

Notes on the Origin and History of the Chicago Group

From notes and audio tapes from Raynor Rozak Lee von Hohenstein about events surrounding his opening and early days as related to David McCormack from 2010 to 2013. Also from notes as related by Luscian Schurwanz February 2014 to David McCormack. Time verifications from Rozak's daily latihan journal 1959 to 1964 and from the log of Bapak's travels found in volumes of Bapak talks. Also from "A Little about Subud Chicago" written by Shoshana Margolin and Luscian Schurwanz. I hope everyone involved will please forgive any errors and omissions.

The Guerjiff group in Chicago and Wisconsin area was led by Tom Bartoff and Ovana Wright, the wife of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The group heard about John Bennett's opening in Subud. One of the members, Harrington McDonald*, wrote to Bennett who suggested he get in touch with someone from Subud in San Francisco. He did, and Lonard James and his wife scheduled a time to come.

To prepare for the visit, Harrington and about four others took circulars around to various groups such as the Theosophical Society and Alcoholics Anonymous.

According to Raynor's meticulous daily latihan journal, on Whitsun Sunday, May 17th, 1959 "John Bennett opened a group of people to Subud. I being a member of the group felt nothing." Rozak related the following concerning events surrounding May 17, 1959. Everyone who responded to announcements of Bennett's lecture on this new "something" came to the Fine Arts Center on Friday May 15th to listen to Bennett. Rozak remembers from 200 to 300 showed up for the first explanation. Those who wanted to know more were asked to return the next day to listen to more. At the end of the second talk on Saturday those who wished to hear more were asked to return on Sunday. After that third talk those who wished to receive the contact were asked to return in the early evening to the Fine Arts Center on Van Buren Street. Rozak recollects the Bennett's were assisted by Lonard-Lufhti and Irene James. "The men's latihan in the ballet studio was not packed like sardines but there were also no large spaces to move either." So

it would be fair to say that between 80 and 140 men and women were opened. Bapak followed up after the initial openings only weeks later on June 16th, 1959 with an 11 day visit. Bapak stayed at the Sherry Hotel where the latihan were held and began latihan the evening he arrived. Rozak recalls that many in the large crowd who attended Bapak's first talk on the 17th were not opened. The questions were at times odd, inane, or off subject. They were patiently answered by Bapak who shook each person's hand when they left the talk. Rozak remembers that many of those that listened were not at the latihan. Rozak's journal and the travel log show there were 8 latihan and three talks with Bapak over 10 days. Bapak departed on the 26th June, 1959.

After Bapak's visit the 80 to 180 members that were opened in May and June of 1959 slowly condensed down to about 45 members. Some of the committed early members were Tom Bartoff, Bob Worth, Mhd. Laksar Lawrence Rattey, Harry Samuel Wiestrom, Raynor Lee von Hohenstein, Kunrad Upton, Olive Gordon, (Not related to Bernie Leonard Gordon opened in 1963), Harrington McDonald*, (not to be confused with Harold McDonald of Louisville), Mr. Chalice, George Hukor, and Lawrence _____, who was a lawyer, Irene James, Sarah Chalice, and probably Honora, (who later married Mhd. Laksar Rattey), and perhaps Alice Lentz who later opened my wife. The San Francisco and L.A. groups had been started by Bapak earlier than the rest of the US. It is thought the James' arrived from San Francisco. They moved to Chicago and stayed until the group was grounded in the latihan. Probably the most able helper after they left was Tom Bartoff.

Of the 14 who were opened from the Theosophical Society only about two or three stayed on. (Sarah Chalice and her husband and perhaps Olive Gordon.) From Alcoholics Anonymous Lawrence Laksar Rattey, artist George Hukor, and Lawrence _____ (the lawyer) were the ones that continued. Most of the others were members of the Guerjiff group that lived in Chicago proper and comprised the early "anchor" for Subud Chicago, particularly after the James' felt their work was done and departed.

According to Luscian and Rozak at least six of the men members were doing too much latihan and went into crisis. There was not much help for them. The lucky ones were told to take a break from latihan and if fortunate they followed that advice. Several had major problems before being opened

and they did not have any help to watch over them. Some of these crises were of major proportions with very serious consequences. After that everyone realized it was really necessary to listen to Bapak and not just open probationers without understanding what their true situation was and not to do more latihan than recommended. Mhd. Laksar, Rozak/Raynor, and Luscian were three that “over did it” but later were able to stabilize and explain the need to follow Bapak’s advice.

Luscian had just been opened in late summer of 1961 when the group moved from the Fine Arts Center on Van Buren St. to the nearby Creative Arts Center across from the Congress Hotel. This also was a spacious dance studio. Both Luscian and Raynor recollect with great fondness the warm camaraderie during “coffee hour” at the Congress hotel across the street with up to 20 members after latihan. This was where probationers joined in as well. Also within months of being opened Luscian recalls Sjarfrudin, Bapak’s future son in law, came through Chicago on his return trip to Indonesia from Coombe Springs. Lucian was impressed by his simple and direct answers and his composure at all times and “the flow of the latihan” along with his sense of humor. “It was hard to believe he had only been opened about five years then.” He felt he was a true example for Subud and was completely at ease any place in the world.

Lucian relates the August 1963 visit by Bapak had some hitches in it. The members tried with the understanding they had to set it up appropriately, but “didn’t have the capacity at that time.” Bapak and party were driven up to the hotel that had been arranged. It was hotel that was used for disreputable purposes. Mhd. Laksar then felt to ask Bapak if he wanted to stay there. With zero hesitation Bapak quickly replied in English, “Let’s go.” The tapes of Bapak’s talks on the ‘63 visit never turned up or were of too poor a quality to use. None-the-less there was a good influx of openings for the next two years. In time this again condensed down to 35 to 45 regulars. Many of those opened in this period are all over the world and are committed members.

The following are some anecdotes from Luscian and Raynor about the early days to give a further sense of how things proceeded during the birthing process. Harrington McDonald would explain about the latihan to probationers that it was free and open to all; then he would try to look

serious and added, “And if needed for a small sum we can close you.”, and his straight face would give way to a smile. Luscian said of Harrington McDonald that he responded to a subud newsletter requesting members to share experiences of their first 20 latihans. “Harrington sent 20 blank sheets of paper.” It wasn’t until Bapak’s second or third visit and Harrington was in front of Bapak that he really felt and moved in his latihan.

Rozak said of himself that after reading “Concerning Subud” and listening to Bennett he was extremely enthusiastic about receiving the contact. At the initial openings on May 17th nothing happened and he became upset with himself. How had he swallowed this farce so completely and what were all these fools doing jumping, stomping, and shouting? The next day he was at choir practice when water started dripping on his head. He looked at the ceiling with an apartment above but saw nothing. He started to sing but it continued. He asked to be excused. Over the next two days he became “filled with water” from the drops of invisible water entering his head. “I was humbled”, he admitted.

In 1962 Raynor was doing latihan, and Kunrad Upton, who was not at the latihan, walked inside of him from behind and stayed a minute or two and said enthusiastically with his cheerful young voice, “BYE LEE”. Raynor (at that time Lee) thought it was neat that a young and inexperienced member could do this. Weeks later he found that Kunrad had passed on due to appendicitis. Around the same time Kunrad also visited Luscian Schurwanz and had about an hour long conversation with him.

Once Luscian and Laksar tried several times to get Joe Koach to feel his latihan as Bapak suggests in the helper guide, without much success. At the suggestion of Miss Maurey (later Halima Brugger), “as a way to find out for yourself if this is real or phony” Joe went to Indonesia. Luscian relates that in front of one of Bapak’s secretariat Joe began to immediately feel his latihan nicely for the first time. He was a hard headed businessman who also became satisfied the use of funds were proper and so became a committed Subud member.

When Luscian was a probationer he finally found a prized parking meter quite a distance from the hall and needed coins. A lady helped him out. Later he saw her again. It was Honora Rohana Rattey who gave operatic

singing lessons in the Fine Arts Center. Luscian sheepishly admitted he may have been doing too much latihan and the “vibrations” from flying leaps against the steel beams may have contributed to the group having to find new facilities. “But the latihan felt real to me and that was what I needed at that time.”

After that Mhd. Laksar found a place for latihan on Hubbard Street. It was on the third floor. There was an Italian restaurant under it that served a fair amount of liquor. Most agreed the accommodations were not as nice as what they had before but it was very central and near to downtown for a low rent. It came up for sale and Mhd. Laksar Rattey and Samuel Wiestrom tried very hard to get the group to purchase it for \$16,000. There was not enough support. Three and a half years later Luscian reminisces the building was worth between \$160,000 and \$200,000. The group continued there but at a higher rent until 1975.

In 1972 Bapak visited a third time and he approved of the accommodations. Bapak’s room and a wing for visitors and were on the 11th floor of the Shoreland Hotel. On the roof was a large ballroom. There were small glitches and the usual criticism but over all things went well and the tapes preserved.

After 1975 the group moved to a space on Pratt Street in Chicago where men and women did latihan in two adjacent rooms that did not have much sound protection.

In 1975 there was an influx of members from Skymont, the Subud community in Virginia. They brought life and activity with them. But alas, after one year, they left, mostly to live in California. Shortly after that, the group left the rented space on Pratt Street and did latihan in various places like the basement of a member’s house and assorted churches. During this time, the group dwindled.

One space, in a building that rented to non-profit groups, worked out well for a short time until the building was sold to an enterprising owner who wanted to earn greater profits from the rentals than non-profits could afford.

Finally, under the leadership of the chair at that time, Ruth Kelly, the group purchased a two-story house on Fullerton Street. The bottom floor had been used as a business and was an open space for the men’s latihan. The top floor had been the apartment of the owner and his wife, and the women did latihan

in the combination living-dining room. Things stabilized for the group at this point. After a number of years, however, we noticed a change in the neighborhood. We sold the building and became drifters once again.

There were many opportunities to see Bapak on the east coast of the US and Canada, but as far as I know the fourth and final visit to Chicago was 1977. Though that stay probably lasted for 8 days, only one talk was preserved.

There was a visit and international congress two years later in Toronto in 1979 during Ramadan that a fair number of members attended.

In the late 1990's Magnus (Daniel) Cheifetz purchased a beautiful building in Evanston, and the group contributed 14% of the sale price from the money they had earned from the sale of the Fullerton house. Magnus furnished two of the four rooms with carpets and chairs for latihan and used the other two rooms for his business.

The group also had use of the basement which was furnished as a café, but seepage and mildew eventually made the space unusable.

In 2010, Magnus told the group that he needed the rooms that we were using for his expanding business. Shoshanah found a ballet studio in the northeastern part of Chicago, a place equidistant for the members scattered throughout the city and suburbs. That is currently where we meet on Wednesdays and Sundays.

Subud Chicago today in 2014 has about 35 members with a few others who are doing latihan apart from the group. After many years without, we now have a three-person committee: Dana Todd as chair, Mahallia Ward as vice chair, and Victor Margolin as treasurer

Luscian estimates there have been 500 to 600 members opened over the years in Chicago after Bennett and party opened the initial crowd. The number of members who eventually stayed after Bapak's first visit (35-45) has remained fairly constant. Luscian noted that in the early years the listed members attended latihan nearly every time. Luscian's final thoughts; "Once at Coombe Springs I asked some questions of Sjarfrudin and Asikin. Sjarfrudin politely began his characteristically Indonesian reply with, "Well I can see you have done a lot of reading."

Luscian Shurwanz was opened in the fall of 1961 and has resided in Chicago with much travel to Subud groups and events. Raynor -Rozak was a Chicago member from 1959 to the second half of the 1960's. They have been diligent helpers for decades and been active in the outer sphere of Subud as well.

Footnote *Harold "McDonald" spelling of last name could have been Harold "McDonnell" or McDonnel