

The Prison City of Akka

It was our last day in Bahji. We have written elsewhere of our first visit to the Shrine of Baha'u'llah, of the Garden of Ridvan and of the Masraih Mansion. Today we were to visit all these precious places associated with Baha'u'llah and the Master in the prison city of Akka.

In a large Modern station wagon, fortified by a delicious breakfast, we drove leisurely toward the city famous since the days of the Old Testament, the Crusaders, Richard the Lion-hearted, Saladin, Napoleon; a city that was to be as renowned in the future for the love of humanity that had arisen there as it had been in the past for the hate which had encamped there.

We stopped the car along the seashore outside the gate of the old city near the spot where the sailing vessel which had carried Baha'u'llah from Haifa had anchored. Soon we began to resent the ease with which we traveled, the comfort, the tasty food, the fine clothes. We began to abhor everything of luxury about us. With each additional step, the longing increased to share in the sorrows and hardships that had been the lot of Baha'u'llah.

The eyes looked out across the blue-green bay toward Haifa. There Baha'u'llah had arrived on board a steamer, had been transferred to a sailing ship which had carried Him and His family and followers to this very shore before us. To our right, the sea splashed high up against the walls of the old city in distant thunder. A few feet in front of us, the swells rose and broke with a gentle rush along the beach. An overturned row-boat was drying its healthy timbers in the wind alongside a broken skeleton of past glory -- yesterday and today side by side.

The Beloved of our hearts had come to this very shore where our feet now stood. Somewhere near, His own dear footsteps had passed over this same rough land, fulfilling prophecy each step along the way. Muhammad had said, "All of them (the companions of the Bab) shall be slain except One Who shall reach the plain of Akka, the Banquet-hall of God."

The eye of the spirit could picture again that weary band of exiles passing through that hostile crowd of city-dwellers who had gathered here on this shore to see this "God of the Persians." They had been warned about this band of heathen from a far-off land, and it was through the midst of this atmosphere of prepared hatred (which once took the place of the sweet, free April air we were now breathing) that Baha'u'llah and His ~~loyal~~ loyal friends walked to and through the gate of the city, that was to close its cold prison walls about him for nine years.

With eyes closed and the sound of water beating its rhythm on the shore we said the "Remover of Difficulties" and we could feel about us the presence of those who had brought the seed of life to this barren land over eighty years ago.

~~With eyes~~

Ahead of us lay the city of Akka with air so putrid, according to the proverb, that a bird when flying over it would drop dead. This was the penal colony in which the Turkish and Persian authorities felt that Baha'u'llah and His Faith would pass away forever. Before the eyes of the Pilgrims in our party was the great iron gate of the walled city, the gate that closed upon the Blessed Beauty and had shut Him up, they hoped; forever until He would waste away inside "this most desolate of cities" as Baha'u'llah, Himself, had called it, a city "most unsightly in appearance, most destable in climate, foulest in water, this "metropolis of the owl."



We drove through the newer part of Akka down to the great sweep of sandy beach where a stormy wind lashed the great breakers and drove them as far into the old city as possible. We turned left and wound our way over the hill down into the old city again and parked the car just inside the great wall. As we got out, the wind blew everyone's coat collar up around the neck. The day was still grey, misty and chill. The cold crashing of the surf, punctuated the silent spots in our conversation as we stood, our backs to the sea wall gazing across the way at the House of Abbud.

The sea, the wind, the swirling mist, none could cool down the ardor that stirred inside the Pilgrim as he looked up this grey shell of a house that once sheltered the Supreme Prophet of God. This was once the sanctuary of the Supreme Pen. Its walls had resounded to the words of the Most Great Book, the Mighty Aqdas. Here were formed the laws which would stand inviolate and unaltered for a thousand years. Here were fashioned the provisions which would lay the foundation for the greatest structure in the social history of mankind.

Here, those ancient prophetic words had come true, "The Government shall be upon His shoulders." Here, the Author of the Baha'i Faith, protected by these blessed walls from the stinging winds of the sea, had poured out the fairest fruits of all His Revelation, the Aqdas-preeminent among all the writing which had streamed forth in an never-ending river from His holy pen.

What a plain, unimposing structure. Two stores in height with a small balcony around the second floor front, drab grey in color, bleak in appearance, beautiful to the believer.

We were all staring silently up at the balcony which surrounds the bedroom of Baha'u'llah. Many long hours He had paced this balcony, looking out over the sea and down upon the very earth where we were now standing. This small balcony, which can be crossed in less than ten paces, furnished almost the only outside exercise for Baha'u'llah in seven long years of imprisonment within the walls of this house.

There was a long quiet pause as the Pilgrims looked up in thanksgiving to the Almighty for this humble house, this simple setting for the Most Precious Jewel of God.

No doubt every mind was filled with different memories, stories recalled from various books. Once these stories had been but words caught between two covers but now during the pilgrimage, they were all coming alive with reality.

Finally one of the Pilgrims coughed. The spell was broken. Cameras appeared on all sides. We had come back from that other sweet realm to this plane to laugh and talk and walk. This experience is repeated time after time throughout the pilgrimage, as the poor pilgrim with his weak human body flies back and forth between these two worlds so unlike, one of God and one of man. The transfer is shattering, and by the end of one's stay it has completely exhausted these untrained spirits. To be alone, solitary and uninterrupted, becomes an overpowering need. The being is saturated. Tiny incidents, small happenings, perhaps a glimpse, a view, a smile, a comment -- later you will recall these, surprising even yourself. You had lost them in the olympian presence of these momentous sights and memories. These are the ocean, the others happy little rivulets. But later you will find a beauty and joy in them too, that will cheer and comfort you. This account is being written more than a month after the Pilgrimage, and wonderful forgotten corners are constantly being illuminated. Everyone one will tell you that it takes some time for your pilgrimage to have its full realization. Believe them!