

Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Work with Sherifa

Franklin Merrell-Wolff
July 6, 1978

During the year 1922, the principal head of the Temple of the People entered into her final illness and died one night when my wife was attending her. After the funeral services and the various activities connected with this death, we severed our connection with the Temple of the People and went down to San Fernando and managed to purchase the largest portion of my father's orchard. She became interested in the work of one of the members of Krotona—which was at Hollywood at that time—and went to New York associated with that work while I continued with the orchard.

While in New York, she met Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan, who was the head of the western branch of the Sufi movement. The Sufis seemed to have been originally an esoteric division of the Mohammedan or Moslem religion, but at least in the form that Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan represented the Sufi movement; it was an attempt to effect a religious marriage among the various religions. This, at that time, so he told me later, had extended so far as to include Christianity, Judaism, Moslemism, the Mazdaznan religion, connected with Zoroaster, Hinduism, and southern Buddhism, but he said that at that time it had not extended to the inclusion of northern Buddhism.

But to return to the story, Sherifa came back to the west with Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan. I met them at the Union Station in Los Angeles and quickly arranged to drive up to San Francisco, taking the necessary baggage. The result was that we were associated with his work in San Francisco for about a month, listening to his lectures and occasionally talking to the Murshid, and then were given the task to go back down to Los Angeles and arrange for his giving a series of meetings in the Los Angeles area.

The necessary work of securing a hall and putting forth the advertising of the forthcoming lectures of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan was in due course accomplished. And then when the first day of meetings rolled around, which was a Sunday, it had been arranged that the Murshid would arrive by train at the Union Station well before meeting time. I went to the station to pick him up and his associate, but no Murshid appeared. Meanwhile we had, through advertising, a substantial audience gathered to hear him lecture. The question was what to do with no lecturer? I decided while driving back to the hall to undertake to give an extemporaneous impromptu lecture in his place, and this I did. How well I did, I do not know, but at any rate I managed to talk the most of an hour. At the close of the lecture, just as we were winding up, Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan, Murshida, and a Mr. Connaughton from Santa Barbara arrived, somewhat flustered. I turned the audience over to him and he uttered a few words, and then the audience was dismissed—the other meetings being already noted in the advertising campaign. What had happened was this: they had been at Santa Barbara under the direction of Mr. Connaughton and they had missed the train. Mr. Connaughton then

drove down the road at fifty miles an hour, when the speed limit was thirty-five, and thus was able to arrive at the time which they did.

This series of lectures aroused a considerable interest. Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan was really a beautiful figure. He had been a musician, and when he lectured, you had the impression that it was a kind of music. You would not take away so much conceptual ideas as a music-like effect. The course of lectures and the subsidiary activity continued as provided. It was arranged to have established a sort of universal church which was placed in the hands of Sherifa and myself.

An amusing thing happened in connection with the advertising campaign and the attempt to reach individuals who might be interested; we contacted a Mr. Pundit, an East Indian Brahman who had become a naturalized American. A friendship grew up between ourselves and him and his wife, and the result was we were invited out to stay a weekend at his house, which we accepted. While there, there was some conversation as to what my own identity was. It was generally agreed that I was an ex-Brahman, and at the noon meal one day he said, "You are a renegade Brahman," since I had taken incarnation in other than the Brahman caste of the East Indian race. Then both his wife and my wife jumped upon him and said, "What about you?" And he burst out laughing. Any Brahman who accepts naturalization in a foreign country is also a renegade Brahman.

During this course of lectures, there was one small incident that revealed a good deal about the character of the Murshid. One evening after the lecture, one of those who lingered around because of his superior interest and invited us, that is, Murshid, Murshida, Sherifa, and myself to take a bite at a nearby eating place. We accepted, and as we walked down the road to the place and arrived at it, our guide noted that it did not appear very impressive and was little hesitant. He asked Murshid if it would be all right for him to enter there and Murshid made this answer, "Where humanity goes, there I go."

Sherifa and I carried on the work of the church. We secured a hall and did the necessary advertising. I gave the lectures and Sherifa took care of the more or less ritualistic portion. She also read a selection from each of the different religions that had been integrated by the Sufi movement. But this work continued for rather a brief time—just a matter of months—and then it became evident that it was impossible to work with Murshida, who was a very dominating character and really wanted only yes-men under her; and the result was that we severed our connection from this activity to be in charge of the Sufi work on the West Coast. So we withdrew from this work after a relatively brief period.

It was during the period between 1923 and 1928 that we established our contact with the United Lodge of Theosophists. This contact proved to be of quite considerable importance. The first time we went to a United Lodge meeting, we were recognized by an associate who had known me up at Stanford. He immediately informed certain leading figures in the association, namely, John Garrigues and Mrs. Clough. We were taken to a side room, and there we had an important conversation. John Garrigues, at first, commiserated with us because of the death of Mrs. La Due. But then he developed a critical evaluation of the Temple of the People. That put me upon the defensive, and I championed the Temple of the People as best I could. Apparently I did pretty well, for he

complimented me later. This opened the door to a problem in the Theosophic movement with which we were very little familiar.

The history of this movement is considerable, and I shall abstract what I have to say as best I can. Originally it was a dissemination of certain more or less esoteric information given forth at first in *Isis Unveiled* and subsequently more systematically in *The Secret Doctrine*. There was an old statement, which I understand is ultimately traceable to the Great Buddha, that the Masters of the East will not appear in the West save in the last quarter of each century until such time as the Blessed One takes an incarnation in the West. Thus I have read. There was one of the Brothers known by the pseudonym of Koot Hoomi who was very much interested in the West. He had in fact, it seems, been a student in a Western university and he had more than usual sympathy with Western man. He proposed to the Brotherhood to give a more complete formulation of the body of knowledge maintained by this Brotherhood, rendering it available to the West and, in fact, all the world. Most of the Brothers thought Western man was not sufficiently advanced to receive it. He was, however, supported by two Brothers known as Morya and as Hilarion, and was supported a considerable degree by the one known as the Maha-Chohan. The agent for this work, the one around which it centered, was H. P. Blavatsky, later followed by W. Q. Judge. H. P. Blavatsky was the means whereby the writing of *Isis Unveiled* became possible, but those who wrote it did so by *tulku* means, that is, they entered into her and she stepped aside while they contributed what they had to contribute. In the case of *The Secret Doctrine*, I understand a different method was employed, but the evidence seems to be that *The Secret Doctrine* is the composition primarily of the one known as Koot Hoomi, and Morya, and to some extent by HPB—she contributing, it is said, the third section and the footnotes in her own right. This was a revelation of certain material that had been held more or less esoterically.

The Secret Doctrine in particular is a highly philosophical work, in many respects quite abstruse, particularly when using certain symbolic forms of language; but it's an immensely profitable book to study. It gives a totally different orientation to the processes that produced this world and to many things such as the processes after death until rebirth and relationships of planes and worlds—just to list a few items. When this movement had developed to a degree, there were many unhappy circumstances connected with it. There was hostility from the orthodox Brahmans who did not approve of the revealing of so much; there were those who sought to defame the founders; and there were those who tended to make more or less perverse interpretations. The result was that there was considerable confusion as to what was the authentic Theosophical movement.

It is said that the United Lodge of Theosophists was founded by a Robert Crosbie, who had been an associate, so it is said, with W. Q. Judge in New York. It is also said that after the death of W. Q. Judge, he came to the Point Loma area where a certain Theosophical group had been located. He left that area and came to Los Angeles and was a bookkeeper in his outer life. He started the work by hiring a hall at his own expense, providing the necessary accommodations, and doing his own janitorial work; and he started delivering lectures without there being any audience present, until, finally, individuals began to come. And from that he developed and ultimately received the aid of individuals of substantial means and superior executive and intellectual capacity. He set certain policies that are rather unique. There is no formal organization of which one

becomes a member and pays certain dues. Every individual becomes simply an associate in the work and decides whether he will make any contribution and what the nature of that contribution shall be. In the articles written in the journal associated with the organization, the articles are never signed—the idea being that no one shall receive a personal dignity or standing by a personal reputation. The orientation is to maintaining the body of teachings that were given in the last quarter of the nineteenth century intact and unchanged until the last quarter of this century, which would be a period when again the Masters of the East would send a representative to the West. The publication of books, such as *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, *The Ocean of Theosophy*, and so forth, is in the form of a precise reproduction, even including typographical errors. The policy is no change whatsoever. There is a reason for this, for in the case of the third edition of *The Secret Doctrine* put out by Annie Besant and Mead, there was something like 80,000 alterations, some of them, to be sure, only typographical, but some making a change in meaning. The policy of the U.L.T. was to maintain the body of the doctrine taught unaltered. This may have been at times a bit on the fanatical side, but it was substantially, I would say, a sound policy.

We attended the meetings at the United Lodge of Theosophists for some time, going fairly frequently until they built their new building at 33rd and Grand. From San Fernando to the old location was about a distance of twenty-five miles, most of the driving being done at night. But the new location involved a considerably longer drive, with the result we found it too much of a burden to make the trip.

Now as to myself, I was deeply impressed with the character and intellectual quality of the work that was produced by the U.L.T. association. I could have found a basic home in it, but I must admit that it produced an effect that seemed cold. It seemed as though the heart side was relatively neglected—a side that had been rather strongly developed in the Temple of the People at Halcyon. This was a deficiency that affected Sherifa more profoundly than it affected me. She did not find it an adequate opening for her resources. Though we always have remained a friend of the United Lodge of Theosophists, we have not identified ourselves with it in the exclusive spirit.

Meanwhile, we were operating an orange grove as our financial basis, and in addition had begun the building of our house. This was a substantial building partly made out of stone structure, partly out of stucco. I did somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of the building of this place, and it was our dwelling until we moved to Santa Barbara in 1956.

There was here a real problem. To carry on the public work of propounding and propagating a philosophy connected with the deepest interests of life, on one hand, and then making a living, upon the other. One of the policies in the United Lodge of Theosophists was that one should make no income out of his public work, that he should divide his activities into two parts: one of them the economic part, and the other the idealistic or religious part of his work. It was a noble standard, but unless one was really efficient in the economic sense, had unusual talents, as was true in the case of John Garrigues, it could become a too difficult problem. We found, ultimately, that in trying to perform public work, which never paid much more than its cost, and trying to make a living upon an orchard, that the orchard tended to lose out. This is a basic problem.

I agree with the position maintained by the ULT, that one should not make the public work an economic activity for himself. I have followed this example as best I could, and in my past practice for several years, there has been no assignment of dues to be paid by a membership; there has been no asking for financial support. I've followed the policy of placing upon the book table a golden colored bowl to which I make no reference in my official position of leading a meeting. If anybody wishes to make a contribution, he can do so, but that is entirely at his discretion. There is a basic principle here and it has been formulated this way: that no charge can be made for a spiritual service, nor gift accepted. On the other hand, for a physical service, the contribution of a place where people can meet, the providing of chairs, and the material amenities, and for the intellectual effort that one puts forth which he has gained by his objective effort here, his study and so forth, a material compensation may legitimately be received, but not for a spiritual service. This brings up the question how to differentiate between that portion which may be regarded as a spiritual service and that portion which may be regarded as a material service or an intellectual service? I've never found a completely satisfactory definition, but this much seems to be clear, that anything that produces what we call an induction, a glimpse of a spiritual state of consciousness, or anything that may be contributed to lifting the *karmic* burden of others, is to be regarded as a spiritual service for which no compensation is either demanded or accepted. My pragmatic solution is to leave this to the discretion of the individual who makes a donation.

Now that I have referred to the economic problem, I may make a completion of the total picture with respect to that side of this life. We have never known privation or an economic deficiency that cost any hardship; nonetheless, we never have been flush. When in 1928, I played a part as an appointed Disciple of the Absolute to continue the work initiated by one called Yogi Hari Rama, there was a policy prescribed by him on the economic side. Those who came to receive the instruction in the use of certain devices called "keys" that were supposed to serve in producing health and certain other effects, the policy was laid down by Yogi Hari Rama himself; it was a formal charge for these. I continued this policy because it was prescribed by him, but never felt comfortable about it. When we ceased to be associated with that work, I reverted to the basis of free contribution. As a matter of fact, we never operated at a loss. There was always enough that came in which paid all the expenses and the traveling from town to town with a small amount left over when we returned to our home in San Fernando, but the amount was not significant. The operation of this public work paid its way, but little more than that, and for that I am grateful. I do not want to make money out of the public work; however, it should pay its own cost.

Because of the neglect of the orchard as a result of being away so much of the time, there was a more rapid deterioration in its productivity than would have been the case if it had been carefully maintained. I do not have a clear memory how we financed our way during the period from 1950 to 1956 when Sherifa's health was deteriorating; however, we managed to cover the period up to the time that the value of the land had increased because of the demand for ground on which houses could be built. And this gave us a break. And, in general, I may say that the economic foundation of this family has been maintained primarily through the economic rise in the value of land. We had acquired some land in San Luis Obispo at the time of life at Halcyon—two 160-acre pieces and one ten-acre piece. These ultimately were sold at an appreciated valuation.

Also, the land in San Fernando ultimately sold at a substantial increase in value. So that when we made the move to Santa Barbara, there were economic resources at that time. Because of the growing expenses during the final illness of Sherifa, I acquired two apartment buildings, which I operated and they became a source of additional income. Somehow we managed to get through all the expenses of that time—medical and other, as well as the cost of the final probate of the will—with economic assets essentially intact and no debt.

When we moved to the ranch in the area of Lone Pine, there still were properties in Santa Barbara which were subsequently sold, some at a loss of a minor nature and others at a substantial gain in price. The result was that we continued our life in Lone Pine at the ranch with a sufficient economic income to satisfy all needs—to take care of two operations on Gertrude and one on myself, and one on the eye—and yet remain in the black, as the accountants say. The income has been sufficient, has provided a comfortable life, but no money for flush activities. It did, however, provide a series of automobile trips over the country which was a source of very substantial satisfaction. We have been out of debt except briefly at one time in Santa Barbara and are so today. Everything at the present moment would be basically sound except for the inflation, for which I have not yet found an adequate answer. I do not believe in debt if it can be possibly avoided. I do not believe in the invasion of principal except as the last resort. What the cost of settling the estate will be is not now known, and therefore we do not at present know what the ultimate economic status will be.

Let us now return to a final evaluation of the contact with Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan and with the United Lodge of Theosophists. Inayat Khan was a man preeminently of heart. He was not, I would say, a great intellectual, but he was a man of art, and listening to him lecture was a positive delight. Also, the element of the heart was strong in the Temple of the People. The result was that the impact of the United Lodge of Theosophists gave an impression of coldness. It was intellectually superior, but in the humanistic sense, it seemed rather cold and aloof. This did not disturb me personally. I liked their superior intellectual character. I approved of their ethical orientation. I heartily approved of their object of keeping the teachings that had come in the last quarter of the last century in tact until the time rolled around for the next agent. But this absence of heart did not affect Sherifa favorably. So the U.L.T. could not be for both of us our spiritual home.

We come now into a period where my memory is not too clear, namely, the period from the contact with the U.L.T. and 1928. One thing had come out of the contact with the U.L.T. that was a source of substantial satisfaction. This was the meeting with, and the ultimate friendship with, Dr. Frederick Finch Strong and his wife. He served Sherifa in connection with various medical problems and furnished myself certain treatments. But the relationship was more on the basis of a common Theosophical interest. He was a man of high intelligence who had some subtle powers. And we had two trips with them. In 1926 we took a trip up the way to Owens Valley and at Olancho turned over to Death Valley. That was our first view of that valley. As I remember this trip was in April. In those days there were no paved roads in the vicinity of Death Valley. We had only desert trails. When we got down on the valley floor, we passed every now and then a filled up grave. In those days they buried them where they found them. This

valley is well named. It has not only excessive temperatures, but the dryness approaches nearly zero humidity. The heat may reach in summer normally around 125 in a device that protects the thermometer from the radiation of the ground. Extreme temperatures have been reached officially of 137, and Shorty Harris, a prospector in the area, claimed he was in the valley when the temperature was 140. The ground temperatures are much higher—said to be on the order of 190; and it is easy to fry eggs on the ground. The sun temperature runs up to the order of 160; the 137 and the 140 were shade temperatures. This is combined with excessive dryness and produces an area of supreme danger; however, we crossed it at an early time when the temperatures were relatively moderate. Even so, the temperatures were equivalent to normal summer heat.

Later, the following year 1927, we took a one month's trip with two cars including the Strongs, Jim, the son of Sherifa, Sherifa, and myself. And we made that trip over the Mormon Dugway, which is referred to in the first Mephisto dream.¹ We covered a good deal of the Indian country at that time. Roads were unpaved and unspeakably bad. Every so often the road would be cut by a stream. The average advance in an hour was eight miles. This was real pioneering, and we finally wound up at Bluff, the place I have referred to before. The total experience was one of superior interest. The contact with the Strongs was a valuable one which continued so long as we lived in the vicinity.

Much of the events during the period before 1928 is now obscure in my memory. We did go to Hollywood to see moving pictures, and we drove in Los Angeles in a considerable degree. The city was much smaller then than it is now, and speed limits were very different from what they are now. When my father first secured a car in 1911, I was the one who first learned to drive. The speed limit in the country was 20 miles an hour and in town fifteen miles an hour. There was virtually no pavement anywhere in the country, only in the cities at that time. In fact, as late as 1928 when we drove to Chicago to begin public work there, there was no pavement from the time we left Los Angeles County until we reached Missouri. It was dirt road travel and a speed of thirty-five miles an hour was about the limit that was possible. Once we drove for an hour at forty miles an hour on a particularly good piece of road at the price of burning out a bearing, which held us up for three days.

¹ See the audio recording "Conversation with Franklin Merrell-Wolff, Dr. Rein'l, and Others," part 2, for a description of this dream.