

10 June 1981

Dear Friends,

We have been extremely busy these days and it pains me to think of how I have not been able to write to you. We have so many overwhelming stories to relate, stories so glorious that one feels guilty about not being able to write them. One of the greatest, most important and most bewildering features of the present persecutions is our Bahá'í children. So much is told about the pressures, the persecution, and the plight of our adult believers whether in the cities or in the villages and at their jobs and their professions, how these outstanding symbols of perseverance and love bear every degree of hardship with joy, calm and dignity and are the embodiments of submission to the Will of God. Yet hardly anything has been said about our dear children, what has been falling upon these blessed little souls, what these cherished ones, the newest members of the Company of the Righteous<sup>1</sup>, have been manifesting and their astonishing role. You would be dumbfounded to see what they do, what is their essence and reality and how their gentle and dear beings reach such heights of grandeur!

After the Revolution, this New Creation of the Blessed Beauty has been displaying their true inner character and the magnificence of their souls. All the characteristics and the laudable fruits of the tree of humanity that are destined for this "supreme Talisman<sup>2</sup>," they have manifested and continue to do so. Of course, after reading the Writings of His Holiness the Báb, one expects this: "The newly born babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time, and the lowliest and most unlearned of that period shall surpass in understanding the most erudite and accomplished divines of this age...."<sup>3</sup> It is expected that this manifestation becomes clear as the day just as His Holiness 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "By the favor of God, how often a drop hath become undulating like a sea, and an atom hath become shining like the sun!"<sup>4</sup>

But now the tale of these amazing and incredible beings. Whatever I tell of these little heroes of the Faith is astounding and hard to believe. What effects and what fruits of human accomplishment they show! What knowledge and what scientific approach! What depth of understanding and how profound the power of thought! And more important than all, what strength and fortitude they evince! These tender saplings are flourishing and blossoming under these tremendous emotional and spiritual hardships and pressure. They bloom day by day and one sees that it is under this oppression and persecution that the generation tasked by Bahá'u'lláh to build His new civilization on the ruins of the old world order is growing, maturing and coming of age.

It is unbelievable that human beings could ever think of pressuring innocent children of such tender age in the way the people in the schools of Iran are doing at this time. Thousands of our dear Bahá'í children are facing such inhumane afflictions. Their aptitude and intelligence are without parallel. Everyone recognizes these talents in them. They are often called "young scientists" and it

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<sup>1</sup> Company of the Righteous, or the People of Righteous is another reference to the Bahá'ís of Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh: Gleanings CXXII: "Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess."

<sup>3</sup> The Báb, quoted in "The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation", trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v3, p. 561.

is recognized that they are more knowledgeable than their teachers. Their superiority even the enemies of the Faith grudgingly acknowledge. Sometimes, when government authorities complain about the activities of the Bahá'ís, they cite as examples the actions of our little ones and how they confront their Muslim teachers and fellow pupils.

What do these children do that makes them deserve such pressures? Our Bahá'í children excel in their Islamic religious lessons and know the subject matter better than all their fellow students. They read and explain the meaning of the Qur'án better than their Muslim counterparts, sometimes even better than their teachers! If there is a Bahá'í child in a class, undoubtedly the highest mark in Islamic religious studies belongs to him or her. Their teachers are often left in awe. They win all competitions in the recitation of the Qur'án and in religious instruction examinations. Yes, when it comes to religious studies and reading and interpreting the verses of the Qur'án, these children show such aptitude and capacity that the teachers are frequently surprised and in awe, but at the same time they are extremely resentful.

It is thus that these teachers have initiated a campaign of opposition and conflict against these little ones. When asked where is the justice or fairness in attacking a child of ten or eleven years of age, they angrily reply that that these Bahá'í children know more than they do! They complain that in their classes the Bahá'í children are occasionally made prayer leaders and are nicknamed by their fellow students "little Ayatollahs" because these Bahá'í children with their elegant words and eloquent speech – and much better than their teachers – explain and elucidate the verses of the Qur'án.

This is a glimpse of how these troubles start! The teachers feel that these young Bahá'í children with such intelligence, understanding and knowledge need to be "guided to the right path"<sup>5</sup> under the directives of the Ministry of Education. It is certain that the Ministry has adopted a detailed and menacing plan to brainwash the Bahá'í children. We have so much evidence of such a plan! Their political and religious leaders are gathering together and discussing how best to "guide" and "educate" these Bahá'í children. You would be so surprised to see what a detailed and all-encompassing effort the authorities of the present régime are putting in to confront our young children and youth. How suddenly they are surrounded and confronted. Two or three instructors of religious classes or trained ideologists of the Ministry of Education, sometimes more, as well as a number of students, join forces and attack a Bahá'í child of ten or eleven years. With all their power they try to shatter the very foundation of the child's beliefs. They will argue with them for hours and use multiple techniques and methods to "guide" them. But these dear young ones have been inhaling the breath of love of God since their first breath and have been stirred by the gentle breezes of His Will. They rise to defend themselves and repel such a concerted and rigorous attack against their beliefs. You would be wonder struck to see them reply and respond to their teachers. They quote verses from the Qur'án by heart and use memorized quotations from the Bahá'í Writings. They explain, interpret and analyze, adduce proofs and give deductions.

Sometimes such confrontation between a teacher, perhaps in his thirties, and his Bahá'í pupil of ten or eleven years of age, takes place in the classroom. The teacher begins with a barrage of insults, unfair accusations, and calumnies against the Faith. The child, of course, does not

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<sup>5</sup> Meaning, use the resources of the Ministry of Education to convert these Bahá'í children into Islam.

passively accept these insults and responds impressively and with remarkable lucidity. Thus, begins the public discussion about the Faith between him and his teacher. It is often the teacher that is rendered astonished and speechless. This delights the other children, who applaud and sometimes shout “hooray!” for the student who has overcome the mighty instructor. The teacher then becomes irate and leaves the classroom to consult with other teachers, who now come to his rescue. This time, two or three of the teachers gang up on the Bahá’í child and pull him away from other classes, such as gymnastics or mathematics, to discuss the Faith. Here are three of them attacking one young child hoping to overwhelm and penetrate his mind with their arguments! They argue and argue. What a fair encounter! It is truly astounding. What a mighty effort they put in! What pressure do they impose on him and what fortitude and steadfastness does the child show! These are unbelievable. We are so worried for these little ones. We pray and beseech God that, in this arena where there has not been - and shall never be - any fairness or equity between the force of the aggressors and the stamina of our young defenders, they may receive less damage and battering.

We have hundreds and hundreds of such cases. It has been such a joy sitting with these amazing souls and listening to them sharing what they have heard and what replies they have given. I am enclosing a few examples for you and these you may share with others to help answer this one question, “Do these young ones play a less significant role in this struggle compared to the older ones?”

Consider the kindergartens and the accomplishments of our youngest children, how with courage and power they chant prayers by heart and sing Bahá’í songs. Some of the more prejudiced and fanatical teachers get irate and angry while others joyfully listen and marvel at the aptitude and intelligence of the young child and think of the child as a prodigy. The child is then taken to the headmaster’s office and, once again, this dear and amazing young child, now in front of all teachers and the headmaster, chants Bahá’í songs and recites passages from the Hidden Words. Is there a more astonishing sight?

Little Sámán is five years old. He has memorized six prayers - the Short Obligatory Prayer, the prayer for ablutions and a number of extracts from the Bahá’í Writings- and recites them beautifully and eloquently by heart. He is just preparing himself for entrance to the first grade. He is studious, dedicated and very bright. One can see the magnitude of his talents and intelligence just by observing his beautiful eyes. He learns incredibly quickly and can beautifully and with eloquence recite and repeat whatever he has been taught. In this way, he has learned all the songs and poems taught in kindergarten.

One day, an education inspector is sent to his school and the teacher, in order to boast how successful he has been in teaching the children in his class, calls upon Sámí<sup>6</sup> to recite whatever verses he had been taught in class. Sámí then proceeds and with full poise and control recites them one by one. His performance astonishes the inspector. At the end, the teacher says, “My dear Sámí could you also recite the poem ‘I am a Muslim child.’?” Sámí stays silent and merely observes the teacher with those intelligent eyes, not uttering a single word. The teacher repeats his instruction, but this young child stays quiet and motionless. The teacher is puzzled and a bit

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<sup>6</sup> Nickname for Sámán

shocked, so he asks again, and yet again, silence is the only answer he gets. Now the teacher gets embarrassed in front of the inspector. He is certain that any poem the other kids learned, Sámi knows ten times better. Finally, he asks, "I am sure you know this. Why aren't you saying it?" Sámi then replies, "because I am not Muslim, I am a Bahá'í."

The inspector then storms out of the room in anger and the situation now escalates to the headmaster's office. Sámi's mother is called to the school. She is warned that Sámi should be instructed not to teach the Faith! They then explain the situation to the mother who has no idea what has just happened. Outside of the school premises, Sámi's mother recommends that he should try and not openly proclaim his Faith since it is possible that they may bother him. However, this little child of us has learned steadfastness from his Bahá'í community and does not capitulate. He says, "I am a Bahá'í and will proclaim that everywhere!" He has also learned justice and forbearance when facing the injustice of the fanatics and the prejudiced and says, "if they bother me, I will go to the police station and complain! It is close to here!" Until now little Sámi has refused to recite that poem, even at home and in front of his own parents!

Iláhih is eight years old and the daughter of Ihsán Mehdízádeh, one of the three recent martyrs in Shíráz. She is the only one of his family who was allowed to meet with her father the day before his execution. The day after the funeral of her beloved father, Iláhih takes flowers and sweets to her school and distributes them amount the teacher and her classmates. The shocked teacher looks at the composed face of this and asks, "is it is a Bahá'í custom to bring flowers and sweets when one's father is killed?" This is how our little girl replies, "My father was not killed, he was martyred!"

Akram Mutahharí, the eleven-year-old daughter of Mr. 'Alí Mutahharí, one of the seven martyrs of Yazd<sup>7</sup>, is another example of such astonishing actions and heroism. Sometime after the martyrdom of these 7 blessed souls, her teacher asks the students in her class to write an essay about their experiences and memoirs during the summer vacation. Akram in a sweet and factual way details all that has happened to her family during the summer-how the Revolutionary Guards and others came to their house and took her beloved father away, how they kept him in prison for some time, how she met him in prison, and finally about his martyrdom. Her essay is so moving that it brings tears to the eyes of the teacher and the children in her class. However, since the word "Bahá'í" is written in the essay, the anger of the prejudiced teacher is aroused. He takes her essay and heads for the headmaster's office. A few days later, the headmaster summons this young girl to his office and says, "your essay deserves an A+, but since you have mentioned the word "Bahá'í" a few times, you need to take it back." Our innocent Akram says, "I was supposed to write about my experiences during the summer. Whatever I have written is the exact truth. My father was killed because he was a Bahá'í!" The headmaster threatens Akram and says, "I should expel you because of what you have said and written, but since your mother has lost a husband and suffered a great deal, I will permit you to stay." Eventually, the headmaster demands that Akram write an essay on some other subject, which she does and finally gets her A+.

I have asked her to write about this experience in her own words and she has. She and her older sister have both written their experiences and have sent them to me. I read these for other Bahá'í

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<sup>7</sup> The seven who were martyred on 8 September 1980 included 2 Auxiliary Board Members and 5 prominent Bahá'ís, one of whom was 78 years old.

junior youth and youth so that they become familiar with the power of the youth and hear in a language similar to themselves what has befallen us.

But the tale of Ármán Yazdání is a different tale and an epic story of the pressure and persecution that has befallen these youngest blossoms of our community. Ármán and his family live in Tehran. I heard that because of the pressures that has been applied to him at school, he has started having headaches. A physician has diagnosed Ármán as having tension headaches. I went to see him. You would hardly believe what a degree of difficulty this petite child with mischievous eyes has had to face. I had asked him to write it down for me, but his mother said that he has been unable to jot down everything- he has forgotten some parts. However, I am forwarding what he has been able to relate, and in his own handwriting, so that you may realize what degree of injustice and pressure is levied against these innocent children. You get to witness how 3 prejudiced and fanatic teachers gang up to attack this frail 11-year-old boy. Little Ármán is unable to tolerate the verbal insults of these and right in front of his friends initiates a defense of the Faith. Using his own logic and reasoning, he refutes their false accusations. His friends and classmates get excited and clap and shout hooray! The teacher has no concerns that he is dealing with a young and vulnerable child. Rather, he sees in Ármán a formidable adversary and unleashes his attacks. Even then, Ármán prevails. The teacher calls for help from 2 other teachers and now these 3 together start the process of “enlightening” our young child. Whatever Ármán holds dear and sacred, they insult and curse. They bring books written against the Faith and read them for the entire class. There is no humiliation or insult that they spare. The ultimate and most tragic is that they put him in a room by himself and place these books in front of him and make him copy all the most offensive and insulting attacks against the Faith again and again and again! Tell me, wouldn’t someone older, bigger and stronger than Ármán also develop similar headaches under these conditions of psychologic torture? What a heinous attack! What an evil battle! In one corner, 3 educated adult teachers backed by their government and the rank and file of the country and in the other, a fragile 11-year-old!

And now Ilhám, the oldest daughter of Mr. Ihsán Mihdízádi<sup>8</sup>. She is 14 years old. On 30 April the news arrives that the blessed body of his esteemed father, who had fallen victim to darts of oppression and tyranny and for no other reason than being a lover of the Blessed Beauty, along with that of two other pure souls had arrived at the Bahá’í cemetery of Shíráz. She and her mother go to see him one last time, but they are denied entry. The reason they give is that the decree of the religious leaders has been that the burial must take place quietly and without anyone<sup>9</sup>. But she calls to the Revolutionary Guards and pleads with them, she says “tell me which one of you was it that killed my father? I would like to give him gifts and sweets and kiss his hands<sup>10</sup>.” The next day at school she is surrounded by her tearful and crying friends who share how much they have been crying over the news of the death of her father. In class the teacher asks her how come she is not

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<sup>8</sup> Mr. Ihsánu'lláh Mihdízádi was a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Shíráz and was martyred alongside Mr. Yadu'lláh Vahdat and Mr. Sattár Khushkhu on 30 April 1981

<sup>9</sup> The Bahá’í cemetery had been confiscated by the authorities and was under their control.

<sup>10</sup> The Persian statement to kiss someone’s hands means to show how greatly you appreciate something that they did for you.

crying? With much dignity and composure, she replies, “it is because my father was martyred for his beliefs [in the Faith]. Why should I be crying?”

Ru’yá has just turned fifteen and is in the first year of high school. Her school is not in a remote village where prejudiced and uneducated people might be expected to live. It is in one of the prosperous localities north of Tehran and is supposedly more civilized. A few months into the school year, an instructor of religion enters her classroom and loudly asks, “is there anyone here who does not belong to the true religion?/is there anyone here who is a non-religionist?” Naturally, no one replies. The instructor then says, “what I mean by non-religionist is a Bahá’í. Which one of you is a Bahá’í?” Ru’yá then stands up and says, “I am a Bahá’í”. The teacher then in abusing and insulting language says, “this girl is unclean and untouchable<sup>11</sup> and none of you are to have any contact with her.” The teacher then demands that Ru’yá sit in the back of the room at a desk by herself, sending those sitting with her to another seat. He then announces that from that day until the end of the school year, no one is allowed to sit next to Ru’yá because she is unclean and anyone sitting next to her will also become unclean!

The first few days, Ru’yá enjoys the freedom to spread out her work and not be crammed in like the rest. But, little by little, being alone and shunned, and having others avoid her because she is “unclean” takes its toll on her, especially for a young person at such an age where social interactions and friendships matter a lot.

How my heart breaks to see our children and youth suffer daily humiliation and insults in the name of the Blessed Beauty! It is a wonder how strong, deepened, and steadfast they are! And our Ru’yá? She just turned 15 and immediately signed her declaration card, strengthening and reinforcing her bond with What has caused her so much isolation, loneliness, humiliation and pressure!

I have asked some of these children to write about their experiences and the types of discussions they have had with their teachers and fellow students. A beautiful compilation has been made, and although it has been composed by these children in simple language, it demonstrates the depth of their understanding of the Faith and their profound love for Bahá’u’lláh.

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of ritual uncleanness/untouchable (نجس) as understood and practiced in some tribal societies and in the religious communities of certain earlier Dispensations, particularly various sects of Islam, does not have an equivalent meaning in the West. It means that there are items that are ritually unclean and coming into contact would make the Muslim ritually unclean. These are diverse and include animals such as dogs and pigs but also can include women in their courses. Bahá’u’lláh abolished this concept (see Kitáb-i-Aqdas para.75). Bahá’u’lláh wrote, “God hath, likewise, as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of ‘uncleanness’, whereby divers things and peoples have been held to be impure. He, of a certainty, is the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous. Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Ridván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes.”