

Taxi Mail during the Palestine Mandate
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An appropriate subtitle for this conference might be “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Nowhere is this more evident than in the ingenuity with which entrepreneurs sprung up to supply mail delivery services, often (usually) well in advance of the “official” systems. It was almost Darwinian, with each new method created to fit exactly the niche that demanded its existence.



Figure 1

Look at the myriad of city or local posts established in the U.S., Germany [Fig. 1] and Scandinavia, all tolerated for a period until the central government system was able to subsume them.



Figure 2

Similarly, there were express companies like the Adams Express Co and the famous Wells, Fargo, [Fig. 2] in the U.S., that were instrumental in testing markets and expanding routes between cities and territories. Great Britain had a very extensive series of private railroad express companies, under contract to carry mail. The Swiss and the Finns had well-established bus systems for carrying mail. Some systems were purely ad hoc such as those maintained by some of the large hotels in the Swiss Alps which would charge their guests a fee to carry a letter to the nearest town for placement into the official system [Fig. 3]. Such arrangements exist today. While in New Zealand a few years ago, my wife and I were in a small tour bus going from Te Anau to Milford Sound on the South Island. Halfway there, the driver apologized for having to go off the main road, drove 3 miles to a small trading store, changed his bus driver's hat to a N.Z. Post hat, put a magnetized NZPO sign on his door,

dropped off and picked up mail on his twice weekly route, something he did for which he received a small stipend.



Figure 3

These are examples of independent or non-traditional mails that were sanctioned by the government. There were others that were clearly illegal and quickly suppressed. Then there was the taxi mail system that developed in Palestine during the British Mandate.

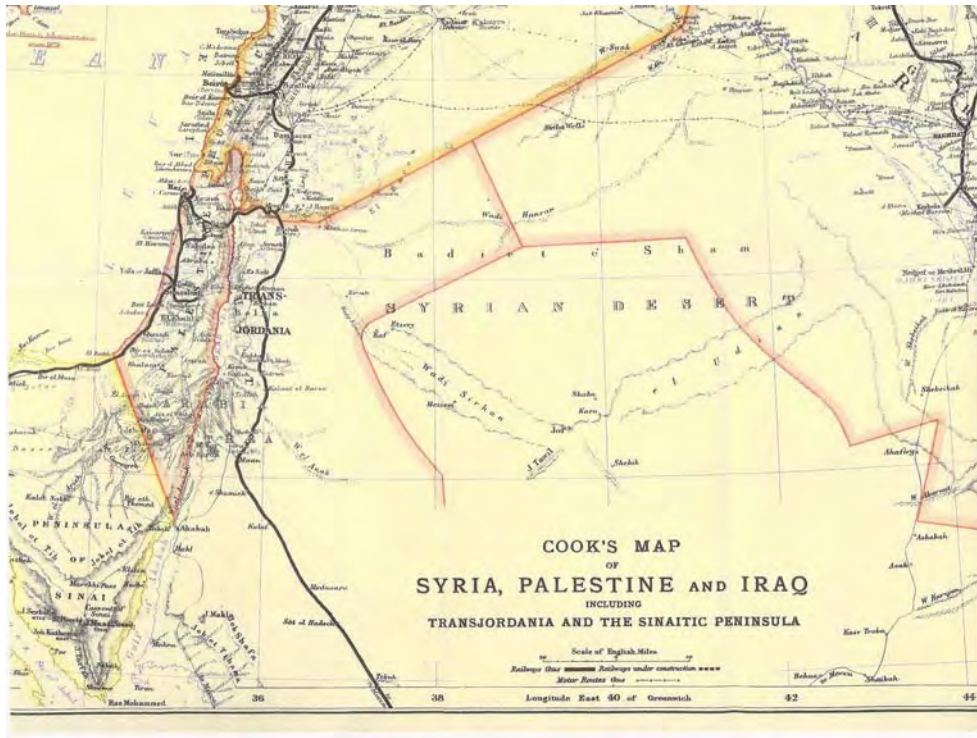


Figure 4

The Mandate was, and Israel is, a small country. [Fig. 4] It never had a well-developed rail system, just one bequeathed by the Ottoman Empire connecting the major cities of the Levant with Egypt. The indigenous population of Ottoman Palestine did not require a sophisticated rail or postal system. But the arrival of numerous Europeans in the late 19th century demanded better international service and so were established the foreign post offices of Austria, Germany, France, Italy and Russia. Later the Jews came, in several waves of immigration. The additional pressure of anti-Semitism after the Great War uprooted centuries-old European communities. These Europeans had a history of trade, literacy, and close family ties despite separation, all of which required better service and they were best served by an extensive system of busses and taxis. The major cities of Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem are, after all, no more than two hours apart by road. Following the Great War, a number of demobilized soldiers stayed on in the mid-East. Many were trained mechanics, familiar with automobiles and their foibles. A number began local taxi services. The Nairn brothers, Gerald and Norman, proved long-range trans-desert travel was practicable and established the famous Nairn trans-

performing all the incidental services of receiving, collecting, dispatching, and delivering all letters,..."

Note that no claim was made regarding regularity or dependability of service.

The exclusivity did not extend to parcels, creating a loophole so that at least one company, the Rapid Express of Tel Aviv, described their handling of "consignments" rather than "letters."

[Fig. 7]

"RAPID"
The most efficient Express Service in Tel-Aviv.
consignments
Immediate delivery of ~~letters~~ parcels under complete responsibility. Everything is accepted by us as trustees.
Execution of all kinds of commercial and private commands, orders, purchases, messenger-boys service.
Prompt execution of the most complicated commands.
For collect. deliveries, associations and institutions special reductions.
Call by phone sufficient for immediate execution of orders.

"RAI"
Der verlässliche E-Express in Tel-Aviv.
Sofortige Beförderung von Paketen bei vollst. Übernahme der Verantwortung. Wird zu treuen Händen.
Erledigung aller geschäftlichen und privaten Aufträge, Einkäufe, Botendienste.
Prompte Erledigung aller Aufträge.
Für geschlossene Gesellschaften u. Anstalten große Rabatte.
Telefonanruf genügt für sofortige Ausführung der Aufträge.

PHONE: 3

Prices	Single Einzel	by subscrip. Abonnement	against receipt Gegen Quittung
<i>Letters, from private usage</i> Letters Briefe	5 Mil	2 Mil	10 Mil
Parcels Pakete - 5kg	10 Mil	5 Mil	against receipt only nur gegen Quittung
" - 10 "	20 Mil	10 Mil	"

Rapid, 1 Nachlat Benjamin St., Room 7

c. 1938 leaflet of the Rapid Express Service with references to "letters" deleted by hand and replaced by "consignments", acknowledging official monopoly on letter carriage.

Figure 7

Under normal conditions, the official mail service worked well enough but in times of civil unrest, official channels often broke down and folks turned to the taxis to assure delivery of important messages. An editorial in the Palestine Post of 1940 observed:

"REFLECTIONS - The Government is rigidly enforcing the law which prohibits the carrying of communications other than by the Department of Posts and Telegraphs.

Taxi-drivers, found to have been taking letters and packets from one town to another for private persons, have been fined. Cars have been carefully searched for evidence of this rival carriage service for some weeks now, and it is being stamped out. But surely the authorities must have pondered why this type of traffic has developed. Letters between the three main towns sent by ordinary mail usually take two days - by car, they take a couple of hours. Hence business people and others needing an express service were prepared to pay double the Post Office rate, and more, for automobile transport.

The present taxi companies are willing to cooperate with the Post Office, but so far their offers have not been accepted... The Postal Authorities ought to meet its clients on this not unimportant issue".

Comments made in extant correspondence confirm this need for the service. For instance, in a card sent by post from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv on July 4, 1939, Guido Tedeschi writes concerning his immigration papers: "I am worried because I hear that people who have made application later than I are now already obtaining their certificate." He plans to press his case in person in Tel Aviv on July 6 and requests: "I should be grateful to you if you let me know something through the "Aviv" [taxi service] before I leave on Thursday." [Fig. 8]

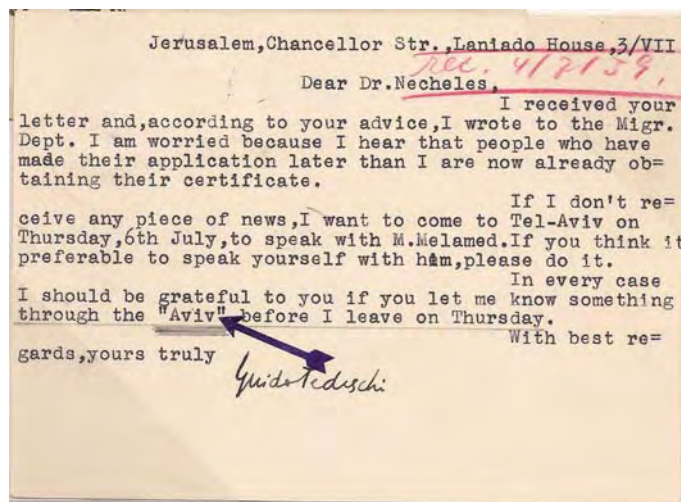


Figure 8

To my knowledge, this sort of taxi mail service is not to be found anywhere else in the world. Most examples of taxi mail are between cities rather than within one. It was an illegal service, not officially sanctioned, its practitioners fined when possible, yet tolerated. No concerted

effort was made to end it. It was vital during times of unrest. Indeed, there are examples where the government itself used the service! And so it flourished, sub-rosa.

There were and are

many taxi

companies in the
not all carried mail.

Holy Land but
18 companies

are known to have

carried mail;

Al-Alamein, Aleh,

Aliyah, Arie

(Aryeh), Armon,

Atid, Aviv,

Carmel Arusa,

Drom Yehuda,

Egged, Grey,

Hasharon,

Company	Mandate	Minhelet Ha'am	Israel
Al-Alamein	4		
Aleh	1		4
Aliyah	3		
Armon		1	1
Aryeh (Arie)			18
Atid	18	2	2
Aviv	14	2	9
Carmel Arusa			1
Drom Yehuda	8		
Egged	32		11

Kesher, Maggen, Rama, Ron, Yael and Yael Daroma. Drom Yehuda and Egged are bus companies; Maggen is a trucking company. For our purposes, they are treated as taxi companies.

The following chart lists the 18 companies and the number of letters from each period in my census of

206 examples.

Grey		1	
Hasharon			3
Kesher	16	1	12
Maggen	8		3
Rama			1
Ron			2
Yael	14	2	1
Yael Daroma	1		8

The Mandate ended on May 1, 1948; the State of Israel was proclaimed on May 16; the period in

between is known as the Minhelet Ha'am, or Transition period.

The earliest known dated envelope carried by taxi is June 15, 1933 carried by Egged from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. An envelope is reported from 1928 but it bears no markings and has no enclosure; its status is unclear.

There are no primary source data as it was, clearly, an illegal service that could not be actively advertised. We are left with the envelopes themselves and, to this day, new mail-carrying companies are still being discovered. To that end, I have compiled and published a list of the known non-mail carrying taxi companies.

Let's review the, quite formal, protocol for the taxi mail. Where this protocol came from is not known but the chains of accountability is not dissimilar to the official British Mandatory registry and express services and, in that sense, justifies the higher cost of taxi service.



Figure 9

Ordinarily the mail was to be handed in at the office of the taxi company at which time the fee was paid. **[Fig. 9]** It was also possible to hand items directly to the drivers. Most companies used slips printed in various colors [the color is of no apparent significance]: one was given to the sender as an acknowledgement of receipt; one was affixed to the letter; and a third often served the company as a receipt to be signed by the recipient. These slips showed the name of the company, and such details as the place of acceptance and destination, the name of the recipient, the date, the charge and the dispatch number. The letters to be carried were taken, on the next trip, to the office of the company in the recipient's town.

It was the sender's option to instruct the taxi company to telephone the addressee, informing him of the arrival of a letter for collection. This procedure was noted on the letter either in manuscript or with a special label to which the telephone number of the addressee was added.

Since Kofar Hayishuv labels are often found on taxi mail, note should be made that, in July 1938, the "Vaad Leumi" [National Committee of the Jews in Palestine] passed a resolution concerning a **voluntary** tax [Kofar Hayishuv] to be levied on certain services and goods including bus and taxi posts. **[Fig. 10]** This charge was 5 mils per letter, paid at the time of posting. The company then placed a 5 mil Kofar Hayishuv stamp on the letter, often canceling it with their company hand stamp.

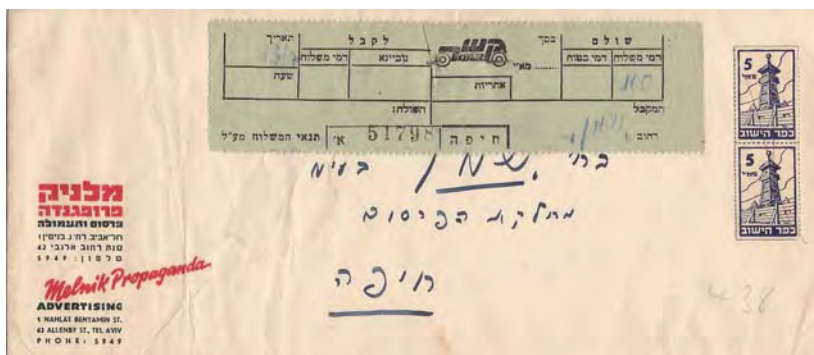


Figure 10

Most letters traveled among the three major cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. Letters to or from other places are distinctly uncommon. [As an adjunct to this talk, my one frame display shows some of these routes.]

The carriage fees were established by the companies themselves. These charges were indicated on the various labels applied to the envelopes by the companies. At the beginning of the period when utilization of the taxi post became a fairly common practice, that is, the early 1930's, when things were relatively quiet, the fees were proportional to the official ones at a ratio of between 5 and 10 to 1. A broad statement can be made that the fees were between 20 mils and 50 mils during the 1930's, when the internal postage rate was 5 mils, later 7 mils, and between 80 mils and 100 mils in the 1940's until the 1948, when that rate was 10 mils. In times of conflict, such as the 1936 Arab Riots, the fees went up significantly; during the 1948 War of Independence fees as high as 400 mils have been seen to or from Jerusalem. But, even when

fees were relatively high, considering the service was actually like registered express mail, the charges seem reasonable.

The fee structures are even murkier after the founding of the State. In the early 1950's, the State finally acknowledged the existence and value of this service and permitted it, upon payment of normal postage, over and above which the company was free to charge what it would. Official labels indicating payment of the normal postage began appearing on envelopes about 1953. **[Fig. 11]**



Figures 11 and 12

“Express” service permitted delivery to the recipient directly rather than the recipient having to come to the taxi company office. **[Fig. 12]** This appears to have engendered considerable increase in fees and so is uncommon. There has been speculation that the “Express” designation might also have meant a dedicated trip without waiting for passengers. Clearly,

the bus companies could not offer a door-to-door service. Registration and/or insurance were not available from either taxis or bus companies.

Some questions remain: why did not all taxi companies offer mail carrying service? Was there tacit agreement among the companies within a given service area? Not enough business to support more than one service in an area? Why are most examples between cities rather than within cities? This could be a function of relative safety within cities but danger between them where official carriers might more readily become targets.

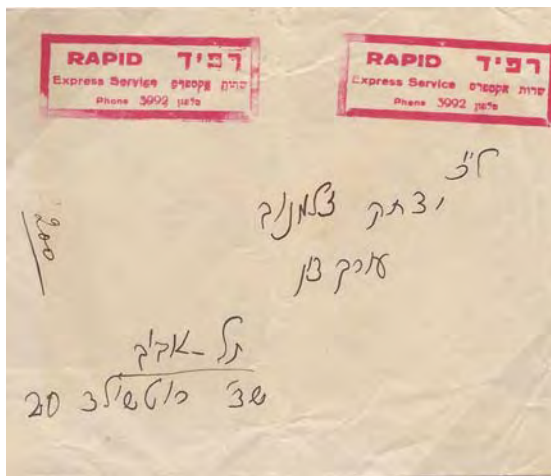


Figure 13

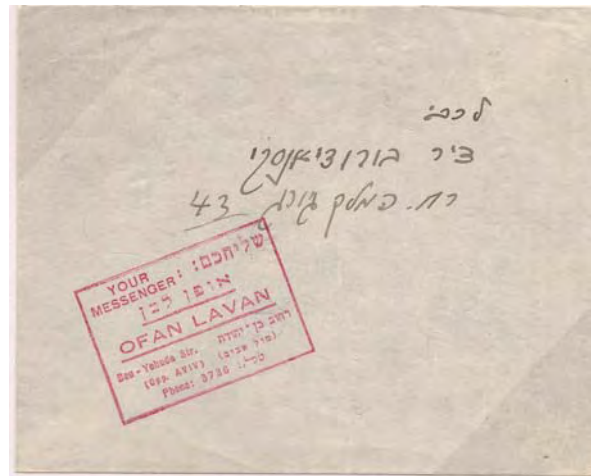


Figure 14

In addition to taxis and busses, there were a few other organized private carriers, usually ad hoc organizations that dispersed when their service was no longer needed. These services include Rapid Express Service of Tel Aviv **[Fig. 13]**; Ofan Lavan's private messenger service, also of Tel Aviv **[Fig. 14]**; the Haifa Messenger Service **[Fig. 15]** and the 1946 Jewish National Fund Youth Organization messenger service **[Fig. 16]**. The military couriers of the Minhelet Ha'am, one-off couriered letters and the many international courier services are not relevant here.



Figure 15

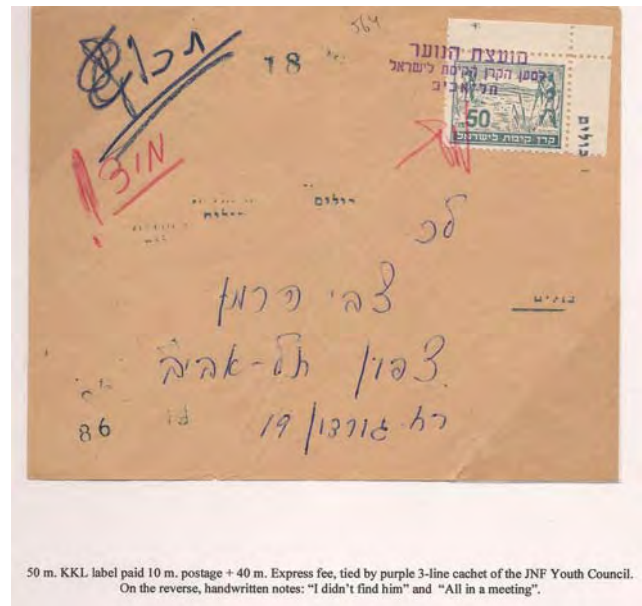


Figure 16

I hope this overview of the Palestine taxi services, unique in postal history, has been useful in emphasizing how readily contingent means of transportation are entrained to satisfy communication needs. To my knowledge, while the busses and taxis continue to be the principal form of intercity public transportation in Israel, letters are no longer carried in a clandestine manner. The service is not needed now but one can be sure that if the need again arises it will return.

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