

## THE CYPRUS EXILES

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Moojan Momen

Bahā'u'llāh made an open declaration in Edirne in about 1866 of his claim to be the messianic figure "He Whom God shall make manifest" prophesied by the Bāb. Bahā'u'llāh's half-brother, Mīrzā Yahyā, who had been widely considered the leader of the Bābīs, rejected this claim and so a split occurred in the Bābī community. Eventually, this split was resolved in favour of Bahā'u'llāh as some 90% of Bābīs became followers of Bahā'u'llāh. This article is mainly concerned with the fate of Mīrzā Yahyā, the unsuccessful rival of Bahā'u'llāh.

After the events that led to the split between Bahā'u'llāh and Mīrzā Yahyā, two of Mīrzā Yahyā's leading supporters, Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī and Āqā Jān Big-i Kaj-Kulāh went to Istanbul. According to Bahā'ī histories, while there they began to stir up trouble with the Ottoman authorities against the Bahā'īs<sup>1</sup>. At about the same time, a number of Bahā'u'llāh's supporters also went to live in Istanbul. One group was Mīrzā 'Alī Sayyāh, Miṣḥkīn-Qalam, and Āqā Jamshīd Gurjī. It appears that they had found it difficult to earn a living in Edirne and thought that with Miṣḥkīn-Qalam's talent for calligraphy, they would fare better in Istanbul<sup>2</sup>. A while later, Bahā'u'llāh instructed Darvīsh Sidq-'Alī, Āqā Muḥammad-Bāqir Mahallātī (Qahvihchī) and Ustād Muḥammad-'Alī Salmānī to proceed to Istanbul in order to sell some horses that had been sent to Bahā'u'llāh<sup>3</sup>. Āqā 'Abdu'l-Ghaffār Isfahānī had also been sent to Istanbul<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Hasan Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh: the King of Glory*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1980, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> Ustād Muḥammad-'Alī Salmānī, *My Memories of Bahā'u'llāh* (trans. M. Gail), Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Salmānī, *Memories*, pp. 58-9. Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh*, pp. 250-2.

<sup>4</sup> Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 252.

In about early 1868, these seven Bahā'īs in Istanbul were arrested together with the two followers of Mīrzā Yahyā who were also in Istanbul<sup>5</sup>. A short time later, Bahā'u'llāh and his companions were arrested in Edirne and precipitously sent to Gallipoli, not knowing their ultimate destination.

All of those who were arrested in Edirne with Bahā'u'llāh were eventually sent to 'Akkā with him but a different fate awaited the seven followers of Bahā'u'llāh arrested in Istanbul. Only one of them was sent with the rest of the exiles to 'Akkā, Darvīsh Sidq-'Alī. Two of them were sent back to Iran, Ustād Muhammad-'Alī Salmānī and Āqā Jamshīd. The other four were condemned to imprisonment in Cyprus along with Azal and his family. The two followers of Mīrzā Yahyā that were also arrested in Istanbul were sent to 'Akkā.

In 31 August 1868, the Austrian Lloyd liner carrying Bahā'u'llāh and his companions reached Haifa. As the exiles were disembarking, Āqā 'Abdu'l-Ghaffār, one of the four condemned to go on to Cyprus threw himself into the sea. He was rescued and resuscitated but the officials would not alter the sentence and he was taken on to Cyprus.

The exiles arriving in at Famagusta in Cyprus on 5 September 1868 were:

Followers of Bahā'u'llāh:

1. Āqā 'Abdu'l-Ghaffār Isfahānī
2. Mīrzā 'Alī Sayyāh
3. Mishkīn-Qalam
4. Āqā Muḥammad-Bāqir Mahallātī (Qahvihchī)

Mīrzā Yahyā and family:

1. Mīrzā Yahyā, Subh-i Azal
2. Fātima, wife

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the circumstances of these arrests, see Salmānī, *Memories*, pp. 58-65; Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh*, pp. 248, 250-2.

3. Ruqiyya, wife
4. Ahmad, son
5. Ridvān-'Alī, son
6. 'Abdu'l-'Alī, son
7. Rafī'a, daughter
8. Bahjat Raf'at, daughter
9. Tal'at, daughter
10. Fātima, daughter<sup>6</sup>

Two servants also accompanied the exiles, one named Ruqiyya was a servant of Shaykh 'Alī Sayyāh, the other was Mishkīn-Qalam's.

The exiles, after interrogation by the police, were allocated houses in Famagusta. It is not clear from the records and accounts whether the family of Shaykh 'Alī Sayyāh, one of the followers of Bahā'u'llāh, accompanied them on their arrival or joined them later (probably the latter as one account gives the total number of the exiles as 14 persons and two servants<sup>7</sup>).

Āqā 'Abdu'l-Ghaffār escaped from Cyprus on 29 September 1870 and went to 'Akkā. He lived in the Khān-i Afranj and in order to conceal his identity he changed his name to Āqā 'Abdu'llāh. After the passing of Bahā'u'llāh, he moved to Damascus where he died.

Mīrzā 'Alī Sayyāh died in Famagusta on 4 August 1871. His widow, Fātima, married Mishkīn Qalam.

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<sup>6</sup> List in Browne's diary of trip to Cyprus and 'Akkā, Browne manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, Sup. 21 (8), p. 20; as amended in E.G. Browne, *A Traveller's Narrative written to illustrate the Episode of the Bāb*, Cambridge: University Press, 1891, vol. 2, 376-389.

<sup>7</sup> Browne, *Traveller's Narrative*, p. 381.

Mishkīn-Qalam moved from Famagusta to Nicosia in 1879, and to Larnaca in 1885. He was employed by Mr Cobham, Commissioner at Larnaca, as Persian secretary. His departure from Cyprus is noted in a letter from Cobham, dated 18 September 1886: "The Persian heresiarch and calligraphist Mushkīn Kalam left Cyprus for St. Jean d'Acre on the night of Tuesday September 14-15, renouncing his pittances and the protection of the Island Government. He found an unwonted opportunity in a Syrian vessel going directly to Acre..."<sup>8</sup>. It appears that some members of Mishkīn-Qalam's family remained in Cyprus, at least for a time, since a list of pilgrims to 'Akkā shows the arrival of Mishkīn-Qalam's son, 'Alī-Akbar, from Cyprus on 29 March 1888 for a stay of 116 days.<sup>9</sup>

Āqā Muḥammad-Bāqir Mahallātī died on 22 November 1872 (in Famagusta?).

During his time in Cyprus, Mishkīn Qalam had succeeded in converting a Turkish Cypriot by the name of Na'im Effendi. He came to 'Akkā twice. He achieved a high position in later life and his sons were also prominent in Cyprus and Turkey in government and the military. It is not clear what happened to this family. The descendants of Na'im Effendi have been traced by the present-day Cyprus Bahā'ī community and do not appear to know anything about the Bahā'ī Faith.

#### The Family of Mīrzā Yahyā

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Mīrzā Yahyā is reputed to have been an uxorious man. His own son Ridvān-'Alī reports him to have had eleven or twelve wives<sup>10</sup> while another source gives fourteen

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<sup>8</sup> Browne, *Traveller's Narrative*, p. 388

<sup>9</sup> Manuscript list of pilgrims that came to 'Akkā in 1304-5, copy in Afnān library; original in Haifa. It would also appear that Mishkīn-Qalam's wife (the widow of Shaykh 'Alī Sayyāh) stayed on in Cyprus; see Browne *Traveller's Narrative*, p. 387, last few lines of the table on this page.

<sup>10</sup> Browne, "Personal Reminiscences of the Bábi Insurrection at Zanján in 1850, written by Āqā 'Abdu'l-Aḥad-i-Zanjání", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1897, pp. 761-827) p. 767.

wives<sup>11</sup>. The following table is the best that the present author has managed thus far by way of a reconstruction of Mīrzā Yahyā's wives and their children.

The sources for this list are abbreviated as follows:

T - Browne, *Traveller's Narrative*, pp. 384-6;

P - Browne, "Personal Reminiscences", pp. 766-7;

M - Browne, *Materials*, p. 314, 321-2;

J - Notes of Jalal Azal at Princeton University Library, pp. 560-572.

C - Browne's notebook for his journey to Cyprus and 'Akkā in 1890, University of Cambridge, Browne Manuscripts, Sup. 21 (8), p. 20;

S - the genealogical table compiled by Shoghi Effendi and published in *Bahā'ī World*, vol. 5: 1932-4, New York: Bahā'ī Publishing Committee, 1936, between pp. 204 and 205;

K - Malik-Khusravī, *Iqlīm-i Nūr*, pp. 202-205; and

I - Information obtained during my trip to Cyprus.

1. Wife: Fāṭima<sup>12</sup>, daughter of Mīrzā Muḥammad, the younger full brother of Mīrzā Buzurg Nūrī and thus Mīrzā Yahyā's cousin. Married in Iran in about 1850. She was arrested when Government troops attacked Takur. Mīrzā Yahyā left her behind with the children when he fled to Baghdad. Resided in Takur (T,M,J,K)

Children:

i. Muḥammad Hadi, b. 1848, Tihiran; d. 1896, Tihiran (T,P,M, J,S,K)

- had descendants living in Iran, among whom:

a. Mahdī (S)

b. Diyā'u'llāh (S)

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<sup>11</sup> Muḥammad 'Alī Malik-Khusravī, *Iqlīm-i Nūr*, Tihiran: Mu'assisih Matbu'at Amri, 115 B.E./1958 p. 202-5.

<sup>12</sup> Also called Hājjīyya by Sayyid Mahdī Dihajī in his *risāla*, Browne Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, Mss no. F.57, p. 94 and in Malik-Khusravī, *op cit*, p. 202; but in other accounts her sister Ruqīyya, see below, is called Hājjīyya.

- ii. Muhammad Maḥdī, died young (J)
2. Wife: Narjis. Married in Iran. Left behind when Mīrzā Yahyā fled (J)
- iii. son (J)
3. Wife: Maryam, known as Qanita<sup>13</sup>. Married in Iran. Left behind in Baghdad in the care of Mīrzā Ja'far Narāqī when Mīrzā Yahyā moved on to Istanbul. They returned to Iran in 1286/1869-70 (J,K)
- iv. Mīrzā Nūru'llāh, b. 1848 - a physician who lived at Raṣht. Visited Cyprus on at least three occasions, once being in 1878 (T,P,M,J,S). He had many wives and children, among whom:
- a. 'Abdu'l-'Alī (S)
- b. Ahmad (Rūhu'llah), visited Cyprus in 1896 (P,S)
- aa. 'Inayat, 'Inayatu'llāh, b. c. 1889 (P,S)
- bb. 'Atiyyih (S)
- c. Maryam (S)
- d. 'Alīyyih (S)
- One of these two daughters was called Khānum Gul and married Mutarjim Humayūn<sup>14</sup> (S,K)
- aa. Hūshang (S)
- bb. Manūchihr (S)
- cc. Fakhrū'z-Zamān (S)
4. Wife: Fātima (Mulk-i-Jahān, Malakih Khānum) of Shīrāz, the sister of Mirza Bāqir. Married in Iran. Followed her husband to Baghdad, Edirne and Famagusta. d. 1868 in Famagusta. (T,M,J,C,K)
- v. Ahmad Bahhāj. b. 1853. m. 'Ulaviyya (or Fātima). Moved to Istanbul in

<sup>13</sup> Sayyid Maḥdī Dihajī, in his *risāla* (Browne Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, Mss no. F.57, pp. 94, 189), states that she was from Isfahān. Malik-Khusravi states that she was from Kirmanshah (*op.cit.*, p. 203).

<sup>14</sup> Shoghi Effendi's genealogical chart (*Bahá'í World*, vol. 5: 1932-4, between pp. 204 and 205), however, seems to have Khānum-Gul as a daughter of Mīrzā Yahyā himself.

1884. His wife and two daughters adopted Protestantism in Istanbul. He moved to Haifa in 1921. d. 1933 and is buried in Bahā'ī cemetery in Haifa. (For further details on him see below). (T,P,M,J,C,S,K)

Daughters:

a. 'Ādila ('Ādila Sultan, Āyatu'llāh) b. Cyprus, 1880, moved to Istanbul - then moved to France and later became a missionary in Algeria. d. Switzerland - no issue (P,M,J,S)

b. 'Alā'iyya (Grace) - married a German and went to live in Federal Republic of Germany - one son, one daughter (J,S)

vi. 'Abdu'l-'Alī, (known as 'Alī Effendi) b. 1857-8. Was a cloth merchant.

m. 'Ismat, daughter of Sayyid Muhammad. Lived on in Famagusta. Died 1956. (T,P,M,J,C,S,I,K)

Children:

a. Wahida - a spinster, died of cancer of the breast (J,I)

b. Nayyira - was taken to Haifa by her uncle Aḥmad but later returned to Cyprus - a spinster (had been engaged to a pilot who was killed in the war; is said to have gone mad after this) (J,I)

c. Jalal Azal (Çelal Ezel) - went to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahā' and through him was employed in the Palestine civil service. Some time after 1948, he returned to Cyprus and was employed at a radio monitoring station in Cyprus - m. 'Ismat, daughter of Badī'u'llāh, son of Bahā'u'llāh. d. 5 April 1971. No children. (For further details of him see below.) (J,S)

d. 'Alīma - married a Turk, Fadil Urfzadih (Fazel Örfzade).

Is said to be still alive (J,I) Children:

aa. Süle Örfi (Shulay Urfī) married Mr. Hakki Suha, a prominent newspaper owner and later in charge of a television station. He died in 1987. She herself is a prominent person in Nicosia, works in the Australian High Commission and the U.N. High Commission for Refugees. Have several children (I)

bb. Dr. Ezel Örfzade (Urfi). Has English wife and is now living in Canada and is a radiologist. Returned to Cyprus for a time in 1970 (I)

e. Tali'a - married but died without issue (J)

f. The list of Ridvān-'Alī contains several other names. I am not sure if these are the same as the above or may have been children who did not survive to adulthood: 'Āzima Sultān, Satwatu'llāh, together with a daughter who died when 14 days old (P)

vii. Ridvān-'Alī, b. 1863. Went to Istanbul to join his brother Ahmad. Visited 'Abdu'l-Bahā' in Haifa in about 1894. Adopted Christianity, took the name Constantine the Persian and married a Greek woman. Lived for a time in Larnaca where he was employed by Mr Cobham the British Commissioner - died without issue in about 1917 (T,P,M,J,C,S,K)

viii. Muhammad (Mehmed, Bayānu'llāh, Walī-Muhammad, Jamālu'llāh), b. 1867. Described in 1912 as "not quite right in the head<sup>15</sup>." Went to Istanbul for a time to join his brother Ahmad. Came to Haifa in

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<sup>15</sup> E.G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Bābī Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918, p. 314.



the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahā, but proved troublesome and so was sent to Iran, where he was put into the care of his half-brother Mīrzā Nūru'llāh. m. an Iranian woman and died without issue (T,P,M,J,S,K<sup>16</sup>)

5. Wife: Ruqīyya, known as Ḥajjiyya, was sister of Fāṭima, Mīrzā Yahyā's first wife (see above) and thus also cousin of Mīrzā Yahyā. Married in Baghdad. d. Cyprus.

(T,M,J,C,K)

ix. Raf'at (Bahjat Raf'at, Bahjat al-Quds, Raf'atu'llāh) b. 1861-2. died a spinster (T,P,J,C)

x. Fu'ād (Fu'ādu'llāh). b. 1868-9. d. unmarried, Famagusta, 1888 (T,P,J,K)

xi. 'Abdu'l-Wahīd (also known as 'Abdu'l-Jalīl, Muhammad Jamīl, 'Abdu'r-Rashīd and is also probably identical with the Vahīd on some lists). b. 1871-2. m. Hamīda, daughter of Mīrzā Mustafā (Mīrzā Ismā'īl Sabbāgh). He died without issue and his wife returned to Iran with her father and remarried (T,P,J,S,K)

xii. Maryam, b. 1873 - moved to Tihiran in A.H. 1315 (1897), married her cousin in Iran and left several children, among whom: (T,J,S,K)

a. 'Alīyyih (S)

b. Maymanat (S)

xiii. Taqīu'd-Dīn, also called Diya'u'd-Din, b. 1876-8. He died unmarried but in his will, he recognised an illegitimate son (from an affair with a Turkish Cypriot married woman, the wife of 'Alī Ruhi): (T,P,M,J,S,K,I)

a. Riza Ezel, to whom he left a plot of land near Mīrzā Yahyā's grave. Riza Ezel worked in the Customs department and is currently the caretaker of Mīrzā Yahyā's grave and lives in a nearby house (I)

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<sup>16</sup> Malik-Khusravī incorrectly makes him the son of Badri-Jān

aa. Ruhi Ezel, the son of Riza is in the Police force in Cyprus (I)

xiv. Muhtaram, this may be the same as Raf'at above (S,K)

6. Wife: Fātima, the second wife of the Bāb, the sister of Mullā Rajab-'Alī Isfahānī; married in Baghdad in about 1854-6 (while Bahā'u'llāh was wandering in the hills of Sulaymāniyyih) for about a month before divorcing her and giving her in marriage to Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī<sup>17</sup>.

7. Wife: Badrī-Jān (Badr-i-Jahan), the sister of Mīrzā Nasru'llāh and Mīrzā Ridā-Qulī Tafrīshī; married in Baghdad but she had refused to live with him after a time and was exiled to 'Akkā with Bahā'u'llāh. She was sent to Cyprus by her brother but still refused to live with Mīrzā Yahyā and went to live in Nicosia instead. In 1886, she moved to Izmir and then to Istanbul where her daughters married. In 1888, she returned to Cyprus and died there after Azal (J)

xv. Safiyya (Rafiyya), b. 1861; exiled to Cyprus with her father, then moved to Istanbul with her mother in 1886. Married Mirza Āqā Khān Kirmānī. But after two years left him and returned to Cyprus. Returned to Istanbul in about 1889. Died without issue (T,J,C,K<sup>18</sup>)

xvi. Tal'at or Tal'atu'llāh, b. 1864; exiled to Cyprus with her father, then moved to Istanbul with her mother in 1886. Married Shaykh 'Alī Rūhī. Left her husband in 1888 and returned to Cyprus. Returned to Istanbul in about 1889. She later remarried to Mīrzā Mahdī of Isfahān and died in childbirth (T,J,C,K)

Children from her first husband:

a. Muhammad Zīyā'u'llāh (Nūru'd-Dīn, Kalimu'd-Dīn,

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<sup>17</sup> Hasan M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith*, London: George Ronald, 1970, p. 35n.

<sup>18</sup> Malik-Khusravī incorrectly has her as the daughter of Fātima Mulk-i-Jahān.

‘Izamu’d-Dīn), died before 1896. (P)

b. Fādila (Fādila Sultān). d. unmarried. (P,J)

c. ‘Alīyya. Married to Tām ibn ‘Abdu’s-Salam, no issue<sup>19</sup> (J)

d. The list of Ridvān-‘Alī also contains the name Abadiyya

Sultān - this may be the last-named above (P)

8. Wife: Daughter of an Arab, married in Baghdad (K)

xvii. Mīrzā Rivānu’llāh (K)

9. Wife: Daughter of Mullā ‘Abdu’l-Ghanī or, by some accounts, Mullā ‘Abdu’l-Fattāh (K)

10. Wife: Daughter of Mīrzā Haydar-Qulī Namad-sāb; she was half-sister of Khānum-Jān, a cousin of Mīrzā Yahyā (was possibly named Fātima) (K)

11. Wife: the wife of Mullā Muḥammad Mu’allim Nūrī, who was martyred at Shaykh Tabarsī (K)

12. Wife: Ruqīyya, daughter of A’raj Isfahānī (K)

13. Wife: Nisā Khānum Tihirānī (K)

14. Wife: Qanita, described as Ahl-i Balada and a companion of Ṭāhirih when she was in Nūr (K)

15. Wife: Sāhib-Jān Isfahānī (K)

xviii. Mīrzā Rūḥu’llāh (K)

16. Wife: Wife of Shaykh ‘Alī Zanjānī. Nabīl Zarandī reports that he heard from Āqā

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<sup>19</sup> *Zuhūr al-Haqq*, vol. 6, p. 906-7

Yaḥyā, the son of Muḥammad Ḥasan-i Fatā, a leading Azalī of Qazvīn, that when he went to Cyprus he heard the following from Shaykh ‘Alī Kaffash Zanjānī<sup>20</sup>: His wife was taken into service in Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s household in Cyprus. Later she said to him that Mīrzā Yaḥyā wanted her and so her husband consented to this. A while later, she was turned out of Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s house pregnant. Mīrzā Yaḥyā and his eldest son Aḥmad accused each other of being the father. The matter eventually went before the local court (*saray*). Āqā Yaḥyā wanted to check this story that he had heard and therefore he asked Mīrzā Yaḥyā about it. The latter asserted that it was his son, Aḥmad, who had made the woman pregnant and on account of this he had withdrawn him from the position of being his heir and had made Mīrzā Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī his heir.<sup>21</sup>

17. Wife: Mīrzā Yaḥyā married the wife of the martyr Mīrzā ‘Abdu’l-Wahhāb Shīrazī in Baghdad.<sup>22</sup>

There are a number of other children mentioned in some of the sources whom I have not been able to place exactly:

- xix. Hibatu’llāh or Jazbatu’llāh. b. 1860; a daughter who was in Istanbul in 1896 - this may be another name for Safiyya (see above) (P)
- xx. Mashīyyatu’llāh; a daughter who died in 1875, then aged 8 (P)
- xxi. Maryam Sultān; b. 1876, married in Istanbul in 1895 (P)
- xxii. Fātima; d. 29 August 1871 (T,C)
- xxiii. Rūḥu’llāh (S)

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<sup>20</sup> Presumably the same as Shaykh ‘Alī Bakhsh Zanjānī met by Browne in Cyprus. See "Personal Reminiscences of the Bābī Insurrection at Zanjān in 1850", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 29 (1897) 761.

<sup>21</sup> *Zuhūr al-Ḥaqq*, vol. 6, p. 541n-2n.

<sup>22</sup> *Zuhūr al-Ḥaqq*, vol. 6, p. 1010

xxiv. Hamīdih (S)

xxv. ‘Alīyyih (S,I)

a. Muḥammad Riṣḥat (Re ṣat). A carpenter in Famagusta.

Married a Turkish Cypriot woman named Munevver,

d. 1986 (I)

aa. Ismet Ezel, works for the Famagusta lycee and is a part-time newspaper reporter (I)

There is another grand-daughter (?great-grand-daughter) of Azal whose name is Sirin Birinci and who lives in Nicosia (I)

The number of Mīrzā Yahyā’s wives led to some unusual domestic arrangements. An English observer describes a daily ritual that was to be observed in Famagusta:

He had two wives, each of whom had a separate house, and every day, at four in the afternoon, the first wife took him to the door of the second wife’s house and handed him over. After twenty-four hours had passed, and punctually at 4 p.m., the second wife took Subh-i-Ezel back and handed him over to the safe-keeping of the first wife.<sup>23</sup>

After some years in Cyprus, Mīrzā Yahyā was joined by three of his followers from Zanjān: Āqā ‘Abdu’l-Aḥad<sup>24</sup>, Ustā Mahmūd and Shaykh ‘Alī Bakhsh.

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<sup>23</sup> Rupert Gunnis, *Historic Cyprus*, London: Methuen, 1936, p. 89. I am grateful to Mr Tacgey Debes for this reference.

<sup>24</sup> He was the author of the account of the Zanjān upheaval which E.G. Browne published: "Personal reminiscences of the Bābī Insurrection at Zanjān in 1850" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 29, 1897, pp. 761-827. Sayyid Miḥdī Dihajī reports that this man was the brother of Āqā Naqd-‘Alī Abā Baṣīr, the blind Bahā’ī who was martyred in about 1867; *Risāla* of Sayyid Miḥdī Dihajī, University of Cambridge Library, Browne mss, F57, p. 286. While it is certainly true that Āqā ‘Abdu’l-Aḥad had a brother called Naqd-‘Alī as he states in his reminiscences (p. 780), the account does not seem to indicate that this brother was blind as Abā Baṣīr had been since childhood.

Mīrzā Yaḥyā remained a recluse in Famagusta - there are no reports of him going to the mosque or to coffee-shops. The inhabitants of Famagusta appear to have regarded him as a Muslim holy man and Mīrzā Yaḥyā went along with this. When people called to greet him on Muslim feasts like Bayram (it being customary to visit a holy man on such occasions), he accepted this. There was no attempt to teach the local people the Bābī or Azalī religious beliefs.

Although freed from the conditions of his exile in 1881 after the British occupation of Cyprus, Mīrzā Yaḥyā preferred to remain in Famagusta as a pensioner of the British government. Mīrzā Yaḥyā died on 29 April 1912 at the age of about 80. According to the account by his son, Ridvān-‘Alī, who had by this time become a Christian and taken the name Constantine the Persian, no "witnesses to the Bayān" (i.e. Bābīs) could be found to carry out the funeral ceremony and so it was carried out by the Imām-Jum‘a of Famagusta and other Muslim clerics.<sup>25</sup>

All of Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s family in Cyprus maintained an outward appearance of being Muslims. The people of Famagusta used to call them sun-worshippers because of their custom of leaving the city at sunrise to go to Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s grave to pray. Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s descendants at the present time appear to know little about their family history or religious past can for all practical purposes be regarded as Turks and Muslims. Riza Ezel, the caretaker of Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s grave at present, told us that his grand-father was a Muslim holy man. Since Jalal Azal’s death, his widow ‘Ismat put an annual notice in the newspapers on the anniversary of his death inviting people to a Mevlid recital and Qur’ān reading in his memory (this being the traditional Turkish Muslim custom)<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Bābī Religion* , p. 312

<sup>26</sup> The information in the last two paragraphs was obtained during my trip to Cyprus in October and November 1989. I am most grateful to Mr Mustafa Salman and Mr Erol Olkar, two Bahá’ls of Famagusta whose families have been closely associated with Mīrzā Yaḥyā’s descendants. I am also grateful to Mr Tacgey Debes for much information conveyed to me in correspondence since my visit.

## The Grave of Mīrzā Yahyā

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The grave of Mīrzā Yahyā was originally about a mile from the old walled city of Famagusta but the modern city has now encompassed it. The grave is situated inside a small simple flat-roofed shrine building about 7 metres by 5 metres with a small portico at the front. I was unable to ascertain the date of the building. Inside the building, there is a single bare-walled room with a low grave in the centre. There at two chairs at one end of the grave and at the other end of the grave there were placed three books:

- a Qur'ān;
- a hand-written volume consisting of a number of *ziyaratnamih*s (tablets of visitation) for Mīrzā Yahyā, Tāhirih, 'Azīm, and other material;
- a printed book of poems called *Sham'-i Jam'* by Fathu'llah Qudsi (pen-name Fu'ād, of Kirmān), presented by Jalīl Karīmī (?) in 1366 (A.D. 1987).

At the same end of the room there are a number of items on the wall:

- on the right as viewed a plaque in English which reads: "The holy tomb of Subh-i-Azal Mirror of God 1831 - 1912. The text on the wall has been written by the Bab, "The Primal Point" - Great and Glorious is His Dignity - nominating Subh-i-Azal as His Successor in the Bābī Religion. "
- in the centre a portrait of Mīrzā Yahyā. I was informed that it was painted by Dr. Philotheos Mughapghap, a well-known citizen of Famagusta<sup>27</sup>, but that it is not a good likeness.

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<sup>27</sup> Presumably the same person as in Browne, *Materials*, p. 314.

- on the left is the text referred to above of the nomination in Arabic. This also records the information that Mīrzā Yahyā was born in 1247 and died at 7 in the morning on Saturday 12 Jamadi al-Awwal 1330.

The building is immediately surrounded by some twelve cypress trees and it is set in a field of some 10 acres. But the city is encroaching on it and a few years ago Mehmed Reşat sold one large lot on the edge of this area which is already being built upon. The caretaker of the grave and shrine is a grandson of Mīrzā Yahyā, Riza Ezel but the overall control rests with Mrs Şule Örfi.

#### Ahmad Bahhāj and Jalal Azal

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Ahmad Bahhāj was the eldest of Mīrzā Yahyā's children to accompany him to Cyprus. In 1884, he moved to Istanbul where he worked in a bank. He was joined there by his wife and two daughters. At some stage, his wife and daughters became Protestant Christians in Istanbul. In about 1899, Ahmad's employment at the bank ceased for some reason and by 1912, we find him impoverished and working as a railway porter in Famagusta. His wife and daughters appear to have remained in Istanbul. Then in 1921, learning of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's presence in Palestine from his nephew Jalal and remembering 'Abdu'l-Bahā's kindness to him as a young boy in Baghdad and Edirne, he came to Haifa<sup>28</sup>. He appears to have become a Bahā'ī and remained in Haifa as a rather reclusive figure until his death in 1933. He is buried in the Bahā'ī cemetery in Haifa.

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<sup>28</sup> Based on statements made by Ahmad to Lady Blomfield in 1922; Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1967, pp. 237-8. See also Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh, King of Glory*, p. 232n



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- a Qur'ān;

- a hand-written volume consisting of a number of *ziyaratnamihs* (tablets of visitation) for Mīrzā Yahyā, Tāhirih, 'Azīm, and other material;

- a printed book of poems called *Sham 'i Jam* 'by Fathu'llah Qudsi (pen-name Fu'ād, of Kirmān), presented by Jalīl Karīmī (?) in 1366 (A.D. 1987).

At the same end of the room there are a number of items on the wall:

- on the right as viewed a plaque in English which reads: "The holy tomb of Subh-i-Azal Mirror of God 1831 - 1912. The text on the wall has been written by the Bāb, "The Primal Point" - Great and Glorious is His Dignity - nominating Subh-i-Azal as His Successor in the Bābī Religion. "

- in the centre a portrait of Mīrzā Yahyā. I was informed that it was painted by Dr. Philotheos Mughapghap, a well-known citizen of Famagusta<sup>27</sup>, but that it is not a good likeness.

<sup>27</sup> Presumably the same person as in Browne, *Materials*, p. 314.

In about 1915, during the First World War, Jalal Azal, the son of 'Abdu'l-'Alī and grandson of Mīrzā Yahyā, volunteered for service to the British Government and was sent as personal assistant, chief censor and head interpreter to Lt-Col Bidwell who was in charge of a Turkish prisoner-of-war camp in Madras in India. When one of the internees, Murad Bey of Baghdad, heard of his relationship to 'Abdu'l-Bahā, he praised 'Abdu'l-Bahā greatly and urged Jalal in the strongest terms to see out 'Abdu'l-Bahā's guidance and assistance in his moral and material education. On his return to Cyprus, Jalal Azal wrote in 1920 to 'Abdu'l-Bahā, asking for permission to visit him. He was also responsible for bringing about Ahmad Bahhaj's journey to Haifa. 'Abdu'l-Bahā managed to get for Jalal Azal a good position in the Palestine Civil Service. He was Land Settlement Officer in the Land Court in the Haifa-'Akkā area. Jalal Azal remained therefore in Palestine. It is difficult to know whether he regarded himself as a Bahā'ī at this time but almost certainly he was regarded by others as a Bahā'ī and he was in communication with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs of the United States, for example.

After some years however, he appears to have become disaffected. This was also perhaps connected with his marriage to 'Ismat, the daughter of Badī'u'llāh, the son of Bahā'u'llāh and brother of Mīrzā Muhammad 'Alī. At some time, presumably in 1948 at the end of the British Mandate, he returned with his wife to Famagusta. He took up employment in the radio monitoring station at Cyrenia run by the American intelligence services.

Some time in the 1950s or 1960s, Jalal Azal changed to active attempts to advance the Azalī case and to attack the Bahā'ī Faith. This may have been precipitated by the arrival in Famagusta of Bahā'ī "pioneers" and the conversion of a number of local people well-known to Jalal Azal. There was a concerted effort by a number of people including Jalal Azal, his wife 'Ismat, and her sister Qamar Mūsā Bahā'ī (d. 10 November 1970), who had

married Mūsā Bahā'ī, the son of Mīrzā Muhammad 'Alī, to unite all three generations of the internal opponents of the Bahā'ī Faith, the "Covenant-Breakers"<sup>29</sup>. By three generations is meant:

First generation: Followers of Mīrzā Yahyā in his opposition to Bahā'u'llāh.

Second generation: Followers of Mīrzā Muhammad 'Alī in his opposition to 'Abdu'l-Bahā.

Third generation: Opponents of Shoghi Effendi, both from within the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahā and others such as Ahmad Sohrab who rejected Shoghi Effendi's authority.

This in itself was a remarkable event full of bizarre contradictions. In theory, the second generation accepting as it does Bahā'u'llāh should have had nothing to do with the first generation followers of Mīrzā Yahyā. Similarly, the third generation, accounting themselves loyal followers of 'Abdu'l-Bahā should have had nothing to do with the second generation who are based on opposition to 'Abdu'l-Bahā (let alone supporting the first generation)<sup>30</sup>.

Jalal Azal was of course the Azalī link in this scheme. His wife and her sister Qamar Musa Bahā'ī were representatives of the second generation and in close contact with the other members of the second generation. The second generation had already put themselves in close contact with the third generation. After the marriage of several of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's grand-children with the descendants of Sayyid 'Alī Afnān (who had vacillated for some time between 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Mīrzā Muhammad-'Alī), almost all of the descendants

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<sup>29</sup> Evidence for this plan comes in Peter Berger, "From Sect to Church: a sociological interpretation of the Baha'i movement", Ph. D. Thesis, New School for Social Research, New York, 1954, p. 140, n. 4; Azal's Notes, Princeton University Library, *see supra*.

<sup>30</sup> I was informed by the Cyprus Bahā'īs that in fact 'Ismat, although married to Jalal Azal, had no time for Mīrzā Yahyā's claims and openly derided these even in front of her husband.

of 'Abdu'l-Bahā threw in their lot with the followers of Mīrzā Muhammad-'Alī. Riyād, Shoghi Effendi's brother, visited Jalal Azal in Cyprus on at least four occasions during which they exchanged information and material. Jalal Azal and his wife visited her relatives in Damascus. Yvonne, a daughter of 'Izzu'd-Dīn Wudūd, as well as Mīrzā Jalāl, the grandson of Mīrzā Mūsā Kalīm, both second generation opponents, collaborated with Ahmad Sohrab, the New History Society and the Caravan of East and West, third generation opponents<sup>31</sup>.

Part of this combined plotting was a court case raised by Qamar Bahā'ī, Jalal the grandson of Mīrzā Mūsā and others in about 1950-1, challenging Shoghi Effendi's right to carry out major construction work around the shrine of Bahā'u'llāh. One of their key witnesses, Nayyir Afnān, died shortly before the case was due to open, and it all came to nothing. One of the culminations of this plotting was a grand meeting that was held in Famagusta in the late 1950s. Representatives of all three generations were present including: Jalal Azal, 'Ismat and other representatives of the second generation opponents and Ahmad Sohrab. One of the aims of this conference was to build a mausoleum over the grave of Mīrzā Yahyā. To this end, an amount of money was collected but it "disappeared" and nothing came of the project.

Jalal Azal provided information to Dr Imani from Beirut who was researching a book attacking the Bahā'ī Faith. Later in America, Dr Imani was in contact with Rev William Miller. Imani put Miller in touch with Jalal Azal. Between March 1967 and February 1971, the latter provided Miller with a great deal of material with which to attack the Bahā'ī Faith in his book, *The Baha'i Faith: its history and teachings*<sup>32</sup>. Miller also arranged for the material that Jalal Azal had sent him to be deposited in Princeton University Library.

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<sup>31</sup> One of the main episodes in this planned attack was a court case over access to the shrine of Bahā'u'llāh. This case was brought by Qamar Bahā'ī, who was a second generation opponent and the star witness was to have been Nayyir Afnan, who was married to Shoghi Effendi's sister and was a third generation opponent. But the death of the latter in 1952 aborted the plan.

<sup>32</sup> South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974.

Jalal Azal died on 5 April 1971 of a cerebral stroke, exacerbated by his tendency to excessive alcohol consumption. His wife remained in Famagusta and used to commemorate his death by an annual announcement in the newspaper.

### Comparison and Analysis

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In 1972, Eric Cohen published a sociological analysis of the followers of Mīrzā Muhammad 'Alī in 'Akkā<sup>33</sup>. These were the Bahā'īs who, after the passing of Bahā'u'llāh in 1892, had turned away from 'Abdu'l-Bahā's leadership and attached themselves to his half-brother, Mīrzā Muḥammad 'Alī. Cohen found that from an initial position of strength within the Bahā'ī community of 'Akkā, they had gradually declined into stagnation, inactivity and insignificance as compared to the main-line Bahā'ī community which had continuously extended its activities and influence in the Haifa-'Akkā area.

Cohen was unable to find a suitable name in the existing sociological literature to describe this group. He rejected the application of the term "sect" to them because "though outwardly resembling a sect, [they had] sunk into a kind of ossification." Cohen proposes the term "residual religious community" to describe them. In his paper, Cohen defines this as a community "either a remnant of a sect which was side-tracked by its rivals, or a once important religious organisation, such as a church or denomination, which has gradually been reduced to relative insignificance<sup>34</sup>." He gives the remnants of the followers of Mīrzā Muḥammad 'Alī in 'Akkā as an example of a sect that has been side-tracked by its rivals, and the Samaritans as an example of a church that has been reduced to insignificance.

I was very struck by the parallels between the group in 'Akkā described by Cohen and the remnants of the Azalīs in Cyprus. My brief enquiries during the few days that I was able

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<sup>33</sup> "The Baha'i community of Acre" *Folklore Research Center Studies*, vol. 3 (1972) pp. 119-141.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, "Baha'i community", p. 140.

to spend in Cyprus can scarcely be compared to Cohen's research over a much more extended period. Therefore my findings are hardly adequate for anything more than a preliminary comparison. But within these limits, there are grounds for comparing the two groups.

Both groups can be described as having been side-tracked by a more successful rival. As Cohen has described, the faction of Mīrzā Muḥammad 'Alī (hereinafter called "the 'Akkā group") began as a very serious challenge to 'Abdu'l-Bahā's leadership. Most of the leading Bahā'īs of 'Akkā supported the challenge as did almost all of Bahā'u'llāh's family. Similarly, Mīrzā Yahyā's challenge to Bahā'u'llāh's leadership was at first very serious. Mīrzā Yahyā was widely regarded as the successor of the Bāb and so his rejection of Bahā'u'llāh's claim was a serious blow. Thus initially both groups began as very considerable challenge to their rival.

Despite this initially strong position, both groups saw their position rapidly eroded as their rivals gained the initiative and won the allegiance of the majority of the community. Within a decade of the split, both groups had been comprehensively defeated and reduced to insignificance. Mīrzā Muḥammad 'Alī, was at first able to recruit most of the influential Bahā'īs of 'Akkā and several important figures in Iran. His flagging fortunes were then shored up again in 1900 when Ibrahim Kheiralla, the key Bahā'ī teacher in America, defected to his side. During the 1930s and 1940s, a number of members of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's family disobeyed Shoghi Effendi and were expelled from the Bahā'ī community. These effectively became incorporated into the 'Akkā group. But even these events were not sufficient to reverse the steady decline in his position. A similar course of events occurred with Mīrzā Yahyā. Over 90% of the Bābīs of Iran gave their allegiance to Bahā'u'llāh within a short period of his putting forward his claim. Browne, visiting Iran in 1888 was hard pressed to find any Azalīs at all. Mīrzā Yahyā's position in Cyprus became increasingly isolated and marginal. Even of his sons, one became a Christian and another later joined 'Abdu'l-Bahā in Haifa.

Another feature described by Cohen is the fact that these "residual religious communities" become inward-turning and defensive; they do not try to spread their beliefs. Part of their problem arises from their indefinite status with the authorities. Cohen describes how the main body of Bahā'īs remain outward-looking, innovative and expansionist (seeking new converts); they actively encourage the spread and universalisation of their religion. With them the religion is constantly growing and developing. The 'Akkā group became, by contrast, inward-turning, conservative and defensive, struggling to protect its interests and right to exist. It deplored the recruitment of various nationalities (especially Americans) to run the world centre in Haifa and the changes made in the religion as it adapted itself to these new cultures. It made no attempts to reach the non-Bahā'ī world. Most of the literature produced by the group consisted of apologetics for its position vis-a-vis its rival. While the main body of Bahā'īs was recognised by the Israeli government as a separate religious community, the status of the 'Akkā group is undefined. Similarly the Azalīs, especially in Cyprus, became an inward-turning and defensive group. It represented the conservative faction who did not like the changes that Bahā'u'llāh introduced. It tried to become in effect an ossification of the structures of the earliest period of the religion, except that it could not really be that since it had neither the numbers nor the enthusiasm nor were the circumstances the same. It made no attempt to convert the local population or any other group. Its literature has mainly been polemics against Bahā'u'llāh. Its status as a group is indefinite in Turkish Cyprus.

Cohen states that part of the conservative and traditional aspect of the 'Akkā group is that it remains in effect Muslim. The members of the group attend mosque and receive religious services (for births, marriages, death, etc) from the official Muslim establishment of 'Akkā. They remain socially identified with traditional Muslim family and social norms. This feature of outward blending with the established religious norm is also a feature of the Azalīs in Cyprus. They are to all intents Turkish Muslims. They go to the mosque and receive religious services from the official Muslim establishment. 'Ismat organised Mevlid recitations and Qur'ān readings on the anniversaries of Jalal Azal's death.

Cohen also makes the point that the 'Akkā group is threatened by extinction within one or two generations through intermarriage and assimilation into the Muslim population of 'Akkā. He does not make it a part of his definition of a "residual religious group" as those groups that were substantial churches or denominations such as the Samaritans are more able to preserve a distinct identity and maintain their social boundaries. The Cyprus Azalīs are also in danger of extinction. They are already extensively intermarried with the local Turkish Cypriot population. It is difficult to see how they can maintain a separate identity for more than one or two more generations.

Cohen makes the point that although the 'Akkā group is small and threatened with extinction, it is also internally divided due to an ossified accumulation of the conflicts of the past. My sources for the Cyprus Azalīs was not sufficiently informed to be able to tell me of any internal divisions. Jalal Azal however refuted the commonly-held position that Mīrzā Hādī Dawlatābādī was the appointed successor to Mīrzā Yahyā as the leader of the Azalīs<sup>35</sup> - thus indicating the existence of split among the Azalīs.

Cohen refers to the fact that the 'Akkā group having been comprehensively defeated on all issue (especially to do with authority over the Bahā'ī shrines) has acknowledged defeat and ceased active opposition. The last serious attempt at active opposition was the 1952 court case<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, the Azalīs have long since ceased any active opposition. The short foray into activity by Jalal Azal in the 1960s was something of an anachronism. Indeed it is difficult to see it as a serious attempt to revive the Azalī position. Had he been serious in attempting to do this, he would scarcely have co-operated so enthusiastically with Rev. Miller, whose only interest was in combatting both Mīrzā Yahyā's and Bahā'u'llāh's positions.

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<sup>35</sup> Jalal Azal's Notes, pp. 557, 791-2; this is alluded to in Miller, *The Bahā'ī Faith*, p. 107, 114, n.53.

<sup>36</sup> See note 30 above.

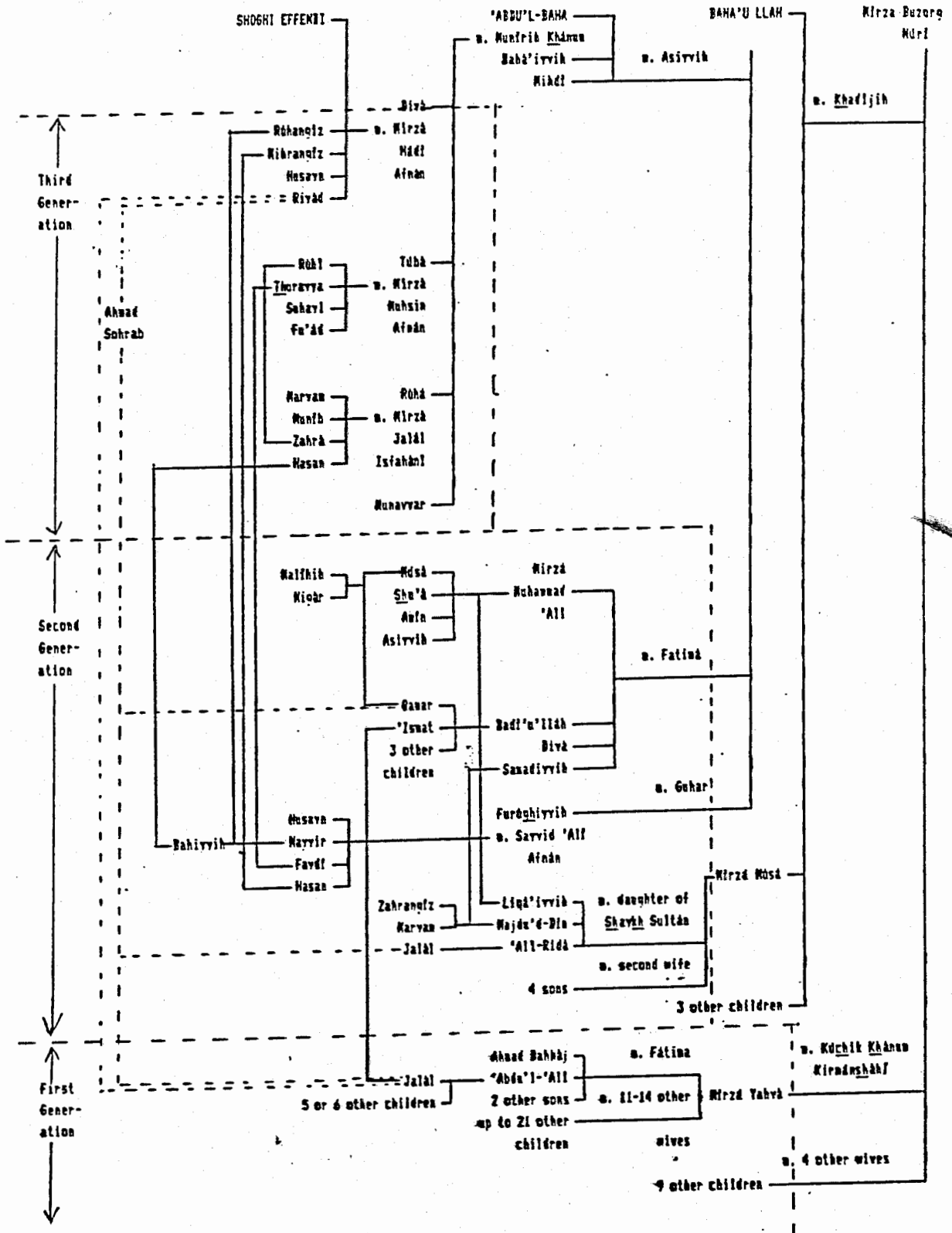


There is one final comparison to be made between the two groups although this is a matter of historical accident and not a point in Cohen's definition. Both groups acquired land outside the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Several of the 'Akkā group now find themselves wealthy since the city has grown out and their land is now prime development land. Similarly with the Cyprus Azalīs, they have been able to benefit from properties and land acquired in the past which has now greatly increased in value.

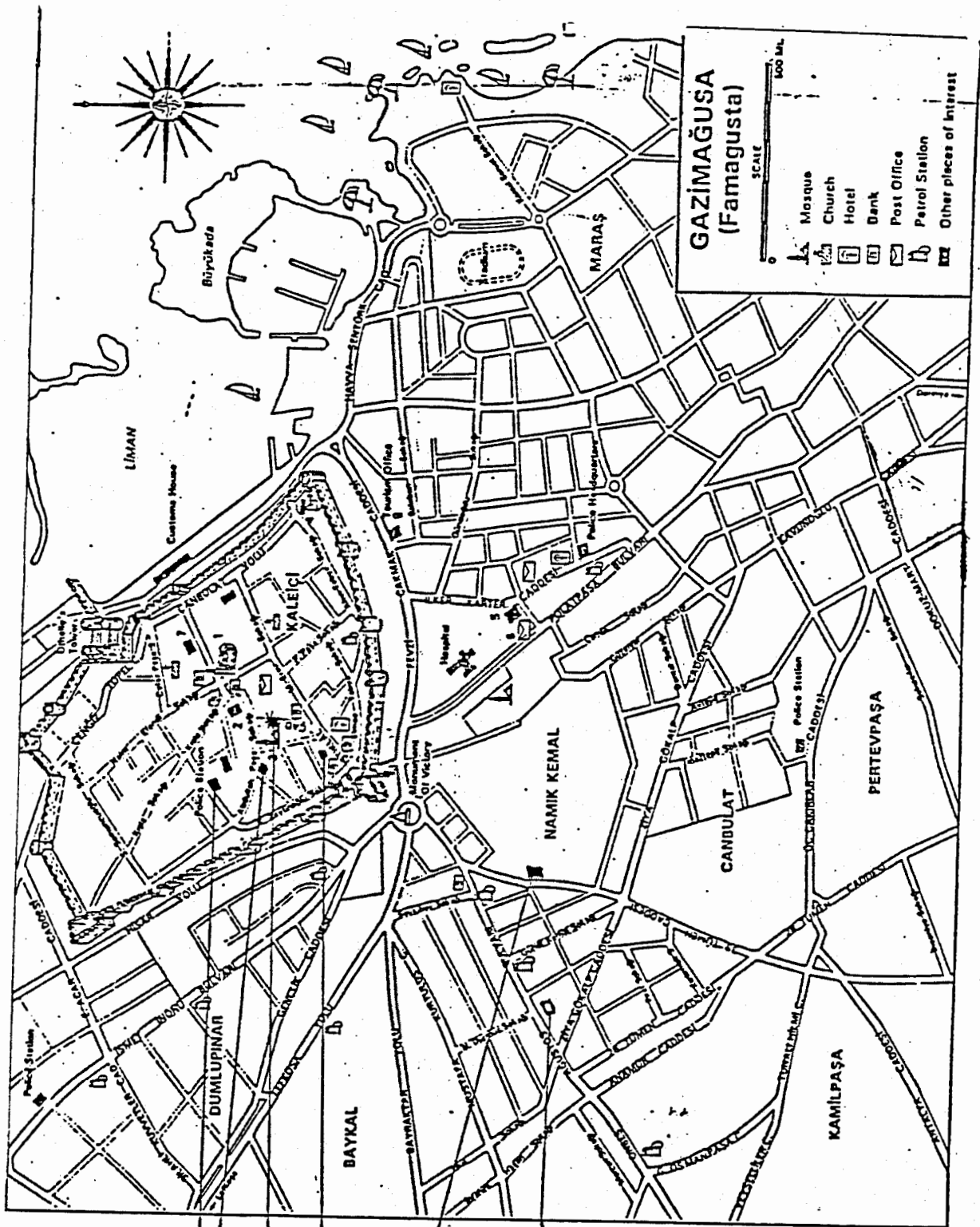
It would appear therefore that the Azalī community of Cyprus provides a further example of Erik Cohen's characterisation of a "residual religious community".

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CHART SHOWING INTER-RELATIONS OF THREE GENERATIONS OF "COVENANT-BREAKERS"



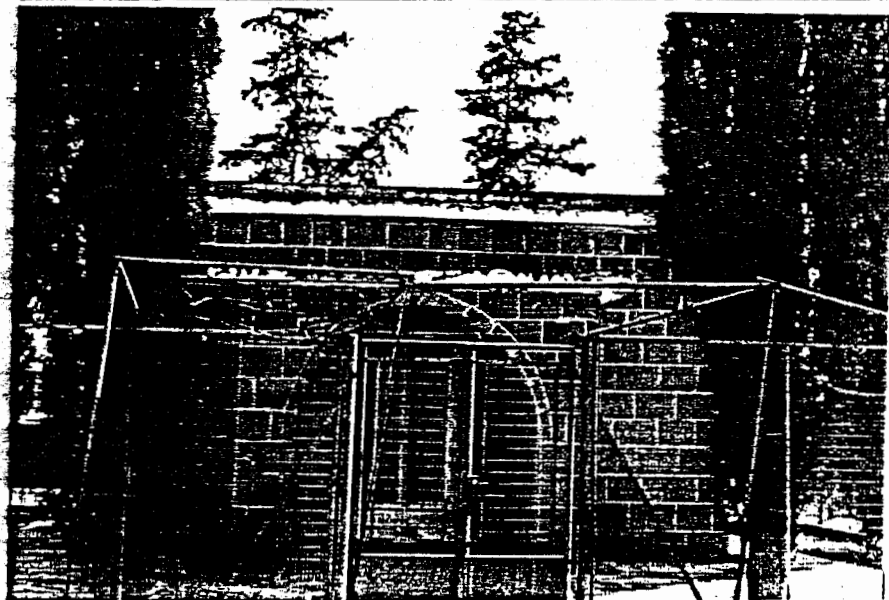
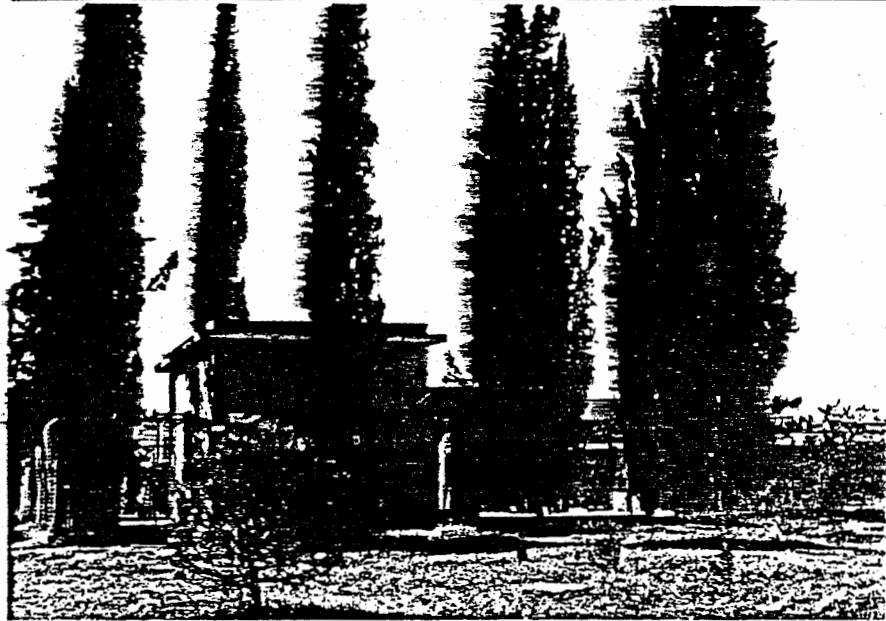
**AZALI AND OTHER SITES OF INTEREST IN FAMAGUSTA, CYPRUS.**



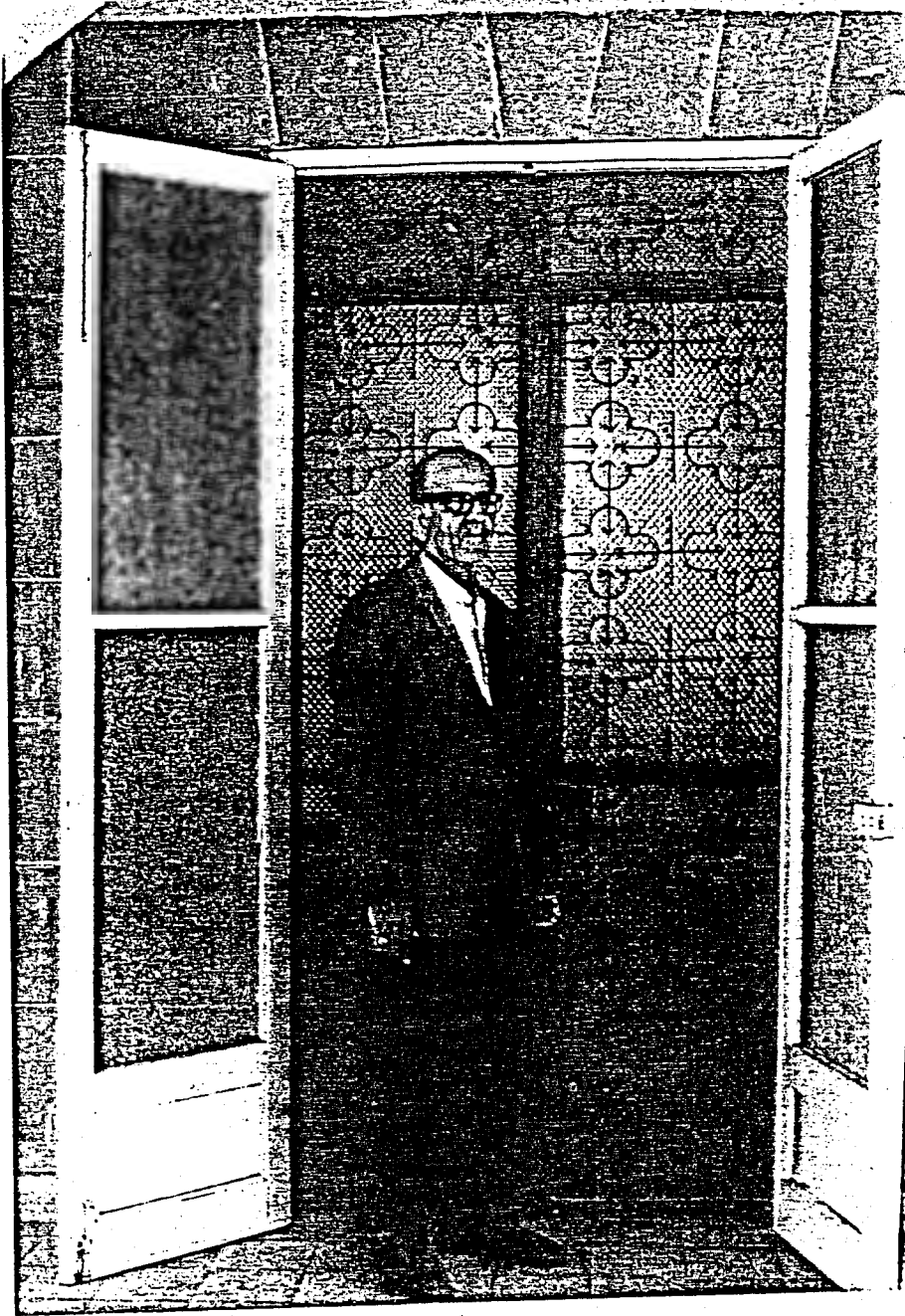
- Sites of Houses of Mīrzā Yahyā (no longer extant)
- Jalal Azal's House
- Mīrzā Yahyā's House (extant)
- British Cemetery: grave of Olive McKinley (Knight of Bahā'u'llāh).
- Shrine and Grave of Mīrzā Yahyā

VIEWS OF THE EXTERIOR OF THE SHRINE OF MĪRZĀ YAḤYĀ

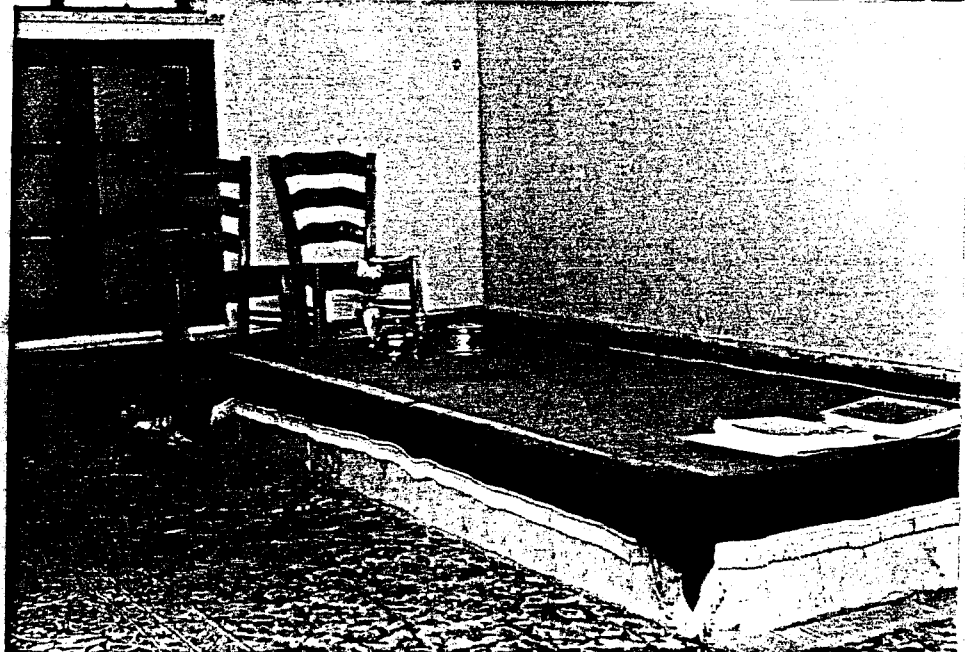
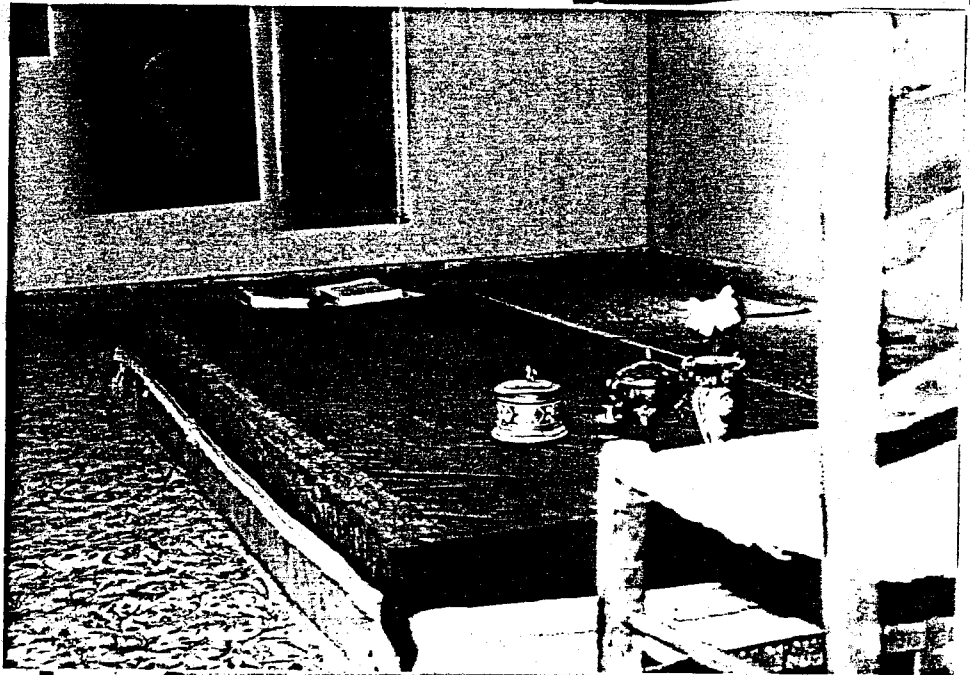
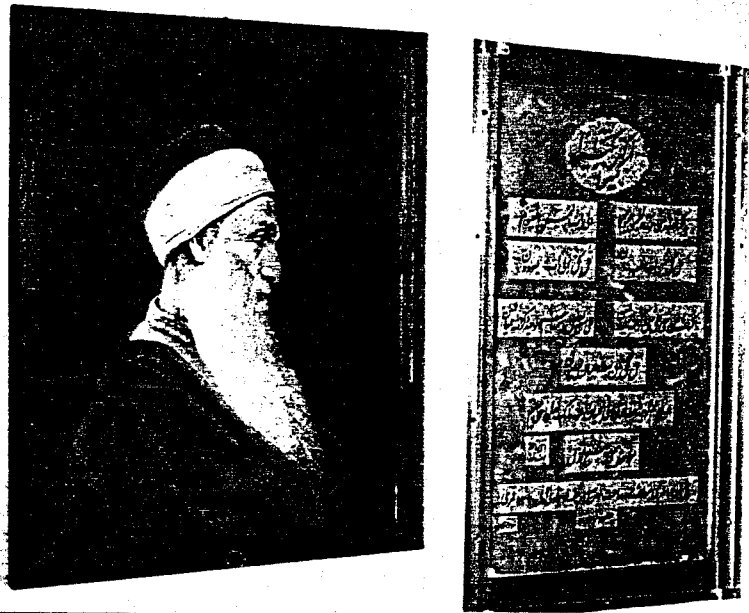
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CARETAKER OF THE SHRINE OF MĪRZĀ YAHYĀ, MR. RIDA EZEL STANDING AT THE DOORWAY OF THE SHRINE.



VIEWS OF THE INTERIOR OF THE SHRINE OF MĪRZĀ YAHYĀ



VIEWS OF THE HOUSE OF  
MIRZĀ YAHYĀ IN  
FAMAGUSTA.

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