

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: 4 (1994-1996)
Heft: 12

Artikel: MS Berner Oberland
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855116>

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MS Berner Oberland by Leslie & Naomi Falkson. Photos by Authors

When we filed our second report on the Berner Oberland at the end of last year (Swiss Express - March - Ed) we gave an undertaking to cover the naming ceremony and maiden voyage scheduled for the first day of Spring, i.e. 21st March 1996. Accordingly, the following sequel completes our trilogy on the latest vessel to join the Thunersee fleet.

The day did not dawn bright and sunny to greet either us or the equinox; on the contrary, it was chilly and overcast with leaden skies. Nevertheless, our eager anticipation of the day's events remained intact as we gently made our way through the seventy seven bends of the north lakeside corniche-style road between Merligen and Thun, conveyed in great comfort by one of the Mercedes-Benz articulated buses operated by STI. Interestingly this company still traditionally regards its bus system as a light railway - with appropriate practices - despite replacing their trams in 1958 with trolleybuses. These, in turn, have given way to a mixed

collection of rigid body Saurers and newer M-B & MAN artics.

On arrival at Thun quayside we laid eyes on the elegant new flag-ship for the first time since last November; she was approximately 75% completed then and little more than a shell. Not surprisingly, a magical transformation had taken place in the interim - one that had been impossible to envisage accurately. Yes, we had seen her undergoing trials in the late evening during the preceding week but as these exercises had taken place in some secrecy, under cover of darkness, it had not been possible then - however hard we peered into the gloom - to properly gauge the sharply clean-cut lines that we were now witnessing in close-up.

Multi-coloured bunting rose from the foremast over the wheelhouse, where it divided into two lines arranged in a V - formation streaming back to the stern. The white superstructure - normally relieved only by a narrow red outline to the bulwarks - was enhanced by the huge exotic



Opposite page: MS Berner Oberland setting off on her maiden voyage.

Above: The dockside at Thun.

bouquet of flowers and fronds that overhung the bows.

The TV camera crews were in position, together with other media personnel. Members of a male voice choir, dressed in white tunics and blue jeans (see picture), were assembling and smartly turned out bandsmen in gold-braided uniforms (picture) were checking their gleaming trumpets, cornets and tubas for the merest speck of dust while rapidly pressing the valves to ensure an instant response, as musicians are inclined to do. Blue blazered BLS officials busied themselves at the foot of the immaculate gangway, inspecting invitations proffered by the invited guests before ushering them aboard. Overall there was a certain air of expectation, extending to the gathering crowd of onlookers in the station car park opposite.

The vessel's name on the landward side of the prow had been neatly shrouded, pending the impact of the champagne bottle shortly to be broken at the crucial moment, such moment to

precisely signal the swift removal of the obscuring material to reveal all.

A few minutes before Bernese politician Dori Schaer-Born was due to become the new ship's appointed Godmother (by aiming and swinging the said bottle!) we made our way round to the MS Bubenbergr, elevated to that day's role of press tender. Once out on to Bubenbergr's sundeck we were able to fully appreciate what BLS had received in return for their outlay of nine million francs (£5m). A modern streamlined vessel with the forward peaks of the three upper decks canted back at approximately 45°, in the styling trend now widely adopted on luxury sea-going yachts and cruisers. Another feature shared with those craft is the extensive use of structural glass, deeply tinted to minimise the effects of hot summer sunshine, a scenario difficult to imagine on such a cold day!

The appointed moment duly arrived and, as the special bottle shattered on cue, a huge cheer went up. A sequence of three prints appearing in



Above: A band plays to greet guests invited for the maiden voyage at Thun.

the next day's Thuner Tagblatt deftly captures the bottle in mid flight and on impact!

Dori and the other guests then reboarded the ship to sample Berner Oberland's maiden voyage to Interlaken. We trailed in her wake as far as Schadau then our skipper took up station alongside the Berner Oberland to allow photographers the best views. Both ships docked simultaneously at Spiez - an unique happening in our experience - at ninety degrees to each other.

The brief call was a logistical one, allowing the TV crew to transfer from the star attraction to our ship. There were few onlookers at the L-shaped landing stage and those taking lunch at the quayside restaurant barely allowed an upward glance as we made fast. For them the food is surely king and due homage must be thus accorded.

With the camera safely secured on the apron beyond the hand rail we resumed our passage to Interlaken, admiring the Berner Oberland from

every angle. We spoke with the charming presenter/producer who told us that the item would be screened that evening on the main news programme. She laughingly added 'Don't blink - you may miss it.'

We proceeded in line astern up the canal to Interlaken West to be greeted by the mayor and other civic dignitaries. By the exit ramp from the landing stage a framework had been erected bearing wooden letters about a metre high to read 'Berner Oberland'. Having been doused in a suitable fuel earlier, this set piece was ignited (see picture) as the two ships were secured. During this operation the starboard strake of the Berner Oberland was grazed and, to our surprise, it was still displaying the damage on 10th April.

As the flames subsided a little and the now disembarked band prepared to play, a team of parachutists leapt from a helicopter at low altitude and began their spectacular descent. Some with coloured smoke pluming from



Above: The dockside at Interlaken West, a pyrotechnic display proclaiming the arrival of MS Bener Oberland.

canisters strapped to their boots and with others grasping fluttering flags they landed on the steep grass embankment (see pictures) less than ten metres from the ships, accompanied by huge applause from the passengers and others.

After this display of skill, and while they retrieved and began to fold their silk 'chutes, the mayor began his speech. It would be discourteous to say that he spoke for a long time. Suffice it to say that the parachutists had long since disappeared by the time he had finished and the wooden sign had transmogrified into charcoal.

With the Interlaken formalities at an end the band boarded Bubenberg to delight us with their stirring music on the return trip. The Berner Oberland cast off first and we followed her down to the lake. As we reached open water it became bitterly cold but no one cared! Everyone stood at the stern, gazing down on to the heads of the musicians below and enjoying the marches and other rousing pieces. To be sure, nobody sleeps

when a Brass Band plays at close quarters!

The rest of the excursion passed uneventfully. Some ate, some drank, some did both; as Barry Norman might enquire, 'And why not?'

It was a 'good day out' and great fun to be taking part in a little bit of Swiss marine history.

As you ask - yes, we did see the Berner Oberland on television that evening. The spot took up all of fifteen seconds of screen time. Not bad, eh?

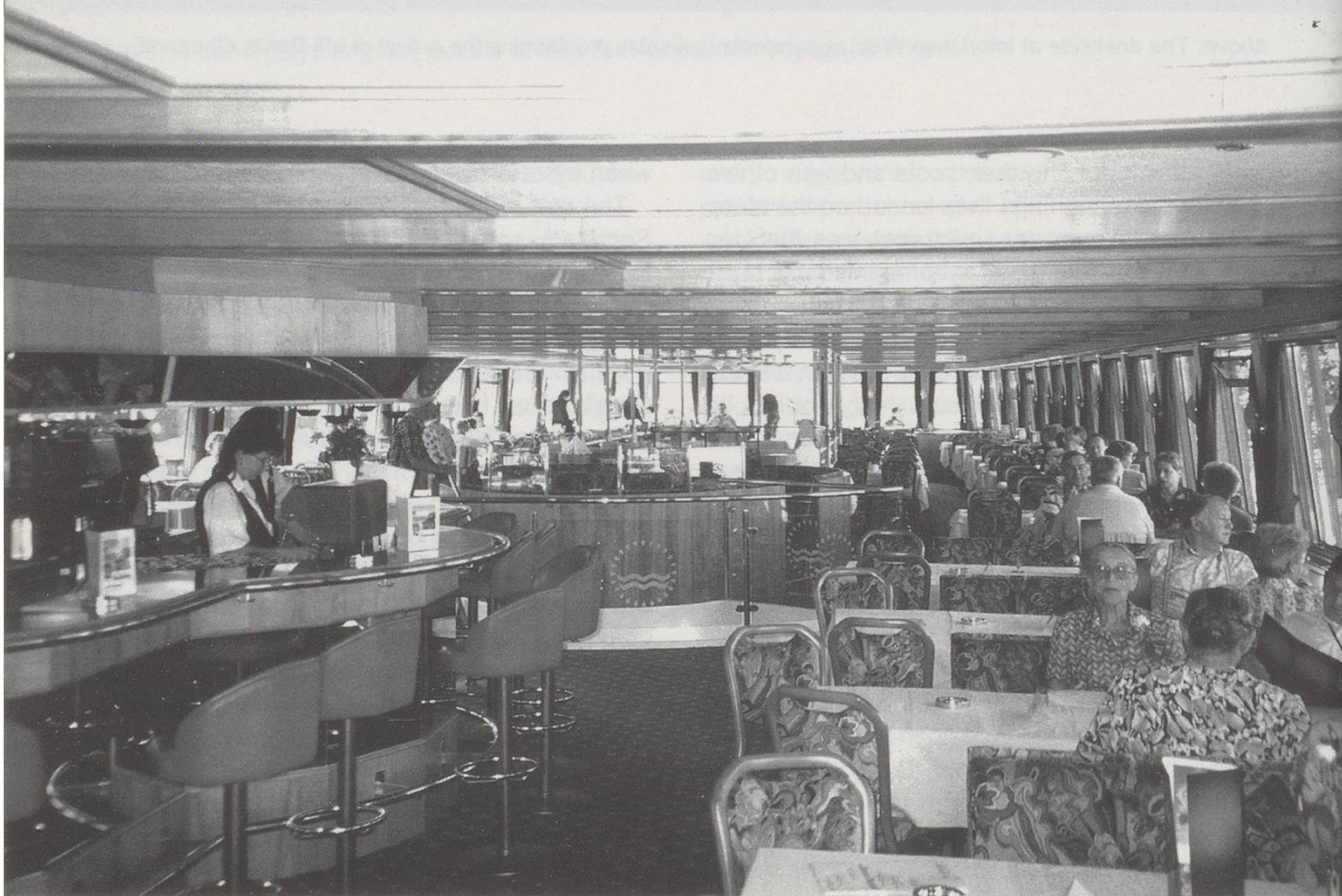
FOOTNOTE: On our arrival back in London we found in the post a pair of First Class tickets for the Berner Oberland with an apology from the BLS that they had not been able to accommodate us on the maiden voyage. We shall look forward to using them in due course.

Leslie & Naomi Falkson

30th April 1996



Above: The parachutists landing on the dock at Interlaken. Below: One of the bar/restaurant areas.





Above & Below: Views inside the boat showing the restaurants and boarding areas.

