

Teaching the Faith in Australia 1963-1975: Personal Recollections

Hedi Moani

Introduction

As the last born of eight sons, I was the result of my parent's final attempt to gain the daughter they had always longed for. I was born on the 16th February 1944, in the Holy Year of the Centennial of the declaration of the Báb in the district of Mazindarán. In this year, the first Seven Year Plan devised by the beloved Guardian was launched, and a number of Bahá'í families from Tehran, including the Ma'anis, responded to its call for pioneers and settled on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Here in the vicinity of Amol (the scene of the martyrdom of Quddús), in the village of Mahmood Abad, the pioneers shared, in the style of the 'long houses' of the Dayaks of Borneo, the only rental accommodation available in the area. This building, my birth-place and first home, was none other than the tea drinking palace of the late Reza Shah. Although the spirit of this pioneering venture was brave, laudable and sacrificial, lack of forward planning and practical difficulties forced most of the families to return to Tehran before the conclusion of the plan. My first childhood memories are, therefore, of a life of relative ease spent in the Northern suburbs of Tehran in the early 1950s. We enjoyed the benefits of a large and active Bahá'í community within the confines of a society traditionally hostile to our Faith. In our neighbourhood Jews, Armenian Christians, Zoroastrians and Bahá'ís associated amicably with each other as well as the Moslem majority. Through travel, trade, literature, the printed media and the cinema, we were also familiar with many aspects of life and civilisation of the West.

The Ten Year Spiritual Crusade

With the advent of the Ten Year Plan in 1953, once again the family decided to venture into the field of pioneering. By 1963, five of my brothers had settled in Africa, Arabia, Indonesia, Southeast Asia and Austria, while

the two married brothers and their families remained in Tehran. My parents and I pioneered to Damghan, a small and fanatical city, tracing its origins some 3000 years back to the first capital of the ancient Medes. It was near Damghan, at Cheshmih Ali (Ali's spring), that on their journey to Khurásán, Mullá Husayn and company set up camp. According to Nabíl, on this occasion a gust of wind caused the sudden fall of a great branch near their tents, signalling, in the words of the Bábu'l-Báb, the downfall of Mohammad Shah. Over a century later, that relic of the early Bábí history, laid at the bottom of that large reservoir of water; intact and undisturbed.

My teenage years were mostly spent in Damghan, where, from the tender age of ten I began to learn the meaning of blind prejudice, senseless persecution, and fear born of ignorance. As evident were the evidences of Bahá'u'lláh's unfailing protection, and the invincible power of God, ensuring the ultimate triumph of the Cause. Later in life I realised the value of such lessons in the school of adversity, preparing me for the unforeseen challenges of serving the Cause.

A Year in Southeast Asia

In 1962, two of my pioneering brothers returned to Iran for a brief visit. Encouraged by their tales of adventure and service, two of my Bahá'í classmates (Abol Fazel Beyzaee and Fereydoon Misaghian) and I decided to pioneer to Southeast Asia. They went to Laos, and I ended up in Jakarta, after having spent a little time in Brunei. Here, at the home of Mínoo and Margarret Fozdar; I met uncle Yankee Lee Ong, the first Malaysian Bahá'í of Chinese origin. Shortly after my arrival, because of communist insurgencies, all expatriates were forced to evacuate the area. We were taken aboard a Royal Air Force Hercules to a military base on the island of Labuan and a few days later to Singapore. Soon after, I flew to Jakarta, where I stayed for almost a year; learning English and adjusting to my first encounter with the rich cultures of Southeast Asia. This first year overseas holds a special place in my heart. The magic of the Far East has left me with many a treasured and indelible memory. The Bahá'í pioneers in the area lived like members of an extended family. Their recent successes in mass teaching in the Mentawai Islands, Sarawak and other areas in the region, had generated much excitement and anticipation throughout the Bahá'í world. It was here that I had the honour of meeting Dr Mohajer for the first time. He wanted me to study medicine and offered me all his medical books, but on hearing of my interest to go to Australia, he advised me to take up an extensive course of studies. This I did, when eventually the difficulties of attending university in Indonesia (without a good knowledge of the Bahasa), led me to pursue that objective in Australia.

Melbourne Australia 1963-65

On the 16th of November 1963 I arrived in Melbourne and joined a small group of Persian Bahá'ís living in the country. They consisted of three Persian youth whose parents were pioneers in Southeast Asia: Kamran Eshraghian, Farid Payman, and Bijan Vosoogh. They arrived in Adelaide in the early 1960's and were followed by Dr and Mrs Gabriel and their children Mona and Bashir. Sponsored by Mr Handley of Ballarat (John Handley's father), they settled in Melbourne in 1962. To my knowledge, there were no other active Persian Bahá'ís living in Australia prior to this date.

The first Australian Bahá'ís I met were Frank and Bibi Khan, who in 1962 on their way back from pilgrimage visited Tehran. I attended a meeting at which Frank Khan spoke about the building of the Sydney House of Worship. The use of helicopter to complete the dome of the building fascinated me greatly. At the Gabriel's home, very early after my arrival, I had the privilege of meeting Effie Baker, Mr and Mrs Frank Khan (for a second time), Gerty and Gerhard Schmeltzle and Betty Anderson (my first contact with an Aboriginal Bahá'í). The first Bahá'í meeting I attended was held at the Theosophist centre in Little Collins Street. Here I met the Bahá'í community of greater metropolitan Melbourne, and the Bluett family, who were visiting Victoria on their way to Papua New Guinea. That same afternoon of 22nd November 1963 we heard the shocking news of the assassination of JF Kennedy.

At the time, barring the Gabriels and the Truemans, there were no other Bahá'í families living in the Melbourne metropolitan area. This to some degree determined the direction of our teaching efforts and its concentration on single middle class intellectuals with a spiritual bent. In 1963-64 I boarded with Pym Trueman's family in Toorak, and attended George Taylor's Coaching College in Little Collins Street. During that year, the warmth of Pym's hospitality combined with my youthful enthusiasm to share the Bahá'í message with my fellow students, led to many a social events and firesides. These were supported by such Bahá'ís as John Walker, Collin Wosley, Grenville Curtin, Claudia Kelly, Elizabeth Bloomer, Camilia Chance, Bob Patterson (who pioneered to Samoa and soon after passed away in that country), and Brian Whitehead, to name but a few.

The highly diverse group of students at George Taylor's private College consisted mostly of the children of affluent families living in Africa, India, Europe, Southeast Asia, as well as Melbourne and Victoria. In subsequent years, some of my classmates who attended these meetings achieved national recognition. Sikai Holland, the daughter of the first black Ambassador of Rhodesia distinguished herself in the 1970s as a prominent activist in civil and Aboriginal rights. In short, Pym Trueman's Punt Road flat became a centre for Bahá'í activities and its warm and informal atmosphere led to much

teaching and fruitful social interaction. At this time, Pam Ringwood, a tutor in law at the University of Melbourne, conducted Bahá'í deepenings for the youth at her home, and the Gabriels had a regular weekly fireside.

Having put behind me the limitations imposed by the oppressive conditions of Iran and its lack of religious freedom, I saw Australia as a land of incalculable teaching opportunities and felt a sense of urgency in tapping its immense spiritual potential. To me the Australian society was a rare celebration of cultural diversity, and a powerful expression of political and religious freedom. The significance of Australia as the first and only politically united continent in the history of the planet and a land destined to act as a powerful advocate for individual rights and the liberation of the Oriental followers of Bahá'u'lláh (as indicated by Shoghi Effendi's last letter to Australia and New Zealand), are never dimmed in my mind - any more than its role as the southern pole of the Spiritual Axis could be ignored when considering the spiritual future of the region and the world. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Australian society has distinguished itself as a living laboratory of unity in cultural diversity. The path is now open, I believe, for this country to become a leading light in the establishment of universal peace; and a beacon of freedom in these, the darkest hours in human experience. Little wonder that the very name 'Australia' was officially adopted on the 21st of December 1817, only weeks after the birth of Bahá'u'lláh. The privilege and the responsibility for awakening the nation to so high a destiny rests primarily on the shoulders of the Australian Bahá'í community. They are called upon to regenerate the dormant spiritual potential of a vast country; a task that at the closing years of the millennium, calls for their urgent, selfless and ceaseless endeavours.

Geelong and Formation of the First LSA: 1965-1968

In 1965 I left Melbourne and enrolled at the Gordon Institute of Technology (now Deakin University at Geelong). At the time Emily Easey was the only Bahá'í in the city, but soon after my arrival Reg and Sue Priestly and family also moved in enabling us to form an active Bahá'í group, which soon became the first Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Geelong. We proclaimed to the Mayor, ran public meetings, wrote to the papers, published articles, conducted firesides, formed Bahá'í Club and advertised the Faith on a regular basis. Mrs Wright's declaration in 1965 was the first fruit of such activities.

Teaching at Colleges and Universities

For the first nine years in Australia, schools, colleges and universities were the principal arena of my teaching activities. In four educational institutions (George Taylor's, Gordon I.T., Perth I.T., and Melbourne University)

I had the honour of being the first and only Bahá'í student on the campus. Through Divine confirmations, and the assistance of Bahá'í friends, both at the Gordon Institute of Technology in Geelong during the 1960's, and later at the University of Melbourne in the early 1970's, two new souls in each establishment joined the rank of the believers. Solomon King, the first Australian Bahá'í of Turkish origin, and Milan Gricic, among the earliest Bahá'ís of Yugoslav extraction, were students at the GIT. Mistakenly, they attended a meeting of the Bahá'í club, and showed a keen interest in the Faith. Their declaration in the late 1960s, was a great boost to our small community as well as the Bahá'í Clubs at the GIT. At the University of Melbourne in 1970-71, I publicised numerous meetings attracting the attention of both the students and the staff. Each week at the Union Building I held a Bahá'í display. Finally, with the formation of the Bahá'í club, we were given our own room and mail box. Mrs Bainbridge was a most supportive and kind Bahá'í friend at this time. Shirley Charter's visit from New Zealand caused the declaration of two pure souls who made the affiliation of the Bahá'í club possible. Both Dr Furutan and Dr Mohajer spoke at public meetings sponsored by this club.

Tasmanian Working Holidays

Twice in the sixties I travelled to Tasmania and boarded with Mr and Mrs Benson and their son David, who lived in Devonport. Albert being a journalist arranged for my first media exposures, through both radio and the newspapers. At the ABC interview I dared to advance the notion that Australia will one day boast of a unique culture, created through the confluence of both the East and the West. It is a credit to the freedom of speech in this land that in 1965 they broadcast views so contrary to the opinion of the vast majority of the Australian population! In a similar interview in the 1990s I would have added the significance of the abiding spiritual influence of the Aboriginal culture; the essential ingredient to a unique Australian cultural identity. This blending of the East, the West and Indigenous cultures, guided by the eternal principle of the oneness of humanity, is in my view the recipe for creation of a wholesome society; balanced in all its material, intellectual and spiritual pursuits. This amalgam will ultimately evolve into a global culture of infinite diversity, creativity and vigour; and the emergence of a social order committed to the rule justice and an inviolable peace among all who dwell on the earth. During the summers of 1965-67 I joined a Tasmanian travel teaching team, covering Victoria, South Australia, NSW and the A.C.T. This team of Bahá'í youth consisted of David Benson, Ken Gretton, Edith Van den Dool and myself. We travelled the Eastern States in a "figure of eight" route, giving public meetings, interviews, firesides and initiating some exciting teaching activities in Sydney's Hyde Park and Kings Cross. In Hyde

Park our considerable stock of pamphlets ran out, so great was the receptivity of the public in Sydney! We wondered then, as I wonder now, why such opportunities for proclamation and teaching are so often neglected by the friends? In Adelaide we held what was possibly the first public meeting conducted by Bahá'í youth in Australia. We gate-crashed David and Safura Chittleborough's wedding, and listened to the Hand of the Cause of God Collis Featherstone speak about racial unity!

The International Conference in Sydney, 1967

A significant shift in my understanding of the Cause resulted from the International Conference held in Sydney during October 1967. The event was commemorating the Centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and leaders of the world. Some 300 Bahá'ís attended the Conference, including Hands of the Cause of God Dr Giachary and Mr Collis Featherstone. This gathering generated a new sense of mission and confidence throughout the Bahá'í community. For me, it was well worth the sacrifice of living on potatoes and vegetables for three months in order to save sufficient funds out of my meagre student allowance to attend this historic event! Meeting Dr Giachary alone was worth all that effort and more! Here was also a chance to meet some of the pioneers who opened the Pacific region to the Faith. Alvin and Gertrude Blum, Lilian and Suhayl Ala'i, Nui Tuatonga and others.

Love and Fellowship Among the Friends

Together with a newborn confidence resulting from the International Conference in Sydney was another factor of great importance assisting the teaching work in the late 1960s; namely the love and fellowship experienced among the Australian Bahá'í Community. At the time, the number of friends throughout the country were small enough for each Bahá'í to know the entire national community. In Melbourne, when Bahá'í as much as stopped over for an hour or two at the airport, the local friends would go there to greet them. As this close fellowship began to wane in the early 70's, the emphasis began to shift away from loving association attracting the seekers of truth, to consolidation and administrative efficiency. In the Four year Plan the House of justice called for a new mind set on the part of both the elector and the elected members of the Bahá'í community to remedy such an imbalance.

The Arrival of the Persian Bahá'ís

In the early 1970s the number of Persian believers in Australia rapidly began to increase. The Islamic revolution in 1979 brought a further upsurge of Persian Bahá'ís who took refuge here from the atrocities committed by the fanatical regime of their homeland. The impact of these sudden upturns in the Bahá'í population of the country could have been less dramatic had a

New Zealand style of compulsory distribution of the refugees throughout the country been adopted. The undesirable concentration of Bahá'ís (and of Persians in particular) in the large cities can only be remedied by a consecrated commitment to: a) homefront pioneering; b) overseas pioneering; or c) entry by troops in the capital cities and the rest of the country. Should this latter solution be adopted, after the enrolment of say 50,000 new believers, once again the Persian believers will number less than 10% of the total Bahá'í community. I believe that in communities such as the Gold Coast, such a process is already in progress.

A deeper understanding of this phenomenon may point to the mystical workings of God's greater plan for the promotion of His Cause. Its far reaching consequences, as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets, go far beyond our present understanding of the organic nature of the growth of the Faith. All we know is that this army of light must be put to best use in illuminating the Australian continent and turning the Pacific into an ocean of light.

Perth 1968-1970

In summer of 1968 I left Victoria and lived in Perth for approximately 15 months before resuming my studies at Melbourne University in March 1970. This turned out to be one of the most memorable years of my life. Teaching the youth was highly encouraged in this community, and great firesides were held at the home of John and Margaret Handley. Charlie Pierce, a most dynamic teacher of the Faith had arrived from Great Britain. His love for the Faith burned so brightly that the youth were drawn to him like moths to a flame! There were many declarations around that time, changing the face of the Bahá'í community in Perth, and turning a new page in the history of the Faith in Western Australia. One day Charlie was driving in West Perth and he saw me walking in a quiet street. His enthusiasm in greeting a Bahá'í brother was so great that he drove his car right into the path of an expensive sport car driving in the opposite direction! This was the nature of spiritual attraction among the Bahá'í friends at the time!

Love and Unity Leads to Teaching Success

One of the most remarkable outcomes of this spirit of love and unity, followed by intense teaching activities, was the rise of an extraordinary number of Bahá'í pioneers from Western Australia in the early 1970's. Charlie met Barbara at a fireside in 1970, they married and pioneered to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) soon after. The Deamer family followed the same destination and Gwen Strickland studied nursing for three years in order to pioneer to Nepal. Kevin Croft also accepted the Faith about this time. John and Margaret Handley and family pioneered to Fiji. Others pioneered to the Kimberlies in the North West of Western Australia. Fiona McDonald also

joined the Faith in that period, and is today serving as the chairperson of the NSA of Australia. Still others went homefront pioneering, or travelled across the world to serve and teach the Cause of God.

Both quantitatively, and qualitatively, they achieved remarkable feats for a numerically small and isolated Bahá'í community! Hands of the Cause Mr Faizi and Collis Featherstone, as well as Joy Stevenson (then the chairman of the NSA), and ABM Bill Washington, travelled big distances to visit Perth during that year. Iran Roshan Milne was the first and only Persian Bahá'í residing in Perth in 1968. Mr and Mrs Soheil Taheri and their children arrived in 1970. We felt overjoyed that at the turn of the decade, so much growth was being accomplished, and the Faith of God was gaining in strength and number in Perth, the remotest capital city in the world!

This experience of teaching success in WA, was a prelude to the years of intense teaching, pioneering and spiritual activities that followed in the 1970's. They commenced with two unprecedented years of teaching efforts in Melbourne, followed by five years of pioneering to Darwin, NT; a year of service in Kiribati, and the crowning experience of pilgrimage to the Holy Land in April 1974.

Return to Melbourne

In March 1970 I returned to Victoria to complete my architectural degree at the University of Melbourne. Having experienced such a remarkable period of expansion and growth of the Faith in Western Australia, the untapped teaching potential of the great city of Melbourne was a challenge that could not be ignored. A brief analysis of the situation led me to diagnose the malady as 1) a dearth of love and fellowship among the friends; and 2) lack of focus on teaching activities. As witnessed in the early 1970s, to the degree that the community maintained its loving fellowship and taught the Faith, success accompanied their every effort.

Intense Teaching Activities;

The events in Victoria at the opening years of this decade, represent some of the most intense teaching activities in the history of the Australian Bahá'í community. In the early 70s we had the rare privilege of welcoming to this land several Hands of the Cause of God, including Dr Furutan, Dr Mohajer, John Robarts and Mr Faizi, adding their spiritual blessings and encouragement to our own much loved Hand of the Cause of God Collis Featherstone. We were also host to some outstanding Bahá'í teachers from NZ, the USA, UK, Europe and other countries around the globe. In Melbourne, in rapid and coherent succession, they taught us some salient lessons on mass teaching and entry by troops.

A Bahá'í Club at the University of Melbourne

The formation of Melbourne University Bahá'í club was one of the fruits of teaching in the early 1970s. With the declaration of Ken Robinson and Bridgitte Keating, resulting from the audacious approach of Shirley Charters, and the assistance of a few non-Bahá'í well wishers of the Faith, in 1971 the Bahá'í club was officially formed and was given its own room and mail box. It was in this club room that the first and only Chinese member of the NSA of Australia¹ made his initial inquiry about the Faith. About this time, Shirley Charters proclaimed to the Chancellors of Melbourne and Monash universities, and Hands of the Cause of God, Dr Mohajer and Mr Furutan, also spoke on the campus.

Teaching the Masses

Concern with the Vietnam war was the outcry of the student body in the early 70s who sought justice and compassion, instead of war and carnage. Love cults and the alternative movements were in their heyday. The harvest of souls ready and eager to receive the call of their Lord was greater than any time before or since in the history of our Faith; but alas, the workers were few and the community of the Greatest Name lacked the vision and preparation to take the fullest advantage of this rare and historic opportunity. Unlike N.Z., where such courageous teachers as Shirley Charters, Gwen Venus and Alex Cookson, succeeded in attracting a significant number of youth to the Faith, the conservative element in our community made us err on the side of caution, and hence our failure to meet the final spiritual challenge of the third epoch. Our efforts in Victoria, however, were blessed with an abundance of Divine confirmations promised by Bahá'u'lláh. These took the form of visits by many of the Hands of the Cause and some outstanding Bahá'í teachers, who came to Melbourne in the early 1970's. They provided much needed guidance, and taught us lessons essential to the process of entry by troops. The following is a digest of their legacy, left for the future generations of Australian Bahá'ís; those who are yet to experience the supernal joys and challenges of a massive increase in the number of believers in this land.

Systematic Distribution of Bahá'í Literature

Dr Mohajer instructed us in the "systematic distribution of Bahá'í literature, resulting in the publication and spread of tens of thousands of pamphlets throughout the country, and formation of a Bahá'í information centres and a correspondence course. An outstanding example of this approach was seen at the Sunbury (a Woodstock-like) Festival in Victoria. 10,000 pamphlets were distributed among the 30,000 youths attending the event, and it was my privilege to address this live audience, (arguably, the largest in the

1. Sein Yeang Chew.

history of the Faith) about Bahá'u'lláh! A news item and photograph depicting this even appeared in the 1971 edition of the *Malaysian Bahá'í News*.

500 Removers of Difficulty

The visit of Hand of the Cause of God John Robarts consolidated our experience of 'mass teaching' by the introduction of "prayer" as an indispensable ingredient to the success of the process. In particular, he emphasised the long obligatory prayer and 500 "remover of difficulties". Some went overboard with enthusiasm and held-frequent prayer vigils, and the 500 removers of difficulties were said on a daily basis. We all came to recognise the pivotal significance of the devotional element in the task of teaching of the Cause.

The Personification of Audacity

The outstanding Bahá'í teacher from NZ, Shirley Charters, taught the Victorian Bahá'í community many a lesson in audacity. This lioness of the Kingdom, in her own unique and at times socially embarrassing manner; provided a rare-example of courage in proclamation of the Word of God. Her contribution to the Victorian 'mass teaching' process was to highlight the vital importance of ceaseless and fearless proclamation of the Cause of God! Time spent with Shirley Charters could never be erased from one's memory! She is in my view, the most outstanding Bahá'í teacher born to the land of the Long White Cloud.²

The Street Teaching Team from the U.S.A.

The tempo of the teaching work in Melbourne had reached such heights that the Universal House of Justice decided to send us three experts in street teaching from South Carolina, who had the experience of seeing thousands of new believers accepting the Faith in a short period. The ethnic composition of this team could not escape the attention of the Australian Bahá'í community. The group consisted of an African American, an Anglo-American and a Jewish-African-Anglo-American Bahá'í.

This team galvanised the-friends in the bold action of reaching the masses in the streets with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. From the time of their arrival, a group of us dedicated every spare hour at our disposal to this 'street teaching' method. Many souls, both old and new believers, were transformed by the experience of the power, the courage and the joys associated with this public process of promoting the Word of God. Some gnats turned into eagles and their doubts and fears gave way to valour and certitude!

In various suburbs of Melbourne firesides were held each and every day of the week. During 1971, my final year at the University, without private

2. New Zealand

transportation, I managed to attend over 350 of these firesides! Cooperation and loving fellowship among the friends involved in these activities were at an all time high. It was then that I met Harry Penrith,³ an Aborigine Bahá'í who was actively involved in both the Bahá'í community and its promotion. Mahvash Master, living in Melbourne at this time, was another soul transformed through contact with Dr Mohajer, into a most dynamic Bahá'í teacher. She taught the Cause unceasingly, and set ablaze many a heart with the love of Bahá'u'lláh. She traversed the length and breadth of the continent and remained faithful to her life's mission of igniting the fire of God's Love in every assembly even unto her last breath. Suffice it to say that the excitement the love and the willingness to sacrifice and share by those who followed the guidance of the hands of the Cause and the House of Justice in this period, remains unsurpassed in my Bahá'í experience, either before or since those fateful years!

Young Pioneers go to N.T.

Having completed my Architectural degree at the University of Melbourne, I decided to pioneer to Darwin, a post at which I stayed from February 1972 to April 1978, barring a year of service in Kiribati and six months of travels and pilgrimage in 1974, from which I returned to Darwin just in time to experience the devastations of cyclone Tracey! Out of the summer school of 1972, followed by the National Youth Conference in Canberra, both blessed by the presence of Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone, came a number young pioneers who settled in the Northern Territory. They included Juanita Buckney, Julia Salter, Marion Leedham, and Paul Stevenson (who opened Bathurst Island to the Bahá'í Faith, thus fulfilling a goal of the 9 year plan). It was February 1972 when I began my employment with the Federal Department of Works, based in Darwin. Leaving Melbourne for this post, I was accompanied by a friend, Adib Shahmardani, who kindly accepted to drive me through the heartland and be my fellow Bahá'í pioneer in the Far North. The vehicle dedicated to this epic journey was a 1963 VW, assembled out of the wrecked car yard belonging to a Melbourne Bahá'í, purchased at the modest price of \$400.00. It was mechanically in excellent condition and was freshly painted in bright orange. The only improvement we made to it was to write a highly visible slogan "Bahá'í Unites Mankind" in flowing 6 inch black lettering across its engine cover! On the way we stopped in Adelaide where a teaching conference was in process. In attendance were the Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Gertrude Blum and Councillor Howard Harwood, together with many other friends. Gertrude predicted that I would prosper materially as well as spiritually in the service of the Cause, and to this day I pray for the speedy fulfilment of her predictions! On our departure, Howard Harwood gave us enough grapes to last us the rest of the journey.

3. Burnum Burnum, c.1936 - 1997.

Alice Springs

We stopped in Port Augusta briefly, and in order to make contact with the locals played the pool tables. We managed to impress them sufficiently to establish a dialogue. We then left for Alice Springs, where, at the time, Mr and Mrs Mansell Morris were the only Bahá'í pioneers. We covered every letterbox in town with Bahá'í literature, and stayed the night at the Morris's. I remember Mrs Morris being concerned about how we were going fare as the first Persians ever to penetrate the heartland of Australia. She must have forgotten that our camels had preceded us over a century earlier! My answer to her, however, was that we intended to capitalise on being Persians, in order to teach the Australian Aborigines! Upon reflection, this was my first conscious thought about one of the most challenging issues of our time: the relationship between the cultures of the East, the West and the indigenous First Nations. Years later the theory of the complementary nature of these cultures, each offering a basket of knowledge essential to a wholesome development of civilisation, engaged a great deal of my thoughts. The practical civilisation of the West the philosophical heritage of the East and the spiritual cultures of the indigenous peoples are not only complementary, but interdependent. Once Divinely guided, their harmonious blending will lead to the birth of a global culture, rich in its infinite diversity, and marked by its pursuit of excellence in material, intellectual and spiritual pursuits. This global culture and its accompanying World Civilisation will usher in the long promised 'Golden Age of the entire human race'; the ultimate goal and the crowning achievement of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Entry By Troops in Alice Springs

In Alice Springs, known for its racial intolerance in the 1970's, Adib Sharmardani and myself, having covered the town with Bahá'í pamphlets, went to teach the Faith to some Aborigines who were camping in the dry bed of the Todd River. The result was 15 declarations, 14 of them Aborigines. Admittedly, with no Bahá'í communities in place for follow ups, they were never heard of again. The Bahá'í community at that time was unaccustomed to declarants with no forwarding address, telephone numbers or even an exact date of birth or surnames! Their conditions were summed up in the prophetic words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "blessed are the nameless and traceless poor, for they shall be the leaders of mankind!" (a more detail account of these events was published in the *Australian Bahá'í Bulletin*, April 1972).

Darwin Before the Cyclone

In the years prior to cyclone Tracey that devastated Darwin in the Christmas of 1974, that city, as well as all the townships along the road to Alice Springs, including some settlements in Gove Peninsula, and Bathurst Island,

had, in no uncertain terms, received the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine, and other settlements along the main highway, almost every household had received some Bahá'í literature. The orange VW with the "BAHÁ'Í UNITES MANKIND" slogan, was by then a recognised feature of Darwin life. Daily it was parked strategically across from the central P.O. for several hours acting as a silent teacher. Meanwhile we mixed and mingled with the crowd, using the street teaching methods we had learned in Melbourne. Great efforts were put into reaching the hippies who camped on the City beach, although Aboriginal teaching was always our first priority. This presented our youthful and inexperienced team with extreme difficulties. In those days in Darwin, you could hardly communicate with any Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders, as they either had insufficient command of the English language, or were not sober enough to hold a conversation, no matter what time of the day or evening! All we could do was to mention the name of Bahá'u'lláh, show our genuine love, and pray that God would change their intolerable conditions. The root cause of these problems, I believe, lies in the injustices committed in this land against the First Nation Aborigines. This subject is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that in the opinion of those who have lived in South Africa and in other lands renowned for racial injustice, the Australian treatment of Aborigines ranks among the most inhumane the world over. It is the moral imperative of the Australian Bahá'í community to help rectify this shameful chapter in the history of their nation. So far the Bahá'í efforts in this arena have been far from adequate. With the approach of the 21st Century and the Lesser Peace, we may well ask ourselves, for what time or mandate should we wait in order to act decidedly on this most urgent and challenging of all tasks facing a nation with such 'incalculable spiritual potential'? Seventy-five years after the Cause of God has reached the shores of the Australian Continent, its community boasts but of a few deepened Aboriginal Bahá'ís. We have no Bahá'í cultural group representing their heritage to the rest of the community, nor do we have a strong Aboriginal teaching teams active within the borders of Australia and beyond. There are few, if any, Bahá'ís in Australia who have seriously studied an Aboriginal language or are fully conversant with their culture. We have little understanding of their values, and have rarely attempted to live amongst them in order to demonstrate the reality of the oneness of humanity. Intermarriage within the community of the Greatest Name, between Aborigines and other racial groups is almost unheard of. The time for a much higher profile for this long suffering community has now come, and the Bahá'ís (as advised by the beloved Guardian must provide a platform for the legitimate expression of their grievances, before it is too late.

In my monthly travels to hold Bahá'í classes for the Leyton's children in Katherine, I observed the contrast between Aboriginal and mainstream

Australian families living only a few hundred meters apart. While the children of both families attended the same school and studied the same curriculum, one family lived in a government supplied air conditioned house, fitted with all the modern conveniences while the other dwelled on the bare ground, sheltered under some rusty corrugated iron sheets held up by a few recycled timber posts, a rickety structure with no walls or furniture, no beds, no desk, no bathroom and no parents who could either read or write let alone encourage their offspring in the pursuit of excellence. Both children were judged by the same standards and were expected to conform and succeed in the same society.

A Family Year of Service

In the light of the deprived conditions of the Aboriginal children and youth, it may be timely to devise a well-considered scheme for an international “family year of service” project, which aims at hosting Aboriginal students in Bahá’í homes. This concept could well extend to other countries and peoples, assisting to eradicate the ethnic and cultural prejudices that to this day plague the life of many nations. What better demonstration of our faith in the unity of the human race, and our concern for the well being of future Australians could we present, than to apply such preventative remedies to the lingering question of racial disharmony and cultural misunderstanding. In due course the establishment of a Bahá’í school for the Aboriginal children, and/or an orphanage associated with the house of Worship, would further enhance and strengthen the love and fellowship among the diverse cultures of the Australian society.

Cyclone Tracey

The cyclone that destroyed the city Darwin on Christmas eve 1974 was a rare social and spiritual experience of immense significance. Darwin was a city with a high proportion of individuals belonging to dysfunctional families. Many people with personal problems, trying to escape their past would take refuge in the remoteness of the North. Greed for lucrative Government contracts was another factor in attracting the work force to the area. Darwin boasted of being the world’s capital for consumption of beer and defacto relationships! Another hallmark characteristic of their life there was its intolerance towards the Aborigines, who in spite of the city’s multi-cultural composition were mostly living in sub-human conditions and were treated as such. Their treatment by the government agencies in the Northern Territory that were entrusted with the promotion of their welfare and the protection of their interests, were often blatantly racist, manifestly unjust and morally unforgivable. On the other side of the ledger, Darwin was the most cosmopolitan capital city in the country, the gateway to Asia, and the first Australian city to have a Chinese Mayor. As the most culturally diverse

capital city, and due to its manageable population of 40,000, it held the great promise of becoming the country's foremost laboratory for cultural diversity and a fertile soil for promotion of the oneness of humankind.

Prior warnings about the possible impact of the cyclone on the city were generally ignored by a population engrossed in the celebration of Christmas. I can recall the Departmental party on the afternoon of the 24th of December 1974. It was characterised by a total commitment to hedonism; a Godless commemoration held on the occasion of the birth of Christ!

The documented pattern of the city's devastation, as recorded by the satellites and published in the local papers, seemed astonishingly deliberate! Darwin was made of suburbs separated by stretches of bare roads, each branching out to reach a cluster of houses at the end. For the comprehensive destruction that resulted from cyclone Tracey, the eye of the cyclone must have travelled a complex path, going to and fro, reversing and changing direction to reach each and every suburb by the shortest route.

Meteorologists confirmed this seemingly deliberate and highly improbable path adopted by the cyclone. In the biblical context, parallels may be drawn with Sodom and Gomorrah, and the destruction caused by the inequities committed by a people who turned their back to God's forsaken children, and hence to God Himself.

The Cyclone Aftermath

For a number of Months following Tracey, life in Darwin was an unprecedented social experience in the history of this land. The destruction of houses proved a great equaliser, as all food and shelter was confined to a few schools and government hostels. Money, the great icon of materialism, had lost its power. No commodities could be purchased, while essentials were freely supplied at the supermarket. There were no other shops or businesses operational for some months! Also provided free of charge, were public transport, meals and accommodation.

In addition to receiving a weekly hardship allowance, every two weeks the Government employees were sent for "R&R" to an Australian capital city of their choice. For a while, damaged houses were fully restored by the armed forces, and every kind of building material and assistance was provided for the community. It was a time for the city, if not the nation, to reflect and take stock of their relationship to God and some of His less fortunate children! The socio-economic as well as spiritual implications of this unique experience, resulting from the greatest of natural disasters in the history of the nation, could well be the subject of a separate and fascinating study.

The North Western Arc

During the city's recovery period I was able to travel, in February-March 1975, through the North-West region of Australia, stopping at every town between Darwin and Perth in order to teach the Faith and place Bahá'í books in libraries and to contact churches and schools wherever possible. Up to that time to my knowledge, no other Bahá'ís had lived or visited the area. In Perth I met with Drs Peter and Janet Khan on their return to Australia after a prolonged stay in the USA. I continued to live in Darwin until the city was fully rebuilt and left for Queensland on April 21st 1978. Ruth Scott was the only active Bahá'í living in Darwin at the time of our arrival. The De Silva family from East Timor, despite language barriers and lack of deepening, supported the consolidation of the LSA by their annual vote. When the Wildes arrived from Adelaide and Francis and family from Hawaii the Community began to function with much greater efficiency. Ray Katt became a Bahá'í in the mid-seventies; and two pioneers from the US swelled our numbers. Marion Leedham taught at the local high school and concentrated on aboriginal teaching.

In Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the 1970's proved a turning point in the spiritual destiny of the N.T. and the Aboriginal people. It was in 1972 that finally the Aboriginal population ceased to decline and through a mysterious process akin to telepathy, the Aboriginal race decided to turn back the tide across the entire continent. The direct correlation between such a major event in the history of a people and the promotion of the word of God in their midst, is worthy of the greater research than is permissible in the scope of this paper. In short, the teaching experiences of the 1960's and the 1970's, proved both the capacity of the Australian Bahá'í Community for rapid response to the call for teaching and pioneering, as well as their willingness for personal sacrifice in the path of service to their beloved Cause. The failure to sustain the process of entry by troops was due to an unfortunate lack of unified vision by a community mentally unprepared for a massing increase in its numbers.

Another essential component of teaching success in Australia is the recognition of the pivotal role played by the original inhabitants of this land in the spiritualisation of the nation as a whole. They are the gatekeepers of the hearts of the nation. Teaching Aborigines, therefore takes precedence over all other Bahá'í activities Australia. In this way, and in this way alone, can the Australian Bahá'ís ultimately fulfil the unimaginably glorious spiritual destiny that is rightfully theirs.

A quarter of a century after the soul harvest of the 1970's, the Universal House of Justice informed the nations of the world that once again the opportunity to increase in the number of believers is knocking at our door.

Once again, in the closing decade of the 20th century, the spiritual destiny of the Australian nation hangs in the balance, and the future of its people, to an unsuspected degree, depends on how the Bahá'ís, at this crucial time in the nation's spiritual history, respond to the call of God and initiates a sustained process of entry by troops, welcoming under the tabernacle of unity the eager souls awaiting their invitation. The question remains, that having missed the opportunity of the 1970's, are the Australian Bahá'ís now ready to embrace the challenge of entry by troops presented to them by the Four Year Plan?

A Poem

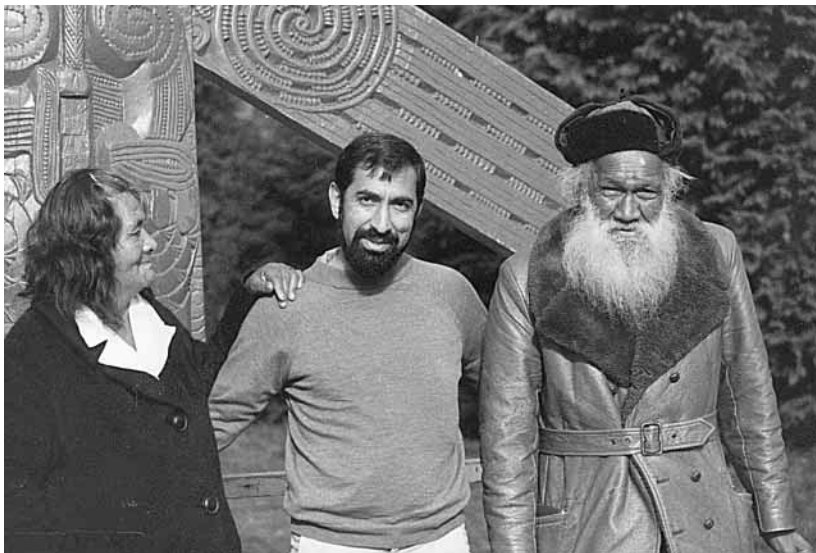
In the light of the spiritual battles fought and won in the vast arena of this island continent, portrayed by the beloved Guardian as a land of “unimaginable spiritual potential”, and in consideration to the challenges that lie ahead, it is befitting to close this paper with the blood stained manuscript of a poem, found in the coat pocket of a fallen Australian soldier in Flanders Field:

*“Ye who have faith to look with fearless eyes,
Beyond the tragedy of a world at strife,
And know that out of death and darkness
Shall arise, the dawn of ampler life.
Rejoice! Whatever anguish rend the heart,
That God has given you this priceless power;
To live in these great days
And have your part in Freedom's growing hour,
That you may tell your sons
Who see the light high in the Heavens,
Their heritage to take.
I saw the powers of darkness put to flight!*

On the evening of Tuesday 13th October 1998 Hedi Moani was murdered in his home. On 23rd June 1999 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand received a letter from the Bahá'í World Centre which read:

“The House of Justice has noted that the police in Takapuna have provided information from the deposition statement of Mr. Dean Hemopo, who has entered a plea of guilty with regard to the accusation that he murdered Mr. Hedi Moani. In this statement Mr. Hemopo indicates that he carried out this crime because of his belief that Mr. Moani was converting the leaders of the Ratana Church to the Faith and that he was responsible for subversion of that organization through his teaching activities as a Baha'i.

In the light of this information, the Universal House of Justice has decided that Hedi Moani should be designated as a martyr to the Cause of Baha'u'llah. You are asked to convey this decision to the close relatives of Mr. Moani and to the members of the New Zealand Baha'i community, who will doubtless draw inspiration and new energy in their service to the Faith from the fact that this devoted servant of the Cause has attained the rank of martyr in your country.



Mere Barrett, Hedi Moani, and Huti Barrett photographed at Hia Kaitupeka Pa, Tamarunui, New Zealand.