Khan-i-Avamid in Akka

The History of Khan-i-Avamid

Khan-i-Avamid (also referred to as Khan al-Umdan) means "Caravanserai of the Pillars" or "Inn of the Columns" due to its structural architecture with its 40 pillars. It was built in 1784 and was used as a trading place, where merchants used to use the ground floor as a warehouse and the second floor was used as a hostel. The clock tower was built in 1906 and as such, did not exist during the lifetime of the Blessed Beauty. [1]

Moving to the Khan-i-Avamid

Baha'u'llah, His family and companions left the barracks after being confined there for a period of two years, two months and five days. This transfer, which took place in the autumn of 1870, became necessary as the barracks were needed to accommodate Turkish troops. Baha'u'llah and His family were confined in a house while some of His companions took residence in other houses and the rest were consigned to the caravanserai, named the Khan-i-Avamid. [2]

Baha'u'llah and His followers found themselves living in the midst of townsmen whose hearts were envenomed, whose minds were warped with prejudice. Dealing with such men called for qualities which only faith could provide. [5]

Living Conditions at the Khan-i-Avamid

As for the Khan-i-'Avamid (Inn of the Pillars), it was a caravanserai unfit for a dwelling-place. Most of the companions of Baha'u'llah were consigned to this place, occupying rooms on the upper floor mostly in the western and southern wings of the building. [2]

The rooms in the Khan-i-'Avamid were damp and filthy. 'Abdu'l-Baha sold a certain gift which had been given to Him in Baghdad and with the proceeds began to repair the rooms for the companions of Baha'u'llah. He left the repair of His own room to the last. The money ran out and as a result His room remained un repaired and in very bad condition. Not only were its walls damp but the roof leaked and the floor was covered with dust. He sat and slept on a mat in that room. His bed cover was a sheepskin. The room was infested with fleas and when He slept under the sheepskin, fleas gathered and began biting. [2]
The flees

Regarding the flees, one of the pilgrims who stayed there during the Ministry of Abdul-Baha, wrote the following; "The congestion of 'Akká's fleas is well beyond the imagination of those that have not experienced it. I recall that while in Khán-i 'Umdán, my feet were covered with them, much like wearing a black boot" and "These fleas are renowned and until a person has experienced them, one finds it hard to believe how terribly plentiful and bothersome they are. I remember that once I walked into a room and immediately my two feet were covered by them to near my knees, much like wearing a pair of black socks." [3]

'Abdu'l-Baha had worked out a tactic of defeating the fleas by turning over his sheepskin at intervals. He would sleep for a while before the fleas found their way again to the inner side. He would then turn the sheepskin over again. Every night He had to resort to this tactic eight to ten times.[2]

These companions of Baha'u'llah had to live in an austerity similar to that when they were in the barracks. Food was scarce and rations far from adequate for each person. Yet they spent their time in the utmost joy. Their greatest longing was to be called to the presence of their Lord. Their attachment to Baha'u'llah was the source of their strength. It enabled them to live in the utmost happiness in spite of all the hardships which were heaped upon them in those gloomy surroundings. [2]

As a Pilgrim House

'Abdu'l-Baha occupied one room Himself and for some time this was the room in which He entertained guests. The pilgrims arriving from Persia were first received by 'Abdu'l-Baha in this room. He saw to it that they were ready to attain the presence of Baha'u'llah. Not only did the pilgrims learn from Him, through His courtesy and utter selflessness, lessons of humility before Baha'u'llah, but also they were helped to improve their outward appearance-- for example by putting on new clothes when they were to attain His presence. [2]

Story of the Arrival of one Pilgrim

Abdul-Baha told about the following episode that involves the Khan-i-Avamid (as to the best of my knowledge) and the Land Gate of Akka;

In the days of Baha'u'llah, during the worst times in the Most Great Prison, they would not permit any of the friends either to leave the Fortress or to come in from the outside. [Covenant Breakers] lived by the second gate of the city, and watched there at all times, day and night. Whenever they spied a Baha'i traveler they would hurry away to the Governor and tell him that the traveler was bringing in letters and would carry the answers back. The Governor would then arrest the traveler, seize his papers, jail him, and drive him out. This became an established
custom with the authorities and went on for a long time -- indeed, for nine years until, little by little, the practice was abandoned.

It was at such a period that the Afnan, Haji Mirza Muhammad-'Ali, ... journeyed to Akka, coming from India to Egypt, and from Egypt to Marseilles. One day I was up on the roof of the caravanserai. Some of the friends were with me and I was walking up and down. It was sunset. At that moment, glancing at the distant seashore, I observed that a carriage was approaching. "Gentlemen," I said, "I feel that a holy being is in that carriage." It was still far away, hardly within sight.

"Let us go to the gate," I told them. "Although they will not allow us to pass through, we can stand there till he comes." I took one or two people with me and we left. At the city gate I called to the guard, privately gave him something and said: "A carriage is coming in and I think it is bringing one of our friends. When it reaches here, do not hold it up, and do not refer the matter to the Governor." He put out a chair for me and I sat down.

By this time the sun had set. They had shut the main gate, too, but the little door was open. The gatekeeper stayed outside, the carriage drew up, the gentleman had arrived. What a radiant face he had! He was nothing but light from head to foot. Just to look at that face made one happy; he was so confident, so assured, so rooted in his faith, and his expression so joyous. He was truly a blessed being. He was a man who made progress day by day, who added, every day, to his certitude and faith, his ardent love. He made extraordinary progress during the few days that he spent in the Most Great Prison. The point is that when his carriage had come only part of the way from Haifa to Akka, one could already perceive his spirit, his light. [4]

As time went on, however, the situation changed, the companions of Baha'u'llah were able to find other accommodation in town and managed to engage in some humble professions. The Khan-i-'Avamid then became the first Baha'i Pilgrim House in the Holy Land. Some individuals remained there and had the task of serving the pilgrims, who stayed for months--and some for years. [2]

Daily life at the Khan-i-'Avamid (Ministry of the Master)

Daily Meal

The honored Áqá Muhammad-Hasan Khádim [servant], who was corpulent but very agile and efficient, arranged all the affairs of the pilgrims. Single-handedly, he prepared the pilgrims' meals three times a day, cleaned the rooms, shopped for provisions, cooked, washed the dishes, set the sufrih, served tea, and even occasionally washed the pilgrims' clothing. The meals were very simple and unceremonial. They typically consisted of a simple broth, at times served with yogurt.
[In the mornings,] he would bring water, fire up the samovar and serve breakfast that consisted of some pure wheat bread with one or two cups of sweetened tea. Then he would go to the bazaar and purchase meat, potatoes, onions, and other necessities. Once he had returned, he would commence making the broth. Afterwards, he would bring wheat flour, make the dough, and by late morning would carry a large pan of dough, often over his head, to the bakery.

Once the bread was made, he would bring it back to the pilgrim house wrapped in a white tablecloth and would begin his other work. Very calmly, about an hour past noon, sometimes two, when all were hungry, he would spread the sufríh and place on it plates of raw vegetables and cheese. Each pilgrim was served some broth that contained one or two pieces of meat, about two pieces of potatoes and an occasional tomato. [3]

In fact, during their free time, the pilgrims were asked to assist in sifting wheat. Each person would pour about a pound of wheat on a paper or a tray and, seed by seed, separate good seeds from the rejects. Áqá Muhammad-Hasan would take the good seeds to the mill, and then bring back bags of flour to the pilgrim house where he would make the dough. After he made bread with it in the bakery, the pilgrims themselves enjoyed the product. What wonderful taste and what great joy were concealed in this collaborative effort. Nothing else could compare with it. With utmost eagerness and delight the pilgrims, often numbering in excess of thirty or forty, ate this bread all by itself, and such joy would overcome them that it can never be described. Another reason why the bread was so satisfying was that Áqá Muhammad-Hasan was unable to serve lunch or dinner at the standard mealtime. Therefore, being very hungry, we pilgrims ate the bread with the greatest pleasure and enthusiasm. Indeed, no food can ever hope to rival the delight of that bread! [3]

Visits by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

To cheer the friends, His Holiness 'Abdu'l-Bahá often came and joined us in meals. After inspecting the kitchen and the situation of the pilgrims, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would provide the necessary instructions for improvements. [3]

There was another room on the eastern side, which opened into the hallway and served as the kitchen, where visitors removed their shoes. A parrot lived in a cage and whenever 'Abdu'l-Bahá entered the room, in a loud and clear voice the parrot would say, "Allah-u-Abhá!" He would say this with such resonance that it could be heard from a considerable distance. Occasionally he would say, "Marhabá!" and 'Abdu'l-Bahá would smile and respond "Allah-u-Abhá" [3]

Most days, pilgrims' lunch and dinner was ábgúsht. One day 'Abdu'l-Bahá came by the pilgrim house and inquired of my uncle, Áqá Muhammad-Hasan, who was the custodian of the pilgrim house, "Áqá Muhammad-Hasan, what do you have for lunch?" He responded, "Ábgusht." He ['Abdu'l-Bahá] stated, "Abgúsht is a healthy meal. Therefore, I will be your guest today." It must be evident what joy and elation overcome the pilgrims from learning that that day they would have lunch in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "This did not [take place] save by His Bounties, the Generous." In those days, a cloth was spread on ground for serving meals. Either salad or yogurt
accompanied lunch and dinner. In addition, sugary halvah made with ground sesame seeds was at hand as well. [6]

**Atmosphere among the Pilgrims**

All the pilgrims were the same and considered equal. All types of backgrounds, rich and poor, young and old, urbane and villager, and people of various religious descents could be found among the pilgrims. However, there was no favoritism or discrimination in their ranks whatsoever, nor was there any luxury or self-indulgence. Day and night the pilgrims were in the utmost ecstasy and rapture, their spirits soaring to the Supreme Concourse, thoroughly oblivious to worldly concerns and such mundane things as food. Rich and poor were one and the same. All were profoundly devoted to the Beloved and adored His heavenly, moon-brilliant Countenance. Neither superiority nor inferiority existed among the pilgrims. Rich or poor, we all sat at the same table, enjoyed the same food and drank from the same chalice of love. "How magnificent is that assemblage of love where the deprived sits equal to the king!" [3]

At all events, an unbounded and indescribable spirituality enveloped everything. Night and day, all were engaged in speaking the Truth. For sleeping, no special or designated spot was available, pilgrims would assign each other's place of rest, and with utmost spirit, fraternity, joy and enchantment would all sleep in the same area. Some would sleep in bags, and close them from inside, so they would be immune from the bites of mosquitoes and fleas. Everyone rose early in the morning. [6]

Because of the provocations of the Covenant-breakers and the machinations of the Ottoman authorities, pilgrims could not attain the presence of the Master collectively. Often, two by two, we would walk the narrow alleys from the pilgrim house to the Master's residence. These alleys were so narrow that if a pedestrian came from the opposite direction, we had to press our backs against the wall to let him pass. However, when we arrived at the Master's house, particularly on the night that we gathered at His reception hall, we would be galvanized by the vivifying atmosphere, particularly when 'Abdu'l-Bahá began to speak. His utterance had such a profound effect on the audience that it seemed to penetrate the very depths of one's soul and being. [3]

**Famous Bahá'ís living at the Khan-i-Avamid**

The pilgrim house of 'Akká consisted of a large room facing the sea and was on the eastern side of the city (located in Khán-i 'Avâmíd or otherwise known as Khán-i 'Umdán). Two rooms with stone walls were built on its western flank where the honored Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí and the esteemed Mishkín-Qalam resided. [3]

Mishkin-Qalam ... was eventually freed [from Cypress] and came to 'Akka in 1886, taking up residence in the Khan-i-'Avamid. [7]. In 1912, "he passed away in 'Akká in Khán Avamid.
'Abdu'l-Bahá came for the preparation of his burial. His burial place is in the Bahá’í cemetery of 'Akká. [6]

In .. 1885 Baha'u'llah gave permission for Zaynu'l-Muqarrabin to come to 'Akka where he took up residence in the Khan-i-'Avamid, continuing to transcribe Tablets and frequently having the honour of being in Baha'u'llah's company. [7]

References

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