

## CHAPTER 1

# Childhood and Youth

### Birth and Early Childhood

The village of Nurs straggles along the bottom of the south-facing slopes of a range of the massive Taurus Mountains south of Lake Van in the province of Bitlis in eastern Anatolia. Its deep valley is carved through the mountains from Hizan, the nearest township some ten hours away on foot. Until the road was built in the 1980s the only path to the village followed this valley, along which flows the rushing stream that borders the south side of the village. The settlement is surprisingly rich in vegetation, and the varied greens of its trees—walnut, poplar, and oak—and its gardens and fruit trees offer a pleasant contrast to the stark slopes bearing down from above. Its houses of roughly cut stone rise in uneven tiers, huddled against the slope and shaded by the trees. It was in one of these humble dwellings with its tiny windows and sagging straw roof that Said Nursi was born in 1877,<sup>1</sup> the fourth of seven children. His father, called Mirza, had a smallholding of land, similar no doubt to the small terraced plots still cultivated today. His birthplace, too, stands unchanged, inhabited by distant relatives.

Mirza was also known as Sufi Mirza, to denote either his attachment to a Sufi order or his piety,<sup>2</sup> while his wife was Nuriye—or, more correctly according to one biographer, Nure or Nura.<sup>3</sup> They were among the settled Kurdish population of the geographical region the Ottomans called Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup> In Nursi's words, his family was an ordinary one and could boast no illustrious forebears.<sup>5</sup> According to some reports, Mirza's generation was the fourth descended from two brothers who had been sent from Cizre on the Tigris to preach in the area.<sup>6</sup> It is conceivable that they were members of the Khālidiyyah branch of the Naqshbandī order, which spread rapidly through the area in the nineteenth century,<sup>7</sup> though this would have meant that Mirza was at most the second generation. Nuriye was from the village of Bilkan, some three hours' distance from Nurs.

The two eldest children of the family were girls, Dürriye and Hanım. The latter later gained a reputation for her knowledge of religion and married another *hoja* (teacher) who bore the same name as her brother, Molla Said. They went into voluntary exile in Damascus following the Bitlis Incident of 1913, and died while circumambulating the Ka'bah in 1945.<sup>8</sup> The next child,

Abdullah, also a *hoja*, was the young Said's first teacher. He died in Nurs in 1914. Said was followed by Molla Mehmed, who taught in the *medrese* (religious school) in the village of Arvas,<sup>9</sup> not far from Nurs. Then came Abdülme-cid, who for many years studied under his elder brother, Said. His main claim to fame was his translation into Turkish of two of Nursi's Arabic works. He died in Konya in 1967. Nothing is known of the youngest member of the family, a girl called Mercan (Ar. Marjān). The eldest girl, Dürriye, the mother of Ubeyd, also a student of Said, was drowned in the river at Nurs when Ubeyd was small.

Mirza died in the 1920s and was buried in the Nurs graveyard. Once Said left the family home to pursue his studies, he never again saw his mother. She died during the First World War and was also buried in Nurs. In later years, Said was to say: "From my mother I learnt compassion, and from my father orderliness and regularity."

Said passed his early years with his family in Nurs. Long winters were spent in the village, and short summers in the higher pastures or in the gardens along the low slopes and riverbanks in the valley bottom. The growing season was short, but sufficient to meet the villagers' needs. It was a life close to the natural world, in harmony with its rhythms and cycles, full of wonders for an aware and responsive child like Said. He was unusually intelligent, always investigating things, questioning and seeking answers. Years later when explaining how scholarly metaphors may degenerate into superstition "when they fall into the hands of the ignorant," he himself described an occasion that illustrates this.

One night, on hearing tin cans being clashed together and a rifle being fired, the family rushed out of the house to find there was an eclipse of the moon. Said asked his mother: "Why has the moon disappeared like that?"

She replied: "A snake has swallowed it."

So Said asked: "Then why can it still be seen?"

"The snakes in the sky are like glass; they show what they have inside them."<sup>10</sup>

Said was only to learn the true answer when studying astronomy a few years later.

Whenever the opportunity arose, and especially in the long winter evenings, Said would make the trek to *medreses* in the vicinity to listen to the discussions of the shaikhs, students, and teachers. These occasions and the culture they reflected clearly had a formative influence on his character and future activities. A reference to them in his later writings illustrates too the influence on the life of the region's people of the revivalist Naqshbandī/Khālīdī order, which with its emphasis on scholarly learning—specifically, the study of jurisprudence (*fiqh*)<sup>11</sup>—and virtuous activity in preference to the quest for mystical knowledge had spread rapidly in the nine-

teenth century, displacing the Qādirī order and establishing many *medreses* and *tekkes* that became centers disseminating the traditional religious sciences.<sup>12</sup> Şerif Mardin describes the subprovince of Hizan as being “riddled” with their schools.<sup>13</sup> This explains also—in part, anyway—how a tiny isolated hamlet like Nurs whose people were bound by the timeless cycles of simple husbandry could have produced in Said Nursi’s generation so many teachers and students of religion and a figure of his stature. He wrote in the mid-1940s:

In the district of Hizan, through the influence of Shaikh Abdurrahman Taġī, known as Seyda, so many students, teachers, and scholars emerged I was sure all Kurdistan took pride in them and their scholarly debates and wide knowledge and Sufi way. These were the people who would conquer the face of the earth! When I was nine or ten years old I used to listen when they talked about famous ulama, saints, learned men, and spiritual masters. I used to think to myself that those students and scholars must have made great conquests in religion to speak in that way. [Also] If one of them was a little more intelligent than the others, he was made much of. And when one won an argument or debate, he would be held in great esteem. I was amazed because I felt the same way.<sup>14</sup>

That is, to be victorious in debate also appealed strongly to the young Said. In addition, more than being merely independent-minded, it was as though from his very earliest years Said was trying to discover a way other than that which those around him followed, as the following shows:

When I was eight or nine years old, contrary to my family and everyone else in the vicinity, who were attached to the Naqshī order and used to seek assistance from a famous figure called Gawth-ı Hizan,<sup>15</sup> I used to say: “O Gawth-ı Geylānī!”<sup>16</sup> Since I was a child, if some insignificant thing like a walnut got lost, [I would say] “O Shaikh! I’ll say a Fātiḥah for you and you find this thing for me!” It is strange yet I swear that a thousand times the venerable shaikh came to my assistance through his prayers and saintly influence. Therefore, however many Fātiḥahs and supplications I have uttered in general in my life, after the Person of the God’s Messenger (PBUH), they have been offered for Shaikh Geylānī. . . . But preoccupation [with study of the religious sciences] prevented my becoming involved with the *tariqat*.<sup>17</sup>

Although, as is stated here, Said never joined a *tariqat* or followed the Sufi path—he was later to describe Sufism as being inappropriate for the needs of the modern age—his close relationship with Shaikh ‘Abd al-Qādir Geylānī continued throughout his life; on many occasions throughout his life Said received guidance and assistance through his saintly influence.

### Said Begins His Studies

Said started his studies at the age of nine by learning the Qur'ān.<sup>18</sup> He appears now as a pugnacious child, prone to quarreling with both his peers and elders. But this sprang from the frustration at having a spirit that as yet could find no way to express itself, and at the incomprehension that he often met with from both his teachers and his fellows.

It was the example of his elder brother, Molla Abdullah, that first prompted the young Said to start studying. With unusual perspicacity for a child of nine, he had noticed how Abdullah had benefited from his studies; he had gradually improved and progressed so that when Said saw him together with his friends from the village who had not studied, his self-evident superiority awoke in Said a strong urge to study himself. With this intention, he set off with him for Molla Mehmed Emin Efendi's *medrese* in the village of Tağ, near İspart, some two hours from Nurs on foot. However, he fought with another student called Mehmed and did not stay there long.

For the young Said also held himself in great esteem. He could not endure even the smallest word spoken to him in a commanding tone, or to be dominated in any way. So he returned to his own village, where he told his father that he would not attend any more *medreses* until he was older because the other students were all bigger than he was. Due to its small size, Nurs had no *medrese*, so Said's lessons were then restricted to the one day a week that his elder brother, Abdullah, returned.

Here is how in later years Nursi described himself at this age:

When I was ten years old I had great pride in myself, which sometimes even took the form of boasting and self-praise; although I myself did not want to, I used to assume the air of someone undertaking some great work and mighty act of heroism. I used to say to myself: "You're not worth tuppence, what's the reason for this excessive showing-off and boasting, especially when it comes to courage?" I didn't know and used to wonder at it. Then, a month or two ago [1944] the question was answered: the *Risale-i Nur* was making itself felt before it was written: "Although you were a seed like a common chip of wood, you had a presentiment of those fruits of Paradise as though they were actually your own property, and used to boast and praise yourself!"<sup>19</sup>

About a year passed in this way, then once again Said set off to continue his studies full-time. But his needs were not to be answered by any of the teachers or *medreses* he visited. He went first to the village of Pirmis, and then to the summer pastures of the Hizan shaikh, the Naqshbandī Sayyid Nur Muhammad. There, his independent spirit and the fact that he could not endure being dominated made him fall out with four other students. They

would join forces and pick on him constantly. So one day Said went to Sayyid Nur Muhammad and said: "Shaikh Efendi! Please tell them that when they fight me to come two at a time and not all four at once." This pluck on the part of the ten-year-old pleased the shaikh greatly, who smiled and said: "You are my student, no one shall bother you!" And from then on Said was known as "the shaikh's student."<sup>20</sup>

Said remained a while longer, and then went together with his elder brother Abdullah to the village of Nurşin. Since it was summer, they left the village together with the villagers and other students for the high pastures of Şeyhan. Once there, Said quarreled with his elder brother, and they fell out. The principal of the Tağ *medrese*, Mehmed Emin Efendi, was angry with Said and asked him why he opposed his elder brother. But Said did not recognize the teacher's authority either, and retorted that since the *medrese* belonged to the famous shaikh Abdurrahman Taği, he was a student like himself and did not have the right to act as a teacher. He then left immediately for Nurşin, passing through a dense forest that was difficult to penetrate even by day. From there he moved on to a village called Kuğak.

With its oral culture and social structure dominated by the shaikhs, aghas, and tribal leaders, stories about the saints and religious figures abounded among the people of the region, and not all of them were apocryphal. Many were, and are, related about Said Nursi, some of which have been recorded by researchers together with their "lines of transmission." The account of his early studies is certainly authentic. It was written first by his nephew and then later—based on this account—by his closest students under his supervision; and it has been verified by witnesses. So, too, the gist of the tales and legends about him can be taken as true, even if some details have been changed in the telling. There are sometimes different versions of the same stories. Some are related to his future service to Islam, others illustrate his learning and other virtues, and a few link his qualities to the uprightness and piety of his parents.

One, reputedly told by Nursi himself, relates how in his first place of study, the Tağ *medrese*, the illustrious owner of the *medrese*, Shaikh Abdurrahman Taği (d. 1886–87), used to show a close interest in the students from Nurs, rising at night during the winter to make sure they were all covered and would not catch cold. Moreover, he used to say to the older students: "Look after these students from Nurs well, one of them will revivify the religion of Islam, but which of them it will be I do not know at present."<sup>21</sup> This may actually have been another shaikh, for Abdurrahman Taği had moved to the village of Nurşin many years previously.

A well-known story describing Mirza's uprightness and Nuriye's piety concerns one of the young Said's teachers who was intrigued by the child's abilities and wanted to meet his parents. So taking a number of his students,

together they made the six- or seven-hour journey to Nurs. A short time after arriving, Mirza appeared, driving before him two cows and two oxen with their mouths bound. After the introductions, Said's teacher asked him the reason for this. Mirza replied in a modest manner: "Sir, our fields are a fair way off. On the way, I pass through the fields and gardens of many other people. If these animals' mouths were not tied, it is possible they would eat their produce. I tie them up so that there's nothing unlawful in our food."

Having seen how upright Said's father was, the teacher asked his mother how she had brought up Said. Nuriye replied: "When I was pregnant with Said, I never set a foot on the ground without being purified by ablutions. And when he came into the world, there was not a day when I did not suckle him without being purified by ablutions."

Said's teacher had now discovered what he had come to learn. Of course, such parents should expect to have such a son.<sup>22</sup>

### Young Said's Independence

At that time in eastern Anatolia any scholar who had completed the course of study in a *medrese* and could demonstrate his mastery of the subjects obtained his diploma (*icâzet*) and could then open a *medrese* in a village of his choice. If he was able, he would himself meet the needs of the students, such as food, heating, and clothing, and if he was not able to, they were met by the villagers either through *zakât* or some other way. The teacher asked for no payment for his teaching.

Young Said would in no way accept *zakât* or alms. To accept assistance meant becoming obliged to others, and he felt that to be an unbearable burden on his spirit.

One day, his fellow students went to the neighbouring villages to collect *zakât*, but Said did not accompany them. The villagers, being impressed by this and appreciative of his independence, themselves collected a sum of money and tried to give it to him. Given the poverty and deprivation of the region,<sup>23</sup> this was indeed a meaningful gesture. But Said thanked them and refused it. Whereupon they gave it to Molla Abdullah in the hope that he would persuade him to accept it. The following exchange then ensued:

Said said: "Buy me a rifle with the money!"

Molla Abdullah: "No, that's not possible."

"Well, in that case, get me a revolver."

"No, that's not possible either."

So, smiling, Said said: "Well, get me a dagger, then."

His elder brother laughed at this and said: "No, that's impossible too. I'll just buy you some grapes; then we'll make sure the matter remains sweet!"

Said stayed a while in the *medrese* at Kuğak, then set off alone for Siirt and the *medrese* of Molla Fethullah, again showing his fierce independence and almost foolhardy courage, for travel was extremely dangerous due to the lawlessness of the times. Pursuing his studies for some two months under this well-known teacher, he then departed for Geyda, a village near Hizan where Sayyid Sibğatullah, the Gawth of Hizan, is buried. Said attended the *medrese* here but had to leave after a short time because he was involved in a fistfight in which, while trying to defend himself, he wounded another student. He returned to his father's house in Nurs, where he spent that winter.<sup>24</sup>

### Said Dreams of the Prophet

That winter Said spent in Nurs. Toward the spring he had a powerful dream that impelled him to return to his studies. It was like this: it was the Last Day and the resurrection of the dead was taking place. Said felt a desire to visit the Prophet Muhammad. While wondering how he could achieve this, it occurred to him to go and sit by the bridge of Sirat, for everyone has to pass over it. While the Prophet is passing, he thought, I shall meet him and kiss his hand. So he went and sat by the bridge, and there met with all the prophets and kissed their hands. Finally, the Prophet Muhammad came. Said kissed his hands and asked for knowledge from him. The Prophet said: "Knowledge of the Qur'ān will be given you on condition you ask no questions of any of my community." Upon which Said awoke in a state of great excitement. And indeed, he thereafter made it a personal rule never to ask questions of other scholars. Even when he went to Istanbul, he adhered to it; he always only answered questions put to him.

Filled with enthusiasm, Said left Nurs, going first to the village of Arvas and from there to Shaikh Emin Efendi's *medrese* in Bitlis.<sup>25</sup> Because of his tender years, the shaikh did not teach him himself, saying he would appoint one of his students to do so. This wounded Said's self-esteem. One day while Shaikh Emin was teaching in the mosque, Said rose to his feet and objected to what he was saying with the words: "Sir! You're wrong, it's not like that!" The shaikh and his students looked at the young Said in amazement. It was inconceivable that a mere student should challenge a shaikh's authority.

Again Said had to curtail his stay. This time he set off for the Mir Hasan Veli *medrese* at Müküs (Bahçeseray), whose principal was Molla Abdülkerim. When he saw that the new, lower-grade students were given no importance, he ignored the first seven books, which should have been studied in sequence, and announced he would study the eighth. He remained there only a few days, then went to Vastan (Gevaş) near Van. After a month in Gevaş, he set off with a companion called Molla Mehmed for (Doğu) Bayezit, a small town near the

foot of Mt. Ararat, and it was here that his real studies commenced. Until this time, he had studied the works on Arabic grammar and syntax taught in the *medreses* of eastern Anatolia as far as the work called *Hall al-Mu'addad*, which was of an intermediate level and the equivalent of the well-known work called *Izhār al-Asrār* that was taught in the Istanbul *medreses*.<sup>26</sup> It was now 1891–92.

### Bayezit

Said's period of study in the Bayezit *medrese* under Shaikh Muhammad Celālī<sup>27</sup> lasted only three months, but it was to provide him with the foundations of or key to the religious sciences on which his later thought and works would be based. Also, it was once again to show what he had instinctively displayed from the very beginning of his studies—namely, his dissatisfaction with the existing education system and his awareness of the urgent need for its reform. Moreover, the astonishing number of works Said read, memorized, and digested in this short period of time was to demonstrate his remarkable power of memory and exceptional intelligence and understanding, both of which were developed to a degree far exceeding the average for boys of his age. He was fourteen or fifteen years old.

During his time in Bayezit, Said completed the entire course of study then current in *medreses*. The works studied were heavily annotated with commentaries, commentaries on commentaries, and even commentaries on those commentaries and further expositions, so that to complete the course under normal conditions took the average student fifteen to twenty years. The method was to completely master one book and one subject before passing onto the next.

Said began from *Molla Jami*,<sup>28</sup> and completed all the works in the course in turn. This he did by ignoring all the commentaries and expositions, and by concentrating on only a certain number of sections in each work. On being asked by a displeased Shaikh Muhammad Celālī why he was studying in this way, Said answered thus: "I am not able to read and understand this many books. But they are all caskets of jewels, treasure chests, and the key is with you. I only implore you to show me what is in them so I can understand what they are discussing, and then I shall study those that are suitable for me."

Said's aim in replying thus was to point out the need for reform in *medrese* education and to prevent time being wasted through the inclusion of so many commentaries, annotations, and expositions. And in answer to his master's question: "Which subject, which of the sciences studied, is suitable for you?" Said replied: "I can't distinguish these sciences one from the other. I either know all of them or none of them."



Whichever of the books Said studied, he would understand it without seeking anyone's assistance. He was able to study and master the most difficult works of two hundred pages or more like *Jam' al-Jawāmi'*, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, and *Ibn Ḥajar*<sup>29</sup> in twenty-four hours. He gave himself over to studying to such a degree that all his ties with the outside world were cut. On whichever subject he was questioned, he would give the answer correctly and without hesitation.

While in Beyazit, Said passed much of his time, and even the nights, in the mausoleum of the Kurdish saint and poet Shaikh Ahmad Hani,<sup>30</sup> so that the people said he was specially privileged with Ahmad Hani's spiritual radiance. One night Said's friends from the *medrese* missed him and started searching for him. Finally they looked in the mausoleum and found him there studying by the light of a candle. But he rebuked them for disturbing him. While Said was thus plunging himself into studying, he also started to follow the way of the Illuminist (*Ishrāqiyyūn*) philosophers and to practice extreme self-discipline and asceticism. The Illuminists had accustomed their bodies to such practices gradually, but Said ignored the necessary period of adjustment and suddenly undertook the most rigorous ascetic exercises. His body could not support it, and he grew progressively weaker. He would make one piece of bread last three days, trying to emulate the Illuminists in their practice of the theory "asceticism serves to expand the mind."

Not being content with this, he followed Imām Ghazālī's mystical interpretation of the Hadith, "Give up what you are doubtful about for that about which you have no doubts" from *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*,<sup>31</sup> and for a time gave up eating even bread; he subsisted on grasses and plants. Furthermore, he rarely spoke.

At the end of three months, toward the springtime, Said obtained his diploma from Shaikh Celālī and was then known as Molla Said. He evidently intended to pursue the ascetic life, for he donned the dress of a dervish with a sheepskin flung over his shoulder and set out for Baghdad, intending to visit its famous religious scholars and the tomb of Shaikh 'Abd al-Qādir Geylānī. He wanted also to test his knowledge against that of other scholars. Avoiding roads and traveling at night, he came after three months to Bitlis. It was a remarkable feat of courage and endurance that should not be underestimated, for not only is it a distance of at least two hundred miles, but the country is very wild and mountainous and at that time was still heavily forested. Besides such natural foes as bears and wolves, the whole region was infested with bandits and brigands. Together with the intertribal feuding, it rendered any travel perilous, let alone for an unarmed boy of fifteen or so.

When Molla Said finally arrived in Bitlis, for two days he attended the lectures of Shaikh Mehmed Emin Efendi. The shaikh proposed that he wear the dress of a scholar. In eastern Anatolia at that time the turban and scholar's

robe were not worn by students, but only presented when the diploma (*icāzet*) was obtained. The scholar's dress was the right only of teachers (*müderris*). But Molla Said did not accept the shaikh's proposal, answering that since he was not yet mature, he did not think it was fitting for him to wear the dress of a respected teacher. How could he be a teacher while still a child? And he put the gown and turban away in a corner of the mosque. Nevertheless, it was from this time that he started to teach the Arabic sciences and have his own students.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, with his practice of meeting other scholars in argument and debate and presenting himself to answer their questions, he was trying to establish himself as a religious scholar and teacher.

### Şirvan

From Bitlis, Molla Said traveled on to Şirvan, where his elder brother, Molla Abdullah, taught in the *medrese*. The following exchange took place at their first meeting:

Molla Abdullah: "I have finished *Sharh al-Shamsī*<sup>33</sup> since you were here. What have you read?"

Molla Said: "I have read eighty books."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, I have finished eighty books. And I have read a lot of works not included in the syllabus."

Molla Abdullah found it hard to believe that his brother had read so many books in such a short time and wanted to test him. Molla Said agreed, and Abdullah was left in admiration and astonishment. Then hiding it from his own students, he accepted his younger brother as his master, though only eight months before Said had been his student and started to take lessons from him. When Abdullah's students discovered their master being taught by his younger brother, Said told them that he was doing so "to avert the evil eye." The reason for his change of dress and "image" at this time, described below, suggests that he explained his action in this way as an act of self-mortification rather than out of mere modesty. For rumors had begun to spread among the people that the young Molla Said was a sort of child *veli* or saint-prodigy, and it was in response to this, to conceal the level of knowledge and spirituality he had attained, that he put aside his dervish garb and first started to wear the dress of a Kurdish chieftain, for which he was to become famous. This consisted of a suit made of patterned, finely woven woolen material, russet in color, with full trousers resembling plus fours; long leather boots; a waistcoat; a long sash wound round the waist several times; and a turban. Bediuzzaman persisted in wearing this dress even when he went to Istanbul,<sup>34</sup> and changed it for the more sober gown (*jubba*) of a religious scholar only on his transfor-

mation into the New Said after the First World War.<sup>35</sup> It may also be seen as a declaration of his intention to follow a way other than either the traditional dervish (or Sufi) way or the learned profession.

### Siirt

Molla Said remained with his brother a while longer and then made his way to Siirt. It was here that he was challenged by the local ulama for the first time and was successful in debating with them and answering all their questions. His reputation now became firmly established. On his arrival in Siirt, he went to the *medrese* of the famous Molla Fethullah Efendi, who was to experience the same astonishment as Molla Abdullah at the number of books Said had read and learned. He also examined Molla Said, who again gave perfect answers. So he then decided to test his memory and handed him a copy of the work by al-Ḥarīrī (1054–1122)—also famous for his intelligence and power of memory—called *al-Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīriyyah*. Molla Said read one page once, memorized it, then repeated it by heart. Molla Fethullah expressed his amazement.

While there, Molla Said learned by heart the work on the principles of *fiqh* he had studied in Bayezid, *Jam' al-Jawāmi'*, by reading it for one or two hours every day for a week. Thereupon Molla Fethullah wrote in the book, in Arabic, “He committed to memory the whole of the *Jam' al-Jawāmi'* in a week.” Said’s own copy with the same statement written in the first person in his own (poor) handwriting on the cover is still extant. It has 362 pages.<sup>36</sup>

From a letter written by Nursi in 1946 while in exile in Emirdağ, it is learned that it was at this time, as a result of these feats of learning, that he was first given the name of Bediuzzaman—Wonder of the Age—by Molla Fethullah Efendi. He wrote to one of his students: “My Curious Brother, Re’fet Bey, you want information about Bediuzzaman Ḥamadānī’s works in the 3rd century [Hijrī]. I only know about him that he had an extraordinary intelligence and power of memory. Fifty-five years ago one of my first masters, the late Molla Fethullah of Siirt, likened the Old Said to him and gave him his name.”<sup>37</sup>

News of these events spread around Siirt, and upon hearing it the ulama of the area gathered together and invited Said to a debate and to answer their questions. Said accepted, and both defeated them in debate and was successful in answering all their questions. Those present were full of praise and admiration for him, and when the people of Siirt came to hear of it, they regarded Molla Said as something of a *veli*, or saint. However, all this aroused the jealousy of the lesser scholars and students in the area, who, since they were unable to defeat him in argument or in learning, tried to do so by force.

They set upon him one day, but the people intervened and prevented any harm coming to Said, who told the gendarmes who arrived on the scene, having been sent by the governor: "We are students; we fight and make it up again. It is better if no one outside our profession interferes. The fault was mine."

Said answered in this way out of his extreme respect for the learned profession, which he felt would be slighted by the interference of the ignorant and uneducated, although it was to assist him.

After this incident, Said always carried a short dagger with him in order to deter those tempted to fight him.<sup>38</sup> He was strong and agile and now came to be known as Said-i Meşhūr, Said the Famous. He challenged all the ulama and students in Siirt to debates, letting it be known that he never asked questions, but answered anyone who chose to put questions to him. He also competed in sports and physical feats, and demonstrated his superiority in these, too. One day in Siirt, he challenged a friend, Molla Celāl, to jump a water canal. He himself cleared the broad canal successfully, then stood back to watch his friend. Molla Celāl took a running jump, but alas, not being as athletic as Said, landed in the mud at the edge of it!

### Bitlis

It was probably Molla Said's successes in the field of scholarship that made him abandon his journey to Baghdad and return to Bitlis and the *medrese* of Shaikh Emin so as to establish his reputation in the provincial center. However, as before, the shaikh dismissed Said as too young to understand anything. Molla Said was not to be deterred and requested once again that he be given the opportunity to prove himself. So Shaikh Emin prepared a series of questions on various most difficult subjects, all of which Molla Said answered correctly and without hesitation. The shaikh then set him some riddles and puzzles, which he solved in record time. He then went to the Quraish mosque and began to preach to the people.

Said became very popular, drawing a large number of the people of Bitlis to listen to him. But it resulted in two factions forming in the town: those who supported him and those who supported Shaikh Emin. So to forestall any trouble, the governor expelled Molla Said from Bitlis, and he made his way from there back to Şirvan.<sup>39</sup>

A story about Said Nursi at this time, related by Badıllı together with its line of transmitters, shows both that the illustrious Shaikh Emin bowed to his superior knowledge and that Said did not hesitate to voice his opinions whatever the rank or position of those he was addressing. While he was in Bitlis, three Wahhābī (according to one source they were Shi'ī) preachers visited the provincial governor, who called on Shaikh Emin as the town's foremost

scholar to meet them in debate and reply to them. Perhaps the shaikh felt he was inadequately informed, but in any case he was disinclined to face them; he suggested summoning the young Molla Said instead. Once again extricating himself from attempts to prevent him—this time he was locked in his room—Said presented himself, only to be met with the governor's disparaging amazement as Shaikh Emin rose to his feet and seated him in his place. Not in the least perturbed, Molla Said turned to the governor and said: "Actually it's you who's the Wahhābī! Those who stood up when I entered did so out of respect not for my person, for I'm younger probably than their grandchildren, but for my knowledge!"

He then proceeded to expound the beliefs of the Wahhābī school and their origins and historical development and demolished convincingly the ideas on which they are based. The story has it that he spoke so reasonably, the Wahhābī scholars offered their excuses and made themselves scarce, while the governor admitted that he had been secretly trying to spread Wahhābism but was now persuaded of its errors.<sup>40</sup>

Undoubtedly, the purpose of this anecdote is to demonstrate Molla Said's exceptional talents, but it also gives an idea of some of the religious currents that were seeking to extend their influence in the area at the end of the nineteenth century—there is another anecdote about Said silencing Shī'ī preachers so successfully they turned around in their tracks and made their way back to Iran.<sup>41</sup> This and two other important factors—Christian missionary activity and the Armenian question<sup>42</sup>—suggest that the Muslims of eastern Anatolia were in a somewhat embattled position, and though there are no references to the latter questions in Said's biography at this stage, they must have impinged strongly on his consciousness and been a powerful motivating force. The breakdown of the social order and social and political changes that were consequences of the nineteenth-century centralizing reforms and administrative reorganization known as the Tanzimat, together with the missionary and Armenian questions and their effects on the area, particularly Bitlis, have been dealt with in some detail by Şerif Mardin.<sup>43</sup> Here a few brief points will fill in some of the background to the progression of Said's activities.

The position of weakness into which the Ottomans had fallen vis-à-vis the European powers had far-reaching repercussions all over the empire but was felt especially in the eastern provinces, since it was exacerbated by the two above-mentioned interrelated factors. Of the various denominations of missionaries that had been granted the freedom to pursue their activities in the empire by the reform rescripts of 1839 and 1856, it was the American Protestants who had become most active in Bitlis. Generally, most of the missionaries' activities, which gained momentum in the 1880s and 1890s,<sup>44</sup> were educational, and by the end of the century they had founded some four hundred schools throughout the empire with well over thirty thousand students. These

supplied excellent education, the chief purpose of which was conversion.<sup>45</sup> They were directed mainly at the Christian minorities. The missionaries undermined the Ottoman state in many ways and were one of its main headaches, not least in Bitlis, where they were alleged to have assisted the Armenians' revolutionary efforts.<sup>46</sup> The Protestant missionaries' proselytizing had proved fruitful in Bitlis. The Armenians converts to Protestantism there had "a substantial church edifice with a congregation of about four hundred and a large boarding-school for boys and girls."<sup>47</sup> Quoting the same source, Mardin informs us that American missionaries had a school for girls with fifty boarders and fifty day students. Others had opened a "Girls' Seminary" that then established branches in outlying districts.<sup>48</sup> This was itself revolutionary in a region where girls were rarely given any education—Molla Said's sister Hanım was an exception.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, together with the Great Powers, particularly Russia and Britain, the missionaries did much to fan rising nationalist aspirations, against which background the Armenian question<sup>49</sup> should be seen. Initially, the great majority of Armenians living within the Ottoman domains were opposed to the nationalist struggle, which was instigated by non-Ottoman Armenians and furthered by two revolutionary societies, the Hinchaks and the Dashnakzoutiun.<sup>50</sup> What is particularly relevant here is that the revolutionaries incited a series of revolts in the eastern provinces, which they claimed as their homeland, and in Istanbul, one of which took place in Van in 1896.<sup>51</sup> However, even in Bitlis and Van, where there was the greatest concentration of Armenians, they did not form more than 26 to 30 percent of the population.<sup>52</sup> The violence, uprisings, and their suppression by the Hamidiye regiments<sup>53</sup> were most widespread from 1890 to 1894. Thousands of both Armenians and Muslims were killed.<sup>54</sup> These were the conditions prevailing over much of the country as Molla Said roamed from place to place debating with the ulama. But more important were the feelings of outrage as acts of terrorism and massacres and ensuing counter-massacres were consistently used by the revolutionary networks in a propaganda war against the Ottomans, as was indeed their aim, providing justification for the European powers to increase their pressures on the Ottomans and to threaten intervention. The frustration and sense of weakness, which reflected on Islam itself, must surely have been a constant spur, goading the ambitious young Said in his efforts to revitalize Islam.

### **Tillo**

As Said's fame grew, so did his difficulties. From Bitlis he had gone to Siirt. There some teachers and lesser scholars whom he had previously defeated in

debate constantly sought opportunities to reduce his prestige in the eyes of the people. They had him watched and followed, and one day when he missed the time for the morning prayer and performed it late, they started rumors about him. He soon moved on, this time because in that rough-and-ready life one of his students was attacked by the local villagers. He was offended at this and went to Tillo, a village a few miles outside Siirt.

His stay here—he incarcerated himself in a small domed building of stone intended originally as a place of retreat, called the Kubbe-i Hassa—is famous for three things. Firstly, he memorized an Arabic lexicon, the *Qāmūs al-Muḥīt*, as far as the fourteenth letter of the alphabet, *Sīn*.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, while he was here Said's younger brother, Mehmed, used to bring him his food each day. And Said, dipping his bread in the soup, would eat it and give the crumbs to the ants around the building. When asked the reason for this, he would say: "I have observed that they have a social life, and work together diligently and conscientiously, and I want to help them as a reward for their republicanism."<sup>56</sup>

Although it was not until later that Said was first "awakened politically," it is clear from this story of the ants that he had already at this stage acquired ideas that he would adhere to throughout his life. Since these are described below and in detail in a later chapter, suffice it to say here that his political ideas were based on Islamic practice and on the principles of freedom, justice, consultation, and the rule of law.

Thirdly, it was also while he was in Tillo that Molla Said had the dream in response to which he first started to work among the tribes as a conciliator and man of religion generally. He dreamt that Shaikh 'Abd al-Qādir Geylānī appeared to him and ordered him to go to Mustafa Pasha, the head of the Miran tribe,<sup>57</sup> "and summon him to the way of guidance." Mustafa Pasha was to desist from oppression, perform the obligatory prayers, and enjoin what was lawful. Otherwise Said was to kill him.

This was a surprisingly tough task for a boy who can still have been no more than sixteen years old and marks what may be seen to be another stage in his career: that of working as a man of religion among the tribes—a function usually performed by the shaikhs. It was all the more surprising, since the tribal chief in question, Mustafa Pasha, was notorious for his brigandage and general oppression, which have been well recorded. Besides his leadership of the Miran, one of the few tribes that had managed to increase its power on the destruction of the old emirates, he was appointed commander of one of the Hamidiyye regiments, founded by Sultan Abdülhamid in 1892; hence his title of pasha. This enabled him to extend his power, through the use of force, over further tribes and a wide area. A traveler through the region soon after his appointment, which must have coincided roughly with Molla Said's unusual mission, probably 1892, noted that he "had established his

own petty ‘kingdom,’” which was virtually independent of the Ottoman government and which he maintained through exacting illegal tolls and raiding.<sup>58</sup>

Notwithstanding this formidable prospect, Said immediately gathered together his belongings and made his way south to the region of Cizre on the Tigris.<sup>59</sup> His relations with the tyrannical chief there illustrate one of his most striking and enduring characteristics—namely, his absolute lack of fear, especially in the face of oppressors and the powerful. Rather, it was a disdain for fear of anything other than his Maker.

### **Molla Said and Mustafa Pasha**

On approaching Mustafa Pasha’s tent, Said learned that he was elsewhere and took the opportunity to rest. A while later Mustafa Pasha returned to the encampment and entered his tent, whereupon all those present rose to their feet, except Molla Said, who did not so much as stir. This attracted Mustafa Pasha’s attention, and he inquired who the man was from Fettah Bey, a major in the militia. He informed him that it was the Famous Molla Said. Now, Mustafa Pasha did not care at all for the ulama, but he thought it wise to suppress his anger, and asked why he had come. Molla Said replied as ordered in his dream: “I’ve come to guide you to the right path. Either you give up your oppression and start performing the obligatory prayers and enjoin what is lawful, or else I’ll kill you!”

Mustafa Pasha was doubtless taken by surprise at this reply and left the tent to consider the situation. After a while he returned and again asked why he had come. Said repeated what he had said. After further exchanges, Mustafa Pasha thought of a solution; he would set up a contest between Molla Said and “his” religious scholars in Cizre. If Molla Said was victorious, he would do as he said, otherwise he would throw him in the river. Said was quite unperturbed. He told Mustafa Pasha: “Just as it’s beyond my power to silence all the ulama, so is it beyond your power to throw me into the river. But on my answering them, I want one thing from you, and that’s a Mauser rifle. And if you don’t stick to your word, I’ll kill you with it!”

After this exchange, they mounted their horses and rode down to Cizre from the high grazing grounds. Mustafa Pasha would not speak to Molla Said on the way. When they came to the place known as Bani Han on the banks of the Tigris, Said slept, entirely confident about his forthcoming trial. When he awoke, he saw that the scholars of the area had gathered and were waiting, books in hand. After introductions, tea was served. The scholars had heard of the Famous Molla Said, and as they awaited his questions in a state of some trepidation, Said drank not only his own tea but some of theirs, as well. Mustafa Pasha noticed this and informed the scholars that he was of the opinion that they would be defeated.



Molla Said told the Cizre scholars that he had taken a vow to ask no questions of anyone but that he was ready for theirs. Whereupon they presented him with about forty questions, all of which he answered satisfactorily—except for one, which they did not realize was incorrect and accepted. As the gathering was dispersing, Molla Said recalled this and hurried back to inform them and give the correct answer. Upon which they admitted that they were well and truly defeated, and a number of them started to study under him. Mustafa Pasha also presented him with the promised rifle, and began to perform the obligatory prayers.

Molla Said was physically fit and strong, just as he was intellectually. He particularly enjoyed wrestling and used to wrestle with all the students in the *medreses*. And they were never able to beat him.

One day, he and Mustafa Pasha went out to race each other on horseback. Mustafa Pasha had ordered that an unbroken, uncontrollable horse be prepared, which he gave to Molla Said to ride. Molla Said wanted to gallop the rebellious horse after walking it around for a bit. Given some rein, the horse galloped off, away from the direction it had been pointed. Said tried to stop it with all his strength; he could not. Finally the horse careered toward a group of children. The son of one of the Cizre tribal leaders was standing right in its path. The horse reared up and struck the child between the shoulders with its forelegs. The child fell to the ground under the horse's hooves and began to struggle desperately. Quickly, those watching reached them. When they saw the child, by then motionless as though dead, they wanted to kill Molla Said. On the tribal leader's servants pulling out their daggers, Molla Said immediately drew his revolver, and said to them:

"If you look at the reality of the matter, Allah killed the child. If you look at the cause, Kel Mustafa killed him, because it was he who gave me this horse. Wait, let me come and look at the child. If he is dead, we can fight it out later." Dismounting, he picked up the child. When he saw no signs of life in him, he plunged him into cold water and immediately pulled him out. The child opened his eyes and smiled. All the people who had rushed to the spot to watch were dumbfounded.

Molla Said stayed a short time longer in Cizre after this incident, then set off with one of his students for some desert country and its nomadic Arab tribes. He had not been there long when he heard that Mustafa Pasha had reverted to his former evil ways, and he returned to advise him to give them up. But it was more than Mustafa Pasha could bear to be dictated to in this way, and it was only at the intervention of his son, Abdülkerim, that he refrained from assaulting Molla Said, who then left at the son's request and returned to the Berriyye desert, this time alone.<sup>60</sup>

Said was attacked twice by bandit nomads in the desert, which lies between Nusaybin and Mardin. The second time he would have met his end,

but they recognized him and, regretting their attack, offered him their protection on the dangerous parts of the road. Molla Said rejected their offers of assistance, and continued on his way alone until several days later he reached Mardin.

Said Nursi's student and biographer, Abdülkadir Badıllı, records a first-hand account of a witness of Molla Said's encounter with the ulama at Cizre that throws light on his spiritual or mental powers (*kerāmet*). Though in later life he always discounted such powers, or else ascribed them to the Qur'an or *Risale-i Nur*, they were an essential attribute of the shaikhs and religious leaders of those times. The possession of such powers would also explain how this young *molla* could have imposed his will on an autocratic tyrant like Mustafa Pasha.

In 1969 Badıllı interviewed a ninety-six-year-old member of the Buhti tribe called Fakirullah Mollazade, who had been studying in Cizre at the time of Said Nursi's trial by the ulama, which he attended. On completion of his studies he settled in Nusaybin, where for sixty years he worked as a preacher and mufti. Though bedridden at the time of the interview, he was still in full possession of his mental faculties.

Fakirullah told Badıllı how he had been so drawn to Molla Said after his successful trial that he had remained with him for seven months as his student, and that he had witnessed many instances of his *keramet* or wonder-working. Molla Said evidently liked him and often used to joke with him. One day he told him: "*Sad salo!* You'll live to be a hundred! I'll die in Urfa, but they'll break open my grave and remove me elsewhere! *Nemiro! Sad salo!* Immortal hundred-year-old!"

Fakirullah went on to say that he had forgotten about this until Said Nursi came to Urfa in March 1960, two days before his death. He immediately set out to visit him, but was too late. And it is a fact that three and a half months after Said Nursi's death, his tomb was broken open by the military authorities and his remains were removed to an unknown spot, and that Fakirullah Mollazade died in 1973 at the age of a hundred.<sup>61</sup>

### **Mardin**

Besides his continuing success in scholarly debate, which included all his contests with the Mardin ulama, Molla Said's stay in Mardin was significant in several other respects. But first an anecdote that illustrates Said's characteristic daring and courage.

As related by Haji Ahmed Ensari, one day Molla Said went out with his host's son, Kasım, and suggested they climb the minaret of the Ulu Mosque to see the view. Having climbed it, Said suddenly jumped up onto the parapet of

the gallery of the minaret, which was only about four centimeters in width. There he spread his arms wide and started to walk round it. Kasım shut his eyes out of fear. Appearing from the other side of the minaret, Said shouted out: “Kasım! Kasım! Come on, let’s walk around together!” But shaking at the knees, Kasım descended the minaret and joined the people who had gathered to watch from below, wondering at the boldness of this intrepid young *molla*.<sup>62</sup>

To understand just how bold this was, one has to remember that Mardin is built on the slopes of what resembles an extinct volcano, the summit of which has been fortified and made into a large citadel. The town looks down on the Mesopotamian plain, which spreads out to infinity to the south. The decorated stone minaret of the twelfth century mosque rises to over sixty feet, standing out spectacularly as the ground falls away to the plain. If one wanted to perform an act of daring, this was the place to do it.

While in Mardin, Molla Said stayed as a guest in the house of Shaikh Eyyub Ensari, and began to teach in the Şehide Mosque, answering the questions of all who came to visit him. One of the notables of the town, Hüseyin Çelebi Pasha, was so impressed by Said’s knowledge and skill at debating that he offered him numerous gifts. But in keeping with his usual practice, Said refused them all, except for a good-quality rifle, called a *şeyhane*.

It was at this time, however, that Molla Said was in his own words “awakened” politically and made aware of the wider issues facing the Islamic world. In a work entitled *Münāzarāt (The Debates)*, first published in 1913, he wrote: “Sixteen years before the [Constitutional] Revolution [of 1908], I encountered in the region of Mardin a person who guided me to the truth; he showed me the just and equitable way in politics. Also at that time, I was awakened by the Famous Kemal’s *Dream*.”<sup>63</sup>

The “Famous Kemal” mentioned here is Namık Kemal, one of the leading figures of the nineteenth-century Young Ottoman Movement,<sup>64</sup> the main aims of which are reflected in this work of Kemal’s that Molla Said came across at that time, *The Dream (Rü’ya)*. It is written in the form of an address to the nation by a heavenly representative of freedom. This beautiful, fairy-like symbol of freedom, which has slipped through the clouds, urges liberation from despotism and struggle for the sake of the nation, progress, and the prosperity of the fatherland (*vatan*). Following this, it outlines the picture of a society and country of the future, which is free, whose people are sovereign, citizens are educated, and in which full justice and rights are established.<sup>65</sup>

In another place in *Münāzarāt*, Nursi described himself as “Someone who for twenty years has followed it [freedom—*hürriyet*—as opposed to despotism] in his dreams even, and has abandoned everything because of that passion.”<sup>66</sup>

Thus, it was at this time in Mardin that Molla Said first became aware of the struggle for freedom and constitutional government that the Young

Ottomans had been pursuing since the 1860s. As we shall see in the following chapter, Said Nursi maintained that such freedom was both enjoined by Islam and was the key to progress and the answer to the question “How can this State be saved?” He thought despotism and absolutist government were among the major causes of the dire condition, internal and external, of the Ottoman Empire and Islamic world.

Also while in Mardin, Molla Said met two “dervishes” who were instrumental in broadening his ideas. One was a follower of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–97), who in the summer of 1892 was brought to Istanbul by Sultan Abdülhamid with a view, so Afghānī hoped,<sup>67</sup> to using him in furthering his pan-Islamic policies.<sup>68</sup> The second was a member of the Sanusi order, which played such an important role against the colonial expansion in North Africa.

It is conceivable that the person Molla Said encountered who gave him guidance and the follower of Afghānī were one and the same, if “the just and equitable way in politics” signifies the liberal values of constitutionalism. For the introduction of constitutional government in the Islamic world and limitation of absolutism were part of Afghānī’s ideas for mobilizing Muslims in the way of progress and for resisting the encroachments of European imperialism.<sup>69</sup> No further explanation is given in the original reference in Nursi’s biography to the meeting with the two dervishes. However, it was more specifically in connection with Islamic unity, or pan-Islam, that the other reference to Afghānī in Said’s works of the period is made, for which Afghānī was most famous.<sup>70</sup> In his defense speech in the court-martial of 1909, Said declared: “My predecessors in this matter [of Islamic unity] are Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, the late Mufti of Egypt Muhammad ‘Abduh, Ali Suavi Efendi and Hoja Tahsin Efendi, [Namık] Kemal Bey, and Sultan Selim.”<sup>71</sup>

These questions are dealt in greater detail in a later chapter, but it is worth noting here that the names quoted above are preceded by what may be taken as a definition of Islamic unity as Said understood it. This was not political unity; its aim was “to stir everyone’s consciences and urge them down the path of progress. For the most effective means of ‘upholding the Word of God’ at this time is through material progress.” This gives us a pointer as to why he included names not immediately associated with Islamic unity but with education and especially with the introduction of the modern physical sciences. Interestingly, this fits in with the mention of the Sanusi order. A nearly contemporary work on it tells us that together with the phenomenal spread of the order all over the Islamic world in the nineteenth century and its aim of Islamic unity,<sup>72</sup> with its emphasis on education and the single-minded application of its members to mundane work rather than to acts of supererogatory worship, it resembled a social society or brotherhood more than a mystical order.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in the light of Nursi’s subsequent activities, it seems reason-

able to suppose that the dervishes in Mardin introduced him to Afghānī's powerful ideas for arousing and uniting Muslims and revitalizing Islamic civilization, for which constitutionalism and education were crucial, and initiated him into this struggle.

It is also recorded that it was during this stay in Mardin that Molla Said first engaged in active politics. Again, it is not clear precisely what is meant by this, but his "awakening" and encounter probably provide the clue. In any event, the governor, Mutasarrıf Nadir Bey, saw fit to intervene and expelled him from the town, sending him to Bitlis under armed guard.<sup>74</sup>

The task was to prove an unusual one for the two gendarmes, Savurlu Mehmed Fatih and his friend İbrahim, assigned to deliver Molla Said to the governor of Bitlis. This story became well known in the region. They set out on the journey, Said riding with both his hands and feet bound with iron fetters. While they were in the vicinity of a village called Ahmadi, it was the time for the obligatory prayers. Said asked the gendarmes to unfasten his bonds so that he could pray, but they refused, frightened he would try to escape. Thereupon Said the Famous undid the fetters, dismounted from his horse, performed his ablutions at a stream, then performed the prayers under the astonished gazes of the two gendarmes. Recognizing his unusual powers, they said to him when he had finished: "Up to now we were your guards, but from now on we shall be your servants." But Molla Said merely requested them to do their duty.

When asked at a later date how this had occurred, he replied: "I myself don't know; it must have been a miracle of the prayers."<sup>75</sup>

Molla Said was indeed famous, and news of his exploits spread throughout the region, reaching also the village of Nurs. In later years he described his parents' reactions to what they heard:

In the old days, my father and mother used to be told of my strange doings in that eventful, rough-and-ready life. When they heard news like "your son is dead," or, "he has been wounded," or, "he is in prison," my father used to laugh and enjoy it immensely. He would say: "Mashallah! My son's doing something controversial again, he's demonstrating his courage and daring; that's why everyone's talking about him." While my mother would weep unhappily in the face of his pleasure. But then time would very often prove my father to be right.<sup>76</sup>

### Bitlis

Despite having been deported from Bitlis two years earlier and then being brought back there by an armed escort, Molla Said soon established himself

in this provincial center, and as a guest in the residence of the governor, Ömer Pasha. It was his zeal in upholding the Shari‘ah that won him the governor’s respect, even though it had been directed against the governor. Molla Said had heard one day that Ömer Pasha and some officials were carousing in his office. Finding it unacceptable that representatives of the government should behave in such a way, he armed himself with a revolver and a dagger and burst in on them. Then, declaiming a Hadith about the drinking of alcohol, he rebuked them in the strongest terms. Surprisingly, the governor suppressed his anger and did nothing. When leaving, his aide-de-camp asked Molla Said why had acted like this, which normally he would have paid for with his life. Said merely replied: “Being executed didn’t occur to me, I was thinking of prison or exile. Anyway, if I die combating an unlawful deed, what harm is there in it?”

But when, a couple of hours later, two policemen sent by the governor escorted him back, the governor rose to his feet when he entered the office and treated him with great deference, saying: “Everyone has a spiritual guide; you shall be mine and you shall stay with me.”<sup>77</sup>

So for the next two years Molla Said stayed in the governor’s residence, during which time he devoted himself to further study. There is no record of his involvement here in the political adventures that had led to his expulsion from Mardin. His stay with the governor was not, however, a sort of unofficial detainment, as is shown by an anecdote related by his nephew, Abdurrahman, in his biography. He describes how one day Molla Said was set upon by a large number of soldiers when he refused to comply with orders to keep out of the prohibited zone of the army barracks. There was a garrison of 2,500 men stationed at Bitlis at that time. He finally extricated himself from the fairly violent fracas on the intervention of an officer, and afterward explained that he had needed such a lesson in order to accustom him to complying with “the restrictions of civilization,” something he felt to be totally opposed to his nature.<sup>78</sup> He prized his personal freedom over virtually everything.

Abdurrahman also gives us some valuable insights into the young Said’s psychological makeup and how he had acquired his remarkable learning. He tells us that until about this time all Said’s knowledge had been of the sort called *sīnuhat*. That is to say, he had understood the subjects he had studied without much thought; understanding had come to him as a sort of inspiration without his exercising his reasoning faculty unduly. Because of this, he had not found it necessary to study the subjects at great length. But whether due to his increasing maturity or because he had become involved in politics, this former ability now slowly began to disappear. So in order both to preserve his position among the ulama, and especially to answer the doubts raised about Islam, Molla Said embarked on a comprehensive study of all the Islamic sciences. These included those that can be thought of as instrumental, such as logic and Arabic grammar and syntax, as well as the main sciences of

Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), Hadīth, and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). He committed to memory around forty books in two years, including works on theology (*kalām*), like *Matāli'* and *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif* by Jurjānī, and the work of Ḥanafī *fiqh*, *Mirqāt al-Wuṣūl ilā 'Ilm al-Uṣūl* (by Muḥammad ibn Feramrūz, d. 1480–81). It used to take him three months to go through them all, reciting a part of each from memory each day.

During his time in Bitlis, Molla Said began to memorize the Qur'ān by reading one or two *juz'*<sup>79</sup> each day. He learned the greater part of it in this way, but did not complete it. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, he wanted to avoid being disrespectful to the Qur'ān, for it had occurred to him that to read the Qur'ān at great speed was lacking in respect; and secondly, that the more urgent need was to study the truths the Qur'ān taught. In the following two years, therefore, he learned by heart the forty or so works noted above on the Islamic sciences, which would be the key to those truths, and would preserve them by answering the doubts that had been raised concerning them. The governor's residence in Bitlis provided a favorable environment to pursue this program.

Ömer Pasha's wife was dead, and he had six daughters. One day, one of these girls wanted to go into Molla Said's room to clean it, or for some such innocent reason. However, Molla Said scolded her and brusquely shut the door in her face. The girl was taken aback and upset at this.

The same day while in his office, someone who was trying to make trouble for Said, no doubt from jealousy, whispered in the governor's ear: "How can you leave Molla Said in the house all day? Your daughters are not married and you have no wife, and he is a vigorous young man. How can you do such a thing?" He thus tried to sow seeds of doubt in the governor's mind about Said.

That evening when he returned to his family, Ömer Pasha was met by his disconsolate daughter, who immediately complained to her father: "That Said you have given the room to is mad. He tells us off and never lets us in there." Feeling remorse for his suspicions, Ömer Pasha went straight to Molla Said's room and treated him with great courtesy and kindness.

In a later work, Bediuzzaman explained his attitude as follows:

When I was twenty or so, I stayed for two years in the residence of the governor of Bitlis, Ömer Pasha, on his insistence and because of his respect for learning. He had six daughters. Three of them were small and three of them were older. Although I stayed in the same house as they for two years, I could not tell the three older ones apart. I paid them so little attention, how could I? Another scholar came and stayed together with me as a guest, and within two days he had got to know all of them and could tell them one from the other. They were all perplexed at my attitude and asked me: "Why don't you look at them?" I replied: "Preserving the dignity of learning doesn't allow me to look at them."<sup>80</sup>

The last time Molla Said was taught by anyone was while he was in Bitlis. The lesson came from one of its leading Naqshī shaikhs, Shaikh Muhammad Küfrevi.<sup>81</sup> The text of the shaikh's homily may be translated as "All praise be to God, Who has determined the proportions and measures of things through His power and has delineated their forms and shapes through His wisdom. And blessings and peace be upon Muhammad, the pivot of the sphere of prophethood, and on his Family, the Beloved of the robe of chivalry and manliness (*futūwwa* and *murūwwa*), so long as the stars revolve around the face of the heavens and the clouds make their progress over the globe." Then, one night following this, he dreamed of the shaikh, who summoned him in his dream and said he was leaving. Said immediately went to him, and when he saw that the shaikh had already left, he awoke. He looked at his watch; it was one o'clock in the morning. He went back to sleep again. When in the morning he heard the sound of mourning and weeping coming from the direction of the shaikh's house, he hurried there to find that the shaikh had died at one o'clock the night before. Uttering a prayer for him, Said returned home sadly.<sup>82</sup>

Molla Said had tremendous love for the great shaikhs of eastern Anatolia. Four of these are mentioned in his biography:<sup>83</sup> Sayyid Nur Muhammad, who taught him the Naqshbandī way.<sup>84</sup> Shaikh Abdurrahmān Tāgī,<sup>85</sup> from whom he learnt "the way of love (*muhabbet*)"; Shaikh Fehim,<sup>86</sup> from whom "by means of an intermediary" he acquired "knowledge of reality" (*'ilm-i hakikat*); and Shaikh Muhammad Küfrevi, from whom he received his last instruction. Three leading ulama who had taught Said are also mentioned as having won his love: Shaikh Emin Efendi of Bitlis, Molla Fethullāh of Siirt, and Shaikh Fethullāh Verkānisi.<sup>87</sup> This brief list illustrates an important point mentioned previously; that most of the leading ulama of eastern Anatolia at the end of the nineteenth century seem to have emerged from the Naqshī/Khālidi order. It was probably due to its backwardness as well as the distance from the capital that the region had produced so few members of the learned hierarchy<sup>88</sup>—a clear indication of why Said Nursi was to attach paramount importance to comprehensive educational reform.

Besides the rivalry and jealousy mentioned, it may have been Molla Said's holding aloof from the dominant Naqshī way, his innovative ideas, and eventually his formulation of new methods of education that were the cause of the opposition he received from time to time, generally from lower-ranking *medrese* scholars and students. He also met with opposition when he first started to teach the modern physical sciences together with the religious sciences.<sup>89</sup> Part of his plans for educational reform was to be the introduction of modern science by way of the *medreses* so as to allay the ulama's fears concerning it.

Finally, despite his veneration for the leading shaikhs mentioned and his appreciation for the learning he had received from them—and, reputedly, for



their recognition of his exceptional abilities—he never followed any of them exclusively. He continued to follow his own path, which finally became fully clear to him only after he entered into the second main period of his life after the First World War.

### Van

After two years, at the invitation of Hasan Pasha of Van,<sup>90</sup> Molla Said moved on to Van, for while Bitlis was an important center with many ulama, there was none of any standing in Van. This was most probably in 1895 or 1896 when Said was nineteen or twenty years of age. With various breaks of up to five years, Van now became Said's base until he was sent into exile in 1925. A certain amount has been recorded about the twelve years he spent here before he made his first journey to Istanbul at the end of 1907; he divided his time between traveling among the tribes as a conciliator in disputes and man of religion generally and teaching in Van and mixing with government and other officials.

While in Van, Molla Said stayed first with Hasan Pasha, and then, after İškodralı Tahir Pasha was appointed governor, for a long period in the governor's residence. Tahir Pasha was a distinguished official much respected by Sultan Abdülhamid II, and served as governor in Mosul and Bitlis as well as in Van. He was a patron of learning, followed developments in science, and owned an extensive library. He was the first state official to perceive Bediüzzaman's great talent and potential, and continued to encourage and support him till his death in 1913.

Paradoxically, it was probably Said's independence that allowed him to accept the patronage of the governors of Bitlis and then Van, where he might have been expected to eschew such favors of the highest representatives of the state. That is, he was not attached to any religious order or establishment that might have hindered his pursuing his aims and career in this way. As far as the governors were concerned, they were keen to support his scholarly enterprise. How far this was a general policy is not clear, but certainly with Tahir Pasha it was also a personal preference or interest.

Tahir Pasha's residence was a favorite center for government officials, teachers of the new secular schools, and other intellectuals; there they could meet to discuss questions of interest. Tahir Pasha was eager for Molla Said to join these discussions, but the new environment soon opened Said's eyes to the effects on the thinking and attitudes of these officials of the secularizing reforms of the Tanzimat, and the chasm that had opened up between them and traditional views. He realized, moreover, that in its traditional form Islamic theology (*kalām*) was incapable of answering the doubts and criticisms that had been raised about Islam. This led him to take the momentous step of

learning the modern sciences—something unprecedented among the ulama of the eastern provinces. It was in this that he received the most encouragement from Tahir Pasha. Taking advantage of his library and the newspapers and journals supplied to his office, Molla Said embarked on the study of such subjects as history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy (probably natural science), as well as current affairs and developments in Ottoman life and the Islamic world.

Said had no teacher for this; consulting the available literature, he taught himself. He made swift progress, expedited by his applying his practice of debating to this new field. On one occasion he got into a discussion on geography with a high school teacher. The discussion became prolonged, and they decided to continue the following day. Within twenty-four hours, therefore, Molla Said memorized a geography book, and when they again met, he silenced the geography teacher in his own subject. On a second occasion, he silenced a chemistry teacher, having mastered the principles of inorganic chemistry in five days.<sup>91</sup>

Molla Said's quickness and brilliant intelligence demonstrated itself particularly in mathematics. He could solve the most difficult problems mentally and almost instantaneously. He wrote a treatise on algebraic equations, which unfortunately was subsequently lost in a fire in Van. Tahir Pasha used to organize contests of knowledge and competitions in mathematical reckoning. Whatever the calculations, Molla Said would find the solution before anyone else; he always came in first in these contests.

It was not until this time that Said learned Turkish, but he appears to have quickly overcome the handicap. Similarly, he would answer unhesitatingly the questions Tahir Pasha would cull from the books newly arrived from Europe. One time he saw such books lying around and understood that the pasha was compiling some questions; he quickly read the books and learned their contents.<sup>92</sup>

Molla Said continued to memorize those works he considered essential, approximately ninety during the years he was in Van. On one occasion, while passing the door of Said's room, Tahir Pasha heard what he thought was the sound of prayers and invocations being recited softly; it was Molla Said repeating his books by heart. Years later, he told Mustafa Sungur, one of his students:

Tahir Pasha assigned me a room when I was staying in his residence, and every night before sleeping I would spend around three hours going over the books I had memorized. It would take me three months to go through the lot. Thanks be to God, all those works became steps ascending to the truths of the Qur'an. Some time later, I ascended to those truths and I saw that each of the Qur'an's verses encompasses the universe. No need then remained for anything else; the Qur'an alone was sufficient for me.<sup>93</sup>

It was at this time that as a result of these feats of learning and the prodigious amounts of knowledge he was acquiring, Molla Said now became widely known as Bediuzzaman or the Wonder of the Age, the name given him by Molla Fethullah of Siirt several years previously.

Although Molla Said also used this title himself, it was not out of vanity. In an article published in 1909, he was asked the question: "You sometimes sign yourself Bediuzzaman; doesn't the name indicate self-praise?" He replied, "It's not like that. I present my faults, excuses and apologies with the title, for Bedi' means strange. Like my style, my manner of expression and dress are strange, they are different. Through the tongue of this title, I am requesting that the opinions and customs generally held and practiced are not made the criteria for judging mine."<sup>94</sup>

Then, in a later work, he stated that he used the name "in order to make known a divine bounty." He wrote: "I now realize that the name Bediuzzaman, which was given to me many years ago although I was not worthy of it, was not mine anyway. It was rather a name of the *Risale-i Nur*. It was ascribed to the *Risale-i Nur*'s apparent translator temporarily and as a trust."<sup>95</sup>

Molla Said had his own *medrese*, and it was during his stay in Van that he formulated his ideas on educational reform and his own particular method of teaching. He developed this through examining the principles of all he had studied together with his experience of teaching religious and scientific subjects, then considering them in relation to the needs of the times. The basis of this method was to "combine" the religious sciences and modern sciences, with the result that the positive sciences would corroborate and strengthen the truths of religion. Said now followed this method when teaching his students.<sup>96</sup>

Molla Said's chief aim was to establish a university in eastern Anatolia where this method would be practiced; that is, where the physical sciences would be taught together with the religious sciences and his other ideas applied. This university he called the Medresetü'z-Zehra after the Azhar University in Cairo,<sup>97</sup> as it was to be its sister university in the center of the eastern Islamic world. He later extended his project to include three such institutions—in Van, Bitlis, and Diyarbakır, respectively. Having traveled throughout eastern Anatolia, he had seen that not only would they be a sure means of combating the widespread ignorance and backwardness of the region, but would also be a solution for its other social and political problems. Nursi's ideas related to education are discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.

Molla Said used to spend the summer months in the high pastures of Başid, Feraşin, and Beytüşşebab. More than anything he loved the mountains of Kurdistan, "where there is absolute freedom." In addition to his mediation in tribal disputes and work among the tribes, he would roam the mountains and forests reading "the book of the universe" and pondering over its meaning and

messages as directed by the Qurʾān. He had a close affinity with the natural world and its creatures. They also felt an affinity with him. Of the stories illustrating this is one for which we also have the date: 1321 (that is, 1905). On this occasion Said was high up on Mount Baḡid, alone. He was sitting on a rock in contemplation, having performed the evening prayers, when a great wolf appeared. But this “lion of the mountain” merely came to him “like a friend,” then passed on its way doing nothing.<sup>98</sup>

When news of a tribal dispute reached Molla Said, he would intervene and reconcile the two parties. He was even successful where the government had failed in making peace between Şekir Ağa, the head of the Giravi branch of the Ertoshi tribe,<sup>99</sup> and Mustafa Pasha, the chief of the Miran tribe, by settling their dispute over pasturing rights. Because personal courage was the most highly prized quality, Said was held in awe by all the tribes of the area. Mustafa Pasha was persisting in his lawlessness and oppression, and this time tried to placate Said by giving him money and a horse as gifts. In keeping with his usual practice, Said refused them and told him that if indeed he had gone back on his word to give up his oppression, he would not reach Cizre, where he was headed. And indeed, they heard later that Mustafa Pasha had been killed on the road and had never reached Cizre.<sup>100</sup> That was in 1902.

Molla Said’s distinctive dress—he now carried a large dagger and pistol at his waist and had bandoliers slung across his chest, with baggy trousers and on his head a shawl wound round a conical hat—was frequently the subject of comment. Tahir Pasha had greeted it with astonishment when he first met him.<sup>101</sup> In fact, Said claimed that Tahir Pasha had offered him a thousand gold liras, a house, and one of his daughters if only he would consent to wear the dress of a religious scholar. But he had refused.<sup>102</sup>

Said appears to have been accepted almost as one of Tahir Pasha’s family. At any rate, during the First World War he worked closely with Tahir Pasha’s eldest son, Cevdet Bey, who was then governor of Van and a high-ranking official of the Committee of Union and Progress, and was also married to one of Enver Pasha’s sisters. This raises the question of whether Tahir Pasha was a secret supporter of the constitutional movement. It would be another reason for the firm though sometimes troubled relations between him and the prodigiously gifted yet unceremonious Molla Said.

Nursi read the newspapers regularly while in Van. One day, Tahir Pasha pointed out an item that evoked an overpowering response in him. It was the report of a speech made in the British House of Commons by the secretary for the colonies. Nursi described it as follows:

About the year 1316,<sup>103</sup> the author of the *Risale-i Nur* underwent a radical change in his ideas. It was as follows: up to that time, he had only been interested in, and had studied and taught, the various sciences; it was only

through theoretical knowledge that he had sought enlightenment. Then at that date, he suddenly learned through the late governor, Tahir Pasha, of Europe's dire and evil intentions toward the Qur'an. He heard that a British secretary for the colonies had even said in a newspaper: "So long as the Muslims have the Qur'an, we shall be unable to dominate them. We must either take it from them, or make them lose their love of it."

He was filled with zeal. Heeding the decree of "So turn away from them" (Qur'an, 6:68, etc.), the numerical value of which is 1316, it overturned his ideas and changed the direction of his interest. He understood that he should make all the various sciences he had learned steps by which to understand the Qur'an and prove its truths, and that the Qur'an alone should be his aim, the purpose of his learning, and the object of his life. Thus, the Qur'an's miraculousness (*i'jāz*) became his guide, teacher, and master. But unfortunately, due to many deceiving obstacles in that period of youth, he did not in fact take up the duty. It was a while later that he awoke with the clash and clamor of war. Then that constant idea sprang to life; it began to emerge and be realized.<sup>104</sup>

As this passage states, the explicit threats of the British colonial secretary to the Qur'an and Islamic world caused a revolution in Nursi's ideas, clarifying them and setting him in the direction he would now follow. The threats caused him to declare: "I shall prove and demonstrate to the world that the Qur'an is an undying, inextinguishable Sun!"<sup>105</sup> Using the knowledge he had acquired to prove its truths, he would demonstrate the Qur'an to be the source of true knowledge and progress, so defending it against the deliberate efforts to discredit it and corrupt the Muslim community. In a letter he wrote in 1955, Nursi stated that he found two means of doing this: one was the *Medresetü'z-Zehrâ*, which took him to Istanbul and even to Sultan Abdülhamid's court, and the second was the *Risale-i Nur*.<sup>106</sup> But this second means only became realized with the emergence of the New Said subsequent to the First World War. Until that time, Nursi was actively involved with the compelling events of the times. For the most part he served the cause of Islam through active participation in social and political matters. But, as shall be described in a later chapter, he was also preoccupied with "human" science and philosophy, and hoped to follow his aim through them.