

The Bahá'í Faith in Algeria

Rowshan Mustapha
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Foreword

The term North Africa, as used in conversation, generally means the five countries of the north of the continent vis: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Having already written three books regarding the history of the Faith in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, I hope to add a history of the Faith in Algeria, which is the subject of the present book.

The readers of the above mentioned books and this book will probably immediately notice that the writer of these history books is not a historian in the academic sense. Destiny had me a live witness of most of the events I record in these history books, which become narratives of history rather than history. Destiny seems to have also afforded this advantage to this writer from amongst the pioneers and early believers in this region of North Africa. Hence the moral responsibility that this writer feels and which prompts him to record what is available before it is irreparably lost in time.

I owe a lot in this history to the memoirs of Muḥammad Zeggat, Aḥmad Zagad, ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamid Kherbouche as well as an extensive report in Persian by one of the pioneers in Oran.

‘Abdu’l-Ḥamid Kherbouche continued his help as I was writing this history.

My wife and I have known many of the Persian pioneers as well as many of the Algerian believers in this history.

We visited them many times over the years especially during some ten years when Ulfet was Board member for Algeria. Many Algerian friends visited Tunisia and we associated with them delightfully.

However, this history covers the period beginning with the entry of the Persian pioneers in Algeria in 1953 up to the end of the century.



North Africa

Timeline

1951	Guardian calls on Egypt to send pioneers to Algeria and Libya	
1953	Persian Pioneers arrive in Algeria Ezzat'u'lláh Baghdadi Family and Émád Sabírán, closely followed by Khodabakhsh Attar and family.	
1953	Amine Khodja 'Abdel-Karim 1 st Algerian Bahá'í.	
1954 April	Establishment of the first LSA of Algiers	
1960	Rúh'ulláh Sa'adat – pioneer, opens the Centre of Oran	
1960	Kherbouche accepts the Faith	
1960	Ibrahim Maher and family join Oran	
1961-Feb 2	K. Attar announces only 5 Bahá'ís in Algiers including Amine Khodja	
1961-May 30	First LSA of Oran with Algerian believers	
1963	Algiers LSA re-established with Algerian Bahá'ís.	
1963-June	Dr. 'Ezzat'ulláh Ta'í elected member to LSA Algiers.	
1964	'Abdel-Hamid Kherbouche opens Constantine to the Faith.	
1966	Establishment of first LSA of Constantine	
1966	Establishment of NSA of Algeria and Tunisia with seat Algiers	
1967 Apr 12	Aḥmad Zagad accepts the Faith: Arrested and imprisoned 5 times and exiled three times.	
1968	First arrest of Aḥmad Zagad in Constantine.	
1968	Mass conversion of young Algerians mainly in Algiers.	
1968-August	Oceanic Conference of Palermo – Pioneers and Algerians attend.	
1968-Oct	Dr 'Ezzat'ulláh Ta'í tries to register the Faith at the Prefecture of Algiers as a "Religious Association".	
1968-Nov 8.	Expulsion of Persian Pioneers from Algeria.	
1968	Algerian Bahá'ís in Algiers, Oran & Constantine warned by Authorities to stop all activity.	
1968 - Dec	Historic meeting at Bab El-Oued of 5 Algerian Bahá'ís: 'Alí Zamghouni, 'Abd'ul-Karim Khodja, Muḥammad Zeggat, Aḥmad Zagad and 'Abdu'l-Ḥamid Kherbouche – Algerian Baha'ís shoulder the promotion of the Faith in the country.	
1969 - Jan	Muḥammad Zeggat and family occupy the locality intended for Ḥazíratu'l-Quds for its protection following advice of Lawyer Navidi. The Administration archives are collected and hidden.	
1969	Ḥacéne Zeggat – Police Constable, first Algerian Bahá'í to be imprisoned for his Faith. Liberated a few months later as result of intervention of Mr Navidi.	

1969	Muhammad Zeggat and Rabeḥ Belloui expelled from their functions at the “Mustapha” hospital by order of the Minister of the Interior because of their Faith.	
1969	The Rabeḥ Belloui case at the Hydra Algiers Police station in presence of Amine Khodja – threats against Muhammad Zeggat and wife Ḥalima.	
1970–Feb 2	Exile of 5 Algerian Bahá’ís: ‘Alí Zamghouni, ‘Abd’ul-Karim Khodja, Muhammad Zeggat, Áḥmad Zagad and ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamid Kherbouche to Merouana, Adrar, Timimoune, El-Oued and Djelfa respectively. Zeggat family – Ḥalima and 5 children expelled from home in the street.	
1970- Nov 4	Divers liberations with interdiction of sojourn in Algiers, Oran, Constantine and Annaba	
1970 Feb 9	Second arrest of Aḥmad Zagad in Algiers.	
1970 Feb.	Muhammad Zeggat et Abd’ul-Ḥamid Kherbouche arrested confined residence in Colo and Djijel resp. for 4 months. The Zeggat family – Ḥalima with 5 children were expelled from the house which was to be requisitioned.	
1973 - April	Counsellor Muhammad Kibdani visits the Bahá’ís in Algiers to re-activate the Community. A meeting is held at the Ḥaziratu’l-Quds occupied by the Zeggat family. Shu’a’ulláh Nickampoor was present. The following day, the usual Authority Service came and arrested Muhammad Kibdani, Muhammad Zeggat and ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamid Kherbouche –delivered to the Moroccan Authorities, condemned to residence in Collo after one week in jail, condemned to residence in Jijel after one week in jail, respectively.	
1988	During a meeting in Reims with Mr ‘Alí Nakhjavani, Counsellor Nosrat Tirandaz and Legal adviser Moḥsen 'Enayát, the Comity of Algeria of 1968 was re-established.	
1994 – Feb.	The Comity of Algeria was dissolved.	
1994- 23 Mar	Muhammad Zeggat and Ḥalima escaped to Tunis after death warning.	
2003-31 Dec	Death of Muhammad Zeggat.	



Introduction

Algeria was one of the most important colonies of France, which, after many conflicts and wars of independence that started in the year 1954 and lasted for eight years and in which about one million people lost their lives, finally gained independence in 1962. About one million foreigners, mainly French, were forced to leave the country. This vast country, which has an area of 2.382 square kilometres, had only 19 million people of different races living in it at the time the first Bahá'í pioneers went there. Algeria is the biggest country in Africa, most of which is desert. Ninety percent of the population live along the Mediterranean coast-line or some 12% of the country. The people of Algeria are mainly Berber.

An appreciation of the suffering and sacrifice of the Algerian couple Muḥammad and Ḥalima Zeggat, are summarised from the non-published book by André Brugiroux: “Les Maquisards de Bahá'í”, as well as my personal notes. Other Algerian Bahá'ís have suffered terribly from the Authorities, though to a lesser degree and I mention ‘Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche and Áḥmad Zagad in particular. Áḥmad was taken in police custody 5 times and exiled three times until he was obliged to flee to France with his wife following threat of being killed.

The savage war of independence of Algeria was not a war between two armies. It was the formidable French forces against Algerian guerrilla fighters. The arrival of the pioneers to Algeria and their efforts to teach the Faith coincided with the beginning of that terrible period of the struggle in the country.

The Algerian population tried, without much success, to heal the wounds inflicted by the war of independence, but rather only managed to enter into a ten year bloody revolution of the FIS (Front Islamic de Salut) throughout the 1990s that further soured their spirits. The Algerians who accepted the Faith have shown a tenacity and attachment that is exemplary, mirroring the spirit of the Algerian Resistance Fighters (Maquisards in French) who conducted the war of independence.

The Bahá'ís of Oran, some of them are amongst the earliest Algerian Baha'is, were found with a profound attachment to their Faith after two decades of meagre contact from the Bahá'í world outside.

The Bahá'í Community progressed with rapid strides in Algeria in its first 2 decades but rapidly precipitated into complete halt and isolation.

In the year 2003, the National Spiritual Assembly of Tunisia was entrusted with the challenge of re-activating the affairs of the Faith in Algeria which continued to be a difficult territory.

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The Bahá'í Faith in Algeria

Chapter 1

Opening Algeria

The Guardian requests NSA Egypt send Pioneers to Algeria

In the year 1951, Shoghi Effendi entrusted the National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt with the opening of Algeria to the Faith. At that time, Algeria was under French colonial rule and the efforts of two young Egyptian Bahá'ís to go there were not successful. I do not know of any other effort from Bahá'ís of Egypt to pioneer to Algeria.

Persian pioneers responded to the call.

Arrival of Persian Pioneers

The earliest arrival of pioneers to Algeria was during the year 1953.

Three pioneers arrived within a short period between and considered the first arrivals. These were Mr Émád Şabírán, Mr Ezzat'u'lláh Baghdadi and Mr Ibrahim Maher.

However, Mr Émád Şabírán left early after to pioneer to Tunisia.

The list of pioneers that I have from Board Member Muḥammad Muşţafá files and Mr Rochan Movaddat, who had accompanied his parents to Algeria, is as follows:

Mr Şaleḥ Vaḥdat	Mr Ibrahim Maher
Mrs Belgheis Vaḥdat	Mr Eḥsanu'llah Maher
Miss Nosrat Vaḥdat	Mrs Behjat Maher
Miss Mahin Vaḥdat	Mr Khobakhsh Attar
Mr Rabii Baghdadi	Mrs Attar
Mrs Narjis Baghdadi	Mr Eḥsanu'llah Baghdadi
Mr 'Ezzat'u'lláh Baghdadi	Mr Rúhollah Mavaddat
Mrs Farahnaz Baghdadi	Mrs Muniréh Mavaddat

Mr 'Alí Muḥammad Djalali, a Bahá'í erudite of Islám, came as a travel Teacher to Algeria late in the year 1953.

Other pioneers to Algeria later followed, and I make special mention of Dr 'Ezzat'u'lláh Tá'í and his wife Dr Rúhíyyih. The Tá'ís came to Algeria in 1963 after some two years in Tunisia and were successful in teaching the Faith in their new pioneer country, Algeria.

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The Administration

The establishment of the Administration in Algeria was good and rapid, initiated by the pioneers closely followed by increasing Algerian membership.

In 1953, Ámin Khodja 'Abdel-Karim became the first Algerian to embrace the Faith. He resided in Algiers, the capital.

In 1954, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Algiers was established – the first in Algeria.

In the year 1961 the Local Spiritual Assembly of Oran was established with the participation of Algerian members.

In the year 1964 ‘Abdel-Hamid Kherbouche, a new believer himself, established a Bahá’í Centre in Constantine and two years later the Local Spiritual Assembly of Constantine was formed with all Algerian members.

In the year 1967 The National Spiritual Assembly of Algeria and Tunisia was established with its seat in Algiers.

In the year 1968, Muḥammad Zeggat in a timeline history of the Faith in Algeria, indicates that a relatively large number of new Bahá’ís were registered in the region of the capital Algiers.

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Names of some of the early Algerian Bahá’ís, around the year 1970, and their towns of attachment are recorded here for posterity:

In the capital Algiers region:

Mr Muḥammad Zabouri and his wife
Sakina
Mr ‘Abdel-Ḥameed Kherbouche and Mrs
Fatiḥa
Mr Kuoidar Kherbouche
Mrs Ḥassina Kherbouche
Mrs Ramila Kherbouche
Mr Muḥammad Zeggat and Mrs Ḥalima
Mr Ḥacine Zeggat
Mr Rachid Zeggat
Mr Ibrahim Laamech
Mr Rabaḥ Beloui
Mr Tahar Laouamri
Mr ‘Abdel-Raḥman Messkine
Miss Houria
Miss Messouda
Miss Nikempoor Shoau’llah

In the Oran region

Mr ‘Alí Samghouni and children
Mr Smain Khiari and Mrs Melika
Mr ‘Abdel-Kader Sarsar and Mrs Fatima
Mrs Khedidja Sarsar
Mr Áḥmad Bendaḥou and Mrs Mbarka
Mr Muḥammad Baki
Mr Muṣṭafá and Mrs Malika

In the Constantine Region

Dr Ḥamid Saḥnoun and Mrs Zouhour
Mr Mekiar and Mme
Mr Rmita and Mme
Mr Kamal
Mr Ragaii
Mr Laid Zeggat and Mrs Khokha
Mr Saci Laid Zeggat
Mr Larbi Laid Zeggat
Mr Nabil Laid Zeggat
Dr Áḥmad Zagad and wife Dr Rafika.

Chapter 2

Algeria looked receptive to the Faith

Rapid increase of new believers

The news of the rapid increase of new believers in Algeria were a source of envy of the believers in neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco.

An erudite Shaykh Zabouri of Oran declared his belief in Bahá'u'lláh overnight of hearing the Message.

The young Áḥmad Zagad who accepted the Faith in 1967 and within a short period his parents joined the believers and 7 cousins or young relatives accepted the Faith, one of them being Muḥammad Zeggat himself whom the Authorities later considered the leader of the Algerian Baha'is.

Three Local Spiritual Assemblies were established with predominant Algerian membership. Three Bahá'í centres were established. For an Arab country, the progress of the Faith in Algeria promised a bright future.

In 1968 the Algerian Bahá'ís were suddenly deprived of the pioneers. Yet alone and persecuted with little contact with the outside world and harassment from the Authorities, the remnants of the Algerian community survived and thrived.

Purchase of Property for the Faith

Persian pioneer Mr Saleḥ Vaḥdat purchased three properties one of which, an apartment in downtown Algiers was dedicated to be the Ḥazíratu'l-Quds of Algeria.

With the precipitated turn of events of the year 1968, only the Ḥazíratu'l-Quds remained under control of the friends in Algeria to this day.

The Bahá'ís are considered Zionists

In the year 1968, the Bahá'í World celebrated the Centenary of the Arrival of Bahá'u'lláh in the Holy Land and an Oceanic Conference was held in Palermo, Sicily between the 23rd and 25th of August of that year. It was the first Conference of its kind. More than 2300 Bahá'ís attended from all over the World. The Universal House of Justice invited the Bahá'ís attending that Conference to visit the Holy Land soon after it ends. Many of the Persian Pioneers of Algeria attended the Conference. The Algerian Bahá'ís Muḥammad and Ḥalima Zeggat as well as 'Abdel-Hamid Kherbouche and Áḥmad Zagad attended the Conference and subsequently went to the Holy Land.

That Conference was certainly followed by the Secret Services of many governments and specially those of Arab countries of North Africa, notably Algeria, Libya, Egypt. These countries were enemies of Israel and Egypt was at war with that country. The participation of a number of Persian pioneers of Algeria together with the Algerian Bahá'ís to that Conference, therefore, was not appreciated by the Algerian Authorities and they were convinced that the Bahá'ís who attended that Conference must have also gone to Israel – a country which is considered the enemy of Algeria, and visiting Israel or communicating with people in Israel was considered an act of treason.

‘Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche, who attended the Conference, confirms: (the beginning of our problems with the authorities) happened shortly after our return. We were certainly spied upon and the fact that there were believers attending the Conference who went to the Holy Land led the Authorities to consider us to be Zionists.

The initiative to register the National Assembly

Sometime during the month of October of 1968, Dr ‘Ezzat’u’lláh Ta’í approached the “Prefecture” of Hydra in Algiers “for the registration of the (Bahá’í) movement as a Religious Association” – these are the exact words used by Muḥammad Zeggat in his timeline as well as in the memoir of André Brugiroux. There is no indication that the Universal House of Justice had been consulted regarding this endeavour.¹ Kherbouche thinks that because that approach was without any result, it was deemed unnecessary to inform the Universal House of Justice.

However, Dr ‘Ezzat’u’lláh’s approach to the Prefecture may have precipitated the action of the Authorities to deport the Persian pioneers and arrest a number of Bahá’ís. This notion is refuted by Kherbouche but accepted by Muḥammad Zeggat. It is, thus, a moot issue.

¹ In his email of September 6, 2020, Kherbouche wrote : Cette histoire de tentative d'enregistrer la Foi n'a pas abouti et donc 'il n'y pas eu lieu de prévenir la Maison universelle de Justice.

Chapter 3

Sudden rise of Persecution

The first wave of persecution

On the 3rd of November 1968, the Judiciary police summoned all the 9 members of the National Assembly for interrogation. I have no record of the sort of questions asked.

The next day November 4, 1968 these members of the National Assembly were arrested.

On the 8th of November 1968, all the Persian Pioneers in Algeria were expelled to France, while the prominent Algerian Bahá'ís in Algiers, Oran and Constantine were arrested and warned that they have to cease their Bahá'í activity, in fact cease to be Bahá'ís altogether.

Before leaving for the airport, the pioneers asked to be allowed to read a prayer with some eleven other Algerian Bahá'ís including Ḥalima, the only Algerian women arrested. As the prayer was chanted, the guard who watched over them, is said to have stood at attention during the prayer.

Four days after the departure of the Persian Pioneers, the Algerian Bahá'ís, approximately 11 in number, were released after signing a declaration that they will not be active the Faith any more.

The first imprisonment of Algerian Bahá'í

In 1969, a few months after the warning of the Authorities, Ḥaçéne Zeggat, an officer in the Gendarmerie,² was the first Algerian Bahá'í to be imprisoned for the Faith.

According to the timeline of Muḥammad Zeggat, Ḥaçéne was released some months later after the intervention of Mr 'Aziz Navidi – the International Bahá'í Lawyer, who had come to Algeria on behalf of the deported Persian pioneers to arrange for the retrieval of their belongings.

A historic meeting

Muḥammad Zeggat was a revolutionary. The years as a “Resistance Fighter” left their impression on him. He considered that if he and the few steadfast believers do not rally to spread the Faith, the Faith will be lost in Algeria. He took upon himself to rally the few young Algerian Bahá'ís he trusted to continue their efforts to propagate the Faith in their country.

He, therefore, arranged for what he called a “historic meeting” that took place in December 1969 in a locality known as Bab El Oued, on the sea front where five young Bahá'ís decided to take the matter of the Faith in Algeria into their hands. These five were:

1. 'Alí Saḥnounge from Constantine
2. 'Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche from Constantine

² State police

3. Muḥammad Zeggat from Algiers
4. Áḥmad Zagad came from Constantine
5. ‘Alí Samghouni from Oran.

“*Friends, the situation is serious. Now that the Iranian Baha'is have been expelled and the faint-hearted have left the sinking ship, the faith rests on our shoulders. We have the responsibility, nay, the obligation to ensure the sustainability of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh on this land of Algeria*”, were Muḥammad’s thoughts addressed to the gathered five believers.

‘Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche, however, did not attach much importance to that meeting, as he considered the participants to be young in age and not knowledgeable enough in the Faith at the time. Muḥammad described the meeting when the five met and the consultation started, *slowly their backs curved in towards the centre of their circle*. That attitude was certainly followed by police agents who had the duty to keep a watchful eye on them.

However earlier in the same year of 1969 something happened that brought Rabeḥ, Ámin Khodja and Muḥammad Zeggat before the police of Hydra when a warning was issued to Muḥammad Zeggat and his wife Ḥalima.

Immediately following that December historic meeting, Muḥammad took measures to safeguard the documents of the Faith, and at the request of Lawyer Aziz Navidi, when he came to Algiers, Muḥammad and Ḥalima Zeggat and their children moved and set up home in the Ḥaziratu’l Quds in order to protect it from being confiscated. Another villa that belonged to the Vahdat family, left unoccupied after they were deported was immediately requisitioned by the Authorities. There was a shortage of property in Algeria at the time, and especially in the capital Algiers.

Second wave of persecution

The few devout and steadfast friends continued to meet discretely, and continued observing Bahá’í feasts and occasions. But Muḥammad Zeggat was convinced that a police informer had infiltrated their restrained community.

As I write these lines, I note that three of the five Bahá’ís mentioned in the “Historic Meeting” mentioned above, are still alive today, ‘Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche, Áḥmad Zagad and ‘Alí Saḥnounge. Ulfet (my wife) and I were always associated with the Bahá’í friends in Algeria,³ and we know them personally. We know that Muḥammad Zeggat was a Resistance Fighter in the war of independence, and fortunately he was in the Medical Services, while Kherbouche was in the Military Communication, a Resistance Fighter also. Áḥmad Zagad was young when he joined the Algerian armed uprising.

In general, the Algerian Bahá’ís have shown an exemplary attachment to the Faith and to their Bahá’í identity. Ulfet says that “the Algerian Bahá’ís were weaned too early,” meaning the pioneers were forced to leave them when they were young in the Faith.

These young Bahá’ís, both young in age and young in the Faith were aflame, but did not know how to conduct themselves in serving the Faith. Their knowledge of the Administration was primitive and they had no one around to explain or give the example.

During the second half of the 1970s and all through the 80s, some of the young Bahá’ís migrated to France and kept ties with their brethren in Algeria. Muḥammad Zeggat, who had

³ Ulfet was an Auxiliary Board member for Algeria for some 8 years early in the 2000s.

studied Law after losing the chance of being an anaesthetist, quickly became a renowned lawyer in his hometown Chelghoum El 'Aïd, and at the same time he continued to teach the Faith and promulgate its principles. He became known as "The Bahá'í". In his book attacking the Faith, Áḥmad Ḥammani – President of the Supreme Islámic Council of Algeria, made indirect mention of Muḥammad Zeggat and of his cousin Áḥmad Zagad.

Chapter 4 The Perseverance of the Algerian believers.

Muḥammad Zeggat singled out by the Authorities

On November 5, 1968 Muḥammad Zeggat was visited at his home by a senior policeman named Sa'íd who came to interrogate him on "this new Bahá'í movement".

Muḥammad received him badly.

He considered that no one has the right to come to his house without notice to question him about his belief.

Sa'íd, whom Muḥammad Zeggat says was to poison his and Halima's lives for many years after, left but not before threatening Muḥammad with severe reprisal. "I will destroy you!" he said, picking up the file he came with and left.

Muḥammad Zeggat was convinced that as an old Resistance Fighter he deserved a more respectful attitude from someone like Sa'íd.

The very next day, November 6, 1968, 7 civil clad policemen stormed Muḥammad's apartment at 5.00 am, and while one of the policemen was levelling a gun at Muḥammad ordering his "hands up", the others went about searching the house, throwing everything on the floor and tearing open the mattresses looking for some proof. Suddenly one policeman said, "Here is the proof. He organises meetings!" – It was a picture of Muḥammad in military outfit haranguing the villagers to rise against the French long before he had accepted the Faith. It had nothing to do with the Faith.

Poor Ḥalima was trembling in her nightgown in a corner of the room and the children were crying around her. Muḥammad Zeggat was handcuffed and carried away to the Hydra Police Station.

Soon, Muḥammad found that 'Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche had also been arrested at his parent's home in Algiers.

The Harassment Continued

Muḥammad Zeggat was not to have any rest. In his own words he says:

"After that interrogation (of Nov. 6, 1968) I stopped counting the arrests. They either came to my home to take me away or they called me to Hydra Police Station. Every fortnight, sometimes every week. Each time I go through a few hours of interrogation and intimidation or during a whole day. At times I was left in the station overnight because they forgot to tell the guard to let me go home...? There was no bed or food. Many a night I was left to suffer trying to rest on unstable chairs in the reception room.⁴The rhythm was hellish"

- Ah! You meet and you are plotting! You are a traitor, we'll destroy you!

- As long as you do not abandon that idea, we shall not leave you to rest!-
was their warning.

Muḥammad Zeggat was the most harassed. He was considered the leader. That harassment went on during the whole year of 1969.

⁴ Les Maquisards de Bahá p. 116-7

In 1969 again, Muḥammad Zeggat and a certain Rabeḥ were suspended from their work in the “Hospital Mustapha” by order of the Minister of Interior because they were Baha’is. Muḥammad was in his final months of graduating as an anaesthetist and in the meantime, was working as such due to the severe shortage of qualified professionals in the country. Rabeḥ introduced to the Faith by Muḥammad Zeggat, and even accepted the Faith, but later betrayed Muḥammad and the Faith and turned tormentor of Muḥammad in particular.

These two incidents indicate that among the Algerian Bahá’ís, those who remained steadfast, must have been active in spite of the warnings they received and the imprisonment of one of them, namely, Haçéne Zeggat.

A Night to Remember

On the 2nd of February 1970, Muḥammad Zeggat was called out of his home and taken to the Hydra Police Centre. He was scheduled to sit his final exam of anaesthesia in 5 days and he wanted to study. He had been in custody in Hydra only two days earlier, but the Police Officer insisted on taking him to the Hydra Police Station once more, in total disregard of his particular circumstances. Halima intuitively gave him his burnouse⁵ for the night in case he is retained.

On the way to Hydra, the black Peugeot 403 took a detour to pick up Muhammad’s cousin, Áḥmad Zagad from the school where he was the General Supervisor. He was not there, but soon arrived at Hydra around mid-day. Four hours later, it was Amine Khodja’s turn to join the others.

Muḥammad Zeggat, who had gone through many arrests felt strongly that something big this time was in the offing.

As usual, Halima came next morning with milk and brioches, but Muḥammad was not allowed to go out and see her and the children. At a certain moment Muḥammad spotted ‘Alí Samghouni, the friend from Oran, tugged into a cell of smugglers and robbers.

The following morning at 5 am, a middle aged Persian man was brought in. He was in his pyjamas. He was slapped and beaten. But he indignantly shouted out saying: “Why do you arrest me. I am here at the request of the Algerian government to sort out a problem with the refinery. The government knows I am Bahá’í...” He was identified later as Mr Nickampoor – a petro-chemical expert on secondment by the Persian Government to the Algerian Government.

Over a period of three days and three nights Áḥmad, Khodja and Muḥammad were held in the waiting room and then moved over the following two nights to a cell where they found ‘Alí Samghouni – all four managed to sustain only on the milk and brioches that Halima brought to them every morning.

Every evening after midnight the interrogations would start. At one point, Rabeḥ, the traitor, was in attendance, and managed to punch Muḥammad in the face as he came into the interrogation room. He then picked up a gun, and pointing it at Muḥammad’s head and pulled the trigger. Fortunately there was no bullet. Rabeḥ asked for the ammunition, but the other policemen calmed the situation. Muḥammad, nevertheless, was hit by the gun on his cheek and this caused a flow of blood. He was further punched and beaten all over.

⁵ a long circular cloak with a hood attached, worn especially by North African Arabs.

- *Well, Muḥammad for the last time will you deny (your Faith) or not?* Sa'id asks.

Muḥammad knows what the consequences are, he is completely resigned to his fate...

-I am Bahá'í, will remain a Bahá'í and will continue to be Bahá'í until the end of my life. This is my final decision. Now you do what you want... was Muḥammad's answer!

He had hardly said the last word when a policeman clamped his throat while another punched him in the stomach. On coming round from the blackout, he found himself in a toilet under a cold water spray from a shower, and was drenched when they fetched him after half an hour. Muḥammad tried to go near the heater, but was kicked furiously towards the entry door of the waiting room and was left in the cold winter draft. These were atrocious acts, and he suffered severely.

On February 8th, Muḥammad was due to sit for his diploma exam in anaesthesia. He pleaded to be allowed to go:

- No question of letting you out. Shut up. Without diploma you cause us enough trouble. What will it be when you are with one," was the answer.

For Muḥammad it was really tragic. His future was in total jeopardy.

Sa'id, the terrible tormentor, growled at the four Bahá'ís telling them that they shall be exiled as soon as 'Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche, the fifth member of the famous historic meeting is brought in. They were to be exiled to their "assigned residence", as they say in French, to different localities in the country:

1. Amine Khodja was assigned to Adrar – about 1450 km south of Algiers.
2. Muḥammad Zeggat to Timimoune – about 1115 km south of Algiers
3. Áḥmad Zagad to El Oued - about 640 km from Algiers.
4. 'Alí Samghouni to Merouana – about 440 km from Algiers.
5. 'Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche to Djelfa – about 305 km from Algiers.

Following that announcement, the five Bahá'ís were put on a truck and taken from Hydra to the barracks of the more disciplined, but more severe, National Security Service.

Muḥammad Zeggat and his younger cousin Áḥmad, who was the first person from whom Muḥammad heard of the Cause, found themselves in a cell, separated from the other three Bahá'ís who were in a separate cell.

The longest night in my life

"Thus commenced the longest night of my life," writes Muḥammad Zeggat in his memoirs, *"Not even during the most dramatic moments when I was in the underground resistance in the hills and mountains did I have this feeling of anxiety!"*

They were all there, in a contemplative mood.: Not a word from the jailers, no contact with their three other friends, a guard in uniform with the fixed bayonet standing at the door of the cell, while others were walking up and down the corridor; quite an alarming situation. The only comfort they had was a hot meal served them upon arrival and the first since 8 days.

If it were true that they were to be exiled to the localities indicated, Muḥammad and Áḥmad reckoned, then two cars would be used because the destination of three of the friends was in one direction from Algiers, while the localities of the other two would be in a different direction, in which case again, Muḥammad should have been in the other cell with Amine Khoja and ‘Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche, while ‘Alí Samghouni should have been with Áḥmad in one cell. Muḥammad and Áḥmad contemplated that they were going to be shot and executed. The other three, in their cell, happened to arrive to the same conclusion after similar reflection.

Áḥmad, younger than Muḥammad, was a “Gendarme” with the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale) and knows all the complex activities of the National Security Service. All that was taking place had the appearance to him that they will be executed by fire squad.

To make things worse, around 11 o’clock in the night, they distinctly heard a digger machine working the ground beyond their cell.

“Here we are, they are preparing our burial hole” murmured Muḥammad.

“If they shoot me,” confided Áḥmad, *“Before I die I will write Allah ’u’Abhá with my blood on the soil,”* in redemption of the failure of his country, Algeria, to recognise the Faith.

To their mind, all this matter of exile is a charade just to keep them quiet. Muḥammad reasoned that midnight would be the time of their execution. True enough, the lights come on and the cell door was opened and they were asked to come out. Muḥammad looked at his watch, a new one he recently bought. It was midnight exactly. The digger, or whatever it was, had stopped working. The hole was ready. That, they were sure of.

Outside in the open ground, Muḥammad searched the hole he thought they were to be buried in, but in the darkness he did not see much. He said his last prayer and *“a strange feeling enveloped me, and contrary to my previous doubt, I am ready to die, to offer my life for the love of Bahá ’u’lláh and His redemptive Cause”*

An officer called the exiles by name, one by one, and gave each a file to take with him and to present to the Authority at destination. It was then that Muḥammad was taken to join Amine Khodja, ‘Abdel-Hamid Kherbouche, while Amine Khodja joined Áḥmad. Then, and only then, did the exiles feel better.

The Tablet of Áḥmad helped again

In the car taking them to their exile locations, Muḥammad Zeggat, ‘Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche and Amine Khodja were chained together, and they were most uncomfortable. Muḥammad Zeggat asked if ‘Abdel-Hamid knew the Tablet of Áḥmad because he would like to have it with him in exile. ‘Abdel-Hamid said, Yes, he knows it by heart, So Muḥammad took a piece of paper from a briefcase he had and gave it to Kherbouche who started to write the Tablet down, with great difficulty, while saying the words aloud. One of the policemen sitting behind them heard the Words. He asked the driver to stop, saying: *“These are Words of true religion. Free up the hands of these exiles”*. Thus Kherbouche was allowed to end saying the prayers he knew by heart and to write it down at ease. The three Bahá’is were astonished how quick the answer came with the Tablet of Áḥmad!

Seven months later, they were allowed out of their exile but with strict interdiction to live in any of the big cities in the country: Algiers, Oran, Constantine or ‘Annaba.

Each one of these beloved exiles had stories to tell of the period they were exiled. Each one met with serious and severe tests. Each one of them saw the Protective Hand of Bahá'u'lláh in action and each one spread the Word that changed the attitude of the audience and jailers, though in some cases to the worse.

The Head of the Supreme Islamic Council denounces the Bahá'í Faith

Upon his return from exile at the town of El-Oued, Áḥmad Zagad wanted badly to resume his studies of medicine and also to resume his job at the Ḥiḥi College of Constantine. His efforts in writing to the Ministers of Education and of the Interior and finally to the President of Algeria, resulted in his return to his job of General Supervisor of the Ḥiḥi Boarding School. The Dean of the College, Mr Sadok Ḥammani, fully appraised of Áḥmad's Faith and past history of exile, confirmed to Áḥmad that he sees no conflict between his belief and his work.

The confidence of the Dean and probably his admiration of the Faith allowed Áḥmad to be included in meeting important visitors at special events. This is how Áḥmad Zagad got to know the Dean's cousin, Áḥmad Ḥammani was to become the Head of the Supreme Islamic Council.

Áḥmad Ḥammani knew the Faith through his cousin Dean Sadok Ḥammani and during a visit to Chelghoum el-'Aid, the birth town of both Muḥammad Zeggat and Áḥmad Zagad, he answered a query by saying: "Bahá'u'lláh is a good man but not a new Messenger".

Later when Dean Sadok Ḥammani passed away, Áḥmad Ḥammani changed and in the year 1986 published a nasty book entitled **"Clear proofs of the waywardness of Bábism and the infidelity of Bahá'í'sm"**

The book was widely distributed and was followed by a "Fatwa" that Bahá'ís should be given 3 days to denounce their faith in Bahá'í'sm or face death.

Chapter 5

Efforts to re-activate the friends of Algeria

Counsellor visit

The Counsellor for North Africa, Mr Muḥammad Kebdani of Morocco, while not residing in Algeria, was, nevertheless following the events there closely. Sensing a period of apparent calm for the friends, Mr Kebdani made a visit to Algiers, sometime during the month of April 1973, some four years after the exiles related above, and met with some friends in the Haziratu'l-Quds where Muḥammad Zeggat and his family lived to safeguard the place since the expulsion of the Persian pioneers in 1968, as was mentioned above.

The next day, deceptively reported upon by a couple who were once considered believers, led to the attendance of the (usual) police to where the meeting took place, that is where Muḥammad Zeggat lived. They arrested Muḥammad Kebdani, Muḥammad Zeggat and 'Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche, all present at the time. After 4 days of poor sleep and lack of food, as well as beatings, Muḥammad Kebdani was taken to the Moroccan boarder and delivered to the Moroccan authorities. To the astonishment of the Algerian Police who took him there, their Moroccan counterpart who knew Kebdani received him with courtesy and respect.

'Abdel-Hamid Kherbouche and Muḥammad Zeggat, however were jailed for one week after which Kherbouche was placed in an assigned residence in the town of Jijel, while Muḥammad was assigned the town of Collo – both towns along the sea coast. The duration of the assigned residence was of the order of four months.

The North African Conference in Reims – France

A lull and quiet period followed and during the year 1988 when in August of that year, the Universal House of Justice called for a Conference of the North African countries to be held in Reims in France at the home of the generous family of 'Ezzat'u'lláh and Rúḥíyyih Ta'í. Mr 'Alí Nakḥjavání represented the Universal House of Justice. Moḥsen 'Enayát of the World Centre Legal Affairs was present as well as Counsellors Gila Bahta, Muḥammad Kebdani and Nosrat Tirandaz.

During that Conference an Executive Committee for Algeria was formed of the five members: Muḥammad Zeggat, 'Abdel-Hamid Kherbouche, Aḥmad Zagad, 'Alí Samghouni and 'Alí Saḥnounge.

In February 1994 the Executive Committee was disbanded and the situation in Algeria was chaotic with the rise of the struggle between the Islamic fundamentalists and the Government. Muḥammad Zeggat was informed by trusted sources that he was on the list of the fundamentalists to be eliminated. He was, therefore, obliged to leave Algiers and come with his wife Ḥalima to Tunis on the 23rd of March 1994 where they remained for over a year. 'Abdel-Ḥamid Kherbouche and Aḥmad Zagad were threatened to be killed by the same Muslim "Selefi" uprising. They had to transfer with their families to France.

Chapter 6

A case of Perseverance

Ḥalima or Mrs Muhammad Zeggat

Of all the Algerian Bahá'ís who experienced the difficulties of the late 1960s and early 70s, it was Ḥalima, Muḥammad Zeggat's lion-hearted wife, who suffered most. It would require many pages to include the terrible situations Ḥalima experienced when she became Bahá'í, and so only a summary is presented in the following pages.

Halima had declared her Faith in March 1968. Less than 8 months later she was confronted with a severe test. In November 6, 1968, her home was ransacked by seven policemen while she crouched in a corner in her night gown with her 5 children, the youngest 1 year old. It was a certain Sa'id who was leading the group of policemen that stormed the house. He ordered Muḥammad to be carried away. Ḥalima was wary of Sa'id who threatened to destroy Muḥammad while, in the meantime, he destroyed her home!

Sa'id then asked Ḥalima if by chance she was a Bahá'í too? She answered him defiantly that she was Bahá'í.

- What do you mean? Retorts Sa'id, surprised.
- I mean I am Bahá'í! She affirmed.

Sa'id tried to find out how she became Bahá'í, and having to re-join his subordinates who took Muḥammad away, ordered a somewhat old orderly, who looked a kind man, to convince Ḥalima to deny the Faith or take her over to the Police Station. Halima did not deny her Faith, but confirmed it even more.

Ḥalima was, therefore, taken to the Police station where Muḥammad and the arrested Bahá'ís were. She was forced to leave her five children in their apartment⁶ on the 11th floor of the building with their aging grandmother, crying and screaming and hanging to her skirt as she pushed them away and closed the door on them. She left her heart there. She was, fortunately, released quickly when the superior officers realised the plight of her children. But her file with the Police was opened on that day – the only Secret Police file of a Bahá'í woman in Algeria.

Being taken to the Police station for questioning happened many times during the more than a dozen arrests of Muḥammad. These arrests and interrogations varied in duration from hours, days, a week or even two weeks at a time.

Every time Muḥammad is arrested or Ḥalima is taken to the Police station she is asked to deny her Faith, and every time she asserts her faith.

- *You are a woman, what interest do you have in this religion?* She was told at times.
- What do you mean I am a woman? She would answer forcefully!
- *Your day is not far off, wait a little; your children are young now, we'll see later...*
Was their warning...?

Every time Muḥammad was carried away, that old and kind Orderly would be left to survey and try to convince Halima to deny the Faith. He would try, but was always confronted with both Halima's obstinacy as well as her kindness and explanation. With time the orderly felt sorrow and admiration for her and became friendly, to the extent of giving

⁶ This was before she moved to the Ḥaziratu'l-Quds

her the phone number of his wife should she need help any time. When she served lunch for herself and the children she would invite him to lunch with them. In the beginning he refused apologetically, but with time he not only shared their meals but even prayed with them too.

The clothes factory

In September 1969, Muḥammad had his job at work terminated and further employment for him banned. Muḥammad was thus unable to find work and it became evident that Ḥalima had to work for their living. Her immediate thought went to do some sewing. In her young age her mother taught her the rudiments of sewing and during the war of independence she developed her ability by sewing Algerian flags. She had also taken a course in sewing at the government institution “Couper/Couture” when she was a young girl.

By chance, a clothes shop not far from their home, and belonging to a certain gentle Maltese lady offered Ḥalima the possibility of working at home, assembling already cut cloth for shirts. Muḥammad immediately took out the remains of their savings and used it as a down payment for a sewing machine. Ḥalima worked long hours every day and every night to make ends meet.

Muḥammad, jobless and not allowed to work, took up the task of delivering the finished work and purchasing or transporting the supplies to the little factory.

During the 17 months that followed, Halima developed her little factory by adding helpers. One of the helpers was the wife of Rabeḥ, whom she engaged as she took pity for her family and as Rabeḥ was also denied work like Muḥammad. This partnership did not work, and Rabeḥ and his wife became enemies of the Faith and were the cause of much suffering for Muḥammad.

Ousted from home and its restitution

On the morning of February 2, 1970, Muḥammad was arrested as usual and taken to the security centre of Hydra. Although Halima was used to such events, yet she found that the timing was unusual. He had just returned from one of those arrests only two days before. Normally he was given more days to rest between the arrests.

- Poor me, what will happen now? She lamented in her heart.

In the afternoon of that fateful day, the fearsome Sa'id came together with 4 thugs and entered the apartment⁷ “*like hordes of the steppe*”. Sa'id gave the orders:

- *Out! The children also...*

Halima tried to reason with Sa'id. She invokes her young children, she cried, she supplicated, but to no effect!

The apartment was sealed and Halima with her 5 children, the youngest, Chiraz, in her arms, were thrown out onto the pavement in front of the building in the stinging cold of winter. Their clothes were only those worn indoors in the apartment.

The black Peugeot 403 left off, and the 4 children remained hanging on to their mother in front of the building in the street while the baby was in Halima's arms.

“What a nightmare! Everything happened so quickly that the confusion paralysed me. I am stricken and incapable of any reaction. The sounds coming from Boulevard Boulaïd seem like those producing no feelings. The passers-by, the trees, the ground or the sky, I do not

⁷ The apartment is the Ḥaziratu'l-Quds to which they had transferred to keep it from being requisitioned.

notice. I am unable even to try to pray. Questions torture me: What will become of me? How will I feed the children? Have they killed Muḥammad? Where shall I go? Each of these questions were as painful as can be!”

Her first thought was to go to her family in Ferdjiou, or Muḥammad’s family in Chateau d’un, both some 300 kms away. But she changed and dispelled the idea. What if Muḥammad is not killed, in that case she has to struggle to get him out. If she leaves Algiers, she will not be able to do anything. She must stay here.

“In my mind, fogged with sour thoughts, the face of ‘Abdel-Rahman, a dear friend of ours, suddenly appears. He is an honest ex-Resistance Fighter who lives in the same quarters where we previously lived, the quarter of Léveyé. I see no one else who could help me.”

Léveyé is on the other side of town at a distance from where she was. Nevertheless, all six got into a bus and managed to get to the house of ‘Abdel-Rahman with tears in her eyes and a heart “that weighs a ton.”

At the site of Halima and the children, ‘Abdel-Rahman understood the situation immediately. He knew of their plight with the Authorities. He lived in a one room apartment with his mother and two brothers, yet he left the room for Halima and the children, and with the mother and two brothers he occupied the kitchen.

Halima’s first night was sleepless. She concluded that her first objective must be to reclaim her home, the Ḥaziratu’l-Quds. By 8 o’clock next morning she went with her 5 children to town dressed in black like the country women and asked for the “Central” police station and found it. Taking her children with her had two objectives: to soften the hearts of the people she was to see and to protect her from harassment. She was not allowed into the offices, she remained in the waiting room the whole day without food or drink – the children were fed biscuits. No results were obtained that day. The next day she was again in the waiting room with her children, again without any result. On the third day she was finally admitted to an office where she pleaded to know where her husband was. She was advised to go to the Police centre in Hydra – that famous place she was brought to four times, starting with the arrest of 1968.

The next day at 8 in the morning, again with the children, Halima took a rented cab to Hydra. Hydra is on a hill and is a large township. Her four previous visits were in a police car. This time she had to find her way to the centre on her own? She walked and walked all morning asking passers-by for the Police centre. No one wanted to help. The name of the place created fear. She turned to Bahá’u’lláh. The children sat on the pavement unable to continue walking, while the baby was crying in her arms. Standing in agony not knowing what to do, her tears flowed. A stranger in a country djellaba stopped to inquire after this pitiable scene. He was a God-sent individual who agreed to guide them to the Police centre. After walking for a few minutes, they came to a long medium height wall. He motioned with a move of his chin that this was the centre, and moved away. Halima finally found the entrance, and pushed the heavy gate open. She found the waiting room and waited there for the remainder of the day.

Finally a civil dressed Orderly appeared:

-You cannot stay here madam, it is 7 pm and the premises are closed. You have to go out...

- Go out? To go where? I was expelled from my home with these five children and now I have nowhere to go... I beg you, these children are sick, for five days I have been walking with them through the town...

The orderly hesitated, then disappeared. Suddenly she found herself climbing to the next floor and into the office of the Principle Commissar a Mr Salah...

- Well, then it is you madam Zeggat. What is this ... with which you come here?

Gently she explained:

- *Ah! You do not know why you are out of your home, no one told you why? Well, I will tell you why: you are out because you are baha'ist...*

- It is not baha'ist, it is Bahá'í, Mister!

She did not know from where she got the energy to make that remark to him – a remark that she repeated many times later, but never succeeded in getting her torturers to get it right.

- *Yes I am aware of the whole story. Yes, your husband is imprisoned here.*

- Is he alright?

- *He is alright, but he is strong-headed!*

- ...

- I am not looking for my husband, I want the keys to my home. I have nowhere to go.

- *Do you not have parents and family?*

- Yes I have, but they are poor. Who will accept me with five children?

- *What do you want me to do, then?*

- I do not know! You threw me out, therefore, you have to find a solution. I have nowhere to go, I am telling you again. I shall not move from here until...

- *We'll see that tomorrow.*

Salah rings for the Orderly who takes Halima and the children out.

The next day, Halima takes to the road at 7 am. Always with the children. She had to wait for almost the whole day before she was taken to Salah – known as the thief of Vespa, the Italian small motorcycles that he was notorious of stealing when he was in France.

- *This apartment belongs to the baha'ist. It is their centre, he growls.*

- In any case, I rent it. I pay a rent to Mr Attar and Mr Ta'i.⁸ This is my home and I do not have anywhere else to live in.

- *I am fed up with your weeping!*

“The Commissar falls silent while I am cold as ice from head to feet. After a minute of silence that seemed an age, he rings for Sa'id and the Orderly”

- *Take, here are your keys – throwing them across his desk.*

To Sa'id and the Orderly

- *Accompany this tribe to the city so that I hear no more about them.*

Halima returned to her home, to the children's delight, on the evening of February the 7th. The seals were removed.

Now she decided to retrieve her husband.

The next day at 8 am, as usual with her children, Halima takes milk and biscuits to Muḥammad at the Hydra centre. This time the policemen ate the food in front of her and threw the clothes on the ground. She returned home with sadness in her heart. Just as she finished her lunch, the usual Policemen arrived to take her to Hydra, again, as always, in the black Peugeot 403.

She was left to wait in an office. Suddenly the terror Sa'id appeared with two other men and, surprisingly, Rabeḥ – the Bahá'í who recanted his faith and turned Police informer.

“I watched these men with apprehension and each time I see Sa'id, I shudder with fear. Sa'id looks at Rabeḥ and points at me saying:

⁸ Two Persian pioneers who were expelled in November 1968.

- *Is she the one?*

- *Yes, she is the one!* Answers Rabeḥ with a sly smile!

- *It seems that you and Madam Ta'i are well considered by the Bahá'ís because you are a couple of beautiful fillies (immoral expression). This is what you're friend here tells me.* Growls Sa'id.

Rabeḥ followed with a hoard of lies and foul accusations of immorality about the Bahá'ís... referring to me (Halima) as the queen of ... because I am the more beautiful.

- *May God forgive you Rabeḥ. God is witness that you lie and you know you are lying...*

- *She hides things at her home also, said Rabeḥ, secret files and things of the Jews!*

To find out the truth about these grave accusations, Halima is taken back to her home with the Inspector Sa'id and the informer Rabeḥ.

- *What do you want me to show you, there is nothing.*

- *Do not take the trouble of talking to this ... says Rabeḥ, she will not show you anything. I shall show you myself.*

He went to the bathroom where over the toilet tank there was a shelf on which were placed Mr. Khodabakhsh Attar's business files since his expulsion in 1968. Sa'id took a stool and climbed on it and drew the files down. He is jubilant – he got the files! He took the thickest file, brilliant red in colour, opened it and followed the lines with his finger reading aloud: black Pepper, 3 Kg hot Pepper, 1.5 kg Cummins, 3 bags Curry, 5 boxes grilled Pistachio: 30 dinars...

- *What is this nonsense, Sa'id turns to Rabeḥ, are you fooling me? This has nothing to do with what I am looking for!*

Sa'id was so furious while Rabeḥ lowered his head in shame. That is why Rabeḥ wanted to kill Muḥammad with a revolver that night in prison.

Sa'id asks Halima to follow him back to the Hydra centre. She complained that the children are tired, but to no effect.

In Hydra they present to her Amine Khodja.⁹

- *This one (meaning Khodja) says that you hide the money of the Bahá'ís in your home.*

- *Mr Sa'id, excuse me... do you want to be ridiculed once more?* Was Halima's quiet answer.

“My Husband” – The second Endeavour

During six consecutive days Halima prepared food for Muḥammad, picked her protective children and went to Hydra, and during the six consecutive days the policemen at Hydra either threw the food away or returned it back to her. She was denied seeing Muḥammad. She was convinced that he had been shot dead and they did not want to tell her that.

On the 13th of February 1970, Sa'id told her that Muḥammad has been exiled to Timimoune! She is further cautioned not to try to go there.

- *There is nothing but highwaymen, serpents and scorpions over there... the sun is awful and there is no water... if you love your children, do not go there... You are allowed to go to Timimoune, but you will not escape losing your life.*

In spite of all warnings, Halima decided to visit Timimoune and make sure Muḥammad is alive. With great difficulty she finally fell on an advert in an Air Algérie agency advertising

⁹ Halima says that Khodja did not deny the Faith but probably was intimidated.

the possibility to go there. The trip would mean three days and three nights of continuous travel.

On the 3rd of March, she left the children with a young maid in whom she had full confidence and travelled to Timimoune. She was doubtful to find Muḥammad alive with all she was told about conditions there and by the time she got to Timimoune, fatigue and doubt rendered her mind extremely tired. Finally when she did see him coming like a haze into the unique Timimoune hotel lounge, she fainted.

The officials in Timimoune were good to her, as they were good to Muḥammad also. They kept asking her to convince Muḥammad to deny the Faith, but were surprised to know that she was Bahá'í also.

Finally, Halima returned to her home, leaving Muḥammad in his exile, but now she knew he is alive and hope is revived for the future. It is the 23rd of March 1970.

But her difficulties were far from over: She found the door of the apartment locked but not sealed. The police could not have had anything to do with this – she figured.

Where are the children? Every sinister thought went through her mind.

A neighbour elder couple whom she approached for information and help informed her that Bashir, Muḥammad's younger brother, visits the place often. The couple offered Halima to stay with them for the night at least. Halima stuck a note on the door saying she is next door.

Early the following morning Bashir turned up. Halima impatiently asked him where the children are, while thanking the neighbours and moving into her home – next door. A shock! The house is empty. Even the sewing machine was carried away.

Of all the people Halima and Muḥammad have accommodated and helped, Bashir received the greater share. And now he tried to dislodge Halima and take the apartment for himself and his family. Halima had suffered much from Bashir even when Muḥammad was around. Family ties were sacred in Algeria at that time. Bashir was Bahá'í, and in fact was imprisoned for being Bahá'í. But he changed and now, amongst other faults, he drinks alcohol.

The Children – Third Endeavour

The children, furniture and all were taken to Muḥammad's father's home at Chateau d'un. He had never been in favour of Halima as a daughter in law. Should Halima go to Chateau d'un, she will never be able to get away even alone without the children. She not only needs the children as a mother, but indeed as protectors against being assaulted by the police in her stand to protect the house – which is the Ḥazíratu'l-Quds also, and in her efforts to release her husband. She categorically refused the orders of Muḥammad's father to come over to Chateau d'un. She begged the father by telephone to send the children to her, many a time every day without success. Bashir refused to help. He had his own designs to pursue. After sixteen days from her return from Timimoune, her prayers were answered.

Brahim, the husband of Muḥammad's younger sister, listened to the heart rending supplications of Halima. He felt her agony and arranged to take the children and some of Halima's furniture in a truck that normally transported bags of coal, and drove all night in heavy rain to bring them home. The children were coal black and the furniture was mostly damaged, but nothing mattered now that she has her children - her "combat weapons", because with them she can restart the struggle with the police.

The sewing machine table was there, but not the sewing machine. How can she feed her children without the means of gaining some money? Brahim appreciated this problem and

immediately returned to Chateau d'un and a few days later returned with the sewing machine.

Bashir, that horrible man, was a mere onlooker in all this. He made no effort to help, and he even pocketed the meagre savings of Halima during her absence, leaving her penniless. Fortunately she had money owed from a couple of her clients which she immediately collected and was able to buy a kerosene stove, an essential requirement for cooking food for her and the children

After settling the house and her work, Halima went to Timimoune on her second trip. This time she took Wahid, her third son with her. She arranged for a shorter route, yet when the shared taxi was between Goléa and Timimoune towards evening, they met with a terrible sand storm that in addition to rendering the condition inside the taxi horrible, the taxi drove accidentally into a sand dune and stalled. It would not restart. They were stuck for the night. It was winter, and the desert winter nights are ice-cold.

Halima, dosed while sitting on the sand, anxious and irritated. She had terrible nightmares and sobbed shaking with tears. It is then and for the second time in her life the smiling and radiant face of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, appeared to her in a dream, consoling and calming her. At dawn, her heart was overflowing with gratitude and full of energy "ready to brave the gales of adversity." After a short while, a passing Jeep picked them up and took them to Timimoune.

Halima spent ten joyful days in Timimoune this time and was honoured with her son on the day the Oasis celebrated the feast of "circumcision". When Muhammed Zeggat arrived in exile, he looked for a way to be useful of some sort. The hospital of the Oasis, directed by a French doctor, lacked competent staff. Muhammad presented himself to help without asking for remuneration and was taken in. At the period of circumcision of the kids of the village, he asked that the kids be operated by him in the hospital instead of the local barber whose efforts in the past gave rise to a high number of infection, and some deaths were also recorded. That year Muhammad circumcised some 35 boys without any incident. Instead of individual family feasts, a single general celebration was held with the usual music and dancing. It was then that Halima, Bida and Faycal sat with honour on a decorated and flowered stage with Muhammad and the notables of the area.

The release of Muhammad – Fourth Endeavour

Back in Algiers from her sort of holiday in Timimoune, Halima had one more victory to achieve: liberate Muhammad. She arranged the house, bought a second Singer sewing machine to be paid for by instalments, hired two helpers in her sewing set-up, and really worked hard and long hours to build a small saving.

In the meantime, she also had to stand up to the continuous harassment of Muhammad's father who after repeated efforts from Chateau d'un, came in person to convince Halima to divorce that "infidel" of a son.

The visits to the Hydra centre began again.

Her efforts over the days she went with the children to ask the detestable Sa'id to help free Muhammad, ended fruitlessly. She soon realised that Sa'id cannot help and decided to go to one level up: Salah or Vespa! He must have more influence, she figured.

- Madam, you have the cheek of the devil! You obtained your apartment and now you want your husband?

- Yes! Exactly I want my husband. How do you think we can survive, five children and me without him?

- *We do not wish for any harm to any one, Madam Zeggat. It is he who is harming us. We wish no other than good towards him, good towards you too... All he has to do is a simple signature!*

- A signature for what?

- *Renounce the Baha'i Faith, to confirm that he is no more Baha'i. It is simple, we have already prepared the declaration: all he has to do is sign it.*

- Monsieur le Commissaire, this has nothing to do with my situation. I reclaim my husband to solve a social problem. He has to come to Algiers, to work and feed his children. I am not reclaiming my husband because he is Bahá'í. If he does not want to renounce his Faith that is his choice, whether he is right or wrong. Everyone can have his or her point of view... I repeat... I claim my husband because I have five children to feed. You know this quite well, you see them every day with me ... You cannot ignore the evidence, they are in front of you at this moment.

She knows that the site of the children irritates him because one morning he reproached...

- *Madam, why do you always bring the children with you? They are young and they are tired... Why do you trail them with you every time?*

- Where do you want me to leave them?

- *Leave them at home...*

- Maybe you want them to burn themselves or get wounded or go over the balcony? They are too young. I cannot leave them alone. I am a mother who knows her responsibilities!

The truth was, the children protected her from possible sexual assault, besides softening the hearts of the officials.

Finally she came to the conclusion that she cannot obtain any progress from the Hydra centre, because on the last day, Halima asked for the return of the books and papers that were confiscated. "Vespa" or Salah said she had to go to the DGSN (Direction générale de la Sécurité Nationale) for that, because there the books and papers were retained.

She decided to go there.

It is a million times easier said than done. Where is the DGSN? The director of National Security is not that approachable. A photographer friend whose shop was near her home, a certain Hadj Karkar tells Halima that the DGSN is beyond the Kasbah and the name of the director is Draia.

Halima went to the DGSN for several days, some in the morning and some in the afternoon, taking her children with her every time. "Mr Draia is busy!", "Mr Draia is not here!" or "He is not to be disturbed!" Her answer is always "I can wait!"

An officer finally told her to come on a Sunday or a Wednesday when he officially receives visitors. On Sunday she was there and asked for an audience. She was told that Mr Draia simply will not receive her. "Write," was the advice of the officer – equivalent to a gentle go away. "Draia will never read a letter from me." Halima was almost in tears.

An elderly person who had followed the scene told her to go directly to Draia's home.

The next morning a taxi reluctantly agreed to take her and the children also to Draia's residence, reaching it through a drive inside a forest. Suddenly four Maquisard-type individuals stopped the car. Halima came out of the taxi, as it went quickly backwards and disappeared.

- *Where do you think you are going, little lady?*

- I want to see Mr Draia!

They laugh, and finally persuade her to go home because there was no way she can see Mr Draia. She returned home despondent.

When Halima told the photographer, Hadj Karkar, what happened, he suggested that she prepare a letter and go to Draia's home where he resides with his second wife, a young American.

At her third trial to get to Draia's house she asked the taxi to stop at a short distance from the house and continued with the children on foot. The Guards stopped her:

- I come for the same thing, Mister!

She holds the children next to her and explained her story to the new guards. She wants to see Mr Draia.

From 11h30 until 13h she argues and insists with the energy of despair.

- Today I am decided, I will not move from here until I see him. I have a letter to give to him.

- *In that case, give it to me and I will give it to him.*

- No, I am afraid you will not give it to him.

At that moment, precisely, a black DS (a prestige Citroen sedan at the time) with a small national flag on the side stopped at the gate. An elegant gentleman in a grey suit came out of the car, looked at Halima and the children in surprise and without a word continued through the gate.

It must be Draia, Halima is certain. She begged the head guard to take her letter to him. The head guard ran and caught up with him. Draia opened the letter and read while walking, stopped and looked at Halima and the children and then continued to walk and resumed reading. Halima felt her heart about to explode. He stopped again looked at Halima and then went on his way while the head guard returned to tell Halima that she had an appointment with him at 4 pm at the DGSN.

Draia's office is perfect though austere in style.

- *O yes! I am, of course, aware of your case. What is happening to you is normal. You are not aware of the wrong you committed ...*

- Sorry to interrupt, sir, this has nothing to do with me or with the children either...

Draia did not for a moment think that Halima could be Bahá'í also. He did not move from his position. After five minutes of discussion, Halima left with no result. She was in disillusion!

Nevertheless, she does not give up.

This time she decided to go directly to the President of the Republic. She is unable to come near the Palace. One of the Guards advised her to write to the President and she decided to do so.

Time went by. She received no answer to her letter to the President of the Republic.

Halima met the Algerian Bahá'í wife, Leila, of Nakhoustine, an Iranian Bahá'í, and petrochemistry expert and who was seconded to the Algerian government for his expertise. In spite of this, he also was deported with the pioneers.

Leila informed Halima of the endeavours of the Bahá'í lawyer 'Aziz Navidi at the Ministry of Interior regarding the belongings of the deported Bahá'ís, and suggested that Halima should go to the Minister of Interior for her case.

This is how Halima one morning found herself sitting on a wooden bench with her children in the Ministry of Interior. The strenuous efforts of different secretaries to dislodge

her failed. Towards mid-day she was still arguing when Mr Madeghri, the Minister of Interior was leaving his office to go to lunch. An orderly went to him and told him that no one was able to get rid of that women with her children. The man seemed courteous and gentle. He listened to the grievance being explained to him by the orderly and beckoned her. The guard tried to keep the children away, but the Minister ordered to let them come with her.

The Minister's office was sumptuous. Halima never saw anything like that. Even the children were amazed. The Minister seemed to be a kind person with the character of a family father. With much respect he questioned her. He heard of the Bahá'í Faith but admitted he did not know much about it or that there were Bahá'ís living in the country and a certain number were in exile.

Halima pleaded her case as though she was condemned to death. (In her own words.)

- *It is possible to free him*, says the minister!

That was on the 26th of November 1970.

Halima had the same feeling of disappointment on her way back home: *It is possible to free him* is easy to say and cannot be other than one more ruse to send her home and keep her quiet.

Five days later, there was panic on the boulevard in front of the building where Halima lived. Ministry of Interior police in uniform and on motorcycles came up to frightened Halima and delivered a telegram requesting her to go to the "Central."

Halima was terribly perturbed, and was sure she will be exiled! Maybe she overplayed her hand in her efforts to the extent that she should be punished. Terrible thoughts went through her head. Nevertheless, she dressed the kids, picked up a quantity of clothes for them as well as some milk and biscuits, in case they are retained, and off she went to the "Central".

Arriving on the top of the marble steps she showed the telegram to one of the officers. She was immediately taken to an office where someone was waiting for her.

- *Are you Madam Zeggat?*

- Yes.

- *Well! I am to inform you that your husband will be released...*

Halima had become by now mistrustful and suspicious!

- How do you know that? Are you going to ask him to sign the paper of renunciation? I know he will not sign any such paper, he will not be released?

- *No Madam, there is nothing of what you say. Your husband will be liberated on the occasion of the amnesty of the 1st of November.*

- And he, does he know that?

- *No, and that is why we asked you to come here.*

Always suspicious, Halima wants to know what will be asked for in exchange of his liberty.

- ...

- ...

- *We shall liberate him with the others.*

- Who are those others?

- *Kherbouche., Khodja, Samghouni, Ahmad ...* (The other exiled Bahá'ís.)

That evening Halima was able to phone Muhammad in Timimoune and scream: Freedom!

The Difficult Road Ahead

Muḥammad is liberated, but he is not allowed to reside in Algiers. On his way north from his exile in Timimoune, he dropped into the town of Médéa, 50 km south of Algiers, where an old friend of his, Tahar Laadjal, an ex-Resistance fighter lived. The fraternity between the Maquisards is sacred and Muḥammad had asked Halima to join him there.

Unfortunately, Tahar knew that Muḥammad was Bahá'í and told him frankly that having become an infidel, their friendship was terminated.

Muḥammad decided he will go with Halima home and stealthily at night they went home in Algiers. If caught, he would go to prison. But after a few minutes of reflection he decided to abide by the order of keeping out of Algiers and stealthily again went to his hometown Chateau d'un, 300 km south –west of Algiers. There he lived in his father's home. Everyone in Chateau d'un knew Muḥammad and his history of Maquisards amongst other qualities, but they also knew that he has adopted another religion than Islám. He is, therefore, Kafir, Jew, traitor... He sustained the humiliation for 45 days until one of his uncles added to his insults by spitting on his face in the market place. Muḥammad left that night his father's home and covered with the heavy shepherd's coat, called *cashabia*, he slipped into his home to the joy of Halima and the children. The date was January 16, 1971, and for the following 6 months Muḥammad was in hide-out in his home. He did not leave the sitting room while the women workers were on their sewing machines in the adjacent rooms. The doorbell was to be rung twice by the members of the house or the women workers to make sure they are friends. Muḥammad was freed from exile but condemned to the hide-out and to inactivity.

On the 6th of July 1971, Muḥammad could stand his inactivity no more. Halima had developed her sewing factory and acted as the deliverer of the products as well as the purchaser of supplies. That day, he decided to go out at night for a walk.

Slowly the night walks developed into midday walks and ended with Muḥammad replacing Halima as deliverer and purchaser for the factory.

Throughout the remainder of the year 1971 and the whole of 1972, Halima's factory with Muḥammad's help, flourished and Muḥammad started a clothes shop in his hometown Chateau d'un – re-christened Chalghoum-El A'íd, and became more accepted by his father now that he is a successful businessman...

Muḥammad also bought 3 hectares of farmland not far from the town centre of Chalghoum-El A'íd, which he baptised as "*Fessikh*" – meaning delta in (local Algerian) Arabic, which eventually became the place where Bahá'í summer schools or meetings are held.

Ousted from home again and its (fifth) Ordeal

Following the incident that took place on the 4th of April 1973 when Counsellor Muḥammad Kebdani visited the Zeggats as mentioned above, and the assignment of Muḥammad to reside in the locality of Collo, Halima was confronted with a problem even greater than any she met with before.

On one morning at 8 o'clock, and Halima still in night dress, the horrible Sa'id and a few policemen turned up and ordered her to go out of the house.

- *The house was returned to you in the hope that you stay quiet. Unfortunately you continue your stupidity. This time nobody can save you, neither Boumediene¹⁰ nor God nor your Bahá'u'lláh. This time you are out for good. I live far from Algiers. That is not right. I will take this luxury apartment. Out you go, and quickly.*

¹⁰ President of Algeria.

At 10 in the morning the apartment was sealed with red wax and Halima was on the pavement with her 5 children, Bida, the oldest, was then 10 years of age and Chiraz, the youngest, 2 years old.

Hadj Karkar, the kind photographer, was witness to the scene. He chastised the police and the speed of action that took place. The police got into their cars and left. Halima and the children went into Karkar's shop.

That afternoon Karkar, took Halima to his home where his wife, who was aware of the case, welcomed her and the children with all kindness and served the whole family dinner. They offered to keep Halima and the children as long as they need to, but Halima chose to go to her brother in law Bashir who now lives in a sumptuous villa in the suburb of Algiers.

Bashir received Halima badly and took her in, in a basement and offered a meagre breakfast to the kids, while his were served richly. The children were losing weight and their health began to suffer as the days went by. Halima and the children lunched at a pastry shop with pizzas and cakes and drinks. The shop owner realised that she must be in trouble.

Again she went to see Sa'id to ask the whereabouts of her husband. While waiting outside his office to be admitted, she overheard him shout in a telephone conversation and understood that Muḥammad was in the prison of the "Centrale" which somewhat assured her. But she was refused to see Muḥammad.

Then she was able to trace the office where Salah (Vespa) was. He was promoted head of all the Police of Algiers.

Salah informed her that the apartment will be seized by the government, being considered the centre for the Bahá'ís. No argument of Halima on this subject was acceptable.

Her daily tribulations with the Central continued during 5 days without success. She continuously kept Karkar informed of her efforts. Karkar was a former Maquisard and he is also a Chaoui¹¹ like Muḥammad - a noble character. Karkar suggested that Halima try to contact a certain Madam Merbah whose husband Moulay Merbah is the head of the Military Security – a dreaded man. He actually took her to a few hundred metres before the house on Hydra hill and wished her good luck.

The house was certainly stately, with a garden, gardener, roaming guard holding a Doberman dog... and all the appearance of importance and luxury. She rang the gate bell and answered the loud speaker and waited. An elegant man came up to the gate.

After an exchange of questions and answers, the man, who seeing Chiraz feverish in her arms, consented to go and explain to Madam Merbah, who she was and why she wanted to see her...

He returned to tell her that Madam Merbah will not see her. Halima was trembling. Madam Merbah was her last resort. The answer was negative. She told the messenger to kindly tell Madam Merbah that she will return the next day at 8 o'clock.

At eight next morning, she rang the bell.

Again, "the wall answered" as her son conceived to name the operation. A few minutes later the gate opened slightly and a man looked out into the street up and down, counted the children and went away without a word, after closing the gate. Halima started to lose hope. But the gate re-opened and a tall and thin lady with a serious and pale face appeared.

Contrary to all appearances, Madam Merbah turned out to be a kind hearted lady. She listened carefully to Halima and told her she will telephone her at ten in the evening.

¹¹ A Berbers group

Unfortunately, the telephone was in Bashir's quarters at first level, while Halima and the children were in the basement. Bashir and his father who lived with him arranged to answer Madam Merbah's ten o'clock call but did not call Halima who was sitting up waiting. Halima realised how the wickedness of Muḥammad's family was limitless towards her.

The next morning Halima took the children and went to Madam Merbah. She was welcomed into the palatial house and served most generously herself and the children, with coffee and chocolate and more.

At this meeting there was opportunity for Halima to explain the Bahá'í Faith and Madam Merbah promised to do all she can to return the apartment to Halima and very kindly asked her to return the next morning at the same time, 10 o'clock.

At the third meeting Halima was extremely distressed to see Madam Merbah paler, tense and irritated. With a nervous gesture she handed over to Halima the government Party's daily *Moudjahid* paper saying: *Is that what you talked to me about yesterday?*

In enormous red script the 21st April 1973 daily front page reads:

MAIN BASSE SUR LE ZIONISME¹²

With a picture of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa and even a portrait of Muḥammad and mention of Kherbouche and Kebdani as well as the seized apartment... within the two page article.

Halima is stunned but explained fully the false accusation of Zionism. Insisting that what the article said was not correct at all.

- *Madam Zeggat, do you agree with them, are you also baha'iste?*

- Yes, of course, I am Bahá'í, but that has nothing to do with what the police are doing to me. They took my husband – that is a matter of men! But sending me out of my home for the second time is my problem.

- *What do you mean for the second time?*

While Halima gave the lady a summary of what happened in 1968 and since then, she felt that the attitude of Madam Merbah was changing towards better sentiments towards her. Yet the last answer was all the same, a shock for Halima:

- *In that case there is nothing that I can do, unfortunately.*

Halima did not give up, continued to explain and plead her situation... Lady Merbah concluded:

- *There is nothing I can say now, I am obliged to talk to my husband, he will certainly be furious. Do not expect any positive response... The problem is that we are here in a political imbroglio... I will telephone to you tonight...*

At 10 pm Madam Merbah phoned, Halima was next to the phone...

- *Madam Zeggat, I regret, there is absolutely nothing that I can do!*

¹² CLAMP DOWN ON ZIONISM

- Madam Merbah, with all the respect I have for you, tomorrow at 8 I will come to you. I cannot leave you, you are my only hope and I swear I will remain in front of your door until a solution is found to my problem!

For the fourth meeting with Madam Merbah, followed the same generous reception, Halima was gratified with a promise that Madam Merbah will seriously speak with her husband that night and telephone to her.

At the fifth visit on the tenth day since her expulsion from her home, Madam Merbah tells her:

- Go and see Mr. Dighi at Bab el Oued.

Mr. Dighi is the Director of the DGSN who had refused to receive her, but Madam Merbah assured her that her problem was settled. Mr. Dighi received her in his office. He was expecting her and directed her to go immediately to the “Commissariat du Grand Alger” to see, among all people: Mr. Salah or Mr Vespa!

Halima went immediately to the Commissariat. Finally, it was Sa'id himself who gave her the keys and personally unsealed the apartment.

The release of Muḥammad – Sixth Endeavour

July the 5th of the year 1973 was a beautiful summer day.

After the re-possession of her apartment in April, Halima continued her visits to Madam Merbah almost weekly. She was Halima's only support and her company inspired peace to the soul.

That day, Halima was on her way to Madam Merbah for one of her visits feeling low and depressed. Muḥammad was still at his new exile in Collo. Madam Merbah surprised her with:

- *Return to your home quickly, your husband is released!*

At the entrance of the building she found two motorcycle policemen waiting, with a further policeman ringing the bell of the apartment. She was told that she had a summons to come immediately to the “Grand Alger.”

She went there immediately and was directed to the office of Salah (or Vespa):

- Once more, Madam Zeggat, your husband is released!

Victory again. Thank you Bahá'u'lláh.

Post Script

I have to stop at this point of the history of these five men and one woman, the early Baha'is in Algeria. Maybe at some future date, another friend may continue the fascinating history of the Faith in Algeria. At this moment the Faith is making a timid progress in Algeria with the help of the National Spiritual Assembly of Tunisia, but I know the character of the Algerian – man or woman. Someday, hopefully soon, the Bahá'í world will hear about Algeria.

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