

Jalal Khazeh Remembered

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Harry Liedtke

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In a few days from now it will be exactly 60 years when in a London hotel elevator I was given a big brotherly bear hug by a Hand of the Cause of God of the Baha'i Faith. It happened on Sunday, April 28, 1963 at a small hotel within walking distance of London's great Albert Hall. It was the opening day of the first Baha'i World Congress which we had come all the way from Toronto to attend.

My wife Gisele, our 10-year old son Keith and I were on our way to have breakfast. As the elevator door opened on the next floor down, a well built gentleman, thirty years my senior, stepped into our elevator and greeted us with a tentative smile. My wife's blond coiffeur and my own flaming red hair immediately told him that we came from the Occident and quite possibly were fellow Baha'is among 6,000 visitors from all over the world who had arrived for the Congress.

I in turn realized that he probably had come from the other end of the world for the very same reason. I smiled at him and offered him my hand in greeting. That's when he flung both his arms around me and squeezed me so hard that it momentarily took my breath away. I found out that my new friend was no other than Jalal Khazeh from Teheran and that he wore the mantle of a Hand of the Cause of God. Much later I read that "In 1952 Jalal Khazeh went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and considered himself to have been transformed by the experience. He said that before meeting Shoghi Effendi he exhibited pride, that he used to ignore the servants who swept the steps of the National Hazíratu'l-Quds in Tehran. Upon returning from pilgrimage he physically embraced these servants, lifting them off the ground."

It almost sounded as if he had prepared for our meeting in London. It made me feel doubly honored. It was Jalal's spontaneous bear hug in the elevator which right at the start set the tone for this first day of the Congress and for the rest of the event. It opened the flood gates of solidarity and love as I saw the many new faces from across the globe as long lost brothers or sisters. How I wished that this feeling of pure joy would stay with me during

life's inevitable ups and downs that lay ahead.

Our joyful encounters lasted deep into the night as we moved from one crowded reception room to the next to find old friends and to discover new ones. I couldn't believe it how among hundreds of people I again and again found friends whom I had known in Europe a decade earlier. I was now able to introduce them one by one to friends I had made more recently in North America. It seemed as if an invisible traffic warden was showing me the way through a shouting laughing, hugging mass of happy humanity.

Less successful by comparison was a lone London Bobby who tried in vain to shepherd high spirited visitors from Albert Hall across busy Kensington Avenue to the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park.

Nobody paid him the least attention until he desperately raised both his arms and shouted 'Allah-u-Abha'. The crowd froze, then ran to hug and kiss this perplexed man in uniform.

The memory of Jalal Khazeh's hug added a special motivation to my work as simultaneous translator when I had the honor to translate for a number of speakers like Ruhiyyih Khanum, Alvin Blum who had pioneered to the Solomon Islands, Rawland Estall from Canada and Pouva Murday who had opened up the Chagos Archipelago for the Baha'i Faith. Sitting in glassed cubicles high above Albert Hall's auditorium, the translators shared their historic tales with large non-English speaking sections in the audience. It all culminated in the introduction to the world of this dispensation's first Universal House of Justice.

Six decades later, I vividly recall the wonders and the blessings of the World Congress. It took place in a venue built by Queen Victoria in memory of her beloved Albert, Prince Consort Albert was a man of many talents. Early photography was one of his many interests. He also was a gifted musician and wrote music which the family played. In 1842 composer Felix Mendelssohn, then 32 years old, visited the Royal Couple at Buckingham Palace. They loved his music and sang along as he played the piano. He paid them several return visits and wrote to his mother, "the Palace is the only house in England where one feels completely at home."

Outside his family, Albert's deepest interests lay in commerce, engineering, manufacture and architecture. In the face of fierce opposition he orchestrated the Great Exhibition of 1851 and realized a profit which by his foresight went into the funding of South Kensington. It was nicknamed "Albertopolis", a collection of museums and institutions of learning. One of his dreams was a great Hall of Arts and Sciences, but he was not to see it built.

When in 1867 Queen Victoria laid the corner stone, she quite unexpectedly announced that 'Royal Albert' would be added to the hall's name. She opened Royal Albert Hall four years later. At the inaugural concert, Anton Bruckner himself played the steam engine driven organ. Millions of visitors have since listened here to countless world-class artists, but few may have noticed the

Queen's message that runs along the oval dome and speaks to her humanity and faith. Returning to London in 1964 I made a note of her Message which was not mentioned at our World Congress. On account of the building's height one can only catch its beginning when you cross Kensington Avenue and stand at the Albert Memorial.

"This Hall was erected for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences and Works of Industry of All Nations in Fulfillment of the Intentions of Albert, Prince Consort, — "The site was purchased with the proceeds of the Great Exhibition of the year 1851. The First Stone of the Hall was laid by Her Majesty Queen Victoria on the 20th day of May 1867 and was opened by her Majesty the 29th day of March in the year 1871. — Thine, Oh Lord, is the Greatness and Power and the Glory and the Victory and the Majesty. For All that is in the Heavens and in the Earth is Thine. The Wise and their Works are in the Hands of God. Glory be to God on High and on Earth Peace."

This Message, concealed to many, had made this venue worthy of hosting the Baha'i World Congress and certainly recommends itself to those who are the rulers of today.

And how could I ever forget Jalal Khazeh's brotherly bear hug in the elevator. I was about to do to him what he so spontaneously did to me. But as a 35-year old it probably didn't seem appropriate to hug a man my father's age. No, this would be a lame excuse. The truth is that sweet Jalal simply beat me to it.

By Harry Liedtke.

Kelowna, April 14, 2023

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