



BAHAISM VI. THE BAHAI COMMUNITY OF ASHKHABAD

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vi. The Bahai Community of Ashkhabad (‘Ešqābād)

Attracted by religious freedom and economic opportunities unavailable to them in Iran, Iranian Bahais began to settle in Ashkhabad around 1884; the community prospered and reached its peak during the period 1917-28.

The first Bahai settlement in Ashkhabad dates back to 1300/1882 when Moḥammad-Rezā Arbāb b. Moḥammad Kāzem Ešfahānī and Ḥājī ‘Abd-al-Rasūl Yazdī b. Moḥammad-‘Alī Yazdī made their way there from Iran. During the next two years, they were followed by Ostād ‘Alī-Akbar Bannā’ Yazdī, Ostād Moḥammad-Rezā Korramšāhī, members of their families, their friends and others. The early Bahai settlers of Ashkhabad were principally contractors and traders; also present, but fewer in number, were craftsmen, artisans, and simple laborers.

The community’s early years were marked by rapid physical and economic growth and religious tolerance on the part of Ashkhabad’s non-Bahai inhabitants. The arrival of the respected Bahai scholar Mīrzā Abu’l-Faẓl Golpāyegānī on 15 July 1889 greatly enhanced the intellectual life of the community (R. Mehrābqānī, *Šarḥ-e aḥwāl-e Abu’l-Faẓā’el Golpāyegānī*, Tehran, 1974, p. 161).



An event that affected the early history of the community occurred on 12 Moḥarram 1307/8 September 1889 when a well-known Bahai leader, the seventy-year-old Ḥājī Moḥammad-Rezā Eṣfahānī, was stabbed to death in the Ashkhabad *bāzār*. His murder was engineered by fanatical Shi'ites who could not tolerate the increasing prosperity of the Bahai community. Immediately after Ḥājī Moḥammad-Rezā's murder, the conspirators were arrested, and a special court was convened. The court sentenced two of the Shi'ite assassins to death and five others to exile and/or imprisonment for terms ranging from sixteen months to fifteen years; but, through the intercession of the Bahai community, the sentences were commuted. This act of forgiveness enhanced the prestige of the Bahais and earned them, for the first time, government recognition and protection (A. 'Alizād, *Tārīk-eamr-e mobāarak dar madīna-ye 'Eṣqābād*, ms., Haifa: Bahai International Archives, MR 2403, I, pp. 32-34).

The community continued to grow and to form social and religious organizations during the years immediately after Ḥājī Moḥammad-Rezā's assassination. In 1313/1895, the first local Spiritual Assembly was founded (A. Māzandarānī, *Zohūr al-ḥaqq*, Tehran, 1974-75, VIII, p. 981). A Bahai school for boys was begun, regular gatherings to observe holy days were held, committees were formed to conduct community affairs and, by 1319/1901, the Bahai population of Ashkhabad topped 1,000 (Māzandarānī, p. 983). From Ashkhabad, which served as the center of Bahai activities, the faith made its way to Tashkent, Marv, and Samarkand.

The community's most outstanding achievement, however, was the erection of the first Bahai temple (Mašreq al-Aḍkār) in the world. The temple had been planned during the ministry of Bahā'-Allāh (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette, 1970, p. 300) and was designed, under the direct supervision of 'Abd-al-Bahā', by Ostād 'Alī-Akbar Bannā', during his visit to 'Akkā in 1311/1893 (Māzandarānī, p. 995). The temple was started in 1902 and officially inaugurated in 1919.

From 1917 to 1928, the Bahai community flourished. In 1335/1917, the journal *Kvoršīd-e kāvar* began publication ('Alizād, I, p. 69); in 1336/1918, the Bahai Youth League was formed and established a public library, published a Bahai calendar for ten years, arranged seminars, produced a wall-mounted bulletin, *Fekr-e javān* for young people, and offered music classes and literacy courses for adults ('Alizād, I, pp. 71-84). In 1338/1920, the local Spiritual Assembly of Ashkhabad was officially recognized by the government (Māzandarānī, p. 990), regular gatherings were held to acquaint non-Bahais with the faith, two



kindergartens were founded and various institutions such as the pilgrim house, the meeting hall, the medical clinic and two Bahai schools operated at full capacity.

Around the middle of 1928, the Bahais of Ashkhabad, conspicuous by their activities and influence, became the special victims of a general Soviet campaign against all religions. The Soviets appropriated the temple in 1928 and rented it to the Bahais for a five-year period which was extended for another five years. Bahai activities and institutions were curtailed or abolished, and leading members of the community were imprisoned or deported to Iran. During the early 1930s, the government-imposed economic hardships became so severe that many Bahai families, on the point of actual starvation, were forced to emigrate to Iran.

In the mid-1930s, the Bahai community was able to regain its freedom and revitalize its administrative organization; however, this brief renaissance was cut short by fresh waves of persecution that began in the early months of 1938. In February, 1938, several hundred Bahais were arrested, houses were searched and literature and relics were confiscated; those arrested were charged with “working to the advantage of foreigners” (*Bahá’í World VIII*, 1938-40, p. 88). During their confinement, which lasted more than fifteen months and, in some cases, twenty-one months (‘Alizād, I, pp. 134-36), several Bahai prisoners died, and the rest were gradually exiled to Siberia. About 600 old men, women, and children were deported to Iran (*Bahá’í World VIII*, p. 89). The temple was converted to an art gallery in 1938 and was severely damaged in an earthquake ten years later. In 1963, it was demolished by the authorities and replaced by a public park.

Unauthenticated reports suggest that around 200 Bahais continue to live in and around Ashkhabad but do not have any organization or religious activities.

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