

Human Development and Cultural Diversity in Sakhalin

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It is a great pleasure to have an opportunity to meet all of you here and talk to you. Taking this chance, let me send you best regards and love from the Bahá'ís of Sakhalin. Today we have already learned much interesting information about cultural diversity, development and human potential in Japan and let me also say some words on this subject.

We are talking today about diversity and from this point of view Sakhalin is a unique place. Probably you know from the history of my country that Sakhalin was not well developed during the 1940s and '50s, and that Stalin, who was a head of our state at that time, invited young people from all over the Soviet Union to come to Sakhalin for its development. Young people responded to this call with enthusiasm and rushed towards Sakhalin to commence development of its industry and agriculture. Representatives of all social republics, or more accurately of all nationalities and ethnic groups, lived in the USSR at that time and, after overcoming lots of transportation difficulties, they arrived at Sakhalin.

Russians and Byelorussians, Georgians and Moldavians, Lettishs and Yakuts, Tatars and Bashkirs, Armenians and Koreans were so charmed with the beauty of the island that they stayed in Sakhalin for a long time. Some of them settled here forever. They were very young, full of energy, had common purposes and dreams, and spoke a common language. In the evenings, after a hard day's work, they would arrange cultural gatherings where they would sing Russian and Ukrainian songs together, dance Moldavian and Georgian dances, and recite poems of Byelorussian and Armenian poets.

When people are young it is natural for them to fall in love with each other. As a result, the majority of Sakhalin families are mixed. This is how my father, who was Russian, and my mother, who is Tatar, met each other.

Historically, Sakhalin Island has always been multinational. In the course of excavations, archaeologists have found the remains of different ancient cultures, some of which were as much as seven to nine thousand years old! Scientists discovered that even at that time the inhabitants of Sakhalin belonged to different tribes and had different cultures. Today, in the territory of Sakhalin there are Russians and Byelorussians, Ukrainians and Moldaviens, Koreans and Georgians, and Lettishs and Tatars. This picture can not be complete without mention of the indigenous peoples of the island, the Nitkhs, Orochung, Ainu and Uiljta. The history of these tribes has had many tragic moments, but this is a subject for a separate discussion.

Today, at the family level, people try to keep their national traditions and language. But unfortunately, Russian culture dominates in Sakhalin, with probably just one exception: In the North of Sakhalin, where there are a number of small villages, the native people belong to the same nationality or tribe—Nifkhi, Uiljta. The former Soviet Government has tried to support the national minorities and in the North of Sakhalin the native people still keep their traditions, culture, and skills.

The History of the Bahá'í Faith in Sakhalin

The Bahá'í Faith came to Sakhalin during the very interesting period which we call *perestrojka* (reconstruction). Democracy made its first steps in Russia and we were at last allowed to have first-hand information. Sakhalin was opened to foreigners. I remember how all my friends, so hungry for all kinds of information, rushed to read everything that had previously been prohibited, watched famous new movies, and met interesting new people. I should say that Russians are seekers by nature, and Sakhaliners are not an exception. Everything is interesting to them and at that time, in 1990, my friends started to talk about a new religion, the Bahá'í Faith.

As I mentioned, the Iron Curtain had been lifted and Sakhalin, for many years a closed military zone, opened its frontiers to foreign guests. For the Bahá'í Faith Sakhalin was opened by the Knight of Bahá'u'lláh our dear Counsellor Mr. Abbas Katirai, who, together with his wife, came to Sakhalin despite many economic and political problems, ignoring difficulties in transportation and daily living. In order for you to understand how difficult it was for Mr. Katirai, I would like to give you one example. One month after the beginning of *perestrojka* all food products disappeared from the shops. It was impossible to buy any food if you didn't possess a special coupon, which could be obtained only by local people if they were workers of this or that factory or enterprise. Food was so limited that even for us it was difficult to survive. Mr. Katirai brought not only the message of Bahá'u'lláh to Sakhalin, he also delivered lots of goods: footwear, construction materials and food products. It was the first help Sakhaliners received from a Bahá'í. It is a historical fact.

After Mr. Katirai, many travel teachers and pioneers from all over the world visited Sakhalin. From this point of view my island is blessed by the mercy of Bahá'u'lláh. Once we calculated that within seven years more than 60 Bahá'ís from 18 countries took part in our schools, meetings, seminars, children classes, conferences, etc. Among them are Ms. Munsiff (who is very well known in Japan), Gary Wyckoff, Beth McKenty, Ruha Taaid, Migumi Hubendick and many others. The first Bahá'ís I met were Mr. and Mrs. Higgins. We were lucky to play host to three Counsellors, four Auxiliary Board members, one Representative of the Universal House of Justice, one Representative of the World Center, seven Members of National Spiritual Assemblies and—this is the most precious for us—Hand of the Cause Ruhyyih Khanum, who was usually accompanied by her friend Ms. Nakhjavani.

Dear friends, I know that Counsellor Katirai, being a very humble person, doesn't like to talk much about his activities, but I am specifically requested by my friends to tell you how much he has done for us. Every time he comes it is a special time for the Bahá'ís of Sakhalin. We love him very much and praise Bahá'u'lláh for giving us a chance to see him again in Sakhalin.

But let me come back to the year of 1991. At that time I had the privilege of working in Counsellor Katirai's office. We traveled a lot, spreading the Message of Bahá'u'lláh over the island. In different villages and towns we had meetings with people, making both new Bahá'ís and new friends. It was the happiest time of my life. People were very amicable, curious, and receptive to the new spiritual teachings. Local

Administrations rendered considerable assistance to us every time. Some people embraced the Faith very easily. And sometimes funny things occurred.

Once we had a meeting with the teaching staff of a musical school in a small town of Kholmsk. The meeting was really very interesting. Actually, it was a kind of a concert. Both pupils and the teaching staff played piano. One woman said after the meeting: "Thank you very much for your coming. Frankly speaking, when you came to us we thought that Bahá'ís are lovers of the German composer Bach, and that is why we tried to play Bach as much as possible." Finally they understood what "Bahá'ís" were and were so amazed to see how these Bahá'ís, who were not professional musicians, nonetheless beautifully played at the same concert the musical compositions of the great German composer Bach. It was a great challenge to hear people in some places say, "Where have you been? We were waiting for this Message our whole lives." It means that we have to be quick; time is too precious, and we should spread the Faith today, now, yesterday!

By the year 1995 we had already eight Local Spiritual Assemblies: five in the South and three in the North of Sakhalin. In 1993, with a help of Walter Madella, a Bahá'í from the Philippines, the Bahá'í Training Institute "Movedat" ("Brotherhood") was established in the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. The main goal was to increase manpower and develop human resources. Since that time we have held regular courses in this Institute. Unfortunately, Walter is not with us any more. He passed away in Russia and was buried somewhere in Siberia. But sweet memories of him and his activities in Russia will remain in the hearts of Russian Bahá'ís forever. He taught us by his own example how to be humble in everything and how to serve the Faith 24 hours a day.

In 1995 we had about 150 Bahá'ís and eight Local Spiritual Assemblies. Now the number of Bahá'ís is 164, but, unfortunately we have lost five of our eight Local Spiritual Assemblies, three in the North and two in small towns on the South. There are a number of reasons for this. First is, of course, the difficult economic situation these days, because of which many small towns are practically dying. Second, there was recently a strong earthquake in Neftegorsk. Under such circumstances many people, especially from the North, have left Sakhalin for the mainland.

Current Bahá'í Activities

Now our Institute is headed by a coordinator, Auxiliary Board Member Nadia Kalygina, and a working group which consists of six people, representatives of Local Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils. The program of each course, its budget, and where it should be conducted is discussed, as a rule, several times by these seven persons. We have both stationary courses, which are conducted in the building of our Institute in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and mobile ones, which we usually organize in the Bahá'í Centers of Kholmsk or in the Dolinsk community.

The mobile courses are very convenient, especially now, when the economic situation is greatly changed in Sakhalin since Bahá'ís share the destiny of all Sakhaliners. The majority of enterprises are standing idle. All five pulp-paper plants, which provided Sakhaliners with jobs, are now closed. There is also unemployment in the fish, timber, and mining industries. Some of the Bahá'ís from the more remote

places have no money to come for a course. We feel that in this situation it is better for the teaching staff of our Institute to go to their community and hold a course there.

However, the total number of Bahá'ís has not been much reduced due to the new enrollments. Now we have Bahá'ís in a total of fourteen towns and small villages, and there are three active Local Spiritual Assemblies in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Kholmsk, and Dolinsk. Among our Bahá'ís are doctors and teachers, interpreters and industrial workers, office clerks and drivers, sailors and soldiers, and even two artists. Within these past seven years we have brought up six Auxiliary Board Members (three of whom serve the Faith now in Moscow, Kazan and Novosibirsk) and eight of our own pioneers. I would like to say that Sakhalin was the first in many things. The first Russian Bahá'í, our dear Olga Dainovskaja who now serves the Faith as Auxiliary Board Member and works at the World Center in Haifa, was from Sakhalin. From the moment *perestroika* began, the first local Bahá'í bulletin was born in Sakhalin. The first Regional Council in Russian was formed in Sakhalin. The first Russian group of twenty-one Bahá'ís who studied in India, in the Panchgani Academy, was from Sakhalin. One of the first Bahá'í Institutes which started its regular activity in Russia was our Sakhalin Bahá'í Institute. Within seven years we arranged five winter and five summer schools. The first summer school, which was organized by our youth especially for children, also took place in Sakhalin.

As for the childrens' summer school, it was really very nice. Except for the Marion Jack Project it was our first experience of such kind and, of course, we worried whether or not our youth would be able to manage this school. Taking into consideration the words of the Universal House of Justice that "it is of the utmost importance that the youth movement be guided and steered by the youth themselves," the Regional Council decided to trust our youth and authorize them to develop a program, preparing and conducting all classes by themselves. One of the goals of this school was "the promotion and cooperation of youth of the region" and creating "among the youth a great deal of zeal and enthusiasm for service to the Faith." During the preparation of the program our youth had many consultations with the Local Spiritual Assemblies and the Regional Council, and they carefully studied the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The result was unexpected even for us: they brilliantly coped with this task.

More than 40 children, both Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, took part in this four-day school which was conducted under the name "Welcome to the Country of Ventures." This experience was so successful that the Regional Council decided to hold a summer school again the next summer, this time for seven days.

Another current project is a long-term literature project. Here we made several presentations of our literature in local libraries and gave them some of our books. We did the same in the regional library, where our books were accepted with great pleasure. More than that, the regional library itself distributed our books among other local libraries which we couldn't reach. Now, in practically all libraries you can find Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, copies of the magazine *One Country*, and some of the documents and messages of the Bahá'í World Center.

In addition we invited Masha Skrebtsova, a Moscow Bahá'í poet and author of five volumes on the spiritual education of children. We arranged several meetings in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Dolinsk, and Kholmsk for Masha to introduce her books. Such meetings were a kind of a concert. Masha sang her songs and recited her own poems. Her poems always make people think about such everlasting things as love, friendship, life and death, good and evil, God and our attitude towards the Lord.

We introduced Masha's books to the students of Teachers' Training College and to the teachers of grades one, two, and three at several elementary schools and we received the highest evaluation from them. Because these books consisted of tales and poems of well-known Russian and foreign writers, stories from the history of different religions including the Bahá'í Faith, and a number of questions and tasks which require from a child quickness of wit and a skill of discussion, it is very easy and interesting to work with them. Many teachers use the materials from the books and sometimes they even don't know that they are working with the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

There is a small village near the town of Dolinsk called Pokrovka. In Pokrovka we have a Bahá'í who is an elementary school teacher, Ms. Fedotova. She has been using Bahá'í literature as a base for moral education of her classes for six years. Her pupils are something special! They look at this world with wide-open eyes; they treat each leaf, butterfly or ant with love and gratitude; they can easily talk about such concepts as the creation of a man and world religions—all, of course, at simple level. These children are so different from other children of the same age that teachers from other towns used to come to Pokrovka to see them. Even the functionaries from the Regional Education Department agree that the program of moral education, as suggested by the Bahá'ís, is much better than that of the Ministry of Education.

Ms. Fedotova is not only a talented teacher, she is also a well-known local artist and writer. Actually, in each community we have talented people granted by the mercy of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Kholmok community, for example: we have a grandmother of 72 years who composes all her own music and beautifully sings Bahá'í prayers. In Korsakov one of the Bahá'ís is a sculptor. Her small handicrafts are very popular among the foreign tourists. In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk our youth always organize a concert for the 19 Day Feasts where they play guitar, piano and violin, chant prayers and sing Bahá'í songs. It makes the atmosphere of the Feast very spiritual and festive.

The Sakhalin Bahá'ís always try to participate in different projects outside the island. Two Bahá'ís from the Nevelsk and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk communities took part twice in a big cultural project organized by the Board of Counsellors in Asia. For two months they traveled with the Bahá'í choir all over Russia. The choir was a great success and greatly influenced the cultural life of the towns and cities they visited. The choir's activity was widely covered by media, and as a result, we have had many new enrollments within Russia.

Among the other local projects now under execution are projects for women. Recently we conducted two seminars for both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í women. The seminars had the name, "My home is my harbor of peace and happiness." We were pleased to see the quick response of our women to this seminar. Some of them were very much encouraged. They rose and started to work with non-Bahá'í women in the offices and enterprises where they have their jobs.

In general, the Bahá'í communities in Sakhalin work according to plans which are made on the basis of a general plan elaborated by the Regional Bahá'í Council of Sakhalin. These plans are very interesting and include the major points of the plan suggested by the National Spiritual Assembly of Russia for the Four Year Plan.

This year the Sakhalin Bahá'ís will pay great attention to working with mass media and important persons of our region, such as administrators and functionaries of both regional and local Governmental

Bodies, different committees and the editorial staff of the local newspapers. We already have much experience working with them.

The Regional Council has already established friendly relations with the Women's Committee attached to the Regional Administration in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the Regional Committee on Religions, the Regional Public Relations Committee, the Director of the Regional Education Department, the Director of the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk University, the Editor in Chief of the newspaper *Sovetsky Sakhalin* and with a number of non-governmental bodies and organizations. A set of documents which represent the Bahá'í Faith at a high level will be presented to the high ranking leaders of the region. By the way, some of the officers from the Women's Committee have taken part in our seminars and expressed a desire to participate in the next one.

We plan a winter school to be conducted in February, and one more seminar for women. Our youth started the study of *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*—thank Bahá'u'lláh we have a Russian translation prepared by our National Spiritual Assembly—and this work will be continued. Right after my return we will have a special course at our Institute. We Bahá'ís of Sakhalin, like all Bahá'ís everywhere, are aware of the importance of the two remaining years of the Four Year Plan. And that is why we will talk more and more about such aspects as entry by troops, the importance of the different funds, about the Right of God, *Huqúqu'lláh*, and the Arc project.

I would like to tell you a short story. Once we had a meeting with some Bahá'ís from the Kholmsk community. Our children took part in it along with the adults. We had an interesting conversation, talking much about different funds and the importance of making contributions. Suddenly one of the children went away from the meeting and came back in few minutes bringing all of his money which he had been saving for three years. He declared that he would like to contribute it to the Arc project. It was a two-kilogram sack full of coins! His example had such a great influence on all of us that we contributed twice as much as we had expected to.

One thing we have understood very well from our experience is that children are a very good way to promote the Faith. That is why we pay great attention to our children's classes. Unfortunately, we only have regular childrens' classes in two communities. But as I have already told you, now we are trying to implement our programs on moral education in some elementary and secondary schools.

Dear friends, of course not everything is going as smoothly as I told you. And we, like all Bahá'ís, have many problems and difficulties on the path of Service. But we have one achievement which helps us to overcome all obstacles. Following the Writings, we have established firm relations between the two arms of our Bahá'í Administration. The corporate work of the Local Spiritual Assemblies, the Regional Council, and two Auxiliary Board Members helps us not only to plan and successfully coordinate our strength but also to settle all our problems quickly and according to the Writings. And we hope that such mutual work will help us to increase our manpower, helping us to develop our human resources to achieve conditions necessary for implementation of the main goal: entry by troops. Thank you very much.