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RAIN STORM DAMAGE - SUMMER 1987

B. Harper

During July the heavy rains brought destruction to the Bernina line above Poschiavo. I travelled over the line from St. Moritz as far as Brusio on Friday 21st August. About two miles before Poschiavo the line traverses an open hillside. A section of the line had been destroyed by a mud and rock slide some 300 yards wide carrying away traction masts and track. This had been rebuilt and a speed restriction was in force.

On alighting at Poschiavo and walking to the town centre one could get some idea of the catastrophe to the place. The rocks and boulders that had come down the hillside had turned at the valley bottom and followed the river raising the river bed level by some 6 - 8 feet. At the entrance to the town the road bridge over the river had been clogged up with rocks and debris and the inundation had diverted itself through the shopping street. All the shops had their windows broken by the rubble piling up some 6 feet high in places. Some buildings required timber supports, having been partly undermined. This was all tidied up by the time of my visit but the buildings all needed drying out. Work was also continuing on excavating the river bed.

Travelling on by train down to Brusio at several places mud, rather than rocks, half buried the permanent way.

I understand that a few days after my visit, having more or less continuous rain on 24th - 26th August, that the town suffered a repeat inundation.

On Sunday 23rd I was to travel by Glacier Express from St. Moritz to Disentis. However, at Tavanasa all the passengers were transferred to Post coaches as the line was under water and mud a mile or so further on. The damage was clearly seen from the road with track all twisted and the ballast washed away. The Post coaches deposited the passengers at Disentis station for onward travel by connecting FO service. I was staying in Disentis.

The following day, Monday 24th, with still more continuous heavy rain, I journed back to Ilanz. RhB trains were still running a local service as far as Trun. Two locos, nos 609 and 614, being trapped on the section Trun - Disentis. At Ilanz in the afternoon train no. 754 Glacier Express arrived on time, having started for St. Moritz at Tavanasa. It was well loaded, and a coach party of Germans boarded it. This train crosses with local train from Chur no. 765 at 3.26 pm. This never arrived. We were informed that the line between Ilanz and Reichenau was washed away by the Vorderrhein. However, within about thirty minutes 12 Post buses were organised and passengers transferred. An incredible feat of organisation in so short a time.

25th August - still more rain ! Today I was told there would be no trains either way from Disentis. I had planned to travel FO 10.03 to Brig, then use the ELS to Interlaken, and change for Grindelwald. I enquired if there was a replacing Post bus to Brig or even Andermatt, so I could change on to the Schöllenenbahn to the Gotthard. However the road over the Oberalp pass was also impassable. The only way was by Post bus to Reichenau, then train to Chur, then SBB on to Interlaken. It was not as I had planned but it turned out to be an interesting and comfortable journey, the train travelling via Rorschach, St. Gallen, Wil, Winterthur, Zurich, Olten and Bern. It would have been quicker to change at Sargans and Zurich, but having got wet, and with wet luggage we at least were warm and in the dry.

Had we been able to reach Andermatt it would not have been possible to use the Gotthard line, although at the time I did not know it, as the River Reuss had washed away embankments near Gurtnellen. Further north at Fluelen the river had burst its banks and flooded the land. In a Swiss magazine issued later in the week it showed rolling stock with flood water up to the buffers.