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A START WITH MITROPA

by M.South

Towards the end of the roaring Twenties an intense rivalry developed between the two principal purveyors of international luxury train travel in Europe for that now almost extinct species, the wealthy upper class Englishman abroad. Today, I doubt that many people compete for Britain's favours, a fact that is forcibly brought home to the Briton abroad as Japanese, Germans, Frenchmen and Americans are given precedence over the relatively impecunious holidaymaking Brit.

But back then, having virtually invented tourism and thereby put Switzerland on the map (usual disclaimers re. Messrs.Thomas Cook & Son), the upper class Englishman and his entourage were creatures to be pampered, courted, cosseted and - of course - parted from suitable quantities of their inheritance or capitalistic profits by suitably servile purveyors of luxury accommodation.

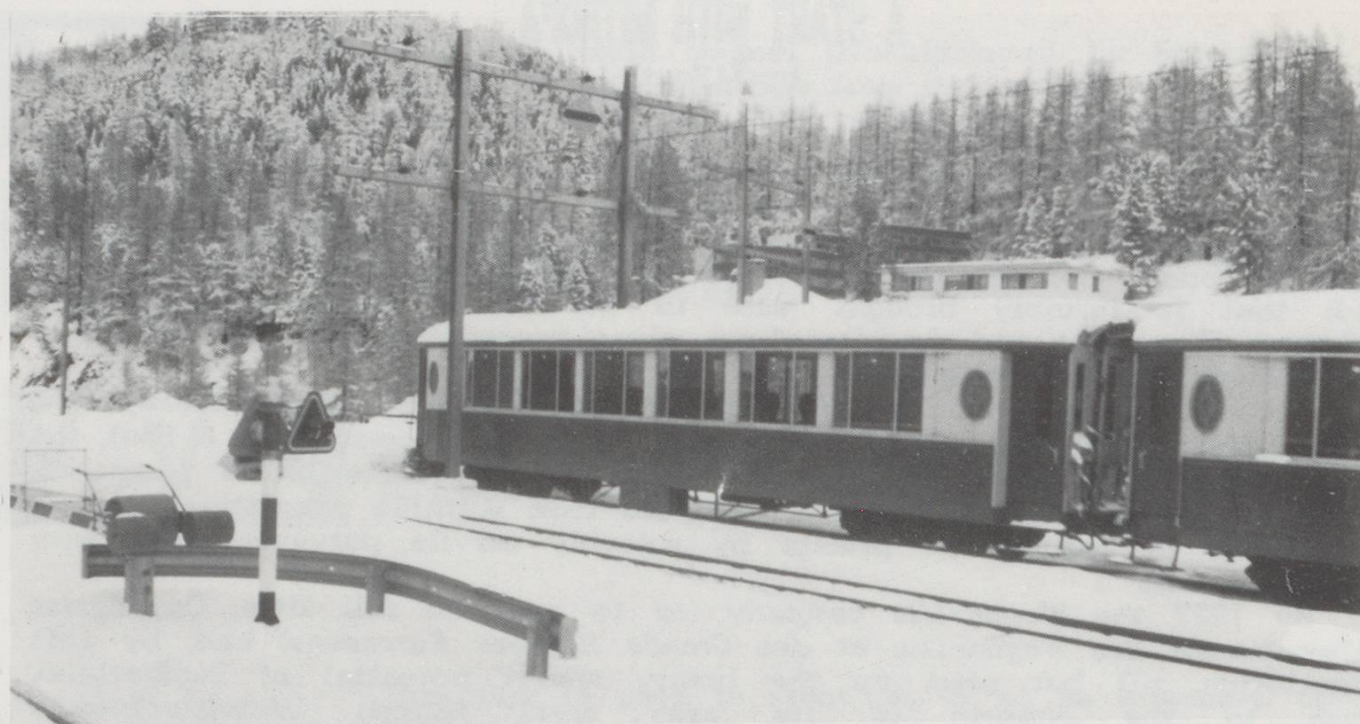
By 1927 the *Wagon-Lits* company (or to give its full title, *Compagnies Internationales des Wagon-Lits et des Grands Express Europeens*) had, by deft negotiation, all but sewn up the luxury travel potential of Switzerland, much to the chagrin of its arch rival *Mitropa* (*Mitteuropäische Schlafwagen-und-Speisewagen AG*). To some extent, this was what in modern parlance would be called a grudge match. *Mitropa* had been forcibly created in 1915 by the German Central Government's sequestration of all the *Wagon-Lits* assets within that country. Remember, Germany was at war with France at the time. Furthermore, *Wagon-Lits* had just hastily removed its headquarters from Brussels to Paris, whilst their financial base remained in Belgium, a neutral country largely occupied by the German Army in transit to take over France. By 1926, *Mitropa* was to all intents and purposes a subsidiary of the post-war German Reichsbahn. Though an accommodation had been reached between *Wagon-Lits* and *Mitropa*, there was no love lost between the two concerns.

With the standard gauge railways of Switzerland barred to *Mitropa*, they took the obvious way out by striking agreements with the then independent Bernina Railway and the Rhaetische Bahn (RhB) to operate two and three restaurant cars respectively over their systems.

The two Bernina cars B^{4u} Nos.161 and 162 were constructed by SWS in 1928 and later renumbered WR Nos.3813 and 3814 after the Bernina Bahn's absorption into the RhB system. They were strictly speaking Dining/Parlour cars, without any food preparation facilities. They worked between St.Moritz and Tirano in Italy, seating 36 people in a car body limited to 15.32m over couplers by the drastic curvature of the line below Alp Grum. To rectify the lack of proper catering facilities in these cars as built, the Bernina Railway made available a 1908 SIG-built 4-wheeled covered van K208, which was rebuilt in 1928 into the truly unique 4-wheeled Kitchen Car (*Kuchenvagen*) X^u No.31. Normal motive power for these cars was the equally unique Bernina Ge6/6 electric locomotive No.81.

Usually they ran as a pair, accompanied by other Bernina coaches and not always together with their Kitchen Car which seems to have been a particularly camera shy (or rarely used) vehicle. Even when X^u No.31 did run in service, it always seems to have been taken off trains at Campocologno and never ran over the Italian border down into Tirano, doubtless to avoid Customs complications regarding any liquor or tobacco stocks aboard.

In 1929/30 SWS built three slightly longer and heavier 36 seat restaurant cars for the Rhaetian main line, D^{4ru} Nos 10-12, later WR3810-3812. Unlike the Bernina cars, these included a kitchen/food preparation area within their confines. These Rhaetian cars WR 3810-12,



Rhaetian ex-MOB Pullman cars at St Moritz.

Photo Alan Pike

worked from Chur to St.Moritz on the *Engadine Express*, which connected with cars off the *Mitropa Rheingold* from (London Liverpool Street-Harwich) Hook of Holland to Lucerne, through the spectacular Rhine Gorge. The third spare car gravitated up and down the western arm of the RhB as far as Disentis, with its end-on link to the Furka Oberalp Railway, providing a meal service on the "real" *Glacier Express* (of which more later) in its daily transits between Zermatt and St.Moritz.

Wagon-Lits retaliated in the summer of 1931 by persuading the metre gauge Montreux-Oberland-Bernois Railway to run the world's only all-Pullman narrow gauge train, the *Golden Mountain Express* between Montreux and Zweisimmen via Chateau d'Oex and Gstaad. This train connected with standard gauge Pullmans on the BLS group line branch from Zweisimmen to Spiez, where they coupled to other Pullman cars on a through Paris-Interlaken service. Four brand-new and stunningly luxurious saloon cars AB^{4u} Nos 103-6 were specially built by SIG, supplemented by MOB-rebuilt saloons A⁴ No.101 (ex SIG built A⁴ No.83 of 1914) and AB^{4u} No.102 (ex AB⁴ No.85, ex SWS built AB⁴ No.75 of 1915).

Curiously, there were no Restaurant Cars built to operate with the train, though perhaps this was because there were already four Restaurant Cars running on the MOB, owned by the CSWR/SSG (*Compagnie Suisse des Wagons-Restaurants/Schweizerische Speisewagen Gesellschaft*), and it seems they had an exclusive concession that did not end until 1941. In fact, *Wagon-Lits* was a significant covert shareholder in CSWR, but went to substantial trouble to hide this fact from both the public, governments and their regulatory agencies and even their own employees! These CSWR cars were 30-seat DR⁴ Nos.11-13, built by Ringhoffer in 1906 and 36 seat DR⁴ No.17 by the same builder in 1911.

Thus *Mitropa* served the German-speaking (*Schweizer-Deutsche*) Swiss metre gauge with through links to Germany, whilst *Wagon-Lits* with their service into France did the same for the French-speaking (*Suisse Romande*) Swiss metre gauge.

Scheduled motive power for the heavy *Golden Mountain Pullman Express*, particularly bearing in mind the MOB's 7.3% (1 in 13.6) adhesion only worked stretches, should have been one of the two specially built articulated FZe6/6 electric locomotives Nos 2001-2002, but they were not ready until 1932. Sadly, the service lasted but one short season till the end of 1931, due to the worldwide effects of the Great Depression. The American traffic, for which the whole equipage was especially designed had all but evaporated.

After languishing in semi-storage for several years, all four specially built cars AB⁴ Nos.103-106, were sold in 1939 to the RhB, where they became all First Class Salonwagen A⁺ Nos.1141-1144. Today they are still in active use on the RhB, particularly on charter work, with wedding trains something of a specialty. They may also occasionally be seen on the Furka-Oberalp Railway on similar duties. By one of life's ironies, they are often made up into trains incorporating one of the ex-Mitropa Restaurant Cars (Speisewagen/Wagon-Restaurant) WR Nos.3810-3814 for the provision of kitchen facilities, which the ex-Wagons-Lits vehicles all lack.

One such regular working is the Saturdays and Sundays only *Unterengadin Express* between Chur and Scuol-Tarasp, where all four ex-Wagons-Lits are often found together. Another service is the winter season skier's express which connects with *Sea Containers* James Sherwood's luxury *Venice-Simplon-Orient Express* train at Chur, on its dog-leg journey from Calais via Paris and Austria to Venice, carefully avoiding its namesake Simplon tunnel. This vintage *Wagons-Lits* equipped train should not be confused with the similar *Nostalgie Istanbul Orient Express* train run by *Intraflug AG's* Albert Glatt between Paris-Salzburg-Vienna-Budapest-Bucharest and Istanbul ☐

To be continued

Key

Ringhoffer Ringhoffer of Smichow, near Prague
SIG Schweizer Industriegesellschaft of Neuhausen
am Rheinfall, Switzerland
SWS Schweizer Wagons und Aufzugfabrik AG
of Schlieren, Switzerland

SECRETARY'S NOTES

The Society is investigating the possibility of publishing a booklet which could be described as an enthusiast's guide to Switzerland. The intention is to include interesting/lesser known parts of both the Federal and private railways, and would include a brief description, special features, photographic opportunities, nearby recommended places to eat and sleep, railway oriented walks or walks which contain points of railway interest.

Round trips taking half a day or one day would be included. These could include rail, road, water and foot transport.

Model shops would also be included, giving the ranges stocked, permitted methods of payment and whether English is spoken.

All members are requested to assist in the compilation of this booklet by sending notes and suggestions to the Secretary at 27, Campbell Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 2SQ. It is quite possible that more than one booklet could be produced. It is intended to publish during 1992.

Due to an administrative faux pas, some members received the wring renewals form with their December 1990 *Swiss Express*. We apologise for this error and for the confusion caused.