

AKKÁ

In the mid-1800s 'Akká (Acre) was the end of the world, a final destination for the most notorious murderers, highway robbers, and political enemies of the Ottoman regime. A walled city of filthy streets and damp, desolate houses, 'Akká had no source of fresh water, and the air was popularly described as being so foul that birds flying overhead would fall dead out of the sky. The authorities expected that Bahá'u'lláh and His companions would perish quickly in this prison city.

After brief stops in Smyrna, Alexandria, and Haifa, Bahá'u'lláh and His followers were forced to endure an eight-hour crossing of the Bay of 'Akká (now known as the Bay of Haifa) on a sailing ship. The daughter of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahíyyih Khánum, later described the trip: "The heat ... was overpowering. We were put into a sailing boat.

There being no wind, and no shelter from the burning rays of the sun, we spent eight hours of positive misery, and at last reached 'Akká, the end of our journey."

On 31 August 1868, the exiles were finally brought ashore near 'Akká's sea gate — one of only two entrances to the fortress city. Despite the rigors of the journey and the scores of citizens who assembled at the port to mock and jeer at the one labeled "The God of the Persians," Bahá'u'lláh stated:

"Upon Our arrival, We were welcomed with banners of light, whereupon the Voice of the Spirit cried out saying 'Soon will all that dwell on earth be enlisted under these banners.'"



'Akká was surrounded "by a double system of ramparts; was inhabited by a people whom Bahá'u'lláh stigmatized as 'the generation of vipers'; was devoid of any source of water within its gates; was flea-infested, damp and honey-combed with gloomy, filthy and tortuous lanes." Bahá'u'lláh in His letter to the Sultan of Turkey wrote that 'Akká was "the most desolate of the cities of the world, the most unsightly of them in appearance, the most detestable in climate, and the foulest in water. It is as though it were the metropolis of the owl."

On the way to the prison, the exiles were led past the Al-Jazzar Mosque, where soon after their arrival the sentence of Sultan 'Abdu'l-Azíz was read — a sentence that "not only condemned them to perpetual banishment, but stipulated their strict incarceration, and forbade them to associate either with each other or with the local inhabitants."



After being led through the narrow and filthy streets of 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh and the rest of the exiles climbed the stairs to the prison.

When they first arrived at the citadel, the exiles were taken to rooms adjoining the barracks square. The floor of one of the rooms was covered in mud, and the heat and humidity, combined with the stench of the prison, so overwhelmed Bahíyyih Khánum that she fainted.

"So filthy and brackish was the water in the pool of the courtyard that no one could drink it. Three loaves of black and salty bread were assigned to each, which they were later permitted to exchange, when escorted by guards to the market, for two of better quality. Subsequently they were allowed a mere pittance as substitute for the allotted dole of bread. All fell sick, except two, shortly after their arrival. Malaria, dysentery, combined with the sultry heat, added to their miseries."

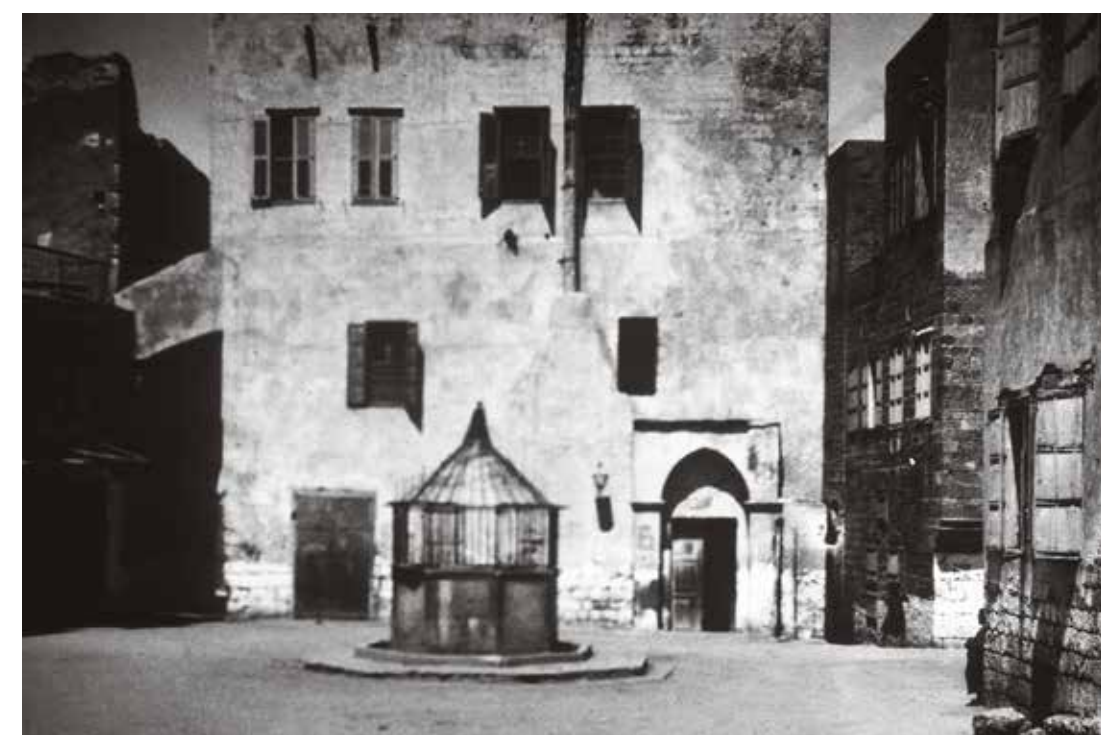
Bahá'u'lláh and His companions eventually were led to their cells in the northwestern wing of the citadel — grim, hot, and inhospitable — where they were put under guard.

Referring to the hardships which He and His companions endured in the prison of 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh states, "None knoweth what befell Us, except God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.... From the foundation of the world until the present day a cruelty such as this hath neither been seen nor heard of."

The first months in the prison were harsh and restrictive, the prison guards interpreting the Sultan's decree rigorously. Bahá'u'lláh was kept under surveillance and was virtually isolated. But gradually, although not a single word of the sentence was changed, the officials began to treat their Bahá'í prisoners differently. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's care of the sick and His concern for the welfare of the prisoners, together with Bahá'u'lláh's demeanor and nobility, so impressed the authorities that they relaxed some of the restrictions.



The House of 'Údí Khammár he place now referred to as the House of 'Abbúd was originally two residences separated by a wall. When Bahá'u'lláh first moved to this location, He and His family occupied the eastern residence, the house of 'Údí Khammár. But the house was not big enough to accommodate everyone adequately. At one point more than thirteen people had to sleep in one room.



Shortly after the death of the Purest Branch, authorities permitted Bahá'u'lláh and His family to move to other quarters — the House of 'Údí Khammár — within the walled city of 'Akká. The rest of the exiles were sent to other locations in the city.

Although their living quarters changed, the exiles were still incarcerated in the prison city of 'Akká. But it was now easier for people to visit Bahá'u'lláh.



After the banquet held by 'Abdu'l-Bahá near Bahjí, the governor of 'Akká confirmed that Bahá'u'lláh was free to live outside the walled city. Although He was at first reluctant to avail Himself of this permission, He eventually was persuaded to leave the city for the Mansion of Mazra'ih.

Bahá'u'lláh departed the prison city in 1877 after nine years of continuous incarceration within the city walls.