

Dedication of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney

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With the approach of the fortieth anniversary of the Dedication of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Mona Vale, on the outskirts of Sydney, on 16-17 September 1961, the time seems appropriate for me to convey my personal impressions of an event which may properly be described as marking a milestone in the emergence of the Australian Bahá'í community.

Comprehensive reports of the events associated with the Dedication were published in the "Australian Bahá'í Bulletin" in October 1961 and in the United States "Bahá'í News" in December 1961. My comments, which should be regarded as supplementary to those reports, are offered in the hope that they will convey an additional perspective from one who was involved in the process, as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly and as the Secretary of the Temple Dedication Committee.

The National Convention:

The story of the Dedication opens at the National Convention held in Sydney at Ridván 1961. It was clear to all attending this event that a serious, and indeed critical, situation existed. The Dedication date had been announced well ahead of time, and overseas visitors were making plans to attend, in addition to the commitment made by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum to play a leading role in the Dedication, following the pattern instituted when she dedicated the Temple in Wilmette in 1953 as the representative of the Guardian.

However, the construction had proceeded slowly, and convention delegates were deeply dismayed to see how much remained to be carried out to complete the edifice. Despite generous contributions by the Guardian and the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land, acting as Custodians of the Faith, the bulk of the construction cost was falling on the small Australian Bahá'í community, which was composed of people of modest resources. As a result, the funds contributed fell well below the amount required; the builders, Welch

Brothers, had become aware of this, and were apprehensive about the prospects for securing the necessary funds from an organization as obscure as the Bahá'í National Assembly.

In addition, the builders found themselves encountering constructional problems far beyond their experience and expertise. No dome of such dimensions had been built in the region. The marble cladding process to be used for the exterior surface of the building was not well developed. No crane was available of sufficient size to place in position the flèche at the apex of the dome. Building work in Sydney was almost entirely on conventional, rectangular structures; innovative architecture such as the Sydney Opera House lay in the future.

Anxious and apprehensive, the delegates consulted at length about whether or not to recommend that the National Spiritual Assembly defer the Dedication until the construction was complete. As a Convention officer I was in a good position to observe the dynamics of this consultation. On the one hand were those whose orientation was spiritual – but carried to the extreme of impracticality – urging the group to disregard entirely the apparently bleak prospects for completion, and to rely solely on the movement of spiritual forces which would miraculously solve all problems if the step of faith was taken; they were aided by the small band who confidently anticipated physical calamities to envelop the planet before 1963 and who urged completion on schedule to avoid the prospect of the envisaged major social disruption further deferring completion of the Temple.

On the other hand were found sound practical realists, some with business experience, who argued passionately that it was folly to proceed to an irrevocable commitment to the September Dedication while so much uncertainty existed about the pace of construction, and the level of contributions. They also pointed out that too little time remained for arranging the Dedication ceremonies.

Eventually the following Convention recommendation was adopted for consideration by the National Spiritual Assembly:

“That every effort be made to hold the Temple Dedication next September; but, if necessary, the Dedication be postponed.”

The wording was a marvel of compromise, offering solace to all points of view.

Actions of the National Spiritual Assembly:

Eight members of the Assembly gathered at the Hazíratu'l-Quds some two weeks after the National Convention, with Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone – who was at that time a member – absent in Central America to attend the inaugural National Conventions of Honduras and Nicaragua. The

meeting was dominated by the imperative need to resolve the Dedication question, over which the Assembly members were almost evenly divided.

I recall clearly the earnestness of the consultation, and the several occasions during which we turned in prayer for guidance as we wrestled with this seemingly insoluble issue. We felt the weight of responsibility most keenly during this process. There were extended periods of silence, with each member analysing the diverse views, and yearning for illumination. When we felt ready to vote, the mood of the meeting was such that several members did so with tears in their eyes, well aware of the consequence of their actions.

Having decided to proceed with the September date, the National Spiritual Assembly set in motion a number of practical measures to resolve its problems. It arranged a meeting with the Architect, Mr. John Brogan, and the principals of Welch Bros., where the Assembly decision was announced. It was clear that we could not provide the funds by the time of the Dedication. However, we committed ourselves to fully meeting our financial obligations in due course, so that a satisfactory arrangement was reached by which payment was carried out progressively over an extended period, not being completed fully until 1965. The total cost of the building was £214,000, considerably in excess of the architect's initial estimate of £150,000 because of the extraordinary measures necessary to solve the irrisory constructional problems.

The Assembly decided not to reappoint the Temple Construction Committee, and assumed responsibility itself for the acceleration of the pace of building. The Assembly met with the builders on the site every month when it gathered in Sydney for its regular meeting. Between meetings I was assigned the task of going to the site every Saturday afternoon to meet with representatives of the construction team, and to prepare an itemized report, which was mailed to all members on Monday morning. Their comments and questions, conveyed to me by telephone if necessary, were presented at the following Saturday afternoon meeting at the Temple site.

In these days of email and fax communications, it strains credulity to recall that in 1961 the Xerox machine was unknown in Sydney, and multiple copies could be made only by the use of carbon paper or by resort to duplicators with inked cylinders and wax stencils. For the weekly reports I chose to make 9 copies using carbon paper inserted between sheets of the thinnest paper I could buy, called onion-skin. One of the consequences of this indolent approach was that the ninth copy was only semi-legible at best, and had to be sent to the Assembly member I judged to be most tolerant or having the greatest visual acuity. The original was crystal-clear but suffered from a proliferation of small holes where my pounding of the manual typewriter keys with enough force to impress the ninth copy had surgically dissected the looped paper in letters such as o, e, g, and a; the result was a document having the beauty and appeal of fine Irish lace!

A Temple Dedication Initial Planning Committee was constituted on 14 May, with a mandate to consider the Dedication needs and report back at the next Assembly meeting on 9 June. At that time it was reconstituted, with the same four members, as the Temple Dedication Committee and assigned its duties with 14 weeks to accomplish them, and a total budget of £1,000 for such purposes as rental of halls, hiring buses and temporary seating at the Temple, food catering, printing of programmes, and the conduct of a major public meeting.

Temple Dedication Committee:

This Committee functioned in a simple but effective manner, aware that it was desperately short of time and grievously lacking in resources or experience. Even now, some four decades later, I thrill at the memory of the manner in which the great majority of the Sydney metropolitan area believers rallied to the needs, working sacrificially to the point of exhaustion, displaying decision-making qualities they were unaware they possessed, and deliberately refraining from seeking reimbursement for many of their expenses.

We formed nine sub-committees, the names of which indicate the scope of the work: hall arrangements; transport and accommodation; catering; tape-recording and public address; printing; publicity; devotional programme for Dedication; choir for Dedication service; post-Dedication one-day tour. Time did not permit circulation of comprehensive minutes and reports. Each member of the Dedication Committee supervised the work of two or three sub-committees and acted as a member of those bodies. The Committee met weekly, where the individual members reported on their sub-committees; from those meetings a consolidated report went to the monthly National Spiritual Assembly meetings, together with its recommendations and requests for guidance. On two occasions, in June and in September, just before the Dedication, a meeting was held for all Committee and sub-Committee members, to ensure that all those involved were well informed and that the proper co-ordination occurred.

Despite our best efforts, there were some gaps and deficiencies in the organization; fortunately they were overcome through the good judgement and initiative of individual sub-committee members who discreetly extended their endeavours to meet the needs. In some instances, sub-committees proved incapable of carrying out their functions; the responsibility of preparing a draft of the Dedication devotional programme had to be reassigned to Adelaide believers at the last minute, as did the task of printing the programmes for the Dedication ceremonies.

Unfortunately, there were some exceptions to this description of the community response to the challenge of the approaching Dedication. A small group of believers, including a few sub-committee members, were incurably pessimistic, and lost no opportunity to criticize or denigrate the efforts of

others. Ultimately their role inadvertently became beneficial, in that the rest of the community resented their negativity, and was motivated to prove them wrong through achieving a highly successful Dedication.

Dedication Publicity:

Four decades later it is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of the obscurity in which the Bahá'í Faith in Australia was enshrouded in 1961. Australia was very much a racially homogeneous country sheltering within the confines of the White Australia Policy, solidly Christian with appalling misconceptions about the other religions of the world. In such a setting we sought to take advantage of the Dedication to secure publicity for the Faith. Among our many limitations was the fact that neither of the two Publicity Sub-Committee members, of which I was one, had any experience of this field, to which was added the fact that funds did not permit our securing professional advice.

The situation was resolved by the occurrence of what appears in retrospect to have been something of a miracle. We prepared an advance-notice press release, delivering it by hand to the principal newspapers and other media outlets. Late one afternoon I visited the "Daily Telegraph" newspaper, located then in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, clutching the press release. The front desk referred me to an experienced reporter, Mr. Pat Burgess, who was free at the time and was prepared to see me, probably because he had no idea of the meaning of the word "Bahá'í" and was curious. In the ensuing discussion with me, it soon became clear to Pat that I was totally inexperienced in the field of public relations and had no real idea about what I was doing. He insisted that I sit down, gave me a pad of paper to take notes and dictated over the next one hour and a half, a comprehensive set of measures which should be carried out to take full advantage of the opportunities.

Central to the strategy he set out was that efforts be made to secure a feature story at an early stage in one of the afternoon newspapers, since these papers were always searching for material. This article could then be used as a springboard for publicity in other media. This was achieved, with a two-page spread in "The Sydney Sun" newspaper on 30 August, and accomplished its purpose. The other measure he advocated was an endeavour to persuade the Lord Mayor of Sydney to hold a Mayoral Reception for Rúhíyyih Khánum and other Bahá'ís; if this could be arranged, it would give a much-needed sense of legitimacy to the Dedication proceedings, and would open many doors at media outlets. It was achieved also, and is described in some detail later.

Building on the "The Sydney Sun" interview and the commitment of the Lord Mayor, we could confidently approach the major newspapers to consider special supplements, supported by paid advertisements from the builders and other contractors, and to interest radio and television stations, popular

magazines such as “Australian Women’s Weekly” and “Woman’s Day” as well as cinema newsreel producers such as Movietone News. The “Reader’s Digest” resisted our efforts to have a colour picture of the House of Worship on its cover, but did mention the word “Bahá’í” on the cover, a seemingly-minor accomplishment which had a far more beneficial effect in the Pacific Islands than we had envisaged. A three-page list of the publicity items appears in the October 1961 Bulletin but does not include magazine articles which appeared during that month.

The Lord Mayor’s Reception:

The National Spiritual Assembly made a formal approach in writing to the Lord Mayor, Alderman Harry Jensen, followed up by several meetings I held with his Executive Aide, who carefully studied brochures and booklets on the Bahá’í teachings. Following several days of anxious waiting, we were exhilarated to receive the news that the Lord Mayor would host a reception for Rúhíyyih Khánum and a number of other guests up to a specified limit on Wednesday 13 September 1961.

It fell to the National Assembly to decide who was to be invited to the Mayoral Reception. It assigned the task to me, in view of the need for the selection of overseas guests to be made almost at the last minute when it was clear who would be available. The Assembly specified that about half the number should be from other countries, and the Australian component should include interstate representation if possible.

In my ignorance I thought this to be a reasonably straightforward task when compared to the various crises which were arising on almost a daily basis. Little did I realize the intense feelings which were aroused among a few Bahá’ís from the Sydney metropolitan area who felt, for various reasons including their own perception of their social standing, that they should have been invited. I was subjected to a barrage of telephone calls, at home and at my laboratory, as this small number of indignant people tried to pressure me to add them to the list; clearly they felt that a university student from a rural background was incapable of appreciating either the subtleties of the issue or the teaching opportunities which would result when they told their neighbours later of their participation in a Mayoral Reception in the Sydney Town Hall. Since I was much more concerned about obeying the National Spiritual Assembly than about the offence I was causing, I was able to resist their pressures without undue distress.

Bahá’ís of the present day, four decades later, cannot possibly appreciate the sense of exaltation which all the believers invited to the Mayoral Reception felt, when we were received by the Lord Mayor in the Town Hall, and witnessed the dignity and respect he accorded to Rúhíyyih Khánum. From a position of unmitigated obscurity, the Faith had now progressed to a point where television cameras and newspaper reporters were clamouring to record

the honour being shown by the Lord Mayor of Sydney to our representatives.

Harry Jensen proved to be a genuine and gracious host, taking a sincere interest in the diversity of peoples from 19 countries who formed our party. A minor aspect was his shock of recognition when I arrived, designated by the National Assembly as the escort of Rúhíyyih Khánum. I had some months previously organized a complex University Commemoration Day event in which Mr. Jensen and I, together with another student, had played a central role, much to his enjoyment. As a consequence we greeted each other with unusual warmth, to the puzzlement or consternation of some others.

The Dedication Events:

The official reports well describe the various events held with the participation of 320 believers from 19 countries. This was the largest gathering of Bahá'ís ever held in Australia; contrast this to the present day where one local Bahá'í community, that of Brisbane, has itself a greater number of believers.

Three events stand out in my memory, each with its own distinguishing characteristic. One was the Dedication itself on Saturday 16 September, with 300 Bahá'ís gathered, in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving that this vast enterprise had been successfully accomplished. There was a sense of victory at this achievement, and a surge of confidence in the power of the Faith to accomplish the seemingly impossible.

Second was the Public Inaugural Service on Sunday 17 September. No words of mine can convey the excitement of Rúhíyyih Khánum as we drove along Mona Vale Road from the city, and saw the roadside lined with parked cars for hundreds of yards in each direction from the entrance to the Temple grounds. Police were directing traffic, television cameramen jostled for the best positions, and the eagerness of the public to be part of the occasion, all contributed to the air of celebration. One very busy policeman received fleeting fame, when interviewed by a newspaper reporter to give his impressions, through his description of the white Temple edifice as “the angel of Sydney”. Over 2000 people were accommodated in two devotional services in a packed Temple auditorium. We were dimly aware that life for the Bahá'í Faith in Australia would never be the same; although we were sufficiently realistic to know that this level of public interest would not endure, we were aware also that, on this pleasant Sunday afternoon in September, we were crossing a bridge into a new and enduring degree of public awareness, with our days of obscurity left behind.

The third highlight was on Friday evening 15 September, when 250 believers gathered at the Macquarie Auditorium in Sydney to hear Rúhíyyih Khánum speak to us for two hours about the progress of the Faith, its plans and activities, and especially about Shoghi Effendi. All present left the meeting with a heightened sense of family – that the Bahá'í community was not a

congregation in the traditional religious sense, was far more than an assemblage of adherents to a religious belief, but was, in a very real sense, united by bonds as strong, or even more so, as those within a happy family. This sense of close relationship was intensified by our common experience of the grief at the recent passing of Shoghi Effendi, and our deep awareness of the need for sacrificial action in service to the Faith, so that the Universal House of Justice could be brought into being at Ridván 1963.

Personally significant to me, some years later, was my attendance at the inaugural Hyde-Dunn Memorial Lecture in the Marriott Hotel in Sydney on 15 September 1995, knowing that this was the exact spot on which had stood Anzac House where a Public Meeting had been held on 16 September 1961, with Rúhíyyih Khánum as the featured speaker to an audience of 400 people.

Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum:

This account would be incomplete without further reference to Rúhíyyih Khánum, who was the first and only member of the Holy Family to bless the Australian continent with her presence. She came to Australia accompanied by Miss Jessie Revell, Treasurer of the International Bahá'í Council, with whom I developed immediately a warm friendship. Both were ill: Rúhíyyih Khánum had contracted a very bad cold, which had weakened her and resulted in prolonged and uncontrollable coughing spasms from time to time, much to our distress; Jessie Revell had fallen while en-route to Sydney, and had badly bruised an ankle and an elbow, which caused her much pain. Both were determined to discharge their responsibilities to the extent possible. However the "Daily Telegraph" newspaper, which gave almost daily coverage to the events of the Dedication, carried a brief article on 15 September headed "Sickness of Bahá'í Leader" which was greeted with mixed feelings by Rúhíyyih Khánum.

The National Assembly asked me to act as their escort and to drive them to the various meetings; my cynical Bahá'í youth friends were astonished at the sudden improvement in my driving skills, and my newly-found scrupulous adherence to all traffic laws. One ostentatious Bahá'í visitor from abroad looked with disdain at my Holden vehicle with which I carried out these duties, and tried to pressure me to allow him to rent a Cadillac for this purpose. Fresh from surviving the Lord Mayoral Reception, I had no trouble resisting his pressures, so that I had no need to resort to informing him that 1961 Sydney was devoid of any Cadillacs, much less such vehicles for rental. The only transportation incident worth noting was my success in locking the car with the key still in the ignition when I took Rúhíyyih Khánum for a media interview before the Dedication events began. Rúhíyyih Khánum solved the problem by stepping out into the traffic to wave down a passing NRMA service operator, who was able to open the Holden with alarming ease, using a bent piece of wire.

There were few hotels of international standard in Sydney in those days. The National Assembly, rejecting both the Hotel Australia adjoining Martin Place and the newly-built Chevron Hotel in King's Cross as being too ostentatious, selected the Carlton-Rex Hotel, then located on Pitt Street, to accommodate Rúhíyyih Khánum and Jessie Revell. This created a new problem for me, as the National Assembly in session gave me firm instructions that I was to arrange payment of their hotel accommodation, using funds it placed at my disposal. Innocently I made the appropriate arrangements with the front desk at the hotel, after the guests had checked in. The first sign that this simple process was too good to last occurred next morning when I came to pick them up. Jessie Revell was the first to arrive in the hotel lobby to meet me. After the customary greetings, she informed me in a pleasant conversational tone that "Do you know that Rúhíyyih Khánum has decided to chop your head off?" I confessed myself unaware of this prospect, disclosed a great personal interest in the subject, and was enlightened by Jessie that Rúhíyyih Khánum insists on paying her expenses when travelling. Caught between the firm insistence of the National Assembly and the unyielding position adopted by Rúhíyyih Khánum, I sought unsuccessfully to persuade Rúhíyyih Khánum through appeals to reason and the administrative authority of the National Assembly. I made a pathetic and unconvincing effort to arouse her feelings of pity at the unenviable position I was in. Attempts at compromise failed also, and I chose abject surrender as an optimal survival skill, confident that the National Assembly would show mercy to me.

I will forever remain grateful to the opportunity of informal association with Rúhíyyih Khánum during the days around the Dedication. I was struck by her endless curiosity, her genuine interest in people in all walks of life, and her keen intelligence. I was at that time engaged in electronics research which impinged on the newly emerging scientific field of radio-astronomy. She was not aware of this subject but her ability to ask incisive questions and to both absorb and integrate new information enabled her to very quickly acquire an impressive grasp of the key issues and the potential of this field.

Uppermost in my memory is that Macquarie Auditorium meeting, to which I have referred. Rúhíyyih Khánum was still grieving over the passing of Shoghi Effendi but forced herself to recount her experiences of World Centre life with him, being aware how eager were the friends to hear about them. Exploring these memories took an emotional toll on her, greatly exacerbated by a question from an unthinking member of the audience to the effect of "What did you think when you found that the Guardian had passed away?" Rúhíyyih Khánum gave a kindly answer, but it was clear to Jessie Revell that the question had distressed her greatly and she alerted me to this fact.

When the meeting was over, Jessie and I joined Rúhíyyih Khánum who told us she felt very unsettled and not ready to return to her hotel. We found a small coffee shop and took some refreshments. Rúhíyyih Khánum was

plunged in gloom, and our efforts to divert her had no effect. On other occasions I had teased her, as gently and respectfully as I could, but when I tried this time her only response was to issue the instruction “Jessie, you have one good leg, you kick him!” which my friend Jessie chose wisely to ignore.

As the evening continued, Jessie was clearly very tired and we delivered her to her hotel. Rúhíyyih Khánum remained unsettled and we drove along the darkened streets of Sydney, which was in those days devoid of any late-night life. Eventually Rúhíyyih Khánum announced that she was hungry, and felt she could sleep if she ate something.

Where was I to take her? I was sufficiently familiar with King’s Cross to know that it was out of the question. I was vaguely aware that there were a few elegant supper clubs in the centre of the city, none of which I had ever entered; desperation forced me to suggest them, only to find them rejected.

Eventually Rúhíyyih Khánum clarified her thinking to the point where she decided she wanted a good hamburger. This was most alarming to me, even though it cast me on familiar territory as a consequence of my late-night excursions in the city in search of hamburgers when carrying out my research experimentation at Sydney University. I was well aware of the small number of places where hamburgers were available late at night. Most provided a product of appalling standard, but one was excellent – that in George Street at Central Square adjoining a petrol service station catering to all-night taxis. My alarm was that I knew from experience that the clientele of this place was drawn from the seamiest segments of Sydney life, including those of highly dubious professions. The thought of Rúhíyyih Khánum meeting with such uncouth and profane customers was beyond me.

I told her that we would go to Central Square but that I would leave her in the car while I obtained the hamburgers and we could eat them in the vehicle. I was silently congratulating myself on having resolved the problem when we arrived in the precincts of the place and Rúhíyyih Khánum decided she was also thirsty and needed coffee with her hamburger. There was no option but to accept the dictates of fate, and so we entered this setting, while I silently uttered a fervent prayer that no Bahá’í would discover that I had taken so eminent and so honoured a guest of the Australian Bahá’í community to such a place.

The memory remains with me today. The hamburger shop had no seating, with all clients standing at the counter, jostling for space if necessary. Coffee was provided in thick mugs so sturdy that they would damage the concrete floor if dropped on it. Rúhíyyih Khánum stood in the midst of this scene, surrounded by taxi-drivers and women of the night, captivating all by her bearing and her genuine interest in them. The entire atmosphere was changed from its usual rowdiness and abuse to one of calmness and quiet, as she brought more and more people into the conversation through her sincere interest in them and her friendliness. The others present were totally unaware of who

she was, but reacted spontaneously to her presence by refining their manners, speech, and relationships. Rúhíyyih Khánum had a wonderful time, and left the shop animated and glowing, lifted out of her sadness.

As I reflected on this experience in later weeks, I drew many important lessons from it: the virtues of sensitivity and a non-judgemental attitude in individual conduct; the implications of our avowed commitment to the oneness of humankind; the means of attracting others to the Faith through our involuntary and unstudied expression of Bahá'í teachings in daily life.

These are but a few of the experiences associated with the memorable visit of Rúhíyyih Khánum to Sydney, a bounty which gave us a new awareness of the monumental achievements of the Guardian and which brought us closer to the World Centre of the Faith.

Conclusion:

Despite the passing of forty years, it is still too soon to assess accurately the significance of the Temple Dedication. I have referred already to the increase in confidence of the Bahá'ís, the strengthening of the bonds of family, and the welcome enhancement of public awareness of the Faith and its Temple. The believers realized, almost with a degree of surprise, that they belonged to a religion which was admired by the public for its inclusiveness and reasonableness, which further strengthened their self-confidence.

The Temple Dedication triggered a surge of teaching activity all over Australia in pursuit of the Ten Year Crusade goals. As reported at the Dedication Conference there were 14 Local Spiritual Assemblies in Australia in 1961, identical with the number existing at the commencement of the Crusade at Ridván 1953. This number had to be doubled in the 19 months remaining till Ridván 1963. That this formidable goal was achieved, and indeed surpassed, was a measure of both the spiritual energy released in the Bahá'í community as well as the degree of sacrifice made by the friends in all parts of the country.

The practical needs in the aftermath of the Temple Dedication forced us to rise to a higher level of efficient functioning. Provisions had to be made for caretaking, cleaning and the maintenance of the building and its surrounding areas. Guides were required for the steady stream of visitors, and weekly devotional services had to be planned, conducted and supported by regular attendance. All was accomplished, often through heroic efforts of believers who sought no recognition or expressions of gratitude, but found their satisfaction and fulfilment in the act of service. In so doing they established a pattern which continues in Australia to the present day.