

The Universal House of Justice

Department of the Secretariat

4 March 1975

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Immediately after sending the cable announcing the joyful news of the acquisition of this property [the house of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá], the Universal House of Justice had the enclosed article prepared at the World Center, and it is sent for you to disseminate as you see fit.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

The House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá

Some of the most poignant, dramatic and historically significant events of the Heroic Age of our Faith are associated with this house, which derives its name from the Governor of 'Akká who built it and used it as his official residence during his term of office, from 1820 to 1832. It stands just inside the northwestern corner of the sea wall of 'Akká, in the close neighborhood of the citadel where Bahá'u'lláh was confined. The main building is L-shaped, facing south and east on its outer prospects. The structure, though chiefly on two stories, is irregular and on the inside angle has balconies, uncovered stairways, a bathhouse and a well. The entire property comprises large courtyards and is bounded on the west, or seaward, side by a wall, which turns due east at its southern angle and continues towards the heart of 'Akká, forming after a few yards, the wall of a narrow street; at the eastern terminus of this wall, and within the property, is an imposing house which was occupied by that Governor of 'Akká whose incumbency coincided with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's residence in the main building, and whose northern windows permitted him to maintain a constant surveillance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's activities. Beyond this house is a small mosque. The eastern boundary of the property is a row of houses giving directly, on its western aspect, to the courtyard and offering many additional vantage points for observing the Master. A similar row of houses extends from the northeastern corner along the northern boundary until they terminate at the longitudinal wing of the main building which, at this point, projects northwards into several conjoined buildings, making a large irregular outcrop on the northern boundary. The western end of the northern boundary is a short stretch of wall completing the enclosure at the northwestern corner of the west wall. Large stables, coach houses and storerooms line the southern boundary.

In this house, fifty lunar years after the Báb's martyrdom, in January, 1899, the casket containing His sacred and precious remains was received by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who successfully concealed it until it was possible to inter it, with all honors, in its permanent resting-place in the bosom of Carmel. In this house 'Abdu'l-Bahá was confined during the period of His renewed incarceration. Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By*, testifies to the conditions of His life at that time:

Even His numerous friends and admirers refrained, during the most turbulent days of this period, from calling upon Him, for fear of being implicated and of incurring the suspicion of the authorities. On certain days and nights, when the outlook was at its darkest, the house in which He was living, and which had for many years been a focus of activity, was completely deserted. Spies, secretly and openly, kept watch around it, observing His every movement and restricting the freedom of His family.

Yet during these troublous times, and from this house, He directed the construction of the Báb's sepulcher on Mount Carmel, erected under its shadow His own house in Haifa and later the Pilgrim House, issued instructions for the restoration of the Báb's holy House in Shiraz and for the erection of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the world in the city of 'Ishqábád. Again the Guardian is our reference for the Master's ceaseless activity at that time:

Eyewitnesses have testified that, during that agitated and perilous period of His life, they had known Him to pen, with His own hand, no less than ninety Tablets in a single day, and to pass many a night, from dusk to dawn, alone in His bedchamber engaged in a correspondence which the pressure of His manifold responsibilities had prevented Him from attending to in the daytime.

It was in this house that His celebrated table talks were given and compiled, to be published later under the title *Some Answered Questions*. In this house and in the darkest hours of a period which the beloved Guardian describes as "the most dramatic period of His ministry," "in the heyday of His life and in the full tide of His power" He penned the first part of His Will and Testament, which delineates the features and lays the foundations of the Administrative Order to arise after His passing. In this house He revealed the highly significant Tablet addressed to the Báb's cousin and chief builder of the 'Ishqábád Temple, a Tablet whose import can be appreciated and grasped only as future events unfold before our eyes, and in which, as testified by Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá "in stirring terms proclaimed the immeasurable greatness of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, sounded the warnings foreshadowing the turmoil which its enemies, both far and near, would let loose upon the world, and prophesied, in moving language, the ascendancy which the torch-bearers of the Covenant would ultimately achieve over them."

During the twelve years of His residence in this house, 'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated the true nobility of His divine nature; overcame hatred with love; pursued without rest, against ever-mounting opposition, the direction of His Father's Cause; maintained in the face of fanaticism, jealousy and bitterness His unceasing care of the poor and sick; and overcame, with unruffled equanimity, the severest crisis of His life. The Guardian's words testify to these things:

At His table, in those days, whenever there was a lull in the storm raging about Him, there would gather pilgrims, friends and inquirers from most of the aforementioned countries [Persia, the United States, Canada, France, England, Germany, Egypt, 'Iráq, Russia, India, Burma, Japan, and the Pacific Islands], representative of the Christian, the Muslim, the Jewish, the Zoroastrian, the Hindu and Buddhist Faiths. To the needy thronging His doors and filling the courtyard of His house every Friday morning, in spite of the perils that environed Him, He would distribute alms with His own hands, with a regularity and generosity that won Him the title of "Father of the Poor." Nothing in those tempestuous days could shake His confidence, nothing would be allowed to interfere with His ministrations to the destitute, the orphan, the sick, and the downtrodden, nothing could prevent Him from calling in person upon those who were either incapacitated, or ashamed to solicit His aid....

So imperturbable was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's equanimity that, while rumors were being bruited about that He might be cast into the sea, or exiled to Fízán in Tripolitania, or hanged on the gallows, He, to the amazement of His friends and the amusement of His enemies, was to be seen planting trees and vines in the garden of His house, whose fruits when the storm had blown over, He would bid His faithful gardener, Ismá'íl Áqá, pluck and present to those same friends and enemies on the occasion of their visits to Him.

In this house was born the child ordained to hold the destiny of the Faith in his hands for thirty-six years and to become its "beloved Guardian," the child named "Shoghi" by his Grandfather, who grew up under His loving and solicitous care and became the recipient of His Tablets.

When Bahá'u'lláh ascended, in 1892, the Mansion at Bahjí remained in the occupancy of the arch-breaker of the Covenant, the Master's half-brother Muḥammad-'Alí, and members of that branch of Bahá'u'lláh's family. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the members of His family, including His illustrious sister the Greatest Holy Leaf, remained in the House of 'Abbúd, which continued to be 'Abdu'l-Bahá's official residence. In the course of the fifth year after Bahá'u'lláh's passing, the marriage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's two eldest daughters took place, and it quickly became apparent that the portion of the House of 'Abbúd available for occupation was woefully inadequate to the enlarged family. With characteristic vigor 'Abdu'l-Bahá took action and in the months preceding the birth of Shoghi Effendi arranged to rent the main building, and subsequently the subsidiary wings, of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá's house, and He established it as His official residence. Thus it came about that, in 1897, Shoghi Effendi was born in the same house (in an upper room of the wing facing south) that witnessed events of such vital importance to the Faith and the future of mankind.

The Guardian's childhood and upbringing in that house are referred to by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum in *The Priceless Pearl*:

It may sound disrespectful to say the Guardian was a mischievous child, but he himself told me he was the acknowledged ringleader of all the other children. Bubbling with high spirits, enthusiasm and daring, full of laughter and wit, the small boy led the way in many pranks; whenever something was afoot, behind it would be found Shoghi Effendi! This boundless energy was often a source of anxiety as he would rush madly up and down the long flight of high steps to the upper story of the house, to the consternation of the pilgrims below, waiting to meet the Master. His exuberance was irrepressible and was in the child the same force that was to make the man such an untiring and unflinching commander-in-chief of the forces of Bahá'u'lláh, leading them to victory after victory, indeed, to the spiritual conquest of the entire globe. We have a very reliable witness to this characteristic of the Guardian, 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself, Who wrote on a used envelope a short sentence to please His little grandson: "Shoghi Effendi is a wise man—but he runs about very much!"

In those days of Shoghi Effendi's childhood it was the custom to rise about dawn and spend the first hour of the day in the Master's room, where prayers were said and the family all had breakfast with Him. The children sat on the floor, their legs folded under them, their arms folded across their breasts, in great respect; when asked they would chant for 'Abdu'l-Bahá; there was no shouting or unseemly conduct. Breakfast consisted of tea, brewed on the bubbling Russian brass samovar and served in little crystal glasses, very hot and very sweet, pure wheat bread and goats' milk cheese....

It was to this house that that historic first group of pilgrims from the West came to see the Master in the winter of 1898–99, and in which many more from both East and West sought His presence. Some of them have left memorable descriptions of their experiences with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His household in that home. Ella Goodall Cooper, one of the very earliest American believers, records the following:

One day ... I had joined the ladies of the Family in the room of the Greatest Holy Leaf for early morning tea, the beloved Master was sitting in His favourite corner of the divan where, through the window on His right, He could look over the ramparts and see the blue Mediterranean beyond. He was busy writing Tablets, and the quiet peace of the room was broken only by the bubble of the samovar, where one of the young maidservants, sitting on the floor before it, was brewing the tea.

Thornton Chase, the first American believer, records in his memoir, *In Galilee*:

We did not know we had reached our destination until we saw a Persian gentleman, and then another and another, step out at the entrance and smile at us. We alighted and they conducted us through the arched, red brick entrance to an open court, across it to a long

flight of stone steps, broken and ancient, leading to the highest story and into a small walled court open to the sky, where was the upper chamber assigned to us, which adjoined the room of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The buildings are all of stone, whitewashed and plastered, and it bears the aspect of a prison.

Our windows looked out over the garden and tent of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the sea side of the house. That garden is bounded on one side by the house of the Governor, which overlooks it, and on another by the inner wall of fortification. A few feet beyond that is the outer wall upon the sea, and between these two are the guns and soldiers constantly on guard. A sentry house stands at one corner of the wall and garden, from which the sentry can see the grounds and the tent where 'Abdu'l-Bahá meets transient visitors and the officials who often call on him. Thus all his acts outside of the house itself are visible to the Governor from his windows and to the men on guard. Perhaps that is one reason why the officials so often become his friends. No one, with humanity, justice, or mercy in his heart, could watch 'Abdu'l-Bahá long without admiring and loving him for the beautiful qualities constantly displayed.

Mary Hanford Ford published an account of her pilgrimage to this house in *Star of the West*, vol. XXIV:

The little room in which I stayed and in which the significant conversations with 'Abdu'l-Bahá took place, was of the simplest description. The floor was covered with matting, the narrow iron bed and the iron wash stand with larger and smaller holes for bowl and pitcher were of that vermin proof description with which I had become familiar. Everything was scrupulously clean, and there was an abundant supply of sparkling water for bathing and drinking. A wide window looked over the huge town wall upon the blue Mediterranean and before this stretched a divan upon which 'Abdu'l-Bahá sat when He came to see me.

The palpable victory which 'Abdu'l-Bahá had wrested from the persecution, intrigue, hatred, vilification even, directed against Him during His twelve years in the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá, was signally apparent when, upon His release from incarceration in 1908, He moved to His new residence in Haifa. At that time the future Guardian was a boy of eleven, but his appointment, although a carefully guarded secret, had already been made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the part of His Will and Testament revealed in that house.

As we contemplate the extraordinary focusing of powerful forces and events upon this house, we eagerly anticipate the day when it will be restored and made ready for pilgrims, who may inhale from its atmosphere, its grounds and sacred walls, the fragrances of a glorious past.