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### Irish Bahá'í Summer School

**O.Z. Whitehead**

**Waterford 1990**

*transcription of audio recording*

It is such an enormous privilege to be gathered here with all of you wonderful people and to be able to share no matter how adequately my own humble impressions of Shoghi Effendi and then perhaps to say a little more than that about him. It always seems strange to me that only a minority of people during his lifetime recognised his greatness or even knew anything about him, or if they did, they only smiled and did not recognise his station. Because what man on this earth after the ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá could even come up to him in any importance whatsoever. To read his writing, to know about his life, to examine what he said and the instructions that he gave to the Bahá'í community, which were indeed instructions that fitted the entire world, was to open up a new level of consciousness in all of us who have done so. To read his writing once is only the beginning. A second time, a third time, and then to carry on with the work that he did.

As I sit here now, I can see plainly in my mind's eye, the presence of Shoghi Effendi as he sat in the dining room of the Western Pilgrim House during the second week of January in 1955. As we entered the room for the first time and looked at him, we could see in his face an expression that we had never seen in any human being's face before. It was suffused with deep thoughts, with feeling and sensitivity of the finest kind. And as he stood up and greeted us and asked us to come near to him and put our faces next to him, I could sense he was not just a spiritual person, that he represented the entire universe since the passing of his Grandfather.

I felt, of course, as if I was in the presence of the Manifestation of God, which he was not, but he was the Sign of God on earth, and the power that exuded from him was overwhelming, and yet at the same time, it made you completely happy to be in his presence and to listen to what he had to say. He was very

informal. He spoke in a clipped Oxford accent. He spoke at first about the British believes and their progress in the Faith at that particular time. He said that the British had been exemplary in the way in which they pioneered and he was very pleased with what they had done. And he was delighted, too, with the progress of the Bahá'í Cause in Africa, which he said had outstripped the Guardian's expectations.

Naturally, we were inclined, some of us, to ask him questions and, being an American, I was used to that because in no way did I feel constrained in his presence. I felt only that I wanted to absorb all that he had to give us at that time. And I was aware, too, of this enormous privilege that I had, undeserved completely, in being in his presence. I said, among other things I asked him, Shoghi Effendi, why is it that the clergy, and before I had a chance to say more, he said, 'I recognise that question and the reason that they do not accept the Messenger of God for this Day is because their understanding of Christianity is superficial.' And then I said, 'Shoghi Effendi', and he answered me so graciously each time and as he looked at you with those wonderful eyes that seemed to penetrate into your heart – I can see them now. I'd never seen eyes with an expression like that. He seemed to look at you and understand you with complete perfection and yet without one iota of criticism in his glance.

And I said, 'Shoghi Effendi, many people whom you admired and learned to like and believe in as people do not come into the Bahá'í Faith, do not show interest and then many who we have not really known or regarded in one way or another, do.' He said it is a quality of the soul.' And then he said, 'Mankind has just left the age of puberty and is now in the very early stages of maturity. But gradually, we will have world order and finally world civilization for which we are all striving.' And then he thought a minute, and I could feel when he thought that he could see into the future in a way that no one else could on this earth. 'It'll take a thousand years to usher in the Most Great Peace.'

And I was rather naïve at the time, as I am still, and hadn't been in the Faith very long. I hadn't realise what Shoghi Effendi had been through. Many of us in the West came in at that time, and this was about 1950, and although we loved Bahá'u'lláh and loved 'Abdu'l-Bahá and accepted the Guardian, we didn't realise completely, though we had read about it, exactly all the suffering that they had endured. What Shoghi Effendi had been through for a period of thirty-three years at that time. And I said, 'Do the Messengers of God, Shoghi Effendi, know a great deal more about the worlds of God than they tell us?' Well, a very naïve question. He said, of course they do. They only tell us what we can understand.

And to every question, to every type of remark that anyone made, Shoghi Effendi would reply and, just to be a little light-hearted for a moment if I may, I asked him, 'Shoghi Effendi', 'Yes.' 'What do you think of Winston Churchill?' Well, Rúhíyyih Khánum, that wonderful lady, was sitting next to him and she said, 'Oh Zebby, now don't get the Guardian started on Churchill!' He said, 'Churchill is very capable, but lacking in principle. More capable than Eisenhower or

Roosevelt.’ And then he added, ‘President Woodrow Wilson was very pure hearted.’ And you know, from that remark, as a result of that remark, I began to study a good deal about President Woodrow Wilson and a book that I can really recommend to you to show to you that there is good American character existing, who did at least imbibe many of the principles of the Bahá’í Faith and had an integrity that Shoghi Effendi admired, or he never would have said that, called ‘When the Cheering Starts’. Woodrow Wilson, we believe, had read some of the Bahá’í books, but the Guardian said not to say this because you couldn’t be perfectly sure. But unquestionably he did have in his plan, which he had delineated for the League of Nations that somewhat was similar to the Divine Plan that Bahá’u’lláh had revealed in the nineteenth century. So, as a result, I have done some study on this man who the Guardian commended.

He saw into the heart of the world, into the heart of everyone and although he had been through such sufferings as we cannot understand or could not possibly have endured, yet I could feel in him a happiness, a spiritual happiness which was not possible for the rest of us to attain and yet we can hope to go nearer and nearer to that goal as we go along. He was very amusing about America. He said that in America, the matriarchal system existed. He said in America, the man works very hard all day for his wife and in the evening he returns home tired and wishes to rest. She has been relaxing most of the day and wishes to go out to dinner and attend the theatre. He is very tired, indeed, and would like to rest, but he loves her very much, doesn’t want to lose her, so he takes his bath, gets dressed and accompanies her there and comes home more tired than before. He dies young. She is sad for a while then with the money he has amassed, she starts to travel and travels all over the world. Now this, of course, situation is greatly changing, but he had sensed it at that particular time and of course it was true.

I asked him, ‘Shoghi Effendi, is there any difference that you can make in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh.’ He said no. All are of equal importance. All the Writings of Bahá’í are the Word of God and we cannot discriminate between them as to their importance for one way or the other. In the early time of the Faith, the early time of the Guardianship.

I think it is interesting to remark on a story that Mr Faizi gave in his essay on Mrs Collins, that wonderful woman. She had gone there – I may have the date wrong – in about 1922 and she felt that the Guardian was going to talk about eternal life only and the soul and all kinds of very attractive subjects about how we would live here, maybe happily and go to the next world and what Bahá’u’lláh said about eternal life and what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had said about it. Instead of that, Shoghi Effendi gave her some letters that he had already written for the American community on the administrative order and how it could be formed. Oh, she was astounded and thought, what could this be? And she read these papers, which described the foundation of the Assembly and the voting of the National Assembly, the voting at the National Convention and all the administrative matters that we now about now. And she read it. The next

day, he asked her what she thought of it. She said she didn't know what to think of it. She couldn't understand it at all. And so he was very patient with her and took her on a long walk through some of the Holy Places in the Holy Land there and he described it to her again and still he made no impression on her at all. She still wanted to hear about the eternal life and the wonderful things we might do here. And finally, she began to read it and she began to think, well, there is something in this. So he dispatched her to go home to the Convention in Wilmette and explain these letters to the friends and this is what is so extraordinary. She went home and gave a marvellous explanation of the letters on the administrative order that he had written in about 1923, I think it was, 24, and she was the one who went from community to community and explained how the administrative order was going to be formed. I think this is a most interesting story to show how a person could have gone there believing in Bahá'u'lláh at that time, and a woman of enormous capacity, and yet she didn't yet quite understand the organisation of the administrative order.

And isn't it interesting, too, that our beloved George Townshend, who first really recognised the station of Bahá'u'lláh in about 1916, and was completely changed by this recognition, and yet he went through this difficult stretch which he described in his essay on the Seven Valleys, on the soul. Until he realised the necessity of the administrative order and realised the Church could not be reformed by Bahá'u'lláh, but that finally it would become a very important thing of the past. He, with all his spirituality, with all his brilliance, with all his scholarship, took this time to do it. We can see in his books. My favourite book that he wrote, thought I know that it is not the most important book that he did, is *The Heart of the Gospel*, in which he explains to a Christian audience how much the Bahá'ís love Jesus and how Bahá'u'lláh is the return of the spirit of Jesus in the station of the Father of all mankind. And yet in the last book which we know gives the history of the Faith and the explanation of how the world will be run in the future through the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

I would like to read now, if I might, just a short, well, it isn't an essay, but a little interview I had just briefly before the passing of Ḥasan Balyuzi. (6:09 skipped, story of his meeting with Mr Balyuzi)

When I was in the Holy Land, I had the opportunity on the last day I was there of meeting with Rúḥíyyih Khánum in her sitting room and we were talking about marriage and she asked me if I ever thought I'd marry to which I said I had and explained a few experiences I had had and made some mistakes. I said, 'Rúḥíyyih Khánum, I must ask you a very personal question. Did you have any intimation at all that you were going to marry Shoghi Effendi when you were a young girl?' And she said, 'Zebby, I don't mind answering that question at all.' And the answer is so beautiful that I just have to recount it now. I'm sure she wouldn't mind

One night when I was here at the age of sixteen, I dreamt that I had rescued the Guardian from a burning house. I took this dream very seriously and when I came downstairs that night for dinner, I looked at Shoghi Effendi and I thought

of what I had seen in my dream. He looked at me very stirringly and I dismissed the thought. And then he turned towards me and smiled. And that was the only intimation that I had.

And when he asked me to marry him, I thought first that this would be very good for the Cause. And then I thought to myself, I love him anyway. Of course I want to marry him.

And she said this so simply, though what a tremendous, important thing that was in world history that she married Shoghi Effendi.

Now, during the pilgrimage, Shoghi Effendi, of course, made many, many fascinating remarks which I'd like to quote directly from because in the matter of time, one can sometimes make some mistakes. John Ferraby changed the subject to Prayers and Meditations. The Guardian explained, in Prayers and Meditations, Bahá'u'lláh was often referring to the Báb. We must realise that when He refers to the Báb as the last prophet, Bahá'u'lláh wrote this particular meditation before He Himself had become a Manifestation. I asked the Guardian this final question, 'Is it alright to teach immoral people the Bahá'í Faith?' Rúhíyyih Khánúm spoke quickly, 'What about Mary Magdalene?' 'I mean people, Shoghi Effendi, who almost like the gangsters.' The Guardian gave a delightful smile. 'If you don't get robbed', he said. He rose then and walked out of the room. As he did so, the Guardian looked like a deeply sensitive and happy young boy of extraordinary charm.

On that evening, the last evening at dinner, John Ferraby sat opposite to the Guardian. As soon as I'd entered the dining room, he said to me, 'This is your last night, isn't it? I am glad to see that you do not look unhappy.' After I'd taken my place on John's right, Shoghi Effendi said, 'I hear that you have an old mother that you are looking after.' I said, 'Yes, Shoghi Effendi.' 'How old is she?', he asked me. 'She is 83', I answered. 'Oh, then you cannot pioneer', he said without hesitation.

The Guardian said, 'When you get back to New York, tell the Bahá'ís to disperse, but not to the metropolitan areas, rather to the rural sections.' 'It is hard to do even what one should do in New York', I remarked. 'Of course', he said. 'There are many distractions in the big city.' Anxious to know what the Guardian would say about the Bahá'í activity in the next mentioned city, I said, 'I came into the Cause in Los Angeles. The Bahá'ís are doing a great deal of work there and in the surrounding territories.' 'Yes', he declared, 'but Los Angeles is very materialistic and the cities around it are becoming the same. Materialism in the United States has started in the big cities and has spread to the small cities. That country is now successfully materialising the world.' 'A materialistic society is certainly dull', I remarked. 'Dull!' he said. 'They are very dangerous.'

There were no changes in the Guardian's instructions: the believers should disperse. 'I have asked the Persian believers to disperse and only 3% have obeyed the Guardian's instructions. The Americans should disperse in great numbers. If they would do so, it would have an enormous effect on the Cause.'

Then', he said, 'first tell the believers in New York disperse and then anoint them with this attar of roses.' I was so moved by my little present, by this present he gave the attar of roses, that I could hardly say, 'Thank you, Shoghi Effendi.' He rose from his chair and walked to my side of the table. Now, I just want to mention this little bit now, not of course because of any compliment he gave to me, he didn't at all anyway. But when he got up that last night and he approached me and said, 'I will give you my special prayers.' It was just as if lightning had hit the room. The entire atmosphere changed when he said this. And you know I can feel it now as I sit here, the atmosphere that he conveyed. It is completely unearthly in a sense because I could never experience it in any other way at all.

Years ago, long before even Shoghi Effendi even knew that he was going to be the Guardian or knew such a thing as the Guardian existed, he was going to Baliol College Oxford and during that time, he often visited the Manchester community. And one evening when he felt that the atmosphere was right he said, 'The Greatest Holy Leaf has given me a vial of attar of roses and she has asked me that when I felt the atmosphere was right that I should use this and anoint the friends with it and I want to do that tonight.' Now, everyone said that at this particular occasion the atmosphere was wonderful and they could sense an extraordinary quality about the young Shoghi Effendi that other people did not have, although they had no idea of the station that was soon to be conferred upon him. And he used to visit there quite often. I do not think that he was entirely happy at Oxford. The atmosphere was rather cold. I think the professors were probably too academic, but imagine that young man of genius who had gone there through his Grandfather's admonition to learn – well, he already wrote beautiful English because he had already translated a great number of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets – but to learn even more about English and yet whom did he have to talk to, who would understand him. So at times he would visit the communities. I believe he knew Lady Blomfield and John Esslemont, whom he loved very much.

And he heard, of course, at the end of his time there this terrible news in a most cruel thing that happened, the ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Imagine how he must have felt. But he had always gone to England, thinking that he would see the Master again and now he would not see him on this earth and he was alone without him. And he did not know anything about his appointment as yet. And when he arrived in the Holy Land, he had another shock, which was meaning that he was appointed Guardian. Can you imagine what he went through at his age and realised the tremendous responsibility that he had been given, that the whole future of the planet rested on his shoulders. With that sensitive young man with many around, they didn't understand him at all. Some fortunately who did. He was able to establish a great deal before he was naturally forced to take a rest, which wasn't really a rest, but a time of meditation, prayer and study. Of many months away from the Holy Land.

But think of what he went through and what he came back and did. Dr Giachery

has expressed in his book, which doesn't try to cover the whole life of Shoghi Effendi, as Rúhíyyih Khánúm has really covered his life, but in Dr Giachery's book, he marks out the wonderful talents that he had, that God endowed him with. Look at the way he wrote. Who ever has written in a style that Shoghi Effendi writes. Every paragraph has so many meanings in it. It's like when you read it, it evokes so much to you. It stirs you up inside and it is a model of modern writing that he has given us. He was a reader of Gibbon, a reader of McCoy, a reader of Carlisle, indeed. But when you read Gibbon, and then you read Shoghi Effendi, you turn to Shoghi Effendi. You don't turn back to Gibbon. All he used him as a model of style. The talent of people, the administrative talent and the deep, human quality which he had. When you met him, you could feel this, as I've said before, this quality which was unearthly.

You know Doris Holley told me this interesting little story that when Horace went on a shortened pilgrimage – which is shocking that he didn't go for a longer one really, because he should have. She wondered how he would react to Shoghi Effendi. Those are two very strong personalities and they had worked together a great deal over a period of years. As you know, Horace was the secretary of the National Assembly of America and naturally, he was in correspondence with Shoghi Effendi constantly and the ideas that Horace had Shoghi Effendi always acted upon. I'm sure Shoghi Effendi inspired them originally, but he seemed to catch the idea. He started the Bahá'í World, he helped with the administrative order, everything. And they had met finally after a period of how many years, 50 or 60 years work of this kind. 50 years anyway. And when he came back, Doris said, 'Well, he said just one sentence: "You would die for him."'

Now think of this strong-minded Yankee man with a brilliant mind, well educated and the Guardian said the greatest authority on administration in the world, saying about the beloved Guardian, you would die for him. This is the quality he invoked in people who loved him. And nothing that I can say is in anyway adequate.

When I read my little pilgrim notes over again, I realise how inadequate they are because when we think that after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that he was the sign of God on earth. That he was the one that all the world should turn, and will turn in the future. And what a tragedy it is, as wonderful as the Faith is doing now, that more people didn't know who he was and have the opportunity of loving him.

Now we have the opportunity of reading his books. God passes by is the history of the first 100 years of the Bahá'í Faith that he wrote. Now it was a very long job to do. Tremendous book. We read it and it has so much in it. So much of wisdom, too, and understanding and the story of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Shoghi Effendi said to me once, 'Did you enjoy the Dawnbreakers?' I said, 'Yes, Shoghi Effendi, I did, but you know, frankly I like what you write even better than the Dawnbreakers.' And he smiled and he said, 'Well, The Promised Day is Comewill not be at all popular with the clergy because it is very hard on them.'

He was utterly humble about his achievements and yet we live only a brief time after his passing. I think that Dr Giachery's description of the Guardian's funeral is one of the most moving I have ever read in my life. And it showed the deep sorrow that everyone felt for him. And yet I am awfully happy, I suppose many of us are that London has got the great privilege of being near his resting place. And how now, even though at first there were not huge numbers coming to the grave, now there are and when you go there now you find every day more and more people coming to what will be realised in the future as really the most spiritual spot in the entire British Isles. And next to that will be the resting place, of course, of George Townshend, Ḥasan Balyuzi and the many other great people who have died here in England and were good Bahá'ís and followers of Bahá'u'lláh.

Forgive me for not saying very much, only expressing my feelings and emotions and skipping around so much, but when you think about Shoghi Effendi, there is so much in your heart that it is hard to stay on just on little point, aspect of his life. All we have to give him is our love and all we have to give him is thankfulness that he existed and that we are here today because of all that he did for us. Again, I can see his face before us. I'm sure watching everything we do and trying hard to help us.

*(a bit skipped – applause and chair speaking. Goes to questions)*

He didn't mention John Esslemont. I knew about his love for him, of course, and his deep feeling for him. The only personality that he actually mentioned was – well, I will say what he did say. I had been very grateful to someone who had helped me in the Faith, Helen Bishop. You probably know who she is. A very brilliant woman. And I said to Shoghi Effendi, hoping to be able to return a compliment to her, that I enjoyed Helen Bishop's introduction to the Kitáb-i-Íqán. He said, 'Yes. Not in the same category as George Townshend's writing, the best of the Bahá'í writers.' And then I mentioned one or two other people: Mrs Kinny, Carrie Kinney. You probably know about her who had been a believer since 1898 in America. And he said she is celebrating 50 years service to the Faith by pioneering in a neighbouring town.

I mentioned also Willard Hatch, who had been a believer since the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He is a very old believer. I don't know why he isn't much known about, but I was in the same community with him and I certainly remember he said to me once – and this is the kind of thing he would do. I was studying about the Faith in Los Angeles. We had a lovely centre in those days. It was very different than it is now frankly. And he said to me, 'Now, Zebby, you're sincere. You read the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh carefully and the Will and Testament. Now you be good boy and do that.' And I remembered that, you know. He said just the right thing. Of course, what Shoghi Effendi has given us in the Dispensation is absolutely very important for us to study and I've always believed that ever since that particular time. It helped me so much to know it. Of course the Will and Testament is imperishable, too.



He didn't mention any particular personalities. I wonder if I could say one thing he did say. I hate to mention names because there was someone in the Cause there at that time who had led the Cause, a very, very great believer. And at the end of his life he defaulted. Let's not even mention his name. It's depressing. We know. We hope Bahá'u'lláh will forgive him in the future because he was a very old man when he defaulted and who knows what happened to him. He looked at me and I don't mean for a moment he was sending me out, 'You must learn to defend the Faith from enemies from within and from without.' And I often wondered what he meant. And later on I realised what he meant. I said, 'Shoghi Effendi, what makes a Covenant-breaker?' He said, 'Ambition and arrogance. Arrogance and ambition.' And he said, 'I hope that anyone who breaks the Covenant will realise what they have done before they go to the next world. Because if they don't, they will suffer so much when they get there.' But it didn't seem to be at all animosity, just sorrow, disappointment and grief that anyone should break the Covenant.

That's the way he looked at it. He had suffered enough from the hands of the people who had broken the Covenant on this earth. I suppose we never know, none of us know why a person gets sick. People do get sick and we have to pray for them and we can't, of course, associate with Covenant-breakers, but this is a terrible thing that has existed and has caused, naturally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian great suffering. The Guardian had said that he had translated all the necessary abstractions that we needed in the Gleanings, which were taken from 12 volumes in the Persian. But that in the future, more abstractions will be translated and some will be more obscure and more difficult to understand.

He also said – I can mention this – that we should gain understanding from reading the Kitáb-i-Íqán and also of the Qur'án. It is most extraordinary how the Guardian could translate the words of Bahá'u'lláh so beautifully and also write books of his own in his inimitable style and also write letters to the believers, of which there are many thousand, I believe . . .

*recording ends*