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Riding an Re6/6 by Ron Smith

1985 was one of the highlights of my life. I was studying Intermodal freight transport on the Continent. For part of this study I visited Basle depot and then the Hupac depot at Busto Arsizio, which is just inside Italy. I based myself in Luzern and the SBB had wonderfully arranged for me to travel in the cab of a loco between Luzern and Bellinzona.

On the appointed time and day, my wife, myself and two boys were waiting at the buffer stops in Luzern hauptbahnhof I was unsure just where I had to meet the SBB man, and thought that hanging around at the end of the platform would be best. Then the train rolled in, it was a Euro-city from Germany to Italy, very long, mostly orange coaches, and the green Re4/4 cautiously eased up to the buffers, and stopped to uncouple. I decided that perhaps the other end of the train would be the best place to meet my contact, and so we scurried up the platform, weaving in and out the busy throng of passengers.

At the front, with typical Swiss slick precision and speed, a green Re6/6 11681 "Immensee" was already coupled up. A man in a suit was standing by the front of the loco, and we quickly introduced ourselves and he led the way round the nose to the off 'de, where the cabs only door was. I waved goodbye to my family - my wife was looking apprehensive, the boys cheerfully overawed by it all. We climbed up into the cab and met Herr Schmidt (part of the Swiss clan of Smiths!) our driver. He was preoccupied with his preparations for departure. The SBB man, Herr Stucki, opened the door into the central machinery compartment and withdrew a wooden bench, which he and I would sit on during the journey.

In no time at all we were off, imperceptibly creeping forward and then gently accelerating through the pointwork at the station throat, and then curving into the tunnels.

We continued accelerating gradually, and bursting out of the final tunnel we took the sharp

curve to the right over the green river Reuss, and came off the bridge and into another short tunnel, still leaning into the curve with its cant deficiency. Just as we were rolling into the daylight we disturbed two pigeons who flapped away from us in panic. Suddenly one of the pigeons did a zig-zag, then turned and flew smack into the top of my windscreen. There was a disproportionately loud bang and a shower of feathers. Herrs Schmidt and Stucki exchanged rapid worried words. They were concerned in case the pigeon hit the pantograph. Herr Schmidt checked his gauges, and after a while they both relaxed, but it had been such a bang, more than you would think that a pigeon could cause.

We rolled on uneventfully through the magnificent scenery of lakes and mountains to Arth Goldau. Here we carefully cruised to a halt, with another train from Zurich pulling into the adjacent platform. This is a regular interval feature of Arth Goldau. Passengers cross from the Zurich train to ours, and vice versa. The other train had stops en route, but we were non stop to Bellinzona. After a protracted stop, we were away again, quickly getting up to line speed and sedately powering through the endless curves and imperiously sweeping through stations.

We had passed the end of the lake at Fluelen, and the mountains were closing in. It did not seem possible to get a train up there.

We were running along a rare straight stretch with Herr Schmidt proudly telling me about his 10,000 horses at his command and how the Re6/6's are the most powerful locos in the world, when ahead of us I could see a local train stopped in the station in front of us, on our track! I was horrified, from the other end of the station the line seemed to go uphill at a fearful angle. We would surely be stopped while the local got away and we would then have to limp along behind it for ever. Not so. Herr Stucki explained that the Gotthard route is so busy that every opportunity has to be taken to use its capacity to the full. We would just

overtake the other train, and we did, crossing over, running past, and crossing back to our track at about 20 mph.

I commiserated with Herr Schmidt, we did not stand a chance with the gradient against us, what bad luck. No problem, was the reply, we have 52 axles, 540 tonnes, he smiled, he pushed the controller all the way over and sat back. The old girl started making a bit more noise in the equipment department, and there was a slight constant shuddering and a small corkscrew movement in the cab, and we accelerated rapidly away up the ramp. What an amazing demonstration of power! Herr Schmidt was chuckling at my astonishment. He was proud of his loco.

We were now approaching Wassen, and I took the classic photos of the church from below, as we approached, again from alongside as we passed back the other way, and then from above on the other side of the valley. The sun was shining and glinting off the church's dome. The ride of the loco was superb as we curved in and out of the loops within the mountain sides, crossed bridges, and all at a constant speed.

We had an unexpected stop at Goschenen, and I took the opportunity to alight and take a photograph of our train, but was beckoned back quickly, climbed into the cab, and we set off into the Gotthard tunnel. Herr Stucki explained that it is split into four sections in order to gain better utilisation of the precious track capacity. Almost as if arranged, we crossed to the other track to overtake an engineers train, and then crossed back to our side just as another train, going North, passed us. Very impressive operating.

When we emerged, Herr Schmidt shouted something, and Herr Stucki translated it. I had to open the window and point my camera upwards and backwards, and I had just four seconds to take a picture, immediately after we emerged from the next short tunnel. I did as I was told, and it was not until I returned home to Scotland and developed the film that I saw what I had been photographing. It was a hillside with loops of railway and road bridges piled one on top of

another as the spiral loops came out into daylight. It was incredible, and as I thanked Herr Schmidt for the tip, he held out his lapel and asked what I thought of his badge. Stupidly I couldn't think what it was that he was trying to tell me, it was an oblong metal badge, with a light blue background, with the word "DRIVER" on it. Painfully slowly, the penny dropped - it was in English! Heff Stucki translated that it was given to Herr Schmidt by an ex LNER driver, who had received a "LOKFUHRER" badge in exchange. Herr Schmidt always proudly wore his LNER badge.

We were now running smoothly along the broadening valley with its obvious Mediterranean influences in the architecture, plants, and names of the stations. The sun was brighter and hotter now, and we seemed to be heading straight into a mountainside. I couldn't see where the track went. We continued relentlessly towards the mountain until we curved sharply to the right and through Biasca, with its waterfall dropping vertically behind the goods yard.

All too soon we were slowing for Bellinzona. I really did not want to get off, I could have stayed on the footplate all day, but there was no choice. As we slowed, we could see Herr Schtnidt's relief was waiting at the platform end. As soon as we stopped Herr Schmidt wiped the exterior handrails for us, and stowed the wooden bench away in the equipment compartment. We descended and he handed over to his colleague who was going to drive the final part of the journey in Switzerland to Chiasso, where he would hand over to an Italian crew and loco.

I said a very grateful goodbye to Herr Schmidt, and crossed the tracks to the other platform with Herr Stucki to meet the representative of Hupac who was waiting too take me on to Busto Arsizio. We had barely reached the platform when the train was off again with customary Swiss punctuality and efficiency. It had been a marvellous experience, which I will always remember - and to think that Herr Schmidt actually gets PAID to do this every day!.