**Jerusalem’s Water Project in the Mid-30’s:**

**High Technology Infrastructure for the Capital**

**Is This the Whole Story?**

At the beginning of 1936, the British High Commissioner for Palestine, Arthur Wauchope, visited the large water-supply system which had been constructed at the entrance to the capital, Jerusalem. Wauchope took an interest in the success of the project because of its importance and because it involved a large financial investment. The initial operation of the facility was not very successful, as the pipelines and reservoirs were found to be defective, but with the passage of time and after the necessary repairs, the water supply to the city improved dramatically.

A description of the planning and construction of the water facility in the second half of the thirties will allow us to explore not only the facts about water supply to the city, but also the contribution of British rule to the development of the land. Beyond that, it will enable us to address to what degree development of the land was undertaken to meet the needs of the British Empire and to what degree it was intended to meet the needs of its inhabitants. At the end of World War I, in the wake of various treaties, the League of Nations granted control over Palestine and the West Bank to the English. In accordance with the Mandate, the English were charged with the responsibility of preparing the land for the establishment of a Jewish national home while safeguarding the rights of other inhabitants. The realities of the thirties led to the development of a nationalist struggle between the Zionist and Palestinian movements, ultimately bringing the British Mandate to an end.

To grasp the significance of the water facility’s construction, we need to understand the facts about Jerusalem’s water supply. Despite the difficult geographical conditions of the city—the lack of large water sources in the area; the problems of development in mountainous terrain; the great distance of the city from important roads—Jerusalem attained sacred status over the course of generations. As a result, the city grew and expanded, leading to an ever-growing water shortage. Throughout history, the rulers of the city made great efforts to increase its water supply. These efforts continued into the Mandatory period. Since Jerusalem served as the capital of Mandatory Palestine, the British established their governmental offices there and the High Commissioner fixed his residence in the city. Might this be the reason that the British erected such an expensive and advanced water facility for Jerusalem?

Immediately after the conquest of the city in December 1917, British army authorities began work on improving the infrastructure and services in the city, including water supply. Attempts at increasing the water supply to Jerusalem continued intensively throughout the 1920s, mostly through utilization (exploitation) of spring water from locations to the south and east of Jerusalem. During severe drought years, tanks of water were also transported to the city by train, but these solutions did not solve the water-shortage problem, which worsened due to climatic conditions and the constant growth of the city’s population.

The city’s Department of Water Services attempted to solve the problem by rationing—limiting the provision of water from cisterns and existing reservoirs to certain days and hours. However, in the face of public protest by Jerusalem’s inhabitants (mostly the Jews), the department was powerless. The increasing protests at the end of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties, came to the attention of the High Commissioner and his administrators, leading to the search for a meaningful solution to the city’s water problem.

Throughout the Mandatory period, the British worked to develop the land and create good economic and physical conditions. They paved roads, established educational institutions and planned cities. The two largest infrastructure projects of the period—the ports in Haifa and Lod—were not constructed for the local inhabitants, but rather to meet the needs of the Empire. The location of Palestine at the intersection of Europe and Asia, between East and West, made it the best possible place to set up sea and air infrastructures for Iraq and India, important territories of the British Empire. But what of the water supply to Jerusalem? Was the investment in a water-supply system for Jerusalem due to its religious and historic significance and the British presence in the city, or was it because of the needs and protests of the local inhabitants?

Facing a drastic water shortage and understanding that it could only worsen, the British authorities decided to construct a substantial water supply facility for Jerusalem. Based on the plans, this facility would continue to be relevant to the city’s needs even with the large population growth forecast for the early 1950s. In light of this, we can assert that the water supply system for Jerusalem built in the early 1930s was the largest infrastructure investment made by the British during the Mandatory period to meet the needs of the local population, rather than for sake of the Empire. The Mandatory regime facilitated water supply projects in Arab villages and established police stations and military bases, but the water supply system for Jerusalem was unique in its scope, goals and the architectural and ideological legacies it left.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the authorities initiated the planning and construction of a water facility about sixty kilometers from Ras el Ein (later, Rosh HaAyin), a city located near natural springs. The idea of using spring water from this area for the benefit of Jerusalem’s water supply had already been raised in the 1920s, but for a variety of reasons, the British chose solutions in areas closer to Jerusalem. After the plans for the Ras el Ein facility had been finalized, they were sent for inspection to London. This systematic approach to projects was also used for other initiatives of the Mandatory authorities in Palestine and is evidence of the professional attitude of the British to the land’s development, part of their legacy.

The Rosh HaAyin-Jerusalem project was characterized by a number of unique features necessitated by the topographic challenge of pumping water to a height of 800 meters. To accomplish this, the British planned and constructed an array of four pumping stations along the route of the project. This water-supply system was not the first to transport water from one region to another; even in ancient times, water was moved a long distance to Jerusalem from the south. For this project, though, the topographic difficulty could be overcome only by use of technology. Additionally, since the water in the supply system came from uncovered natural springs, the British constructed a water-purification plant to ensure the water quality for the city.

Work on the facility began in 1932. Despite promises that the project would be completed by the summer of 1935, completion was delayed. Construction of the facility was the responsibility of the Department for Public Works, which employed Jewish and Arab contractors in a variety of jobs. The British insisted on ordering the equipment for the facility from England in order to provide economic benefits to the mother country. The buildings in the various facilities conformed to the international architectural style common in the land at that period, characteristic of building facilities under Mandatory sponsorship. The water-supply system began to operate at the beginning of 1936 and, from that time until 1948, daily water supply increased, culminating in a maximum output of four million cubic meters.

Visitors to Afek National Park, in the center of the country, can see the remains of the facility near the area of the springs. During the 1948 War of Independence, Jordanian forces blew up the pumping station of the facility in Latrun, completely destroying it, with the result that it stopped being operated. Parts of the facilities that remained operational passed into the hands of the Israeli national water company and others were destroyed over time. Today, none of the project’s facilities are connected to the city water supply, apart from the reservoir at the western approach to Jerusalem. The abandoned ruins of the water-supply system testify to the national and imperial scope of the unique enterprise undertaken by the British authorities for the benefit of the local inhabitants. The British invested in this massive water-supply system because Jerusalem was the capital and a holy city, because of pressure from local communities, and because they felt responsible for the city and its future. Only by looking at all these motivations can we understand why the British invested so much time, thought, and money in this project.

Much current research explores Mandatory rule from the perspective of the British authorities themselves, rather than focusing on the national struggle that developed in Mandatory Palestine. Study of Jerusalem’s water-supply system enables us to see that the British authorities understood the great responsibility they bore, especially with respect to Jerusalem. In keeping with this, they invested time and resources so as to ensure the city’s continued existence.

The British authorities brought the water to Jerusalem, but anything relating to water distribution within the boundaries of the city requires further research. We may assume that the segregation of the different national communities within the city was expressed in its provision of water as well.