



New Life for the Dead Sea

Though the planet's lowest point might sound like hell on earth, a few crazy dreamers discovered its heavenly promise of health and beauty. The story of Dead Sea Works' rise from the sands // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



Where To?

Northern Dead Sea

Potash Works Commemorative Site and Moshe Novomeisky Visitors and Heritage Center

W

ho could have imagined that a son of Jewish gold miners in frozen

Siberia would carry on the family tradition in equally stark but utterly opposite conditions? Born in 1873, Moshe Novomeisky grew up so enamored of his father's occupation that he too joined the Siberian mining industry. In 1911, arriving in the Middle East at age thirty-eight to evaluate the region's mineral potential, he discovered the joy of temperatures above freezing. A few years later, he ditched his fur coats and kolpak hat, packed up his family, and boarded a ship carrying the first wave of postwar immigration to the land of Israel.

From Moses to Moses

Word of Geder's new Siberian farmer soon brought Jewish laborers knocking at Novomeisky's door. One of them was another Siberian Moses, twenty-year-old Moshe Langutzky. The two became friendly and, perhaps due to their mutual frosty experiences, settled on a mining project in their new homeland's hottest spot – the Jordan Rift Valley and the Dead Sea.

Beginning in 1925, while Novomeisky negotiated with the British Mandate government for a license to extract minerals from this lowest place on earth, Langutzky spent two and a half years surveying the Dead Sea's northern shore. Extracting potash and bromide from its warm waters in the desert heat, he surely felt somewhat nostalgic for the frigid climate he'd left far behind.

Potash is an excellent fertilizer, while bromine chloride is used as a disinfectant in pharmaceuticals. Both minerals are therefore valuable commodities, and Langutzky's promising experiments assured his partner of the venture's profitability. So Novomeisky raised capital and hired Jews idealistic enough to submit to backbreaking labor in the searing sun and dusty air.

The licensing process took another two years. With Jordan's new Hashemite Kingdom on the Dead Sea's other shore, the British left Novomeisky hanging while they tried to interest the Jordanians in the deal. Meanwhile, Langutzky and his sweaty pioneers kept the experimental station going, building evaporation ponds,



pumping them full of Dead Sea saline, setting up a transportation system along the shore, and operating heavy machinery in 40° Celsius (104° Fahrenheit) in the shade, if you could find any.

Finally, after both the Mandate government and the Hashemites had read the fine print, Novomeisky got the go-ahead for Palestine Potash Ltd., or the Land of Israel Potash Co.

High Winds on the Lowest Sea

After celebratory cheers, champagne toasts, and hora dances, Novomeisky faced a major logistical problem: how to eliminate his Jerusalemite workers' long, daily commute via Jericho to the shores of the Dead Sea? Though ostensibly evenhanded, the Mandate government prohibited Jewish work camps on state land in the Dead Sea region, but Novomeisky's stubbornness eventually secured permission to build such facilities on the northern shore.



Photo: family album



Langutzky suggested opening a second plant some eighty kilometers south, in the lower Dead Sea basin. Mineral concentrations were much higher there, promising significantly lower extraction costs, plus the salt deposits on the shore next to Mount Sodom were a perfect natural sealant for the company's evaporation ponds, preventing the brine stored there from seeping away.

Yet there were two drawbacks: the scorching heat in the Dead Sea's southern basin, and no springs to provide drinking water or cool the proposed factory's equipment. The lake's water levels were also relatively high that season, leaving no room for a road along the western shore.

From mining in Siberia to mineral extraction at the Dead Sea. Entrepreneur Moshe Novomeisky and foreman Moshe Langutzky. Above, Palestine Potash Ltd. installations in Sodom during the British Mandate

Photo: Library of Congress Collection

Forbidden by the Mandate government from setting up camps in the Dead Sea region, Jewish workers had to commute daily via Jericho



With water levels approaching the cliff face, the railroad track to the southern Dead Sea had to go right through the lake. A ship loaded with potash on its way to the northern shore docks by the track, 1930s

Photo: Library of Congress Collection

Twenty young volunteers from the United Kibbutz Movement turned up from all over the country, hoes in hand, to conquer the Dead Sea

The only way to the Sodom salt marsh was thus an hour's trip by motorboat. Workers could be cut off from their families for weeks if not months at a time.

Novomeisky insisted that no one, not even the most dewy-eyed idealist, would tolerate such conditions. Langutzky, hardened by his years in the burning heat, countered that he could find men to work anywhere.

He was right. From all over the country, twenty young men from socialist work battalions and the United Kibbutz Movement's defense units turned out, hoes in hand, to conquer the Dead Sea. On May 1, 1934, amidst May Day festivities at the port on the lake's northern bank, they boarded the SS *Callirrhoe* (named for an ancient harbor on the eastern shore),

sailing into the unknown to the tune of "The Internationale," the socialist anthem, followed by its Hebrew equivalent, *Tehezakna* (Be Strong). In their wake, barges loaded with building materials, machinery, food, and water were pulled along by the ship.

Just as prospects seemed rosiest, with a Hebrew work camp destined to rise from the salty sands, everything went topsy-turvy as surely as in a classic farce. The sea suddenly turned rough, heavy rain ruptured the ship's mast, and the barges broke away and disappeared in the waves. The workers were stranded!

At dawn, one boat was found waterlogged, its planks split and leaking, on a sandbank near Masada. The other was a slight distance away to the north. Part of it was unloaded there, and the *Callirrhoe* sailed on with the boats to the southern shore. A guard was left to take care of the cargo abandoned at Masada. On May 2, after a three-hour journey, they reached the shore



by Mount Sodom. That very day, hammers flew and the first stakes were set for the factory. (“Linchpin of Jewish Settlement in Sodom,” from Israel Even-nur’s diary, quoted in Abraham Ya’ari, *Memories of the Land of Israel* [1947], vol. 2, p. 1230 [Hebrew])

We’ll Build the South!

Given these inauspicious beginnings, we might have expected disillusionment among the workers – but they’d known all along that you couldn’t sink lower than the Dead Sea. So they eagerly set to work on the evaporation ponds, the pumping station, and the ditches channeling Dead Sea water into the plant.

Novomeisky solved the problem of drinking water by turning to Emir Abdullah of Jordan, who controlled the lake’s eastern bank. The success of the Jewish factory, its owner argued to Abdullah,

would encourage investment in a similar project on the Jordanian side. Novomeisky promised to provide professional expertise in return for water. So every day a boatload of pure spring water arrived from the town of a-Safi (the biblical Zoar) and was downed by the thirsty crew.

The hotter the temperatures and the harder the work, the higher the Land of Israel Potash Co.’s reputation soared among thrill-seeking Hebrew pioneers. In Nisan of 1936, as the factory expanded, laborers actually vied for jobs. Competition was so fierce that no work collective was allowed to submit more than two candidates. One of the lucky ones, from a work battalion in Ra’anana, was muscular Srulik (Israel) Even-nur. In his diary, he recollected his hiring:

The meeting was stormy. One after another, members rose to

The higher mineral concentration in and around the southern lake made extraction there more lucrative than in the northern section. Aerial view of evaporation pools, 1937

Photo: Zoltan Kluger,
University of Haifa Library

Control center monitoring the Dead Sea Works, 1968

Photo: Moshe Pridan,
Israel National Photo Collection





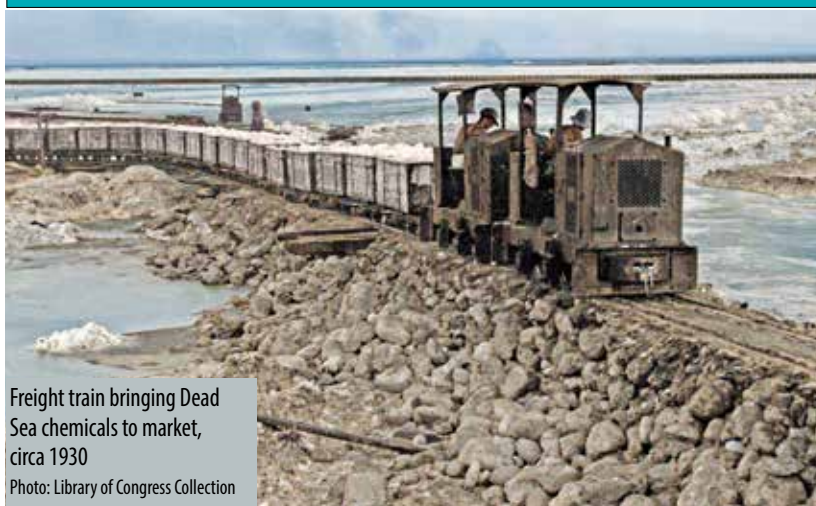
By the By

- ▶ When Palestine Potash Ltd. became the Dead Sea Works in 1952, it seemed nothing more than a name change. In 1961, however, something began to undermine any national sentiment remaining for this surprisingly successful venture. In return for a measly 5 percent of the factory's revenues and the promise of a public share offering, the Israeli government granted the company sole license to extract – until 2030 – whatever it liked in the broad swathe of land and lake between the Sodom salt marshes and Masada.

Everything went swimmingly until 1968, when the government founded Israel Chemicals Ltd. (ICL), incorporating a number of industries, including the Dead Sea Works. ICL's public standing started to waver when its companies bought back all their shares, retired from the stock market, and reconfigured themselves as a private, only nominally government-owned entity. In 1997, when the state sold off the entire concern to an investment firm, the deal stank like Dead Sea sulfur. The exploitation of all Dead Sea resources was now in private hands – completely unregulated – until 2030, with almost no return to the public purse.

Grassroots protest increased over the years, aggravated by the ongoing, wanton destruction of the Dead Sea's unique natural habitat and its stunning landscapes. Irritation gave way to anger as the expanded plant's unsupervised activities exacerbated evaporation of the lower Dead Sea basin. Poor work conditions and inadequate wages added insult to injury. Then it emerged that ICL had vastly underestimated the revenues it owed the government. Extended arbitration ended last year with the conglomerate being forced to pay out another NIS 1.1 billion just for the debt incurred from 2000 to 2017.

How will all this be resolved? What will happen when ICL's license expires in 2030? Will the historic factory be returned to the public or rolled over into some other private concern? More in the next, as yet unwritten chapter of the Dead Sea saga.



Freight train bringing Dead Sea chemicals to market, circa 1930

Photo: Library of Congress Collection

express their burning desire to go to Sodom, to join the endeavor about to expand. The noise of feet stamping as they danced in stormy circles, crying, "God will build the south! We will build the south!" now rose and reached as far as this room at the edge of the camp [...]. We two, the first chosen to go to Sodom, will set sail tomorrow at reveille. My heart is as full of feeling and wonder as that of someone departing for a mysterious land. (*ibid.*)

Two days later, he wrote:

We set out from Jerusalem in the late morning in a cargo van, intrigued by the tools and other items piled inside. Suffocating dread mingled with unceasing excitement; would we make the grade? We'd heard so much about the south and its harsh living conditions, about being cut off and lonely, about barrenness and stifling heat. Would we have the grit for it? (*ibid.*)

Not only did Even-nur survive, but in 1939 he helped establish Beth Ha-arava, the Dead Sea's first permanent settlement. Many potash workers and their families relocated to this community at the lake's northern tip.

Bringing Peace

The self-sacrifice and devotion of the Land of Israel Potash Co. staff soon produced record results. In 1942, the company sold dozens of tons of potash and bromide for close to three hundred thousand pounds sterling. Meanwhile, true to his word, an aging Novomeisky assisted King Abdullah in setting up his own factory across the



By the By

- The Moshe Novomeisky Visitors and Heritage Center was dedicated last month on the site of the original workers' camp, reconstructed after ninety years. Advanced multimedia displays tell the story of the Dead Sea Works and its heroic beginnings. The center was financed primarily by ICL (together with Israel's Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage, the Preservation Council, and the Tamar Regional Council), so its narrative naturally neglects to mention that the corporation's achievements have come at a hefty environmental price of subsidence and shrinkage in the Dead Sea's southern basin and rising water levels in the northern.

That inconvenient truth puts a whole new slant on ICL president Raviv Zoller's remarks at the center's opening, in which he referred to the Dead Sea industries' impact on Israeli society over the last century.



Dead Sea. Profits soared, but as the British withdrawal from Mandate Palestine approached, and armed clashes between Arabs and Jews increased, it was clear that the party would soon be over. Nevertheless, to keep both plants operating, Novomeisky persuaded the Jordanian monarch to declare the area a neutral zone.

On May 14, 1948 – which was also 5 Iyar, the day the State of Israel was proclaimed – Novomeisky rode jubilantly to Tel Aviv to inform Ben-Gurion that the potash works had been saved. Unfortunately, the entrepreneur was involved in a

car accident en route, leaving the prime minister ignorant of Novomeisky's agreement with the Jordanians. War broke out that same day. Three days later, Ben-Gurion gave them custody of all Jewish property at the northern Dead Sea. The population of Beth Ha-arava and the nearby plant were relocated to the facility in Sodom. On May 22, the Arab Legion took possession of both Beth Ha-arava and the abandoned factory site, seized anything valuable, and razed them to the ground.

The southern plant held out another seven months, until Operation Lot opened up an

Handy Info



Where to Eat

Café Greg

Dead Sea Mall
3 Ein Bokek
Kosher, dairy
(08) 625-5588

Ranch House

Isrotel Dead Sea
Ein Bokek
Kosher, meat
(08) 668-9666



Don't Miss

Ein Gedi Nature Reserve

Entry fee
(08) 658-4285

Qumran National Park

Entry fee
(02) 994-2235

Perazim Stream and Flour Caves

Walking route
Entry free

overland route from Beersheba, connecting the Dead Sea with the new state. In 1952, the government nationalized the Land of Israel Potash Co., renaming it the Dead Sea Works. Business has been booming ever since.

Little remains of the original buildings. You can still see relics of the northern factory by the Lido Junction. A few rusty signs are the only indication of the plant's glorious past. ■



Tamar Hayardeni

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