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SWITZERLAND'S RAILWAYS 1980-1989

by A.E.Hauser-Gubser

The contents of this article were suggested by our Chairman, Alan Pike. I realised when I carried out the research how good this was, for it was surprising what came to the surface which, with hindsight, has become important. Please note that what follows is my personal opinion, for which I bear the entire responsibility. Should you find it critical in places, it is meant to be positive. I am, and will forever be, a fervent supporter of our railways.

To understand the essential problems Swiss railways were faced in the past decade, I have divided the article into two parts. In the first I try to describe the economic and political conditions faced by both the smaller and larger railway organisations and in the second I shall discuss important events during these 10 years in chronological order.

PART 1

At the end of the '70s Swiss railways, with the exception of a few completely private lines, were facing the following serious problems:

1. The share of the transport market held by the railways was dwindling from year to year.
2. On the other hand the operating and overhead costs were rising at a frightening speed, resulting in staggering deficits, causing serious concern among all loyal supporters of Swiss railways.

What were the main reasons for this unfortunate situation? First, the most important reason was the favouring of highway construction under the pressure of the Road Lobby, resulting in a very modern but extremely costly network. By the end of 1989 the staggering sum of well over 30 milliards of Swiss Francs had been spent on such highways.

The result was predictable. One had only to take a look across the borders where West Germany and France closed railway lines at such a speed that one could ask oneself whether those responsible were really working in the interests of the Road Lobby.

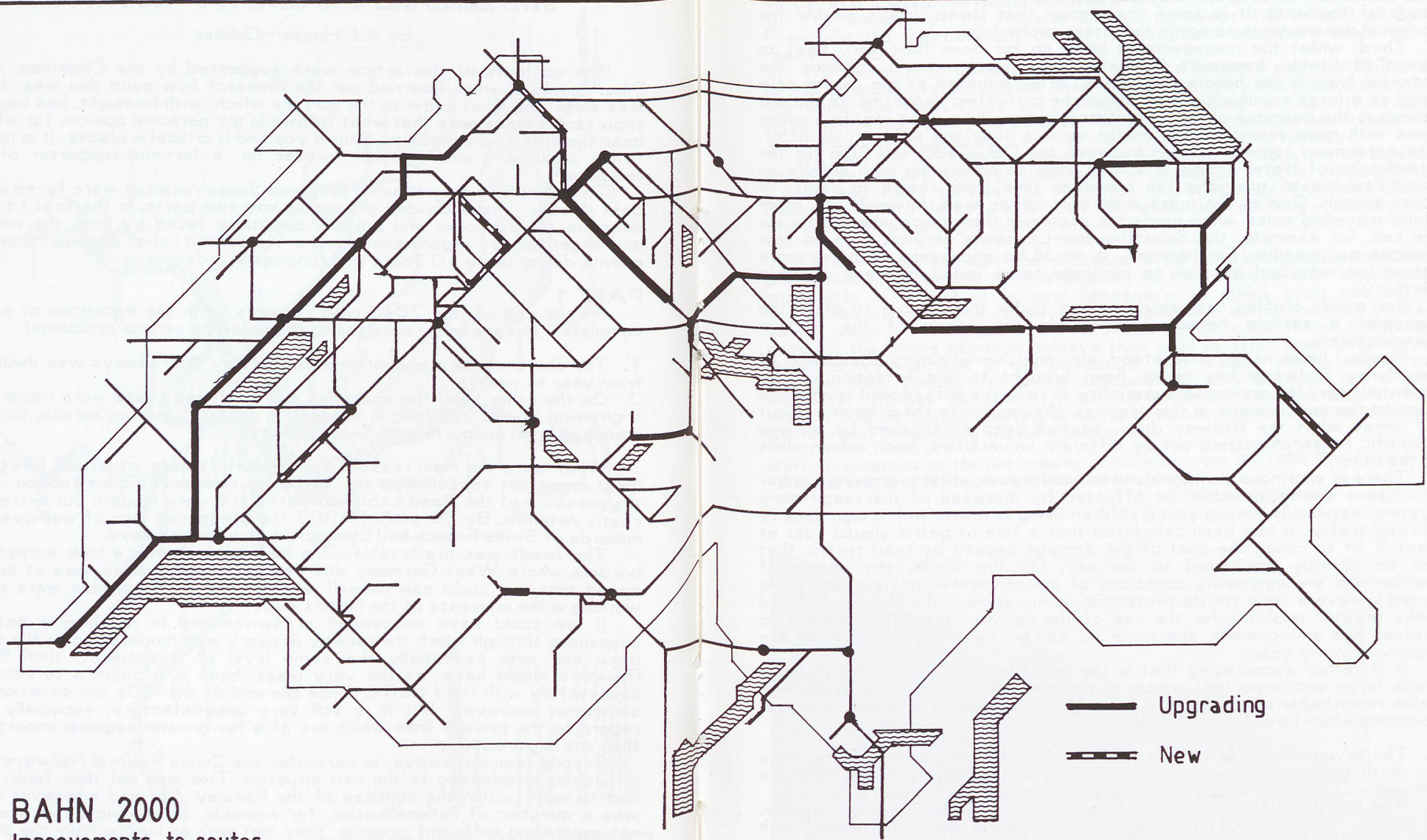
If we could have succeeded in Switzerland in reaching a national consensus through which the railway network was modernised at the same pace and with essentially the same level of investment, then Swiss Railways would have, at the very least, been in a position to compete successfully with road traffic. Since the end of the '70s the situation has somewhat improved, but it is still very unsatisfactory, especially with regard to the private lines which are of a far greater regional importance than one might assume.

Second, some railways, in particular the Swiss Federal Railways, had difficulties in adapting to the new situation. This was not their fault, they had to work within the confines of the Railway Act and whenever there was a question of rationalisation, for example, by closing down stations not generating sufficient revenue, they met with an outcry from the press, usually under the incorrect headline 'Less Performance of Higher Fares'.

Valuable time was also lost because major projects, such as 'Bahn 2000' and the tunnel proposals were, and for that matter still are being fought by opponents who are certainly not paid by the welfare office! Since major projects must be voted for by the People, where a group of opponents are successful in gathering the necessary signatures for a referendum against the proposed project, it is difficult for the Railway

BAHN 2000

Improvements to routes



Administration to prepare the necessary plans when it has to await the result of the vote. It is small consolation that these delays enable the technical departments to apply the latest technology.

Third, whilst the managements have so far done their very best to obtain profitable transport business, they were late in realising the potential lying in the hundreds of sites, often situated at the centre of a town or a large community. In addition the marketing departments did not believe in the business of very comfortable travelling, ie to create a super class with more room and far better service than any airline could offer. The agreement recently signed between the DB, OeBB and SBB for the introduction of Hotel Trains is a first step to competing with airlines on short haul travel, providing the travelling time from centre to centre is short enough. One of the most important points was, however, to offer inland travelling times which made the customer think twice whether to use the car, for example, the Schaffhausen-Lausanne service, with as few changes as possible. Furthermore, it would be necessary to offer more attractive individual as well as package tours including every possible festivity.

For goods traffic, new solutions had to be thought out to offer the customer a service better adapted to the needs of the various manufacturers.

Finally I have never understood why one overwhelming advantage of the Swiss Railways has never been brought to the attention of the potential user; the enormous superiority of railways with regard to damage done to the environment. In this respect, the car costs the economy about 17 times what the Railway does, as has been established by serious scientific research carried out by different universities, each independent of the other.

There is enormous damage done to our forests whilst a growing number of citizens are reported to be affected by diseases of the respiratory system, especially among young children living in towns with a high density of road traffic. It has been calculated that a litre of petrol should cost at least 3 Sf to cover the cost of the damage caused by road traffic that can be directly attributed to the car. On the whole, the people of Switzerland are extremely conscious of environmental matters and have voted in severe laws for its protection. In my opinion, the Railways should make greater publicity for the use of the railway instead of the car to protect the environment, the more so as, by now, the connections are improved every year.

It is rather encouraging that in the last decade Swiss railways have made large and important steps in the correct direction and in several fields remarkable improvements have been achieved. The most important decisions which have been made are:

1. The favourable vote for Bahn 2000 which will bring better connections for both passenger and goods traffic. This complex project must be viewed in connection with a modern traffic concept for the entire country.
2. The favourable vote for the Vereina Tunnel on the Rhaetian Railway, allowing a faster connection between the Engadine and Chur coupled with an easing of pressure on the Albula line.
3. The decision of the Federal Council to propose to the People the construction of two base tunnels instead of one, one through the Gotthard and the other on the BLS line.
4. The favourable vote for the introduction of a rapid transit system (S-Bahn) for Zurich and its conurbation, with special rolling stock. The system will have far reaching consequences for other conurbations, such

as Geneva-Lausanne, Berne and Basle.

5. The decision of the Federal Council to invest 1.5 milliard of Swiss Francs in the improvement of the 'Huckepack' transport which will be ready in 1992.

6. The decision of various Cantons and Parliaments and the Electorate not to abandon certain private lines as demanded by the Road Lobby with the same old trick. Once the railway has ceased to exist, it becomes immediately necessary to vote for higher credits to build new roads than would have been necessary for the modernisation of the railway!

7. By far the best improvement has been the introduction of new and innovative railway policies, especially for passenger traffic. Among others I want especially to cite the Rhaetian and Montreux Oberland Bernois Railways. Their success has been overwhelming, resulting in rapidly rising and lucrative passenger business.

On the whole one can see a change in the psychological outlook in the population which begins to lend support to the railways that was thought impossible in 1980. It is now necessary to make good use of this favourable climate. The railways must make true during the next years; a saying which is often used over here: 'The better is the foe of the already good'. If the Swiss railways achieve their goal to offer from year to year and improved service in the passenger and freight traffic and if they achieve their concept to make stations not only a place for a 'brief encounter' (to use the title of a wonderful British film) but also to make them a site of human meeting in all its possible forms, then the future of Switzerland's Railways will be a bright one.

Work in progress on the new station at Lucerne, June 26 1989. The first of the ferroconcrete ribs for the glazed facade are in place.

Photo C.J.Freezer

