BEGAM ANIS QIDVAI

Children

[*Translator's note:* The translation of Bēgam Anīs Qidvā'ī's *Āzādī kī Čʰā'ōṅ Mēṅ* (In the Shadow of Freedom) was undertaken at the request of Urvashi Butalia for publication by Kali for Women. I agreed to do it because, although I had never read the book, I had heard enough about it to consider translating it a very worthwhile enterprise. I was asked to "translate and edit" the book and have acted accordingly. First, I have eliminated some repetition. The original was based upon Bēgam Anīs Qidvā'ī's own write-up of the numerous notes she had made from day to day in the course of her activities, and this resulted in quite a lot of repetition. For example, there are two separate accounts of the fate of some of the villages near Delhi, and I have composited these into a single account. I have also transposed some passages, so as to present them in chronological order, although not all of these editorial choices and strategies are reflected in the passages grouped here under the title "Children."

I much regret that I did not know of the book long enough ago to produce this translation during Bēgam Anīs Qidvā'ī's lifetime. Urdu, of course, can only reach an audience much less numerous than the audience of English-speakers. The book has indeed been translated into Hindi, though not, I believe, into other Indian languages—but not yet into English. If this translation could have been done and published during her lifetime it could have brought her the acclaim she so richly deserved from the many thousands of people who are only now able to see her greatness. Her narrative impresses me as completely honest. She does not whitewash anyone, and her sympathy for Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan is no less than her sympathy for the Muslim victims of Hindu and Sikh violence.

To end on a personal note, one cannot be otherwise than shocked by the harrowing events that the book relates. But one can also not fail to enjoy the beautiful Urdu in which it is written.]

Jamila begam was spending all day in an ambulance going the rounds picking up the sick and the wounded and taking them to hospital. Whenever a special train was ready to go to Pakistan the relatives [of the wounded] would raise an outcry, "Hand over our relatives to us right away. We'll take them along with us." She had to keep with her a list of people whose relatives were lost or who had died so that she could read it out and tell people how many had died or what had become of them. Injured people came running to the hospital from the city. Sometimes the police or the army brought the injured to put them in the camp hospital. Then many people who'd been thrown from the trains brought their broken bones and injured bodies here. So both in the camp and in the city the hospitals were full.

One morning I too went with Jamila Begam. For some days both of us had been worried about the children. A lot of women came from the [Christian] missions and we thought that they must have collected the children. "Why shouldn't *we* make some arrangement for the orphan children?" we thought. What was happening was this. On days when a train was leaving for Pakistan innumerable children would get onto it. Their parents were often left behind while the children, in their eagerness to make the journey, would go off on their own. Sometimes the parents would go off and the children would be left behind at the station. God knows what happened to these children when they got to Pakistan, or whether they got to their parents or died on the journey. Anyway with this plan in mind we went to Irwin Hospital. There wasn't much time, but we made a rough survey of the whole situation and noted how many children there were there. The ambulance that had brought us had left and was due back in an hour's time after leaving patients at another hospital. So we thought we should go down and sit in the office and, while we were waiting, plan what we could do in the present situation. But before we'd even begun to talk about this a second ambulance arrived and lots of people got very agitated and began asking, "When? How?" When we inquired we were told that a health visitor, Dr. Mufti, had been murdered while going the rounds in Paharganj and it was the corpse's severed limbs that were being taken out of the ambulance. I at once sat down. I again recalled something I had forgotten. A strange sensation ran through my body and Jamila, clutching her head with both hands, was saying,

"It's the limit. It's too much. They've even killed someone who's a servant of the Government of India." But God knows what she was saying after that. I couldn't hear it. Now it was impossible for me to stay any longer. I implored Jamila, "Please, for God's sake, phone my home and tell them to send a car. God knows when the ambulance will come. I can't bear to stay here any longer." In our agitation we repeatedly got the wrong number, but eventually we got through and a car came and took us away.

I was so affected by this incident that for several days I couldn't summon up the courage to think about the children. And we were faced with another major difficulty. If we took the children where would we keep them? Jamila Begam's home was empty and she suggested that we get the government to give us a guard from the army and keep the children there. But we had no friends and no women helpers to whose care we could hand them over. …

I wanted to get the stray children who came to the Old Fort camp for milk and food and to look for their parents, sent to a school or to Jamia Millia. Although I hadn't yet talked to the Jamia authorities about it, I was certain that they would not refuse to take them. Our Muslim brothers at that time conceived of Pakistan as nothing less than an earthly paradise. But it was a paradise in which they could not hope to find servants, and so they took their children with them, thinking that they would do. Perhaps they also thought that a Muslim child should not be left behind in this country of unbelievers. …

Kishvar (my daughter) took a great interest in getting sweet things for the children. In the Old Fort, too, she usually gave them lime juice along with their milk. I'd forgotten this, but today too, on Baqar 'Id, she turned up carrying a tin having already treated the children to money and sweets. In the Old Fort, when things were being handed out, the children would fall over each other to take them from her hands. But here on the roof above the Tomb, the children sat down in lines and took their share turn by turn, without any fuss and uproar. I couldn't bear to look at it. Their expectant eyes, their humble faces, their longing. My heart overflowed and I moved away and sat down elsewhere. At this point Dr. Zakir Husain arrived, introduced himself and told me to gather up all the orphan children and send them to Jamia Millia. "We'll make separate

arrangements for them," he said. What a huge problem these few words solved.

The children were coming happily down from the roof and young people, eyes brimming with tears, were embracing Dr. Zakir Husain and his companions. Old people were embracing one another. On that day big cooking pots of pilau and sweets were provided by the Majlis-e Ahrar and the Jamiatul Ulema, and this brought to a close this historic Baqar 'Id, an 'Id accompanied by thousands of tears and sighs and lamentations...

One day when I arrived at the camp I saw that on a piece of empty ground in front of the workers' tents a carpet had been laid down and a number of people wrapped in shawls were sitting there. I thought perhaps another caravan of people had arrived. They were all gathered there. One of these got up and handed me a paper. I read it and found that it was a petition written on behalf of some orphanage. Below it the orphans had signed their names. It said that refugees [from Pakistan] had occupied the orphanage building and the orphans had all come here with their supervisor asking to be provided with tents and bedding and rations. I went to them, taking a youngster with me. "Where are the orphans?" I asked. "Let me see them." The supervisor said, "All their names are on the list. All of them are those sitting here." At this point I remembered what Dr. Zakir Husain had said. "Good," I thought, "I'll collect all the children I can and send them to Jamia Millia and then arrange tents and rations for the others." But when I looked at those gathered there I could see that there were only a few children and most of them were adults. I told the boy who was with me, "Call out the names one by one and we'll see how many children there are. I see very few. It looks as though their numbers are really quite small." The first name was called and a healthy-looking boy of about fifteen or sixteen, with a beard beginning to appear on his face, at once stood up. I told him, "Son you're grown up. You can go out and earn. But maybe you've grown up in the orphanage so you want to stay with the others. Anyway …" When a second and a third name were called two children of about twelve or thirteen stood up. But when the fourth name was called a hefty young man of thirty to thirty-five stood up. My companion was furious. He shouted at him, "You? Are you an orphan or an orphan's father?" People standing behind him laughed out loud. I looked at the list again and found that the supervisor's name was also on it. When he saw people laughing at him he got angry and shouted, "Madam all of us are there to run the orphanage and the children are here in front of you." But of the eighteen or nineteen names on

the list, eight or nine at the most were children and all the rest were adult gentlemen who ran the orphanage. I tried my best to keep back the children, but they were the property of the Imamia Orphanage and to get them handed over to me I'd have had to get a certificate from some *mujtahid* confirming that I was a Shi'a. They wouldn't even agree to a proposal to send them to a Shi'a orphanage in Lucknow. Unfortunately I could find none of my [Shi'a] brethren in the camp at that time who might have agreed with me and helped me. (In fact there were several Shi'a youngsters working in the camp but none was prepared to identify himself as a Shi'a or a Sunni. All wanted to be classified simply as human beings.) The result was that the supervisor took his establishment with him off to Lahore where I hope that to this day his business is flourishing.
…

I've already said that in October I made the rounds of different hospitals and made a list of the children there and that Jamila Begam had promised to accommodate them in her house. But how could the children have lived there safely, all alone and unprotected? No doubt the senior authorities of the district would have provided a security guard as soon as we asked them.

After a few days, when children were being killed, the survivors would express their grief but nothing more, not thinking it right to accuse anyone, much less to get anyone punished. Anyway Zakir Sahib solved this problem for us too and in November I went to Irwin Hospital to arrange to collect those children who were now well and to take them to Jamia. The big ward on the upper story was empty at the time and all the children were there sunning themselves on the veranda. Some of them had head injuries. Some had broken limbs. One girl's forearm was hanging half severed. One seven-year-old's belly had been cut all over. The skin had been joined up again and the stitches removed. One little nine-month-old girl with injured head and arms was lying groaning on her little bed. But a bright little girl had gathered the rest together and they were playing happily in the sun. I said to her, "You're well now. Were you hurt too?" She laughed and said, "No, I came here with my Bua, you know, my nurse. I used to call her Bua. She died here. My Mother and Father are in Etawah." I asked, "And all the other children?" Cheerful as ever she replied, "All the others? Look, there's Rashida, all her people are dead. All Zainab's people are dead too. And Babu's mother had her throat cut." She was laughing and went on talking freely. She can't have been

more than five years old. Death to her was a game, something amusing. "They're all dead. They were killed. Her mother's throat was cut." All these were everyday events, a wonderful spectacle, an interesting story that she'd never heard before. While I was talking to her a boy was telling me, "My father is alive. Two of my brothers are dead. My dad is in Lucknow. I came here with my brothers but both of them were killed at the station. Send me to Lucknow." He was an intelligent boy and told me his full address. None of the children was more than eight years old but here they were, all living happily together like members of a single family in a single home. All of them had told their story. Out of all of these children only two were now fit to be taken to Jamia. The nurse said that it was very late now and I should come back at ten the next day and get the doctor's permission to take them away. In front of me was another ward where there were injured women and girls. The nurse took me there too. First I saw an eighteen-year-old whose leg was missing. On another bed a dark-complexioned girl of thirteen or fourteen lay groaning. There were wounds all over her body. Two months had passed but her pain had not diminished. There was a pretty girl who had come from Meerut to get a cancerous growth treated. Three months later she didn't know whether her relatives were still living or not, and she was weeping for them. The most horrifying of them was a young woman, one of whose arms had been severed at the wrist and the other further up the arm. Her twelve-year-old daughter was lying in bandages strapped to a nearby bed crying and wailing. And there was her mother without hands to stroke her hair and pat her and comfort her and give her water to drink. I think that as long as I live I shall not forget her tears of helplessness.

I look at my notebook today and see that I still have written there "bananas, *gazak*, and *revrian*." These three things remind me of Rashida and Mehrauli. She cannot have been more than sixteen years old. She told me that when they were attacked the men fought to the death, that many of the women, clasping the Qur'an to their bosom, jumped into a well, and that others ran away. She too ran away but that didn't save her. There were sword wounds on every limb of her body. She said to me, "Mother, make me your daughter. I have no one." And for several days she called me Mother and would wait several days at a time for me to come. One day I asked her, "Rashida, is there anything you would like to eat?" And she said, "Yes, when you come tomorrow bring me bananas and *gazak* and *revrian*." But I had to be in the camp from early morning until evening and only then was I able to return home. I couldn't get *gazak* or *revrian* in New Delhi and my servants were terrified of going to

the old city: so, alas, I couldn't grant her wish. These three words remind me of her and make me feel ashamed. But I've kept this dirty old notebook so that I don't forget my failure and my laziness. I was visiting Rashida when a woman called out to me. She said, "My name is Bhuri. Send for my brother." As if everyone in Delhi would know her brother! I did my best to comfort them all and then, promising to come again, went off to Lady Hardinge Hospital. …

Even now there were quite a few sick people and many children there. There was a dear little six-year-old girl whose head had been wounded by a sword stroke and who was making absolutely no progress towards recovery. The poor child couldn't even tell me her father's name. Whenever I asked she said, "Everyone in Paharganj called him Munshi Ji."

As I looked at the patients I reached the rear veranda where a Hindu sister secretly called me aside and took me to a pretty young girl. She said, "This is Farida Talat. She's a Muslim of good family. We don't know where her father or her other relatives are. She wasn't injured. She fell ill before the riots started and was admitted here. The hospital people know her address. She keeps on crying but they've probably not yet informed her parents. You please take care of this." At one end of the ward a young mother with a little boy on her lap was weeping bitterly. On a bed nearby her three-year-old daughter was screaming. This little girl had fallen victim to an act so barbarous that it made my hair stand on end. Some lion-hearted warriors had held her aloft on a lance they had thrust into her genitals and up into her belly. When a sort of wick, yards long and soaked in medication, was put into her wound her agony and her mother's tears were a scene that no one who had any feeling could bear to see. The woman said, "They killed everybody, and held my child aloft on the lance and left me alive to witness it all. What can I do? Where can I go?" She was sorrow incarnate and I could only tremble.

When, after looking upon all these heartrending scenes, I turned to go home, a Bengali sister took me to her room. She was herself a mother and it distressed her deeply to see the agitation of other mothers. She told me very sadly of conditions in the hospital and then said, "There's another three-year-old girl. She's quite fit now. She had only a slight injury and it took only a day or two to heal. She has nobody. She wanders aimlessly round the hospital all day. She's a Muslim's daughter. Take her away with you." She was brought to me. I asked her, "What's your name?" She said,

"Sita and Hasina." I asked her father's name. He had one Hindu name and one Muslim name. The same was true of her mother. The Bengali sister said, "No matter what she says, she's a Muslim because she spreads her hands and says, 'My father used to say "May Allah help us."' She must be the daughter of some Muslim fakir." But the nurse was telling me, "She's a Hindu." This was a bit of a problem for me. The only solution I could think of was to take her to Gandhiji. I completed the necessary papers and took her straight to Gandhiji. I asked to see him at once and luckily he sent for me immediately. He was sitting spinning. Smiling as always he asked me, "Where have you brought this girl from?" I said, "Bapu, she'll cause ill-feeling between Hindus and Muslims. She says that she and her parents all have two names, and no matter how much I ask her I cannot make out the secret of this. You tell me what to do with her." He laughed and asked the girl her name. She replied, completely calmly, "Hasina and Sita." He said, "All right. For the present keep her with you and then take her to the Kasturba Trust School in Mehrauli and leave her there." So she stayed with me for a while and after a week or ten days I sent her to Mehrauli.

I'd been to all the hospitals in the city and had a list of all the children, but the children weren't there. What had happened and where they'd gone was a mystery. Perhaps after they'd recovered they'd gone off to anywhere they could find a lodging. Or perhaps the missionary ladies had got their hands on them. Whatever had happened I kept on feeling angry with myself for not having thought of it and felt concern about it as soon as I'd got there. But it was too late now. I found a few in Kalra Hospital. They reached their parents in the camp.

I went on taking the children who'd recovered to Jamia (Okhla). One by one they were recovering. The wounds in their bellies, their broken heads and dangling legs, all had been healed, and I went on taking them, limping and weak, to Jamia. An old employee of Jamia, Khuda Bakhsh, used to massage their legs. The masters would bathe them and, as and when their relatives were found, they were handed over to them. Not all the children were from Delhi. Some were from Calcutta and some from Lucknow. One girl was from Meerut and another from Agra. An All-Powerful God had first scattered them, and then gathered them together, and then scattered them again.

When they left the Irwin Hospital they clung weeping to the nurses who had been more than mothers to them. After four months there they felt as though they were being parted from their families. This big ward was their home. They had grown deeply attached to their little beds, their

mattresses on the floor, and their little benches and charpoys on the veranda. On the one hand there were the animals who had injured them, on the other the human beings who had saved their lives and brought them peace and shown them there were still human beings left in the world.

With the help of Sir Muhammad Yamin I was able to get the Meerut girl to the address she had given me. He took her there and handed her over to her uncle, either her mother's or her father's brother. Thanks to Firoze Gandhi's kindness, the boy whose belly had been injured got back to his goldsmiths' community in Lucknow. All the way there he was a real pest to Firoze Sahib. He kept asking him, "Are you Hindu or a Muslim?" And then, "I hate Hindus. Where are you taking me? Where will you leave me?" When he was thirsty he would first get out of the train at a station and at once come back and order Firoze Sahib to go and fetch him some water. "There are a lot of Sikhs here. They'll kill me. *You've* got to go. *I'm* not going." All the way there he kept on about Sikhs and Hindus but Firoze Sahib got him safely there. God knows what joy this must have brought his father who had taken his life in his hands and gone off to Delhi to look for his three sons. Hope out of despair. At any rate one of the three had come home.

That bright and lively girl, Zarina, was the first to leave with me. She was chatting merrily, and as she got out of the car she encountered a middle-aged Sikh in the street. She let go of my hand and at once went up to him and hugged him. He kissed her and asked where she was going. I told him, "She's well now and I'm taking her to Jamia. She'll go to school there and when we find her relatives she'll leave." He was very pleased. He hugged her again and gave her some sweets and then went off. I asked her who he was but she didn't know. He was just "Baba" to all the children. People told me, "This compassionate mortal keeps coming here. The children all run to hug him. He loves them. Gives them sweets. Laughs and chats with them and then goes off again." This true representative of humanity comes into this world of sorrow and distress and gives out love without regard for religion or community. If only all of us were so generous! I'm sorry that I couldn't even find out his name. …

That nice little boy they called Babu got better and came with me to Jamia. All the way there I could see that he was missing his nine-month-old brother, Kallu, who, to be on the safe side, we'd left for a few more days in the hospital. They didn't resemble each other in appearance at all. Babu was a wheat-complexioned, healthy and intelligent chatterbox, and Kallu was as black as ink, dried up and ugly. No one even knew whether

they were children of the same parents, from the same home, or strangers. To the soldiers who had picked them up, put them in their truck and brought them to the hospital they were just two injured children. Babu began to call him brother and so did everyone else. Whenever I went off to Jamia he would cling to me and demand sweets. If I took him an apple he'd sulk and say, "I'm not speaking to you. Why haven't you brought sweets?" One day I went in a jeep and he got very angry. "Why haven't you come in that red car? I don't like this. I'm not going to get into it." I said, "Who's taking you anywhere? I've not come to fetch you." He began to pinch me and said, "I'm going to the bazaar to buy some sweets." Ikram Sahib, who was mother, teacher and caregiver to all these children, told me, "He's a very hot-tempered boy. He says, 'I'll kill you. I'll murder you. Ikram, if you'd died I'd have begun to live. Why don't you die? I'll die too.' And so on and so on. He talks all the time about blood and about dying." One day Ikram phoned me to say that there were things needing to be bought for the children and that if I could come I should. Otherwise I should send a car to go to the Jama Masjid. I thought, "That's good. It'll be a holiday for Babu." So I went myself. Babu was very pleased.

He got into the car but after a little while it was as though he had suddenly remembered something. He began talking as if he was dreaming and talking in his sleep. He put his hand to his neck and said, "There was blood coming out of here, coming out of my dad from here, from here in his neck. And he was saying, 'They killed my wife and my brothers too.' Then he picked me up and threw me up with all his strength, like that. I was sitting on a tin crying. Then the soldiers came and put me in a car and I began to live at home." I said, "What home?" He said, still half asleep and looking away, "The home where Miss Sahib is, and Kallu." All of a sudden he started up and stroked the car and began speaking again. "I used to go with my dad in the car, to get sweets and balloons and things from the Jama Masjid." Suddenly he got angry again. He said, "I'll kill him, that Ikram." This lisping four year old who called Ikram "Itram"—why was he so angry with him? Why did he want to die? Why was he shouting about blood? I started trembling. Rashida and Babu had shown me a glimpse of an outcome which I had not yet thought about. This child was at first in Jamia and then in the children's home in Daryaganj. (The children's home had probably been an old orphanage provided by the Vaqf Board. Some years ago Dr. Zakir Husain had become a member of the Board and it was his innovation to turn the orphanage

into a real children's home.) But his mental balance had gone and in the end he went completely mad. ❐

—Translated by Ralph Russell