



Nostalgia and Promise in Jerusalem's Derelict Ottoman Railway Station

Yair Wallach

Departure of Jamal Pasha II from Jerusalem
c. 1916. *Source: author collection.*

“Dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations.”

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Introduction

The piece *Station* was written as a “performance-essay”, intended for a theatre piece or a short film.¹ The piece takes place in Jerusalem’s late-Ottoman railway station and revolves around its history, present and future, through a collage of voices: a dialogue between two trespassers, a history lecture, and a list of “suggestions for urban intervention”. The aim is to explore the disruptive power of history and nostalgia, as tools to make the present into an unfamiliar territory. In Israel/Palestine today, and indeed elsewhere, the past is summoned daily to explain the present: history serves as a normalising tool, delineating a linear

progression from “there” to ‘here’. Such linearity makes the present (whether desirable or not) seem inevitable: all roads lead to it. The text was written out of a belief that history can be used differently: not to build a narrative of “how we got here” but rather to question the very meaning of “here and now”; to dislodge the present from itself. But before elaborating further on this approach, a few words on the piece’s main protagonist – the Jerusalem Ottoman Railway station.

The Jerusalem Railway Station was born out of the efforts of the Jerusalemite Sephardic entrepreneur Yoseph Navon. Together with his local business partners, the Swiss banker Frutiger and the Arab engineer George Franjiyeh, Navon lobbied the Ottoman authorities for the construction of the Jaffa-Jerusalem railway line. After spending two years in Istanbul, Navon won the Sultan’s approval, but he was unable to raise the necessary capital, and sold the concession to a French company, who opened the line in 1892 and operated it until the First World War. The Jerusalem station, a modest yet elegant building, was built north of the German Colony, and south of the Old City.²

The line continued to operate during the British Mandate, and became a target for militant groups in the developing conflict over Palestine. The railway tracks were attacked during the Arab Revolt; the Jerusalem station was bombed in 1946 by the Zionist militant group the Irgun: one British policeman was killed and the Station suffered considerable damage. After 1948 the station resumed its operation under Israeli rule, running to Tel Aviv (the Jaffa station was abandoned). Gradually, road vehicles overtook the railway as the main form of public transportation. In 1998 the Tel-Aviv Jerusalem line was suspended, and the station was closed for good. Trains, it seems, will not stop there in the future: the city’s main station is currently being built in Jerusalem’s west gateway. The old station has been designated by the municipality for real-estate development, which has not yet been approved. In the meantime, the station stands empty and abandoned, serving as a lunch spot for people who work nearby, a field for dog-walkers, a makeshift shelter for homeless, and an open air lavatory. The building is deteriorating rapidly: it was torched by fire more than once, its windows are smashed and the roof is falling apart.

We are, therefore, in the realm of ruins and decay. Ruins are strange and ambiguous places: sites which lost their social meaning and function, yet linger within the civic body. In the ruin, the prevailing logic and order of society is suspended for a brief moment, and one is surrounded and confronted by the past, which at the same time remains inaccessible as ever. Time dissolves as the past merges into the present, while the inevitable decay of all things is presented to the visitor in the most immediate manner. The effect is a strong sense of longing and bitter-sweet nostalgia.

The Jerusalem train station is a modern, not an ancient, ruin; it is a public building built less than 120 years ago, that was dedicated to a new and exciting technology of mobility and progress. The station’s sorry state seems to represent not only the passing of time but also the failure of modernity. As the cultural critic Andreas Huyssen has written, there is something especially poignant about the ruins of modernity, for they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise

of progress and a better future. And it is this lost future for which we are nostalgic. Nostalgia, writes Huyssen, is “utopia in reverse.”³

Nostalgia is an emotional response, and one that is not often associated with critical thinking. To be sure, in many cases nostalgia is simply an exercise in sentimental indulgence. It can serve as a cover for conservatism: longing for a dubious golden age can be a pretext to uphold privilege and to block change. Nostalgia also lends itself easily to commodification: “retro” is perhaps the oldest trick in the marketing book. In both cases, whether for politics or marketing, there is nothing disruptive or critical about the nostalgic impulse, and it easily accommodates the needs of the contemporary order.

Yet nostalgia can be used in a different way, in a reflective and critical manner. The powerful emotional experience of longing and temporal *mélange* can be a starting point for questioning, which reclaims the past for the purposes of building a better future. In its reflective form, nostalgia can serve as a political tool: to use the uncanny effect in order to forge a critical response to the present. This path was taken by the 20th century thinker Walter Benjamin. In Benjamin’s writing we find both the nostalgic and the utopian residing side by side: a fascination with ruins and the discarded traces of the past, alongside a messianic impulse and a belief in social emancipation.

Benjamin’s interest in ruins was tied to his philosophy of history. The role of the historian was not to explain the genealogy of the present, but rather to use the past as a critical tool to explode the present into a thousand pieces. Benjamin made his arguments not through reasoning, careful arguments and lines of development, but rather through fragmentation and dislocation. For this reason he discarded narrative linearity and instead presented a panoramic view that blended the past and present into one.

Taking inspiration from Benjamin, *Station* suggests that one should approach history not as a visitor in a museum, but rather as a trespasser in a derelict ruin. In the museum, history has a clear meaning: informative signs, written by curators, ensure that visitors take with them the right message. Very little room is left for accident. The experience of trespassing is fundamentally different: one is unsure of one’s own steps. Boundaries shift and change, and cannot be taken for granted; the feeling of insecurity and anxiety is also the source of excitement and adventure.

A Walk Through the Old Station (1)

She asked me to come with her to the old railway station. She said things would become clearer once we’re there; she would explain better. Things have to be seen in context, she repeated. But in any case, she needed to go there. There was one last photograph she had to take. Would I come? It would not take long.

It was October, and the air was still very warm, although the days were growing short. She was wearing her short-sleeved shirt that ties around her neck, with the shoulders exposed, and the blue-and-white-striped pattern that reminded me of old

images of the rising sun. We set off by foot, and crossed the Hebron Road. Walking down, we passed the new theatre. Outside the café, a kitchen worker was taking his cigarette break. We descended into the large empty grounds behind it. From there it was a short walk to the station.

“We have to sneak in from the back because the main entrance is closed off with metal gates” she commented. “Have you noticed the large sign on the front? It says ‘Historical site for conservation – vandilists will be prosecuted’. But what this historical site is, they do not elaborate. – Raise your head, you see?” There, a stone sign in three languages, large letters read with some difficulty, JERUSALEM. “That’s what we’re after.”

She had told me about the station before. A year earlier, in an email, she described the experience in slow, rounded words. *I danced with myself yesterday at the old railway station, through empty, derelict rooms, no one there, only pigeon shit and stinking mattresses. A huge waiting hall, perfect for a party. Graffiti in Arabic, Russian, Hebrew and English. I was filled with the sweetness of trespassing, the promise of the raw past, the random mementos waiting for the hungry collector of meaning. Tiptoed carefully in sharp turns and opened doors, till I found myself behind the ticket counter, from the inside – with no tickets to sell. It was dark, and the holes through the glass window, shot light inside the room in the shape of the Star of David, the symbol of Israel Railways.*

Now we were there, together. We climbed the platform; went into the waiting hall through the hole in the door. We wandered round and kept silent. Then we went out again. “Will you come with me to the roof,” she asked. I sensed that moral support and camaraderie are important in these acts of trespassing; even for those addicted to the unexpected quiet of abandoned spaces, a companion is useful.

We walked upstairs. The stairway was small and unimpressive, followed by short corridor, with rooms on both sides – where the floor existed only in parts. Shattered red terracotta tiles from the roof lay everywhere: the Marseille roof tiles, they announced themselves proudly in French lettering. I picked one of them up. These are the originals, she quietly said, from 1892.

Another step and we were outside, walking till the end of the roof. We took pictures, which are now all lost but one, showing the name of this city in three languages. She read it to me: *Qudus i-Sherif*, in Ottoman Turkish; the last letter, FA, was concreted over, as was half of the letter M of *JERUSALEM* on the left. Underneath, in Hebrew, was the name *Yerushalayim*; it survived in full. The Hebrew wasn’t there from the beginning, it was added only in the 1920’s, she told me. How do you know, I asked. Old photographs, she says, I always start with old photographs.

Suggestions for Urban Intervention (1)

[A computer screen. A woman reads aloud as she types an email].

For some time I have been contemplating how to bring Jerusalem 1900 back to life. It seems evident to me that the city in its current state could benefit from an Ottoman makeover. To achieve this goal, I have devised a number of suggestions.

My first suggestion is to re-introduce the Ottoman *fez* (*tarbush*). The *fez* was, it cannot be denied, one of the most useless headgears ever invented, as it provided protection from neither sun nor rain. Nonetheless, it guaranteed employment not only for its sellers but also for those specialising in *fez* ironing, an honourable trade in Jerusalem 1900 that was in much demand, and could create new jobs in our poor city.

My second suggestion is to revive Jerusalem's First-World-War red lights district, which was in the Nachlat Shiv'a neighbourhood. This seedy enclave was 'cleaned up' and redeveloped a number of times in the last century, only to sink back to its somewhat dreary and tired old self. Rather than trying to fight the punks, queers and others marginalised elements, the area should be handed over to them and cleansed of sad tourists shops and parking grounds. The sooner the better.

My third suggestion is to encourage the use of donkeys for local transport. Not only the sight would – no doubt – bring more tourists to the city, donkey dung can be used for house heating. The benefits are clear: it is a proven means to reduce CO² emissions, and a useful alternative to petrol, which Jerusalem is nowadays importing from overseas.

Jerusalem 1900 Public Lecture (1)

[The aforementioned waiting hall is filled with plastic chairs. In front of them, smiling but slightly nervous, is a man wearing a red *fez* sitting by a desk. He is short, full bodied but not fat, and sports a thick moustache. On the wall behind him a slide is projected with the title above. The man opens with a deep husky voice].

Good evening. We are here – in this wonderful railway station – to explore the possibilities of a different Jerusalem, the Jerusalem that was slowly coming into being between the 1850s and the First World War. Yes, we are here, in the site of Jerusalem's glorious modern yesterday, to consider a different possibility.

To portray late Ottoman Jerusalem as a site of inter-ethnic pluralism, religious tolerance and a belief in modernity may seem bizarre to some of you, who think of the Ottoman days in other terms. The days of the Turk! Despotism. Primitive backwaters. Rule by *baksheesh*, and so on and so forth, before your eyes you picture a slow, corrupt, and undeveloped city, waiting to be awakened by the British knight on a white horse, that General Allenby or perhaps, by Arab nationalism, by Jewish Zionism, pick your favourite. I have too little time here to dispel this unfair portrayal of late Ottoman Jerusalem, but try I will. I will present to you a city in which ethnic and nationalist

tensions rarely ran high, a city of pluralism, tolerance under the benevolent Sultan and the Sublime Porte in Constantinople.

You smile: you have heard it all before: another sentimental account of life in Palestine before the Balfour Declaration, or perhaps before modern life. Another exercise in nostalgia. Well, not so! Not another lost utopia. No, my dear lady and gentlemen. A real city, a living city, a wretched city, anything but an ‘eternal city’ of which we hear today.

A Walk Through the Old Station (2)

I drifted towards the edge of the roof, becoming slightly nervous, wondering if people see us from the street. We went inside.

Downstairs, standing on the platform, watching the skies and the pigeons through the holes in the roof, we talked about the evocative power of train stations, even when they are abandoned.

Are they not going to renovate it? I asked.

She shrugged. ‘I hope not.’

Why? Would you rather it continue to fall to pieces?

Well, what would they do with it? A fancy restaurant?

A museum, I suggested.

God forbid, just not another museum, she said. In that case I definitely hope it would crumble into thin dust.

Don’t be so negative, I said.

She looked at me sternly, and then looked up through the holes in the roof.

“You have to understand. This place is important to me. As it stands now, it holds a promise, an unfulfilled promise for this city, a promise of a different past, and of a different future. This future cannot be attained now – perhaps never will be, but then, perhaps, one day it will be possible. For ‘them’ – the powers that be, the agencies that could make a museum of this place, fund it and operate it, for these institutions and committees the meaning of this place that I have in mind is unpalatable. This is why it stands in ruin. This is why there is no sign celebrating this site as an important monument in the history of modern Jerusalem. And this is also why I like it as a ruin.”

Jerusalem 1900 Lecture (2)

[Moustached man continues his lecture. One member of the audience pulls out a magnifying glass and looks at a map of Jerusalem, then slowly nods off to sleep].

But first, let me guide you through my argument. My first stop is the development of the city in the late nineteenth century. You may know the Zionist version or the Arab version, I do not care so much which. But what you don’t know is that Old Jerusalem dates less than two centuries. Think, for example, of the Christian landmarks of the

Old City: the Russian churches on Jabl Al-Tur; the Dormizion church on Mt. Zion. The French churches the Old City with their red roof tiles. Can you imagine the old city's skyline without them? My dear madam and gentlemen, they were all constructed after 1880.

Look across the road from this station, there is that cultural centre which, very pretentiously, they call the Khan, the caravanserai, to add some Orientalist mystique for gullible tourists. But this building was never a caravanserai, and is not old at all – it dates back to the late nineteenth century, just like this station. It is a former silk warehouse, al-Haririya, and the former house of the great educator and intellectual Khalil al-Sakakini, who lived there at the beginning of the former century.

[The speaker shows a slide of Khalil al-Sakakini, who strangely resembles him. He looks at the slide, then looks through his notes, then looks back again slightly startled. He clears his throat and continues].

Ladies and Gentlemen: Old Jerusalem is new. It is newer than New York. Newer than Melbourne. I concede: some parts of it are older than we can remember. But how much of it? Not much at all. We live in a modern city, and one which dates back to the last decades of the Ottoman Empire.

But now I come to the more difficult part of my argument: to convince you that late Ottoman Jerusalem was different. That it held different possibilities. That it charted another path, through which we could have gone, and did not go. A road not taken. Once the road is not taken there is no going back, my dear two gentlemen and one madam. But it is one thing if we walk blindly on our one road, happily or unhappily marching towards the future, convinced that we have no alternative – never had! It is a completely different thing if we know there was an alternative. A very different alternative. Can it be recuperated, I hear you ask? Can we find the lost path? Can we go back to the crossroads and start again? Good question! Difficult question! At the end of the lecture! At the end!

[The speaker is animated and excited. The audience, on the other hand, are quiet and placid. They do not move. He hits the desk with his fist].

RE: Suggestions for Urban Intervention (2)

[Again, computer screen. The woman continues to write and reads aloud to herself].

Fourth Suggestion: Introduce Architectural Irreverence

Acts of profound architectural irreverence would help to demolish the loftiness of Jerusalem and turn it into a city of human proportions, in line with its former 1900 glory.

The British occupiers, upon their entry to the city, imposed a vocabulary of sacredness and 'respect' on this holy city. It included a ban on all building material other than stone (for external facades); limitations on height, style etc. This dreary

legacy was adopted enthusiastically by Israeli planners, condemning our city to the harsh appearance of the stone, and to the frenzied talk of politicians, preachers, and occasional lunatics, who treat every apartment bloc as a manifestation of the divine.

Well, farewell to all that, I say. No more stone buildings! From now on, only concrete. Build as high as you want, and cover the Old City with modern buildings. Drop the pretence.

The result may not be aesthetically pleasing. It may be plain ugly. But it will be easier to live with.

Jerusalem 1900 Lecture (3)

[Lecturer now seems serious, concentrated, worried even].

But first we have to understand what was lost. How, then, would I define Jerusalem 1900? In two words. Irreverence and pluralism.

What do I mean by irreverence? I mean a willingness to discard the past in favour of the future. You may be, my gentle listeners, members of societies for conservation of old buildings – perhaps this is why you came here today! To protect the old railway station from evil developers. To save it for posterity. But you would have found no sympathy with your interests in Jerusalem of 1900. Take Jaffa Gate for example. This great Ottoman monument of the past! Built by Sulayman the Magnificent in the 16th century, and then – in 1898 – virtually cast aside in favour of a large breach in the city walls for the visit of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Or take the New Gate, opened in the north wall not long afterwards. The magnificent Sulaymanic walls – the most visible Ottoman legacy – breached and demolished so casually, so eagerly. I want you to imagine, my lady and gentlemen, the Municipality opening another gate in the city walls today; it would be unthinkable. And between these two gates, along the walls, a whole new borough sprang up, hotels, shops, banks, photographer studios, dentists, stationers, money changers. And all these buildings hid the city walls, connected the old and the new in a seamless, busy, ugly manner. Like any living city around the world.

And it is here that the Municipality was planning, in 1911, to construct a tramline that would go from Jaffa Gate to the Haram, or as others refer to it, the Temple Mount. Imagine this! A tram running through the old city? How more irreverent can you get?

Now pluralism. This is more difficult, but perhaps a more important aspect. Rid yourself of the notion of this city as a ‘mosaic’ of different communities, each segregated in its little enclave. Forget the nonsense that the old city was divided to four ethnic-religious quarters: Look at the area of al-wad street in the old city, where the noble al-Husaynis lived side by side their tenants the Fromkins – the Ashkenazi publishers of that Orthodox-modern weekly newspaper, the *Havatselet*. Look at the courtyards of the Street of the Jews where Muslim owners often lived with their Jewish tenants. And look at the area north west of the city, where rich Bukharan Jews, European consuls, clergymen and residents, Arab nobility, and the city’s bourgeoisie – of all denominations and ethnicities – resided side by side.

A Walk Through the Old Station (3)

A theatre. She said suddenly. I would make it into a theatre.

A station is always a theatre, in some sense, I said. You dress up for the journey, you arrive to a hall of strangers, and then you perform the same set of tasks: buy a ticket, get it stamped, and find your seat: the engines start, the curtain lifts, and a new vista opens before you.

She smiled. "There is something in stations that always puts me into a state of trance" she said. "A station is no longer the city you're leaving, but not yet the one you are arriving in. A no-man's land between here and there, especially when you are stuck on the platform waiting for a train, and this no-place in between becomes your temporary home."

"Nothing really happens," she said. "Only beginnings and ends. A station is a portal for elsewhere, never a place in itself."

We were still standing on the railway tracks. She seemed deep in thoughts. There is beauty in ruins, she said slowly, as if still trying to explain something.

"What beauty?" I said, teasing her. The beauty of nostalgia. Sentimental indulgence. "Perhaps you like the place to stay like this because you have nothing better to offer."

"No, it's not the reason," she said, a cloud passing through her forehead. "Well, sometimes it is. But not now. Sometimes you have to let things fall apart; they have served their course. Now they must turn to rubble."

"And is this how you feel of the station?"

She became impatient. "No. This is exactly my point. That the station is a different kind of ruin. A ruin full of promise. It's a crack through the wall of the past. It's a time warp. But as long as it stands ruined, we can dream: we can dream of trains and passengers, we can dream of journeys to other cities and countries, and we can dream of a different Jerusalem."

Jerusalem-born Yair Wallach is an independent writer, researcher and analyst based in London. He has recently completed his PhD at the University of London, on the use of Arabic and Hebrew "public texts" (street signs, inscriptions and graffiti) in modern Jerusalem, 1858-1948.

Endnotes

- 1 With the author's kind permission, *Jerusalem Quarterly* has excerpted the present essay from its longer version. "Station," which won an honorable mention in the MIT "Just Jerusalem" competition, 2008.
- 2 See Yosef Glass, 'Yosef Navon Bey and his involvement in late 19th century Palestine's development', *Cathedra*, 62 (1992) (in Hebrew).
- 3 Andreas Huyssen, 'Nostalgia for Ruins', *Grey Room*, No. 23 (Spring 2006), pages 6-21.