

Najla's Dance: The Elusive History of the al-Bireh– Jerusalem Train

A Photographic Essay
by Salim Tamari



Figure 1: Najla with the oil jug leading the wedding dance. Embroidery, In'ash al-Usra Collection, al-Bireh.

During traditional wedding celebrations in al-Bireh and neighboring villages, it is still possible to hear this strange incantation celebrating the roaring whistle of the Jerusalem train approaching the southern approaches of Kafr 'Aqab.

*Come Najla do the dance of the oil jug [on your head]
The al-Bireh engine whistles, may God protect it,
We hear its cry from the bottom of the valley¹*

كومي اركصي يا نجلا بابريك الزيت
زمر بابور البيرة الله يجيره
وسمعنا زعيكه من كاع الواد

There are several variations to this song. Invariably they evoke separation from loved ones taking a train or a steamship – the Arabic word *babur* can mean locomotive, steamship, or engine – to distant lands. Another song goes:

*Blow, engine, blow
while still in our lands,
Hold your whistle, engine,
while we bid our kin farewell.
Blow, engine, blow
while you are still in 'Ara
Hold your whistle, engine,
so we can bid our neighbors farewell.²*

ازمر يا بابور ازمر
بعدك بأراضينا
حاجة تزمر يا بابور
تا نودع أهالينا
ازمر يا بابور ازمر
بعدك ع سوا عارة
حاجة تزمر يا بابور
تا نودع أهل الحارة

Is the whistle in al-Bireh wedding song from a train or a ship? Most old-timers have no recollection of a train passing by al-Bireh or its environs. Ships off the coast of Jaffa were too far from al-Bireh for their whistles to be audible. Many insist that the *babur* referred to is neither a train nor a ship, but must be the engine of the flourmill in Qalandiya, whose grinding echoed to Kafr 'Aqab, just south of al-Bireh. Meanwhile, another version of the wedding song references “the bridge in the middle” or “halfway bridge” (*jisir al-nus*) rather than the “bottom of the valley” (*ka' il-wad*, in the peasant dialect). Thus the older version is rendered as:

*The al-Bireh engine shrieks, may God protect it
I heard its cries from the halfway bridge*³

زحك بابور البيرة الله يجيره
وانا سمعت زعيكه من جسر النص

The topography of this enigmatic train thus includes the bottom of the valley and/or a “halfway” bridge.

A real train did exist at the end of World War I, linking Jerusalem to the region north of Ramallah, and the lines were extended to al-Balu‘ area and beyond, bringing soldiers and military hardware to the retreating Ottoman front in the spring of 1918. The British dismantled the train after the war, in 1919. Evidence for this elusive train exists in two substantial photographic archives: the Matson Collection at the Library of Congress; and the recently released aerial photography of the German air force now deposited in the Bavarian State Archives. The Library of Congress collection contains three images showing the narrow gauge train carrying materiel past the Tombs of the Judges in Shaykh Jarrah, moving north in the direction of Shu‘fat village and al-Bireh. According to the captions in the Matson Collection, the train was built by the British in cooperation with the Australian Army Corps of Engineers.

I could find only one local Arab source for the Jerusalem–al-Bireh train from the time of its operation: Wasif Jawhariyyeh’s photographic history of Jerusalem. One image of the train passing through Shaykh Jarrah shows a number of Australian and British troops relaxing in the foreground as the train passes behind them (figure 3). Underneath it, Jawhariyyeh entered the caption: *tarazina al-jaysh al-Britani ila shamal min qubur al-qada* (Tarazina [?] of the British Army passing north of the Tombs of the Judges).⁴ This seems to be the same photograph as the one held in the collection of the Library of Congress (figure 5), although in the Library of Congress image damage to the negative has largely effaced the soldiers.

A Jerusalem municipality commemorative plaque, erected near the recently renovated Jerusalem train station, indicates that the Ramallah military train was based on two Baldwin locomotives, giving the unlikely date of its launching as 1917, not 1918 (figure



Figure 2: Single-engine Ramallah–Jerusalem train approaching Kafr ‘Aqab, undated, Matson Collection, Library of Congress.



Figure 3: British train passing the Tombs of the Judges, headed north, 1918. This is the only dated picture of the al-Bireh train. From the Wasif Jawhariyyeh Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.

4). The most authoritative source for trajectory of this line is found in Paul Cotterel's history of the Palestine railway:

This line followed a tortuous course from the existing station in Jerusalem to Bira, near Ramallah. . . . The line to Bira included several precipitous hair-pin bends (one of which described an almost complete circle), climbed some fifty metres in a very short distance, and ran through what is now the new part of Jerusalem. The Hebrew University and Knesset (Parliament building) occupy what was once part of the trackbed, as does the Biblical Zoo which, rather appropriately, includes a miniature railway in its grounds. Like so many other military light railways this one was destined to have the shortest of lives, a matter of months merely. Begun in May 1918, it was completed to Bira in the following September – just in time to be outdistanced by the next advance.⁵

Cotterel confirms that the rail line went through the town of al-Bireh, not Ramallah, as the photographs in the Matson collection suggest. Walter Pinhas Pick, in a study of the role of Heinrich August Meissner (Meissner Pasha) in the construction of the Palestine railways, adds a military context:

Within weeks [of their entry to Jerusalem] the British also began to convert the narrow Junction Station–Jerusalem section into a dual-gauge line by adding a third rail. By the middle of 1918 the Holy City – and the nearby front line across the Judean Hills – were being served by both narrow- and standard-gauge supply trains. Even before that, in spring of 1918, the section to Jerusalem, which was then still narrow-gauge, had provided supplies and munitions for Allenby's two pushes into the Jordan Valley and Transjordan.⁶

Only two Palestinian writers have made references to this elusive train: Usama al-'Isa, writing in *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, and Johnny Mansour in his short history of the Hijazi railroad.⁷ Mansour, citing Pick, informs us that work on the Bireh train began on 20 May 1918, and was completed by 31 July 1918, with the line extending 30 kilometers.⁸ Nir Hasson in *Ha'Aretz*, also citing Pick, writes: "the rail system was built by Col. Jordan Bell, who commanded Rail Builders Company 272 of the British Engineering Corps. Some 850 laborers, Egyptians and local Arabs, worked on it; about half of them . . . were women."⁹ Hasson provides the itinerary of the al-Bireh train, using current landmarks to identify its path:

The rail line traversed Jerusalem along a very winding route, apparently because the British wanted to avoid complex excavations and sharp inclines. The first station was at what is now the corner of Harakevet and Masaryk streets, from which the rail climbed through Talbieh along today's Hapalmah Street and down Harav Berlin Street.

From there, the line ran along the Valley of the Cross and today's Ben-Zvi Boulevard, past the hill where the Knesset now stands and the current location of the Jerusalem Convention Center, through Sanhedria, Givat Hamivtar and French Hill, and then northward to Shuafat and El-Bireh.¹⁰

Hasson does not trace the line beyond al-Bireh, though it did not end there. German aerial surveillance shots taken between December 1917 and November 1918 show the trajectory of the newly established rail crossing the Jerusalem hills and passing through Shu'fat, Kafr 'Aqab, and al-Balu' of al-Bireh in the direction of Sinjil along the main Nablus–Jerusalem road. In two of these images the train is demonstratively visible passing by British army installations north of Shu'fat (figure 6).

Returning to the enigma of the valley and the bridge, the aerial photographs of the al-Bireh–Jerusalem line contain several contours that could constitute “valleys” transgressing the central highlands. The most important is the notorious Valley of the Thieves near Silwad, known as 'Uyun al-Haramiyya (Springs of the Thieves) because it was a major site for highway robberies along the Nablus–Jerusalem road. *Ka' il-wad* in the song could also be a reference to the southern approaches of al-Bireh, between Kafr 'Aqab and Satih Marhaba. There are two or three candidates for the bridge, though one or two of them may have been built after the railroad ceased to function. The most likely bridge, which appears in the Bavarian aerial photo, is south of the winter water pool/reservoir known as al-Balu' (see figure 6).¹¹ A second candidate is the old bridge in Ma'lufiyya where the 'araq distillery was established around World War I. A third bridge straddles the plateau of Dahyat al-Barid, north of Bayt Hanina, but at eight kilometers from the periphery of al-Bireh it would seem too far for any whistle to be heard.



Figure 4: The “Ramallah” Train Plaque, Jerusalem Train Station, photograph by the author.



Figure 5: Part of the photograph held in the Jawhariyyeh collection (figure 3), with figures enlarged..



Figure 6: Al-Bireh–Jerusalem train passing north of the village of Shu‘fat toward Satih Marhaba, 5 August 1918, Bavarian State Archives.



Figure 7: German aerial photograph of the Jerusalem road with rail lines, north of al-Bireh, near al-Balu‘ area, with the water pool of al-Balu‘ clearly visible, 1 March 1918, Bavarian State Archives.

But much of this is speculative endeavor. The references to the valley and the bridge may simply be dictated by the rhyme of the wedding song, rather than any actual landmarks. The al-Bireh train did exist, as does documentary proof of its two-year existence. Hasson suggests that the only relics of its lines exist today in the repurposed rails that now bar the windows of the prison museum at the Russian Compound in Jerusalem.¹² Its whistle’s echoes in the wedding songs of al-Bireh and its satellite villages have all but faded from people’s collective memories.

In my view, the main reason for the disappearance of the train from local memory – and, I should add, from national Palestinian memory – has to do with its usage. Unlike the Hijazi railroad and the Haifa–Jaffa–Jerusalem line, which were heavily used as means of transportation, the al-Bireh train was a military installation used for the transport of armaments and soldiers to the new front. As far as we know, it was neither a means of public transport, nor did it serve any civilian economic needs. Another reason for this rupture in memory could be the association of the train with the war years and its horrific consequences for the people of Syria and Palestine. It was also short-lived and disappeared as soon as the front moved northward and the fighting reached a dramatic end with the fall of Damascus and Aleppo. In some ways, it retained a trace on popular memory similar to that of the Jerusalem zeppelin – though the latter was much more photographed and observed by a larger public, it was similarly restricted in its usage.¹³

Finally, the wedding songs discussed here reflect the ongoing contest between the twin townships of Ramallah and al-Bireh over claims to local cultural heritage. While the train has been falsely attributed to Ramallah (by Matson among others), Birawi women have reclaimed both the train and its whistle in their celebratory songs.

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Endnotes

- 1 “A’ras al-‘awda” [Weddings of Return], posted by Abu Kifah to Shabakat Filastin li-l-hiwar (www.paldf.net), 26 August 2009, online at www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=468982 (accessed 25 March 2016). I would like to thank Yasmine Hamayel for providing me with many of these versions of the wedding songs, although she disagrees drastically with the *conclusion I draw from them*.
- 2 The version here was tweeted by @ThameenaHusary, 14 March 2016, online at twitter.com/ThameenaHusary/status/709462789279059968 (accessed 6 October 2016). See also: “Aghani fallahiyya qadima” [Old Peasant Songs], posted by aws_maqdesi to Muntadayat Ahla Qalb (a7laqalb.com), 20 May 2007, online at www.a7laqalb.com/vb/fun6345.html (accessed 16 April 2016). In this version, “Najla” is replaced by “Umm Ahmad,” as the name of the bride or bride’s mother would commonly be inserted into the wedding song according to the occasion. Zeina Sandouka, host of the program “Halwa ya dunya,” on Ru’ya TV, sings an “updated” rendition of the song, in which the train’s whistle is replaced by the horn of a bus, in an episode focusing on al-Bireh: see “Halwa ya dunya – madinat al-Bireh – Filastin,” Ru’ya TV, 24 July 2015, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNdxzkPRGB4 (accessed 6 October 2016).
- 3 This earlier version of the song was provided to me by Iyad Issa, 2 March 2016.
- 4 Photographic Album No. 1, Page 42, photograph no. 35, Wasif Jawhariyyeh collection, Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut.
- 5 Paul Cotterell, *The Railways of Palestine and Israel* (Abingdon, UK: Tourret Publishing, 1984), 21–23.
- 6 Walter Pinhas Pick, “Meissner Pasha and the Construction of Railways in Palestine and Neighboring Countries,” in *Ottoman Palestine 1800–1914: Studies in Economic and Social History*, ed. Gad G. Gilbar (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 213.
- 7 Johnny Mansour, *al-Khatt al-hadidi al-Hijazi: tarikh wa tatawwur qitar Dar’a–Haifa* [The Hijaz Railway: The History and Development of the Dar’a–Haifa Train] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2008); Usama al-’Isa, “Qitar al-Quds–al-Bira al-mansi” [The Forgotten al-Bireh–Jerusalem Train], *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 13 April 2016, online at www.alhaya.ps/ar_page.php?id=132f060y20115552Y132f060 (accessed 6 October 2016).
- 8 Mansour, *al-Khatt al-hadidi*, 48–49. See also: Walter Pinhas Pick, “The Development and History of Railways in Palestine, Israel, and Adjoining Areas, from 1838” (PhD thesis, Dropsie University, 1976).
- 9 Nir Hasson, “Jerusalem Light Rail to Finally Get on Track after 101 Years,” *Ha’Aretz*, 7 June 2011, online at www.haaretz.com/jerusalem-light-rail-to-finally-get-on-track-after-101-years-1.366369 (accessed 6 October 2016). See also: Pick, “Development and History”; Isa, “Qitar al-Quds–al-Bira.”

- 10 Hasson, "Jerusalem Light Rail."
- 11 I am grateful to Carol Khoury for pointing out this bridge on the aerial image of al-Balu' area.
- 12 "Remnants of the rail line can perhaps be seen at the Museum of the Underground Prisoners at the Russian Compound in downtown Jerusalem that was built in a Mandate-era jail. At some point, Jerusalem researcher Doron Herzog discovered that the bars on the building's windows had been fashioned from relatively lighter metal, and if one examines the bars carefully, one can discern the name of the company that manufactured the rail tracks – Dekubel." Hasson, "Jerusalem Light Rail."
- 13 For a discussion of the short history of zeppelins in Palestine, see: Alan McGregor, "Contrary Winds: Zeppelins over the Middle East," *Saudi Aramco World* 45, no. 4 (Jul.–Aug. 1994): 8–17.