Orbison, Virginia: 40 years of service to Faith

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published in Bahá'í News586, pp. 3-5

1980-01

Virginia Orbison was five years old when she first heard about the Bahá’í Faith. She recalls now that she hadn't thought much of it then.

If she had known she would spend 40 years or more of her life spreading the Message of Bahá’u’lláh to South America and Europe, she might have paid closer attention while Claudia Coles was explaining to her somewhat skeptical mother about `Abdu'l-Bahá.

Years later, in Geyserville, California, Miss Orbison heard Helen Bishop speak about the Faith. Suddenly, she recalls, "I said to myself, 'This is the Cause of God,'" and a light went on in her heart. It has been shining brightly ever since.

Miss Orbison carried that light to South America in 1942.

"The Guardian had begun asking for pioneers in 1937," she says. "His first cable said, 'They must know the language.' Well, I didn't know Spanish, and didn't feel qualified to pioneer."

Somewhat later, however, when the appeals for pioneers became more urgent, Miss Orbison decided that the time had come for her to make the move.

In September 1942 she arrived in Santiago, Chile, to carry on the teaching work begun by Marcia Atwater, who had been forced by ill health to abandon her pioneer post.

Miss Orbison remembers many of the early pioneers in South America: Louise Caswell and Cora Oliver in Panama; Gayle Woolson in Costa Rica; John Stearns, who opened Ecuador to the Faith and later died of cancer in Lima, Peru.

"You see," she says, "the Guardian asked simply that those countries be opened, that there be just a few Bahá’ís. He didn't specify numbers."

However, she points out, not only was every goal opened, but Local Spiritual Assemblies were formed in every country. What she terms "a miracle" was accomplished by a handful of pioneers, most of them women.

"When I look back on it," she says, "I don't see how it was possible. But Bahá’u’lláh opens doors, and you simply do it.

"I'd never heard of 'culture shock' or anything like that. I was at a pioneer training institute the other day, and I think they are fabulous. When we went pioneering, we didn't know what we were going to do, hadn't the vaguest idea. And remember, I had been a Bahá’í for nine years before I went pioneering."

Having studied French at a boarding school in Paris, Miss Orbison was able to learn Spanish relatively quickly. To support herself, she took photographs and sold them to movie studios. Before pioneering, she had worked for nine years as a research librarian at Paramount Pictures, so she knew what sort of photos would most interest the studios.

The teaching work was slow and tedious. "I thought to myself," she says, "'I will never live to see indigenous Indian Bahá’ís.' And now look! There are thousands and thousands of them."

After spending 3 1/2 years in South America, Miss Orbison became ill and had to return to the U.S. Following her recovery she returned to South America, this time to Brazil, where she met Leonora Holsapple Armstrong, who had pioneered to Brazil in 1921 when 'Abdu’l-Bahá first raised the call for pioneers. Mrs. Armstrong arranged for the first translation into Spanish of Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era. The translation was made by a Spanish nun.

"Unfortunately," says Miss Orbison, "the translation was not a very good one, and is no longer used."

Mrs. Armstrong, who was designated "Mother of the Bahá’ís of Brazil" by the Guardian, is still serving the Faith there and is a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors.

After World War II, while much of Europe still lay in ruins, the Guardian issued a call for pioneers to European countries, and again Miss Orbison responded. In January 1947, carrying a letter of credentials from Horace Holley, then secretary of the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly, she flew from Rio de Janeiro to Lisbon, Portugal, on one of the first commercial flights across the Atlantic after the war, then settled in Madrid, Spain.

Of the political climate in Spain following the war, she says, "You had to be careful, very careful. You had to know someone well before you'd dare mention the Faith."

"Liberal" ideas simply weren't welcomed at that time. "You can't imagine," she says, "the things that were forbidden" — things such as Theosophy and Esperantism.

A young bank employee who was interested in Esperanto, the international language developed in the 19th century by Prof. Zamenhof, happened to correspond with a friend of Miss Orbison's in California who asked him to look her up in Madrid.

The young man did call on Miss Orbison, and during the course of their conversation she mentioned that a universal auxiliary language (such as Esperanto) is among the principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

"He came back the following day," she says, "and brought another man with him. They both became Bahá’ís almost immediately." They were the second and third Bahá’ís in Spain at that time.

Others were attracted to the Faith, but were afraid to become identified with it. Miss Orbison still remembers her disappointment when, in April of that year, there weren't enough Bahá’ís in Madrid to form a Local Spiritual Assembly. The following year, however, brought more declarations, and at Rid van 1948 the first Spiritual Assembly in Spain was formed in Madrid.

Shortly afterward, Marion Little spent eight months in Spain. She, Miss Orbison and a Spanish Bahá'í traveled to Barcelona where, in 1949, Spain's second Local Spiritual Assembly was formed.

Five years later, as the Ten Year Crusade got under way, Miss Orbison returned to Barcelona for a regional teaching conference following a teaching trip to the Balearic Islands and was surprised to see 40 chairs in the apartment that served as the Bahá'í National Center.

"Have you gone crazy?"she asked, knowing that large meetings were forbidden by the government.

"No pasa nada (nothing will happen)," she was told.

The meeting was held without interruption. But at 3 o'clock the next morning, someone knocked loudly on the door of the apartment in which Miss Orbison was staying with the secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly and a maid.

"Who's there?" Miss Orbison asked.

"Telegramma," said the voice behind the door. As Miss Orbison opened the door, she was greeted with the words, "La policia." A plain clothes member of the "Social Brigade" entered the apartment. "Are there any men here?" he asked.

"No," he was told. "You may look around if you like."

The apartment was searched, after which Miss Orbison and the other women were driven to the local jail. They remembered chilling stories of people having been taken away by the police and simply disappearing.

But Miss Orbison feared for more than her life. In her purse was a list of all the Bahá’ís in Spain.

At the police station, they were taken to a cell three floors underground. Miss Orbison thought of the Siyyah-Chal (Black Pit) in Tihran in which Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned for several months in 1852.

Uniformed policemen stood guard outside the filthy cells. One by one, the Bahá’ís of Barcelona were brought from their homes until all of them, five men and five women, were gathered together in the jail. Forbidden to speak to one another, they wrapped themselves in blankets, prayed and finally slept.

During the night they were taken upstairs, two at a time, for questioning. The first to be questioned were Miss Orbison and a man named Louis, a former Communist.

Outside the office sat a young man who had recently been enrolled in the Faith."Aren't you coming in too?" Miss Orbison asked. "No," he replied. "I'm staying out." She suspected that the man was a spy for the police. In any event, she never saw him again.

Under questioning, Miss Orbison soon realized that the police suspected the Bahá’ís of being Communists or connected to some other so-called subversive cause.

"This man," she said to her interrogator, referring to Louis, "was an atheist, and now he is a Bahá’í."

"You mean he was a Communist," said the interrogator.

"All right, a Communist," she replied. "But now he is a Bahá’í and believes in God. That's an example of what the Bahá’í Faith can do." She tried to explain the Bahá’í principle of obedience to government.

Her purse was taken. She feared that the list of Bahá’ís would be found, but nothing was ever said of it.

Finally, she says, the police were convinced that the Bahá’ís posed no threat to the government, and all were released the following day. They had been treated politely, and no one was harmed.

"We thought at first that this was a calamity," she says, "but it was quite the opposite. It made the Faith known to the government in a favorable way."

Today, says Miss Orbison, the Bahá’ís in Spain are free to proclaim the Faith publicly, and are generally busy putting up signs, holding parades, writing articles for the news media, or speaking on radio or television.

The one thing Miss Orbison says she has learned during 40 years of pioneering is that "one must have faith that, if he or she is on a mission for Bahá’u’lláh, it is bound to turn out right, it must be successful," even if it doesn't appear to be at any given moment.

And like any veteran pioneer, she has a dramatic story to illustrate the point.

While living in Lima, Peru, Miss Orbison visited the U.S. Consulate to speak with George Valiant, a former curator of the Philadelphia Museum who was director of an English-language education project.*

Mr. Valiant asked her what would happen if a Bahá’í were forced to choose between the Faith and his job.

"If he was truly a Bahá'í," she said, "he would leave his job."

Shortly afterward, Mr. Valiant confronted a teacher on his project, who had recently become a Bahá'í, with that very choice. The teacher left the Faith. After that, Mr. Valiant ridiculed the Faith at every opportunity.

The following year, while waiting for a job interview in Brazil, Miss Orbison picked up a newspaper and was stunned by a headline: "George Valiant Commits Suicide."

Mr. Valiant, she says, had been named U.S. Ambassador to Spain, but before leaving for the post, he went into his garden and shot himself.

"No one knows why," she says. "But before he died, he mumbled something about solutions to the world's problems. He had made fun of a solution to the world's problems when I'd told him the Bahá'ís had it."

Why, she wonders, had she happened across that paper? Why at that particular time and place? She had no idea she soon would be pioneering to Spain, or that she would be presenting herself to the American ambassador there.

"Suppose George Valiant were the ambassador," she says. "After all, he was supposed to be. He'd have put me out right away. I'd never have gotten anywhere. Instead, here was this perfectly marvelous man, Phillip Bonsole, a Quaker. He even offered to bring Bahá'í books into Spain through the Embassy for me."

Miss Orbison recalls her tests with humor and understanding, and her achievements with humility. She looks to the future with confidence, wishing only for enough time to do what must be done for the Faith.

When she first became a Bahá'í, says Miss Orbison, she was expected to study the Writings diligently. She read everything that was available and became quite proud of her knowledge.

"And now, after 40 years in the Faith," she says, "I feel I don't really know anything."

Following her return to Spain, Miss Orbison hopes to find time to complete a history of the Faith in that country. She is 77 years old.

* Notes: Officially, Phillip W. Bonsal (note spelling) was not an ambassador, but he was the highest ranking gov't official in Spain w/ the title of Chargé d'Affaires. He is best known as the last U.S. Ambassador to Cuba.

Regarding George Vaillant (note spelling):

"Pezzati continued to tell the story of a previous Museum director, George Vaillant. Vaillant, who was director of the Museum from 1941 to 1945, committed suicide in 1945. He is said to haunt the Museum on several occasions. In 2007, a wispy phantom-like image believed to be Vaillant was caught on one of the Museum's 24/7 surveillance cameras." (From www.thedp.com/article/2011/10/dp_reporter_explores_the_secrets_of_penn_museum.)

His son, a noted psychiatrist, talks about him a bit here: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2005.00999.x/full. [-D.C., 2012]

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