

Sijn-i-Akbar (The Great Prison)

The Event of Bahá'u'lláh's Incarceration in the Síyáh Chál Prison of Tehran

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Fall 2002 marks the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the infamous Dungeon of Tehran and the auspicious birth of the Bahá'í Revelation. As the Bahá'í world gathers to commemorate this momentous event it is hoped that this article will shed more light on the historical details of this period by exploring firsthand accounts of this event including some rare testimonies by Bahá'u'lláh Himself.

In his monumental analysis of the first Bahá'í century, Shoghi Effendi, the appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and its authorized interpreter, categorizes the years of Bahá'u'lláh's life into four distinct and significant stages¹. According to Shoghi Effendi, the first stage in the life of Bahá'u'lláh lasted for twenty-seven years (beginning with His birth on November 12, 1817 and ending with the Báb's Declaration² of His divine Mission on May 22, 1844), and was "characterized by the care-free enjoyment of all the advantages conferred by high birth and riches, and by an unfailing solicitude for the interests of the poor, the sick and the down-trodden."³ The second stage was Bahá'u'lláh's "active and exemplary discipleship in the service of the Báb"⁴ from 1844 to mid August 1852 when Bahá'u'lláh and countless other Bábís were unjustly imprisoned, tortured and the greater number of them brutally murdered by the order of the Qájár government of Iran. The next stage in Bahá'u'lláh's life, according to Shoghi Effendi, though short in duration (from mid August 1852 to mid December of the same year) is "immortalized, as it drew to a close, by the sudden eruption of the forces released by an overpowering, soul-revolutionizing Revelation."⁵ And the fourth and final stage, which culminated with the passing of Bahá'u'lláh on May 29, 1892, was the forty-year period of His glorious and stupendous ministry as the supreme Manifestation of God on earth. The purpose of this article is to explore in detail the third stage of Bahá'u'lláh's life, namely, the four-month period of His imprisonment in the Síyáh Chál and the event of His "Hidden Declaration"⁶.

The Shameful Assassination Attempt on the King and its Consequences

On August 15, 1852, obsessed by the woeful tragedy of the Báb's martyrdom, three⁷ obscure Bábís who held the Sháh directly responsible of that crime ventured

¹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 107.

² For a detailed account of the Báb and His Religion see H.M.Balyuzi, *The Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973).

³ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqí'át-i-Mubárakih*, p. 417.

⁷ In his chronicle of the early days of the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, Nabíl-i-Zarandí identifies these three desperate assassins as Šádiq-i-Tabrízí, Fathu'lláh-i-Hakkák-i-Qumí and Hájí Qásim-i-Nayrízí.

to kill the young Nāṣiri'd-Dīn Sháh (r. 1848-1896) and failed. Immediately after this episode, the blame for its design was directly placed on the entire body of the Bábí community. The result was a bloody and horrific campaign of mass persecution by the Persian government who, with the help of the Shí'a clergy, set out to exterminate all the followers of the Báb.

The British Ambassador in Tehran, Lt-Colonel Justin Sheil, made the earliest documented account of this event on August 16, 1852 to his superior, Earl Malmesbury, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. It reads:

A violent attempt was yesterday made to slay the Shah. His Majesty is residing at his summer encampment a few miles from Tehran. He had just mounted his horse to proceed on a hunting excursion of a few days, when three, or as some say six men, went close up to him as if to present a petition, according to the practice of this country. One of the parties placed his hand on the Shah's dress, and on being repulsed drew a pistol from his girdle, one of his confederates at the same time seizing the Shah's horse's reins. The animal finding himself checked, reared and the Minister of Finance, who chanced to be close at hand, pulled the Shah from his horse. In falling, the shot took effect in the loins of the Shah, but the pistol being loaded with only partridge shot and a few slugs, the wound is merely skin deep, and I am assured by the Shah's skilful French surgeon [Dr. E. Cloquet] that not the least ground for alarm exists. So intent was the assassin on affecting his object that he immediately drew a formidable dagger, and in spite of several desperate wounds, persisted in assailing the Shah, ripping up the entrails of one of the attendants, nor did he cease his efforts until he was slain. Two of his confederates were captured, one being severely wounded. In the fray, two other pistols were discharged at the Shah. His Majesty is said to have displayed calmness and firmness in this trying scene.

Today, to reassure the minds of the people, and satisfy them of the reality of the Shah's safety, salutes of 110 guns have been fired; the large body of troops

"As to the youth Sádiq-i-Tabrízí," writes Nabíl, "the fate he suffered was as cruel as it was humiliating. He was seized at the moment he was rushing toward the Sháh, whom he had thrown from his horse, hoping to strike him with the sword he held in his hand. The Shátir-Báshí, together with Mustawfíyu'l-Mamálik's attendants, fell upon him and, without attempting to learn who he was, slew him on the spot. Wishing to allay the excitement of the populace, they hewed his body into two halves, each of which they suspended to the public gaze at the entrance of the gates of Shimírán and Sháh-'Abdu'l-'Azím." (*Nabíl's Narrative*, pp. 609-10) The French diplomat and orientalist Comte de Gobineau adds that: "They ordered the body of Sádiq, the Bábí who had been murdered, to be tied to the tail of a mule and dragged over the stones as far as Tíhrán, so that the entire population could see that the conspirators had failed." (*Les Religions et les Philosophies dan l'Asie Centrale*, p. 234. Of the fate of Sádiq's two other accomplices, Nabíl writes: "His two other companions, Faṭḥu'lláh-i-Ḥakkák-i-Qumí and Hájí Qásim-i-Nayrízí, who had succeeded in inflicting only slight wounds on the Sháh, were subjected to inhuman treatment, to which they ultimately owed their death. Faṭḥu'lláh, though suffering unspeakable cruelties, obstinately refused to answer the questions they asked him. The silence he maintained in the face of manifold tortures, induced his persecutors to believe that he was devoid of the power of speech. Exasperated by the failure of their efforts, they poured molten lead down his throat, an act which brought his sufferings to an end. His comrade, Hájí Qásim, was treated with a savagery still more revolting. . . . He was stripped of his clothes, lighted candles were thrust into holes driven into his flesh, and he was thus paraded before the eyes of a multitude who yelled at and cursed him. The spirit of revenge that animated those into whose hands he was delivered seemed insatiable." (*Nabíl's Narrative*, pp. 610-11)

encamped near Tehran have been brought to the Royal camp to view the Shah, as well as the Clerical body, the civic authorities, and the bazaars are to be illuminated for several nights.

Yesterday afternoon the Russian Minister [Prince Dolgorouki] and I waited on the Shah to offer congratulations on his escape. We found him seated as usual on such occasions, and His Majesty presented no appearance of alarm or agitation, but he repeated often with fierceness that this attempt had instigators. . . .

It is incredible that the assassins should devote themselves to certain death, unless through religious fanaticism, and it is asserted and believed with confidence that the attempt on the Shah's life owes its origin to Bábee⁸ vengeance. The two survivors declare themselves to belong to this faith, that they were ready to die, and that they had come to seek death and paradise, or rather annihilation. The only symptom of conspiracy was the escape of three of the assassins, which was certainly a remarkable circumstance, as the Shah on these occasions is attended by a retinue of several hundred persons who surround him on all sides.

The Shah is said to feel deep mortification that he should be engaged in a struggle of some minutes without a simultaneous rush being made by his attendants on the assassins. I attribute this backwardness to panic and consternation, and the narrowness of the road where the attempt was made. . . .⁹

At the time of the attempt on the sovereign's life, Bahá'u'lláh was the guest of the Prime Minister Mírzá Áqá Khán-i-Núri¹⁰ at the village of Afchih, in the outskirts of Tehran. His host Ja'far-Qulí Khán, the prime minister's brother was in Shimírán when the assassination attempt occurred and having been acquainted first hand with the situation he immediately wrote to Bahá'u'lláh and apprised Him of what had happened. He told Bahá'u'lláh that the Sháh's mother, Malik Jahán Mahd-i-'Ulyá, was filled with hate and vengeance as a result of the plot to kill her son. He added that she was openly denouncing Bahá'u'lláh before the court and people as the mastermind of that odious act and was trying diligently to implicate the prime minister himself as an accomplice. Ja'far-Qulí Khán "urged Bahá'u'lláh," writes Nabíl-i-Zarandí, "to remain for a time concealed in that neighborhood, until the passion of the populace had subsided. He dispatched to Afchih an old and experienced messenger whom he ordered to be at the disposal of his Guest and to hold himself in readiness to accompany Him to whatever place of safety He might desire."¹¹

As soon as Ja'far-Qulí Khán's letter containing the appalling news reached Bahá'u'lláh, however, He decided to immediately present Himself to the authorities. Bahá'u'lláh knew that, because of His reputation as a Bábí leader, He would inevitably fall under suspicion. Hence, refusing the advice of His host to

⁸ "A new sect in Persia, whose chief tenet seems to be a sort of materialism, that every atom is God, and that the Universe is God." This note was made by ambassador Sheil himself.

⁹ Sheil to Malmesbury No. 99, 16 August 1852: British Foreign Office 60 171. Cited in M. Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions 1844-1944 Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, pp. 130-31.

¹⁰ Entitled I'timádu'd-Dawlih, he was Násiri'd-Dín Sháh's second prime minister from 1851 to 1858. A man with self-serving ambition, he was the chief instigator of the Bábí persecutions that followed the attempt on the life of the Sháh.

¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 602-03.

remain for a time hidden in that vicinity, He mounted His horse the following morning and rode intrepidly towards the headquarters of the imperial army at Niyávarán. On the way Bahá'u'lláh stopped at the home of His brother-in-law Mírzá Majíd Khán-i-Áhí in the village of Zarkandih a short distance from where He was heading. Mírzá Majíd Khán, who was married to Bahá'u'lláh's younger sister Nisá' Khánum, was the secretary to the Russian ambassador Prince Dolgorukov and his house was in the Russian Legation compound adjoined to the main building of the Embassy.

Nabíl writes that soon after Bahá'u'lláh's arrival at Zarkandih some attendants of Hájí 'Alí Khán-i-Hájibu'd-Dawlih, the Chief Steward of the royal household, recognized Him and informed their master who in turn informed the King. He adds that:

The news of the arrival of Bahá'u'lláh greatly surprised the officers of the imperial army. Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh himself was amazed at the bold and unexpected step, which a man who was accused of being the chief instigator of the attempt upon his life had taken. He immediately sent one of his trusted officers to the legation, demanding that the Accused be delivered into his hands. The Russian minister refused, and requested Bahá'u'lláh to proceed to the home of Mírzá Áqá Khán, the Grand Vazír, a place he thought to be the most appropriate under the circumstances. His request was granted, whereupon the minister formally communicated to the Grand Vazír his desire that the utmost care should be exercised to ensure the safety and protection of the Trust his government was delivering into his keeping, warning him that he would hold him responsible should he fail to disregard his wishes.

Mírzá Áqá Khán, though he undertook to give the fullest assurances that were required, and received Bahá'u'lláh with every mark of respect into his home, was, however, too apprehensive for the safety of his own position to accord his Guest the treatment he was expected to extend.¹²

In order to prevent the fury of the royal court from being directed towards Mírzá Áqá Khán, into whose hands He was delivered by the Russian envoy, Bahá'u'lláh decided not to proceed to the prime minister's home and instead set out for Niyávarán and turned Himself over to the government authorities. At the royal army encampment He was at once arrested and, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was detained and interrogated for three days¹³. Unable to illicit any self-incriminating confession from Bahá'u'lláh or produce any evidence to implicate Him in the conspiracy to assassinate the Sháh, the government ordered that He be transferred to Tehran and be cast into the Síyáh Chál prison.

During His transfer from Niyávarán, Bahá'u'lláh was forced, under the blazing sun of a midsummer day, to walk a distance of some twenty-four kilometers to the Capital, barefoot and in chains. On the way He was scorned and ridiculed and

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 603-04.

¹³ Fádíl-i-Mázindarání, *Asráru'l-Áthár*, vol. 1, p. 236. In *A Travellers Narrative* 'Abdu'l-Bahá again confirms that Bahá'u'lláh's detention at Niyávarán did last for "several days" (*A Travellers Narrative*, p. 31).

pelted with stones by the hostile crowd who thronged the roadsides. It is reported¹⁴ that among the abusive populace was an old woman who wished to fling a stone at Bahá'u'lláh, but was unable to keep up with the procession. Seeing her condition, Bahá'u'lláh requested the escorting guards to slow down so that the elderly woman could achieve her desire.

In Tehran Bahá'u'lláh was taken immediately to the Sáyáh-Chál (the Black Pit), the foulest, unsanitary and disease infectious underground dungeon in the Capital. In His monumental epistle addressed to Shaykh Muḥammad-Taqí-i-Najafí, a highly influential Shí'a clergy and a self-professed enemy of Him and His Cause, Bahá'u'lláh describes the circumstance of His arrest and imprisonment in connection with the attempt on the life of the Sháh in these words:

By the righteousness of God! We were in no wise connected with that evil deed, and Our innocence was indisputably established by the tribunals. Nevertheless, they apprehended Us, and from Niyávarán, which was then the residence of His Majesty, conducted Us, on foot and in chains, with bared head and bare feet, to the dungeon of Tihrán. A brutal man, accompanying Us on horseback, snatched off Our hat, whilst We were being hurried along by a troop of executioners and officials. We were consigned for four months to a place foul beyond comparison.¹⁵

The Condition of Bahá'u'lláh's Imprisonment

The subterranean dungeon into which Bahá'u'lláh was thrown had originally served as a water reservoir for one of the city's public baths. Having been abandoned for some years, the government had turned it into a torturous prison where it would consign only the worst prisoners. Let Bahá'u'lláh Himself describe, in graphic detail, the condition of that horrendous place:

As to the dungeon in which this Wronged One and others similarly wronged were confined, a dark and narrow pit was preferable. Upon Our arrival We were first conducted along a pitch-black corridor, from whence We descended three steep flights of stairs to the place of confinement assigned to Us. The dungeon was wrapped in thick darkness, and Our fellow-prisoners numbered nearly a hundred and fifty souls: thieves, assassins and highwaymen. Though crowded, it had no other outlet than the passage by which We entered. No pen can depict that place, nor any tongue describe its loathsome smell. Most of these men had neither clothes nor bedding to lie on. God alone knoweth what befell Us in that most foul-smelling and gloomy place!¹⁶

In the Sáyáh Chál, Bahá'u'lláh's feet were put in stocks and around His neck were placed chains of such heavy weight¹⁷ that their mark would remain imprinted upon His body until the end of His life. According to His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who then was eight years of age, Bahá'u'lláh "was chained to five other Bábís; these fetters were

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 607-08.

¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

¹⁷ The weight of the notorious chain that was placed around Bahá'u'lláh's neck is reported to have been about "seventeen Mann" (Ghadímí, *Jamál-i-Abhá*, p. 33) which is over 50 kilograms or 110 pounds.

locked together by strong, very heavy, bolts and screws.¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also recounts that “the weight of the chain that was put around Bahá’u’lláh’s neck was so heavy that it would push His head down to the ground, and as such, a wooden strut was used to raise up the chain and His neck.”¹⁹ Bahá’u’lláh Himself, in a prayer composed several years later, remembers those cruel and infamous chains as “the chains that broke My neck due to their extreme weight.”²⁰ And in His epistle to Shaykh Najafí, He writes: “Shouldst thou at some time happen to visit the dungeon of His Majesty the Sháh, ask the director and chief jailer to show thee those two chains, one of which is known as Qará-Guhar, and the other as Salásil. I swear by the Day-Star of Justice that for four months this Wronged One was tormented and chained by one or the other of them.”²¹

Shackles and chains were not the only form of corporal torture that Bahá’u’lláh was subjected to in the Síyáh Chál. He recounts that, in addition to being in chains and fetters, both of His thumbs were also bound together behind his back. An act, which according to Him was greatly arduous and distressful. He recalls: “The weight of the chain placed about Our neck was difficult to bear, but having the thumbs of both hands bound together behind one’s back was even more toilsome. The royal guards relentlessly kept us under observation, but the executioners would show us kindness. One even brought Me a cup of tea and some grapes, but as I was in chains and My hands were bound, I was unable to eat them.”²²

For the first three days and three nights Bahá’u’lláh was not allowed any food or drink. When He was permitted a small ration of food, it was poisoned by the guards, an attempt which, though ineffective in its purpose, left grave traces on His health for years to come. Bahá’u’lláh was kept for four months in such cruel and afflictive conditions. He Himself recounts, in great detail, the condition and circumstances of His incarceration inside the Síyáh Chál. The following is the entire account as recorded by Nabíl-i-Zarandí:

We were all huddled together in one cell; our feet in stocks, and around our necks fastened the most galling of chains. The air we breathed was laden with the foulest impurities, while the floor on which we sat was covered with filth and infested with vermin. No ray of light was allowed to penetrate that pestilential dungeon or to warm its icy-coldness. We were placed in two rows, each facing the other. We had taught them to repeat certain verses, which, every night, they chanted with extreme fervour. “God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-sufficing!” one row would intone, while the other would reply: “In Him let the trusting trust.”²³ The chorus of these gladsome voices would continue to peal out until the early hours of the morning. Their reverberation would fill the dungeon,

¹⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 72.

¹⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Khatábát*, p. 126.

²⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqí’át-i-Mubárah*, p. 436.

²¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 77.

²² Ghadímí, *Jamál-i-Abhá*, pp. 36-37.

²³ In a Tablet revealed during the latter years of His banishment to ‘Akká, Bahá’u’lláh confirms the chanting of a very similar verse in the Síyáh Chál. He writes: “. . . in the Prison We often would intone this blessed verse: ‘He is sufficient unto me, and sufficient unto all things, and sufficient is God as the All-sufficing!’”[*Hú-wa Hasbí wa Hasbu Kullih-Shay wa Kafá-billáh-i Hasíban*] (Bahá’u’lláh, *L’álí’ul-Hikmat*, vol. 2, p. 282).

and, piercing its massive walls, would reach the ears of Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, whose palace was not far distant from the place where we were imprisoned. “What means this sound?” he was reported to have exclaimed. “It is the anthem the Bábís are intoning in their prison,” they replied. The Sháh made no further remarks, nor did he attempt to restrain the enthusiasm his prisoners, despite the horrors of their confinement, continued to display.

One day, there was brought to Our prison a tray of roasted meat, which they informed Us the Sháh had ordered to be distributed among the prisoners. “The Sháh,” We were told, “faithful to a vow he made, has chosen this day to offer to you all this lamb in fulfillment of his pledge.” A deep silence fell upon Our companions, who expected Us to make answer on their behalf. “We return this gift to you,” We replied; “we can well dispense with this offer.” The answer We made would have greatly irritated the guards had they not been eager to devour the food we had refused to touch. Despite the hunger with which Our companions were afflicted, only one among them, a certain Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-Mutavallíy-i-Qumí²⁴, showed any desire to eat of the food the sovereign had chosen to spread before us. With a fortitude that was truly heroic, Our fellow-prisoners submitted, without a murmur, to endure the piteous plight to which they were reduced. Praise of God, instead of complaint of the treatment meted out to them by the Sháh, fell unceasingly from their lips—praise with which they sought to beguile the hardships of a cruel captivity.

Every day Our gaolers, entering Our cell, would call the name of one of Our companions, bidding him arise and follow them to the foot of the gallows. With what eagerness would the owner of that name respond to that solemn call! Relieved of his chains, he would spring to his feet and, in a state of uncontrollable delight, would approach and embrace Us. We would seek to comfort him with the assurance of an everlasting life in the world beyond, and, filling his heart with hope and joy, would send him forth to win the crown of glory. He would embrace, in turn, the rest of his fellow-prisoners and then proceed to die as dauntlessly as he had lived. Soon after the martyrdom of each of these companions, We would be informed by the executioner, who had grown to be friendly to Us, of the circumstances of the death of his victim, and of the joy with which he had endured his sufferings to the very end.

We were awakened one night, ere break of day, by Mírzá ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb-i-Shirází, who was bound with Us to the same chains. He left Kázimayn and followed Us to Tíhrán, where he was arrested and thrown into prison. He asked Us whether We were awake, and proceeded to relate to Us his dream. “I have this night,” he said, “been soaring into a space of infinite vastness and beauty. I seemed to be uplifted on wings that carried me wherever I desired to go. A feeling of rapturous delight filled my soul. I flew in the midst of that immensity with a swiftness and ease that I cannot describe.” “Today,” We replied, “it will be your

²⁴ This man had already proven himself to be a coward and a shameless apostate. Four years earlier, fearing for his wretched life, he had recanted his faith as a Bábí and abandoned his fellow defenders at the Fort of Shaykh Ṭabarsí. After the treacherous fall of the Fort, to absolve himself once again of any connection with the beleaguered Faith, Mírzá Ḥusayn impudently approached Quddús, on the day of His martyrdom, and brutally struck Him in the face, as Quddús was being dragged through the streets of Bárfurúsh.

turn to sacrifice yourself for this Cause. May you remain firm and steadfast to the end. You will then find yourself soaring in that same limitless space of which you dreamed, traversing with the same ease and swiftness the realm of immortal sovereignty, and gazing with that same rapture upon the Infinite Horizon.”

That morning saw the gaoler again enter Our cell and call out the name of ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb. Throwing off his chains, he sprang to his feet, embraced each of his fellow-prisoners, and, taking Us into his arms, pressed Us lovingly to his heart. That moment We discovered that he had no shoes to wear. We gave him Our own, and, speaking a last word of encouragement and cheer, sent him forth to the scene of his martyrdom. Later on, his executioner came to Us, praising in glowing language the spirit which that youth had shown. How thankful We were to God for this testimony which the executioner himself had given!²⁵

The Bábí Pogrom of 1852

Within a few days of the King’s assassination attempt, the central Government, encouraged by the royal Court, began its campaign to round up all the Bábís across the country and put them to death. According to foreign diplomatic documents²⁶, the initial executions, which included such high ranking Bábí personages as Táhírih (Qurratu’l-‘Ayn) and the Báb’s “amanuensis of revelation” (*kátib-i-wahy*) Siyyid Husayn-i-Yazdí, began as early as a week after the attempt on the life of the Sháh. The most dramatic description of these public genocides was documented by an Austrian diplomat, Captain Alfred von Gumoens, who, having observed in horror the Bábí killings, resigned his post in Iran and returned to his country. The following is an extract from a letter²⁷, dated 29 August 1852, which Gumoens wrote to one of his friends back in Austria:

Dear Friend, My last letter of the 20th inst. mentioned the attempt on the King. I will now communicate to you the result of the interrogation to which the two criminals were subjected. In spite of the terrible tortures inflicted, the examination extorted no comprehensive confession; the lips of the fanatics remained closed, even when by means of red-hot pincers and limb-rending screws they sought to discover the chief conspirator. All that transpired was that they belonged to the Bábí sect. . . . This sect was founded about fifteen years ago by a certain *Báb*, who was shot by the King’s command. The most faithful of his adherents fled to Zanján, where two years ago, they were reduced by the Royal troops, and, as was generally believed, were exterminated without regard for age or sex. Like all religious intolerance, this unmeasured persecution produced exactly the opposite of the effects intended. The Báb’s teaching gained more and more ground, and is at the present moment diffused through the whole country. . . Very skillfully had the Prophet [i.e. the Báb] pointed out to the disciples of his teaching that the way to Paradise lay through the torture-chamber. If he spoke truly, then the present Sháh

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 631-34.

²⁶ See M. Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions 1844-1944 Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, pp. 132-38.

²⁷ This brutally graphic letter, depicting the Iranian savagery, was published in its entirety in *Oesterreichischer Soldatenfreund* on 12 October 1852 and again in English in *The Times* of London on October 23.

has deserved great merit, for he strenuously endeavours to people all the realms of the Saints with Bábís! His last edict still further enjoins on the Royal servants the annihilation of the sect. If these simply followed the Royal command and rendered harmless such of the fanatics as are arrested by inflicting on them a swift and lawful death, one must needs, from the Oriental standpoint, approve of this; but the manner of inflicting the sentence, the circumstances which precede the end, the agonies which consume the bodies of the victims until their life is extinguished in the last convulsion are so horrible that the blood curdles in my veins if I endeavour to depict the scene for you, even in outline. Innumerable blows with sticks which fall heavily on the back and soles of the feet, branding of different parts of the body with red-hot irons, are such usual inflictions that the victim who undergoes only such caresses is to be accounted fortunate. But follow me my friend, you who lay claim to a heart and European ethics, follow me to the unhappy ones who, with gouged-out eyes, must eat, on the scene of the deed, without any sauce, their own amputated ears, or whose teeth are torn out with inhuman violence by the hand of the executioner; or whose bare skulls are simply crushed by blows from a hammer; or where the *bázár* is illuminated with unhappy victims, because on right and left the people dig deep holes in their breasts and shoulders and insert burning wicks in the wounds. I saw some dragged in chains through the *bázár*, preceded by a military band, in whom these wicks had burned so deep that now the fat flickered convulsively in the wound like a newly-extinguished lamp.

Not seldom it happens that the unwearying ingenuity of the Orientals leads to fresh tortures. They will skin the soles of the Bábís' feet, soak the wounds in boiling oil, shoe the foot like the hoof of a horse, and compel the victim to run. No cry escaped from the victim's breast; the torment is endured in dark silence by the numbed sensation of the fanatic; now he must run; the body cannot endure what the soul has endured; he falls. Give him the *coup de grâce*! Put him out of his pain! No! The executioner swings the whip, and – I myself have had to witness – the unhappy victim of hundred-fold tortures run! This is the beginning of the end. As for the end itself, they hang the scorched and perforated bodies by their hands and feet to a tree head-downwards, and now every Persian may try his marksmanship to his heart's content from a fixed but not too proximate distance on the noble quarry placed at his disposal. I saw corpses torn by nearly 150 bullets. The more fortunate suffered strangulation, stoning or suffocation: they were bound before the muzzle of a mortar, cut down with swords, or killed with dagger thrusts, or blows from hammers and sticks. Not only the executioner and the common people took part in the massacre: sometimes Justice would present some of the unhappy Bábís to various dignitaries and the Persian [recipient] would be well content, deeming it an honour to imbrue his own hands in the blood of the pinioned and defenseless victim. Infantry, cavalry, artillery, the *ghuláms* or guards of the King, and the guilds of butchers, bakers, etc., all took their fair share in these bloody deeds. One Bábí was presented to the crack officers-corps of the garrison; the general in command dealt the first blow, and afterwards each one as his rank determined. The Persian troops are butchers, not soldiers. One Bábí fell to the share of the *Imam-Jum'a* [the Muslim clergy who leads the Friday Prayers] who put him to death. Islám knows nothing of charity!

When I read over again what I have written I am overcome by the thought that those who are with you in our dearly beloved Austria may doubt the full truth of the picture, and accuse me of exaggeration. Would to God that I had not lived to see it! But by the duties of my profession I was unhappy often, only too often, a witness of these abominations. At present I never leave my house, in order not to meet with fresh scenes of horror. After their death the Bábís are hacked in two and either nailed to the city gate, or cast out into the plain as food for dogs and jackals. Thus the punishment extends even beyond the limits which bound this bitter world, for Musulmán's who are not buried have no right to enter the Prophet's Paradise.

Since my whole soul revolts against such infamy, against such abominations as recent times, according to the judgment of all, present, I will no longer maintain my connection with the scene of such crimes. Though I were to be offered honors and gold here, I long for Europe's civilization . . . I have already asked for my release, but have so far received no answer; in the East everything is delayed, only the executioner's axe moves fast.²⁸

Confiscation of Bahá'u'lláh's Properties & Assets

While Bahá'u'lláh laid in chains and shackles in the Síyáh Chál the Government ordered its soldiers to storm His ancestral district in Núr²⁹ and to confiscate all His properties³⁰. In the village of Tákur, Bahá'u'lláh's lavishly furnished home, which He had inherited from His father, was completely robbed of its material wealth and the building itself was demolished. His luxurious house in Tehran was also ransacked and its valuables carried away. In fact so grave was the plundering that Bahá'u'lláh's family were forced to flee their home and seek refuge at a destitute part of town. In one of his talks given in August of 1915, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about some of Bahá'u'lláh's opulent household possessions which, in those days, were plundered by the state:

Prayer beads made of pearls—one of the most precious of the household possessions of the Blessed Beauty, and valued at 10,000 *túmáns* in the currency of those days—had been spared for us. Every bead was the size of a hazel-nut, and in the middle of each was embedded an emerald. After our possessions had been looted, we were obliged to leave this string of beads in a trust for 1,000 *túmáns*. Since interest charges were accumulating, we could not afford to reclaim it. Today, if those same prayer beads were still in our possession, they could be sold for 100,000 *túmáns* in Paris.

Another precious object which was in the possession of the Blessed Beauty was the book of Háfiz³¹ in the handwriting of Mír 'Imád³². Muḥammad Sháh sent an

²⁸ M. Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions 1844-1944 Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, pp. 132-34.

²⁹ Situated in the province of Mázindarán.

³⁰ All of Bahá'u'lláh's wealth was inherited from His father, Mírzá 'Abbás-i-Núrí, who passed away in 1839. Mírzá 'Abbás was an eminent administrator in the court of the Qájár king Fath-'Alí Sháh (r. 1797-1834) and had come to hold many important and responsible posts in the ministerial capacity.

³¹ Khájih Shamsu'd-Dín Muḥammad-i-Shirází, better known as Háfiz of Shiráz (1320-91 C.E.), is considered one of the greatest Persian poets of all times. His book of poetry, the *Díván-i-Háfiz*, has been translated into many European languages including English.

envoy to enquire about the price of the book. The Blessed Beauty gave the reply: “The book contains 12,000 verses; with each verse valued at one *ashrafī* [a gold coin], the book therefore has a value of 12,000 *ashrafīs*.” Muḥammad Sháh’s answer was: “With 12,000 *ashrafīs*, we are able to outfit two full regiments of soldiers.”

Yet another of the valuable possessions of the Blessed Beauty was the prayer of Kumayl³³ in the handwriting of the Imám ‘Alí, son of Abú-Ṭálib, in the Kufic style of calligraphy. The scholars of that day, including Mír ‘Imád, had testified in writing that the handwriting was that of the Imám ‘Alí. It was truly of such value that no price could be put on it.

Vast amounts of jewellery and many precious objects were in our possession, but all of them were lost.³⁴

Bahá’u’lláh’s “Hidden Declaration”

“At a time when the Cause of the Báb seemed to be hovering on the brink of extinction,” writes Shoghi Effendi, “when the hopes and ambitions which animated it had, to all human seeming, been frustrated, when the colossal sacrifices of its unnumbered lovers appeared to have been made in vain, the Divine Promise enshrined within it was about to be suddenly redeemed, and its final perfection mysteriously manifested. The Bábí Dispensation was being brought to its close (not prematurely but in its own appointed time), and was yielding its destined fruit and revealing its ultimate purpose—the birth of the Mission of Bahá’u’lláh. In this most dark and dreadful hour a New Light was about to break in glory on Persia’s somber horizon. As a result of what was in fact an evolving, ripening process, the most momentous if not the most spectacular stage in the Heroic Age of the Faith was now about to open.”³⁵

According to Bahá’u’lláh Himself it was in the midpoint of these torturous months in “the Great Prison” that He “received the first intimation³⁶ of His sublime

³² One of the most celebrated Persian calligraphers of the time of the Safavid king Sháh ‘Abbás the Great (r. 1587-1628) who is credited with perfecting the *nasta’līq* style of Persian calligraphy. It is said that he was put to death by the Sháh’s order in 1615 for his adherence to the Sunní path of Islam.

³³ Kumayl-ibn-Zyád-i-Nakha’í was an avowed disciple of Imám ‘Alí (the son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad and the first of the twelve Shí’a Imáms of Islam) who is noted for the important oral traditions he has left from the Imám. He was killed by his enemies around the year 701 C.E..

³⁴ A.A. Furútan, *Stories of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 14-15.

³⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 91-92.

³⁶ According to *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* “intimation” is a noun derivative of the verb “intimate” which means to “state or make known.” Shoghi Effendi’s statement that Bahá’u’lláh “received the first intimation of His sublime mission” implies that it was at this point that Bahá’u’lláh was given His divine Mandate, or in other words, the scope of His Revelation was “intimated” or “made known” to Him. It should not, however, be misconstrued as implying that it was the first occasion in which Bahá’u’lláh became aware of His own reality as the Manifestation of God. In his explanation of Bahá’u’lláh’s enunciation to Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh, in the *Lawḥ-i-Sultán*, which reads: “O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me. . .”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “Sleeping and waking is passing from one state to another. Sleeping is the condition of repose, and wakefulness is the condition of movement. Sleeping is the state of mystery; wakefulness is the state of manifestation. . . . the Holy Manifestations have ever been, and ever will be, Luminous Realities; no change or variation takes place in Their essence. Before declaring Their manifestation, They are silent and quiet like a

mission”³⁷ as the Promised One of all ages. In a Tablet, revealed decades later, during the years of His banishment to ‘Akká, Bahá’u’lláh, while expatiating on the object and goal of His Revelation, makes a rare allusion to the precise time when the details of His divine Mandate were revealed to Him in the Síyáh Chál. He writes:

. . . Suddenly on the second day of the month of nativity [i.e. Muḥarram], before sunrise, all [Our] manners of expression as well as speech and thought were transformed; a transformation which heralded the joyful tidings of [Our] Ascension. This [revolutionizing] transformation continued successively for twelve days, during which the waves of the Ocean of divine Utterance surged and the splendors of the Day Star of Assurance shed their radiance. . . .³⁸

From this passage it can be positively inferred that the initial revelations began on the 2nd of Muḥarram 1269 A.H.³⁹ and lasted until the 14th of the same month. As the first of Muḥarram 1269 A.H. (the first day of the Muslim New Year) fell on October 15, 1852, “the twelve day event” of these inaugural revelations would have taken place from October 16th to the 27th, 1852. In His epistle to Shaykh Najafí, Bahá’u’lláh further elaborates on His personal experience of this momentous event. He states:

During the days I lay in the prison of Tīhrán, though the galling weight of the chains and the stench-filled air allowed Me but little sleep, still in those infrequent moments of slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent that precipitateth itself upon the earth from the summit of a lofty mountain. Every limb of my body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear.⁴⁰

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: “Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Ere long will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.”⁴¹

In a more mystical reference to His divine experience in the dungeon of Tehran, Bahá’u’lláh, in the *Súriy-i-Haykal* (*Súrih of the Temple*), written some decade and a

sleeper, and after Their manifestation, They speak and are illuminated, like one who is awake.” (*Some Answered Questions*, pp. 85-86).

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 93.

³⁸ Fāḍil-i-Mázindarání, *Asráru’l-Áthár*, vol. 2, p. 18. The English rendering of this passage is made by the current writer and as such must only be viewed as a provisional translation of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless Utterance.

³⁹ “After Hijra.” The Prophet Muḥammad’s migration or *hijra* from the city of Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. is the basis for the Muslim calender which uses the lunar reckoning of time as oppose to the solar convention in use in the western world.

⁴⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

half later, recounts in symbolic terms how the “Most Great Spirit”, personified as a maiden, appeared before Him and announced His station to the rest of the world:

While engulfed in tribulation I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden—the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord—suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul that her countenance shone with the ornament of the good-pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call, which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer beings tidings, which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God's honoured servants. Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: “By God! This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could ye but understand. This is the Mystery of God and His Treasure, the Cause of God and His glory unto all who are in the kingdom of Revelations and of creation, if ye be of them that perceive.”⁴²

Bahá'u'lláh's release from the Síyáh Chál

Bahá'u'lláh was released from the Síyáh Chál in the second week of December 1852⁴³ after overwhelming testimonies had established beyond the shadow of a doubt His non-complicity in the plot against the Sháh. When He was discharged from the prison, Bahá'u'lláh did not divulge to anyone His experience of divine revelation; His Mission was destined to remain concealed from the eyes of humanity for another decade. Nevertheless those who were in close contact with Him could not help but realize a spiritual transformation in His person.⁴⁴

In summing up his analysis of the third stage of Bahá'u'lláh's life, Shoghi Effendi writes:

Such were the circumstances in which the Sun of Truth arose in the city of Tihrán—a city which, by reason of so rare a privilege conferred upon it, had been glorified by the Báb as the “Holy Land,” and surnamed by Bahá'u'lláh “the Mother of the world,” the “Dayspring of Light,” the “Dawning-Place of the signs of the Lord,” the “Source of the joy of all mankind.” The first dawning of that Light of peerless splendor had, as already described, broken in the city of Shíráz. The rim of that Orb had now appeared above the horizon of the Síyáh Chál of Tihrán. Its

⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, pp. 5-6.

⁴³ M.A. Fiydí writes that Bahá'u'lláh was released at “the end of the month of Şafar 1269” (*Hadirat-i-Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 83). The last day of the month of Şafar was December 12 and since Bahá'u'lláh left for exile exactly a month later, on January 12, 1853, as was demanded by the royal edict, it would be safe to surmise that Bahá'u'lláh was released from the the Síyáh Chál on December 12, 1852.

⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh's daughter Bahíyyih Khánum, who was then six years of age, recounts many years later, that she and her family did observe a change in Bahá'u'lláh after His release from the Síyáh Chál. Her recollections were documented by Lady Blomfield, an early British Bahá'í, who published them in her book. Bahíyyih Khánum recalls: “Jamál-i-Mubárák [the Blessed Beauty] had a marvellous divine experience whilst in that prison [the Síyáh Chál]. We saw a new radiance seeming to enfold him like a shining vesture, its significance we were to learn years later. At that time we were only aware of the wonder of it, without understanding, or even being told the details of the sacred event.” (Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, p. 45).

rays were to burst forth, a decade later, in Baghdád, piercing the clouds which immediately after its rise in those somber surroundings obscured its splendor. It was destined to mount to its zenith in the far-away city of Adrianople, and ultimately to set in the immediate vicinity of the fortress-town of 'Akká.

The process whereby the effulgence of so dazzling a Revelation was unfolded to the eyes of men was of necessity slow and gradual. The first intimation which its Bearer received did not synchronize with, nor was it followed immediately by, a disclosure of its character to either His own companions or His kindred. A period of no less than ten years had to elapse ere its far-reaching implications could be directly divulged to even those who had been intimately associated with Him—a period of great spiritual ferment, during which the Recipient of so weighty a Message restlessly anticipated the hour at which He could unburden His heavily laden soul, so replete with the potent energies released by God's nascent Revelation.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 102-3.

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