

The Pir Vilayat Story

Chapter One The Early Years

Pir Vilayat's father, Hazrat Inayat Khan was born in 1882 and grew up in Baroda, India. His mother was an American named Ora Ray Baker whom his father met on his first trip to America in 1911. She was twenty-one at the time. That year they traveled to France and then Russia, where he gave musical recitals, playing the vina to receptive audiences. It was there that their first child, Noor-un-Nisa, was born, on New Year's in 1914 before the start of the world war.



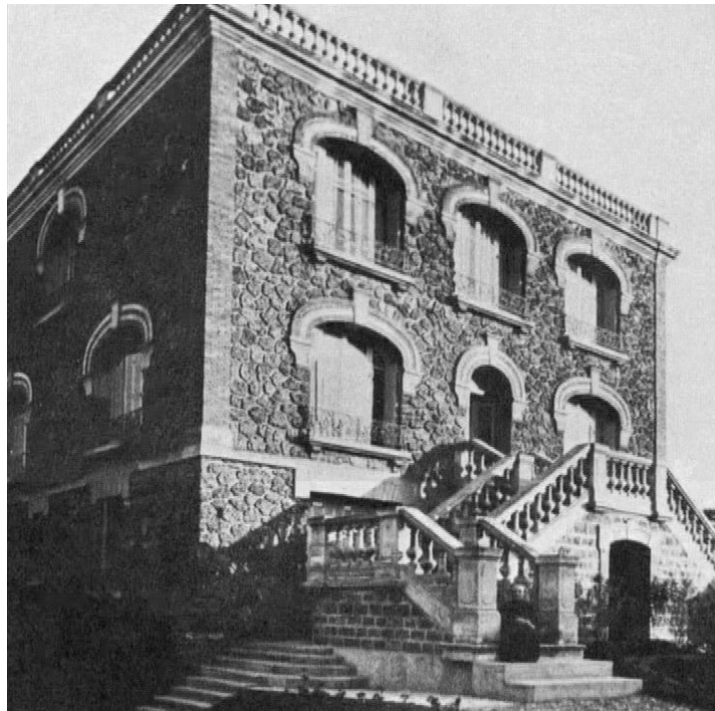
As war was starting they were then forced to return hurriedly to England where they lived until 1920. Vilayat was their second child and was born on June 19, 1916.

In 1920 Inayat decided to move the family to France. He had created an organization to assist him in his work in England, but there were many problems and personality conflicts. He was a great teacher but had been trained as a musician and knew little about organization. The organization he had created had begun to try to control its creator. To move the family, with very young children, was a drastic choice. The children of course were too young to understand any of the reasons for this radical change.

One of Vilayat's first memories from those times was being seasick on the trip across the Channel. The family was leaving behind a secure situation for an uncertain future. There was barely enough money for food. By then there were four children: Vilayat's six year old sister Noor-un-Nisa, three year old Hidayat, and, youngest of all, one year old Khair-un-Nisa or Claire. None of them even spoke French and there were few French students to help them. It must have been an awful time for the family. Murshid was often away giving talks to bring in funds for their support.

One of his first trips was to Geneva. He had actually wanted to move the family there, but his wife felt that another move so far from England and where they did not know the language would be too much. He went there purely on intuition, without knowing why, without even the money for food. It was a supreme test of faith. Sitting on a bench beside the Lake Geneva, he received the guidance to start the head quarters of the Sufi Movement there, which is what he was able to do. It could not have been coincidence that the League of Nations was also transferred from London to Geneva at just that time. One wonders, if he had been able to live and spend more time there, what could have been the result of his influence on subsequent events.

Everything began to improve for the family when one of his students bought a house for them in Suresnes, outside of Paris. Inayat named the



house Fazal Manzil, which means house of blessing. It had been bought for them by a Dutch mureed (student), Mrs. N. Egeling.

Hazrat Inayat Khan's brothers were much more traditional and could never accept the fact that he had married a modern American woman, Initially they all lived in the same house. Perhaps in part because of this, Vilayat's mother assumed the role of a traditional Indian wife. We do not know whether Inayat urged this on her, but perhaps she herself felt more comfortable in this role. She wore robes and was referred to as Amina Begum. In the traditional Muslim culture, the wife would never be seen without her husband or another male family member and Inayat was away much of the time.

After the move to France they lived mostly in Holland where they met Dutch women whom they were to marry, apart from Ali Khan (Inayat's cousin) who never married, however they came to Suresnes during the Summer School. Vilayat had good memories of his uncle Maheboob from this time.



It was only during the summer months that the children could count on their father staying in Suresnes. This was the time when they could see the most of him. In the first years classes were given in the garden unless it was raining. In general there were seventy to eighty people attending at any one time.

By 1925 classes could be given in the newly built lecture hall across the road or in the garden. Sometimes there were leaders and a mureed or two at lunch. Their father always sat at the head of the long table, their mother facing him at the other end. Then the children had a table of their own. Most often Sharifa Goodenough would be there. She would speak Persian with their father since her mother was a noble Persian. She was very strict with the children, telling them not to talk as Murshid liked to keep the house as silent as possible. The best times for the children were Sundays, when their father did not give classes and they could spend time with him. Each day they were given a subject for concentration such as patience, tolerance, forgiveness, kindness or humility. They looked forward to being able to tell him that they had actually done it and how.

Pir-o-Murshid often sat under an apricot tree in the garden where he would talk with his students. There was a ceremony in the field across the road from Fazal Manzil, where Murshid had hoped the *Universel*, a temple which symbolized the underlying unity of the great religions, would be built. Murshid laid its foundation stone.



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In preparing the ceremony his mureeds drew a circle on the ground and marked a point in the middle where Murshid should stand. They did not know that in mystic traditions the circle is the symbol for endlessness. To be enclosed in endlessness means that he passes into the hereafter. Murshid hesitated, then reluctantly stepped into it. Vilayat remembers that the mood was somber at what had been planned as a festive occasion.

On September 13th, 1926, Inayat left for India. He had wanted to go for a year, although we do not know why, but perhaps it was in the hope of curing an illness which the doctors in France could not treat, possibly a form of walking pneumonia. The trip was kept secret; few outside of the family knew that he was going. One wonders why it had to be kept secret? That was to cause one of many problems.

Actually Inayat had wanted to go to India in 1925 but had been dissuaded from doing so by his brother Maheboob. The family was afraid that he might not return. Instead he went to America where he stayed away for seven months, but accomplished little. Samuel Lewis who was to become Murshid Sam, reported that at that time Inayat seemed bitterly disappointed and said, "How many loyal mureeds do you think I have?" "I wish I had twenty! I wish I had ten! I wish I had five loyal mureeds! Five loyal mureeds. I have not as many loyal mureeds as I have fingers on one hand." This would seem to indicate that he felt that his mission to the West had been a failure.

Although there had been many premonitions, no one could have been prepared for the news that he had died in India. Not that they could ever really be prepared for such a loss. He had been the mainstay of their whole world. It was not even clear why he had died. He traveled with his Dutch secretary Kismet Stam. They visited many places and she said that he saw doctors wherever they went. The main biography we have of him states, "After a few busy months traveling and lecturing, he passed away after a short illness in Delhi on February 5, 1927." When he died the room was filled with the scent of roses. He was only forty-four years old.

There is a mystery about how he could leave with so many things undone. The family was not even clear about why he had gone. There was no

one else who could possibly fill the void that he had left. The mureeds were confused. Murshid's brothers were living in Holland most of the time and were not close to the family. Unfortunately, he gave no clear instructions as to who he wanted to head the Order, and how the work was to continue in case of his absence or death. Everyone assumed that he wanted Vilayat to be his successor, but he was only ten at that time.

One possibility was that the thought of his death was just too painful for Inayat Khan to contemplate or openly discuss with the family. His wife was passionately opposed to her son having to shoulder his father's role, knowing all too well the pain and suffering which it entailed. Thus, it was quite possible that in deference to her, Inayat put off declaring his successor.

Vilayat always believed that his father had put his own name after his on the *silsilla* of Chisti lineage holders, which was placed underneath the cornerstone of the Universel and which mysteriously disappeared. In neglecting this essential task of making his choice known publicly, he created a void which it seemed negative forces came to fill. The unforeseen consequences would multiply over time and greatly added to the burdens Vilayat would have to carry in the future.

Chapter 2 Life Without Murshid

If the move to France had been difficult for the family, the period that followed Inayat's death became much worse. Their mother broke down completely. She had always been frail, but now she would remain essentially bedridden for most of the next twelve years. Vilayat was only ten, and his brother Hidayat and sister Claire even younger. What happened was that twelve year old Noor-un-Nisa was forced into the role of their "little mother" in Vilayat's words. She was much too young to fulfill this role. The whole experience was to leave deep wounds on them all.

In 1934, when he was 18, Vilayat traveled with Noor to the south of France, crossed the Pyrenees, and toured Spain. He began to learn Spanish, as it was his habit of learning the language in each country where he spent time. They visited Maurice Eisenberg, who took them to see Pablo Casals who lived nearby. Vilayat managed to get some private lessons with Casals.

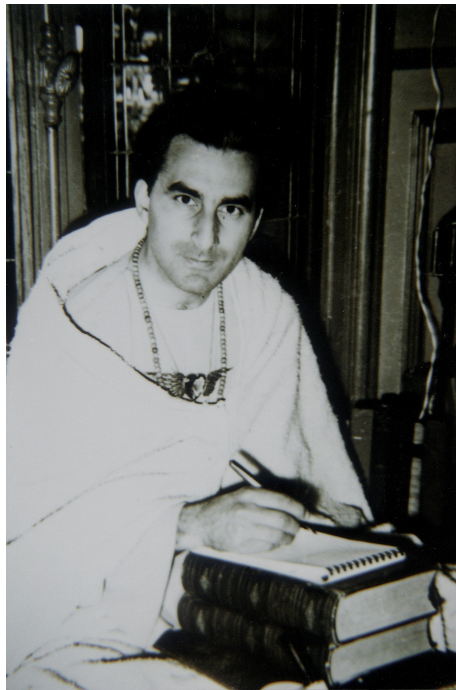
Subsequently, he went there every summer and attended the Masters Classes he gave. This was also the period that Casals did his great recordings of the Bach cello suites, which have never been surpassed. Pir Vilayat spoke of him as being very stern and a very strict teacher. Vilayat attributed his rich tone to what he learned from him. He always played from the heart; what mattered was the emotions that he could convey. Once he gave up studying music, there was no time to practice and so mistakes were inevitable, but that would never stop him for playing for us during the music camps he would give.



In 1937 the two went to Switzerland, where they stayed for many weeks in a small cabin above Lake Zug, looking out on a panorama of snow clad peaks. This was one of their very happiest times together. It had become a tradition for them to do at least one trip every year to different places in Europe. They shared a spiritual attunement which made for deep empathetic understanding. The bond of love and understanding between them had been cemented by all they had suffered together. She was very sensitive, and as he grew older he could shield her, just as she had helped him in the awful time after their father's death. Jean Fuller, a friend she met in England, says that they were both "highly strung and easily upset," but beneath Noor's gentle

manner and sensitivity lay an iron resolve and unbreakable courage. Vilayat appeared to others as headstrong and very determined.

Vilayat was being pulled in several different directions. While he was drawn to music and meditation, he also had wide-ranging interests spanning religion, philosophy, and science as well. Increasingly he had the conviction that he should follow in his father's footsteps which would mean leading the movement he had founded. He began to wear his father's heart and wings on special occasions.



It was his great good fortune to have been able to study with Louis Massignon, the saintly professor who was one of the first to bring his deep understanding of Sufism to Western audiences. He fostered Vilayat's deep connection with Mansour Al-Hallaj, which remained a key source of inspiration all of his life. Each in his own way shared a passionate belief in the need to fight injustice. They both did as much as they could to resist French repression of the Algerian independence movement. Massignon even participated in demonstrations, something almost unheard of for a university professor.

While he was in London Vilayat became a co-leader of the small Sufi center there and began giving talks under the auspices of the Sufi Movement. He was an excellent speaker and thus gained confidence in both his abilities and his understanding of Sufism.

Chapter 3 The War Years and After

On a June afternoon in 1940 Noor and Vilayat sat in the living room of Fazal Manzil debating what to do. The Germans were coming closer and time was short. Neither had French citizenship. Vilayat with an English passport might be arrested. Noor had been born in Moscow, but her father was Indian and her mother American. They did not have many connections with England. In fact, their sympathies were with India and Gandhi's fight for Indian independence from British colonialism. Beyond this, their allegiance was to their father's message and individual freedom. What could they do under the coming German occupation? Where to go? How would they live? Should they join the British army? Fazl Mai had died in 1939, but the funds she had left them were mostly in Holland, which by that time was under German occupation.

They managed to convince their mother and Claire to come with them to England. Hidayat who was married and had children and decided not to leave the country. Claire narrates how she, her mother, Noor and Vilayat all fled the German advance jammed into a little two-seater MG sports car. Hidayat left with his family and one uncle in another car to the south of France. It was a fearsome time to travel. Rumors were everywhere but hard news was scarce. The roads were clogged with panicked humanity fleeing in anything they could find, they knew not where. German dive bombers strafing the refugees flew so low that they could see the pilots' faces, who obviously knew exactly what they were doing. They passed horrible casualties along the roadsides. This experience resolved any lingering doubts that Vilayat still had about the necessity of fighting.

They were able to get as far as Tours and then took a packed train to Bordeaux. When it arrived, they were not allowed to get off, as the town was overloaded with refugees and they ended up about fifty miles away. After five

terrible days during which Noor and Claire were separated from Vilayat and his mother, he managed to buy a motorcycle and took them one by one to a Belgian freighter on which they were to sail to England. They were safe at last, it was June 19th, his birthday.

They heard SOS calls on the ship's radio and warnings of German submarine attacks. However, the sea was calm and they were not attacked. England felt like a haven of peace by comparison, but all too soon it would become a besieged fortress, facing Nazi Germany alone. The army had been evacuated from Dunkirk under German air attack, leaving all its equipment behind.

Luckily Vilayat had friends in Oxford where they could stay at first. After the turmoil they had left behind in France, England seemed strangely peaceful. However, they had only the money they had been able to bring with them, which meant they were really poor and almost totally dependent on the generosity of others. Vilayat and Noor planned to join the armed forces. Claire and their mother found work with the Red Cross which barely provided them with enough to eat. Their mother had never worked before this and she was still quite frail. They had lived such sheltered lives; she had rarely even left the family home all these years. Now they were refugees.

Vilayat was trained as a pilot. It was something he had long dreamed of and he discovered that he passionately loved to fly.

He related:

At one point, I was trained in the Royal Air Force by a Battle-of-Britain pilot. Within three lessons, he put me through the most hair-raising acrobatics. I returned the gauntlet by putting him into an inverted spin which he said later we were lucky to come out of. My joy was making a half loop, then turning off the engine and drifting in the wind amongst the clouds upside down, hanging on my straps in an open cockpit. Everything stops, you stop worrying, stop striving, you're not even trying to self transcend. Here I was at home, set free in the vastness. In fact, my dearest wish would have been to live up there permanently. I would exult in the many splendored array of colors in the clouds, and their evanescent formations and I would turn my plane into the sun, drinking in its sheer effulgence as I glided upon thin air.



It was too good to last; he was transferred to the British navy, officially because of poor night vision, but he hinted that the reason was actually that he kept on taking forbidden risks: he loved to do loops and fly upside down! At that stage he fancied motorcycles and sports cars. Speed and danger had quite an attraction for him then.

However, he was destined to spend the rest of the war at sea. This may well have saved his life; mortality rates among fighter pilots were the highest of any service. Nonetheless, the navy was a severe trial. At first he had to serve as a common seaman. He complained in one letter to Noor that his time was spent in such tasks as carrying potato sacks and picking up cigarette

butts. The whole experience was a rude awakening for him. In fact, he was so furious that Noor worried he would desert and join the Maquis in France. His time on the lower decks had thrust him into a rough world that he had thus far been shielded from. His life up until then had been lived mostly in the rarified atmospheres of Fazal Manzil and studying music and philosophy.

One of his tasks was to search for submarines while on watch duty. This required spotting a periscope, a tiny speck in a vast gray sea, an almost impossible task. However, he explained that this was a first step in learning to use intuition, a vital discovery. It was important training for him in other ways as well.

When the time came, he was part of a mine sweeping flotilla clearing the way for the Normandy invasion, working to disarm some of the thousands of mines strewn along the coast. It was scary dangerous work. He recounted,

I was ahead of the landing troops. So we were shot up from all sides. I would see my friends, we'd been drinking the night before at a party, and the next day I could see them floating in the water, dead. I knew I was next. We never expected to survive.

He had his own close brush with death in the cold waters of the English Channel. He had never learned to swim and felt like an eternity before he was rescued. This was a searing experience, leaving him with bronchitis and a chronic cough which plagued him the rest of his life.

Following the landing they had to ferry supplies to the beachhead, and then did mine sweeping as far north as Norway. After the war's end he still had to remain in the navy, serving out his enlistment. At his request he was allowed to transfer to India. He did not yet know how Noor had died, but he knew she was not coming back and blamed himself.

Late in the war when the allied armies were sweeping across Germany liberating the concentration camps, Noor came to her friend Jean Fuller in a dream; she was surrounded by a blue light and said, "I am free." When Jean saw Vilayat he said he had dreamed the same thing. Whereas Jean thought it meant that she had been liberated, Vilayat concluded the opposite. He said, "It means she is dead."

On leave from Bombay where he was stationed he traveled to Peshawar where he met a captain who was a falconer. When the eagle landed on

Vilayat's outstretched arm, a falconer was born in the young naval officer. He decided to go to Afghanistan where falconry was widely practiced.

Watching eagles there he remembered how, at age seven, he saw an eagle in the Paris zoo and had what he later realized was a *déjà vu*. He now realized that he had seen himself as a Mongol chieftain, with a large bird on his wrist. A little later he saw a stuffed eagle in a museum. He was transfixed and did not want to leave. Gradually he understood the reasons for what was to become a lifelong passion. Years later when a friend asked him, "Were you really an eagle in a past lifetime?" He answered, "Of course, don't I look like an eagle?" Most falconers flew peregrines, kestrels, or other smaller birds. Vilayat, however, felt particularly drawn to eagles. Not surprisingly, they were also his totem.

Mongols had also been keen falconers. Pir believed that he had inherited this trait along with his Mongol blood. Over the years he had flown many different birds: falcons, hawks, and even a buzzard. But his preference had always been for eagles. Golden Eagles were traditionally reserved for the highest nobility. Eagles were the most challenging, especially if captured when fully grown. They are the smartest, but also the most difficult of all to birds to work with Training them was not for the timid, as they could be truly dangerous. What was required was to slowly build up trust.

Once he had trained one, then he could share its joy each time he took the leather jesses off its feet and the eagle could fly at last. As the bird soared higher and higher it was almost as if he was flying with it up there, sharing its new found freedom and exultation.

In 1949 he was to receive another severe blow, when his mother died in his arms in great pain from an intestinal blockage. He believed that this tragedy could have been averted if only he had gotten there earlier. To make matters worse, through a mistake for which he also blamed himself, they could never know where her grave was.

The loss of his father followed by the virtual loss of their mother, then the final loss of sister and fiancée and then his mother's death as well, were overwhelming. Although he could never have prevented any of these tragedies, he still blamed himself. Most likely he was never able to fully heal the wounds from the losses of everyone most dear to him. Who would suspect that this being, who gave so much joy to so many, carried such

burdens all of his life, most of which he kept to himself? The Sufis say that the heart must be broken again and again to be able to be fit as a container for Divine Love. However, now there was no one left with whom he could unburden himself, nor did he have the therapeutic tools that are available today.

In the end his salvation was music which he discovered was the only way that he could lift himself out of his despair, and which he hoped could also heal other as well as well, but music could only do so much. When he talked of Noor's death we could all share some of his pain. This is one of the many times he talked of it:

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