

# IN HIS PRESENCE

Visits to 'Abdu'l-Bahá



Copyright © 1989 by Kalimát Press.

All Rights Reserved.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

*Knock, and It Shall Be Opened Unto You* was originally published as a booklet by the author in 1908. *Memories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* was published in the July-August 1962 issues of *Bahá'í News*, and as a separate booklet by the author (n.d.). "A Week in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Home" was first published in *Star of the West*, Vol. 12, Nos. 10-13, in 1921.

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Wilhelm, Roy.

In his presence.

Contents: Preface by Richard Hollinger—Knock and it shall be opened unto you / by Roy Wilhelm—Memories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá / by Stanwood Cobb—A week in 'Abdu'l-Bahá home / by Genevieve L. Coy.

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1844-1921. 2. Baha'is—Biography. I. Cobb, Stanwood, b. 1881. II. Coy, Genevieve Lenore, b. 1889. III. Title.

BP393.W55 1989 297'.93'092 [B] 89-11076

ISBN 0-933770-71-5

# CONTENTS

<u>Preface .....</u>	<u>vii</u>
<u>Knock, and It Shall Be Opened Unto You</u> <u>by Roy Wilhelm .....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Memories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá</u> <u>by Stanwood Cobb .....</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>A Week in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Home</u> <u>by Genevieve L. Coy .....</u>	<u>67</u>



**'ABDU'L-BAHÁ**

## PREFACE

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has always held a special place in the hearts of Western Bahá’ís. This is not simply because of His station as the Center of Covenant, which is acknowledged by all Bahá’ís, or even because of His saintly life. The Bahá’í communities in Europe and America came into being during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Large numbers of the early believers had been taught that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the Return of Christ and had accepted Him as such. Though their understanding of His true station would change, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would remain their Master, the Head of their Faith, and the perfect Example of what it was to be a Bahá’í. For many, He remained the living embodiment of the *numenus*.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá effectively adapted His presentation of the Bahá’í Teachings to this new Western audience. He addressed issues that were current and controversial in the West

and, at times, He even adopted Western styles of discourse. These early Bahá'ís had little access to the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. For them, the major corpus of their Sacred Scripture consisted of the Tablets (i.e., letters) of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In these early days, there were only two avenues of communication with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The first was through correspondence. American Bahá'ís began writing to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as early as 1894, and He received an almost continuous stream of letters from Bahá'ís in the West from that time on. His replies, the fruits of this correspondence, are collected in such books as *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, *Bahá'í World Faith*, and *Tablets of Abdul Baha*.

The second avenue of communication with the Master was meeting Him in person. Before His travels to Europe and America (1911–1913) such meetings were only possible for pilgrims who journeyed to Palestine, where He resided. In the almost quarter century during which this option existed, a significant number of Bahá'ís did travel from the West to the Holy Land. Of course, the majority of Bahá'ís never did. And so, to share their experiences with their fellow believers, the pilgrims often pub-

## PREFACE

---

lished or circulated manuscripts with descriptions of their trips.

The value of these “pilgrim’s notes” to the Bahá’í community has changed over time. Most of them consisted only of transcripts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s table talks, as they were recorded or remembered by the pilgrims. At the time, these notes provided important insights on issues that were not addressed in the limited Bahá’í Scripture that was published and available.

However, the accuracy of the notes, the quality of the transcription and the translation, was always open to question. Indeed, pilgrims could and did return from Palestine with contradictory reports of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s teachings and instructions. Therefore, the Master instructed that these should not be regarded as binding on the community, unless He had Himself reviewed and corrected the notes. Such approved transcriptions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks, in fact, comprise a significant part of His writings available to us today. *Some Answered Questions* is the most important example.

The value to the Bahá’í community of unapproved transcriptions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks has waned with time. There are, however,

## PREFACE

---

other pilgrims' notes which recount experiences with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with only brief accounts of His conversations. In the early years, these had been common. After 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West, they were published less often. Presumably, this was because most Bahá'ís had been able to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá themselves, or to talk directly to others who had. Written accounts of visits to 'Abdu'l-Bahá were naturally less sought after—though anecdotes about the Master, and especially the Master in America, became a vital part of the oral culture of the community. Stories from this period still circulate among Bahá'ís today.

At this point, seventy-five years after His trip to America, there are few persons who remain among us who have had the bounty of meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá in person. Most Bahá'ís have no experience, therefore, of hearing about such meetings first-hand. So, it seems appropriate now to republish some of the more touching accounts of meetings with the Master. Those collected in this book were chosen almost at random: the notes of Roy Wilhelm, Stanwood Cobb, and Genevieve Coy.

Since these believers visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá at different periods during His ministry, their accounts reflect the changes that were occurring





ROY WILHELM

in the Bahá'í world, and especially in the circumstances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, during this thirteen-year period (1907-1920). Of course, they also reflect the personalities of the authors.

Roy Wilhelm made a pilgrimage with his mother in April, 1907. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was still a prisoner then, confined by the Ottoman authorities to the prison-city of 'Akká. For this reason, He was unable to accompany the pilgrims everywhere. Because of unpredictable prison conditions, most Western pilgrims were allowed to stay in 'Akká for only a short time. Some of those who came to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá during 1907, were turned away completely; others had their visits cut short. The Wilhelms were able to stay in 'Akká for about a week.

Despite such restrictions, the pilgrimage was spiritually invigorating for Roy Wilhelm. He went on to become one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's most trusted followers in America. It was on his property in West Englewood, New Jersey, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá arranged for a Unity Feast, in an effort to unite the Bahá'ís of the New York area. This choice demonstrates 'Abdu'l-Bahá's confidence and trust in Roy Wilhelm, that his home would be chosen as a place of unity where antagonistic factions might be

safely brought together. For years, all of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters to America were sent to Roy Wilhelm, who would then forward them on to their intended recipients. He also handled the Master's financial affairs in this country. Because of his faithfulness and devotion to the Cause, he was appointed (posthumously) a Hand of the Cause in 1951.

Stanwood Cobb tells the story of meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá on five different occasions. His first visit took place near the end of January 1909, though he recalls the visit to have been in February. Restrictions on the Master's movements had recently been lifted. However, because He was still closely observed, this new freedom was only used cautiously. Stanwood Cobb had the impression, in fact, that He was still under guard. When he returned to the Holy Land in 1910, he saw the Master moving about more freely.

His last three meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá took place in the West: Boston, 1912; Washington, D.C., 1912; and Paris, 1913. He felt that the last meeting was the most important, for his own subjective reasons. We learn as much about Stanwood Cobb in these memoirs as we do about 'Abdu'l-Bahá. And this is the



STANWOOD COBB

great value of his remembrances—we catch a glimpse of the effect the Master could have on the thoughts and feelings of the believers, how He could adapt His message to the specific spiritual needs of one individual. It was Stanwood Cobb's willingness to reveal himself in this way, in various publications, that has earned him the reputation of something of a sage in the American Bahá'í community.

Dr. Genevieve Coy went on pilgrimage in 1920, in the company of three other Bahá'í women. They stayed for one week. Her account is valuable in that it holds more details about the daily aspects of her visit. We note that the spread of the Faith around the world was now reflected in the Master's Household: Khusraw, from Burma; Fujita, from Japan; and Mrs. Hoagg, from America, were serving in the Holy Land. More than thirty pilgrims—from Asia and Europe, as well as the United States—were 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guests, including one from Ashkhabad ('Ishqábád), in Russian Turkestan, where the first Bahá'í Temple had been completed.

Genevieve Coy's pilgrimage had a tremendous influence on her life. Within a few months, at the request of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, she was on her way to Tehran to teach in the Bahá'í School for



GENEVIEVE L. COY

probably taken in her room in Tehran, Iran.

## PREFACE

---

girls. Returning to America, some years later, she served as a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New York City, as an administrator of the Green Acre Bahá'í School, and in various other capacities until her death in 1963.

A common theme can be found in these, and in most other pilgrim accounts from this period. The correct purpose of Bahá'í pilgrimage is to pray in the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, the Manifestations of God. But, in reality, the goal of the early pilgrims was to attain the presence of their Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Though He consistently turned their attention to the Holy Shrines, placing the greatest importance on their visits there, it was the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the pilgrims longed for; meeting with Him transformed their lives; His example caused them to dedicate their remaining years to the service of the Cause.

It is our hope that republishing these accounts will put our own generation of Bahá'ís in touch with a part of our spiritual heritage, deepen our love for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and confirm our dedication to the Cause of His Father.

—THE EDITORS

9

Knock,  
and It Shall Be Opened  
Unto You



1907

*by Roy Wilhelm*





**ROY WILHELM**

standing in front of the Bahá'í Temple, Wilmette, Illinois, in later years.

*He that is Greatest Among You  
shall be Your Servant.*

Matt. 23:11

**I**N THE PENAL FORTRESS of 'Akká, in Palestine, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, the "Tideless Sea," there is a prisoner and an exile. His name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which means, the Servant of God. "Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street."\*

It was in this Holy Land that Jesus of Nazareth traveled nineteen hundred years ago, preaching and teaching in the streets of the cities the simple Truth of God. It is true that only a few ignorant fishermen were able to comprehend His Message.

That which most impresses the pilgrim to

\*Isaiah 42:1-2.

the "Most Great Prison," at 'Akká, is the spirit of sacrifice. Nowhere have I witnessed such love, such perfect harmony. The desire of those in that prison is to serve one another.

In our western liberty it is difficult to realize the bitter antagonism and hatred which exists in the East between the followers of the several great religious systems. For example, a Jew and a Muhammadan would refuse to sit at meat together: a Hindu to draw water from a well of either. Yet, in the house of 'Abdu'l-Bahá we found Christians, Jews, Muhammadans, Zoroastrians, Hindus, blending together as children of the one God, living in perfect love and harmony.

Each of these systems proclaims that it is striving to promote the "Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." To accomplish this end, the Christians have sent out many missionaries into the East, and from the systems of the East have come missionaries into the West. Each has seen the realization of its dream only through the triumph of its own over all the other systems, but during all the centuries none has succeeded in consuming another. It is estimated that the three foremost in point

of numbers stand about as follows\*: Buddhists, 550,000,000; Christians, 500,000,000; Muham-madans, 350,000,000. Like the Christians, all the others have divided and subdivided into many branches, some of them as antagonistic as the systems themselves.

At the house of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in 'Akká, we met many of these peoples, but they had lost all trace of the discord and hatred which has been inbred and cultivated for centuries, and now they are as members of one Household. They sacrifice their lives for one another. To what shall we attribute this miracle of unity?

At Port Said, Egypt, a resident Bahá'í came to the steamer with a boat to carry us ashore. After the formalities of the Custom House, we were driven to our hotel, where we remained two days awaiting the arrival of a Russian steamer for Haifa, Syria, the regular steamer being obliged to omit its trip on account of a Sirocco (hot wind and sand storm) which

\*These populations reflect the situation c. 1908. At present, the numbers would be: Buddhists: 309,626,100; Christians: 1,644,396,500; Muslims: 860,388,300. (*The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1989*)—ED.

came from the desert and visited Port Said the day after our arrival, virtually suspending traffic on both land and water for about twelve hours. The evening of the second day, four of our American friends returning from 'Akká arrived in Port Said, and we had a most interesting meeting with the resident believers. We had heard much of the love and kindness shown by the Oriental brothers to the pilgrims from the West—after our visit to Port Said we understood.

The following evening, April 20th, we sailed on the Russian ship for Haifa. It was still quite rough as a result of the Sirocco. The next morning at eight-thirty we reached Jaffa, the port of Jerusalem, where the unloading of cargo caused a delay. At one o'clock, we left for Haifa and the little vessel was pushed to its fullest capacity in the hope that it might make port before sunset, which would enable the passengers to land. Fortunately, we arrived just in time, and at six-thirty dropped anchor a mile from shore. Owing to the shallowness of the water, passengers are landed in small boats, and this is easy only under the most favorable weather conditions. Although the storm had subsided, there was still some sea

running, which made the landing difficult, particularly as it was dark when we reached shore. We were not delayed by the inspection of our baggage and so immediately took a carriage to the Hotel Carmel, which we reached after ten minutes drive.

Our friend at Port Said had given us letters to two merchants in Haifa, but the messenger we dispatched to them returned with the information that both had gone to 'Akká. We had the address of another believer, whose son we knew in this country, and we then sent to him, but it was so late that he did not receive our message until the following morning. He came quite early to the hotel, and his warm welcome made us feel that close relationship into which this Revelation brings all people.

In the afternoon, we went to his home and later visited the Tomb of the Báb,\* which is about a mile above Haifa on Mt. Carmel and which overlooks the city and the bay. The Tomb faces 'Akká, which place one can plainly see on a clear day.

I preceded the others a half hour in order to

\*Now known to Bahá'ís as the Shrine of the Báb.—  
ED.

make some photographs before the sun was too low. Upon reaching the Tomb I found only one room open and within were several Persians sitting about a table. They did not understand English, but by tapping my camera and making signs I made my wishes known and received permission to take some pictures.

I saw upon the finger of one of them, a venerable man with flowing white beard, a ring such as is worn by many of the believers.\* As he was close to me, I whispered in his ear in Arabic the universal Bahá'í greeting†; he immediately cried it aloud, and as he grasped me in his arms and kissed me on both cheeks, the tears came into his eyes. Then they all crowded round, pressing my hands, and I knew that I was among friends. In the meeting of the West with the East is fulfilled the prophecies of the Books.

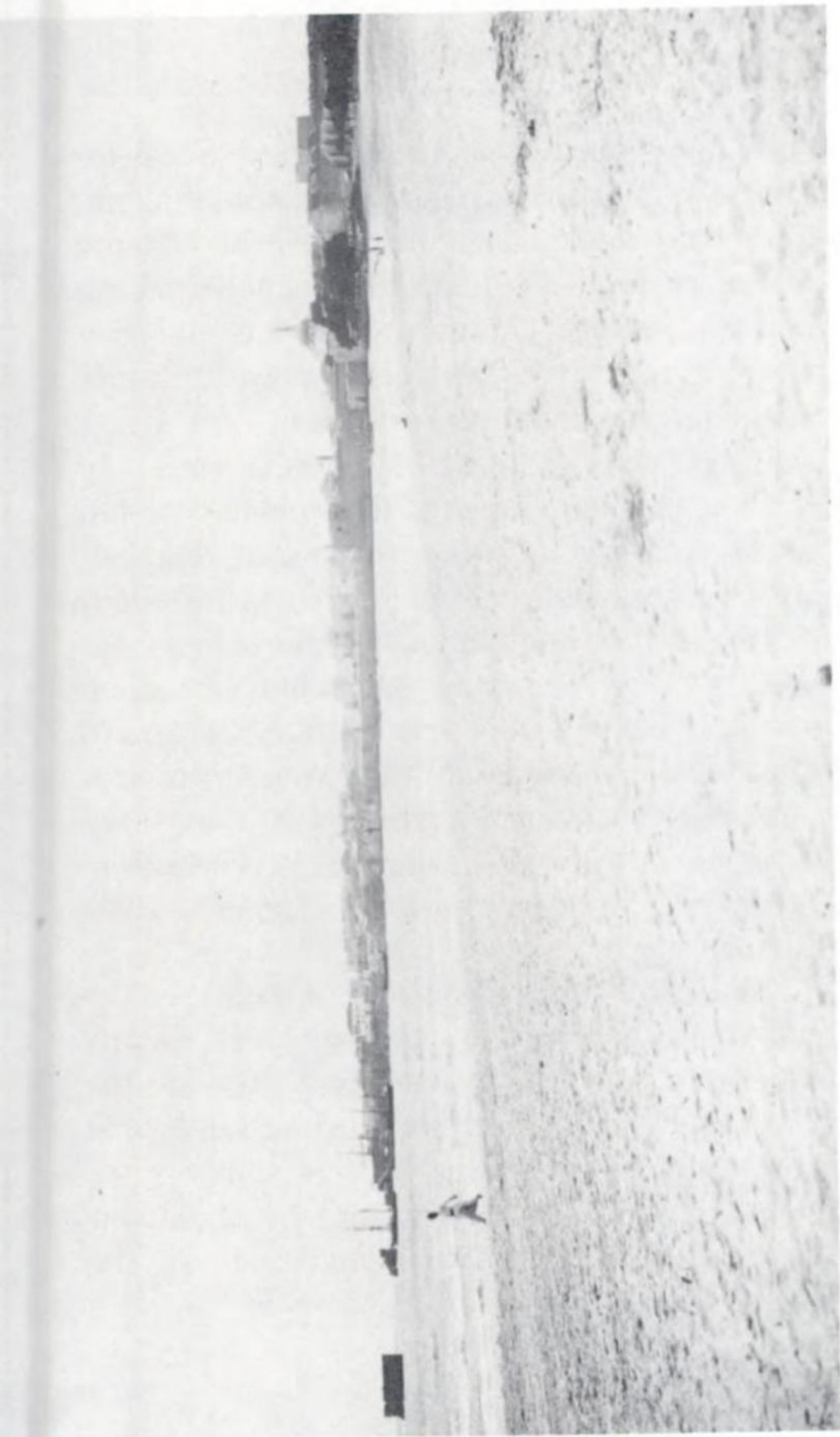
The following morning, our friend received permission for us to proceed to 'Akká, and we engaged a high-bodied carriage for the drive of ten miles, as two streams had to be forded.

\*The symbol engraved on the Bahá'í ringstone is:



—ED.

†Alláh-u Abhá! (God is most glorious!)—ED.



THE "ROAD" TO 'AKKÁ.

The early pilgrims traveled along the beach from Haifa to 'Akká.



The smooth hard sand at the edge of the Mediterranean is the road, and as we drove along, the waves would frequently wash up against the horses' feet. The little horses knew that the sand was hardest at the water's edge, and they followed the waves as they washed up and receded, traveling in scallops, as it were. It is a low sandy coast, and the outline is broken only by an occasional clump of date palms and tall cactus plants. We passed here and there an Arab on horseback, usually a long rifle pointing above his shoulder; also a number of natives with their flowing garments girded up into their belts to give greater freedom and to offer less resistance to the wind, which at times blew with considerable force. Above the water line the sand seemed to be constantly shifting into irregular mounds, some of them as much as fifteen or twenty feet in height.

It was after two o'clock when we entered the gate of the prison city, and we were rapidly driven through narrow winding streets, the driver cracking his long whip to warn people at the turnings, and in about five minutes we stopped at a house the entrance to which was an arch having a heavy swinging door. The

word "Welcome" greeted our ears, our baggage was removed from the carriage, and we were assisted to the ground and conducted through the entrance so quickly that we did not at once realize we had reached the "Most Great Prison," the end of our seven thousand miles' journey. We passed through a courtyard and up a long flight of stone steps into an upper court from which we were ushered through a dining room into a large square room facing the Mediterranean and overlooking the three crumbling walls that remain of the once strong fortification. Here the welcome was repeated, and we now realized that we were the guests of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The young man who had been our escort, after inquiring if we were well and if we had had a pleasant journey, informed us that this would be our room and said he would leave us that we might rest.

In about an hour the young man returned with the announcement: "The Master is coming."

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá crossed the threshold He uttered the words, "Welcome! Welcome!" He then led us to a divan which extended the full length of the room, and bade us be seated beside Him. Taking my mother's hand in His



THE CITY OF AKKA

own and putting His arm around me, He spoke in Persian, addressing us through an interpreter, repeating the greeting, "Welcome! Very Welcome! I have been waiting long for your coming. It is with God's help that you have reached 'Akká. Many leave their homes to come to 'Akká but do not arrive. This is a good day; this a good season of the year because it is Spring. The Cause of God is like a tree—its fruit is love. How are the believers?"

We answered: "They are well and are becoming more united."

He then said: "This news is the cause of my happiness, for the more they are united the more they will receive God's confirmation. They must love one another. Each must devote and sacrifice himself and what he has for the other. I, myself, sacrifice my life for all. You represent all the American believers. In you I see all the American believers. Your faces are shining. I have been waiting long for your coming. Thank God that you came."

We replied: "We do thank God and hope to become worthy."

And He answered: "You will become more worthy."

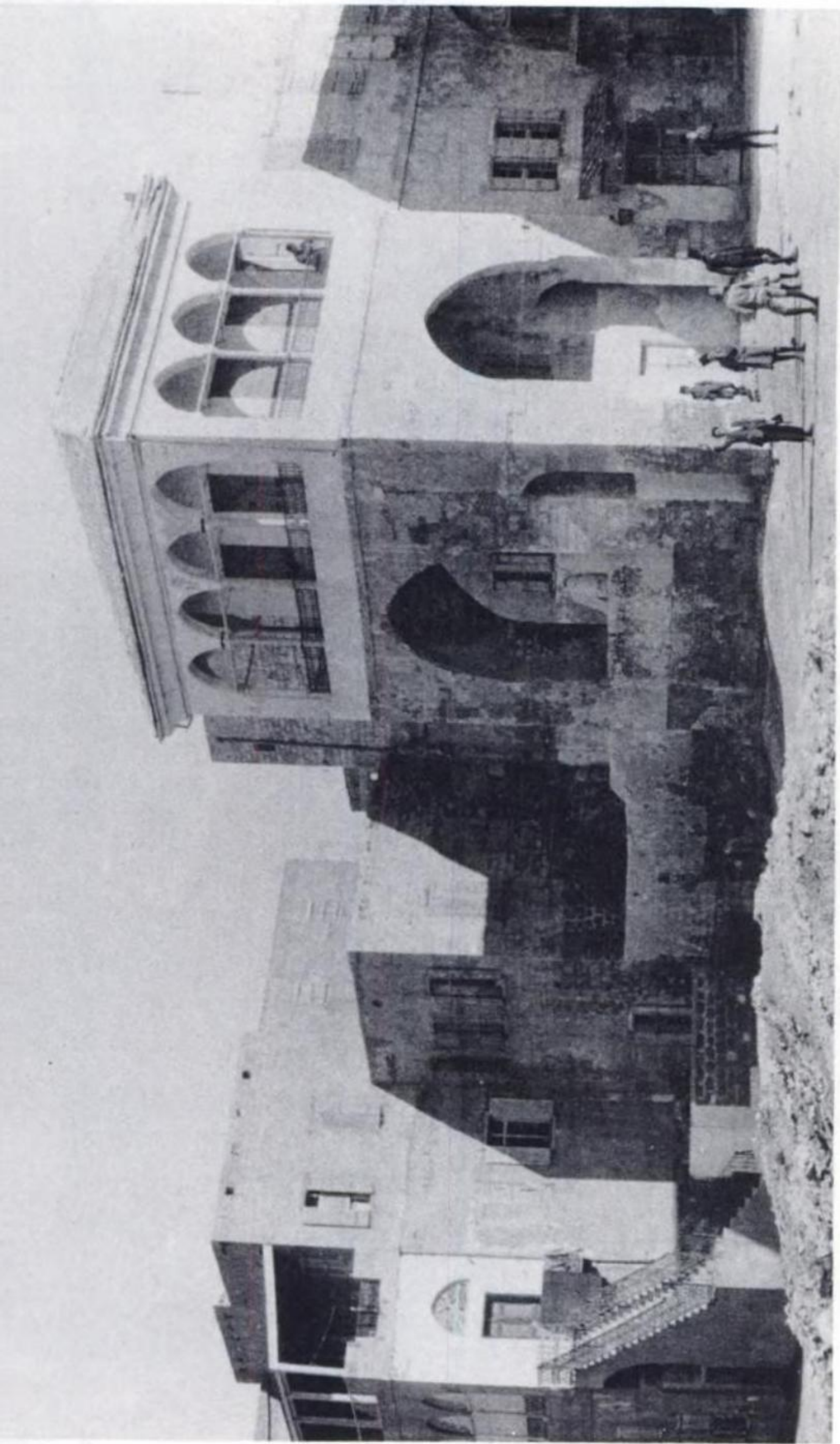
We remained in 'Akká six days, and each

day other pilgrims came to our room. Some of them related incidents of their personal experience with Bahá'u'lláh, and concerning the early days of the Revelation. One, a Persian, told us he had been striving to come to 'Akká for twenty-two years, but had been deterred by the threats of his brother to announce that he was a Bahá'í.\* He said that his only thought was for his wife and children, but that the yearning to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá had finally become so strong that he could no longer defer making the pilgrimage. To our inquiry as to what he thought might result upon his return, he replied, "That remains with God."

Our room fronted upon a little garden in which was a fountain, and nearby a tent in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá receives many of those who come to see Him. So intense are the hatreds between the followers of the different religious systems that it is unusual for a man to be well spoken of outside his own system, but

\*Four years ago, one hundred and seventy Bahá'ís were martyred in his city during a period of four days.—R.W.

This refers to the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Yazd in 1903.—ED.



**THE HOUSE OF 'ABBÚD**  
where 'Abdu'l-Bahá was imprisoned in 'Akká.

'Abdu'l-Bahá is regarded by all classes as a man of such wisdom and justice that it is to Him that they come for explanations of their religious Books, for the adjustment of their business quarrels, and even for the settlement of family difficulties. The inquirer will be told that 'Abbás Effendi ('Abdu'l-Bahá) makes no distinction; that He helps Jew, Muhammadan, and Christian alike.

Neither 'Abdu'l-Bahá nor His Father, Bahá'u'lláh, were ever taught the learning of men. Yet scientific men from different parts of the world go to question and inquire of 'Abdu'l-Bahá about many and various matters. Learned men, priests of the different systems, and even those in authority go to consult with Him; all regard Him as their friend and adviser.

Friday mornings at seven there is another picture. Near the tent in the garden one may see an assemblage of the abject poor—the lame, the halt, and the blind—seldom less than a hundred. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá passes among them He will be seen to give to each a small coin, and to add a word of sympathy or cheer; often an inquiry about those at home; frequently He sends a share to an absent one. It is a sorry procession as they file slowly away, but they all

look forward to this weekly visit, and indeed it is said that this is the chief means of sustenance for some of them. Almost any morning, early, He may be seen making the round of the city, calling upon the feeble and the sick; many dingy abodes are brightened by His presence.

In 'Akká the little birds fly right into the rooms. The door of the dining room was usually open, and we frequently saw them eating crumbs from the table. The evening meal is at nine, after the custom of the Persians, and it is then that 'Abdu'l-Bahá talks and teaches. The following is the substance of what He said to us during one meal:

“Since the beginning of the world up to the present time, whenever a Manifestation or a Holy One appeared, all stood against Him, disgracefully treated Him, rejected and opposed Him, persecuted His followers, plundered their possessions, and at last sentenced Him to death, saying, ‘This man (the Manifestation) is the cause of corrupting our laws and of destroying our religion.’

“They called Jesus a liar. But, notwithstanding all these afflictions which fell upon Him, He won the victory and subdued all to His Command; His spiritual authority prevailed in the



world, and the deniers and those who contradicted Him failed and were frustrated. Though but few persons accepted and were converted in the Day of each one of the Manifestations, yet these few surpassed and overcame great multitudes. During the time of Christ only a few souls believed in Him, but they were so powerful in spirit that none of the learned men among the Israelites could resist and stand against them, and afterward their light illumined the world, their call was raised abroad, their stars twinkled in heaven, their diadem became resplendent, and they are shining with great brilliancy.

“When Christ passed away, He had eleven disciples. The greatest among them was Peter, and he denied Christ three times, but when Bahá'u'lláh departed He had a hundred thousand believers who were calling out ‘Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá’ while they were under swords and daggers, and in these late years many men and women in Yazd were killed by inches without uttering a single cry or complaint, but rather called out the Greatest Name. From these incidents we may judge the future of this Revelation.”