Our columnist recounts the story of (and recalls his visit to) Vennbahn – the world’s only railway that belonged to one country and was inside another.

**After All**

by Vitali Vitaliev

**RAILWAYS**

A historic German transport link that remains forever Belgian

A 2004 photo of a Vennbahn viaduct near Butgenbach, Belgium

IN MY PREVIOUS After All column I mentioned Vennbahn – a now-defunct Belgian railway that used to form several small pockets of Germany inside Belgium. Well aware of *E&T* readers’ unfading interest in railways, I was not surprised to receive a number of queries about Vennbahn which I will try to address here.

I understand the difficulty the readers might have experienced in getting information on Vennbahn – the historic railway that is simply no more. In fact, the very last section of its former track between Auel and Oudler is currently being asphaltered. When finished, all 128km of Vennbahn will become one of Europe’s longest public cycling routes, but that won’t affect its unique enclave-forming capacity.

Here it is important to note that, under the current international regulations, not just the track, but five metres of land on both sides of it, with all the buildings and installations, belong to the country that owns the railway.

Built in 1889 as a fully German railway, Vennbahn was given to Belgium by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles in the aftermath of the First World War. After some years of deliberation, a special international commission agreed that “the trackbed, with its buildings between Raeren and Kalterherbert”, was to be ceded to Belgium, whereas the resulting five enclaves between the line and the Belgian border were to remain part of Germany.

The German names of all five stations on the stretch were retained, freight charges and fares could be paid in either German or Belgian currency, and countless German regulations about ticket-offices, waiting rooms, notice boards, left luggage, etc were accepted by the Belgians. Both countries ran customs controls for both German and Belgian passengers at both ends of the section. And whereas conductors, pointsmen and other “minor” railway workers could be either Belgian or German, the train drivers had to be Belgian nationals.

On 18 May 1940, Hitler ordered that Belgium’s former German regions be re-annexed, and the Vennbahn was triumphantly returned to service as a fully German railway. During the Second World War, it was in much use supplying the German army until it was all but destroyed by the Allied offensive in the winter of 1944-45. Scarce a viaduct was spared, and it was not until 1947 that Vennbahn was partially reopened under its previous – Belgian – ownership.

By 1990, the railway was not commercially viable, and the local community was trying to raise money to transform it into a tourist attraction – a kind of would-be ‘happy end’ to the world’s only railway to belong to one country and run across another. That unique status has been preserved until now, despite the complete cessation of all railway activities in 2008, due to a special bilateral agreement, according to which the former trackbed, even if no longer in use, will stay Belgian, which in turn means that the German enclaves will remain intact too.

I last visited Vennbahn in 2003, when it was still operating as a railway, if only just. The only trains actually moving at Raeren station were on the screen-saver of an old computer in the office of Edgar Hungs, the line’s acting manager.

“The phone cables at the station are so old that we cannot even have an internet connection,” he complained, sucking on a charred and stinky cigar butt.

Herr Hungs was then Vennbahn’s only employee. His German company, with the tongue-breaking name Eisenbahn-Bau Betriebs-Satisﬁzierung AG, had just taken over the troubled historic railway. A couple of months prior to my visit, Vennbahn, then a state-run Belgian enterprise, had gone bust, and its entire staff, both German and Belgian, had been made redundant. Hungs was now facing the difficult task of turning the railway around by hiring a new workforce, ﬁnding new investors and changing Vennbahn’s entire image.

We left the station building, which, although on Belgian territory, was typically Prussian in its design and architecture – a reminder of Vennbahn’s ‘enclave-forming’ nature. A couple of trains without locomotives were “parked” on rusty tracks, overgrown with brown railway weeds. It was clear they had been stationary for many months.

“Our trains consist mostly of 1935 Belgian carriages and Mitropa cars, built in East Germany,” Herr Hunqs said without much enthusiasm.

I noticed a faded chalk inscription on one of the cargo trucks, which was tucked away in a sideline: “Not in common use: Return to Harwich.”

Just like the forgotten Harwich-bound cargo truck, Vennbahn itself was no longer “in common use”. My escort pointed out other signs of dichotomy in Vennbahn, like a grey Deutsche Telecom cabin in front of the Belgian station building. The railway used German signals, but with Belgian colours. Despite being German, the signals were situated on the right side of the track. Belgian-style, whereas in Germany they would belong strictly on the left.

We passed by a deserted pointsmen’s hut next to what Hungs called “the last manual-change point in Germany”. I wanted to say that, since the point was actually part of the track, he should have called it “the last manual-change point in Belgium”, but I didn’t, having noticed that the hut itself stood several metres away from the rails – in what could be Germany.

Before leaving Raeren station, we popped into the engine shed, where disused Belgian and German-made diesels and steam locomotives – looking equally tired and forlorn – stood side by side, like exhibits in a deserted transport museum.

Well, even without trains Vennbahn has not disappeared entirely as an odd geopolitical phenomenon. I hope that at least some of the carefree German and Belgian bikers whooshing along some of the carefree German and Belgian, had gone bust, and its entire staff, both German and Belgian, had been made redundant. Hungs was now facing the difficult task of turning the railway around by hiring a new workforce, finding new investors and changing Vennbahn’s entire image.

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Well, even without trains Vennbahn has not disappeared entirely as an odd geopolitical phenomenon. I hope that at least some of the carefree German and Belgian bikers whooshing along the new asphaltered cycle path will remember the uniqueness of the very ground they are riding on.

“PS. I’d like to thank all the readers who have entered *E&T*’s ‘Hidden Engineering Heritage’ competition (see issue 1, 2019 or bit.ly/hehcomp). We are extending the deadline to 30 September 2019 so you can locate and photograph more hidden engineering gems this summer. Send your entries to vitaliev@theiet.org. For terms and conditions go to bit.ly/eandt-competitions.”

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