

The wartime travels of Shoghi Effendi

Compiled by Harry Liedtke

It is an almost forgotten episode in Baha'i history that the Guardian left Haifa for England 9 months after the beginning of World War II, returning half a year later from a 24,000 kilometer danger fraught journey across the Mediterranean and through war torn France, a month long voyage on a U-boat infested Atlantic Ocean and an expedition by land across the full length of East Africa.

In Chapter 9 of "The Priceless Pearl," Ruhyyih Khanum vividly describes this extraordinary odyssey and hints at some of the reasons for the Guardian's decision to leave the Holy Land. She writes: "Shoghi Effendi was the keenest observer of political events and kept abreast of all happenings. His intelligence and analytical faculties did not permit him to lull himself into any false complacency, induced by the rather childish idea people sometimes have of what "faith" means. He well knew that to have faith in God does not mean one should not use one's mind, appraise dangers, anticipate moves, make the right decisions during a crisis."

For a student of history it is important to juxtapose the Guardian's moves against the political and strategic developments that were taking place at that time. A time line of events which follows should be of help. From the time that he became Guardian, right through to May 1937, Shoghi Effendi had expressed the highest hopes for Germany's Baha'i community. He had called it "the standard bearers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in Europe" and repeatedly referred to Germany as a "promising country."

When in May 1937 the Baha'i Faith was outlawed in Germany, it must have been a big blow to his high hopes and when in August of 1939 Germany made an alliance with the Soviet Union, he suddenly saw not one, but two super powers aligned against the Baha'i Faith. When this odious alliance continued even after the outbreak of war, the Guardian clearly foresaw that the combined resources of Germany and the Soviet Union could overwhelm the rest of Europe, and with it the isolated British protectorate of Palestine. There was the forlorn hope that the island fortress of Great Britain may be able to resist the onslaught and remain a sanctuary.

But everything stayed strangely quiet on the western front after the Nazis and the Soviets had gobbled up Poland, until in early April 1940 this so-called 'phony war' turned real and threatened the rest of Europe with the invasion of Denmark and Norway, followed by the quick conquest of neutral Luxemburg, the Low Countries and with the simultaneous, unstoppable blitzkrieg into France. Only then must Shoghi Effendi have decided to leave the Holy Land to protect a divinely decreed Guardianship.

It had been decided two months earlier that Ruhiyyih Khanum's father Mr. Sutherland Maxwell should in his weakened condition leave Montreal and join his family by crossing the Atlantic in a neutral vessel. His New York departure on the Italian liner SS "Rex" was on the day the Netherlands surrendered and the Guardian and his wife were leaving Haifa. It became the last North Atlantic crossing by a civilian ocean liner. Italy's neutrality would have made their return to Haifa across the Mediterranean still possible should England refuse to issue an entry visa. As it turned out, it was Mr. Maxwell's daughter who won the consular approval for entering England, instead of them eventually getting interned in Italy as enemy aliens. Mr. Maxwell's presence in turn proved to be providential when it was his friendship with Canada's High Commissioner in London which secured their sea passage to South Africa. Here it should be noted that the Guardian had hoped that a personal intervention by his old friend Lord Lamington would expedite a British residency visa. However, Lord Lamington, 80 years old, was in failing health. He died that same year on September 16 at his estate in Scotland.

A Timeline of World Events vs. a Timeline of the Guardian's Travels

March 11–13, 1938 Germany annexes Austria in the 'Anschluss'.

September 29, 1938 Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and France sign the Munich agreement which forces the Czechoslovak Republic to cede the Sudetenland including the key Czechoslovak military defense positions to Germany.

March 14–15, 1939 Under German pressure the Slovaks declare their independence and form a Slovak Republic. The Germans occupy the rump Czech lands in violation of the Munich agreement, forming Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

March 31, 1939 France and Great Britain guarantee the integrity of the borders of the Polish state.

April 7–15, 1939 Fascist Italy invades and annexes Albania.

August 23, 1939 Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union sign a nonaggression agreement and a secret codicil dividing Eastern Europe into spheres of influence.

September 1, 1939 Germany invades Poland, initiating World War II in Europe.

September 3, 1939 Honoring their guarantee of Poland's borders, Great

September 17, 1939 The Soviet Union invades Poland from the east.

September 27–29, 1939 Warsaw surrenders on September 27. The Polish government flees into exile via Romania. Germany and the Soviet Union divide Poland between them.

November 30, 1939–March 12, 1940 The Soviet Union invades Finland, initiating the so-called Winter War. The Finns sue for an armistice and have to cede the northern shores of Lake Ladoga and the small Finnish coastline on the Arctic Sea to the Soviet Union.

Prior to 1940 the Guardian and
Ruhyyih Kamum stayed in Haifa
while Mr. Sutherland Maxwell
and Mrs. May Maxwell were
living in Montreal.

April 9, 1940–June 9, 1940 Germany invades Denmark and Norway. Denmark surrenders on the day of the attack; Norway holds out until June 9.

May 10, 1940–June 22, 1940 Germany attacks western Europe—France and the neutral Low Countries. Luxembourg is occupied on May 10; the Netherlands surrenders on May 14; and Belgium surrenders on May 28. On June 22, France signs an armistice agreement by which the Germans occupy the northern half of the country and the entire Atlantic coastline. In southern France, a collaborationist regime with its capital in Vichy is established.

May 15 1940 German breakthroughs through Ardennes and at Sedan

May 26 - June 4, 1940 The Evacuation of Dunkirk

June 10, 1940 Italy declares war against France and England.

June 14, 1940 The fall of Paris

June 21, 1940 Italy invades southern France.

July 13, 1940 Bombing starts of British coastal airfields. Southampton not bombed until November.

August 1, 1940 German directive to gain air superiority intensifies bombing attacks on Channel traffic and England's south coast.

"DEPARTURE South America by wish of beloved Guardian!" May Maxwell heralded the news, and on **January 24th 1940** on board the SS Brazil she left New York, with many a heart in East and West speeding swiftly after her. "Although in body I am sailing away, yet my deep love and spirit will be as close to you as it always is, and that is a nearness which can never be described in words."

March 1, 1940 May Maxwell dies in Buenos Aires The Guardian invites Sutherland Maxwell to live in Haifa

May 15, 1940 Guardian left Haifa on aquaplane for Italy. On the same day Mr. Maxwell sailed from New York as the SS "Rex" took five days for the crossing to Genoa.

May 20, 1940 The SS "Rex" arrives in Genoa from New York. Drive back to Rome to obtain British landing permit.

May 25, 1940 Entering France at Menton en route to Marseille.

June 2, 1940 Depart St. Malo arrive Southampton next morning.

July 28, 1940 Leaving England for South Africa aboard the SS 'Capetown Castle'

The most precarious part of the journey would have been the sea voyage to Italy. The route may have led 1,000 km from Haifa to Heraklion on Crete and from there a further 800 km to Reggio. Since a hydrofoil of early vintage, - "A small and smelly Italian aquaplane with water sloshing around under the boards our feet rested on as if we were in an old row-boat" - had a speed of at most 50 km per hour, their uncomfortable sea voyage must have taken some 36 hours.

The land route from Reggio to Rome would have been a further 700 kilometers, plus 500 kilometers from Rome to Genoa. It seems incredible that in five days they travelled 1,800 kilometers by sea and 1,200 kilometers by road in order to meet Sutherland Maxwell in Genoa, especially at a time when Italy only had narrow, two-lane roads. Equally hairy must have been their 1,800 kilometer trip from Rome to the port city of St. Malo on the Channel coast.

France was collapsing all around them and roads were jammed with millions of refugees. Anything that had wheels was blocking traffic. Quite apart from these dangers and the unimaginable stress connected with the trip, there were four other incredible key events that in the end enabled them to return to Haifa.

A look at the timeline shows that one of those frequent Atlantic spring storms could have easily delayed the SS "Rex" and scuttled their plans to drive back to Rome to obtain that all important passport stamp and still make it across the French border before Italy declared war on France. This event closed that exit for good. The same is true if it had taken the British consul any longer to make up his mind and affix his magic stamp. With Italy at war against both France and England, there would have been no more hydrofoil to return them to British controlled Palestine. They would have been interned in Italy as enemy aliens. As it turned out, they made it across the border to France with just two weeks to spare.

The next challenge was to travel in under a week through utter chaos and blocked roads 1,300 kilometers from Melton on the Riviera to St. Malo. Next, it was almost too good to be true that on June 2, when the historic troop evacuation of Dunkirk was in full swing and pressed into service every available vessel regardless of size, a ship was there to take them overnight across the English Channel just days ahead of Hitler's army.

The final unreported hurdle that threatened their return to Haifa was a directive to the Luftwaffe issued on August 1, 1940. It ordered the establishment of air superiority along the British Channel coast in preparation of 'Operation Sea Lion,' code name for the invasion of England. The SS 'Capetown Castle' left Southampton on July 28, just three days before German bombing and strafing attacks put an end to all civilian shipping out of British Channel ports. Risking U-Boat attacks, 'Capetown Castle' took them 7,900 nautical miles to Durban. As all flights to Khartoum were booked solid by the military, the Guardian and his wife set out on their 9,000 kilometer safari back to Haifa and left Mr. Maxwell in Durban where he waited for weeks to get on a plane. After an arduous trek through the length of East Africa the Guardian and his wife arrived at Khartoum. As they were resting late one evening on the hotel terrace, a small group of air travelers arrived. Among them was Sutherland Maxwell. The timing had been perfect.

The SS Rex, commissioned in 1931, was Italy's premiere Luxury Liner. Her trip with Sutherland Maxwell on board turned out to be her last Atlantic crossing. SS Rex was kept moored near Trieste for the duration of the war. In September 1944 the ocean liner was sunk by the Royal Air Force after she was hit by 123 rockets.
