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Travelling to Switzerland by Richard Pinner

The article, in a recent issue, about the Rheingold reminded me about my own journeys on it over many years, for it was, by far, my favourite way to travel to and from Switzerland. I had already seen it once in Switzerland, about 1935 (at the age of 13) but to travel on it was just a dream.

My first independent journey to Switzerland (I was a trainee teacher then) took place in 1948. You could travel abroad in 1947, but could only take £5 with you. Now you could, officially, export £25, with £5 in Sterling for the return journey; but for Switzerland you had to apply to the Swiss Bank Corporation with evidence of your costs of accommodation. I was allowed £20 for a fortnight; this had to cover the total cost except for the return ticket. This gave me Fr.340. My hotel in Zermatt charged Fr.11 per day, full board (65p at today's rates). I travelled the cheapest way, via Dover and Ostend. The 3rd class return fare was £7. We sat on wooden seats for 14 hours through the night, arriving in Basel at 11.00 the next morning. We were filthy (trains were steam hauled using some very dirty coal), tired but happy. Coming from a relatively poor, war damaged country, it was an eye-opener to see the spotless station, the restaurant with white, clean table cloths and waiters who went out of their way to serve the poor British (towards whom the Swiss had a slightly bad conscience). The return journey, starting from Basel late at night, was the same in reverse; on arrival in London we all felt like having a holiday!

The following year I joined a geographical study group; we travelled in great comfort, 2nd class, using the Calais-Delle-Bern service.

Soon after I started to organise school journeys to the Swiss Alps. Every August I took groups for mountain walking to high alpine resorts, mainly staying at Youth Hostels. The cheapest route was still via Dover - Ostend and, though we tried the Boulogne - Basel route one year, we preferred the Ostend one. The evening train used to have a buffet car as far as Luxembourg and it was a welcome relief to get a hot drink before the long haul through the night, or early in the morning on the return journey.

In 1953 the 'Rheingold' had started again, first as an 'F' train with all three classes; so I decided to try it. I crossed by the night boat to Hook of Holland, paying one shilling (5p) for a berth in a

four-berth cabin. The boats at that time (Arnhem, Amsterdam and Duke of York) were, at around 4000 tons, small compared with the 30,000 ton giants of today and had no air conditioning, but we thought they were wonderful, compared with the boats from Dover or Folkestone. During hot nights we left cabin doors open to get a little fresh air. The 'Rheingold' left at about 8.00 and was due in Basel about 7.00 p.m.; it was steam-hauled of course. The 3rd class seats (as a poor teacher I could not afford 2nd) were no longer wooden, but some artificial leather. The service was superb. The German staff made us feel that we were the most important persons on board; we felt totally relaxed and cossetted.

With my annual school parties I still used the Dover-Ostend route, but when travelling alone. I used the Rheingold, for it was the most comfortable and pleasant way to get to Switzerland. Leaving Birmingham in the afternoon, I would take the 'Hook Continental' to Harwich, having dinner in the Restaurant Car. There was a regular team of waiters on that service and we became good friends over a period of years, as I used the same Restaurant Car for breakfast on the way back. When B.R. equipped the Restaurant section of the train (there were two cars with seats and a kitchen car in between) with Pullman Cars, the Chief Steward proudly showed me round the new kitchen car. Then, next morning breakfast in the DSG Restaurant Car (at that time this was in the Hook section of the train), dinner somewhere along the Rhine and coffee and cakes along the Black Forest.

But I also tried out other ways, having the ambition to travel by every possible route. In 1958 I travelled by one of the first TEE trains, the 'Edelweiss' from Amsterdam. This was the train built jointly by the NS and SBB. It was a superb journey. I then travelled via Paris and from there by a train via Dijon-Pontarlier-Neuchâtel; interesting but not very remarkable. As I loved Sleeping Cars, I tried those from Ostend, from Calais to Brig via Paris and from Zürich to Utrecht. Then I decided to try the train 'DB'. This meant taking the Night Sleeper from Victoria to Brussels, getting out at Lille, walking along the platform and getting into a coach of the Dunkirk to Basel section. This gave me the chance to see in daylight the landscape

along the line I had so often travelled at night. The difficulty was to get to sleep in the Night Sleeper; the shunting and bumping at Dover and the noise made by fastening the cars with iron chains to the deck of the ferry guaranteed to keep you awake (did you know that the cars had to be placed into an exact spot on the ferry deck so that the holes at the bottom of the toilets were in line with holes in the ferry deck underneath?). When, in 1961, the new Cisalpin had been introduced from Paris (the 4-current Swiss TEE sets), I had to try that too. Using the Night Sleeper to Paris, I took a walk round Montmatre and then went to the Gare du Lyon to catch the 'Cisalpin' to Brig. Finally, I returned from Basel by the 'Arbalete' to Paris (then still the older French TEE Diesel set) and travelled out via Ostend taking the DB Saphir to Frankfurt (the futuristic looking German Diesel set built for TEE services).

But enjoyable as all these experiences were, I always returned to the 'Rheingold'; it was still the most pleasant way to travel.

In 1963 the new 'Rheingold' appeared. Because of its many stops and through coaches to different destinations, it could, at that time, not join the TEE fleet. But, in my opinion, it was by far the finest train in Europe. The riding quality of its new coaches was outstanding and to glide noiselessly along at high speed in the roof-dome observation car, was an unique experience. This was especially so in the evenings (on the return journey) when the lights in the coach were turned off. It meant travelling first class, of course, but, by then, I was rich enough to afford this extravagance once a year.

Two years later I tried yet another way. Crossing to Hook of Holland at night, I travelled to Utrecht and, from there, took a strange kind of train. It started from Amsterdam, travelled via Utrecht, Eindhoven and Maastricht to Liege, from where it climbed into the Ardennes and crossed the whole of Luxembourg from North to South. Starting as a 'D' train in Holland, it became almost a local train from Liege, stopping at many villages. People going shopping and pupils coming home from school used it. In Luxembourg the French took over and from Thionville onwards it became a 'Rapide'. We arrived in Basel about 21.30. It had an old Dutch Restaurant car: one third of it was a van, another a kitchen and the third a Restaurant. But not only did the Dutch crew serve marvellous meals, but, going into the car in the

afternoon for some coffee and cake, I found a real family atmosphere with the waiters sitting down and chatting with us. Because the return train left Basel shortly after 8.00, I could never use it on my return journeys, as I always came from some mountain resort. But I found the stretch from Liège to Luxembourg as beautiful as the Rhine Gorge and was grateful that the train could not rush through the area at great speed.

Then the Hook of Holland part of the 'Rheingold' was cut out. This gave us a new experience. Taking the 'Holland - Scandinavia Express' from the Hook to Utrecht, where we connected with the 'Rheingold' from Amsterdam, we went to the Mitropa Restaurant Car and had a Communist breakfast. It was primitive, but very cheap. On the return journey we, again, changed at Utrecht and had a Communist coffee and sandwich (if we were still hungry after dinner in the DSG Restaurant Car).

But eventually this, too, came to an unfortunate end. The 'Rheingold' had become a TEE and had been repainted and a special fleet of dedicated coaches (with gold lettering on the side) had been used on it. For a time it combined with the 'Rheinpfeil' (to München) to Mannheim; that train brought a Club Car, with small tables along the windows, a shop and musical performances of folk music and dancing by groups from Bavaria and the Rhineland. Refreshments were served and, over the loudspeakers, we had a running commentary about the castles and their legends while we travelled through the Rhine Gorge. But then the train was withdrawn and the EC 'Rembrandt' took over. If you travelled first class, there was little difference; timings were the same; only the two-storied Restaurant Car and the Roof-Dome Observation car had gone, but the train also had second class. To get to it meant taking a local train to Rotterdam and a Dutch Intercity to Utrecht. Coming back that way I found that by taking the 'Rembrandt' to Utrecht, an Intercity to Rotterdam and a local to the Hook, I got there before the boat trains and the other international trains and could get through the frontier controls and on to the boat without standing in long queues.

Looking at the present timetables, I find that this way of travelling is now almost impossible; since Stena have taken over the boats, they are trying to make the sea journey a mini cruise, wanting us to enjoy the journey by spending

money in their restaurants, disco, supermarket, cinema or casino. They have lengthened the journey and have made good connections into or out of long-distance trains very difficult. I would still have tried to travel that way (I had already, because of increasing age, started to break up the journey by spending nights at places like Rotterdam, Cologne, Koblenz, Boppard, Mainz or Karlsruhe), but when the registration of luggage from and to Harwich had become impossible, I had to change to flying; carrying a heavy suitcase was now beyond me.

Two events from my journeys by the 'Rheingold' still stand out in my memory.

It was on the return journey from Basel. I had taken two boys from my school to the Alps and gave them the treat of travelling home by the 'Rheingold'. Encumbered with two cameras and binoculars, one boy carried my Rolleiflex, with orders not to leave it out of his sight. We had gone to the Restaurant Car for some supper, leaving it at Duisburg, from where it continued on the 'Rheinpfail' to Dortmund. Back in our compartment and on the way to the Dutch border, we realized that the Rollei had been left in the Restaurant Car. The 'Zugfuhrer' (Guard) advised me to see the platform inspector at Emmerich, the next stop; in fact he took us to his office on arrival. I had hardly started to explain what had happened, when he stopped me, wishing to know how I, as an Englishman, spoke such good German (I had come to England in 1936, at the age of 13, as a Jewish refugee from the Nazis and had taught German for many years). I hurriedly explained, but he was not satisfied; he wanted to know more. By now it was time for the train to depart; engines had been changed and the Dutch Conductor awaited the signal to leave. I could see all that and was becoming very nervous; here stood one of Europe's premier TEE trains and did not leave because the station official wanted to know details about my family. Eventually he was satisfied and conducted us back to our coach. The train crew and customs officers stood by the doors and obviously though we were very VIPs. Neither our passports nor tickets were examined afterwards. (My camera was found in Dortmund and returned to me in England).

Some years later I, again, returned from an alpine holiday, this time with a friend. We had just crossed the Dutch border when we stopped. We stopped for a long time. Then rumours spread

along the train that a flock of birds had brought down the wires. It was dark by now and I was starting to wonder whether we would get to the Hook of Holland in time for our ferry. When we started again, we travelled very slowly along a branch line, where trains like the 'Rheingold' were certainly never seen. At one place we had to wait until a boy, employed by the NS, had shut, by hand, some gates across the road to allow us to pass. If it had been daylight, it would have been the event of the year: "the 'Rheingold' came past here." Then, suddenly, we arrived at Utrecht, where chaos reigned. The top brass had obviously gone to bed by now (it was about 23.00) and the people on the spot did not know what to do. At the front end of the train we were told to get out (as the train would be taken to Amsterdam); then, towards the rear of the platform we were told to get in again - we would be taken to Rotterdam. There were further rumours: a Dutch business man in our compartment had heard that we would be put up in an hotel somewhere. However, we did not only travel to Rotterdam, but set out for the Hook. By this time we were about ten passengers, all bound for the ferry. We rolled into the station at 1.00 - over two hours late, but, to our astonishment, the ferry was waiting. Never had I passed so quickly through the frontier controls; within five minutes we were on board. The passengers had not been told why the boat had not left; from the side of the deck they saw us coming aboard and, once again, the few of us were assumed to be VIPs.

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