل الجنة الفيحاء  
 موسى أتاه باليد البيضاء  
 وفتحت باب السجن في عكاء  
 لأحاطها الأرياح بالأنواء  
 طلع الصباح وبان بالأضواء  
 وجه يشع لظهره بصفاء  
 يحمي العرين بعزة وإباء  
 لتحولت لحدائق غناء  
 لتضجرت أحجارها بالماء  
 صار الظلام بناظره ضياء  
 مولاي أنت سيد الأمناء

إني أنوح لذكر يوم صعوده  
 إيران يا من حاربت أبناءها  
 عجباً لأم ذبحت أطفالها  
 لكن غضضنا عن أذاك عيوننا  
 نبتت زهور الأمر بين ربوعك  
 دار الخلافة زلزلت بيداتها  
 أغلقت بابك حين جاءك بالهدى  
 لولا السفينة قد أتى ربانها  
 لكن ولي الأمر لاح بنوره  
 وجه كمثل البدر عند تمامه  
 يمشى كمشى الأسد في غاباتها  
 لو مر بالصحراء في غدواته  
 أو مس بالأطراف أحجاراً بها  
 أو كان أعمى قد تنسم ريحه  
 مولاي أنت المرتجي يوم اللقاء

## 3. قصيدة الوفاء

أشرقت يا شمس الضحى  
 وظللت حيناً في العلا  
 التاج قرصك لامع  
 والآن ملتي من علاك  
 هل جف زينتك وانقضى  
 أم ولي شبابك والصبا  
 فأشرق الكون سنائك  
 وملكت وحدك في السماء  
 والصولجان من الضياء  
 فحدثني ماذا دهاك  
 ولذا خبا قبل اللهب  
 وأتى برؤدك المشيب

صعب على العين ترى  
 فهل تعودني وهل أراك ؟  
 لم لا تجيبي تساؤلاتي ؟  
 ما بال نورك قد خبا  
 يا للفنا من ظالم  
 أغاظه رؤيا هناك  
 لا تبك شمساً يا أخي  
 هي في المغيب قد اختفت  
 أتبك شيئاً لو يدم  
 جفف دموعك يا ملاكي  
 اني بكيت لأننا  
 وأرى البكاء وقد علا  
 لم ينج منه طائر  
 وغدا سيعد على حناك  
 أتقول ياخذني الفناء؟  
 الله باق ربنا  
 ونحن بُت وجوده  
 ونحن عنه بلا انفكاك  
 آمنت يا سلوأي حقاً  
 والموت عنه مني  
 هذا الضياء يبهي المغيب  
 يا شمس يوماً في صباحك ؟  
 أترك في العرع الأعمى؟  
 يا شمس ما هذا المصير؟  
 هل للفنا هذا ضمير؟  
 فرماك محبوك الشراك ؟  
 الشمس غابت في الفضاء  
 ذهب الضياء عند المساء  
 سيمل من طول البقاء  
 ولا تكن في الحكم شك  
 سلوأي رهن بالضياح  
 وصداه في كل البقاع  
 وكذلك لم ينج الشعاع  
 كما تعد على سواك  
 فأينه هذا الفناء  
 و اسمه رمز البقاء  
 سبحانه رب السماء  
 أرواحنا دهن المشاكي  
 بل رأت عيني هداك  
 إن كان حيا في رضاك

## 4. إلى رئيسة

"إهداء لزوجتي الحبيبة رئيسة حين كانت في مستشفى ليفر بول بإنجلترا في مايو 1978  
 وكانت عملية خطيرة جدا وكنت أنا في تلك الأثناء في جيبوتي بالصومال الفرنسي  
 وفي منتصف الليل كتبت هذه القصيدة وأنا أبكي" ... صبري

## 5. رثية

كُتبت هذه القصيدة لزوجتي الحبيبة رثية حينما كنا في طرابلس بلبنان بتاريخ 7 يناير 1970... صبري

ورقاء تشدو بأبدع النعمات  
تحرکت الأرواح من عذب شدوها  
كشفت جمال الحق لما مزقت  
قرب اليقين لسامعها كأنهم  
سقت العطاشي من عيون جارية  
وبدا جمال القول حين تزييت  
ضحت بوكر كان فيه صفارها  
سرتا معا والدين كان غداءنا  
ومشينا والأشواك تلمى كفوفنا  
زهدنا راحة الدنيا ولثرونا  
فكأننا حب الحياة خطيتة  
تباطأت في السير مالت تعاليني  
أما رأيت قواي اليوم قد ذهبت  
واه لأيام مضت سرتا بما  
وإذا دعوت الله ندعوه معا  
وان دق منك القلب كنت لا أدري  
ما كان أحلى المر في أيامنا  
وإذا التائب لاحقتنا فإننا  
لمني على يوم مضى من عهدنا  
صبرا رثية إن أيامنا ذهبت  
وقابلي ضحى بفقو فقد أسي  
ولا تحبي لقولي هذا فأنني

أيا روح البها بالحق داوبها  
في خدمة الأمر كم ضحت براحتها  
تركت ديارا كانت فيها بمجتها  
في مصر والسودان والحيشة  
في الطهر كالزهر بالأخلاق قد بلغت  
وفي الصومال كم زادت متاعها  
وفي السجن في طنطا أذهلت عددا  
صاحت بوجه عدو جاء يخذلنا  
" لا ، بل تزيد أجيحنا رغم قوتكم !  
وتلت عليه آيات من الألواح فاضطربت  
عشرون يوما ما مضت إلا و انطفا  
وذاك الرئيس البر شدت على يده:  
ظلمنا ، صبرنا ، ضاعت مصالحنا  
انصف ، رعاك الله ، طائفة  
فأوعدها للتر بالعدل فانتصفت  
إذا ذهبت لأمر الله تخدعه  
سخية برغم الفقر معطية  
لأربعين عاما معا دامت أشاهدها  
مسراتنا لكل الناس تكشفها  
معطاءة في البر جودا بما وسعت  
جواهر الأمر في الألواح تأخذها  
دعوتك اللهم يا قاضي حوائجنا  
فهذه شعلة من الإيمان راغبة  
ويا بهاء الله كن لها سندا  
ويا بهاء الله اقبلني لها عوضا  
ويا روح البها بالحق داوبها

وجه إليها شعاعا منك يشفيها  
وكم من نفوس دعت لله قديها  
والأهل والأبناء هم أغلى أهاليها  
روح الهدى للخلق تعطيتها  
وتشهد الخلق دانيها و قاصيها  
ودمعت بعين ما جفت مآقيها  
من الصحافة والأبناء ترربيها  
" أ جنت تبني لنار الله تطفئها ؟"  
بالحق تعلوا وروح الله تزكيتها"  
ضمانو القوم من فحوى معانيها  
نور الذي قد جاء يطفئها  
أن ابحت قضايانا ! الفحص خوافيها !  
شيعنا من القوم قذفا وتسفيها  
السلم غايتها ، والحب راعيها !"  
وعادت إلينا ، لا فخرنا ولا تيبها  
فلا قوة في الأرض تنيها  
ولا ترضى لغير الله يعطيها  
سباقة للخير ، حاضرها وماضيها  
وأحزانها حتى عن الأحباب تخفيها  
وقه تعطى ما ملكت أياديها  
وللطالب الغرور تبسطها وتعطيها  
أن اشف التي كل ما يرضيك يرضيها  
في خدمة الأمر أن حقق مراميها  
فليس غيرك في الأكوان يكفيها  
فأنني بالروح قبل الجسم القديها  
وجه إليها شعاعا منك يشفيها



وددت أن أحيا لأجلك جاهدا  
 هذا سراجي يا رئيسة قد خبا  
 أمشي الطريق بقوة وثبات  
 منه الضياء والوقت غير موافق  
 صرى على النهج المبين بقوة  
 وداومي الشدو واملني الجنبات

6. صبري يتحدث عن نفسه: "الطائر الغريب"

بلبل الفردوس غنى	غردت معه الطيور
ابهلوا الأحزان عنا	والشدوا لحن السرور
فوق أغصان الأمانى	بين ورد وزهور
بلبل الفردوس نادى	أيها الطير الشكور
رتلوا لله دوما	واشكروا الرب الغفور
صحت من فرط الأنسى	أيها الطير السعيد
إنني طير غريب	إنني طير شهيد
كم بكيت من الجوى	خلف أسوار حديد
أنقذتني من سجوى	قلرة الرب المجيد
فخلدوني و أنقذوني	أيها الطير السعيد
جددوا لي الأمانى	جددوا لي الشعور
صاحت الأطيوار جمعا	أيها الطير الغريب
في ديار الحب هدى	لسنا نرضى بالنحيب
قد عفا عنك الإله	إنه معك الرقيب
فخلعت كل ثوب	ولبست ثوب نور
بلبل الفردوس غنى	غردت معه الطيور

Spiritual conquests were not, and never will be, achieved by armies. Speaking of Ethiopia, it was Queen Makeda of Sabea (Sheba) who sought Judaic enlightenment and wisdom of her own free will; two unarmed souls who won over the hearts of Ezana of Axum (Aksum) to Orthodox Christianity; and the helpless fugitive relatives and followers of Muhammad who evoked the sympathy and protection of Negus Armah. The Bahá'í advent to Ethiopia, the fourth and latest link of this chain, was no exception and we are lucky indeed to have at our fingertips the minute details of this conquest:

Moths Turned Eagles relates the story of Sabrí Elias, a Bahá'í faithful from Alexandria, Egypt, who came to Ethiopia on mission twice – first alone in 1933 until the short-lived Italian invasion of 1935, and later in 1944 accompanied by his young wife, Raissa, and their two infant children until 1954 when they moved onward to Djibouti for a similar mission.

Based largely on audio tapes made by Sabrí and Raissa at different times, the importance of this history, recorded usually soon after the events described, cannot be underestimated, nor can the value of their transposition and translation from Arabic, made over several years by an author for whom this has been a labour of love.