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THE RISE OF
THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY
OF 'ISHQÁBÁD
A. A. LEE

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN RUSSIA: TWO EARLY INSTANCES

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of 'Ishqábád

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1. I am ...
for his kind ...
which ...
2. Though ...
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THE RISE OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY OF 'ISHQÁBÁD

by A. A. Lee

THE HISTORY of the Bahá'í Faith in Russia has been strangely neglected by the Bahá'ís of the West. While many accounts of Bahá'í history in Írán or under Ottoman rule, in Europe or America are available in English, references to the history of the once large and prosperous Russian Bahá'í community are few and scattered. Yet, some of the most signal events in Bahá'í history took place in Southern Russia. It was here that the first official recognition was extended to the Bahá'í Faith by any government. It was here that the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár was raised at the command of Bahá'u'lláh Himself. It was here that, at one time, perhaps five percent of the Bahá'ís of the world found refuge and developed the most complete Bahá'í community which has ever existed.

This paper draws upon the few published materials available in English and some Persian sources.¹ However, it relies most heavily on oral interviews conducted with Bahá'ís who lived in Russia. The paper sketches the history of the Bahá'í Faith in 'Ishqábád in Russian Turkistán from the establishment of the Bahá'í community there until the Russian Revolution.

The history of the Bahá'í Faith in 'Ishqábád falls actually into four major periods. The first extends from the arrival of the first Bahá'ís in that city to the recognition of the Faith by the Russian government and the social separation of the Bahá'í community from the Muslim community. The second period begins at this point and lasts until the Russian revolution. It witnessed the development of a strong, independent, prosperous and closely-knit religious community which became a major force in the city. The third period, from the revolution to the eruption of severe persecution against the Faith, can be regarded as the "Golden Age" of the Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád. And the final period saw the disruption of Bahá'í life, the arrest and deportation of hundreds of believers, the flight of many more, and the reduction of the Bahá'í community to a mere remnant. This paper limits itself to a sketch of the first two of these periods.

The Establishment of The Russian Bahá'í Community

THE RUSSIAN Bahá'í community was established during the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh. A large Bahá'í community emerged in 'Ishqábád during this time and a handful of believers established themselves in Samarqand and Bukhárá as a result of the efforts and activities of "the erudite Fáḍil-i-Qá'iní and the learned apologist Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl".²

1. I am grateful to Mr. Mehrqád Amanat for his kind assistance in translating the Persian sources for me.

2. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 195.

'Ishqábád was, however, the first city in Russia to be opened to the Faith and it became an important centre of Bahá'í activity almost immediately.

In the early 1880's, Russian administration was established in an area of Turkistán which had previously been a part of the Persian empire. 'Ishqábád became the centre of Russian administration for the area. The city lies on a plain just a few miles from the Elburz Mountains which form a border between Russia and Persia. Tradition has it that before the Russians established their control, 'Ishqábád was a village of about "500 tent dwellers".³ However, the Russians began the construction of a new city there, built on a European design, with long, broad streets laid out on a grid plan. The new city attracted many immigrants from Russia and from Írán. It lay on the path of the Transcaspian Railway, which the Russians later constructed, and so became a centre of trade, as well as an important administrative centre.

The first Bahá'ís to settle in 'Ishqábád were refugees from the town of Sabzivár in Khurásán.⁴ These Bahá'ís had earlier fled to Sabzivár from as far away as Yazd and Işfáhán, to escape from persecutions in these areas. Some of them

were merchants. These men were generally known as Bahá'ís and so had enemies in the town among the Muslims.

In about 1884 or 1885, persecutions broke out against the Bahá'ís in Sabzivár. The homes of some of the Bahá'ís were viciously attacked and looted. Three or four Bahá'í men were arrested, taken before the local Muslim clergy, pronounced as apostates to Islám, and sentenced to death. The Bahá'ís of Sabzivár appealed to the capital of the province, Mashhad, and asked the governor for assistance. An order came that those arrested were to be transported to Mashhad and imprisoned there. Some enemies of the Faith made plans to murder the prisoners in Mashhad. But after lengthy negotiations, some Bahá'ís of the city were able to satisfy the governor and secure the release of their Bahá'í brothers.⁵

These Bahá'ís were now unable to return to Sabzivár and they could not remain in Mashhad. They fled to nearby 'Ishqábád. Their families joined them in Russia sometime later. Among the first Bahá'ís to reach 'Ishqábád were 'Abdu'l-Raşúl of Yazd⁶ and Aqá Muhammad-Riđá-i-Arbáb-i-Işfáhání.⁷

Even before the first Bahá'ís came to live in 'Ishqábád, Bahá'ís had become involved in the life of the city. Hájí Mírzá Hasan, the Great Afnán, passed through 'Ishqábád in 1881 or 1882 on his way to the presence of Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká. While in Russia, he decided to buy property in 'Ishqábád. Later, he wrote to his son, Siyyid Ahmad, who was in Sabzivár and asked for him to arrange for the purchase of some properties there. Mírzá Hasan realized, no doubt, that the new Russian city offered excellent opportunities for investment. Soon other Bahá'ís had followed his lead and invested in property there.⁸

3. Kazemzadeh, Kazem: (Interviews March 6, 1977, April 4, 1977, May 14, 1977, and January 17, 1978.) Interview March 6, 1977.

4. *ibid.*, April 4, 1977. Parvini, 'Abbás: (Interviews March 23, 1977 and April 1, 1977.) Interview March 23, 1977.

5. Parvini, Interview March 23, 1977.

6. Later known as 'Abdu'l-Raşúl Alioff.

7. I had the honour of interviewing the son of 'Abdu'l-Raşúl, Mr. 'Abbás Parvini, and the son of Áqá Muhammad-Riđá-i-Arbáb-i-Işfáhání, Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh.

8. Banná, Ustád 'Alí-Akbar, *Tárikh-i-Ishqábád*, photocopied manuscript.

The migration of large numbers of Bahá'ís to 'Ishqábád, however, was the result of the efforts of Siyyid Muhsin-i-Afnán. In about 1884, this Afnán also travelled through Russia from Írán on his way to 'Akká where he made a pilgrimage to the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. He may have actually passed through 'Ishqábád on his journey. But, in any case, while in Russia he learned of the opportunities offered by the new city which was being constructed. He brought this news to 'Akká.⁹

While on pilgrimage, Siyyid Muhsin suggested to Bahá'u'lláh that Bahá'ís might immigrate to this city and stressed the new, strong Russian authority there which could offer safety and protection to the friends, the availability of work, the abundance of land, etc. Since this was a period of severe persecution for Bahá'ís in parts of Írán, the response to Siyyid Muhsin's suggestion was almost immediate. Within a short time, four or five hundred Bahá'ís had settled in 'Ishqábád from different parts of Írán, but especially from Yazd and from Khurásán. By 1890, the number of Bahá'ís had reached about 1,000.¹⁰

During these very early days of the Bahá'í Faith in 'Ishqábád, Shoghi Effendi writes in *God Passes By* that the community was able to "... establish

a Bahá'í cemetery and to purchase property and erect thereon structures that were to prove the precursors of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the Bahá'í World."¹¹ It was Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí-i-Afnán, the Vakílu'd-Dawlih (known also as Afnán-i-A'zam), who arranged for the purchase of a great deal of land in the city. He informed Bahá'u'lláh of this fact and was instructed to use a part of this land for the site of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár.¹²

The land itself had a curious background. It belonged to an Armenian by the name of A'zam. This was an unusual name for a Christian since A'zam is an Arabic word meaning "Most Great" and would usually be thought of as a Muslim name. In any case, the land was well known among the people as "A'zam's Land". These were the properties which were to become the site of the first Bahá'í House of Worship.¹³ The Bahá'ís continued to refer to the area as "Zamín-i-A'zam" (The Most Great Land) after its purchase.¹⁴

Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí constructed a meeting hall and a travellers' hostel on this land at first. The meeting hall was regarded as a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár by the early Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád since, at the time, any place of prayer for Bahá'ís was called by this name.¹⁵ Here the believers were able to hold meetings and practice their Faith with some degree of freedom.

Bahá'ís were able to establish themselves easily in 'Ishqábád with money and skills which they brought with them from Írán. Naturally, a great deal of construction was in progress in the new city. Since many of the Bahá'ís were masons and construction workers, especially the Yazdís, they could easily find work. Moreover, land was cheap and Bahá'ís were able to purchase it and

9. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

10. *idem*, Furútan, 'Alí-Akbar: Written memoir prepared for Dr. David Ruhe; xeroxed., n.d.

11. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 195.

12. Taherzadeh, Adib, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. I, (London: George Ronald, 1974), p. 199.

13. Kazemzadeh, Interview April 4, 1977.

14. Or, A'zam's land. Since Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí was called Afnán-i-A'zam, this title also referred to his ownership.

15. Kazemzadeh, Interview April 4, 1977.

build their own homes.¹⁶ They also found it easy to become successful in trade and became importers—principally in Chinese green tea.¹⁷

Bahá'ís were not the only Persians attracted to 'Ishqábád. The development of the new city drew large numbers of other people from Írán who left their country for a variety of reasons. Among them were a number of *lutís* (hirelings or ruffians) who were forced to flee Írán for political reasons and who attached themselves to the *Shí'ih* clergy in the city. Not surprisingly, many of the Persian Muslims carried their prejudice and animosity against Bahá'ís with them to Russia and resented the rising influence of the Bahá'í community.

'Ishqábád was no haven of tolerance and freedom for Bahá'ís at this time. Bahá'ís were still under a great deal of pressure and were obliged to be cautious about revealing their religious identity. One Bahá'í, Mullá 'Alí, arrived in 'Ishqábád in about 1888. He had come from Mashhad in hopes of escaping the prejudice and persecution against Bahá'ís which existed there. He recalled later that after his arrival he regretted his move to 'Ishqábád since he found that conditions were little different there from what they had been in Mashhad.¹⁸

However, there were no violent incidents in the city and the government was not hostile. Bahá'ís and Muslims lived together in the city with little social distinction between them. Bahá'ís went about their daily lives in a Muslim context.

16. *idem*.

17. Furútan notes.

18. Banná, *Tárikh-i-'Ishqábád*.

19. Mihrabkhání, Rúhu'lláh, *Sharh-i-Abval-i-Jináb-i-Mírzá Abu'l-Faql Gulpáyigání*, (Tíhrán: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 131 B.E.)

20. *idem*.

It is interesting to note how rapidly 'Ishqábád developed into an important Bahá'í centre. The combination of relative freedom and economic opportunity attracted large numbers of believers. In July of 1889, Mírzá Abu'l-Faql, one of the foremost Bahá'í scholars, came to the city and assumed a position of leadership in the community. Other Bahá'í scholars also appear to have come to 'Ishqábád in its early days,¹⁹ and the city may have developed into a kind of intellectual centre for the Faith. Abu'l-Faql wanted to begin the publication of a Bahá'í magazine there as early as 1890, but was unable to raise the necessary funds from among the believers.

The Martyrdom of Muḥammad Riḍá

IT WAS NOT LONG before the large number, and rising prestige and prosperity of the Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád attracted the notice of some leaders of the *Shí'ih* community, and their prejudice and envy caught flame. Their plottings eventually led to the martyrdom of a prominent believer, the official recognition of the Bahá'í community, and the complete separation of Bahá'ís from the social life of their Muslim countrymen in the city.

It was Hájí Muḥammad-Riḍá-y-i-Ishfá-hání who fell victim to the hatred of the enemies of the Faith. He was a powerful and well-known person in 'Ishqábád since he acted as the agent and manager of Siyyid Aḥmad-i-Afnán, whose father, the Great Afnán, had placed him in charge of his extensive properties in the city. Hájí Muḥammad-Riḍá was, therefore, an important Bahá'í and was known among Muslims as the "Imám-Riḍá of the Bábís".²⁰

Muḥammad-Riḍá was always very bold about identifying himself as a

Bahá'í in 'Ishqábád. He was not careful about his speech and refused to dissemble his beliefs. Before coming to 'Ishqábád, he had gone on pilgrimage and attained the presence of Bahá'u'lláh in the Holy Land. There he had begged to be allowed to become a martyr for the Faith. At first, Bahá'u'lláh refused. Then Muḥammad-Riḍá renewed his request. This time Bahá'u'lláh remained silent. Muḥammad-Riḍá related to friends that he took this silence as a sign of acceptance and was quite happy.²¹

During his pilgrimage he also asked where he should go and Bahá'u'lláh suggested that he proceed to 'Ishqábád. He went there and was later appointed by Siyyid Aḥmad as his representative.²²

Muḥammad-Riḍá's murder was the result of the conspiracy of five Shí'ih Muslims: Maṣḥhadí Jalíl-i-Tabrízí, Maṣḥhadí Şamad-i-Tabrízí, Mullá Aḥmad-Tájir-i-Yazdí, Mihdí Tájir-i-Káshání, and Mullá Mihdí Roḍih Kḥán-i-Tabrízí. It seems that they began their plottings a full year before the murder actually took place.²³ Apparently they intended to initiate a general persecution of Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád. Their precise motives are unclear, but their religious fanaticism may have been reinforced by the anticipation of economic advantage. They were certainly encouraged by the new wave of Bahá'í persecution which was sweeping Írán.²⁴

About seventy days before the martyrdom, six Tablets, addressed to various believers in 'Ishqábád, arrived from Bahá'u'lláh. Their themes were all similar and they puzzled the friends very much. The Tablets all enjoined patience on the believers and called them to resignation to the Will of God.²⁵

Muḥammad-Riḍá received one of these Tablets. In it, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the martyrdom of one of the believers. He praises God that Muḥammad-Riḍá has been appointed as a servant of the Cause and testifies that the affairs of the world will not keep him from the Cause. He declares that God will recompense all deeds done on earth. Bahá'u'lláh then states that some incident has occurred in 'Ishqábád and asks God to give His servant patience. He asks the blessings of God on Muḥammad-Riḍá.²⁶

Muḥammad-Riḍá openly asserted to his companions that the Tablets must refer to his own martyrdom. He insisted that Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, who had recently arrived in 'Ishqábád in the company of Siyyid Aḥmad, should prepare his will and testament. He emphasized to Abu'l-Faḍl that time was short and there could be no delay in writing the document.²⁷

On the twelfth day of Muḥarram (the Muslim month of mourning for the imáms), in September 1889, at about 9:00 a.m.,²⁸ the five conspirators "instigated two ruffians to assault the seventy-year old Hájí Muhammad-Ridáy-i-Isfáhání, whom, in broad day in the midst of the bazaar, they stabbed in no less than thirty-two places, exposing his liver, lacerating his stomach and tearing open his breast."²⁹

The murder took place in the bazaar just outside of a tea-house which stood opposite to some shops which Muḥammad-Riḍá managed for the Afnán. A crowd of about 500 Muslims witnessed

21. Banná, *Tárikh-i-'Ishqábád*.

22. *idem*.

23. Mihrabkḥání, *Şarb-i-Aḥval*.

24. cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 197-203.

25. Banná, *Tárikh-i-'Ishqábád*.

26. *idem*.

27. Mihrabkḥání, *Şarb-i-Aḥval*.

28. *idem*.

29. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 212.

the deed and clamoured their approval. The two *lutí* murderers, Ḥusayn-i-Tabrízí and 'Alí-Akbar-i-Tabrízí (known as 'Alí Bábá), were immediately arrested, but a great disturbance was raised in the city. Muḥammad-Riḍá's body lay exposed in the bazaar until late afternoon since no one dared approach it in the midst of the disorder. Finally, two Bahá'ís enlisted the aid of a prominent Muslim friend, and braved a stone-throwing mob to carry the body to the safety of one of the caravanserais of Siyyid Aḥmad where Muḥammad-Riḍá had lived. The burial was arranged with great secrecy under cover of night.³⁰

The next day, disturbances in the city continued. The Shí'íhs told the Russian authorities that Muḥammad-Riḍá had publicly cursed the holy imáms and that his assassins were deeply religious men who could abide his insults no longer.³¹ They had willingly surrendered to the authorities for their crime. It was claimed that this was purely a religious matter, of no concern to Christians, and that, further, since all those involved were Persian citizens, the Russian government should not become involved.³²

The Bahá'í community was in grave danger. Bands of *lutís* roamed the bazaar, bent on the murder of other prominent Bahá'ís. Though they were hesitant about approaching the authorities, on the evening of the day after the murder, a group of Bahá'í men led by Mírzá

Abu'l-Faḍl and Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Karím-i-Tájir-i-Ardíbilí went to the home of the governor to ask for protection.³³ Abu'l-Faḍl presented the case for the Bahá'ís. He argued successfully that the charges made against the martyred Muḥammad-Riḍá were false, that Bahá'ís were law-abiding people, that they believed in all of the prophets of God and wished to live in harmony with the followers of all religions. He pointed out that Bahá'ís also believed in and revered the Shí'ih imáms and so would not speak disparagingly of them.³⁴

The governor, General Komaroff, was convinced. He gave orders to put down the disturbances in the city and offered government protection to the Bahá'ís. The next day, three more people were arrested for the murder and the disorders were ended. Investigations were conducted and more people were arrested. Eventually, nine persons were brought to trial, including four of the prominent conspirators.³⁵

The arrest of so many prominent Shí'íhs struck fear into the hearts of the enemies of the Bahá'í Faith in 'Ishqábád. All those who had any role in the conspiracy to kill Muhammad-Riḍá fled to Írán. Even some people who had only spoken in favour of the murder were afraid that they would be arrested and left the country. Some sixty or seventy Muslims in all felt it wise to return to Írán. From Tihrán, Tabríz and Mashhad, these persons made representations to the 'ulamá in an effort to influence the trial in 'Ishqábád. The fact that so many chose to flee when it became clear that the conspirators would be brought to justice gives some idea of the scope of the anti-Bahá'í plotting which had taken place.

General Komaroff was well disposed toward the Bahá'ís after his initial

30. Mihrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*.

31. Balyuzi, H. M., *'Abdu'l-Babá: The Centre of the Covenant of Babá'u'lláh*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1971), p. 109.

32. Mihrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*.

33. *idem*.

34. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Babá*, p. 109.

35. Mihrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*. Mihdí Tájir-i-Káshání was able to flee to Írán.

meeting with Mírzá Abu'l-Faql. He reported the incident to the Tsar and a military commission was sent from St. Petersburg to conduct the trial of the conspirators. This was considered a sign of favour to the Bahá'ís since it ensured a speedy court-martial and thus meant that the possibility of Muslims influencing the trial through bribes and other means was minimized. No less than 150 persons in 'Ishqábád received subpoenas to testify before the commission. The whole city was agitated by the case. It was the main topic of conversation everywhere.³⁶

The trial began on November 6, 1890, and was completed on November 9 of that year. Translations into Turkish and Persian were provided since these were the principal languages of those involved. The proceedings generally started in the morning and continued late into the night on each day of the trial.³⁷

The judges who conducted the trial required that the various religious communities sit in separate places in the courtroom. The Bahá'í Faith was afforded full recognition as an independent religion and the Bahá'ís were seated

apart from the Muslims who were present. *This was the first formal recognition extended by any government to the Bahá'í community.* It was also a day of separation between Bahá'ís and Muslims. As the believers took their seats in a special section of the room, many Muslims were amazed to discover that their friends were not seated with them, but were among the Bahá'ís. From this point forward, the Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád lived as a distinct social community.³⁸

An interesting problem arose at the start of the trial. The ecclesiastical leaders of each religious community were called upon to place their followers under oath. Each religion had established customs to accomplish this. The turn of the Bahá'ís came, and they were asked to present their *mujtabid* (clergyman) to swear in the believers. Mírzá Abu'l-Faql spoke on behalf of the Bahá'ís and explained that the Bahá'í Faith had no established method of placing believers under oath, for such a thing was not covered in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. He offered to follow any procedure which the judges might require. It was finally agreed that the Bahá'ís would make a covenant with the court to respect its authority and to speak the truth.³⁹

On the last day of the trial, the crowds that packed the courtroom became so great that the judges ordered all spectators out. Large numbers of people waited outside, while the prosecution and defense made their final arguments. The judges then retired and deliberated for two hours.⁴⁰

During this time, rumours circulated among the Muslim crowds that the accused would all be found innocent and set free.⁴¹ This was a cause of great rejoicing. A *samávar* was prepared and three sheep were brought for sacrifice and feasting after the victory. Some

36. *idem.*

37. *idem.*

38. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

39. Míhrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*.

40. *idem.*

41. Mr. Kazemzadeh related the story (Interview March 6, 1977), which he heard from his father, of how these rumors developed. Apparently, the prosecutor, during his remarks on the last day of the trial, turned to one of the defendants and asked, "Why did you kill Muhammad-Riḏá?" The defendant answered, "He was a Bábí, and so we killed him." He apparently did not realize the seriousness of this statement since he was only familiar with conditions in Írán, where Bahá'ís could be killed with impunity. The prosecutor said nothing and sat down. (continued overleaf)

people began to openly curse the Bahá'ís in the streets. The believers observed these events and were very much afraid. They knew that an acquittal would open the door to a general massacre.⁴²

Suddenly, the Bahá'ís outside could see that the samávar was removed and the sheep led away. The verdict had been delivered. The two ruffians who had carried out the murder of Muḥammad-Riḍá were sentenced to death. Four others involved in the plot were exiled to Siberia—one of these for life and the rest for fifteen years. One defendant was found guilty of a lesser charge and was to serve sixteen months in prison and then be deported to Írán. Two of the accused were found to be innocent.⁴³

The Bahá'ís of the city were astonished to learn of the verdicts. Many would not believe the news until they heard the story from the Muslims themselves. They could not believe that the government had provided them with the full protection of the law.⁴⁴ It was the first time in the history of the Faith that any-

one had ever been brought to justice for persecuting Bahá'ís.

When the Muslims realized that all of their efforts to influence the outcome of the trial had failed, they went to the Bahá'ís themselves for help. A delegation presented itself to Áqá Muḥammad-Riḍá-i-Arbáb-i-Iṣfáhání and asked that the Bahá'ís approach the authorities with a plea for clemency so that the harsh sentences might be reduced. The Bahá'ís agreed to do this. The same group of Bahá'ís who had first gone to the governor's house to ask for protection now returned to ask for leniency for their persecutors.⁴⁵

General Komaroff was surprised and impressed by this display of magnanimity on the part of the Bahá'í community. However, he would not be swayed and would promise the Bahá'ís nothing. He pointed out that the Muslims had planned a general massacre of Bahá'ís in the city and that the judgment was a fair one.⁴⁶

On the day of the execution, after the gallows had been prepared, and just minutes before the murderers were to be hanged, it was announced that their sentences had been commuted to fifteen years banishment to Siberia because of the intercession of the Bahá'ís. One of the convicts protested this change, saying that he did not want to receive any mercy from the hands of the Bahá'ís.⁴⁷

Bahá'u'lláh was pleased that the Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád would plead for mercy for their enemies and He praised this act very much. In *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, He writes:

Likewise, ponder thou upon the martyrdom of Hájí Muḥammad-Riḍá in the City of Love ('Ishqábád). The tyrants of the earth have subjected that wronged one to such trials as

The Muslims were delighted by the prosecutor's reaction. Since he did not protest the answer given, they believed that he was satisfied with it and had no objection. Someone went out to inform the Muslims gathered outside of the good news.

The prosecutor asked the same question of all of the defendants and received the same answer. He still made no objection. So, the Muslims were certain that the accused would be set free. But later the prosecutor was able to ask for a conviction on the basis of the defendants' own testimony.

42. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977. Mihrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*.

43. Mihrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*.

44. *idem*.

45. *idem*. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 110.

46. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977. Mihrabkhání, *Sharb-i-Abval*.

47. *idem*.

have caused many foreigners to weep and lament for, as reported and ascertained, no less than thirty-two wounds were inflicted upon his blessed body. Yet none of the faithful transgressed My commandment, nor raised his hand in resistance. Come what might, they refused to allow their own inclinations to supersede that which the Book hath decreed, though a considerable number of this people have resided, and still reside, in that city.

... For the victims of oppression to intercede in favour of their enemies is, in the estimation of rulers, a princely deed. Some must have certainly heard that this oppressed people have, in that city ('Ishqábád), pleaded with the Governor on behalf of their murderers, and asked for the mitigation of their sentence. Take, then, good heed, ye who are men of insight!⁴⁸

The verdict of the trial of the murderers of Muḥammad-Riḍá opened a new era in the history of the Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád. Russia became the only country in the world to extend full recognition to the Bahá'í Faith and offer its followers complete protection from persecution. The city became a refuge for Bahá'ís seeking freedom and opportunity outside of Írán, and the Bahá'í community grew rapidly in size and prestige.

The Development of an Independent Community

AFTER THE TRIAL in 1889, Bahá'ís could no longer live as Muslims in

'Ishqábád. The Faith had been officially recognized, the Bahá'ís had been publicly identified, and the animosity of the Shí'ih community against the Faith was higher than ever. The Bahá'ís quickly developed their own society and raised the institutions of Bahá'í community life. By the time of the Russian Revolution in 1918, the Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád could boast that theirs was the most fully developed Bahá'í community in the world. Nor has any community since that time been able to claim as much.

The Bahá'ís of 'Ishqábád had erected a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár which was the centre of worship for the community. The House of Worship was surrounded by gardens and buildings where the Bahá'ís gathered regularly. A large meeting hall stood nearby, as well as two Bahá'í elementary schools, two kindergartens, a pilgrim house and a medical clinic. A Bahá'í cemetery had long been established. The Bahá'ís had built libraries and public reading rooms, published their own magazine, and owned their own presses. They elected their local Spiritual Assembly annually and maintained a Bahá'í Fund. The Bahá'í youth organized clubs and societies dedicated to drama, gymnastics, and other pursuits. The community supported itself through work and trade, and there were no poor Bahá'ís. The number of believers reached about four thousand.

The most visible evidence of the presence of the Bahá'í community in 'Ishqábád was the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. In 1908, Charles Mason Remey visited the city and left this description:

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár stands in the centre of the city, surrounded by a large garden, which is bounded by four streets. It rises high above the surrounding buildings and trees, its dome being visible for miles as the traveller

48. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), pp. 77-78.

approaches the city over the plain. The building in plan is a regular polygon of nine sides. One large doorway and portico, flanked by turrets, facing the direction of the Holy City ('Akká), forms the principal motive of the façade, while the dome dominates the whole composition.

The walls of the Temple are of brick covered with a firm and hard stucco, which in that climate resists quite well the action of the elements, while the floors are concrete supported by iron or steel beams.

In plan the building is composed of three sections: the central rotunda, the aisle or ambulatory which surrounds it, and the loggia which surrounds the entire building.⁴⁹

The House of Worship was an imposing structure and stood in the centre of the city. There were three mosques in 'Ishqábád at this time, but none could compare with the Bahá'í House of Worship in either size or beauty. Nor were any churches in the city as large or impressive as this building.⁵⁰ It bore witness to the vitality and the wealth of the Bahá'í community.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself had designated "A'zam's Land" as the site of a future House of Worship. After His ascension, Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád urged 'Abdu'l-Bahá

to give permission for the construction of a great Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in the city.⁵¹ But it was not until 1902 that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave orders that work should begin. Shoghi Effendi describes this enterprise as "the first major undertaking launched through the concerted efforts of [Bahá'u'lláh's] followers in the Heroic Age of His Faith" and "one of the most brilliant and enduring achievements in the history of the first Bahá'í century."⁵²

In Haifa, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had given instructions in 1902 for the design of the House of Worship. Ustád Muhammad-Ridá Banná, one of the builders of the House of Worship, was in Haifa when 'Abdu'l-Bahá outlined plans for a building with nine sides, nine pillars, nine arches, nine gardens, etc. He had insisted that the building must be very strong and solid. (He later wrote to 'Ishqábád that the foundation must be made especially strong because the region is subject to earthquakes.)⁵³

The general design of the building, which had been delineated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was referred to a Russian architect, Volkoff, in 'Ishqábád and he developed the plans for construction of the Temple.⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed the whole project in the hands of Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taquí of Yazd. Ustád 'Alí-Akbar Banná was the builder placed in charge of construction.⁵⁵

Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taquí left his business in Yazd and travelled to 'Ishqábád to oversee the project. Upon his arrival, the foundation stone of the House of Worship was laid in the presence of the Tsar's own representative, General Krupatkin, the Governor-General of Turkistán, on November 28, 1902. Hundreds of Bahá'ís attended the ceremonies.⁵⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá sent 95 gold coins as

49. *Bahá'í World*, Vol. II, (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928), p. 121.

50. Kazemzadeh, Interview April 4, 1977.

51. *ibid.*, March 6, 1977.

52. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 300.

53. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977 and April 4, 1977.

54. *ibid.*, March 6, 1977. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 109-110.

55. Kazemzadeh, Interview January 17, 1978.

56. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 300. Banná, *Tárikh-i-'Ishqábád*.

his contribution toward the construction of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár.⁵⁷ Money was also sent from Írán and from Bahá'í communities around the world. But the bulk of the funds for construction were contributed by Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí himself, who sold part of his land and liquidated the greater part of his fortune to raise money for the House of Worship.⁵⁸

By 1907 the dome of the Temple was in place, and it was an imposing structure. But the building was not completed for another thirteen or fourteen years.⁵⁹ The Bahá'ís faced many crises of money and materials and after the first few years progress was slow.

'Abdu'l-Bahá had urged that all Bahá'ís should gather in the House of Worship at dawn to pray and this, in fact, was enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-Aqdas*.⁶⁰ Few Bahá'ís observed this practice before the revolution. However, the majority of the believers would gather in the House of Worship on Fridays to hear the chanting of prayers, after which they would enjoy each other's fellowship. This Friday gathering of Bahá'ís in the House of Worship

and its environs became a real centre of community life. Bahá'ís expected to see everyone there and would ask about anyone whom they noticed was absent.⁶¹

Bahá'í Holy Days were also observed at the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. On the anniversary of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, the believers would gather at about 10:00 p.m. Prayers would be chanted until dawn. The entire community, including the children, participated in these events and shared in the activities.

Riḍván was the most festive period of the year for the Bahá'í community. The First and Ninth Days of Riḍván were celebrated in the gardens of the House of Worship. Wealthy Bahá'ís would give Feasts and invite four or five hundred guests.⁶² The meeting hall was especially decorated for the occasion and at night the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár was flooded with light.⁶³ On the Twelfth Day of Riḍván, the whole Bahá'í community would gather at the grave of the martyr Muḥammad-Riḍá for prayers.

The Nineteen-Day Feast was observed, but during the lifetime of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it was regarded as a private matter. Each Bahá'í felt that it was his obligation to share his house with some of the believers at least once in nineteen days. So, the Feasts were really private parties or gatherings. It was not until much later, under the guidance of Shoghi Effendi, that the Feast developed into an administrative institution.⁶⁴

In the early 1900's, the Bahá'í community of 'Ishqábád formed its first local Spiritual Assembly. This was a body of 12 or 16 men who served for a term of five or six years. Later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent instructions that the number of the Assembly should be reduced to nine and that elections should be held every year.⁶⁵ This seems to have been accom-

57. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

58. *idem*.

58. *idem*. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 128.

59. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

60. *Synopsis and Codification of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1973), pp. 46, 61-62.

61. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

62. *idem*.

63. Furútan notes.

64. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

65. *idem*.

plished gradually. Elections were held on the first day of Riḍván, as in Bahá'í communities today. However, there was no Annual Meeting. A polling station was set up at the large meeting hall near the House of Worship and Bahá'ís cast their ballots there in the morning. The balloting was completed before noon and the results announced the same day. There was seldom any change on the Assembly. Most of the Assembly members were elected from among the most wealthy and respected members of the community, though one or two of them were middle class.⁶⁶

Women in the community could vote for the Assembly, but were not eligible for election to the body until after the revolution. The Bahá'ís feared that the election of women to the Assembly would create misunderstandings. Bahá'í women were also restricted in other ways because of Muslim pressure. They continued to wear the veil in public, as Muslim women did. However, when in each other's homes, the Bahá'ís could put aside their veils, as Bahá'ís did in Írán. And schoolgirls usually did not wear veils. Some Bahá'í women wanted to abandon the use of the veil in public, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá admonished that this would be unwise. It would create disturbances in 'Ishqábád and would give Muslims an excuse to attack Bahá'ís in Írán.⁶⁷

A strict separation of the sexes had to be maintained. In the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár the men occupied the ground floor, but the women and small children

had to gather in the balconies, where they could see down but could not be seen by the men. The same was true in the large meeting hall, the Ḥaẓíratu'l-Quds, near the House of Worship. Separate committees were appointed for women to correspond to those for men.⁶⁸

The intellectual leadership of the Bahá'í community during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lifetime was held by a few learned believers. Shaykh Muḥammad-'Alí, the nephew of Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí-i-Qá'iní (Nabíl-i-Akbar), was sent to 'Ishqábád from Khurásán by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was in charge of the Bahá'í School and was a strict headmaster. Siyyid Mihdí Gulpáyigání, the nephew of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, was another important figure. He had been sent to 'Ishqábád by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to provide leadership in the community after Abu'l-Faḍl was called to the Holy Land. Siyyid Mihdí became recognized in 'Ishqábád, even among non-Bahá'ís, as a great scholar and philosopher. He became the editor of the Bahá'í magazine, *Sun of the East* (*Khurshid-i-Khavar*), when it was established.

Despite the growth and development of the Bahá'í community, little teaching was accomplished in 'Ishqábád and few people entered the Faith before the Russian revolution. This was partially because, according to Russian law, Christians were forbidden to change their religion.⁶⁹ Bahá'u'lláh had instructed the Bahá'ís to refrain from teaching Russians.⁷⁰ The native Turkoman people were Sunnís and identified the Bahá'ís with Shí'ihs and so showed no interest in the Faith. The Shí'ih population of the city was mostly Persian and continued to hold fierce prejudices against the Bahá'í Faith. So, the Bahá'í community was rather isolated

66. Parvini, Interview April 1, 1977. Kazemzadeh, Interview January 17, 1978.

67. Parvini, Interview April 1, 1977.

68. *idem*.

69. Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

70. Furútan notes.

socially.⁷¹ It remained almost exclusively Persian. It also seems that the community, as a whole, was not very concerned with teaching. The Bahá'ís of the city were many and they occupied themselves with the administration of the large community and the development of its internal social life. They were generally prosperous and often became distracted by material pursuits, especially the youth.⁷²

On the eve of the Russian revolution, the Bahá'ís in 'Ishqábád had assumed a dominant position in the city. Poverty had been entirely eliminated in their community. Though they were restricted in some ways by the Tsarist government and by the animosity of their Shí'ih neighbours, they were able to erect the largest religious edifice in the area and to practice their religion in relative freedom. However, this very position of wealth, prestige and visibility was soon to place them in grave danger.

71. *idem.*

72. *idem.* Kazemzadeh, Interview March 6, 1977.

Note: Mr. Lee is currently working on a history of the later period of the 'Ishqábád Bahá'í community.

Glossary

'Abdu'l-Bahá(1844-1921) — the son of Bahá'u'lláh

Afnán — relatives of the Báb

Bahá'í Fund — a fund for the administration of the Bahá'í Faith to which Bahá'ís alone are privileged to contribute

Bahá'u'lláh(1817-1892) — the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith

Feast — a meeting of the Bahá'í community which takes place at the beginning of each Bahá'í month for the purpose of prayers, consultation and fellowship

Imám — a prayer leader in Islám

Kitáb-i-Aqdas(The Most Holy Book) — revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Holy Land *circa* 1873.

Mashriqu'l-Adhkár(The Dawning-place of the Praises of God) — the Bahá'í House of Worship

Mujtahid — a Doctor of Islamic law

Ridván — the "holiest and most significant of all Bahá'í festivals" commemorating Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration of His Mission to His companions in 1863 at Baghdád.

Shí'ih — a branch of Islám . The term is also transliterated, sometimes with regard to its grammatical function, as Shia, Shí'a, Shí'ah, Shí'í or Shí'ite.

Spiritual Assembly — an elected group of adult Bahá'ís responsible for the administration of a Bahá'í community and the dissemination of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings therein.

Tablet — a proper name given to the letters written by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Ulamá — Plural of one who knows or is learned. Denotes those learned in Islamic law and theology.