

Bahá'u'lláh – Part I – The Baghdad Years

As told from the perspective of His Wife and Daughter

A Dramatic Reading

by Marlene Macke *

Part I

Ázíyih Khánum

My beloved Husband was released from that horrible pit, the Síyáh Chál, on condition that He remove Himself from Persia.

After four long months in that filthy dungeon, He suffered untold physical impairment but the children and I sensed that His spirit was unbroken. In fact, His spirit had soared to new heights. I didn't ponder it at the time as there was too much else on my mind. The government officials gave us a month's reprieve for Him to regain some level of health before our journey of exile, and I made what meagre preparations as I was able.

Bahíyyih Khánum

We left Tihrán in January 1853 for Baghdad, my beloved parents, my dear brother, Abbas who was eight or nine years old, myself, six years old, and other members of our extended family. It broke my mother's heart to leave behind my frail three year old brother, little Mihdí. Horses and mules struggled to carry us over the snow-bound mountain passes amid howling blizzards. Our clothing proved completely inadequate to protect us from the searing cold and we nearly starved from insufficient food. I didn't know at the time that my dear mother was pregnant, as she did not utter one word of complaint or worry. And my poor, dear Father was far from healed from the ravages of the torture and deprivation suffered in the Black Pit.

Ázíyih Khánum

When we arrived in Baghdad some three and a half months later, we lived in a tiny house of two rooms. It was here I gave birth to my fourth and last child, Álí-Muhammad. Very hard times continued to afflict us and we had barely means to live. Most people would have been shocked to learn that my beloved Husband sometimes helped with the cooking.

Bahíyyih Khánum

No Persian nobleman – in fact no Persian man of any class – would have dreamed of stepping foot into a kitchen, let alone assisting with the cooking. Women in our culture were seen as little more than servants, chattels, the bearers of the children. But my Father could see that hardship had worn out our sweet Mother and He wished to lighten her burden. We always knew He loved

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and respected her very much. Their marriage was such a model of what a truly spiritual union could be had between husband and wife. Little did we know that in a few years God's laws for the new age would proclaim equality of women and men and the high station of women as cornerstone principles.

Ázíyih Khánum

Beside the help and companionship of my dear Husband, one other event brightened my spirits in those early days of our life in Baghdad. Several years earlier, my Husband and I had the privilege of hosting Táhirih in our home in Tíhrán. Apart from her fame as a gifted poet, Táhirih fearlessly endorsed the Báb as the Mahdi, the Prophet of a New Age. I learned so much from her. Imagine my delight to host some Arab ladies who had been taught by Táhirih when she had passed through Baghdad. To have elevated discourse with these wonderful women alleviated the physical trials of my life.

Bahíyyih Khánum

However, my uncle, Mírzá Yahyá, Father's younger half-brother, caused us much distress. Of course, as a young child, I didn't know exactly what my uncle was up to. Later, I learned the Bábís, dispirited and virtually leaderless after the cruel martyrdom of their Lord, turned increasingly to my Father for advice and comfort. This enraged Yahyá. Insane jealousy drove him to undermine, discredit and criticize my Father. Within a year the situation was very nearly intolerable. We woke up one morning to find my Father departed.

Ázíyih Khánum

We were devastated. The children were too young to comprehend why their Father had left without warning. He had constantly taught the Bábís to live in love, harmony and unity with one another. With Mírzá Yahyá's sneaky invective causing such disharmony in the community, I think Bahá'u'lláh believed if He removed Himself from the community, the disunity would abate.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Uncle Yahyá tormented us all the time my Father was absent. He kept us virtual prisoners in our home. When my adorable baby brother got sick, Uncle refused to let us call a doctor or even let a neighbour come to help us. Our beautiful baby died. Uncle wouldn't even allow anyone to properly prepare the body for burial. He paid a man to take away the body and we never knew where my youngest brother was laid. My mother, my brother 'Abbás and I clung together and wept and wept.

Ázíyih Khánum

My baby was dead. My Lord was gone. Afflictions from Mírzá Yahyá pelted us like stones every day. I feared that even God had forsaken me. Then, after nearly two grim years, we began to hear stories of a much admired holy man, a Dervish, living in the mountains of Kurdistán. My

son prayed through a whole night beseeching God to return our Lord to His family. The very next day we heard a rumour of the exact whereabouts of this Dervish. ‘Abbás begged one of the family members to go find my Husband and entreat Him to return to us.

Bahíyyih Khánum

At last! At last! He was coming home. I waited, breathless with anticipation. We heard a footstep. Instead of my Father, a poorly-clothed and travel-stained stranger walked in. Then He smiled and we saw it was our Beloved. My mother, brother and I arose as one and embraced Him. My mother, always so calm and gentle, wept silently in relief. ‘Abbás clutched his Father’s hand as if he would never again let Him go. Then he threw himself to my Father’s feet and begged to be allowed to lay down his own life for my Father. I was nearly overwhelmed by a surge of tender love for my family.

Ázíyih Khánum

While my Husband had been absent, my children and I were not the only ones to suffer at the hands of Yahyá. The Bábí community also had been attacked, vilified and treated with contempt. These evil acts of Yahyá and his henchmen thoroughly demoralized the faithful Bábís. Saddened by this untenable situation where the very future of the Bábí Faith hang in the balance, Bahá’u’lláh spent the first several days secluded in our home. He must have been mapping out in His mind how He could regenerate the nearly extinct Bábí community.

Bahíyyih Khánum

It’s fortunate we now lived in a larger, if still humble and ill-furnished, house. The Bábís swarmed to Him with such joy, like bees to reviving, life-giving nectar. Soon streams of Bábís flowed from Persia to gain my Father’s presence. Then I realized the leaders of Baghdad, even Muslim clergy, ventured to our house. Having met Him, many returned as fervent admirers. We could see that all the pilgrims, seekers and visitors treasured His wisdom and wise counsel. Keeping the samovar filled with hot water and replenishing the platters of sweets and fruit for all the guests increased our toil from early morning to night but we were happy.

Ázíyih Khánum

The British Consul General in Baghdad offered my Husband British citizenship and relocation to India. My heart leapt at this opportunity. Could we really move far away from our potentially dangerous environment where fanatic Muslim clergy held such sway? My heart fell when Bahá’u’lláh gracefully declined the offer. Then the Ottoman authorities offered our family Turkish citizenship, and this He accepted.

For the seven years after His return from Kurdistán, my children and I lived a life of serving Bahá’u’lláh and the multitudes of guests to our home. He also frequented the streets, bazaars and coffee shops of the city, and He liked to walk on the banks of the Tigris River. I observed His spiritual eminence and love for every person transforming nearly every human heart. It was especially a joy to see the resurgence of the Bábí community.

Bahíyyih Khánum

My mother, ‘Abbás and I did, however, fear for His safety. Enemies still lurked in the city. My Father’s moral ascendancy and influence in Baghdad infuriated them. In fact they commissioned an assassin to murder my Father. The killer made two attempts, one at the public bath and one while my Father was walking by the river, but he lost his nerve both times when he came into the presence of my Father! My uncle, Mírzá Músá, related all this to my mother all this. She begged my Father to have a bodyguard but He refused. However, the local Bábís guarded our home through the night, and they kept a close watch on Him whenever He left the house.

Ázíyih Khánum

I began to sense that another chapter of our lives might soon open. I recalled the veneration dear Táhirih had for my Husband. I reflected how I had felt the silent but detectable elevation of His Spirit when He came out of the Black Pit. I now realized that His solitude in the mountains some seven years ago seemed to have served Him as a period of preparation for what was to come. Now, I witnessed daily the blooming of His spiritual power and I marvelled at the effect it had on people. Secretly, hopefully, I came to realize the Báb’s prophecy heralding the imminent advent of another Prophet might be manifested in my Husband.