

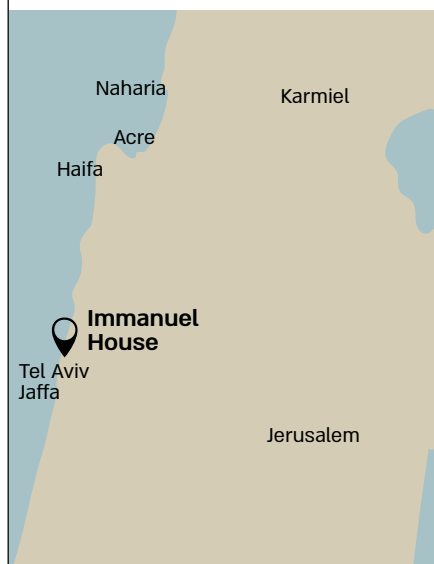


A Home for All Nations

An American villa, a Russian baron with Swiss and Ethiopian wives, and a tropical garden with trees from all over the world. Beit Immanuel, in Jaffa's German Colony, typifies the multiethnic land of Israel before World War I

Where To?

Beit Immanuel, Jaffa
Historic hotel



Where else but in crazy little Israel could you find a Russian baron who was determined to live in Jaffa's German Templar colony, dealt in smuggled antiquities, invented sacred sites, cultivated a tropical jungle in his backyard (complete with apes and parrots), married the daughter of an Ethiopian noble, converted his home into a hotel, and finally emigrated to England only to starve to death in Russia? And where exactly would you find all this? In Jaffa's Beit Immanuel.

The fairy tale actually begins with a tragedy. In 1866, a group of fervently idealistic American craftsmen and farmers arrived in the small port of Jaffa with their families to set up a Christian colony in the Holy Land. The same dubious

sense of direction that had led their ancestors to settle on an unknown continent a few centuries earlier now persuaded the Americans to build their homes on an unmarked, freshly dug cemetery filled with cholera victims. The contaminated ground soon claimed nine more lives, six of them children's. In the wake of this disaster, the colony fell apart, and the remaining pioneers scattered all over the country, abandoning their comfortable stone houses with "made in America" wooden trimmings.

The vacuum was promptly filled by no less fervently idealistic German Templar farmers and craftsmen, who disembarked at Haifa Bay with their families to create their own Christian colony. Once settled in Haifa, they cautiously acquired two of the



deserted houses in Jaffa, finding them germ-free. The Germans then purchased a two-story ex-American villa in 1871 to serve as their community's school and cultural center, adding two wings and a large backyard overlooking the Mediterranean.

One damp morning in 1878, a fine, horse-drawn carriage screeched to a halt outside the building, and from the vehicle stepped Russian baron Plato Gregoryevich Ustinov.

Act 1

Baron Ustinov had first visited the Holy Land in 1861, emerging from the belly of a ship in Jaffa when he was just twenty-one. Wounded during his army service in Russia, he'd also contracted a severe lung infection, and his doctors prescribed the healing sunshine of the Middle East. Ustinov's

search for lodgings suitable for a baronet initially turned up only a couple of pilgrims' hostels with straw beds and crucifixes staring down from bare walls. Luckily he found a slightly higher standard of hospitality at the Basle Pilgrim Mission, run by Peter and Dorothea Metzler, a visionary Swiss Protestant couple.

The Metzlers and their guest hit it off, and after a year of convalescence, he presented his astonished hosts with a substantial parting gift. This bonus enabled them to open a modest infirmary and a Christian missionary school.

Ustinov eventually persuaded the Metzlers to move with their five children to Russia, where they ran his estate. Sadly, Dorothea perished during the birth of her sixth child. On her deathbed, she made the baron swear to marry

Revolving door. By the early 20th century, Beit Immanuel had served as a home in the American Colony, a school in the German Colony, a Russian baron's residence, and a hotel

Photo: Degser



her eldest daughter, Marie, as soon as the girl turned sixteen.

Overcome by both the tragedy and the Metzlers' missionary example, Ustinov converted to Lutheran Protestantism in 1875. Under Russian feudal law, he then had to sell his property and leave the motherland. Yet he took his considerable fortune with him, along with Peter Metzler and his orphans.

A generous donation ensured the group's warm welcome in the German kingdom of Württemberg, whose sympathetic Queen Olga (herself a Russian aristocrat), arranged for Plato to be both naturalized and baronized. Shortly afterward, sixteen-year-old Marie married the baron despite his being almost twenty years her senior.

Two years later, they returned to where their story had begun – Jaffa.

Act 2

On that fateful morning in 1878, when Baron Ustinov stood staring at the Templar school in Jaffa, he resolved to buy it and make a home for himself and his young wife. The building was big enough to ensure that the unhappy couple wouldn't see each other much. Before settling in, the Ustinovs added Italian marble floors, French windows, and a third floor, just to be certain husband and wife would meet as little as possible.

Ustinov later purchased adjacent real estate, combining it with the original school playground to create "The Park," a lush, tropical



Chaotic life. Baron Ustinov in his youth

The baron's botanical gardens were among the first planned landscapes in the Holy Land. Photo by Gustav Bauernfeind, late 19th century



Having abandoned the Russian Orthodox Church for Lutheranism, Ustinov had to sell off his estate and leave Russia



Exotic oasis in the Templar Colony. Members of the American Colony seated in the Hôtel du Parc courtyard, 1902

Library of Congress Collection, retouched by Tamar Hayardeni

garden complete with exotic flora, colorful parrots, and screaming monkeys. Presiding over all this chaos was gardener Nissim Bekhor Alhadeff, the first graduate of the Mikveh Israel agricultural school. Nissim tamed the tropical wilderness with such genius that Baron Edmond de Rothschild hired him as chief agronomist for all the famous philanthropist's colonies in the land of Israel.

The park extended over a quarter of the German Colony in Jaffa, and Baron Ustinov invited the public to wander the grounds at will. S. Y. Agnon described Isaac Kumer, hero of the novelist's *Only Yesterday*, dozing off here. Another visitor was Ita, daughter of Zionist activist Yehiel Mikhel Pines, who was enchanted by the garden:

We remained in Jaffa until the Sabbath ended, giving us the opportunity to visit the beautiful nearby park belonging to the Russian baron Ustinov. It was a particularly splendid garden, with numerous trees from distant and varied countries along with many different creatures, including a

variety of monkeys. And it was open to the public. The baron invited our family into his home. (Ita Yellin, *To My Descendants: My Memoirs* [1938–41], vol. 1, p. 34 [Hebrew])

Rolla Floyd, a well-known American tour guide based in Jaffa's German Colony, wrote to his sister in 1885 about the exotic public park:

The baron has a wonderful flower garden surrounding our house on three sides. His garden has one hundred and seventy different types of blooms [...]. A real mix of people come, each speaking a different language: English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Greek, Spanish, Hebrew, Hindi, Turkish, Arabic, and others defying classification. When the baron bought the property six years ago, there wasn't a single tree or flower, and now he has even purchased more houses, extending and expanding the garden. (Eyal Yaakov Eisler, *Historic Documentation of the German-American Colony Compound in Jaffa*, p. 170)

By the By

→ Moritz Hall was a Polish Jew who converted to Christianity and spent time in Germany and England. He missionized in Ethiopia in the 1860s, where his metalworking skills were pressed into service casting artillery for Ethiopian emperor Tewodros II. Hall wed a local aristocrat's daughter, a black beauty named Katerina. After a brief swing through the Middle East, they settled in Jaffa's German Colony but stayed in touch with the Ethiopian royal family. The couple had thirteen children, ten of whom survived to adulthood. A mysterious elderly character in Agnon's *Only Yesterday* is reputedly based on Moritz Hall.

→ After World War I, Baron Ustinov's oldest son, Jonah, traveled to Russia to rescue his mother and younger sister and find some trace of his father. Jonah became a journalist and diplomat and even risked his life as an MI5 double agent in Nazi Germany. He named his first son Peter, after his brother who was shot down over Belgium in 1917. This grandson of Baron Ustinov was Oscar-winning English actor and author Peter Ustinov.



When world war broke out, Russian patriotism stirred anew in the baron's breast, and at age seventy-seven he set off to join the tsar's army

Here visitors could also enjoy archaeological treasures “acquired” around the country, including sarcophogii and elegant, stone lintels. These were only a fraction of the baron's enormous assortment of antiquities, dominated by tombstones he'd blithely pilfered from an ancient Jewish cemetery west of Jaffa. The graveyard had been discovered accidentally while foundations were dug for the Russian Church of Patros.

Together with Brother Antonin Kapustin, who controlled Russian Orthodox real-estate purchases in the Holy Land, Baron Ustinov arbitrarily declared the site none other than the burial place of Tabitha. According to the New Testament (Acts 9), this saintly woman from Jaffa was raised from the dead by Peter the Apostle.

In 1879, the baron opened his entire collection to the public, free of charge, having built a gallery on the first floor of his magnificent home to house these artifacts.

Act 3

Baron Plato Ustinov was soon a central figure within the German Colony and the local Jewish community. His generosity and vivaciousness endeared him to everyone – apart from his wife. In 1888 the couple divorced, despite Dorothea Metzler's dying wishes.

Ustinov found comfort in the home of neighbor Moritz Hall,



a Jewish-born Christian whose Ethiopian wife had borne him ten children. This unusual family (see “By the By,” p. 69) captivated the baron, and before long Hall's daughter Magdalena was seeking his attentions.

Despite an age gap of almost thirty years, Ustinov and Magdalena were married in 1889 and had five children together. The first, Jonah, was named for the biblical prophet who'd set out from Jaffa for Tarsus but ended up in the belly of a fish. The second was Peter, after Patros, patron saint of Jaffa.

Finalized only in 1895, Ustinov's divorce from Marie cost him a bundle. As a result, he had to tighten his belt, confining his family to the upper floor of the house in Jaffa and converting the other two stories into the Hôtel du Parc. The French-sounding elegance and jungle setting did the trick, and the hotel prospered. Three years on,

Baron Ustinov's hotel was well known for its exclusive guest list, including Kaiser Wilhelm. Eitel Friedrich, the emperor's son, visiting in 1910

Photo editing: Tamar Hayardeni

Ustinov's lush, tropical garden boasted exotic trees, colorful parrots, and screaming monkeys



Jungle remnant. Bengali ficus trees in the baron's garden near Beit Immanuel

Photo: Israel Parker, Pikiwiki

Handy Info

■ Where to Eat

Regina

Tahana complex,
Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv
Kosher, meat, 077-996-8525

Florentina

56 Abravanel Street,
Tel Aviv–Jaffa
Kosher, dairy, (03) 605-0061

Night Shift

9 Hayim Vital Street,
Tel Aviv–Jaffa
Kosher, meat, 053-793-3664

■ Don't Miss

Lehi Museum

8 Stern Street, Tel Aviv
Entry fee, 073-353-4899

Ilana Gur Museum

4 Mazal Dagim Street, Jaffa
Entry fee, (03) 683-7676

Nalaga'at Center

Retzif Ha-aliya Ha-shniya,
Jaffa Port
Entry fee, 072-397-1000

Wilhelm II and his distinguished wife Augusta Victoria spent a night there during their famous trip to the Holy Land.

Yet once again our twisting tale turned to tragedy, just as it had begun. In 1913, Baron Ustinov sold off his antiquities and moved his family to England in search of new horizons. Instead, world war broke out within a year. Ustinov's two eldest sons (both pilots) immediately joined the German army, while the baron himself, his Russian patriotism suddenly reawakened, set off to fight for the tsar. No one knows what became of him. Some say the Russians rejected the seventy-seven-year-old soldier, who then lost his fortune and starved to death. Others claim he fell in battle somewhere. One way or another, his biography ends here.

All that's left of Baron Ustinov's magnificent legacy is the house in Jaffa and a few Bengali ficus and palm trees from his historic botanical gardens and zoo. In 1926, his grieving widow sold the residence to the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. The place has also served as a school, a police station, and even an Israeli military post. It was remodeled in the 1990s, and its present owners, Congregation Immanuel, are Messianic Jews who run it as a hostel.

Don't miss the Baron's Hall Heritage Center, a room dedicated to the building's history and that of the German Colony. Here, thanks to antique slides and a magic lantern, you can see Jaffa as it was when the baron first arrived. And don't forget the breathtaking rooftop view. □



Tamar Hayardeni Author, researcher, and tour guide. Holds an MA in land of Israel and Jerusalem studies from the Schechter Institute and lectures at the Ben-Zvi Institute