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Autor: Behrend, George
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HALF A CENTURY OF SWISS TRAIN TRAVEL

by George Behrend, MA, FRGS, MCIT

Most of the changes to Swiss Rail travel are fairly recent. One is the growing interest in Swiss railways, in Britain, fostered by the lively S.R.S. Regretfully I had to turn down the offer of the Society's first Presidency by the founder, as I felt it would hardly thrive with an absent President, resident neither in UK nor Switzerland.

I was therefore flattered when Alan Ramage asked me for an article for Swiss Express, for more and more people know about the railways already. Today "Riding the Glacier Express" has become one of the prime tourist attractions for American and Japanese visitors to Europe, even though you can no longer see the Rhone Glacier now the Furka Oberalp Railway is open all the year round throughout, and has its nice new tunnel from Oberwald to Realp. To me this seems a symbol of all Swiss Railways, for the trains are the lifeline of the country, especially when the mountain passes are closed by winter snow.

After a long period of uncertainty as to whether motor cars and coaches, often so much quicker than mountain lines, should not totally supplant most railways, expansion



The Glacier Express a prime tourist attraction. Photo F.O.

has begun again. The doubling of the BLS main line, dreamed of in 1913 when the company started building its famous Lotschberg railway, is almost a reality throughout. Recently the smaller private enterprise lines have got together and bought bulk orders for almost identical rolling stock. These new vehicles are brightly lit, warmly heated, draught-proof, well upholstered and can run at higher speeds.

Due to the greater prosperity of ordinary people, with more leisure and more interest in mountain travel, whether for walking in summer or skiing in winter, there is far greater demand for rapid movement to and from the mountain resorts; in particular the speed on rack sections has increased considerably, compared with 50 years ago.

Gone are 3rd class, and wooden seats on nearly all trains. There are few open vestibules; almost all coaches have bogies. Where people used to have to walk with back packs or perhaps towing handcarts which were miniature reproductions of horse-drawn wagons, there are cableways and ski-lifts all over the country. Only one railway throughout the period has kept its steam-engines - The Brienz Rothorn Bahn. Now that steam is superceded, it has become a tourist attraction in many places in the country.

Nowadays most people arrive in Switzerland by air. In the unpretentious but

practical underground station at Kloten Airport, opened incidentally by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II. there is the same self-effacement of the Federal Railways (SBB), found 50 years ago by travellers arriving at obscure frontier towns in France, such as Delle or Pontarlier, with not a hint of the fantastic engineering feats by which the SBB is forced through the mountains. Swiss Railways are relatively unaffected by the air revolution, as regards internal traffic. Few people fly from Zurich to Geneva, for example, though perhaps this will be different when Cointrin Airport is connected to Geneva Cornavin, which takes place in months, rather than years.

The Swiss believe in eating properly on trains. Most trains not provided with proper dining cars, are served by mini-bar trolleys and snack vendors. But self-service diners, popular in France and Italy and prevalent but not popular in Germany, did not take on in Switzerland, where there are only 7 in service, but where there is a large fleet of classical diners, offering full and proper meals at all appropriate hours. Surely the SBB is the only railway in Europe offering full breakfast in a proper diner on a long distance national express - at a few minutes after half past four in the morning! It is very popular with the high class ladies of fortune of Lausanne, returning from their nightly task of entertaining the international community of Geneva !

Fundamental changes have taken place in International train traffic to Switzerland, and in its operation until 30 years ago, the Swiss Dining Car Co. was barred from leaving the country, but now their cars run regularly to Genoa. One of the nicest but little-known ways to Switzerland from Britain is to take the Iris from Brussels, with its SSG diner.

SNCF have extended their TGVs to Lausanne, so as more quickly to link Evian in French Savoy with Paris, than going all round by Macon to Bellegarde, where Evian passengers change from Geneva's TGVs. To reach Berne, you change at Frasne in the remote French Jura, into an ex-TEE set, formerly used by the Cis-Alpin, with Swiss crew throughout the run.

But sleeping car services from the Channel ports are reduced to through cars to Italy and just one service, Ostend-Brig, over the Lotschberg. The Venice Simplon Orient Express has now plugged this gap but the price is high. The fact the VSOE is there at all, gives you an inkling of the elegant way to reach Switzerland 50 years ago. The journey is 'one in a lifetime' with bar, posh a la carte meals etc. The basic fare includes meals, and to provide the only regular Boulogne-Chur through sleeper service (for the Glacier Express & St. Moritz), the train goes and comes, all the way to or from Venice, via the Brenner and Arlberg passes in Austria.

Two elements of Swiss railway life have not changed. The esprit de corps of most of the railway staff, and the locomotive whistles. The latter symbolise the country, binding it together despite the many different cantons and four different languages, in a sort of common bond of continuity, quite apart from Federal politics in Berne. And for a few more years yet you may find some whistles still belong to the 1927 Ae 4/7 2DI electric engines, though these are somewhat rare 'old-timers'. The Re 4/4 II BB and Ae 6/6 CC are now the maids-of-all-work. Increasingly passenger trains are worked with motor coaches and driving trailers, especially on the private lines. Though after 57 years of visiting Spiez, the pleasantness of the place and the attraction of the rail traffic does not seem to flag, my most poignant recollection of Swiss railways, is not in fact in Switzerland at all.

Domodossola is the spot where I have most been moved by Swiss trains. First, because an Italian militiaman pointed a gun at me simply for looking out of the window of the Simplon Orient Express, and secondly because my next Swiss visit did not occur for seven years, once again entering Swiss train operation at Domodossola, but this time after 3½ years away from home. In contrast to war-torn Italy, the SBB seemed the uttermost in civilized railway service; and that is precisely what Swiss railways are.