A Century of the Hotel's History

The American Colony Hotel
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THE
AMERICAN COLONY HOTEL
JERUSALEM

The story of the American Colony begins after the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871, when a successful lawyer and church leader, Horatio Spafford and his Norwegian wife, Anna, threw themselves into the task of helping the many families in distress following the destruction of the city.

In 1874, physically and emotionally exhausted by their work, they decided to take a well-earned holiday in Europe with their four little daughters Fate intervened. At the last moment Horatio had to postpone his trip because of business, but he sent his wife and family on ahead aboard the S.S. Ville de Havre.

Halfway to Europe, on the night of November 21, 1874, disaster struck. Another ship crashed into the steamer amidships and she sank in minutes. Of the hundreds aboard, only 47 were saved, among them Anna Spafford, who was rescued unconscious on a spar of wood. From France, where the rescue boat took her, she sent the awful news by cable to her husband: "Saved alone."

Back in the leafy Chicago suburb of Lake View, Anna devoted her life to charity. The tragedy had intensified the Spafford's deep Christian religious consciousness and in 1881 they decided to take their two new little daughters, Bertha and Grace, born after the shipwreck, and move to Jerusalem. A number of their friends went with them, a group of 16, of which 3 were young children.

The first American Colony — as the group quickly became known — was established in a house in the Old City, between Damascus Gate and Herod's Gate, and from there they began a dedicated life working among the poor of Jerusalem.

From the start, the group built up excellent relations with the diverse community amongst whom they had settled. There were Turks, Jerusalem Arabs and Jews, as well as Bedouin from across the Jordan River. As a token of their friendship with the Bedouin, little Bertha Spafford, then aged five, was formally made a member of the Adwan tribe during a visit to their lands across the river. That friendship between the tribe and the family has lasted until today.

The charitable door of the Colony was open to all in need. In 1882 a large group of Yemenite Jews arrived and were not at first acepted by the Jewish community, it was the American Colony which fed and looked after them.

The next phase in the growth of the American colony came in 1894, when Anna Spafford and her children visited their old home in Chicago and made contact again with the Scandinavian community there. Inspired by her magnetic personality and spiritual fire, many members of the Swedish Evangelical Church resolved to join her in Jerusalem and, when the Spaffords returned there in 1896, they had to charter a small freight steamer to carry the enlarged group across the Atlantic: seventy in all, including twenty-five children.

It was a time of religious revivalism and a certain Messianic fervour was abroad in the Christian world. News of the move of the Swedes in Chicago spread back to Sweden and captured the imagination of the villagers of Nas. A number of them sold all their possessions and, later in 1896, they arrived in Jerusalem — thirty eight adults and seventeen children.

The story of their journey and their life in Jerusalem as part of the Colony is told fictionally but very accurately by Selma Lagerlof in her classic novel "Jerusalem", for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

News of the Swede's arrival spread consternation among the Americans They already had financial problems and their house in the Old City was much too small to accommodate the newcomers. It was time to look for a new centre for their home. Their luck was in.

In about 1860, a rich Arab landowner, Rabbah Daoud Amin Effendi el Husseini, a member of one of the oldest Muslim families in the country, had built a mansion for himself and his three wives. It was one of the first buildings put up outside the Old City, in open country north of the Damascus Gate. Built in typical Turkish fortress style, looking inward, its large rooms, with vaulted ceilings and high-arched windows overlooked a tree and flower filled central courtyard.

The master of the house lived on the west side, with the windows of his rooms looking out, as they do today, on the Nablus Road. On the ground floor he had his offices and on the floor above was his own bedroom — appropriately now Room One of the hotel. Opposite this was his Court Room, which is preserved today much as it was built, known now as the "Pasha's Room", with an elegantly tiled floor and elaborately painted wooden ceiling rising to a dome at one end of the room. Beneath the dome the pasha would hold audience, dispense justice and receive the rents of his tenants. This splendid room, one of the very few from the time still intact, is now the scene of conferences, lively parties and concerts.

The master bedroom naturally had convenient access to those of the three wives on the north side of the building. They had their summer rooms downstairs (numbers 14, 15 and 16) and their winter rooms above (numbers 3, 4 and 5). All faced the courtyard, which was reserved for the women of the household.

None of the three wives, however, produced a son and heir. In good Islamic tradition, therefore, Rabbah Effendi married a fourth, younger and more beautiful than the others. For her he built two sets of apartments, more splendid than the others, at the east end of the courtyard, which was previously only one storey high. It was all to no avail. No son was born and he died without a male heir in 1895. The mansion was empty just as the Colony was looking for a new home.

The Americans and Swedes rented and eventually bought the building, which is today the hotel. The fact that they had come to stay was acknowledged by the designation of the whole area north from the Damascus Gate as "the American Colony", just as there were already a German Colony, a Greek Colony and a French Colony, as well as Arab and Jewish enclaves.

To the surprise of the Americans, the Swedes turned out to be an asset rather than a liability. They were artisans and farmers with practical skills and they started a number of enterprises to support themselves. They gradually became the artisans of Jerusalem, working as carpenters, mechanics and the blacksmiths who shod the horses of the Turkish cavalry. They had butchers, a bakery and a dairy. Children from the Colony delivered bread round the neighbourhood.

At the beginning of this century, with tourists and pilgrims from all over the world arriving, the Colony opened its own souvenir shop near the Jaffa Gate, and a photographic department that has become famous for its record of historical events. The collection is now housed in the archives of the Library of Congress in Washington.

The group continued to live a simple communal life and the rooms of the Arab mansion began to present a very different picture from the days of Rabbah Effendi. Whole families were accommodated in the large courtyard rooms of the three wives.

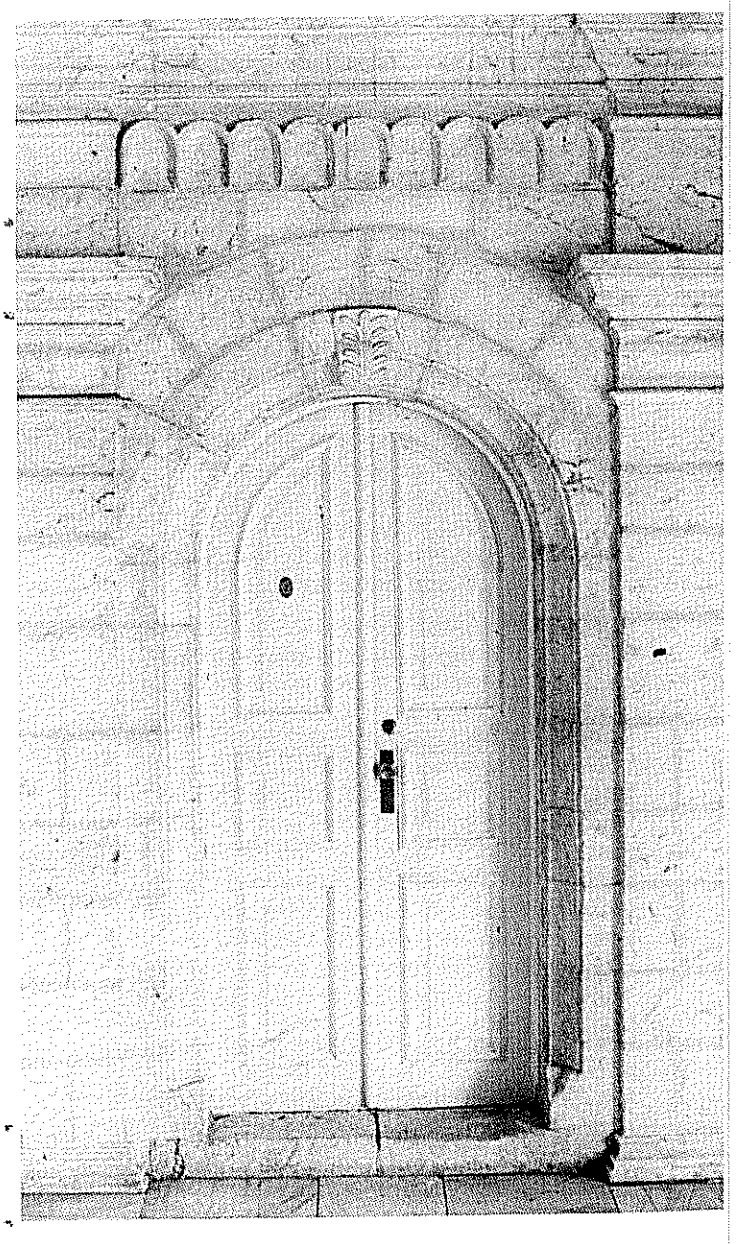
The unmarried Swedes were lodged in the upper rooms of the fourth wife, which came to be known as "the Swedish Tower". The big court room was used for prayer meetings, communal social life and sometimes filled with the ladies of the Colony, spinning, weaving and sewing. In the cellars — now the bar of the hotel — was the dairy.

The community grew to about 150 and, as well as the main Husseini building, two other neighbouring houses had to be rented.

In 1902, Baron Ustinov (grandfather of Peter Ustinov), who ran the Park Hotel in Jaffa, was looking for somewhere suitable in Jerusalem to send his visitors from Europe. He decided the Colony was the best place and made an arrangement which led to the creation of the American Colony Hostel. It lacked modern facilities, but it was comfortable and, most important of all, it was clean.

Tourists only came in the winter months at this time because the summer was considered too hot. Members of the Colony either found rooms elsewhere or doubled up temporarily to make room for the pilgrims. The rooms were lit by oil lamps and heated by large stoves, burning olive wood. In very cold weather a charcoal brazier would be put under the table at mealtimes to warm the diners' feet, the warmth kept in by the floor length tablecloths.

The tourist industry at that time was small but highly developed. The poor often came overland on foot, but the wealthy would arrive at Jaffa by ship and be brought ashore in a rowboat. After a night there they would start their tour with a local agent, travelling on horseback by day and camping by night at a pre-arranged site, where the tents and equipment had been sent ahead by pack animal. After a long day in the saddle, visiting places of interest, the tourist would find a hot bath, a civilized



dinner and a comfortable bed under a mosquito net. This was the type of tourist catered for by Baron Ustinov and who spent their time in Jerusalem at the Colony Hostel.

In spite of various vissicitudes the Colony prospered reasonably well in the early part of this century. The children of the original families grew up and married. The Spafford's elder daughter, Bertha, was married to Frederick Vester, the son of a Lutheran missionary who had joined the Colony, and her sister Grace to John Whiting, the son of one of the couples who came to Jerusalem with the Spaffords. Later, the two brothers-in-law played a leading role in running the affairs of the Colony. A generation of grandchildren was born. Another neighbouring house was rented in which rooms were set aside for a school, attended not only by the children of the Colony, but also those of their Arab and Jewish friends and neighbours.

But with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the settled existence came to an end.

Conditions became very hard as the battles between the British and German/Turkish forces in the Middle East cut Jerusalem off from outside sources. Food was so scarce that the Colony ran a soup kitchen for the hungry. As the battle front neared the city, wounded from both sides were pouring in, desperate for help. Bertha Vester took charge of several hospitals in the Old City. The children of the Colony rolled bandages.

On December 9th, 1917, the Turks surrendered the city to the British. The Mayor of Jerusalem, Hussein el Husseini, took one of the hospital's white sheets, tied it to a stick and used it as a flag of truce. The "flag" is now in the Imperial War Museum in London.

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When the Colony had moved its main living quarters to the Husseini house after the arrival of the Swedes they retained possession of the house in the Old City which had been their original home and, over the years, it had been used for various philanthropic activities. After the war was over there was still much poverty and distress among the local population for some time. Relief work undertaken during the fighting was continued from the Old City base.

On Christmas Eve, 1925, when Bertha Vester was hurrying out from the house to join her husband and children in carol singing at Bethlehem, she met a desperately ill woman being helped by her husband and carrying in her arms a new-born baby. The husband explained that she had not been admitted to the hospital because it was closed for Christmas.

Bertha later wrote, "Here before me stood a rustic madonna and her baby and, similar to Mary's plight there was no place for them to stay." Greatly moved, she immediately had the woman admitted to the hospital, but in the night she died. Next morning the husband brought the baby round and begged Bertha to keep it, because he knew that otherwise it would die in the family's primitive cave home. She took the baby, named him Noël and installed him in the Old City.

More homeless and motherless children were brought to her and thus was started the Spafford Baby Home, named in memory of Bertha's mother.

Jerusalem having now passed from Turkish to British rule, a different life style developed. With the British came western influence into what had been an almost

completely oriental city. More of the younger generation began to lead independent lives as they married, had families, lived and took jobs outside instead of in the closely-knit communal life of former days. As the numbers living within the community diminished, the activities of the hostel assumed greater importance. Many prominent figures from the United Kingdom were hosted there including T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), Field Marshall Lord Allenby and Gertrude Bell.

At the same time quite a lot of the communal activities continued. There were sewing parties to make clothes for the Baby Home; in the Colony's extensive grounds cows and pigs were still kept; there were hen houses and pigeon houses. So life went on, in a mixture of the old and new, until the end of the British Mandate in 1948, when war once more broke out, this time between Jews and Arabs.

The Colony found itself at the centre of the fighting. It received twenty-one direct hits; shells landed in the main cisterns and the courtyard. One of the two palm trees given to Bertha and Frederick Vester as a wedding present by Baron Ustinov was destroyed. The surviving one planted at the turn of the century, still stands in the courtyard today.

Bertha Vester ran a casualty clearing station in what is now the main reception hall of the hotel. On one occasion she organized a truce to allow the Colony to bury one of their dead in their private cemetery on Mount Scopus. The cows had to be sold — their upkeep was too difficult in the war conditions.

When an armistice was finally arranged and the partition of Palestine between Israel and Jordan became a fact, the Colony, along with all the Old City, was in Jordan.

Jerusalem in Jordan was a very different place from Jerusalem under the British Mandate. It was a small town, cut off from the commercial centres of the west side. A considerable amount of building was done, however, during the following years by Arabs who had fled their homes on the west with enough money and built themselves new ones on the east side. As new suburbs developed and empty plots of land were built upon, the Colony, which had once been an isolated country estate was well in the town. In 1954 the Municipality ordered the removal of the pigs, the last remnant of the old farm.

Though a small town, East Jerusalem was still a lively centre of tourism, since it contained all the Holy Places in the Old City and had easy access across the river Jordan to the wonders of Petra and Damascus and the then prosperous and cosmopolitan city of Beirut.

Despite periodical troubles along the border, it was a comparatively peaceful place. Modernization, of which there had been very little hitherto, began in the hostel. A proper hot water system and many new bathrooms were installed and central heating replaced the old wood burning stoves in each room. By the mid-fifties the standard had been sufficiently raised to justify changing the name from the American Colony Hostel to the American Colony Hotel. Tourism developed rapidly and business was brisk.

In the new conditions the house in the Old City also saw some changes. In Jordan there were not enough hospitals and none exclusively for children. With the help of a generous donation from the Ford Foundation, a surgical wing was added on to the building, and the Baby Home became the Spafford Children's Hospital, catering not only to the poor of Jerusalem but to all of the West Bank.

Then came the Six-Day War of 1967. The American Colony — now hotel — situated only a couple of hundred yards from the Mandelbaum Gate, the only crossing point

between Israel and Jordan, was also on the direct route to a small enclave that had been held by the Israelis on the east side after 1948. The hotel was caught in the cross fire from both sides. It suffered only two direct hits but very extensive damage from mortars and small arms fire. The elegant courtyard was once again a mass of shattered trees and bushes, the walls were pitted with holes and there was hardly a whole pane of glass anywhere. Since both sides refrained from shelling the Old City, in order to spare the Holy Places, the hospital was relatively unscathed except for broken windows.

By this time Horatio Vester, son of Bertha and grandson of the founders, had, with his wife, taken over the running of the hotel. As soon as the fighting was over he set about, once again, repairing the physical and economic damage of war.

The Hotel and the hospital were now, de facto, in Israel and had to adapt to conditions in a different kind of country. They had done it before and soon set about doing it again. When things had become more or less normal again after the upheaval of the brief war the re-unification of the city led to a further increase in tourism. A great deal more improvement was done to the hotel, until today it has been completely modernized, with central heating, air conditioning, direct dial telephone system, radios and televisions in the rooms, the addition of a swimming pool with a restaurant beside it, and all the facilities demanded by the modern tourist.

The Children's Hospital changed its function once again to meet changed needs. In Israel there were many hospitals, more sophisticated and up to date. It was therefore decided that preventative, rather than curative medicine was the most important contribution to be made. In 1971 the hospital closed temporarily to reopen as a children's welfare centre, its care starting with an ante-natal clinic and continuing with regular check-ups, immunizations and advice on feeding and hygiene for the new baby and the young child.

Known now as the Spafford Children's Center, its administration was taken over, after Bertha Vester's death in 1968, by her daughter, Mrs. Anna Grace Lind.

Though the Vesters handed over active management of the hotel to a Swiss firm in 1980, it is still owned by the descendants of the original colonists. Horatio Vester died in 1985, but his wife, Valentine, still lives in the hotel and maintains contact with the guests and with her relatives who are also her co-owners. They are scattered all over the world but, for most of them, it was their home for part of their lives.

The authentic atmosphere of the hotel has made it a favourite site for many "on location" film sets. In "A Woman Called Golda" the historic meeting between King Abdullah of Jordan and Golda Meir (played by Ingrid Bergman) was filmed in the "Pasha's Room." In 1987 hotel guests could see Sir John Gielgud, Peter Ustinov and Lauren Bacall relaxing in the courtyard between shots of Agatha Christie's "Appointment with Death", filmed in part in the hotel.

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The history of the American Colony encapsulates that of Jerusalem for over a hundred years. It has felt the shock of four wars and lived under four different regimes; the Turks, the British, the Jordanians and the Israelis. Its traditional Arab buildings, with their lofty and spacious rooms, surrounded by trees and gardens, peace — fully preserve the ever-changing and ever changeless character of the Middle East.

Older history than that of the last century is also connected with the buildings. Much of the surrounding area was the site of a Byzantine cemetery and tesserae from its mosaics are still dug up in the garden. When the foundations for a new wing were being dug in the early 1960s a small Christian family tomb was uncovered, carved in the living rock. It is to the side of the main building, still intact, and can be visited.

Behind the swimming pool rises the minaret of the mosque of Sheikh Jarrah, traditionally named after the doctor sent by Saladin to cure his enemy, Richard Coeur de Lion, when he was stricken by fever during the third Crusade.

The Colony has a modest but unique place too in the events of today — tomorrow's history. Owned as it is neither by Arabs or Jews but by Americans, British and Swedes, and managed today by Swiss, it has always had friends in all sections of Jerusalem's mixed society. It is at the same time an integral part of Jerusalem, because of its long history, and a neutral island, remaining outside the turbulent politics of the land. Here Jews and Arabs can and do meet and feel at home. Because it is a favourite haven of journalists many interviews and press conferences have been held within its walls, where all can express their views freely. When Secretary of State George Schultz came to address his message of peace to the Palestinians the American Colony courtyard was the place chosen for him to deliver it.

High ranking officers of the United Nations and other organisations for the promotion of peace, diplomats from many countries and members of international relief organisations have stayed in the hotel or held meetings there. Many of them are frequent visitors and make it their Jerusalem home.

Many famous names are listed among the guests: the exiled Empress of Ethiopia found refuge there and others including Malcolm Muggeridge, John Betjeman, Graham Greene, Saul Bellow, John le Carré, Leon Uris, Alex Guiness, Marc Chagall, Peter O'Toole, Peter Jennings, Dominique la Pierre, Richard Widmark, Gail Hunnycut, Donald Pleasance, Carl Bernstein and Joan Baez.

Make the American Colony your home from home and add your name to theirs.