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HOHENWEG SÜDRAMPE

By Geoffrey Bryson

Inspired by two illustrated talks given to the London branch of the SRS by Richard Pinner and the 75th Anniversary of the Berner Alpenbahn Gesellschaft - BLS Lötschbergbahn or Bern Lötschberg Simplon - my wife and I decided to walk on a brilliant June day, part of the south ramp from Hohtenn to Ausserberg - 10 Kms - in 3 hours. We drove from our distinctly non railway resort of Montana down to Sierre along the Valais and up increasingly narrow hairpin bends to Hohtenn Dorf and much further on to the station 1078 metres above sea level. We took the last parking place on the beflagged platform near the Buvett - buffet - just as an SBB Re4/4 III headed south with five new BLS Mark IV coaches and a long tail of Mark II's while a BLS Ae8/8 with an equally long freight train headed north. While we explored the small station, picking up a goodly supply of pamphlets including several about the walk, a southbound freight train double-headed by BLS locos type Re4/4 Nos. 163 "Grenchen" and 165 "Moutier" and the hourly express came north followed by an RBe with two coaches and a van on the two hourly Regionalzug service.

The first signpost to the Hohenweg is an old shunting lantern pointing down the road, followed by the first of many clear yellow signs up a path under the railway close to the Luegelkinn Viaduct - 116 metres long - with its neatly widened four arches. The path continues close to the line until it crosses over the mouth of the Schuchli Tunnel - 107 metres. Soon an Ae8/8 is seen heading north with at least 300 new FIAT cars on double deck car carrier wagons - yet another similar load just one hour later - while the southbound Kandersteg to Brig car-carrier had just a few.

The path drops down to Ijolital, via a narrow road and bridge surrounded by cut logs and then climbs back gently around the Brägi and on up to the railway at Rärnerkumme - 4 Kms from Hohtenn and 1000 metres above sea level - where the cafe is full of soldiers dressed in their red/green camouflage suits. A northbound BLS Re4/4 No. 167 "Ausserberg" heads a DB restaurant coach, BLS Mark IV's, SBB RIC's and two SNCB Orange Eurofima coaches, while an Ae8/8 heads south on a freight train.

There is now an alternative upper path - 40 minutes longer - but we continue on the level into Bietschthal which is such a steep ravine that eight rough hewn tunnels (notices warn "Please keep moving - falling rocks") were necessary to bring the steel work for the famous bridge. Several tables and benches are thoughtfully provided under the new concrete abutments. We lunched here in the company of a party of six older Dutch visitors from the Hague.

More than twenty steel steps take you up to the exit of Bietschthal No. 1 tunnel - 589 metres - and then across the vertiginous catwalk alongside the twin tracks on the 136 metres long steel arch with the water 78 metres below. The entrance to the No. 2 tunnel is guarded by twin signals for both tracks are signalled for two way single line working. A little gate - which please shut - and stone steps lead onto the path which has come the long way up and around, after which a wide path continues level along the ravine providing views back to the bridge, on to the corner at Riedgarten where many picnic tables enable walkers to sit and gaze out across the Rhône valley. From here the trains of the BVZ and the SBB express trains running far below resemble the products of BEMO, LIMA and ROCO. A steep drop to 945 metres brings us to a Bisse or Soune, an ancient artificial water channel running horizontally and found throughout the Valais, forming the basis of successful irrigation of the many terraces. We follow this Bisse for about 2 Kms through the woods watching for squirrels and marmot instead of the



BLS Ae6/8 No. 205 southbound on Lougelkinviadukt.

Photo supplied by B.L.S.

lizards on the open rocks. The many unique flowers are a joy, so are the butterflies with their blue, red, black and white spots, and the many crickets.

Suddenly the railway reappears at Mankinn with a new concrete avalanche protection shelter prominent at the entrance to the 385 metre long tunnel. A hang glider soars effortlessly high above and then the Swiss airforce makes its noisy presence felt, were they in hot pursuit? A sudden steep climb brings us to a seat with a stupendous view, then further on up over the far end of the Mankinn tunnel we can look down on the tracks. From here we continue through a steep meadow in which two cows are lying - is rain coming - with the bells sounding gently. A nasty steep stony climb above Dorny

tunnel - 1172 metres - past a flock of sheep at Bigstatt from where we can just see the jubilee flags flying at Ausserberg station far below. A farmer stops us as his water cannon rotates and then we walk down through Ausserberg Dorf and on to the station - at 961 metres above sea level. The journey had taken three and half hours including the half hour break for lunch at Bietschtl. The path continues on to Eggenberg Halt - 853 metres - taking about 1 hour 45 minutes more or a further 45 minutes for a total of 5.5 hours to Lalden at 801 metres or right on to Brig in about 9.5 hours total time. These sections might be better for continual train observation as there are fewer tunnels. Maybe another member will walk this area past the famous Viktoria tunnel and will write about it.

As we wait for the Regionalzug back to Hohtenn we talk to the Dutch party until being drowned by the noise of a BLS Ae4/4 No. 258 and the carrier from Brig with just three cars bound for Kandersteg. Better business for the BLS are the twenty passengers travelling back to Hohtenn in a punctual 7 minutes. The wonders of the Bietschtl bridge are just not visible but the soldiers at Rärnerkumme Cafe were just leaving after a very long lunch break! As we alight at Hohtenn other walkers - who we had seen earlier - join the train northwards. Before we leave in the car a train heads south with a rake of coaches emblazoned with the 75 Jubilee emblem.

I do recommend that you do this walk if you have a reasonable head for heights, some good shoes or boots, a small bag or rucksack for the lunch and waterproof jacket as you are unlikely to be as lucky as we were at midsummer, for we were almost back at Montana before a few spots of rain fell.

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