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RESTORED CARRIAGES  
from 1904 at Elroi.  
(Photos: Wendy Blumfield)

# The train to the east

A railway tale that rolls through 100 years of Jewish settlement and pioneering in the Jezreel Valley

• WENDY BLUMFIELD

**T**he fertile fields and picturesque villages pass by quickly, framed in the large windows. Traveling in the comfortably upholstered carriage of the renewed *Emek* (Valley) railway line, it is hard to believe that our ride from Haifa to Beit She'an will take us just over one hour. At one time, a journey on the Hejaz railway would have taken most of the day, and the legend goes that passengers could get out and pick flowers and jump back on the moving train to continue their journey.

The development of the railways was proposed in Laurence Oliphant's *The Land of Gilead*, written in the 1880s. Theodor Herzl, in his *Altneuland*, envisioned a network of railways crisscrossing and linking cities in the new revived Middle East. And, indeed, at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th, the Hejaz railway published plans for lines linking the coast with the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea and across the desert to Ismailia; and from Haifa across the Jezreel Valley to Tiberias, with a branch line running north to Damascus. Chronicles of the First World War report long, arduous and dangerous journeys by train across the valley.

After four years of planning and construction, the railway, originally built with a 1,050-mm. narrow-gauge line, was opened in October 1905, running between Haifa and Hamat Gader. During the Mandate, the British developed the railway infrastructure throughout Palestine, but after independence, Israel transportation authorities focused less on railways and more on building more roads. The Emek railway stopped operating in 1948, but one can still see the Ottoman architecture at some of the original stations on the route.

However, with the increasing congestion on the roads and rising fatalities from traffic accidents, we have seen a remarkable expansion of the railway system in Israel in the past 25 years, with fast trains linking the periphery with centers of work and industry.

In 2011, construction started on a modern Valley railway passenger service with new standard-gauge rails. It opened in October 2016, following almost the same route as the historic valley railway.

Starting at Atlit, the train stops at all the Haifa stations, then turns east to Yokne'am (Kfar Yehoshua), a modern, thriving center for hi-tech industries, Migdal Ha'emek, Afula, which now has a housing boom as a result of that railway link, and Beit She'an.

A boon for commuters working in the larger cities, it is also a treat for tourists, as Beit She'an is not just a development town, it has one of the largest and most important archeological parks in the country, dating back to the Neolithic period. The line will also ease the freight transport problem on the roads

with its access to Haifa Port and eventually will be extended to Jordan.

Meanwhile, a branch line has extended to Karmiel, linking the Upper and Lower Galilee to the Coastal Railway from Nahariya to Beersheba or its branch to Modi'in. And it is to be hoped that the long-awaited high-speed Jerusalem train will shorten the time and stress of reaching the capital of the country. For a while now, there's even been talk of connecting the Valley line to Jordan to extend the reach of Israeli products.

Personally, I am waiting for the day when the Dimona line is extended to Eilat, providing a fast and safe alternative to the tedious and dangerous Arava Road, which has claimed so many lives.

There were attempts in the 1960s to renew the Emek line. It was of particular interest to residents of the Jezreel Valley towns and villages, particularly Afula, which housed many immigrants who needed to commute to other towns for work and education. But the cost of replacing the narrow-gauge lines with



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standard, plus the complete overhaul of the rolling stock to fit the modern lines, postponed the project for another 50 years.

IN ENJOYING the comfort and speed of the renewed Emek line, one cannot forget the history that covers more than 100 years of Jewish settlement and pioneering in that region.

In my journey to follow the historical route of the Valley railway, I found, sadly, that I couldn't do it by train on the newly renovated line, because the original stations either do not have stopping trains or, with the exception of Beit She'an, are located some distance from the modern buildings.

The original starting point was what is now called Haifa East. A beautiful old Ottoman building still stands, and trains run through on the lines that divide the site of the Israel Railway Museum, where there is a wonderful collection of old carriages and engines and artifacts with a lot of material connected to the Hejaz railway. Trains do not stop at Haifa East unless arrangements are made with visiting groups. Chen Melling, the curator, welcomes visitors and, while still young, has been a train enthusiast since childhood.

To get a more specific history of the Hejaz railway, I drove out through the Jezreel Valley to the Kfar Yehoshua station, which has been converted into a beautiful Valley Train museum.

Readers who enjoyed Meir Shalev's brilliant and humorous book *My Russian Grandmother's American Vacuum Cleaner* will remember that the gift from the rich American uncle arrived in an enormous crate (vacuum cleaners were very large in those days), arriving at Haifa Port and then transported by train to Kfar Yehoshua, from whence it was loaded onto a wagon to be delivered to the family home in a nearby moshav. The horse that led the wagon understood the significance of this gift and, instead of taking the short route to the house,

clip-clopped round the entire perimeter of the moshav in the quiet afternoon hours so that everyone would see and hear its arrival. The Russian grandmother was an obsessive housecleaner, but eventually locked the vacuum cleaner away when she discovered that all the dirt it removed was actually still inside its cylinder. Nobody knew how to empty it.

In 2005, the old German-style buildings at Kfar Yehoshua were restored, old railway carriages placed on the original lines and a museum created within the framework of the Society for Preservation of Israel Heritage Sites.

Rachel Harris, head guide, was born and bred in Kfar Yehoshua, and in the film shown at the museum, it is obvious that the Valley railway was the main attraction in this little village, with adults and children alike thronging around the station when a train was due.

In contrast, my 6-km. drive over to Elroi station near Tivon brought me to a small site that was restored thanks to the passion of the veterans of Elroi, whose life also centered around the comings and goings of the train, Kurdistan immigrants who themselves had built and maintained that part of the Hejaz railway.

At the station – without a platform and looking like nothing more than a stop surrounded by fields – I was greeted by Nahum Levy and Nathan Ben-Haim, both of whom were born and raised in Elroi. These and other veterans formed a nonprofit and raised funds to restore this station and bring in rolling stock dating back to the early 1900s.

Although they usually receive groups only by appointment, my guides opened one of the carriages to show me a film from the archives about the people who built and maintained the railway and station at Elroi, and how it became the focal point of this tiny village.

The small waiting room had been restored, showing timetables illustrating the infrequency and slow progress of these trains. When they repainted the outside walls, they did not conceal the names and heights of several small children (including my two pensioner guides) who used to record their growth spurts on the station walls.

DURING THE Ottoman occupation, there was fierce competition between various railway companies, which delayed or prevented the planned extensions of the Hejaz railway. Part of the original plans would have linked Afula with Jerusalem; and, in fact, the first 17-km. section was completed in 1913 as far as Jenin. During World War I, the line extended to Tulkarm and to Lod, where it connected with the Jaffa-Jerusalem railway and the line to the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.

During that war, the Ottomans took over the Hejaz line for military purposes, but the British besieged

their Mediterranean ports, resulting in a lack of maintenance, supplies and coal, which were needed to keep the railway in operation. Wood was used instead of coal, which accounts for some of the denuding of the forests of Palestine in the early years of the 20th century. By 1918, the British controlled the entire Emek railway.

However, the Hejaz railway was vital for Jewish settlement during those pre-independence years. It helped the transportation of construction materials to build communal villages and immensely increased the population in these remote northern areas. With the benefits were also hazards and the railway became a target for robberies and terrorism.

Immediately after World War II, however, it was the Jewish resistance movements that, in their attempts to weaken the British Mandate, ambushed and destroyed much of the Valley railway, leaving only the Jezreel Valley section, cut off from extensions to the east and the south.

Upon independence, that railway system was taken over by Israel Railways, and the Emek line was discontinued because of the cost of modernization and maintenance.

Therefore, it was with great celebration that some train-enthusiast friends and I took one of the first of the new modern Emek line trains nearly two years ago. We arrived in Beit She'an station, a spotlessly clean spacious building, the only one remaining on the site of the original. My late husband, severely disabled by then, received the best of help and courtesy in getting on and off the train and through the station to a nearby taxi.

Some of our friends went on a return visit to the archeological site, while the rest of us went to the new, beautiful eucalyptus park in the center of the town, an oasis of wooded picnic areas and a huge children's playground, which in the summer is drenched with an illuminated fountain.

The renewed Emek line has opened up enormous opportunities for employment, housing, leisure and tourism in one of the most beautiful parts of Israel. ■

*Israel Railway Museum, East Haifa station: Open daily. (04) 8564293.*

*Kfar Yehoshua Rakevet Ha'emek: (04) 953-4226. Open daily. For guided tours: (04) 953-4226.*

*Elroi Railway station (for groups only, by appointment), Nahum Levy: 052-823-9248.*

*HaRakevet magazine (entire history of Israel Railways, edited by Rabbi Walter Rothschild), www.harakevetmagazine.com*

*The Railways of Palestine and Israel, by Paul Cotterell, who was an ex-British signalmen and first curator of the Israel Railway Museum in Haifa.*



From left to right:

ENJOYING THE new Emek railway when it opened in 2016: The writer and her late husband David (right) with Marion and Harry Hiller. (Jonbryan Majorada)

RELICS OF the Valley railway at Kfar Yehoshua.

THE ENTRANCE to the original railway station and now the museum at Kfar Yehoshua.