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The hostel that doesn't ask

A portrait of the wanderers, god-seekers and lost souls who lived at Abu el-Hawa's guesthouse alongside Lance Wolf, the American who was beaten to death on a Jerusalem street in August

By Shany Littman

One rainy winter night about half a year ago, there was a knock on the door of our room at the Jerusalem hostel. After some hesitation, we opened the door; it was 3 A.M. Standing there were two young men, soaking wet, who asked if we had room for them. We said that there were no empty beds in our room, and so they trudged up to the top floor. A few hours later, we met them in the kitchen, drinking tea for breakfast.

Clutching cups of hot tea, everyone in the kitchen that morning appeared tired and cold. Most of them had not seen their real homes (if, indeed they had homes) for many months. We were different; Tel Aviv residents, we were staying at the hostel for just one night, while working on a documentary about the Mount of Olives. Nobody asked us any questions, even when they saw our camera.



The first thing Abu el-Haw tells his guests is, "sit, have something to eat."

Photo by: Michal Ben-Tovin

What defines the hostel is exactly that: Nobody asks any questions. Everyone is welcome, and nobody has to say how long he intends to stay, or where he or she came from and wants to go after Jerusalem. We broke that rule and asked questions. Some responded to these inquiries happily; others dodged the queries and darted back to their rooms as soon as they could.

There we met Irena from New Zealand, who was visiting Israel for the second time. She seemed to be about 50, and she has a grown daughter back in New Zealand. She came to Israel in the fall of 2009, and after some months wandering around the country she found herself in Jerusalem, broke and with an expired

tourist visa. While touring the Old City, she heard about the Ibrahim Abu el-Hawa guesthouse, in the heart of the A-Tur village on the Mount of Olives. She was told that it was a special place, run by a peace activist, and that guests could stay with no strings attached. Gripped by fear, Irena climbed the stairs that wind up the Mount of Olives; A-Tur is a Palestinian village, different from those parts of the Old City overrun with tourists.

En route to the hostel, she met a 70-year-old Arab man in a white robe with a red kaffiyeh on his head. He gave her his business card. This was none other than Abu el-Hawa, and he led her to the hostel, which is also known as the House of Peace. She resided there for a few months and became a matronly innkeeper of sorts, responsible for allocating rooms.

Irena spoke often of God, and of miracles she had experienced since coming to Jerusalem. She viewed her encounter with Abu el-Hawa as a miracle: "I did not plan to go to the Mount of Olives. That was somebody else's plan. I feel like I've been sent here," she said.

She described a youth full of alcohol, drugs, bad company and law-breaking. At age 17, she and a friend held up a store. "That night, after I went to sleep, I woke up suddenly, and felt two bad creatures holding my head and my feet," she said. "I heard myself screaming. I cried, and then found myself descending a cold, dark slope, into a black hole. I couldn't move or speak, but I felt like I had to fight for my life. I thought of my mother, and how she would take us to Sunday school, and then I thought of God, and suddenly the creatures disappeared. I will never forget that moment. I almost died and went to hell, but Jesus saved me."

The morning after the stormy winter night, Irena sat in the kitchen with the two young men who had arrived at 3 A.M. - Marco, a German, and Nicolas, a Frenchman, who were on their way to Egypt. Both had been touring East Europe and the Middle East for several months. Marco said that as long as they managed to find a cup of hot coffee in the morning, they could continue. They had met in Syria, and traveled together to Jordan, where someone told them about the hostel on the Mount of Olives.

A host by nature

Abu el-Hawa, a Sufi Muslim, opened the guesthouse decades ago. The hostel's reputation passes among tourists; it is known as an inviting place for persons from all nations and religions. For people on long trips, the possibility of staying at a place in the Jerusalem area for a nominal fee is extremely attractive.

The refrigerator in the kitchen has a sign saying, "Your mother doesn't love you." The message is that you should clean up after yourself, because nobody is going to do the work for you. Every resident takes care of laundry and cleans his or her room; in the kitchen, all residents help with the dishes. Abu el-Hawa takes care of the cooking; in fact, the first thing he says to anyone who enters the guesthouse is, "Sit, have something to eat. Then we'll talk about why you have come."

In the laundry room hangs a collection box, where residents leave money to pay for their stay. On his way out, and motivated perhaps by the fact that a camera was pointed at him, Marco left a generous bill in the box. Others, however, take advantage of the system and leave nothing. Abu el-Hawa never asks for payment. He always finds a way to leave a bowl of yellow rice and a vegetable dish on the table. When he has spare money, he treats the guests to soft drinks; when money is short, everyone drinks tea.

Abu el-Hawa says he inherited his passion for hosting guests from his parents. As a child, before the 1967 Six-Day War, he rode a white donkey around East Jerusalem, and earned some money photographing tourists. Sometimes he would invite tourists to his parents' home for a meal, and even to spend the night. When he grew up and had his own home, he continued to invite guests he collected from Jerusalem's streets, out of a desire to bring people closer to each other. He was active with various peace organizations and interfaith initiatives.

That morning, another tourist, Paul from Canada, came into the kitchen. He had spent 18 months traveling around Israel before coming to the hostel. He also had toured extensively in Canada, living outdoors and drinking spring water. One day, he heard God's voice, telling him to travel to the Holy Land.

We asked what exactly he had come to do in Israel.

"To change the world," he replied, without a trace of a smile. He then showed us a stack of papers in which he outlined his purposes, in long sentences uninterrupted by punctuation.

"We are at the start of a period of revelation," he informed us, "and I'm trying to make sure the world knows this and can read the signs. We are heading toward the End of Days; there will be bad days, but then good days. I have come to Jerusalem to spread the word, and then I will go to the Galilee. I am looking for knights, for people who will rise up and fight for the king of the heavens. I have to go now to pray," he announced, finishing his declaration.

An American named Lance Wolf, with a red kaffiyeh and a wrinkled face, entered the kitchen. He also had come to the guesthouse via some miraculous route, which he could not, or chose not to, describe. Lance insisted that many people come to the Jerusalem area due to some force they cannot describe. Everyone in the guesthouse, he explained, had met Abu el-Hawa by accident, and the host had welcomed them.

"The truth is that I prefer the Old City," Lance confessed, "but I have discovered that in my life, what I want and what happens to me are two different things, and it is better to go with whatever happens, and not to try to attain everything I want. I like it when I have a goal, but I don't like to worry about details, because that makes me miss experiences."

When Abu el-Hawa entered the kitchen, Wolf told him, "Welcome to my house."

Death of a guest

In early September, half a year after that rainy winter night, we returned to the guesthouse to console Abu el-Hawa over the death of Lance Wolf, the guesthouse's most permanent resident for the past two years.

Abu el-Hawa said he had worried about Wolf, like a nervous mother. The American would spend long hours in his room, sometimes forgetting to come down to eat; Abu el-Hawa would send somebody to call him down for a meal.

"I was always worried that he would die in my house, and they would say a Jew had died in a Muslim's house," Abu el-Hawa said, sighing.

Wolf had no possessions, so Abu el-Hawa would give him money, cigarettes and clothing.

Wolf did not die at the guesthouse. He died in a street in central Jerusalem, in the middle of the night, after two youths assaulted him, reportedly because he refused to give them cigarettes. The assault was filmed by police security cameras.

"I'd like to kill those who did that," shouted Abu el-Hawa. Astonished by his outburst, he quickly corrected himself, saying, "God, forgive me, they were just kids."

The only item found on Wolf's battered body when he was taken to the hospital was Abu el-Hawa's business card. Abu el-Hawa visited the hospital each day, for a week, until Wolf died. The American, a Jew, was buried in the Givat Shaul cemetery, Jerusalem; Abu el-Hawa says he was not allowed to take part in the funeral.

Visiting the guesthouse a few weeks ago were several Japanese students. Eating quietly in the kitchen, they said they never met Lance Wolf. Irena left the guesthouse after Abu el-Hawa managed to scrape together funds to buy her a plane ticket to New Zealand; he says she is considering converting to Judaism and returning to the Mount of Olives after the Messiah comes. Paul apparently went off elsewhere in the Holy Land, on his search for knights from the kingdom of heaven; surely, he is still trying to spread tidings about Judgment Day.

The only one in the guesthouse who claimed to have known Wolf was a 45-year-old Australian peace worker. He said he met Wolf several months earlier, near the Damascus Gate; Wolf invited him to dinner at the guesthouse, and the Australian moved in.

"I like meeting tourists here who do not know the facts about the occupation," he explained. "I explain things to them, and take them to demonstrations." The Australian declined to give his name, saying the Israelis want to detain him because of his political activity.

In Australia, he lived in a farm in a rain forest. It's impossible to feel lonely at Abu el-Hawa's guesthouse, he said; nonetheless, he confessed, he misses the rain forests. "Olive trees are not exactly the same thing, but I have a mission to do here, and I don't want to leave," he said.