

Meeting

1969 Meeting: Railway Station

Lowell and I never met, for the first time, in a house or at a formal gathering. We met at Park Station, Johannesburg, where I had been instructed to wait. This is the story: I had an uncle living in Orlando West Extension in Soweto, and had intended staying at his home while attending the Bahá'í Convention. I was on a week's vacation from work. Bishop Brown had covered my travelling expenses and asked me to contact William Masetlha (who was at that time a Board Member) on my arrival so that he could show me the way to the Bahá'í National Center in the city. I arrived at Johannesburg's Park Station by train at about 9:00 a.m. on a Friday.

The details of how I had got to Soweto and to my uncle's home can be summed up by briefly stating that at Park Station I was instructed to take a train to Phefeni Station, from platform 2. This route was so etched in my mind that I followed the same steps whenever travelling to Soweto by train. It was so easy to get on the wrong train! Trains were identified by a number on the front engine and by platform.

Professor Brown, who had urged me to attend the convention had provided me with William Masetlha's address. As soon as I arrived I went to locate William at 1108 Dube Township. Having welcomed me and shared some teaching stories William asked me to be at his home by at least 7:00 a.m. the next day, Saturday.

The next morning we got on the train and travelled to the city center. William took me to a quiet spot alongside the station and told me not to leave the spot until somebody, who was not a policeman, arrived. A privately-dressed policeman might be tricky to identify, but we did not go into that. He left me standing there, assuring me that the Bahá'ís used that spot without any trouble.

I was quite used to waiting for buses in Port Elizabeth, so was not bothered with counting the minutes. After all, I was on vacation.

After a short time a car stopped next to me. The driver came out, asked if I was "Robert" and shook my hand. I knew by this last action of shaking hands that he had to be Bahá'í.

In all other ways the man was totally disguised as a South African white. His pants were close to the un-ironed pants farmers in

South Africa wore. However, his eyes were steady and missed nothing. They were curious without being overbearing. I had long studied all kinds of eyes when I was young, and had always tried to interpret the intentions of whoever owned them. I felt safe with him.

In the car, he told me about the Bahá'í Center where we were going, and asked about my life with interest. I perceived that he already knew much of what I had already experienced, but mentioned nothing of it. We arrived at the Bahá'í Center.

At the Bahá'í National Center

I was welcomed at the door by Betty and William Bahá'í Randall, Caretakers at the Center, who both made me feel at home. Betty held out a copy of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, which I had ordered, and gave it to me with the words, "Allow me!"

Lowell introduced me to Maureen Page, who I learned later, was the National Secretary. A valid registration card was made out for me, since I was attending the National Convention. Maureen inquired if I was interested in becoming a travelling teacher. I accepted being a travelling teacher because I wished to travel and see more Bahá'ís. Maureen then stamped across my card the words *Travelling teacher*.

For purposes of the Convention, I was assigned the task of looking after Book Sales by the Audiovisual Officer, Bahá'í Randall. This was because the National Convention that year was going to be held in Soweto, as permits for believers who were white had not been issued in time by the authorities, and so the Convention had to be held without the White believers. The Book Sales Officer would then be unable to attend in person. Lowell made sure that I met everybody but stood at a distance, as if to observe my reaction to each person. There was that air of care and unobtrusiveness with all I met.

I had never been as cared for as was the case at the Bahá'í Center; neither had I received so much attention to my needs except at times when I visited Rosemary and Emeric Sala. As it was nearing lunch time, a table was set up for me and I had a pleasant meal with all watching. It was as if all were inquiring what I had already learned about the Bahá'í Faith and how I reacted to it.

After my meal, I requested time and a place to say the Long Obligatory Prayer. This was granted and it seemed all were curious as to how I would handle the genuflections of the prayer. I had developed my own method which was not strictly correct, as I learned later, but no one said a word or passed a remark. In later years, at a National Conference, one Bahá'í, Martin Aiff, was requested to demonstrate the

correct method for the genuflections. It was then that I learned how to sit or prostrate myself. At that time, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (*The Most Holy Book*, the Bahá'í Book of Laws), had not yet been entirely translated.

Lowell later took me to Park Station where I boarded the train to Soweto. At parting he assured me he would keep in touch. He also promised to visit Port Elizabeth sometime. I had been given instructions to meet with William Masethla who would then help me get to the YWCA Hall the next morning, where the National Convention would be held. I would not see Lowell unless I returned to the National Center which I did not.