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To CH but not by SBB by Denis Stevens

On reading Richard Pinner's fascinating article 'Travelling to Switzerland' (Swiss Express, September pp.13-15) I was inspired to look backwards and trace my own varied approaches to the country. He was one year ahead, for my first visit did not take place until early 1949 when my violin teacher, Jack Kessler, offered to try me on the ski slopes of Adelboden. He knew Switzerland well, having been a member of the Festival Orchestra at Lucerne when Toscanini came to conduct the opening concerts in 1938. Later on Jack led the Winterthur Orchestra, and after war service returned to England to join the Philharmonia.

We left Calais in the afternoon on the 'express' arriving at Basel in the small hours. Engines were quietly changed and we were soon off to Spiez and Frutigen, names that then meant almost nothing to me. After attempting to ski for ten days (I draw seven veils) it was time to go home, which would normally have been done in the reverse direction - not particularly interesting. But I had been invited to spend a day with Dr. Percy Scholes, a famous writer on music who lived above Territet near Montreux, the house-cum-library enjoying a magnificent view over Lac Léman. I therefore planned to return by a different route.

For me, the most striking feature of Adelboden was the mountains. Although I had seen the twin peaks of Kanchenjunga from Darjeeling while in India with the RAF, I had never previously witnessed the more approachable glory of the Swiss peaks. The second feature was the cleanliness and beauty of Adelboden and its postal bus link with the Lötschberg Railway at Frutigen. My journey through Kandersteg, Goppenstein and down the escarpment to Brig was unforgettable, followed by the valley journey to Chillon where the good doctor met me. Just past Hottentot I think I saw an Ae4/4 coupled to an automotrice De 4/5 which must have been borrowed from another railway company. The line to Brig was of course single-track in those days, but the skilled engineering and layout of the line were a joy to behold and a pleasure to experience. It was much later when I took the Rheingold, a comfortable train sporting a secretary ready to take dictation in whatever language you might

choose. I chose to look out of the large picture windows. But I did try the Calais-Basel route once more when my family (wife and three children) joined me on this 'express' train taking eleven hours to accomplish its 40 mph journey with minimal restaurant facilities. No longer for us the American trains where a charming lady would beguile the children with crayons and books of pictures. The young ones, becoming rapidly tired, retired to the luggage racks where they were rocked into oblivion - until the 2 am jolt announced our arrival in Basel. There we collapsed into a hotel and began our visit proper on the following day.

That ushered in a motor-car trip around Switzerland, where we could hardly avoid seeing railways at every turn, and on reaching Kandersteg we entrained for Goppenstein. Movies (away, not home) still reveal the enchantments of rail-auto transport in 1961, when you would pay 25 francs to sit in your car while it was hauled through the tunnel by an automotrice ABFe 4/8.

The end of the trip saw pressure on finances, for even the most careful planning could hardly stretch the currency allowance further, but I carried a cheque-book from my New York bank where I had put aside a few dollars saved from a teaching stint. As the moment of crisis approached I asked at a local Swiss establishment for some francs in exchange for a dollar cheque.

Fully expecting to be asked for identification and a bank statement, I was bowled over by the reply: 'How much would you like, sir?' I settled nonchalantly for a hundred dollars' worth, which in those days was about 435 Swiss francs. With this promptly given aid we were able to pay hotel bills and finish our tour without suffering the confiscation of suitcases. That is not the first time I have had cause to thank the Swiss for courtesy and co-operation.

On a later occasion when we were living near Geneva, my parents came to stay and I devised a simple but picturesque loop providing some splendid views with the minimum of changing. We set off on the Geneva-Berne run, planning to take a Schnellzug from Berne to Brig where we would go back to Geneva via Sion. We had hardly

left Geneva when the ticket-inspector pointed out that since we were a family he would stop the train and switch our tickets for a special pass which would save money. Sure enough he did so, and with barely two minutes' delay he politely arranged everything.

Subsequent trips took us often to Lucerne, Engelberg and Interlaken, where the inevitable Jungfrauoch excursion beckoned. All went well until my younger son accidentally left my binoculars in the men's room at Kleine Scheidegg on the way back, not discovering the loss until we returned to Engelberg. From there I telephoned the station-master at Kleine Scheidegg, and after checking for identification he said 'They will be on your breakfast table tomorrow morning - cost to you 2 francs.'

Becoming increasingly forgetful, I have left two raincoats on BritRail over the past two years, and have had a word-processor stolen. Recovery is futile, since thieves pounce on them with a 'finding's keeping' mentality with the result that I am out of pocket by several hundred pounds. State of the country? Your guess! Last year I left another raincoat on the 'Maria Theresia' - an early evening Panoramic train from Zürich to Sargans - and on reaching Bad Ragaz I reported the loss. You can guess what happened: it was on my breakfast table next morning.

Reliability (and by implication honesty) are stressed by Diana Niall in her recent and engaging book Tracking Across Switzerland: The transport firms all co-operate together, making travel by public conveyance almost a pleasure. At the bus-stops and on the railway platforms there are always unvandalised timetables which can be read clearly and relied on. There are usually benches to sit on while you wait, and not amidst rubbish strewn around by previous travellers. The punctuality is amazing... Clarity of signs is all important. On many stations today timetables fly on tv screens high up in the air, and I need a telescope to read the menu. Perhaps you know that on Swiss stations the ticket office will supply on request a yellow 'Abfahrt' or 'Ankunft' leaflet which tells you in clear type the departure and arrival times of all trains listed in hourly sequence.

If I lived in Switzerland I would queue every year for the new timetables. Careful study reveals all kinds of mouth-watering specialties, from steam on many lines to moonlight trips on the Lake of

Brienzi. I was also pleased to see Panorama trains listed in a special section, for these are a constant delight, especially on the long runs from Zürich to Chiasso. The Interlaken-Lucerne journey is now far more fascinating than it used to be. I look forward to new approaches like the TR 460s between Italy and Switzerland, I remember being stuck solidly in Milan one day when a strike had developed as I was travelling from Venice, but I didn't know about it because the newspapers were all on strike too, and news was in short supply. On reaching Milan (I had a reservation on the TEE to Lugano) I found that it too had been affected, even though it ranked as an international train.

Wondering what to do I tried all the obvious ploys: hotel (everything booked up to the attic), air travel (not a seat to be seen), hire-car firms (nothing left, not even a motor-bike). Then recalling some days spent the previous year in Bissone on the south side of the Lake of Lugano, I remembered seeing a daily gamblers' bus from Milan. On making enquiries I discovered that this was the one piece of transport still functioning. I hurried to the office, bought some tickets, and in an hour we were away, out of strike-bound Milan and rolling towards strike-free Switzerland.

This method is to be recommended only in a real emergency. There are many other ways of entering Switzerland, and of these I would one day like to try the Berlin-Interlaken ICE, which I have sampled so far only from Basel to Berne. It was excellent, and is of course available to holders of the Swiss Pass and other official travel tickets. The great local treasure is of course the Eurostar. From Waterloo one can arrive in Lausanne about eight hours after leaving London, and I hope soon to try the Champs-Élysée from Paris to Berne. The interesting article on Dijon by Geoffrey Dunster and George Hoekstra hints that when Lille-Europe really get up steam (!) there will be even more ways of reaching Switzerland. I recently discovered that it's possible to get to Bad Ragaz in eleven hours and three changes. Compared with former days there are now tremendous possibilities. As a musician as well as a train man, I enjoy the named trains such as the Monteverdi and Pau Casals and when I can't manage to escape there is always the excellent and growing series of MITV video-cassettes. May there be many more!