

From the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

Passages from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Letters of the Greatest Holy Leaf

Documentation – (List of sources)

Notes on Translations

Some References to the Greatest Holy Leaf found in Published Works

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Views of the monument erected by Shoghi Effendi over the grave of

Bahíyyih Khánum on Mt. Carmel

Photograph of Bahá'í's Tablet to Bahiyiyh Khanum

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Bahíyyih Khánum circa 1890

October 1919

an early photograph

INTRODUCTIONby

Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum

'The outstanding heroine of the Bahá'í Dispensation.' Thus does the Guardian characterize his illustrious great-aunt, the peerless daughter of Bahá'u'lláh, the faithful and beloved sister of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In this compilation presented by the Universal House of Justice on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of the Greatest Holy Leaf, Bahíyyih Khánum the Tablets written by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the letters written by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian, have been assembled and many of the letters which she herself wrote have been included. Because of their nature they are not a history but rather an insight into a glorious period of history.

The Greatest Holy Leaf was the eldest daughter of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Born in Persia in 1846 she, in her long life which ended in 1932, spanned, with the exception of two years, the entire Heroic Age of this new world

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religion. At the age of six when her Father was cast into the subterranean dungeon in Tihrán known as the 'Black Hole', her home was immediately looted and despoiled. In a day the wealthy and noble family was beggared and hid in fear of their lives as Bahá'u'lláh lay in heavy chains—the most prominent, the most blameless victim of the turmoil which His Forerunner's liberal teachings had provoked in a land of bitter Muslim Shi'ah fanaticism. Navváb, the refined, frail, saintly mother of the little girl fled to a humble dwelling near the dungeon where she could be near her illustrious and much-loved Spouse; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, her eight-year-old Brother, accompanied His mother when daily she went to the home of friends to ascertain whether Bahá'u'lláh was still alive or had been executed that day—for every day some of His co-religionists were martyred, often being handed over to various guilds, the butchers, the bakers, the shoemakers, the blacksmiths, who exercised their ingenuity on new ways of torturing them to death. Through long days of constant terror the little girl stayed at home with her four-year-old brother Mihdí; often, she recalled, she could hear the shrieks of the mob as they carried off their victims. After four months Bahá'u'lláh was released through the intervention of various prominent people, and He and His family were exiled to 'Iráq. In a very severe winter, through the snow-bound mountains of western Persia, the ill-clad, destitute party for three months suffered the ordeal of what He described as 'that

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terrible journey'. Navváb sold the gold buttons of her clothes to help buy food and washed their garments till her delicate hands bled. Such were the earliest recollections of Bahíyyih Khánum; the happy, secure days of her

first six years must have become a dream-like experience, for no real peace ever entered her life again. Her Brother 'Abdu'l-Bahá testified to this: 'For all her days she was denied a moment of tranquillity.'

The family had barely settled in Baghdád when the infant Faith of Bahá'u'lláh was seized by a new convulsion; a year after His arrival, when the Greatest Holy Leaf was eight, He withdrew for two years to the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih, living as a dervish, His whereabouts unknown to His family and admirers alike. This sacrifice, however, did not avert calamity; the internal and external enemies of His Faith had relentlessly pursued their ends, and in May 1863, just after Bahá'u'lláh had revealed His own station to some of His followers, for the second time Bahíyyih Khánum became an exile and travelled with her mother and other women in covered carts for almost four months from Baghdád to Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, in the caravan of her Father, which comprised about seventy of His followers. By now the young girl had turned her back on the world—a decision which is ever an inward orientation—and was wholly dedicated, every moment of

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her life, to serving her Divine Father, her Brother 'Abdu'l-Bahá Whom she adored, her frail, heroic and beloved mother, her younger brother Mihdí who had rejoined them, and all the followers of Bahá'u'lláh—indeed, all and sundry who ever crossed her path!

Yet a third banishment lay ahead of the Greatest Holy Leaf; with no warning or justification, four months after their arrival, in the depths of a very bitter winter, the Sultán once again exiled Bahá'u'lláh, His family and companions, this time to the city of his displeasure, Adrianople. At the beginning of December, for twelve days, over the wind-swept plains of western Turkey, in storms of snow and rain, in carts and on pack animals, the party struggled, Bahá'u'lláh Himself testifying that 'Neither My family, nor those who accompanied Me) had the necessary raiment to protect them from the cold in that freezing weather.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who rode beside His Father's conveyance, was again badly frost-bitten, as He had already been on the long journey from Tihrán to Baghdád, and suffered its effects till the end of His life. On their arrival, ill, destitute, prisoners, they were assigned to crowded, cold, vermin-infested houses—for Bahíyyih Khánum the most repugnant of all her sufferings. So terrible was their plight during this period that Bahá'u'lláh asserts: 'The eyes of Our enemies wept over Us) and beyond them those of every discerning person.'

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During the four years and eight months they sojourned in Adrianople fresh horrors attended the exiled family. In spite of Bahá'u'lláh's every effort to redeem His half-brother, Mírzá Yahyá, his intense jealousy reached its apex and he poisoned Bahá'u'lláh, Whose life hung in the balance for a month, and Who carried the mark of this treachery in a trembling hand until the end of His life.

The Greatest Holy Leaf often stated that all the years of her life, from childhood to maturity, were overshadowed by the constant threat that she might be separated from her beloved Father; it was a very real threat for on a number of occasions there was a plan to divide the exiles, Bahá'u'lláh to be sent to some unknown destination and His family to another. Once again the machinations of His enemies, within and without, ripened into a plan of this nature. The same Sultan who had exiled Him from Baghdad to Constantinople, and from Constantinople to Adrianople, now issued another edict of exile which was to carry Him to the prison-city of 'Akká in Syria for the last twenty-four years of His life—but His frantic family did not know this, they only knew another exile, and probably permanent separation, now lay ahead.

After a miserable, crowded voyage of ten days, with little food, through rough seas, in August heat, the band of exiles—still all together due to the masterful intervention of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—were

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finally locked into the barracks of the prison-city of 'Akká. Illness, death, privation were their lot for two years, the worst blow of all being the death of the gentle, universally loved Mihdi who, while walking on the prison roof and meditating, fell through an opening and died of his injuries. His body was washed in the presence of his Father Whose poignant grief has been recorded by Him; what went on in the hearts of the tender mother, the loving sister, we can only imagine.

Slowly the wheels of destiny revolved. Through the unceasing efforts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh was able, although still a prisoner, to live the last years of His life in relative peace in a beautiful mansion in the countryside outside 'Akká. Bahíyyih Khánum, however, continued to live in 'Akká with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family, whose imprisonment was not permanently lifted until the fall of the Sultanate in 1908 freed all political prisoners. The sun of the glory of her Father set in 1892, an event which again led to violent upheavals caused by internal and external enemies of the Faith; but the selfless devotion, the consecration to service in whatever form was needed, which had been manifested in Bahíyyih Khánum's life since she was six years old, continued unchanged; her whole being now revolved about the Brother she adored, the Centre of His Father's Covenant, the Head of His Faith. During the years of ever-

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increasing freedom and victory 'Abdu'l-Bahá embarked upon His history-making visits to Egypt, Europe and North America. Some of His letters to the Greatest Holy Leaf reflect not only His constant love and thoughts of her but His joy over the triumphant nature of His tour. But once again, inevitably it seems in her sorrow-filled life, great afflictions came upon her. In November 1921 this Brother—so adored, so close a companion since their earliest childhood—closed His eyes and passed away from a world that had so honoured Him, so afflicted Him for almost four score years.

The death of the partner in her trials, her exiles, her family's upheavals and crises, would have been sufficient for any woman of her age; added to it now came the condition of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's successor, His eldest grandson, appointed Guardian of His Faith, a young man of twenty-four, devastated with grief because 'Abdu'l-Bahá had died during his absence at Oxford University, and completely overwhelmed and prostrated by the news of the station and responsibilities conferred upon him in his Grandfather's Will and Testament. As always Bahíyyih Khánum rose to the occasion, comforted, supported, nursed and encouraged the heartbroken youth, the youth of whom, when he was a child, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had written to her: 'Kiss the fresh flower of the garden of sweetness, Shoghi Effendi.' More than this, she accepted the headship of the

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Faith which Shoghi Effendi, in his great distress, conferred upon her when he withdrew, as he wrote, until such time as '. . . having gained health, strength, self-confidence and spiritual energy' he would be able to take into his hands 'entirely and regularly the work of service. . .'. Upon Bahíyyih Khánum's frail shoulders yet again God placed a heavy load. Though she was now seventy-five, she bore, with her usual nobility, dignity, self-effacement and great inner assurance and strength, all the terrible events related to and produced by the ascension of her Brother. At last came the great freeing, her turn to shake the dust of this earth from her feet and wing away to realms on high. But the release and reward for her was far different for him whom she left behind; 'to one who was reared by the hands of her loving kindness', Shoghi Effendi wrote, 'the burden of this direst of calamities is well-nigh unbearable'. Torrents of passionate feeling poured from his pen, in English to the Bahá'ís of the West, in Persian and Arabic to the Bahá'ís of the East. All his love and, above all, her glory, became embodied in immortal words. During the 36 years of the Guardian's ministry he never ceased to remember her, to associate her with the unfoldment of the Faith throughout the world, the rise of its institutions at the World Centre, the largest or smallest of his own undertakings; whether publicly or quietly in his personal life, her memory and influence were always there. He summed up what she represented historically, and to him personally

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in his dedication to her of *The Dawn Breakers*—the masterpiece he created out of Nabil's Narrative through his unique translation:

To

The Greatest Holy Leaf

The Last Survivor of a Glorious and Heroic Age

I Dedicate This Work

in Token of a

Great Debt of Gratitude and Love

Haifa

February 1982.

single page

chapter 1

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