

Life & Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
As told through the reminiscences of
His sister, Bahíyyih Khánum, and wife, Munírih Khánum
with Western Pilgrim, Lorol Schopflocker

Compiled by Marlene Macke *
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Lorol Schopflocker

Thank you, Bahíyyih Khánum, and to you, Munírih Khánum, for inviting me to tea this afternoon. It is such a privilege to spend time with you both. I love hearing your stories and memories.

Bahíyyih Khánum

We always look forward to meeting with the Pilgrims. It is our great privilege to host the Pilgrims. And I, too, love looking back on the memories of my beloved Family and recalling some of our happy times.

Munírih Khánum

And I add my welcome, dear Lorol Khánum, our beautiful friend. You mentioned earlier that you especially hoped we share with you more of our personal family experiences and some stories of our beloved Master, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá?

Lorol Schopflocker

Yes, please. Tell me everything.

Bahíyyih Khánum

For me, Munírih Khánum, you played a great role in the Family too, once you and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá married. I was so happy when you arrived. I knew you would a perfect wife for my Brother. And I had found a Sister.

* See more about this document at https://bahai-library.com/macke_dramatic_readings

Lorol Schopflocker

I've heard that with all the tests and difficulties the Holy Family suffered in your exiles from Persia, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the one who kept your spirits up and made you laugh and forget your afflictions.

Munírih Khánum

Many of the friends have talked about the adversities the Family continued to suffer upon arriving in the Most Great Prison in 1868. My dear Sister was just 22 years old and 'Abdu'l-Bahá 24 years old. Why, nearly all of the Holy Family and followers were deathly ill with dysentery and typhoid fever, there was no medicine, no food or clean water, neither adequate clothing nor furniture to shield you from the cold of the earthen prison floors.

Bahíyyih Khánum

It was one of our most terrible times in that foul prison. Praised be God, the Master and one other companion remained healthy enough to nurse all of the invalids with the most tender care.

Munírih Khánum

Dear Lorol Khánum, the physical effects of those anxious months lingered long afterwards. The Greatest Holy Leaf has not mentioned to you that she was a healthy person up til that point, but thereafter was never again truly well.

Bahíyyih Khánum

But, gradually, we recovered. However, many of us were filled with uncertainty of the future. Yet every night, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would invite us to remember some humorous event to share, and everybody would laugh and laugh.

Lorol Schopflocker

In addition to keeping your spirits up, the Master had other roles, didn't He? I've heard He took the whole responsibility for leading the Family and all the companions who were in exile with you.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Indeed, since the day we left Baghdad five years earlier, my beloved brother tirelessly lightened the load from our Father's shoulders, securing provisions for us all, dealing with officials and the guards, fielding requests to meet with our Father, and shielding Him from daily cares and worries.

Munírih Khánum

I heard those duties included finding fodder for the 50 mules in the caravan from Baghdad!

All Three [Laugh]

Bahíyyih Khánum

After two years of disparate privation, we left the barracks prison. The new quarters in 'Akká were really too small, but they were clean and our lives became more settled. However, one matter consumed the minds of many. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had not yet married.

Lorol Schopflocker

I can only imagine how many a parent hoped our beloved Bahá'u'lláh would approve their daughter to be the Master's wife!

Bahíyyih Khánum

In the end, He named the daughter of a faithful Bahá'í family from Isfáhán. You arrived in late 1872 and, in addition to marrying my beloved Brother, you became my dearest friend, one with whom I could share the load of the household duties.

Munírih Khánum

In reflection, it seems my spiritual destiny was decreed from the time of my birth. My parents

had been unable to conceive a child, but when the Báb visited our city in 1846, He directed that a morsel of His own food be given to my father. Both he and my mother shared eating it. And a year later I was born.

Bahíyyih Khánum

You know, of course, that Bahá'u'lláh saw a girl with a luminous face and a luminous heart in one of His dreams. That girl was you! He chose you to be the bride of His beloved Son, the Most Great Branch, the Master.

Lorol Schopflocker

Your dear Mother suffered such sorrows and hardships in the previous 20 years of exile and imprisonment. This marriage of her eldest Son must have truly afforded her great joy. Did she not give you, Munírih Khánum, a lovely white dress to wear?

Munírih Khánum [Nods]

Bahíyyih Khánum

Yes, and together my Mother and I made the simple arrangements.

Munírih Khánum

On the wedding day, we visited Bahá'u'lláh who said to me, “O My Leaf and My handmaiden! Verily We chose thee and accept thee to serve My Most Great Branch, and this is by My grace, which is not equalled by all the treasures of earth and heaven.”

Lorol Schopflocker

Your marriage “Not equalled by all the treasures of earth and heaven.” Imagine!

Bahíyyih Khánum

We then repaired to another room where you met your husband-to-be. In all, we were only 7

guests, and you and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Rapturous with happiness, we all felt how blessed that moment, how joyous that hour.

Munírih Khánum

The wedding could not have been more simple yet conveyed a profound spirituality. We had no wedding cake, just cups of fragrant tea. There were no decorations, no choir, just the blessing of Bahá’u’lláh.

Lorol Schopflocker

No cake? No decorations?

Munírih Khánum

None. As I told the English Pilgrim, Lady Blomfield, “The glory and beauty of love and happiness were beyond and above all luxury and ceremony and circumstance.”

Bahíyyih Khánum

I never saw a couple more devoted to each other but the Master and Munírih Khánum had their sorrows too. Of the eight children born to them, two little boys and two little girls died in infancy or early childhood.

Munírih Khánum

Thankfully, four of my daughters grew to adulthood, married, and gave the Master and I grandchildren.

Bahíyyih Khánum

As their great aunt, I loved all 13 of your grandchildren, of course, but I adored your first-born grandson, Shoghi Effendi, the most enchanting little boy.

Lorol Schopflocker

Good heavens, all these children and grandchildren must have kept you very busy!

Munírih Khánum

Yes, they did, and the Master continued with His heavy workload; often away from early morning to late at night, He continued to protect and comfort the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, met with officials, gave alms to the poor every Friday,

Bahíyyih Khánum

Supervised the farms that grew wheat and vegetables in the Galilee, wrote books and letters and prayers,

Lorol Schopflocker

And I'm sure He undertook so many more tasks and chores as the years went by.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Yes, in 1892, when our beloved Father passed away to the Abhá Kingdom, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's responsibilities only intensified. As you know, Lorol Khánum, Father's Will and Testament named the Master the Centre of His Covenant, Interpreter of His Word and Head of the Bahá'í Faith.

Munírih Khánum

I remember how, overnight, the international correspondence from Bahá'ís increased. And the Master took time to attend to His own Writings of Tablets, prayers and books.

Bahíyyih Khánum

And we welcomed the first Western Pilgrims to Haifa. That has been one of our chief joys, to welcome the Pilgrims and hear their stories and see, through them, the unfolding of God's plan for the unification of humankind.

Munírih Khánum

And there were other joyous moments. More than 50 years after the Martyrdom of our heroic

forerunner, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá supervised the burial of the holy remains of the Báb in a mausoleum in the midmost heart of Mount Carmel, God’s holy mountain. And in 1911, my beloved Brother began His momentous travels to Europe and North America.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Finally, in December 1913, your dear Husband returned to us. I remember we ladies waiting for Him in the large central room of our house in Haifa. We heard His voice as He entered. He shouted out, “Hello! Hello!” and the very walls of the room nearly vibrated with emotion. We were that happy to have Him home.

Munírih Khánum

He was so tired. But the calls on His time seemed to intensify, if that were possible.

Bahíyyih Khánum

As just one example, His correspondence alone would overwhelm most ordinary persons. Friends would write to Him about whether or not to buy a piece of land, what name He would advise for a new-born child, whether the friend should marry, what studies they should undertake at university, whether to take a trip. Many letters asked for clarification of aspects of Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings.

Munírih Khánum

We should have seen it coming. The years of imprisonment, recurring health problems and unremitting work had taken their toll on Him. Remember, in 1914, He was already 70 years of age.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Do you remember that beautiful Tablet He wrote to the friends that year in which He said, “The time is coming when I shall be no longer with you... My days are numbered...”

Lorol Schopflocker

Oh my. That was seven years before He ascended.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Yes, but ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had more tasks to complete. The Great War which He had predicted did break out in 1914. The hostilities engulfed us in the Holy Land as they did in Europe. The Master moved all of us inland to a Druze village and we remained there for about a year.

Munírih Khánum

The villagers could not have been more kind, taking us all into their own homes. We had simple foods to eat such as lentils, beans, delicious olives and olive oil, sometimes milk, eggs and goat’s meat. The clean air and good nutrition proved to be such a restorative to us all.

Lorol Schopflocker

And I’ve heard the Master repaid the Druze generosity by setting up a free medical clinic and a school for the children.

Munírih Khánum

Yes, He did. And, although we lived a spartan life in some respects, we were so fortunate. Nearly all of the population stranded back in Haifa were threatened with starvation. The Master literally saved lives through distributing wheat and vegetables from the Bahá’í farms to those without food in Haifa. That included the British troops when they arrived.

Munírih Khánum

But the very best thing about that year in the Druze village was how we treasured spending more time with the Master. He had been away from home so often undertaking His myriad duties, not to mention the three years of His travels in the West, we family members and the companions were starved for His physical presence.

Bahíyyih Khánum

We had some very happy times in the village. My dear Sister, tell Lorol Khánum about the cat.

Munírih Khánum

You know how much the Master loved animals. Well, one of the cats that roamed the village liked to sit by His chair and purr. “This cat,” He remarked, “is indeed joyous, so carefree, so free of fear.” His comment about the cat amused us, but really, it summed up perfectly how we felt

that year—joyous, carefree, free of fear.

Bahíyyih Khánum

And the horse! Sometimes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had to travel to Haifa or ‘Akká on business and when He returned, the final ascent to the village was up a steep and rocky hill, which His carriage could not navigate.

Munírih Khánum

The Head of the Druze village owned a very fine Arabian horse which he insisted the Master ride up the hill.

Bahíyyih Khánum

The Master never really had any pastimes in His life. But riding horses gave him supreme joy. The wind whistling by at a fast gallop must have given Him such a welcome respite and sense of freedom. I remember His beautiful face exhilarated after returning from a ride.

Munírih Khánum

And children! It wasn’t only His own children and grandchildren He adored, He gave of His generous spirit to every little one who crossed His path. Remember how the Bahá’í children and the Druze children would race down that rocky road to welcome Him home? They clamoured to be near Him and danced about with joy to be in His presence. Their dancing was but an external expression of how my heart felt whenever I was with my beloved Husband.

Bahíyyih Khánum

But on more great task remaining to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It involved the writing of the Tablets of the Divine Plan. As you know, dear Lorol Khánum, these fourteen letters collectively figure as one of three Charter documents of our Bahá’í Cause.

Lorol Schopflocker

I know them well. They contain the mandate to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada to carry the message of Bahá’u’lláh to some 120 countries, territories and islands around the world. Several of the American friends have already set out to foreign lands to fulfil the Master’s instructions.

Bahíyyih Khánum

But the march of the years continued. I agree with dear Munírih Khánum's comment that we should have seen it coming. How could we have not more attuned to the signs? We recognize now that our Master knew His time had come to ascend to His heavenly home.

Munírih Khánum

Our eyes and hearts were simply veiled to what would be one of the greatest sorrows, certainly, of your life and mine.

Lorol Schopflocker

I'm thinking, too, of the impending sorrow of all the friends, the poor, the officials and so many others who had come to love, depend on and admire Him.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Do you recall about two months before His passing, He told us about a dream in which He found Himself in a great Mosque filled with a vast multitude? He raised the 'Call to Prayer' but then was drawn outside the Mosque. He asked Himself "For what reason came I forth, not having led the prayer? But it matters not; now that I have uttered the Call to Prayer, the vast multitude will of themselves chant the prayer."

Munírih Khánum

I do remember that. After His Ascension, we pondered this dream and concluded that the vast multitude in the Mosque were the Bahá'ís of every nation, race and religion. They would now continue 'Abdu'l-Bahá's work of spreading the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh around the world.

Bahíyyih Khánum

And our gardener who had faithfully served for over 30 years? He later related a conversation three weeks before 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing. The Master said to him, "Come with me that we may admire together the beauty of the garden... This flourishing place was, a few years ago, but a heap of stones, and now it is verdant with foliage and flowers. My desire is that after I am gone the loved ones may all arise to serve the Divine Cause and, please God, so it shall be."

Munírih Khánum

A few day later He remarked to the gardener, “I am so fatigued! The hour is come when I must leave everything and take my flight. I am too weary to walk.”

Bahíyyih Khánum

My beloved Brother had taken to sleeping alone in a little building in the garden. One morning He came into the house and related that in a dream His Father, Bahá’u’lláh, said to Him, “Destroy this room!”

Munírih Khánum

We exclaimed, “Yes, Master, we think your dream means that you should leave that room and come into the house.” I did not want Him sleeping alone out in that little hut. He simply smiled at me. Only later did we realize that the “room” in His dream represented His earthly body.

Lorol Schopflocker

Did not visitors and Family members meet with Him right until the last day of His life?

Bahíyyih Khánum

Yes. Then at 4 pm, He asked for me and all the Family to come to His room to have tea.

Munírih Khánum

About 8 pm, He retired to bed and two of our daughters kept watch over Him.

Bahíyyih Khánum

My beloved Brother passed away, calmly and serenely, shortly after 1:15 am on Monday, November 28, 1921.

Lorol Schopflocker

I believe some American Bahá’ís were present that night?

Bahíyyih Khánum

Dr. Florian Krug and his wife, Grace, dear John and Louis Bosch and Curtis Kelsey, a young man who was here to install the lighting plants at the Shrines, were here from America. All came

to the room where our Beloved lay. Mr. Bosch sat vigil with me until 4 am.

Munírih Khánum

The American friends were silently numb with loss while the Family and Persian friends wept and sobbed uncontrollably. I was prostrate with shock and loss. But, Lorol Khánum, the Greatest Holy Leaf did not weep. She maintained dignity and composure, and went from friend to friend, offering comfort and solace, stroking a shoulder here, clasping a stretched-out hand there. Through the night, I only heard her sigh and whisper “My God, my God!”

Bahíyyih Khánum

As never before, I needed to remain steadfast. The friends needed me.

Munírih Khánum

The news of the ascension of our beloved Master flew instantly through the town. Telegrams flashed to points around the world. You, my dearest Sister, sent cables to cities such as London and New York to advise of our Beloved’s Ascension.

Lorol Schopflocker

Soon, I imagine, cables flooded into your home from friends and officials from many countries. But what of the practical matters at hand? Is not the custom in the East to have the funeral within 24 hours of death?

Bahíyyih Khánum

I decided the remains of our Beloved would be laid to rest in an empty vault next to the one containing the tomb of the Báb and that the funeral procession would leave our home at 9 am the next day.

Munírih Khánum

That Tuesday morning dawned cloudless to a sight never before witnessed in the Holy Land. In Haifa, schools closed, public offices and the merchants closed, all normal day-to-day activity

halted as mourners gathered to pay their respects to the man they had all admired and respected.

Bahíyyih Khánum

The City Constabulary Force's guard of honour led the procession, followed by Moslem and Christian troops of Boy Scouts, all with their colourful banners held aloft. Then came a Muslim choir chanting holy verses, then the local Muftí led the chiefs of the Moslem community. Nor should we overlook a number of Christian priests, Latin, Greek and Anglican, walking in the procession. Our dear friend, Mr. John Bosch, joined with male members of the Family in taking turns to carry the sacred coffin on their shoulders up the mountain.

Munírih Khánum

Behind the coffin other members of the Family walked, accompanied by the British High Commissioner, the Governor of Jerusalem and the Governor of Phoenicia, Consuls and diplomats and other notables. Then a vast multitude of people including men, women and children, Jews, Christians, Moslems, Druses, Egyptians, Greeks, Turks, Kurds, Armenians. The American, European and local Bahá'ís followed.

Bahíyyih Khánum

The procession took more than an hour to reach and encircle the Tomb, so large had been the throng.

Munírih Khánum

We ladies of the household had stayed in the Master's house. But so many friends gave us accounts of what happened that morning. Nine speakers delivered heart-felt eulogies, including several distinguished Muslim orators and two well-known Christians.

Bahíyyih Khánum

I was especially moved by the Bishop of the Greek Catholic Church in Haifa. He spoke movingly about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's humanitarian deeds, His generosity to the poor, His charm and majesty.

Munírih Khánum

Remember the leader of the local Jewish community? He drew the connection between the

ministry of the Master and the Holy Land as a cradle for the manifestation of the Divine Will of God.

Bahíyyih Khánum

After the British High Commissioner and other dignitaries followed with their own tributes, there was virtually nothing that could have been added by any Bahá'í eulogy.

Munírih Khánum

His final earthly journey had been on the shoulders of loved ones. When they had reached the mid-most heart of Mount Carmel, the sacred casket, adorned by a colourful paisley shawl, had been placed on a plain table. The table itself was covered by a fair white linen cloth, located at the eastern entrance of the mausoleum. After the eulogies, they moved it with silent reverence inside the vault and the Custodian of the Shrine lowered it to its resting place.

Lorol Schopflocker

In the days and weeks that followed, how did you, and the rest of the Family and companions, cope with your crushing grief?

Munírih Khánum

We simply kept busy, and continued to serve the friends and the people in Haifa in the only ways we could.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Every day in the following week, our Family provided a meal for 50 to 100 of the poor in the location where it had been the Master's custom to give them alms. On the seventh day, we distributed wheat to about a thousand poor in Haifa in His name.

Munírih Khánum

I believe the poor of Haifa felt His loss as keenly as you and I did. In our case we lost our beloved Brother and Husband, in their case, they lost the one man who gave them alms and food, provided a doctor for them, shared His own clothing with them and loved them unconditionally.

Lorol Schopflocker

And I believe you had a special gathering after the fortieth day of His passing?

Bahíyyih Khánum

And then, as was the custom in those days, we Family members hosted a memorial feast. We decorated the tables simply, with fragrant trailing branches of Bougainvillea interspersed with white narcissus and bowls of golden oranges from our own garden.

Munírih Khánum

Local dignitaries and officials, some Europeans and people of all walks of life from Haifa and the area were among the six hundred guests. After the luncheon, all gathered in the central hall for a program of addresses and prayers.

Bahíyyih Khánum

The Governor of Phoenicia commented "Most of us here have, I think, a clear picture of Sir 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás, of his dignified figure walking thoughtfully in our streets, of his courteous and gracious manner, of his kindness, of his love for little children and flowers, of his generosity and care for the poor and suffering. So gentle was he, and so simple that, in his presence, one almost forgot that he was also a great teacher and that his writings and his conversations have been a solace and an inspiration to hundreds and thousands of people in the East and in the

West.”

Munírih Khánum

In one of His very last Tablets to the friends of Stuttgart, He not only pointed to His imminent departure from this earthly plane, but also begged the friends to arise in love and unity. Let me tell you, dear Lorol Khánum, what the Master wrote, “Friends! The time is come when I shall be no longer with you. I have done all that could be done. I have served the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh to the utmost of my ability. I have laboured night and day, all the years of my life. O how I long to see the loved ones taking upon themselves the responsibilities of the Cause! Now is the time to proclaim the Kingdom of Bahá! Now is the hour of love and union! This is the day of the spiritual harmony of the loved ones of God! All the resources of my physical strength I have exhausted, and the spirit of my life is the welcome tidings of the unity of the people of Bahá. I am straining my ears toward the East and toward the West, toward the North and toward the South that haply I may hear the songs of love and fellowship chanted in the meetings of the faithful. My days are numbered, and, but for this, there is no joy left unto me. O how I yearn to see the friends united even as a string of gleaming pearls, as the brilliant Pleiades, as the rays of the sun, as the gazelles of one meadow!

The mystic Nightingale is warbling for them all; will they not listen? The Bird of Paradise is singing; will they not heed? The Angel of Abhá is calling to them; will they not hearken? The Herald of the Covenant is pleading: will they not obey?

Ah me, I am waiting, waiting, to hear the joyful tidings that the believers are the very embodiment of sincerity and truthfulness, the incarnation of love and amity, the living symbols of unity and concord. Will they not gladden my heart? Will they not satisfy my yearning? Will they not manifest my wish? Will they not fulfil my heart’s desire? Will they not give ear to my call?

I am waiting, I am patiently waiting.”

Bahíyyih Khánum

Dearest Sister, even though we were outwardly busy in those days, I know you were still prostrated by grief at the lost of your beloved Husband. I know you prayed to join Him in Heaven.

Munírih Khánum

Yes, I did. I didn't know how I could continue to live without Him. But, gradually, I realized He had not really left me. I could close my eyes and see His loving face with its sweet smile. I knew one day we would be joined again in all the worlds of God. And I came to accept that my Family needed me.

Bahíyyih Khánum

You lived another 17 years in which you strove to maintain the unity of your children and grandchildren. You and I unhesitatingly accepted and supported your beloved grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Head of our beloved Faith. But eventually we saw the Master's daughters and your other twelve grandchildren drawn away by the malice and envy of those who wished harm to Shoghi Effendi. In the immediate Family, only you, his beloved grandmother, and I remained faithful supporters to the Guardian. He needed us. And I needed you too.

Munírih Khánum

One prayer sustained us through those dark times. Some years before He died, the Master revealed this prayer, prefacing it with the promise that whoso recites it with lowliness and fervour will bring gladness and joy to the heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that it would be even as meeting Him face to face. Bahá'ís now say this prayer at His Shrine and in remembrance of Him. It has been the greatest of solace to our injured hearts.

“He is the All-Glorious! O God, my God! Lowly and tearful, I raise my suppliant hands to Thee and cover my face in the dust of that Threshold of Thine, exalted above the knowledge of the learned, and the praise of all that glorify Thee. Graciously look upon Thy servant, humble and lowly at Thy door, with the glances of the eye of Thy mercy, and immerse him in the Ocean of Thine eternal grace.

Lord! He is a poor and lowly servant of Thine, enthralled and imploring Thee, captive in Thy hand, praying fervently to Thee, trusting in Thee, in tears before Thy face, calling to Thee and beseeching Thee, saying:

O Lord, my God! Give me Thy grace to serve Thy loved ones, strengthen me in my servitude to Thee, illumine my brow with the light of adoration in Thy court of holiness, and of prayer to Thy kingdom of grandeur. Help me to be selfless at the heavenly entrance of Thy gate, and aid me to be detached from all things within Thy holy precincts. Lord! Give me to drink from the chalice of selflessness; with its robe clothe me, and in its ocean immerse me. Make me as dust in the

pathway of Thy loved ones, and grant that I may offer up my soul for the earth ennobled by the footsteps of Thy chosen ones in Thy path, O Lord of Glory in the Highest.

With this prayer doth Thy servant call Thee, at dawning and in the night-season. Fulfill his heart's desire, O Lord! Illumine his heart, gladden his bosom, kindle his light, that he may serve Thy Cause and Thy servants.

Thou art the Bestower, the Pitiful, the Most Bountiful, the Gracious, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”

(Compiled by Marlene Macke primarily from descriptions and conversations found in *'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh* by H. M. Balyuzi, *The Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: A compilation prepared in January, 1922 by Lady Blomfield and Shoghi Effendi*, *Ásíyih Khánum: The Most Exalted Leaf entitled Navváb* by Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, *The Chosen Highway* by Lady Blomfield, *Dawn Over Mount Hira* by Marzieh Gail, *God Passes By* by Shoghi Effendi, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees* by Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, *He Loved and Served: The Story of Curtis Kelsey* by Nathan Rutstein, *The Master in 'Akká* by Myron H. Phelps, and *Munírih Khánum: Memoirs and Letters* by Munírih Khánum, at Desert Rose Bahá'í Institute, Eloy, Arizona, February 2019.)