

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN THE ESPERANTO MOVEMENT*

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The first reference to the Bahá'í Faith among Esperantists probably occurred in an Esperanto review entitled *Amerika Esperantisto* (number 84 of *The British Esperantist* December 1911 notes the article according to *Amerika Esperantisto*). It presents the Bahá'í Faith as a united religious movement and provides a letter from the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Articles linked to the travels of 'Abdu'l-Bahá through Western Europe and North America appear more frequently in 1913 and 1914. At least two of his speeches at gatherings of Esperantists – Edinburgh 7 January 1913 and Stuttgart 5 April 1913 – appeared in Esperanto gazettes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's repeated proclamation of the Bahá'í Faith during his historic journeys in the West captured the attention of the Esperanto movement. The early Bahá'ís were assisted in their dissemination of the Faith by the Esperanto language and by periodicals in Esperanto.

In addition to his direct contact with Esperantists 'Abdu'l-Bahá informed Bahá'ís of the Esperanto movement and encouraged them to learn the language and to cooperate with Esperantists in the West. He strongly supported the introduction of Esperanto into Western Asia too. He personally invited Esperanto teachers to Iran. As a result the language became a regular subject in the 1930s in the Bahá'í School of Ishqabad, Turkmenistan. In addition, early Bahá'ís taking the Faith to East Asia, to China and Japan, mixed with Esperantists there by means of the language and they promoted the Esperanto movement too.

1925 was the year to usher in the most intense decade of Bahá'í activity in the Esperanto world to date. The international review *ESPERANTO* describing the annual Universal Congress stated: »Of all the specialized meetings the two gatherings in the Bahá'í Office were probably the most interesting, not only due to the ideas inherent to Bahaism but also owing to the broad participation of well known Esperantists together with their moral support...«

Congruent with these activities during and beyond the Universal Congresses an outstanding success was the founding in 1925 of a publishing house and its gazette of the same name – *La Nova Tago* – whose full title is rendered in English: *The New Day – The Bahá'í International Esperanto Gazette*. The founders were Bahá'í Esperantists: Friedrich Gerstner and Hermann Grossmann in Hamburg, Germany. Contributors in the following years included Lidia Zamenhof, Martha Root, John Esslemont, August Forel (the famous Swiss scientist), Vuk Echtner and for most of its life Paul Christaller as language supervisor.

* Provisionally translated into English by Paul Desailly from the original Esperanto.

Most likely profoundly convinced of the suitability of Esperanto vis-à-vis the Bahá'í call for an international auxiliary language and of its continued prosperity and acceptance the founders of this first international Bahá'í gazette focused on the promotion of a language bridge for the rapidly spreading Bahá'í community and also as a platform for bringing the Esperantists of the world to the Faith. In essence Bahá'í Esperanto endeavour by this time was already the two way street it remains to this day. Gerstner recorded in the Gazette's first edition of its second year of publication: »We want firstly to make the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh made known to the Esperanto Movement and secondly to propagate Esperanto in Bahá'í circles.«

For quite a few years La Nova Tago prospered quite well. But, in the wake of a crisis year – between March 1934 and March 1935 not one issue appeared – the gazette continued on for only one more year. Then in 1936 the Nazis outlawed Esperanto in Germany and in the following year the Bahá'í Faith too.

Though various achievements were gained in that decade the Esperantists by and large did not accept the Bahá'í Faith, nor did Bahá'ís start to adopt Esperanto in any significant numbers – a state that continues to the present day.

In 1937 and 1938 Lidia Zamenhof was still undertaking relatively successful and extensive travel to various American cities. Bahá'ís and Esperantists worked well together to arrange her trips and her Cseh courses, i.e. direct method Esperanto tuition. That era however became increasingly suffocating for Esperanto. And, in the aftermath of World War 2, Esperanto suffered a period of very slow growth in the Bahá'í community too.

For several years after the war signs of new life for Esperanto shot up only here and there. For example, the first post war Universal Congress in 1947 in Berne, Switzerland, according to a congress report which appeared in the famous review ESPERANTO, noted Bahá'í greetings »in telegrams mostly in the Zamenhof language from the Bahá'í movement in Cairo, from Shoghi Rabbani [the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi] in Haifa, from Rowhani in Teheran, from Adelaide, Rome, New Delhi, Dutch Bahá'ís in Amsterdam, from Stockholm, Oslo and also from the Bahá'ís of Britain and Belgium.«

Moreover, from March 1947 the International Bahá'í Office in Geneva published a regular bulletin entitled, Bahá'í Informoj of which fourteen editions appeared until October 1949. It was mainly aimed at informing non-Bahá'í Esperantists about the Bahá'í Faith. The termination of Bahá'í Informoj was probably an indication of the relatively meager success of this last mentioned endeavour and indicated too in all probability, especially regarding the North American Bahá'í community – which together with her coreligionists in Iran had become from the birth of the twentieth century the foremost and strongest in the Bahá'í world – that the English language had become vastly more important. After 1945 emphasis in the Bahá'í International Community was entirely focused as far as possible on a global reach and on institutional consolidation. In the last half century or so the Bahá'í Faith has grown into such a truly global community that today it stands as the second most geographically widespread religion in the world, surpassed only by Christianity, with significant membership in more than 200 countries and dependent territories. To a very large degree the Bahá'ís of North America realized this successful propagation.

They unhesitatingly utilized their English mother tongue and learned also the languages of the countries to which they pioneered the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. In this

lengthy process Esperanto was probably of little value because these virgin territories for the Bahá'í Faith were located in the main in the so-called Third World into which at that time Esperanto had hardly penetrated at all. Here and there a few Bahá'í Esperantists did indeed try to revitalize contact between the two Movements and to utilize Esperanto as a vehicle to spread the Bahá'í Faith. Nevertheless, Dr. Zamenhof's language only regained its credentials in the minds of European Bahá'ís in the 1980s when Esperanto achieved a successful breach of the Iron Curtain and opened to the Faith an entire region hitherto almost devoid of Bahá'ís.

So it was then, especially in Europe, that Bahá'ís took on Esperanto in quite large number. An official letter penned by the Universal House of Justice 17-IX-1986 was a catalyst: »Dear Bahá'í friends. Inspiring reports have been received at the [Bahá'í] World Centre of the success of the Universal Esperanto Congress in Beijing, China, and of the participation in it of members of the Bahaa Esperanto-Ligo. The next Congress will be held in Warsaw, the capital of Poland and the home of Ludwig Zamenhof the inventor of Esperanto whose daughter, Lidia, was so devoted a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. We feel that, within the framework of their efforts for the promotion of peace, the Bahá'ís of Europe would do well to increase their collaboration with the Esperanto movement, and we encourage Bahá'ís who feel the urge to assist in this area to learn Esperanto and take an active part in the activities of the movement. As you know, although both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have made it clear that it is by no means certain that Esperanto will eventually be chosen as the international auxiliary language of the world, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the friends in the East and the West to learn it as a practical step in the promotion of the concept of the adoption of an international auxiliary language to break down the barriers to understanding between peoples. Thus, as the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are collaborating with many different individuals and associations in the promotion of projects of economic and social development and towards the establishment of world peace, some of them should make a point of active collaboration with the Esperantists who, they will find, share many ideals with them.«

That letter generated much enthusiasm and dedication on the part of several hundred Bahá'ís. For a short while they successfully attracted to the Cause an entire group of East European Esperantists who to the present day in that region form a significant proportion of the Bahá'í community. However, the whole phenomenon was ephemeral. Esperanto once again quickly lost significance for most Bahá'ís. For example, essential Bahá'í works were soon available in the various languages of Eastern Europe in synchrony with the liberation of the small Eastern Bloc Bahá'í community for whom the mother tongue naturally gained ascendancy. And, for international contacts English assumed a dominant role.