

Cyprus

Europe - Mediterranean

Teaching the Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'í Geography - Cyprus

Cyprus

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, north of Egypt, east of Greece, south of Turkey and west of Lebanon. It measures 240 km long and 100 km wide, with Turkey 75 km to the north. It has two mountain ranges with a central plain. Mount Olympus reaches 1,952 m. The climate is Mediterranean and semi-arid, and water shortages are frequent.

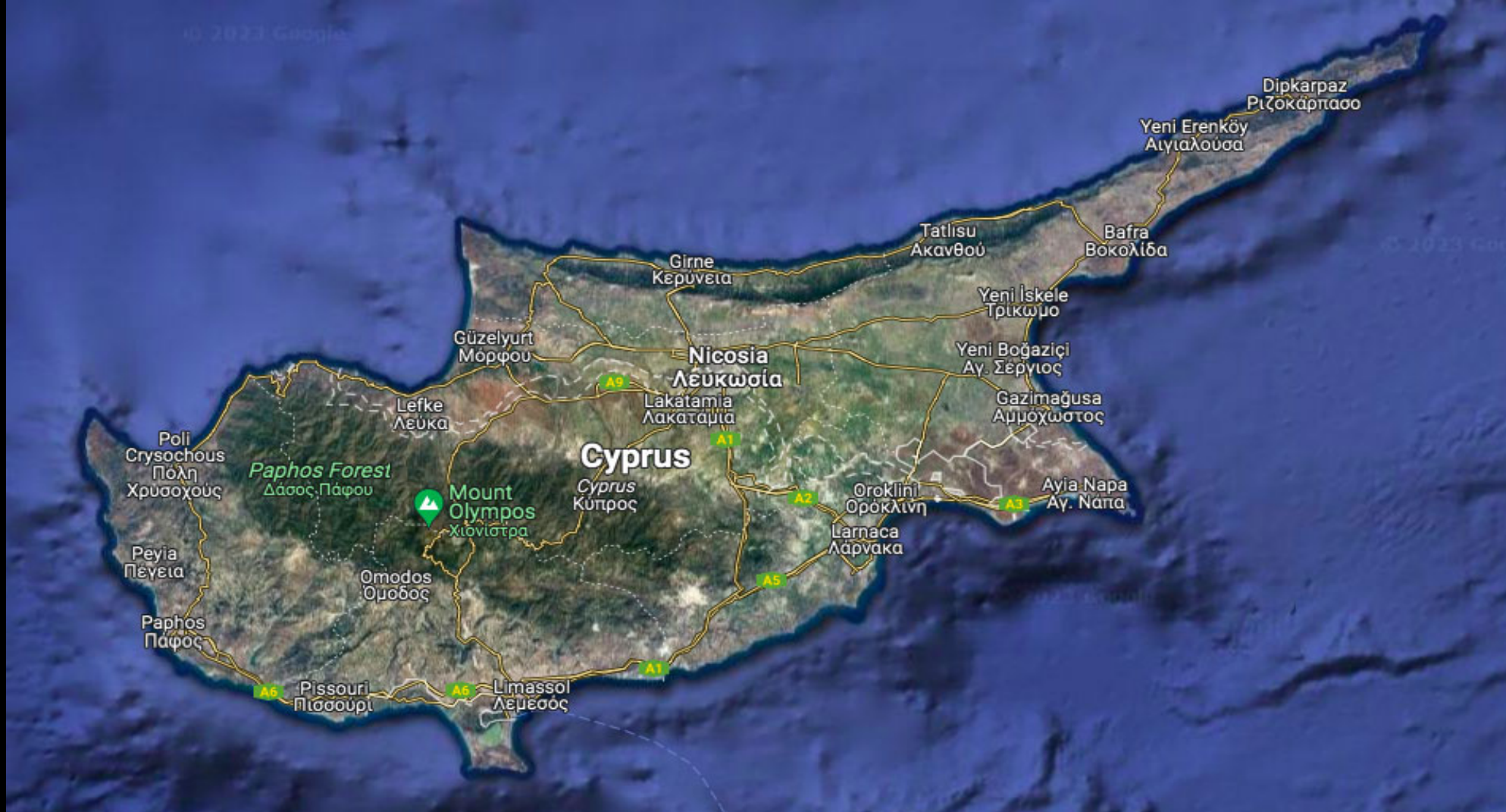
Cyprus
in the Eastern
Mediterranean Sea

with Turkey
to the north





Cyprus - relief



Cyprus



Cyprus



Cyprus



Cyprus

Cyprus

Cyprus was under British rule from 1914 and became independent in 1960, with a population of 573,000. An attempt to unite Cyprus with Greece in 1974 resulted in a Turkish invasion and mass displacement.

The capital of the Republic of Cyprus is Nicosia, but the northeast portion of the island is the self-declared Turkish Republic of North Cyprus in 1983 after the violent separation of the Greek Cypriot (77%) and Turkish Cypriot (18%) populations. A United Nations-controlled Green Line separates the two.

divided
Cyprus
Turkish north
Greek south



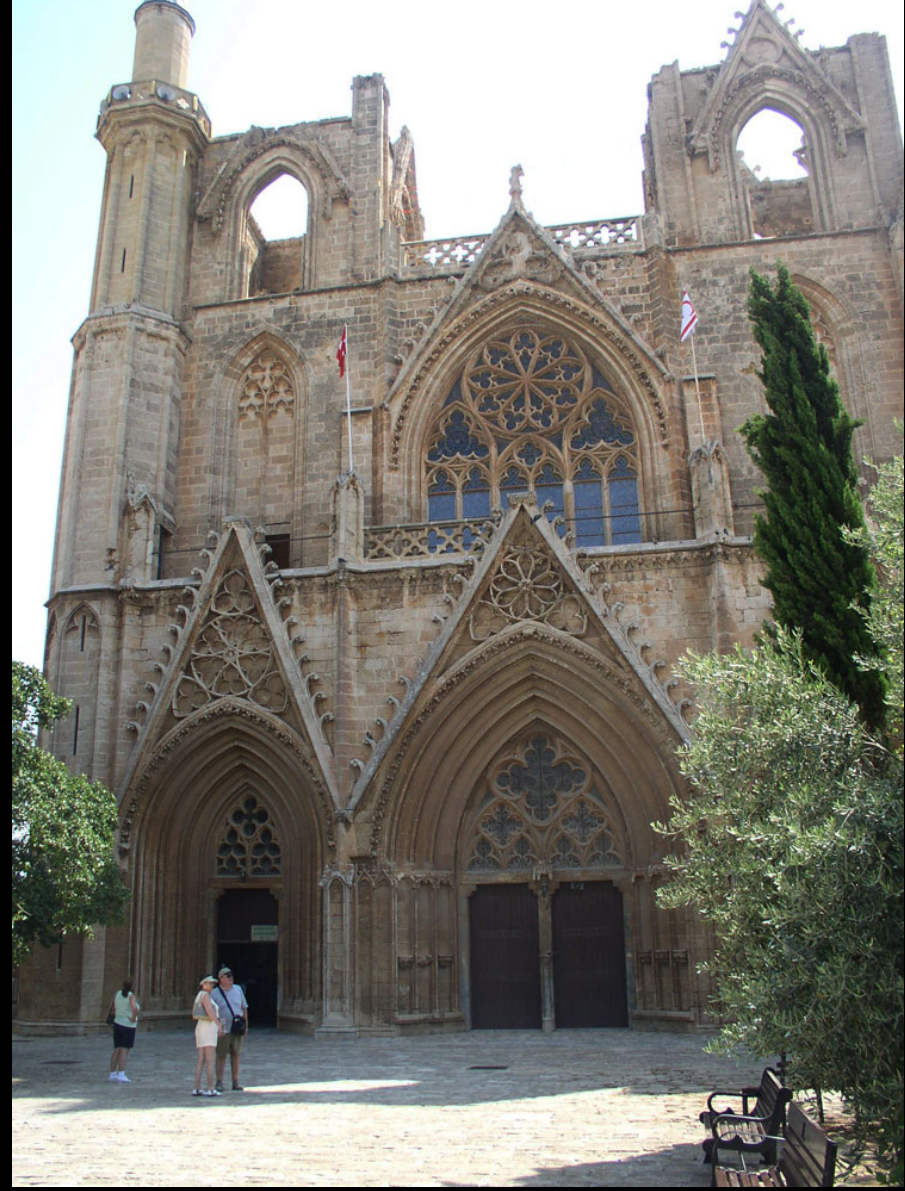


Nicosia looking toward north Cyprus



Cyprus

Cyprus



Cyprus



Cyprus





Cyprus



Cyprus

Knights of Bahá'u'lláh

The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh who opened Cyprus to the Bahá'í Faith were Abbas and Semire Vekil from Turkey and Violet McKinley and her son Hugh from England, who arrived about the same time and first settled in Nicosia.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Abbas and Semire Vekil

Abbas (1911-1984) and Semire Vekil (b.1934) were married in 1952 and went to Istanbul on their honeymoon, where they learned of the Ten Year Crusade.

Semire wrote:

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

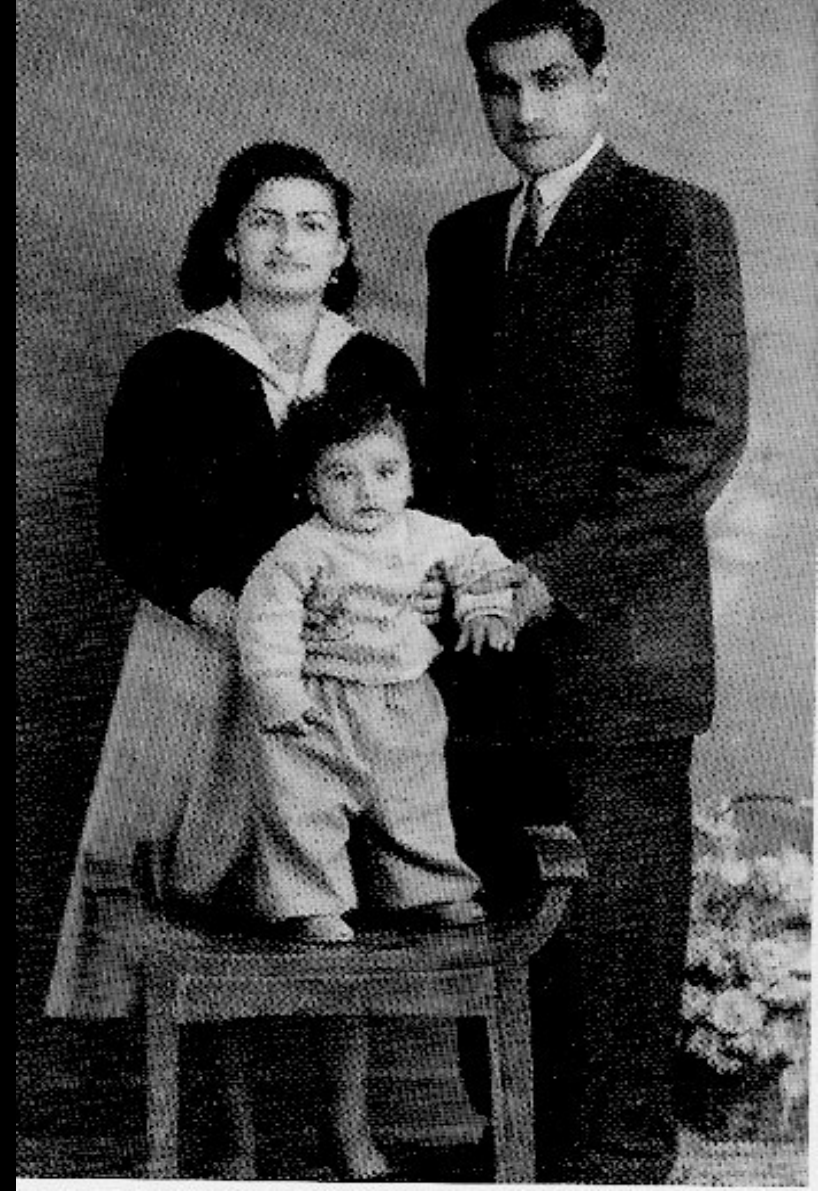
Semire Vekil

“It was an instant decision, as we did not have a lengthy discussion or prior planning. We wanted to respond to the Call by our Beloved Shoghi Effendi and we felt at a time this was what the Faith wanted from us.... In one of my spiritual dreams Shoghi Effendi held my hands to raise me up, and made me move, I felt immediately the meaning of this dream was a confirmation of our decision. I was only 18 years old, but I knew that the pioneering decision we made with my husband was our joined and inevitable path together to show our love and gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh.”

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Semire and
Abbas Vekil

and Leroy



Abbas and Semire Vekil

With Semire eight months pregnant, Abbas went first and settled in Nicosia, Cyprus, on 19 August 1953. Semire joined him in November with their new son Leroy. They first rented a small house with the other Knights of Bahá'u'lláh, Hugh and Violet McKinley, before finding places of their own.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Abbas and Semire Vekil

Abbas, who spoke many languages, established good relations with the Turkish Cypriots and was offered a job in a bank in Nicosia. They concentrated on making friends and gaining trust through informal gatherings, friendship, family visits and personal contacts in their business, bringing together people with different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Abbas and Semire Vekil

One of their contacts was an Armenian priest and important figure in the Greek Cypriot community. Shortly before he passed away, he declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh to Abbas and Semire, but did not make it public. In his will, he asked his son to research the Bahá'í Faith and he later declared. When more pioneers arrived and Semire became 21, they elected their first Local Spiritual Assembly in 1956. Their second child, Suha, was born in Nicosia in 1959.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Abbas and Semire Vekil

On 21 December 1963, fighting started between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities in Nicosia, and spread over the rest of the island. The community was under curfew and the Vekil's house was occupied. Abbas and Semire with their two children, four and ten years old, were forced to leave their home and lived in a hotel room for more than a month with no electricity or water.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Abbas and Semire Vekil

Abbas, with his trustworthy reputation, was asked to become manager of the hotel. For the children's safety, they decided that Semire and the children should move to Turkey temporarily, leaving Cyprus in 1964 for Ankara, Turkey. She hoped to return, but the conflict became worse and the island was divided between a Turkish northern part and a Greek southern part. After nine months of separation, Abbas left Cyprus and joined the family, moving to Istanbul.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Abbas and Semire Vekil

A third child, Fulya, was born in 1965. Abbas served on the National Spiritual Assembly of Turkey. After the death of Abbas in 1985, Semire moved to Canada, but in 2003, she was finally able to return to Cyprus for two years just when the dividing border was opened for the first time in 30 years, allowing the two Bahá'í communities to reunite. Their daughter Suha pioneered to Cyprus with her family and two children in 2000 and served on the National Spiritual Assembly for 12 years.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

Violet Watson (1882-1958) was from a prosperous Protestant Irish family in London. When she met and married Catholic David McKinley, her family disinherited her and she became poor. They lived in Oxford in the early 1920s, where their son Hugh (1924-1999) was born. They heard of the Bahá'í Faith, read *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, and declared in 1928. Shortly after, David died.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet
and
Hugh
McKinley



Violet and Hugh McKinley

Mother and son lived in other English communities, and Violet was elected to the first Local Spiritual Assembly of the Torbay area with Bernard Leach, the famous potter, Mark Tobey the artist, and Reginald Turvey, artist and father of the South African Bahá'í Community. Hugh had a motorbike accident in 1946 and studied the Bahá'í writings deeply during his convalescence. Hugh discovered his musical talent as an operatic singer so they moved to London in 1950.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

A cablegram from the Guardian in 1953 excited Hugh, which he underlined:

“The hour is ripe to disencumber themselves of all worldly vanities, to mount the steed of steadfastness, unfurl the banner of renunciation, don the armour of utter consecration to God’s Cause, gird themselves with the girdle of a chaste and holy life, unsheathe the sword of Bahá’u’lláh’s utterance, buckle on the shield of His love, carry as sole provision implicit trust in His promise, flee their homeland, and scatter far and wide to capture the unsundered territories of the entire planet.”

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

In July 1953, Hugh attended the European Intercontinental Teaching Conference in Stockholm. After consulting with his mother, they decided to go to Shoghi Effendi's goal of Cyprus because they thought that the dry, warm climate might suit Violet's delicate health. Hugh abandoned his music career just after giving his first public performance in London. Hugh wrote to Shoghi Effendi about singing and pioneering.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

The Guardian replied: “Do what you like! If you have a famous international career and become very well known, this is good for the Faith. If you go pioneering that is also very good for the Faith.” But it was Rúhiyyih Khánum’s postscript that convinced Hugh to pioneer: “whatever we do for the Cause of God is eternal, of eternal value; the success of our struggles in life is uncertain, problematic.”

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

Hugh left by train on 11 September 1953, travel-teaching in Switzerland, Florence and Rome. Violet sailed from London on 14 November, teaching her fellow passengers. The ship docked in Haifa on 23 November and Violet wrote: “A thick mist covered the port but the Golden Dome of the Shrine shone through it with an unearthly splendour. ‘The mystic Fane.’ - I could feel the power streaming forth and my whole being was abased in love and adoration of those to whom it was erected.”

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

Changing boats in Haifa, Violet arrived in Cyprus the next day and was met by Semire Vekil because Hugh had found a job as an accountant and was away working. That evening, Jessie Revell (one of the Guardian's assistants), who had come from Haifa for a rest, came to tea, supper and a devotional. Hugh and Violet shared a bungalow with the Vekils until June 1954.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Jessie Revell



Violet and Hugh McKinley

Living on Cyprus proved to be very difficult. For the first two years they all lived in Nicosia and, with other pioneers, formed the first Local Spiritual Assembly in 1956. While Hugh had left school at 15, he taught himself Greek and translated *The Dawnbreakers*. He had his own accounting practice and later taught English. In November 1954 the McKinleys went on pilgrimage and met the Guardian. On 22 January 1955, Hugh married Shamsi Sedaghat from Britain, with two Hands of the Cause attending the wedding.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Violet and Hugh McKinley

On 15 April 1958, Hugh, Shamsi and Violet moved to Famagusta in the north. Two weeks later, Violet developed a high fever, had visions, and felt she was dying. The visions lasted until late May when Violet became aware of the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. She asked why He had come and He replied: "You are my servant." He said that as there was work to be done, her life would be extended for a time. She lived for 16 months, fell ill again, died on 18 August 1959, and was buried in the English Cemetery at Famagusta. The Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land paid for her grave marker, a slab of Carrara marble with a nine-pointed star and the quotation from Bahá'u'lláh: *"They that have forsaken their country for the purpose of teaching Our Cause – these shall the Faithful Spirit strengthen through its power."*

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Hugh McKinley

Hugh remained in Famagusta, and two of his best friends became Bahá'ís, with Mustafa Salman elected to the National Spiritual Assembly when it was formed in 1978. Hugh stayed on Cyprus until 1963, when he attended the World Congress in London and stayed there until pioneering to the Greek island of Syros 1965-1977. He returned to Cyprus for a visit to his friends in 1970, and again in 1992 at the invitation of the Cyprus National Spiritual Assembly to open the Turkish Bahá'í Centre in Nicosia. He died in England on 9 February 1999.

(based on Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Hugh McKinley

His old friend Mustafa Salman wrote the following tribute:

“Hugh McKinley really served during a time when Cyprus was in a turmoil. There were so many difficulties, political and terrorist activities, and he served during this time. He taught prayerfully, patiently, wisely, persistently and lovingly; that’s why he was successful, and in him we saw all these virtues. And all this time he was in Cyprus during this very difficult, critical period, he was so humble, he was so loving and patient with the friends, and the enemies; I mean Turks and Greeks were not in good relations, and he could live under such conditions, and yet teach the Cause of God so wisely, lovingly and prayerfully.”

(Mustafa Salman, in Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 374-381)

Hugh McKinley

“He believed in the power of Bahá’u’lláh, he relied wholly on the power of Bahá’u’lláh because under those conditions... it is not an easy thing, but he managed what many of us say is the impossible in Cyprus.”

(Mustafa Salman, in Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 374-381)