

Chapter 8

Shoghi Effendi married Ruhiyyih Khanum in a very simple ceremony like that of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The marriage took place with no advance notice because Shoghi Effendi knew that any big event would draw unwanted attention to the Bahá’ís in Haifa. So the servants in the house were surprised when the car drove Shoghi Effendi and the young Canadian lady to the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh on the afternoon of 25 March 1937.

Ruhiyyih Khanum dressed in black. This was the custom in that part of the world. Shoghi Effendi wanted Ruhiyyih Khanum to fit into the culture of the household which was Middle Eastern. While she had grown up in a very different culture, she was more than happy to do as Shoghi Effendi wished.

The couple entered the Shrine. Shoghi Effendi asked his bride for the ring which she had been wearing hidden around her neck. He placed the ring on her right hand’s ring finger. Then he stepped into the inner shrine under which Bahá’u’lláh’s body was interred. He picked up dried rose petals with a handkerchief that the keeper of the Shrine always put in a silver bowl at the feet of Bahá’u’lláh. Shoghi Effendi chanted the Tablet of Visitation. The couple returned to Haifa and had the marriage ceremony in the room formerly lived in by

the Greatest Holy Leaf. His parents signed the marriage certificate showing that they gave their consent to the union.

Ruhiyyih Khanum then went to Western Pilgrim House to be with her parents. Because of the culture of Palestine, the Eastern pilgrims and the Western pilgrims were kept in separate houses. At dinner time, Shoghi Effendi joined them. He took out the handkerchief and unfolded it with a warm smile and gave May Maxwell the petals telling her they were from the Holy Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh. Ruhiyyih Khanum’s parents then signed the marriage certificate showing their consent. After dinner, Shoghi Effendi and Ruhiyyih Khanum went off together to the home of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá where he had his rooms.

A message was sent out to the Bahá’í world about their marriage. Shoghi Effendi wanted his marriage with Ruhiyyih Khanum to be seen by Bahá’ís as the union of East and West: “Emphasize significance institution Guardianship union East West and linking destinies Persia America.”^[77] When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi used the terms East they meant Persia and the Near East, and when they used the term West they meant the Americas and Europe. It was extremely rare for people to travel outside their countries or marry people from other countries. A person would have to travel for weeks to get from Persia to North America and almost no one other than Bahá’ís made this trip. A marriage with people from the East and West—Shoghi Effendi was Persian and Ruhiyyih Khanum

was Canadian—symbolised the unity of the world which is the fundamental teaching of the Faith.*

Through her marriage, Ruhiyyih Khanum's parents became family to Shoghi Effendi. He grew much closer to them as members of his own family turned against the Guardianship. May Maxwell, whose only desire was to serve the Cause and Shoghi Effendi, died of a heart attack while on a trip to Argentina. He broke the news to Ruhiyyih Khanum. She remembered the great kindness with which he did it and how he'd comforted her during that difficult period. He made her happy when he described to her that May Maxwell was going around the Abhá Kingdom talking about how wonderful her dear daughter was.

After May Maxwell's passing, Shoghi Effendi and Sutherland Maxwell became much closer and began to work together on projects including the design of the Shrine of the Báb. Eventually Sutherland Maxwell made his main home in Haifa. Shoghi Effendi greatly valued his friendship and his talent for architecture, a subject that interested Shoghi Effendi and for which he had an excellent eye. It must have been an extraordinary joy for Ruhiyyih Khanum to have her father—whom she referred to as 'dad'—with them in Haifa.

* Today the terms 'East' and 'West' are no longer used as much. Since the words are directions, anywhere that is east of you is East and west of you is West. Today when someone uses the term 'Far East' they mean China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and Persia—today Iran—is usually described as being in the 'Middle East' but all these terms are relative to where your own country is on earth. (authors' note)

Being the Guardian was extremely difficult. Ruhiyyih Khanum became Shoghi Effendi's main helpmate. She kept a diary of her time with Shoghi Effendi. In many of the entries, she expresses how hard life was for Shoghi Effendi because of the amount of work he had, the lack of enough people to help, and the difficulties other members of his family gave him. She wrote in 1943:

Anyone who knew the true story of Shoghi Effendi's life would weep—weep for his goodness, weep for his pure, simple heart, weep for his labours and his cares, weep for the long, long years in which he has toiled ever more alone ...^[78]

She had to watch someone she loved suffer greatly:

He forces himself to go on and finish the letters he has had piled for days on his desk—but he reads a thing sometimes ten minutes over and over because he can't concentrate! I think no suffering is worse than seeing someone you love suffer. And I can't remedy it.^[79]

Ruhiyyih Khanum was extremely loyal and endured everything with him, nursing him when he was ill:

He says he feels like a broken reed. No doubt partly due to his having been very ill for ten days with an awful fever ... I have nursed him day and night and to say we have been through a kind of hell is no exaggeration. To be alone with the Guardian

so ill ... was such a strain and a responsibility! I think we slept at most 4 hours a night for a week!^[80]

Making it more difficult for the two of them were the dangers of World War II and the violence of the Arab-Israeli conflict after the War.

In 1940, as the War broke out, Shoghi Effendi had to make a trip to England. Ruhiyyih Khanum's mother had just died in Argentina, and her father, who was in poor health, had come to live in Haifa. They tried to get visas to England. With all the turmoil of the War, these were hard to get. When they absolutely had to leave if they wanted to make it to England in time, the visas had not yet been granted. Shoghi Effendi decided that they would leave for Italy anyway, hoping they'd get visas there. The three left the Bay of Haifa on an old aquaplane which is a plane that takes off on water using propellers. Water was sloshing around the old boards on the bottom of the plane.

They arrived in Rome a few days later. Ruhiyyih Khanum and her father went to the British Consul for Shoghi Effendi to see about getting visas. They were told that this was impossible because the Consul didn't have the authority to issue them, and he couldn't get in touch with headquarters in London because the War had cut the communications. When they gave the bad news to Shoghi Effendi, he told them to go back and try again. Though Ruhiyyih Khanum could not see what the point was of going back, she did as Shoghi Effendi asked because he was the Guardian after all. Back in the office of the Consul, Ruhiyyih Khanum mentioned that Shoghi Effendi was the

successor to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Consul had known 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Holy Land and recounted a memory about the Master which had moved him very much. He stamped visas into their passports. He said that because he didn't have the authority to do that, they were worthless but might help them get into England.

Ruhiyyih Khanum always felt that the presence of Shoghi Effendi was opening the way:

It does not seem real at all that war has come to the world. Passing through blackened towns—seeing troop trains moving up—waiting to hear the radio news ... Shoghi Effendi's way has been opened as it always will be—the scene seemed to crash behind us, but we were safely through.^[81]

A few days after the travellers left Italy, that country joined the war. The travellers went by train through all of France. Ruhiyyih Khanum was disturbed by what she saw:

It is hard to describe the period that followed. The whole episode was like a brilliantly lit nightmare—a personal nightmare for us and a giant nightmare in which the whole of Europe was involved. As our train made its way to Paris every station was crowded with thousands of refugees fleeing the rapidly crumbling Allied front in the North. There was no way of getting any accurate information, chaos was descending.^[82]

The tired travellers made it to Paris where they found out that no more boats were going to England. The only chance they had was

to go to the small port city of St. Malo nearby and see if they could catch one there. Hundreds of people trying to get to England flooded the small town.

Shoghi Effendi, Ruhiyyih Khanum, and Sutherland Maxwell, waited for days for signs of a boat. Ruhiyyih Khanum observed that Shoghi Effendi sat for hours like a statue. She felt that he was suffering greatly. She knew that if the Nazis overtook them, Shoghi Effendi would be in real trouble because the grand Mufti in Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine, hated the Bahá'í Faith and allied himself with the Nazis. Finally a ship arrived. The travellers made it to England. The next day, the Nazis entered Saint-Malo.

When it came time to return to Palestine, the travellers were able to get visas because Sutherland Maxwell knew the Canadian High Commissioner in London.

At that time, the boats were full as the British were evacuating children to safety from the approaching Nazis. They left just in time. The Nazi and British air forces and navies fought one another in the Battle of Britain. Beginning in September, the Nazis bombed English cities for 56 out of 57 days in a row. 40,000 innocent civilians were killed, and a million homes destroyed.

The boat went south along the coast of Africa. This was the only available route open to them. The boat zig-zagged in the water to avoid submarines trying to sink it. The travellers debarked in Cape Town all the way at the Southern end of the African continent. Sutherland was not feeling well at all. Now they would have to travel overland across the entire continent. Shoghi Effendi was worried

about Sutherland Maxwell's health and recommended he stay in Durban for a while rather than undertake the overland route, which was going to be difficult. He could then proceed by other ways to Palestine and wait for them in a hotel in Nazareth.

Shoghi Effendi and Ruhiyyih Khanum set out for Cairo which was all the way on the northern coast of the continent. They drove over bumpy roads through the Congo, which is most of central Africa, 5,000 miles to the city of Juba in the Sudan. There, they boarded a boat and went down the Nile to Khartoum, Sudan, which Ruhiyyih Khanum described as the hottest place on earth. In the evening, they were sitting on the porch of their hotel in Khartoum when a group of airline passengers stepped up. Among them was Ruhiyyih Khanum's father who had just flown there!

The travellers arrived back in Haifa six months after they had left. The war intensified. The Nazi armies were approaching the Middle East and getting ready to invade. During 1941, Shoghi Effendi worried greatly about the approach of the war and what to do. If the Nazis arrived in Palestine, the Grand Mufti would surely turn them against the Bahá'ís, whose beliefs were so contrary to their own.

There were regular blackouts of electricity when everyone had to live in the dark at night. Bomb sirens went off. A few bombs fell nearby. But Palestine was not taken by the Nazis. One day, though, as Shoghi Effendi was writing the great history of the Bahá'í Faith, *God Passes By*, "two army fighter planes in practice flight touched wings, lost control and crashed, one coming down over the roof of our house so low I thought it would sheer through the ceiling of

Shoghi Effendi's room. It landed and burst into flames not 100 yards away at the foot of the street."^[83]

In the years after World War II, Palestine broke out into civil war between Arabs and Jews over control of the land. Jewish refugees were arriving to settle in Palestine in increasingly larger numbers. In Europe they had been the victims of the Holocaust: The Nazi effort to kill all the Jews in Europe. They were coming to Palestine to establish a homeland where Jewish people could protect themselves. The new arrivals came into conflict with the Palestinian Arabs who were already living there. This violence engulfed Haifa where Shoghi Effendi and Ruhiyyih Khanum lived:

Where once a gun shot would have made our blood run cold and filled you with indignation, you soon, from endless repetition, just get used to it ... and go on about your business. Later you hear who and how was shot by these bullets.^[84]

Gladys will now sleep over at this house ... so we can have her near us as the shooting is too much for her to be all alone in the Pilgrim House at night ... Besides it is dangerous for anyone to come and go across the street after dark ...*^[85]

The battle itself was constant and real war. That night for me it was like sleeping at the bottom of a stagnant pool which someone was constantly stirring. I was so tired I did sleep sometimes, but then dream and firing and bombs became all

* Gladys Anderson was a Bahá'í who was serving the Guardian in Haifa with her husband, Ben.

one torpid mixture which was almost worse than sleeping or waking.^[86]

To prevent acts of terrorism, street lights were often turned out at night, making everything dark and frightening:

As the terrorism increased, certain areas, including our own, were voluntarily blacked out at night with no street lights at all; they were often day-time curfews imposed, when pitched battles or major acts of terrorism took place and only the British forces moved about, their great tanks howling down the abandoned streets, often firing random bursts from their machine guns as they rolled by. The wailing noise of their sirens was a most eerie, unpleasant sound, but at night, it was really terrifying to an already nerve-wracked population living on the edge of a volcano which might explode any time.^[87]

Despite the terrible difficulties in the world during the 1930s and 40s, Shoghi Effendi did not stop guiding Bahá'ís. He kept up a stream of writing—letters, very long letters published as books later, and *God Passes By*. His writing helped Bahá'ís to have a hopeful view of the future. Even though the world was at war, it will eventually achieve the Lesser Peace when warfare between countries will generally cease. Then the peoples of the world will acknowledge the claims of Bahá'u'lláh, and the Bahá'í Faith will spiritualise the body of humanity.

Chapter 8 Endnotes

- 77 Response of Shoghi effendi to a Spiritual Assembly in North America, *Ibid*, p. 153.
- 78 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *The Priceless Pearl*, pp. 162-3.
- 79 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 163.
- 80 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 160.
- 81 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 160.
- 82 *Ibid*, p. 179.
- 83 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 162.
- 84 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 168.
- 85 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 168.
- 86 Ruhiiyyih Khanum, *Ibid*, p. 168.
- 87 *Ibid*, p. 187.