

Transalpine goods traffic : Truckers' war at the Saint Gotthard

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Truckers' war at the Saint Gotthard

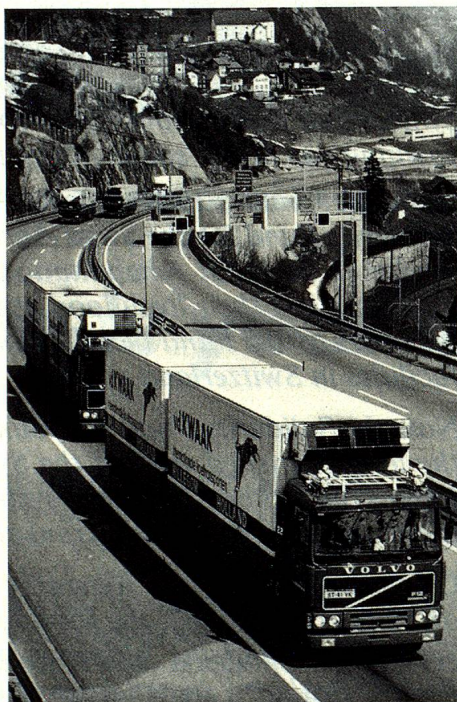
The opening of the Saint Gotthard road tunnel in 1980 led to a run of heavy lorries on this central Alpine transit crossing. The EEC States are now demanding that Switzerland should raise its lower lorry-weight limits up to the Community level, which would result in still more traffic. Switzerland's attitude: no.

The Saint Gotthard motorway (N2) was closed to through traffic for several weeks from the end of August because of serious storm damage causing landslips and flooding. Since 18th September, however, vehicles of up to a total weight of 16 tonnes are again being allowed in transit; the heaviest classes of lorry may use the N2, but, provisionally, since 22 October, only in the morning and evening. Without this interruption, it is estimated that some 500,000 heavy lorries would have chosen the Gotthard route this year. Yet how will it all go on after the damage has been repaired? The situation could become even more critical, for it so happens that the EEC States are pressing for (among other things) an increase in the Swiss heavy-vehicle weight limits from 28 to 40 tonnes. If Switzerland gives way, still more juggernauts will choose the Gotthard route and in so doing will still further pollute the local environment. As an answer to this pressure from abroad, the Swiss government is advocating piggyback transport by rail. Will this ease the problem?

Massive increase of goods transport

In all Alpine countries, transalpine conveyance of goods by road increased enormously in the 1980s, whereas railway goods traffic came to a standstill and even slightly declined. In 1970, in Europe as a whole, almost four times more goods were transported by rail through the Alps than by road. In 1984, for the first time, transalpine road traffic registered a greater tonnage of goods than rail. With the massive increase in road transport, the ratio has since shifted still further in the direction of the road route.

According to figures of the Federal Administration, the main flows of transalpine lorry journeys were from France, with 35%, and from Austria, with 41%. Yet, since the Gotthard road tunnel was opened in 1980,



Most of the road goods traffic trundles over the Gotthard route (photo: AP).

the Swiss share of the traffic has also increased continuously: before the opening, only 15% of all heavy lorries passing through the Alps used Swiss crossings; in 1986 it was already 24%. The Saint Gotthard accounted for the lions' share (three-quarters) or, in figures: before the opening of the highway tunnel an average of 80 lorries a day were recorded; in 1986 it was just under 1,600; and in the first six months of 1987, already around 1,800 lorries a day were being counted.

EEC pressure on Switzerland

Recently, traffic-policy pressure exerted by the EEC countries on Switzerland has steadily increased. The heavy-traffic levy

introduced in 1985 was the apparent stumbling block, but in reality it was a question of other matters and more. Transit goods-traffic crossing the Alps between the northern and southern EEC countries has increased enormously and will increase still further. Compared with today, a doubling of goods-traffic shifts is envisaged by the year 2000 – flows which are linked with the creation of a homogenous EEC home market with free movement of people and free exchanges of goods, services and capital. However, despite lip-service by the Community States to a switch of goods-traffic flows from road to rail, advance is steadily in the direction of road transport: a trend reinforced by the fact that from 1992 all restrictions on the haulage of goods by road in the EEC area for the hauliers will be lifted. From the Brussels' viewpoint, the barriers that Switzerland has erected against heavy-goods traffic bar the way to this transport policy. In concrete terms, the EEC States demand that Switzerland should raise its weight limits for heavy lorries from 28 tonnes to the Community level of 40 tonnes (from 1992, to 41 tonnes). Further points of attack: driving bans at night and on public holidays; in other words, unhindered passage for heavy lorries from the EEC zone through Switzerland is demanded.

However, there is also internal pressure: Increased lorry-weight limits would lead to a still greater run on the Gotthard route. So, today, neither the federal government, nor the environmentalist circles nor the transport undertakings themselves want Switzerland to yield to EEC pressure, even though they are not necessarily swayed by the same motives. Besides a ban on goods being transported internally by the foreigner, the lower lorry-weight limits in Switzerland keep the foreign competition to the Swiss hauliers at arm's length, since its own heavy vehicle park is harmonised with foreign (EEC) weight limits. However, Swiss hauliers run the risk that, as a counter-measure, the EEC States might, in turn, ban traffic with 40-tonne trucks registered abroad and thus allow only Swiss 28-tonners, which would reduce the competitiveness of Swiss hauliers in foreign (EEC) countries. Environment-protection circles fear still greater noise and air-polluting emissions which, for people living near the N2 as well as for the environment itself, have already exceeded the bounds of tolerability, particularly in view of already severely-blighted mountain forests.

In the light of the geographical and topographical conditions of Switzerland, as well as for traffic-policing, traffic policy and

environmental-protection reasons, there is indeed no question of any such yielding by the federal government.

Goods by rail

As one answer, however, the government offers the foreigner a concession in respect of rail transport: in the short and long term, considerably more and larger transit lorries could be carried piggyback through the Saint Gotthard railway tunnel. Of the heavy vehicle fleet today engaged in transit traffic technically 60% of the vehicles could be transported piggyback (i.e., loaded on open, flat carrier waggons) through the Saint Gotthard rail tunnel, from October this year. This is provided that full use is made of all engineering possibilities such as, for example, smoothing off critical points of the tunnel profile. Yet even with this extension of the facilities offered, and with additional trains – the Gotthard line can cope with up to 40 such trains a day – there are limits to the technical possibilities. A massive increase of technical facilities, particularly in regard to maximum permitted corner heights of vehicles, would be possible only if a new transalpine crossing were to be constructed.

New Alpine rail tunnel

Switzerland cannot take an effective stand against the EEC countries' call for ever-greater road-transport capacities until it can offer an attractive alternative to the Saint Gotthard motorway, with an efficient and fast transalpine rail crossing. But this would not be finished before the year 2000. Four projects are currently up for discussion: Splügen (Chur-Chiavenna), Gotthard (Amsteg-Giornico) the «Y Variant» (Gotthard, with branch tunnel from Giornico into the Grisons) and the Loetschberg base-line. At the moment, according to regional speculation, the chances for the Gotthard option seem to be the best, especially since this alternative would be likely to take the wind out of the sails of those groups who call for a second tube for the Gotthard road tunnel. While the Gotthard road was built as a four-lane motorway, the tunnel itself has only two lanes. So it would seem that building a second road tunnel is the obvious solution – a green light for road traffic, as it were. In any case, the automobile associations speak up for such a solution. And the Ticino government lets it be known that it wants a second road tunnel if the railway base-tunnel is not going to be built immediately. However, such a road tunnel would not solve the capacity problem and would merely shift the bottlenecks all along the N2, namely

to the already overburdened areas of Basle, Egerkingen, Lucerne and Mendrisiotto. At all events, the federal government's stance is clear: a second road tunnel should not be built. The Federal Council is expected to take a decision in principle on the routing of a new Alpine rail tunnel next year.

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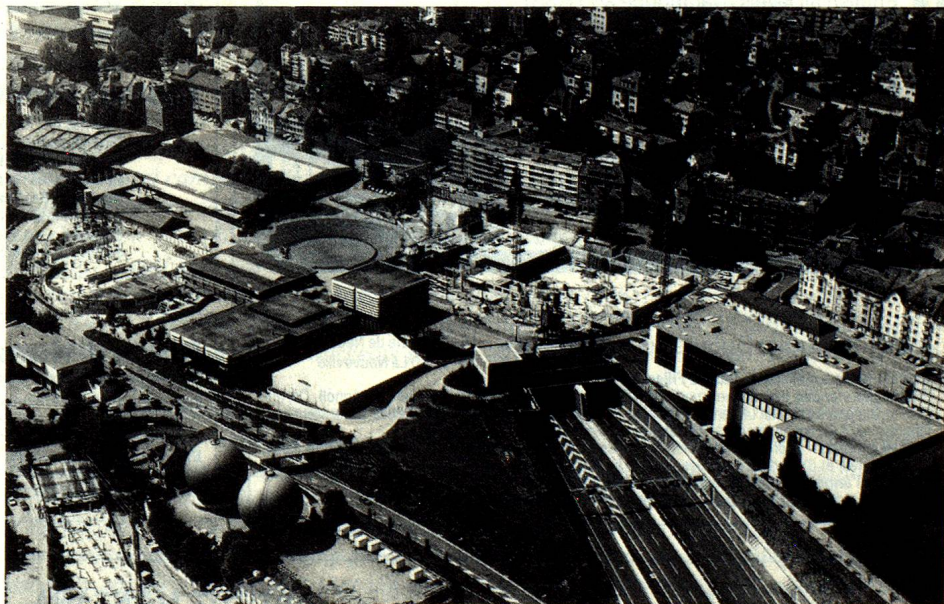
«Peace Agreement»

Fifty years ago – to be precise, on 19th July 1937 – the famous Peace Agreement between the employers and the trade unions in the engineering and metalworking industries was signed. Among other things, the accord, which is regarded as a model for relations between Swiss employers and employees, provides for the peaceful settlement of disputes and a mechanism for avoiding recourse to strikes and lockouts during the life of the contract. At the anniversary ceremony at the beginning of September this year, Federal Councillor Delamuraz declared that there is «nothing more worthwhile from the viewpoint of national policy, and nothing more modern from the viewpoint of social policy, than the Peace Agreement». Leading representatives of the unions and of the employers' associations also paid tribute to the set of agreements concluded – although with varying emphasis.

However, a trade union committee has voiced fairly massive criticism of the Peace Policy, from the aspect of labour, and has put out a press advertisement with the heading «50 years of labour peace is enough». These left-wing trade-unionists are convinced that the peace policy has depolitized organized labour.

New exhaust gas standards

From 1st October 1987 the US-83 exhaust emission standards are valid for all motor vehicles newly imported into Switzerland. Compared with the CH-86 exhaust regulations in force since 1st October 1986, the US standards reduce the permissible emission of exhaust-gas poison to a half (nitrogen oxide) and to a quarter (carbon monoxide and hydrocarbon gases). Petrol-driven cars can comply with these new limits only by the fitting of controlled, three-way catalytic converters. The most significant consequences of the new exhaust-emission standards (compared with those previously in force) are that every sixth (newly-imported) motor vehicle in Switzerland will have to be «cleaner»; some models in the lower price ranges will have larger engines and will be more expensive; and the famous «deux-chevaux» Citroën model will disappear from the Swiss motor car market.



Various stopgap solutions had to be reached because of extensive building work at this year's OLMA, the Swiss trade fair for agriculture and dairy farming, from 8th to 18th October 1987 in St. Gallen. The outlines of the first new hall are already recognizable in the centre of the picture and, at the left-hand edge, the site of the new arena above the parking area. (Photo: Foto Gross/OLMA News Service)



Telegrams

■ 1986 was a good year for the *Swiss economy*, even though the peak results of 1985 were not again achieved. *Vis-à-vis* 1985, the gross domestic product rose by 3,2%.

■ Large influx of *Turkish asylum-seekers*: 2876 Turks sought political asylum in Switzerland during the first eight months of 1987, thus forming the largest group of asylum-seekers.

■ The rate of *air pollution* in Switzerland stays the same; it was as high in 1986 as in 1985. On between 20 and 50 days the permissible daily averages of sulphur dioxide

and nitrogen oxide were exceeded, despite the fact that clean-air regulations allow an excess of the average limits on one day only.

■ The Swiss *Brown Boveri Company (BBC)* and the ASEA group of Sweden have agreed to merge on 1st January 1988 to form the world's largest electrical engineering enterprise. It has been announced that the new super-group is to have its HQ in Zurich.



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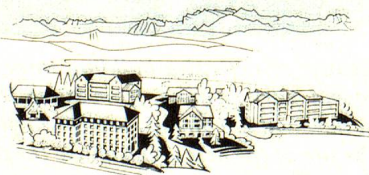
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