Vitali Vitaliev recalls his whistle-stop visit to the world’s only railway with dual nationality

IN MY ever-growing collection of little-known European curios, a special place belongs to Vennbahn – a small Belgian railway cutting into Germany in the outskirts of Aachen. It has unique status under international law as a corridor of one country’s sovereign territory passing through the territory of another. Or rather HAD a unique status, it has to be said...

A train buff of many years standing (and riding), I was saddened to discover recently that Vennbahn, the world’s only enclave-forming railway is no longer operational.

Not that the news came as a complete shock. Several years ago, when I visited Vennbahn while researching a book on European enclaves, it was already tired. More than that: it was clinically dead. The only trains at Raeren station that were actually moving were those on the screen-saver of an old computer in the office of Edgar Hungs, the newly-appointed umpteenth Vennbahn 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 but which must have been last lit in the middle of the previous century; when Vennbahn was still up and running.

Hungs was Vennbahn’s only employee (and employer). His German company, with the tongue-breaking name Eisenbahn-Bau-Betriebs-Satiszierung AG, had just taken over the troubled historic railway. A couple of months prior to my visit, Vennbahn, then a state-run Belgian enterprise, went bust and all its staff – both German and Belgian – were made redundant.

Hung 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 have developed a seven-year-long reconstruction program,” he said. “In future, we are planning to combine tourist trains with some commercial traffic, to rent trains out for parties and so on. But first, tracks need to be changed and rolling stock renovated…”

The station building was, although on Belgian territory, 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. Had they been motorcars, not railway carriages, they could have been easily classified as ‘dumped’ and removed.

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

I noticed a faded chalk inscription on one of the cargo trucks 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’ – a great shame for the world’s only railway that belonged to one country and ran across another.

Built in 1889 as a fully German railroad, it was given to Belgium by the Treaty of Versailles in the aftermath of the First World War. A special international commission agreed – after several years of deliberation – that part of Vennbahn, namely “the trackbed with its buildings between Raeren and Kalterherbert”, was to be ceded to Belgium, whereas the resulting five enclaves 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 strict regulations about ticket offices, waiting rooms, notice boards, left luggage, etc. were all 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 exclusively Belgian nationals!

On 18 May 1940, Adolf Hitler ordered that Belgium’s Cantons de l’Est be re-annexed, and Vennbahn was triumphantly returned to service as a fully German railway line.

During the Second World War, it was in much use supplying the German army until it was all but destroyed by the Allies’ offensive in the winter of 1944-45. Scarcely a viaduct was spared, and it was not until 1947 that Vennbahn was partially reopened under its previous – Belgian – ownership.

By 1990, the railway had become commercially unviable, and the local community tried to raise money to transform it into a tourist attraction. “The grant from the local Euregio, however, was not sufficient to sustain the railway and the whole tourist venture was allowed to die,” Hungs concluded with a sigh.

Like two solitary railway trolleys, we trudged along the empty tracks. Hungs explained that, by international regulations, not just the track but five metres of land on both sides of it belonged to the country that owned the railway. That was why German police could not deal with any offences on Vennbahn, albeit it ran through the German territory but had to contact their Belgian colleagues instead.

He then 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 with Belgian colours. Being German, the signals were nevertheless 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 pointsman’s hut next to what Hungs called “the last manual-change point in Germany”. I wanted to correct him that, since the point was actually part of the track, it should have been called “the last one 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, I popped into the engine shed where disused Belgian and German-made diesels and steam locomotives – looking equally tired and forlorn – stood next to each other like exhibits in a transport museum.

I hoped that the Raeren depot was an engine dormitory, not an engine mortuary. Sadly, my hopes were not destined to come true. By late autumn 2008, the track had been completely removed and Vennbahn was no more. But I will always remember Vennbahn – a small ‘cosmopolitan’ railway with dual nationality.

Vitali Vitaliev, features editor of E&T, has been shortlisted for a PPM’s UK Columnist of the Year Award for his ‘After All’ column.