

## The Mail Robbery between Jaffa and Jerusalem in March 1912

by Tobias Zywietz

Copyright © 2015

Due to the so-called “capitulations”<sup>1</sup> the Ottoman Empire had to reluctantly allow European powers (among other privileges to foreigners and foreign companies) to operate post offices on its territory. These postal services were in actual fact all but tolerated and that also only in port cities, and even there, the Ottoman authorities did everything to obstruct these unwanted rivals.<sup>2</sup>

The political weakness of the *Sublime Porte* gave the imperialist states the opportunity to enforce these privileges by threats of violence and economic sanctions over many decades, and even to expand them at will. Only after the outbreak of the First World War and the related political resurgence of the Ottoman Empire as an ally of Germany and Austria, the government in Constantinople was able to unilaterally repeal these “capitulations” from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1914.<sup>3</sup> When the Ottoman government once again demanded the closure of the foreign post offices in September 1914, the European powers had to obey.<sup>4</sup>

Jerusalem was the only city in the country’s interior (i.e. not a port city), in which such foreign post offices operated: Austria (Lloyd Austriaco agency: 1852, k.k. post office: 1859), France (1890), Germany (1900), Russia (РОПНТ post office: 1901) and Italy (1908). All this foreign mail traffic to and from Jerusalem went exclusively through the port city of Jaffa.

However, the railway line between Jaffa and Jerusalem, operated by French railway company “Société du Chemin de Fer Ottoman de Jaffa à Jérusalem et Prolongements” was prohibited from transporting mailbags of foreign offices due to specific terms in its licence charter.<sup>5</sup> A first leg from Jaffa to Ramle opened on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1891 and the first train travelled the whole distance on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1892. The official opening of the line took place on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1892. Patera explains:<sup>6</sup>

*Although the two aforementioned cities [Jerusalem and Jaffa] have been linked by a single-track railway for a distance of about 87 km since 1892, the now four foreign post offices could not benefit from this means of transportation. The Turkish government forbade the railway company specifically to transport foreign mailbags. As a result of this ban, the administrations of the foreign post offices were forced to have the mail consigned to them in Jerusalem conveyed by rental coaches to Jaffa.*

Father Schmitz describes the situation in 1913 as follows:<sup>7</sup>

*As I said above, only the Turkish Post is linked by means of trains with Jaffa and therefore to the European mail. All foreign post offices have to maintain their traffic through daily coach*

1 The term is somewhat misleading: the Ottoman *kapitülâsyon* / قاپيتولاسيون or *ahidnâme* / ‘ahdnâme / عهدنامه generally describe trade and other international treaties. These were drafted in chapters (*capitule*).

2 Lindenberg, 1926, p.15: “It also banned its own subjects in 1900 from using them [foreign post offices], [...]” See also Hoexter/Lachman, 1958, p. 1051, for the ban of selling stamps outside the post offices, as well as Pollack, 1957, pp. 805–807.

3 Lindenberg, 1926, p 16. Under international law, these treaties actually persisted until the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

4 Livnat, 2015, p. 288.

5 Confer Schmitz, 1914, p. 26, Lindenberg, 1926, p. 15, Pollack, 1957, p. 805 ff.

6 Patera, 1992, p. 30.

7 Schmitz, 1914, pp. 28–29.

rides and these rides are neither easy nor non-hazardous, particularly in winter. The strong rains make the street from Jaffa to Jerusalem often almost impassable. The draught animals have always to be changed half way. As some stretches are almost uninhabited and full of hiding places, and as most rides happen at night, every stage coach is always accompanied by an armed kavass for security reasons. Even so several sporadic robberies have occurred over the years. Just two years ago there was a successful robbery of an Austrian coach. The kavass was shot from a dark hiding place and the coach was plundered, only later a significant part of the loot could be recovered. In order to reduce the costs of these coach journeys, the German, French, Russian, and Italian post offices have decided to undertake these rides jointly with costs shared,<sup>8</sup> and it seems that this alliance of four is permanent, because it brings great benefits to each partner.

This description made me curious to find out more about this robbery. In several philatelic articles the events are only mentioned briefly,<sup>9</sup> in others contemporaneous newspaper reports are simply quoted.<sup>10</sup> I found one article in a German newspaper describing the incident in greater detail.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Mail Robbery between Jaffa and Jerusalem***

*During the night of 29<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> March – as we have already told our readers in brief – the Jaffa-Jerusalem stage coach was attacked by a band of about 20 Maghrebians (Arabs).<sup>12</sup> As usual on the evening of 29<sup>th</sup> March at 7 o'clock (punctual to the timetable) two mail coaches, one from the Austrian Post, the other from the Franco-German-Russian Post, took off from Jaffa, the Austrian coach drove ahead. Approximately 7 km from Jaffa, near the village of Safirije,<sup>13</sup> the band of robbers laying in an ambush suddenly opened well-aimed fire on the Austrian coach that drove ahead. Two of the three horses draughting the coach collapsed dead at once, the accompanying Austrian Post kavass<sup>14</sup> was killed by the first shots, the coach driver escaped. The second, Franco-German-Russian coach, accompanied by a Russian postal kavass drove at a gallop past the Austrian coach on the side facing away from the attack while the kavass fired from his two revolvers onto the attackers. In passing, one of the three horses was shot and broke down after being swept along several hundreds of metres. The kavass and the driver jumped immediately off the coach box, cut the ropes of the fallen horse and chased away in a gallop, trailed by further shots from the robbers that didn't cause any more damage.*

*In the nearest village Ramleh the kavass reported the incident to the mudir (community leader) who immediately sent two policemen on foot to the crime scene. They returned after two hours with the message, that the Austrian Post's kavass and a Turkish policeman were found dead near the burgled Austrian stage coach. As it turned out later, after the first shots four policemen from near-by rushed to the scene to drive off the robbers. But they had to give way to the superior might after one policeman was killed, the others fled. Of the contents of the Austrian stage coach the robbers took away 10 ordinary parcels and 1 insured parcel with a declared*

8 Lindenbergh, 1926, pp. 15–16: “[...] the German, French, Russian, and later the Italian post office together used one stagecoach belonging to a Turk which travelled daily between Jaffa and Jerusalem. The Austrian post office made use of a coach by itself.” According to p. 27, *ibid.*, the Italian post office had at first been refused from participating.

9 See e.g. Eberan von Eberhorst, 1914, p. 22.

10 See reports in *The Holy Land Philatelist*, 1958, p. 1052.

11 *Deutsche Verkehrs-Zeitung*, 1912, pp. 258–259.

12 The German text says “Moghrabiner (Araber)”. The British Consul (see *The Holy Land Philatelist*, 1958, p. 1052) speaks of Algerian robbers under their leader Sheikh Ahmed.

13 The village Safirijeh or al-Safiriyya / السافرية is about 10 km South-East of Jaffa. The British Consul (see *The Holy Land Philatelist*, 1958, p. 1052) speaks of the village Beit Dejun, i.e. Bayt Dajan / بيت دجن, about 2 km West of Safirije. This would then just about confirm the distance of 7 km specified in the report.

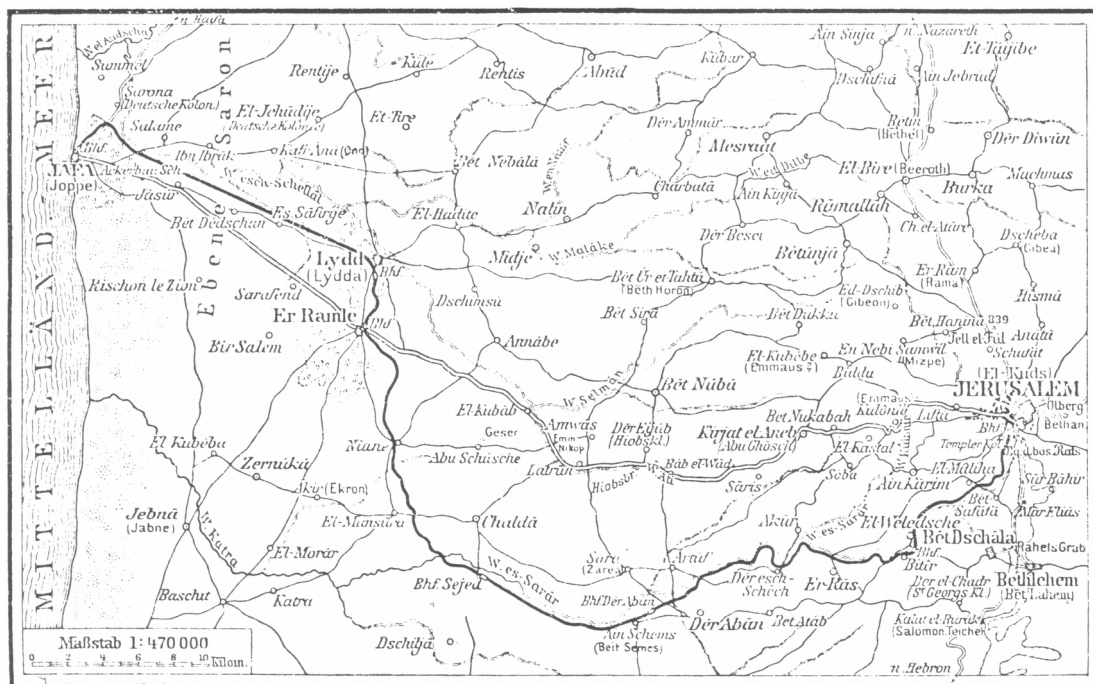
14 According to Eberan von Eberhorst, 1914, p. 22, the kavass killed was called Omar Jakub Wahbe.



value of 300 Francs,<sup>15</sup> the ordinary letter mail was found untouched.<sup>16</sup> Only the presence of mind of the Russian Post's kavass is to thank for the German-French-Russian Post escaping looting.

This raid shines anew a light on the insecurity of the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem, on which the foreign post offices need to operate. It is not for the first time that the post was endangered there. On 31<sup>st</sup> January 1907 at Ramleh, very close to the current crime scene, an attack by a 10-strong mounted band armed with rifles and sabers was attempted on the combined Franco-German-Russian and the Austrian postal coaches. The attack was repelled without people being harmed or mail getting lost. The insecurity of the highway is caused by its very poor quality, in wet weather it is often muddy. During the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> January a mail coach got stuck near the village Kubbab<sup>17</sup> in a hole caused by previous rainfall highly softening the street; it could not escape from the morass. The post-bags had to be loaded onto the three remaining coaches and their hoods partly tied. During this operation a post-bag must have been lost because a German bag was missing on arrival in Jerusalem. This bag was returned by an Arab woman in undamaged state only on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, after a reward was advertised for its recovery.

These events let the request of the involved administrations appear justified: that the Turkish railway Jaffa to Jerusalem gets opened for the secure transport of their mail, which is ruled by the licence charter. Until then, the postal authorities have to make do, and to use each such event to urge the Turkish Government to improve the road and its safety.



Karte von Jâfa - Jerusalem.

Fig. 1 : Detail from a map of the railway line between Jaffa and Jerusalem, showing some of the places mentioned.<sup>18</sup>

15 According to a newspaper report in *Haor* on 1.04.1912 (cited in *The Holy Land Philatelist*, 1958, p. 1052) cash worth a total of 30,000 French Francs is involved, the British Consul speaks about 750 British Pounds.

16 According to a newspaper report in *Haeruth* on 10.04.1912 (cited in *The Holy Land Philatelist*, 1958, p. 1052) five of the robbers were arrested. Coins worth 1,400 French Francs (140 Semi-Napoléon) and the watch of the Austrian kavass were seized. The departure of the mail coaches from Jaffa was temporarily postponed to 12 o'clock noon.

17 This refers to al-Qubab / القباب about 10 km South-East of Ramle towards Latrun, not Kubebe / al-Qubeiba / القبية further East.

I have found a few photographs showing the different coaches at various times:

- *Fig. 2:* This photograph (dated to after 1908)<sup>19</sup> shows the Austrian postal wagon (with the inscription “K.K. ÖST. POST”) to the left and (perhaps) the collective carriage of the other offices to the right.
- *Fig. 3:* This photograph, dated to 1890, shows a different Austrian wagon.<sup>20</sup>
- *Fig. 4:* On a photograph of the German post office (dated to 1905 to 1912)<sup>21</sup> there’s another wagon as well as an armed kavass.
- *Fig. 5:* The original caption reads: “This photo taken in 1912 shows the Austrian mail coach on its way from Jerusalem to Jaffa, just passing a famous landmark (which still stands): A fountain built over the graveyard of Abu Nabbut, a former Pasha.”<sup>22</sup>

### Sources and Literature

- *Ueberfall der Post zwischen Jaffa und Jerusalem.* In: Deutsche Verkehrs-Zeitung, 36. 1912, pp. 258–259.
- Schmitz, Ernst Johann: *Das Postwesen In Palästina.* In: Das Heilige Land, 58. 1914, no. 1, pp. 22–29.
- *The Alexander collection : milestones in the postal history of the Holy Land.* Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2008.
- Lindenberg, Paul P.: *Das Postwesen Palästinas vor der britischen Besetzung.* Vienna: Die Postmarke, 1926.
- Livnat, Raphaël: *Jérusalem et la Poste Française en Terre Sainte 1843–1914.* Puteaux: Livnat, 2015. 397 p.
- Patera, Andreas: *Die k. k. Postämter in Palästina.* In: Postrundschau, 1992, no. 12, pp. 26–31.
- Eberan von Eberhorst, Alexander: *Die österreichischen Postanstalten in der Türkei : Vortrag gehalten am 11. November 1913 ... / von k. k. Ministerialrat Alexander Eberan v. Eberhorst.* Vienna, 1914.
- Hoexter, Werner and S. Lachman: *The postal history of Palestine and Israel : the Austrian post offices [1].* In: The Holy Land Philatelist, no. 48/49, 1958, pp. 1048–51.
- *Contemporary reports: Austrian mail coach attacked near Ramleh.* In: The Holy Land Philatelist, no. 48/49, 1958, p. 1052. Contains three reports of local newspapers: Haor (Jerusalem), no. 143, 31.03.1912; Haor, no. 144, 1.04.1912; Haheruth (Jaffa), no. 100, 10.04.1912; as well as a cable of the British consulate to the embassy in Constantinople dated 1.04.1912.
- Glassman, Emmanuel: *The post office of Turkish Jerusalem.* In: Holy Land Postal History, no. 87/88, 2001, pp. 254–291.
- Steichele, Anton: *Die osmanische Post : X. Die Eisenbahn, ihre Bahnpostämter und Stempel ; [1].* In: Der Israel-Philatelist, vol. 16, 1978, no. 61, pp. 1807–1814=1030.1–8.
- Pollack, Friedrich-Wilhelm: *The fight between the Ottoman and foreign post offices.* In: The Holy Land Philatelist, no. 35/36, 1957, pp. 805–807.
- Hamburger, Meir: *I worked for the Austrian post office in Jerusalem.* In: The Holy Land Philatelist, no. 8, 1955, pp. 224–226.
- Various websites, incl. Wikipedia ([Capitulations of the Ottoman Empire](#), [Palestine Remembered](#), [Muhammad Abu-Nabbut](#), [Sabil Abu Nabbut](#)), and others.

18 Origin unknown; source: Steichele, 1978, p. 1806=1030.6.

19 Photograph from the book *The Alexander Collection*, p. 78. There are no picture credits, the caption simply reads: “Austrian Post near Jaffa Gate, Jerusalem.”

20 Hoexter/Lachman, 1958, p. 1048 (without picture credits). Original caption: “The open mail carriage arrives from Jaffa at the Austrian Post Office in Jerusalem (about 1890). The building, behind the Jaffa Gate, still exists.”

21 Lindenberg, 1926, p. 28 (with original caption). Since Italy is not mentioned, the recording time should be before the 1912 robbery, but after relocation of the post office to the building of the Anglo-Palestine Bank in 1905. The same photo is shown by Pollack in *The Holy Land Philatelist*, no. 68/69, 1960, p. 1372.

22 Photograph from *The Holy Land Philatelist*, p. 225 (without picture credits). The fountain or *sabil* / سبيل أبو نبوت was built around 1815 by the then governor of Gaza and Jaffa, Muhammad Abu Nabbut.





Fig. 2: The Austrian post office in Jerusalem, the left wagon shows the inscription “K.K. ÖST. POST”



Fig. 3: The open mail carriage arrives from Jaffa at the Austrian Post Office in Jerusalem (about 1890).





Fig. 4: The collective mail carriage of the German, French and Russian Post in front of the German post office in Jerusalem. To the fore there's the armed kavass.



Fig. 5: The Austrian mail coach passing Sabil Abu Nabbut just East of Jaffa in 1912.