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By Train to Switzerland

by R.Pinner

I am always surprised to read that Society members fly to Switzerland. Are they only interested in Swiss trains?

For over forty years I have made all my journeys to Switzerland by train and, with a few exceptions, have found them full of interest, both from a geographical as well as from the railway point of view. My favourite route has been for years via Harwich-Hook of Holland and along the Rhine valley to Basel. The slow change from the flat lowlands to the first hills (near Bonn), the journey through the Rhine gorge, along the Upper Rhine Valley with the Black Forest on one side and, on a clear day, the Vosges on the other; later through the Jura, across the Swiss Plateau and finally to the Alps; all this is fascinating and so much more interesting than, sandwiched in a metal tube, to rush from one concrete airport to another.

There is always plenty of railway interest along the way. Changing currencies (and engines) at Emmerich or Vento, German IC or EC trains and a great variety of engines, coaches and trains visible throughout the journey. Always something new, I remember some time in the 1950s, the sudden eerie silence when, somewhere in Southern Germany, we travelled along the first long-welded track (am I right to say that this was a German invention?). I was so surprised, having always understood that rails expand and contract, that I asked the guard who gave me a technical explanation; the music and melody of rail travel! But having got used to it, I suddenly sat up during my last trip; this was different again; complete silence, not one jolt! Gradually I realised we were travelling along part of the *Neubaustrecken* near Mannheim and though we were travelling at great speed, it seemed after a few minutes that we were crawling along. A totally new experience.

Now I become nostalgic. I suddenly wanted to travel once again along the way I did forty years ago. My thoughts went back.

In 1947 you could go abroad but could only take £5 with you. 1948, the first journey, I could take £20 worth of Swiss Francs for two weeks - you could pay the return fare in Sterling. The cheapest hotel was, all inclusive, SFr11.00 a day at SFr17 to the £. The cheapest route was Dover-Ostend-Brussels-Luxembourg-Thionville-Strasbourg-Basel. I seem to remember it was £7 return, 3rd class; wooden seats, 14 hours from Ostend behind a variety of steam engines. Fighting up the Ardennes, then a long halt at Arlon while the Belgian frontier officials examined documents. A few minutes later Luxembourgian officials, dressed magnificently in colourful uniforms with high peaked caps with feathers (as if straight from the operatic stage) examining passports again. Bettendorf, more Luxembourgian officials; then the French officials examining our documents again! A long halt at Thionville, changing engines and crews at about 2.30am under a huge glass roof, the hissing of steam and of people talking on the platform. We always wondered; why was half the population of Thionville on the station platform at this time of night? We used to get out to stretch our legs as there was plenty of time. Opposite, on the other side of the platform stood the train from Basel to Ostend. Blank windows, some people trying to sleep, others, like ourselves, coming out.

On again, trying to sleep on the hard seats, eight people in the compartment. Dawn, and the queue to get into one of the toilets to have a primitive wash. St.Louis, the last stop before Basel! An old dilapidated factory with a huge eagle on its roof by the station. This told us that in a few minutes we would be in Switzerland. Then across no-mans-land, a frontier stone at the side of the track and two long tunnels with choking smoke coming in to the by now open windows. A glimpse of the Zoo and then - Basel.

11.00 in the morning, dirty, for the dust from the coal used by the French came through closed windows and collected in little heaps on the floor. It got into your hair, your clothes; horrible! Tired, we stumbled out through the frontier. And then the Buffet, spotlessly clean, white

tablecloths, polite, friendly service, wonderful bread, butter – not rationed as at home – and jam; all for SFr2.00. A miracle! And later, clean electric trains: another world!

Later, I took school parties to the Alps every summer. We travelled the same way, by now the journey time had come down to ten hours. Collective passports were needed, with 12 copies, one each for entering and leaving Belgium, Luxembourg and France. I usually brought most of them back again! Two copies, on different paper were needed for the Swiss. On arrival at Basel we used to dump our luggage and go upstairs to the reserved toilets, beautiful, clean bathrooms, towels and soap, all for 20ct; WC 10ct extra; the boys had never seen anything quite like it. We felt better afterwards and breakfast tasted better too.

I had once, in 1958, travelled that way in daytime, in one of the first TEE trains, the Edelweiss, the joint Dutch/Swiss built RAM TEE diesel train, but it is only a dim memory now.

Preparing for the journey, I booked hotel rooms in Dover and Brussels and a seat – compulsory according to the timetable – in the EC "Iris". An awful, dirty, rattle box from London to Dover was followed the next day by a strange ferry crossing. Starting from the Eastern Docks, we spent the first hour sailing to the Western Docks to pick up rail passengers! From Ostend, it was a Belgian Intercity train, not the international kind to Cologne and I was very impressed by the smooth running, the general cleanliness and polite trolley service.

Next day, arriving early at Brussels Midi station, I found the "Iris" on the platform, but had an immediate disappointment. At the front were two of the new SBB coaches in orange international livery, then a Belgian restaurant car followed by two old SBB coaches. From paper labels in the windows I assumed that these coaches had been substituted for the regular ones the day before in Basel. My seat was, of course, in one of the older coaches. However, finding few seats had actually been reserved, I changed to one of the new air-conditioned coaches and travelled in splendid isolation, a complete compartment to myself, all the way to Basel.

What a difference from the 1950s! A beautiful fast, smooth run, only the old Restaurant car should have been replaced, loud, hot and swaying wildly, not air conditioned, it was unworthy of an EC train, though the crew were polite and efficient and the cooking good.

No fighting up the Ardennes, no frontier officials anywhere. At Thionville the glass roof had gone and the stop was just two minutes. At St.Louis no old factory and the no-mans-land was built over with ugly factories. Just six hours from Brussels to Basel, seven and a half from Ostend, no tiredness, neither dirty nor dishevelled, only annoyed at having to queue to get through the frontier control.

And yet, in the 1950s you really felt you had travelled, you were proud of the achievement. To be fair, the return journey was awful; after ten minutes in the train at Basel, before we had even started, we would be dirtier than we had been during two weeks in Switzerland. After ten hours on wooden seats to Ostend and a crowded ferry to Dover followed by a boat train that got to London in time for the rush hour, a boy in one of the school parties was right when, fighting our way into the Underground to get to Euston he said, "This is worse than climbing 5000 feet!"

