

Opening Ethiopia to the Baha'i Faith 1933

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Ethiopia: A spiritual legacy down through the ages

Ethiopia's early encounter with God's Messages



Judaism

- **Moses married an Ethiopian wife**
- **King David sang praises to the country, "Ethiopia shall hasten to stretch out her hands unto God"**
- **Abyssinian mythology presents the birth of the empire as a love story between the most wise and renowned among the prophet-kings of Judaism, King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Sabea (Sheba)**



Christianity

Exactly the same year Christianity became a state religion with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Message of the Gospel came to Ethiopia: in 333 AD, two Orthodox monks, Frumentius and Aedissius came from Egypt to Ethiopia and met its reigning King, Ezana of Axum (Aksum), who converted to Christianity together with many of his subjects.



Islam

Islam came to Ethiopia in a record short time, even before Prophet Muhammad made his historical move (Hijra) from Mecca to Medina. In 615 AD, the Prophet Muhammad allowed a hundred of his devoted followers, including one of his cousins and a son-in-law, to move away from the wrath and persecution meted out to the early converts to Islam by the infidels of Mecca

Bilal, an Ethiopian slave was emancipated by Prophet Muhammad to become a prominent disciple



Babism

The Bab's trusted Ethiopian servant was the only soul who gained the following blessings combined:

- **Welcoming Siyyid Kazim upon his visit to the the Bab in Karbila, Iraq in 1843**
- **Serving Mulla Husayn on the eve of the Declaration, and subsequently other Letters of the Living**
- **Accompanying the Bab during His pilgrimage to Mecca**



The Baha'i Faith

- **Baha'u'llah had a noble African servant, Isfandiar, who heroically helped the family of Baha'u'llah during His harrowing imprisonment in Siyah-Chal, Teheran, 1852**
- **If Isfandiar was not described as an Ethiopian, his ancestry would have been traced to the Horn of Africa, still within the same region**
- **In *Memorials of the Faithful*, Abdu'l-Baha said that if there is a perfect man, that would be Isfandiar**

Opening Ethiopia to the Baha'i Faith "by a Baha'i from Egypt"

In 1919, Victoria Bedikian, an early American Bahá'í, sought the permission of Abdu'l-Bahá to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to Ethiopia, only to be told that Ethiopia will be opened to the Faith by a Bahá'í from Egypt. This prophecy was at a time when Sabrí Elias, who was born in an obscure village in the heart of the Nile Delta of Egypt to a Coptic Orthodox family and orphaned when a suckling child, was then 13 years old and not yet aware of the Bahá'í Faith

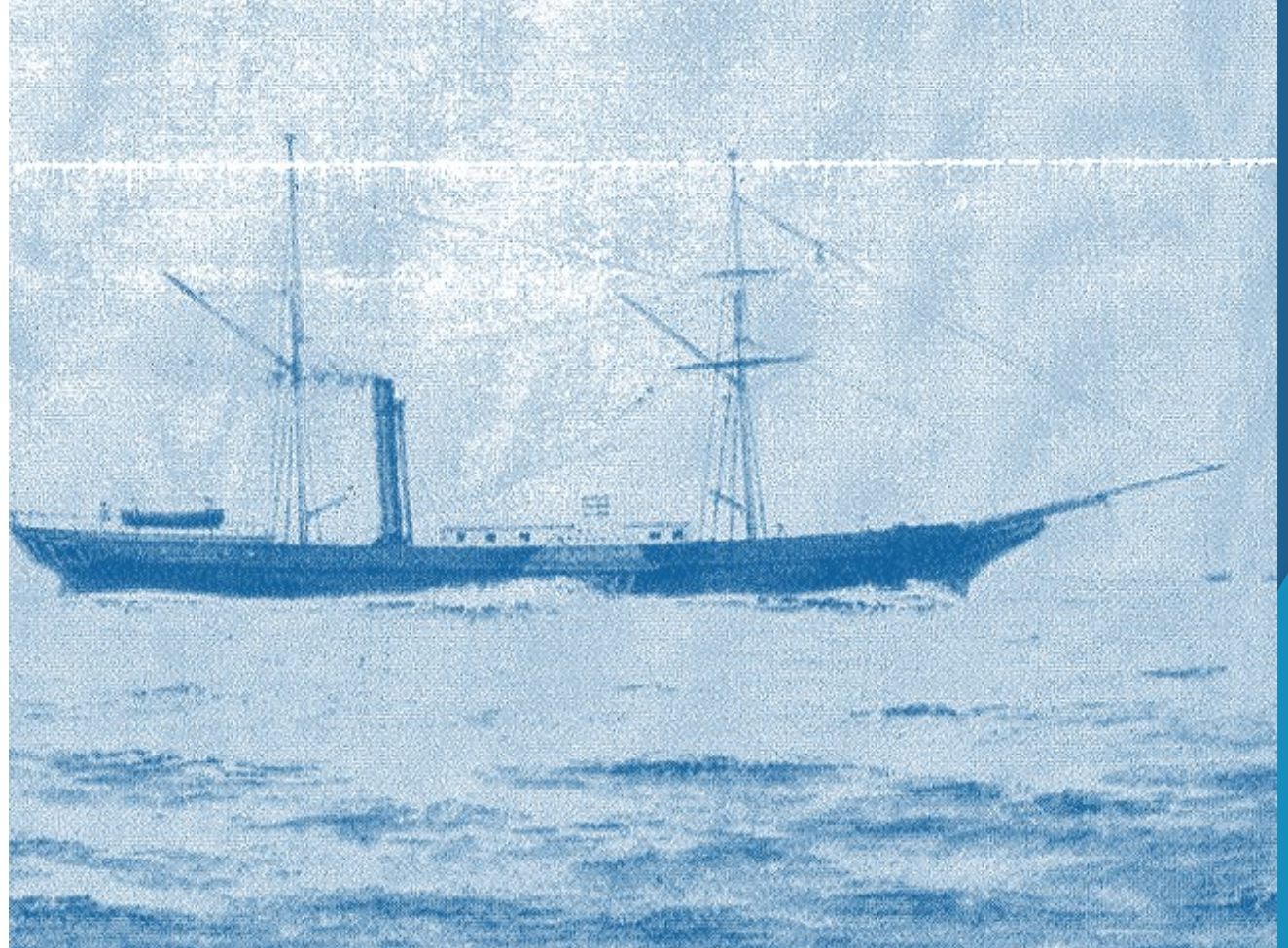


Alexandria!

Ethiopia's Christian affiliation was to Alexandria's Orthodox Papacy.

The Port of Alexandria was blessed by the presence of Bahá'u'lláh 26-27 August 1868, then enroute by sea to Akka, and later by instructing pioneers to settle in the City and form His outpost to the external world.

The City's blessings continued when Abdu'l-Bahá and other members of His family, including the young Shoghi Effendi, chose it for extended sojourns between 1910 and 1913.



A window of opportunity for Ethiopia: No time to lose!

Ethiopia went through seventy turbulent years of a costly struggle to regain its place in the world as the unified nation it once was. Shoghi Effendi's plan for Ethiopia's encounter with the new Faith of God started in the early 1930's.

Although the Guardian was well aware of the agitations that were still in store for Ethiopia, this time at the hands of the Fascist invasion of 1936, his decision was that there was no time to lose. Hence he urged Egypt's NSA to send a pioneer.



Sabri Elias

Sabri Elias, living in Alexandria, was bereft from any schooling except for going briefly to a kindergarten, and his only skill was that of tailoring.

His faith was exemplary, and his passion to teach the Faith started from adolescence. He developed a superb mastery of Baha'i proofs from all Scriptures over the years that preceded his pioneering.



Alexandria Baha'i Community

In 1933, the NSA of Egypt asked Sabri Elias to go on a mission to Ethiopia and open it to the Faith.

Three of the nine Knights of Bahá'u'lláh, who rose from Egypt to open virgin territories to the Faith during the Ten Year Crusade, were from Alexandria



Sabri's selection for this historic mission

Initially, and seeing himself unfit for the mission, Sabri refused the request by Egypt's NSA, in the middle of 1933, to arise. However, he accepted this selection immediately the following day, after having a dream of remorse at failing to respond. He was then 27 years old, with no material resources and unmarried.



Preparations that came with a reward!

- The nearest Ethiopian consular representation was in Jerusalem, Palestine
- Sabri was so happy as it would mean his first pilgrimage and meeting Shoghi Effendi



Preparations with a reward!

Upon arrival at the gate of the House of Abdu'l-Bahá in Haifa, he was told to go, instead, to the nearby pilgrim house, by someone who resembled the Guardian.

Perplexed at the notion that he met the Guardian casually in the street, the attendant at the pilgrim house asked him “When do you want to see the Guardian?” “Now,” Sabri replied aloud “Now, if possible!”



Meeting Shoghi Effendi

Taken back to the House of the Master to fulfil this desire, he waited impatiently yet comforted by looking at a portrait of 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Soon, the ground seemed to reverberate under someone's footsteps and he saw the Guardian standing before him! This time he couldn't even make eye contact with Shoghi Effendi and he prostrated at his feet. Shoghi Effendi raised him up into a warm embrace, "We embrace like friends!" Were the Guardian's welcoming words.



Sabri's tape-recorded impression of Shoghi Effendi

***“I would like to say very sincerely that His Eminence Shoghi Effendi was not an ordinary person. Like the Prophets of God, he belonged to the human race and was born to a father and a mother, and had a family. However, the station and qualities of the Manifestations of God and Their Trustees are of a different nature. It is this different nature that I have found in His Eminence the Guardian of the Cause of God!*”**

Spiritual nourishment and guidance, and a memorable farewell - in Sabri's words:

For a reason in my heart, I asked Shoghi Effendi, "My Master! Are you well-pleased with me?"

"Yes!" he replied. "I am well-pleased with you, because you are faithful. Faithfulness to the Cause of God comes in the first place, and then knowledge and understanding follow."

When time came for my departure, His Eminence Shoghi Effendi directed, "Both the believers who are resident [in Haifa] and the pilgrims should see Sabri Effendi off" at the train station [of Haifa].

The foresight of Shoghi Effendi

On his farewell to Sabrí Elias at the start of this mission he said: *“You will be forced by certain circumstances to leave the capital of Abyssinia. At such a time you would rest for a while and then return once more”*.

The voyage

Sabri traveled, by sea from Port Said to Djibouti via Aden, and then by train to Addis Ababa in November 1933.

With an on-deck ticket that was upgraded to second class through the generosity of two friends who came on board to bid him farewell, and a small sum of money, Sabri met an Armenian youth who happened to be heading to Addis Ababa as well.

The voyage

That Armenian youth, Diran, was separated from his parents from childhood during the First World War, and was rejoining them in Ethiopia for the first time since he was a baby. Sabri and Diran became close friends during the journey.

When they reached Djibouti, Diran needed to obtain a visa to Ethiopia, but he didn't have the money for it. Other rich Armenian travelers refused to loan him money, but Sabri stepped in. The sum involved was almost all that Sabri had. Diran promised to repay Sabri as soon as they would reach the Addis Ababa train station when he would meet his parents.

Sabri's arrives in Addis Ababa

Shortly before sunset, Saturday 25 November 1933, the train arrived Addis Ababa with the tired Sabri and his friend on the journey Diran after a 3-day ascent from Djibouti to the Ethiopian highlands. This date will be eternally remembered as a historical landmark for Ethiopia (and Eritrea). But the arrival of Sabri on that evening was 'like a thief in the night' compared to the excitement of Diran's parents and friends as they welcomed their 'prodigal son'.



In Sabri's tearful audio-recording:

“We boarded the train to Addis Ababa, and the journey was very long. For two full days the train ploughed its way and finally arrived Addis Ababa on the third day. When the train docked, I found that the station was full of Armenians, with a bearded priest together with Diran's father and mother standing in their midst. As soon as Diran came out and could be seen, his mother shouted his name and collapsed, losing her conscience for a moment. When she recovered, she hugged her long departed son. Watching Diran finally reunited with his mother, I forgot completely that someone owes me a sum of money. In spite of the fact that Diran promised to repay me as soon as he would meet his father, I could not remain. Immediately, I went out of the station ...”

One wonders why would Sabri cry as he remembers this event in a recording that he made more than fifty years later? The answer is that he himself was deprived of his mother by a cruel paternal uncle, who treated her badly and chased the mother away after being widowed, in order to lay hands on her inheritance. Later, Sabri and his older brother Sobhi, had to escape torture by the same uncle, and seek refuge in their mother's new marriage home – just to suffer a yet more severe torture, and eventual dismissal by an unwelcoming father-in-law. Thus, Sabri was, again, deprived of living with his mother.

Back to Sabri, the penniless stranger with unheeded advice!

With very little money remaining in his pocket, Sabri went to the cheapest lodging around. His 'room' was a shack on a roof-top.

Thirsty and hungry, he remembered that before leaving Egypt, a wise Bahá'í advised him to keep his money in the innermost pocket of his undercoat.

'Being a stranger in that country,' he was warned, ***'you would die of hunger if you were careless with your money by spending or losing it. Given your condition, a stranger that does not own money for his food would be in great trouble!'***

However, the doors of Addis were flung open to him due to this exemplary sacrifice, in Sabri's words:

“As I was deeply absorbed in my worrying thoughts, I went out of my shack and began to pace the roof of the building. Looking around in the dark surroundings, I took notice of an apartment building that was separated from the hotel by another parallel street. Suddenly, the top apartment of that building was brightly lit and became noisy – Lo! The entire Armenian crowd that I saw at the train station came in, with Dirán in their midst – right in front of my eyes!”

‘Dirán!’ I shouted desperately. ‘Yes, Sabrí!’ the relieving answer came!

“Soon, a delegation of those Armenians came to me at the hotel and took me to the apartment in a warm welcoming spirit. The priest had some knowledge of Arabic, yet his vocabulary was very simple. In his broken Arabic he said, ‘This young man is Egyptian. The Egyptians are all kind-hearted and would never fail anyone who may be in trouble.’ Thus, he continued to praise the Egyptians in this manner as if I was the chieftain of the Egyptians, and I suddenly became the recipient of such hospitality, and got my money back!”

Not having a sufficient capital to start a tailoring shop, Sabrí's first business was that of a humble coffee shop that soon attracted two Ethiopian dignitaries: Ato Siyoum Gibril Salama and his brother Ato Haile Gibril. At first, these two brothers helped Sabrí move to a place suitable for tailoring, and later became the first-ever Ethiopians to embrace the Faith.



Sabrí's relentless teaching efforts brought more people to the Faith including two prominent Muslim clergymen, Hajji Sharíf Al-Hararí, Judge of the Muslim Court, and Siyyid Mansúr, the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Addis Ababa. Thus, the number in Addis Ababa reached some 15 declared Bahá'ís, including one Egyptian and two Yemenis.

Addis Ababa's LSA was elected!

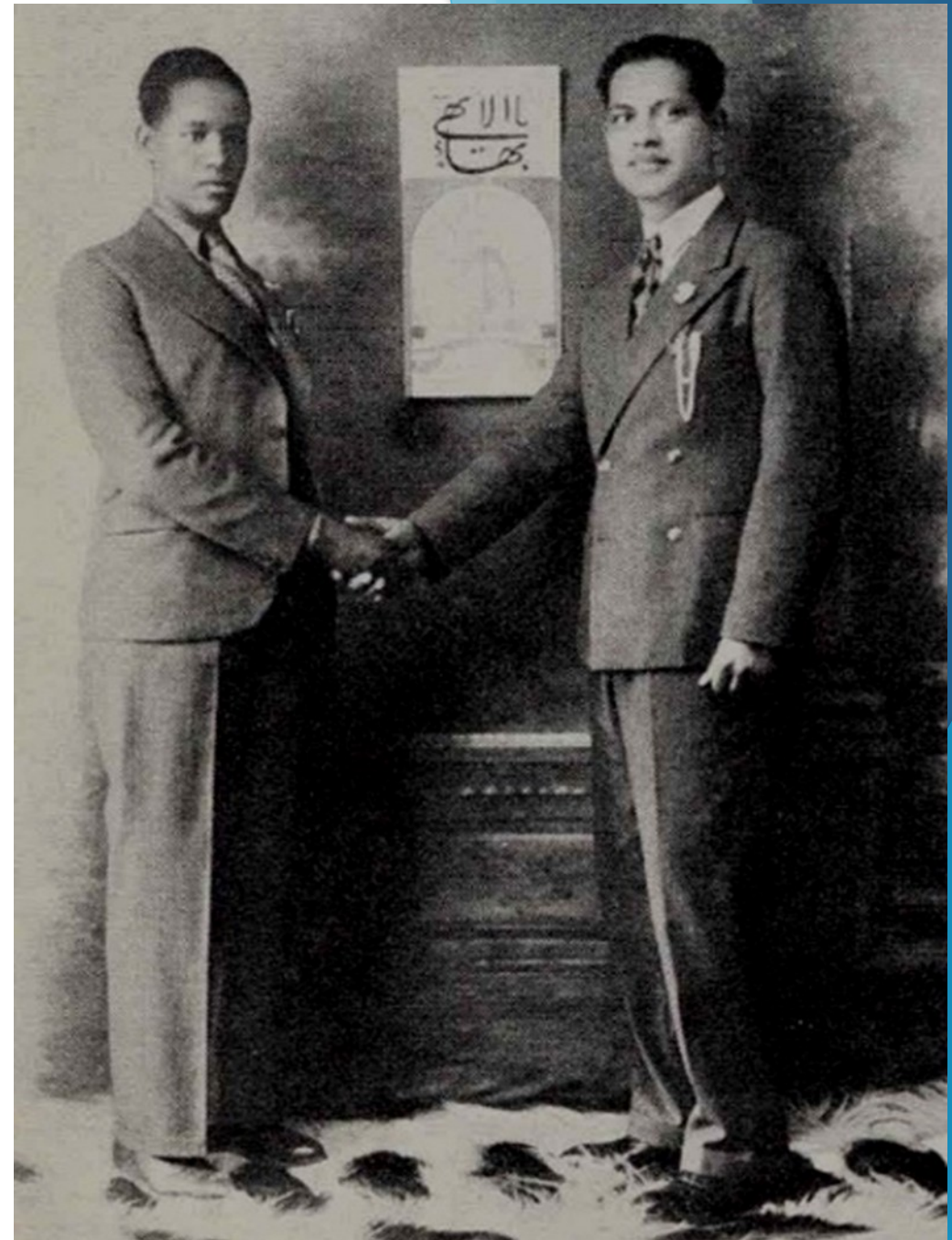


A landmark achievement: **Translating and publishing *Baha'u'llah and The New Era* in Amharic**

This proved to be a daunting task, given Sabri's lack of any knowledge of the Amharic language.

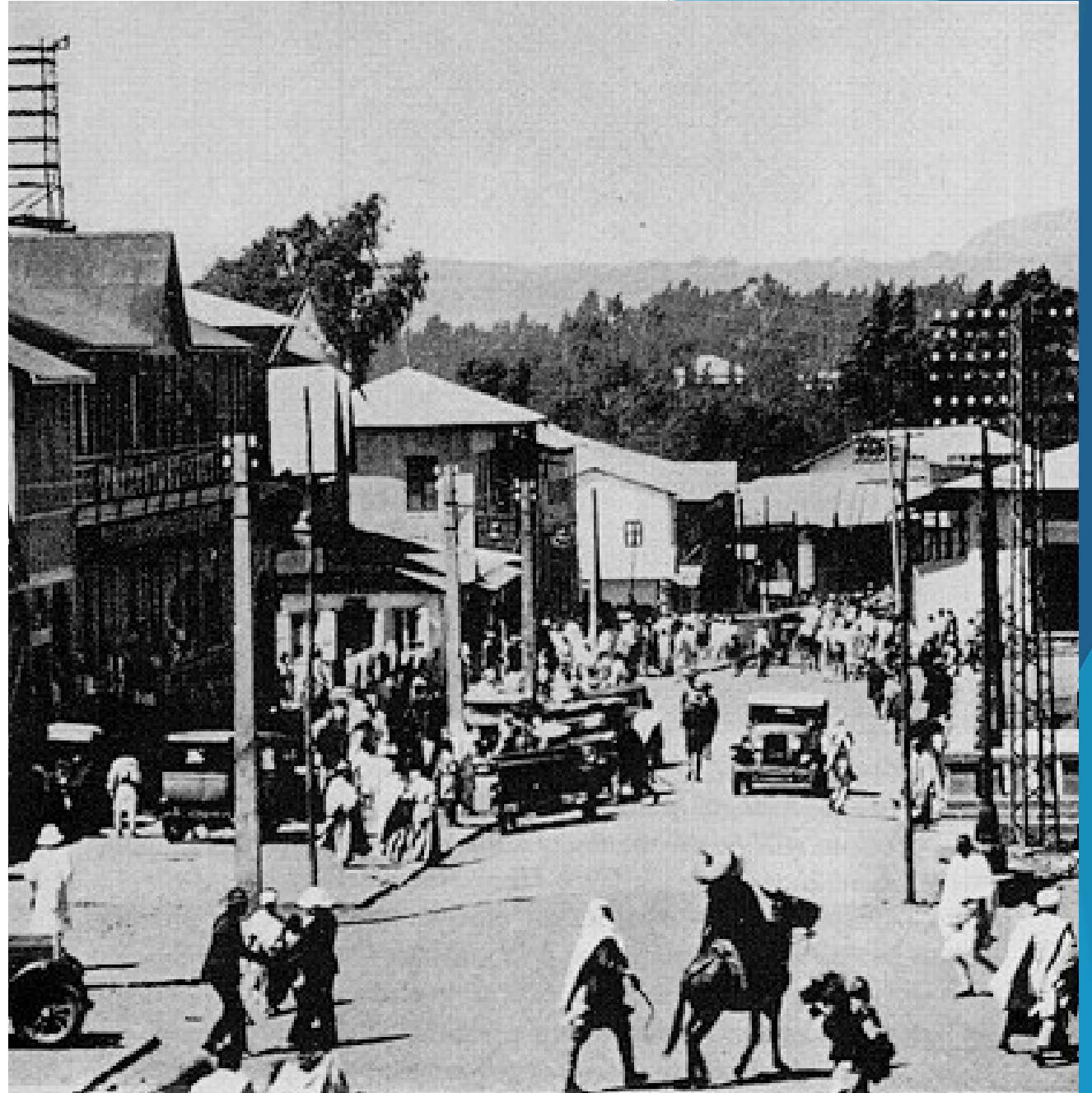
After two futile and painful attempts, the second of which was with the person photographed here, the Siyoum brothers stepped in for the translation, free of any charge. This edition, which was followed two decades later by a more accurate translation, is still in demand due to its appealing style.

Ample copies of the book were printed and circulated widely, contributing to the spread of the Message to remote areas.



Other achievements

- ▶ **Compiling and dissemination of a booklet on Bahá'í principles**
- ▶ **Proclamation through newspaper articles on the Faith, and talks at public occasions**
- ▶ **Indirect extension of teaching to remote areas**
- ▶ **Silencing the clamor of unavoidable enemies of the Faith, through Sabri's audacity, integrity, and upright conduct**



The window of opportunity comes to an abrupt close

Italy invades northern areas of Ethiopia and positions its troops for a march on the Capital by early 1936

Unaware of this menace, Sabri receives an alarming letter from Subhi in Egypt who was following the news of the invasion

Sabri reluctantly cables Shoghi Effendi for guidance, and receives directives to leave with prayers for his safety

Hurriedly, Sabri deposits his stock of Baha'i literature in the train station's freight depot, and looks for any means of transport to return to Egypt

The last freight train leaving Addis to Djibouti was Sabri's lifeline



A journey of all sorts

Once in Djibouti after almost a week in a suffocating freight wagon, during which his food and drink were what the surrounding nature and indigenous sources could provide, Sabri found a boat that took him to the port of Aden, a calling point for ships heading to Port Said.

Walking in Aden's market, he found a European being attacked by mobs, in retaliation for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Donning a western hat and with near-European features, Sabri sensed danger. He threw away his hat and bought himself a black fez. (photograph taken later in better times!)



Arriving in Egypt

Once in Port Said, his confusion was great such that he passed several times by the Yazdi shop (a liaison office with Haifa) before identifying it.

At the Yazdi shop, Sabri found a permission for pilgrimage already waiting for him. Without tarrying to catch his breath or eagerness to see his family in Alexandria, he immediately jumped on the next train to Haifa.

A pilgrimage viewed in the right perspective

The exact date and hour of his arrival to the point of his adoration will remain unknown, but he was then drawn by a strong magnet to get the blessing of meeting the Guardian of his Faith for the second time.

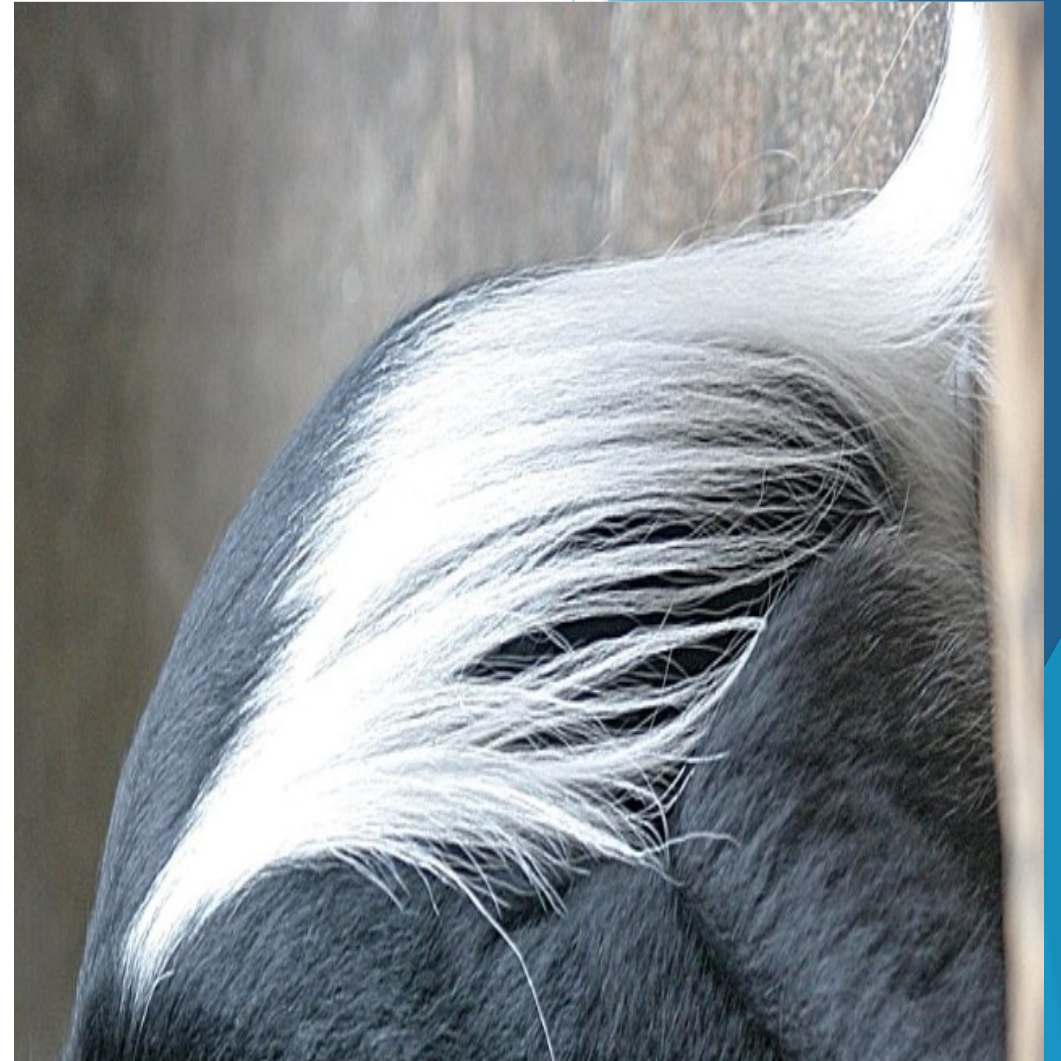
Being unheralded, nobody was at Haifa train station to receive him, and Sabri didn't leave any account of how he met Shoghi Effendi this time. But the unique significance of this pilgrimage will be more and more understood and appreciated by future generations.

Bewildered, yet prepared!

One might think that Sabri was empty-handed when he hurried for safety out of Addis Ababa

He carried 18 copies of the Amharic *Bahá'u'lláh And The New Era*.

Above all, he also took with him a personal gift to Shoghi Effendi: a hide of a rare monkey, known as *guereza* that, he thought, would warm the Guardian's feet while working at his desk on cold nights



**A 2,500 year old prophecy,
inadvertently fulfilled!**

**Shoghi Effendi put Sabri's gift into its right
perspective – in Sabri's audio-taped description:**

***“I reached Haifa and presented this gift, but His
Eminence [Shoghi Effendi] instructed that Sabri
Elias is to place this gift with his own hands in
the Bahá'í Archives, in the presence of all the
resident and pilgrim Bahá'ís of Haifa. He
explained that this was, in fact, a gift from the
Land of Abyssinia. It was a kind gesture for
honouring Abyssinia, as I understood.”***

A 2,500 year old prophecy, inadvertently fulfilled!

“I used to read those days in the Book of Isaiah [18:7] a verse that says,

*‘In that time shall the present be brought **unto the Lord of hosts** of a people scattered and peeled, and from a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden under foot, whose land the rivers have spoiled to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, the mount Zion.’*

“Thus, I placed the gift (in the Bahá’í Archives) and read those verses that I never thought to apply to the time!”

A noteworthy coincidence

It was, more or less, when Sabri was heading to Haifa with “Abyssinia’s gift to the Lord of Hosts”, that another historic journey took place, of less spiritual significance.

Forced by the Italian invasion to leave his Kingdom, Emperor Haile Selassie started his journey to temporary exile in Bath, England, but starting with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The Emperor, his family and imperial entourage arrived in Haifa in May 1936 in great pomp.

As Abdu’l-Bahá wrote of Agnes Alexander: *“I declare by the Lord of Hosts that had this respected daughter founded an empire, that empire would not have been so great! For this sovereignty is eternal sovereignty and this glory is everlasting glory.”*

Sabri, under the Guardian's care!

Shoghi Effendi's soul-searching eyes noticed Sabri's indisposition, and immediately entrusted him to the care of a visiting group from Al-Adasiyyih, the Baha'i village across River Jordan.

There they took him to certain springs of a medicinal water that healed him completely!

Back in Haifa, Shoghi Effendi extended Sabri's pilgrimage to thirty days, instead of the customary nine.



Praises on arrival, and on departure

At the end of this memorable pilgrimage, Shoghi Effendi bid Sabri a special farewell - in Sabri's glowing words:

“Having regained my health, His Eminence the Guardian granted me permission to return to Egypt, and bade me farewell, *‘Rendered confirmed and victorious, God willing!’*”

Upon receiving me for the first time, after my return from Abyssinia, His Eminence welcomed me by saying, *‘You have returned victorious and triumphant ... because you were the cause of linking the north of Africa to its south!’*

In brief, His Eminence showered me with his graceful praise. He also told me, *‘At the beginning, your service was simple, but it has assumed a different dimension, and it will not be effaced from the annals of history.’*

**For the complete story of Sabr  & Raissa Elias
see**

***MOTHS
TURNED EAGLES
The Spiritual Conquests
Of Sabr  & Raissa Elias***

**by
Gamal Hassan**

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