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Finally, it was the unanimous wish of the Committee that we should place on record our indebtedness to Alan Ramage for the concept, design and development of the 'Swiss Express' into a publication well respected here and abroad, notably in Switzerland, where it is highly regarded by official organisations. Through his work, Alan has enhanced the image of the Society, and we remain in his debt. A suitable letter has been sent to him by the Chairman.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

A RENEWAL FORM IS ENCLOSED.

Following a decision earlier this year, the fee for UK members is £8 per annum, and for those overseas £11. These are the minimum sums which enable us to break even unless membership increases. But because existing members have not received the service to which they are entitled this year the SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR EXISTING MEMBERS WILL BE REDUCED TO £6 IN THE UK AND £9 ABROAD provided renewal is BEFORE THE END OF JANUARY 1988.

SECRETARYS NOTES

First of all, another apology. There will be no Annual Dinner this year. As well as editing the magazine, Alan Ramage also organised this event, and the same problems which have caused the non-appearance of 'Swiss Express' have also meant that Alan has been unable to devote the necessary time and effort to arranging it.

The Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday 12th March, 1988 at the University of Bristol. A dinner is being arranged for the Saturday evening, and full details will be included in the next newsletter at the turn of the year.

Please can I repeat the Chairmans appeal for articles for the magazine/newsletter. These should, for the time being, be sent to me. Members who have sent articles to Alan Ramage which have not yet been published are asked to send copies to me, as we do not yet have the material which Alan has accumulated.

NOTES AND NEWS

This spot is taken up almost entirely by an eye-witness account of the storms which beset Switzerland and adjacent countries this summer, and what happened in the immediate aftermath.

Our member, Richard Pinner, was there, as was John Jesson. Richards story which follows conveys vividly the sense of immediacy and urgency at the time, and places on record so much which certainly did not reach other

parts of the world. Without doubt it is a major economic disaster for the country but, as usual, the problems seem to have been tackled with the usual Swiss speed and efficiency.

Richard writes:

Tuesday, 25th August. Together with a friend I had come to Heiligenachwend - a small village above the Lake of Thun. For two days we had suffered several heavy rainfalls; now the weather gradually improved. We went for gentle walks in the forests, unaware of the disaster befalling Central Switzerland, the Rhone Valley and the extreme South-East.

That night, on the news, we heard that the Gotthard Railway had been closed, that floods had occurred in and around Brig, near to Disentis and in the Val Poschiavo, interrupting all rail traffic. Long distance trains to Italy were diverted via the ELS line, travellers to the Ticino were told to travel to Chur from where special buses would run across the San Bernadino to Bellinzona.

The next day I travelled to Lenk to visit a friend. Waiting at Thun and, later, at Spiez, I witnessed several trains, labelled Basel - Gotthard - Chiasso - Milano, coming through, mainly pulled by SBB locos.

But it was that evening that the full horror became clear. I was called to the T.V. lounge by the hotel owner to watch special reports from the affected areas. Fluelen was several feet under water; the plain along the Reuss had become one large lake with isolated farms standing on little hills, approachable only by boat. Some signal masts were sticking out of the water outside Fluelen station; the railway line could not be seen. At the hotel opposite the station, where I had eaten several times, the water was up to the first floor. Hundreds of cattle, pigs and horses had drowned, the floods had come so quickly that there was no chance to save them. The only way to get to Fluelen was by boat or helicopter. But no human lives were lost.

Higher up in the Reuss valley the damage was still worse. Near Gurtellen 200m of the railway line had simply disappeared. In one place some rails were sticking out of the mud; further along, the mountain slope simply finished in the Reuss, as if there had never been a railway. In the village it looked as if an air raid had just taken place. House walls had collapsed into the river, a large chalet had tilted over at a crazy angle with one wall in the foaming Reuss. Still higher up, near Wassen, both roads had been cut; the ordinary 'Cantonal Road' (the old main road), had disappeared in the floods while a new motorway viaduct, built on stilts where 'The Reuss could never get to' was badly damaged; the Reuss had got there, had undercut the pylons on one side so that the concrete of

the southbound carriageway had cracked and the road itself had a pronounced dip in it. (Engineers later estimated that they might have to dismantle the whole viaduct and build a new one and even if they could repair the existing one, it might take two years to do so.)

At Brig the bridge of the F.O. across the Rhone was under water, not above it; at Münster, higher up in the Rhone valley, part of the village had been destroyed, the area being covered in rubble and mud. The railway line had disappeared.

Poschiavo had suffered its second flooding within a few weeks; it was now cut off from both sides. The plain below the town was brown, a huge sea of mud. In the Valtellina a lake above Bormio, formed by rock slides in July, was blocked by boulders and tree trunks; it now threatened to overflow and destroy villages down as far as below Tirano. 25,000 people were evacuated.

In the Rhone valley, too, near Disentis, flooding had destroyed the railway track. The Schöllenen line was closed as well.

Two days later we travelled to Zermatt. The weather was glorious and all seemed normal. Only the number of trains we saw between Thun and Brig was unusual and the fact that our train was pulled by a large SBB locomotive. Brig seemed to be normal, though the F.O. bridge was obviously not usable, it was above the water, but logs were jammed against it in large numbers.

It was marvellous to see (on T.V. and in the papers) how the repair work was tackled. The biggest problem was of course the closure of the Gotthard route. While trains could, after a few days, reach Fluelen, and also get to Göschenen from the South, there was neither railway nor road in between. Finally the north-bound lanes of the motorway viaduct near Wassen were opened to traffic (to all traffic: long-distance and local in both directions) and buses were laid on between Fluelen and Göschenen. But heavy lorries were not allowed and these had to travel via Chur and the San Bernadino. This, in turn, brought strong protests from the population of Thusis; the never-ending stream of traffic coming through day and night made life impossible there.

After ten days in Zermatt I travelled to Kandersteg; here I could observe the results of the floods. An endless succession of freight trains, some pulled by ELS, others by SBB locomotives, came through; also some long distance passenger trains rerouted from the Gotthard.

The SBB did a magnificent job near Gurtellen. Where there was just nothing but a steep mountain side, covered in boulders, a new temporary

bridge was built. Within two weeks single line working started and three weeks after the disaster the full service was resumed.

I watched several T.V. programmes devoted to these events, the most interesting one in the middle of September. For three hours teams of engineers, representatives from the SBB, RhB and FO and from the cantons, sitting in Bern, Luzern, Disentis and Poschiavo were interviewed and questioned. Could the damage have been prevented? Was anyone to blame? After all, rain storms had occurred before and were not that unusual in the Alps. Was the building on the plains around Fluelen responsible, the concreting over of large areas? Did the motorway embankments near Fluelen help to dam up the Reuss and cause even bigger floods? Were the dams too old? How far did the dying forests above the Reuss valley contribute to the floods? How could disasters like this be prevented in the future? Who would do the repair work, who would pay for it all? What compensation would people affected get: farmers, craftsmen and merchants whose entire business had been ruined?

By the time I left Switzerland, a month after the floods, the F.O. was just resuming traffic above Brig in a limited way, though the Schöllenen was still closed.

The Bernina line was open again (to Campocologno), though pictures showed trains crossing huge, boulder and mud covered plains below Poschiavo.

It would take many years for life to return to normal.

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