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The sight of five white-funnelled paddle steamers negotiating a variety of movements along the length of the Vierwaldstättersee and Untersee was unparalleled. I was lucky enough to be able to visit Luzern in April 1997 when SGV (Schiffahrtsgesellschaft des Vierwaldstättersee) advertised one of their paddle steamer parades, which are held every four years or so.

On this occasion they were preparing for the temporary withdrawal of DS Schiller, which many people believe to be the best-proportioned of the Lake Luzern steamers. She was due for major overhaul at the SGV yards which, with heavy financial support from the Friends of the Lake Luzern Steamers, has been completed at a cost of some six million Swiss francs.

As Swiss Express went to press, Schiller was expected to be launched from the indoor dry-dock on 14th February and to jointly celebrate Y2K and her return to the fleet, Saturday 15 April 2000 will see another parade on Lake Luzern by the largest fleet of paddle steamers (world-wide) on an inland lake.

On the last occasion I was on board the MS Weggis, chosen as the photoship due to its speed and manoeuvrability, and we weighed anchor at 10.30 to the accompaniment of a Dixieland jazz band (from Zürich!), ready to stand off Luzern to view the paddle ships set out and take up position in line ahead away from the city. As they left the Luzernersee and the lake widened, they changed formation to 1, 2, 2, led by Stadt Luzern, the fleets flagship, and then five abreast in regatta formation.

Residents and visitors lined the shores as we passed the many towns and villages along the lake; in one place a party of Swiss flag wavers stood precariously on a barge to salute

us, at Beckenried they let off fireworks and a huge number of colourful balloons, while off Treib DS Schiller came face to face with a miniature steam paddle steamer - little and large!

A helicopter buzzed overhead, its photographer ready to take pictures of the formations and of the highlight of the day - when, off Gersau, all five steamers reversed into position at five points around a circle and then headed towards a marker boat, which sped away at the last minute, leaving the big ships to form a perfect star.

Two of the vessels, Schiller and Gallia, terminated at Brunnen, where they took part in a harbour festival. At Fluelen, which has only three landing stages, the photoship had to double park alongside a paddler! Here, too, the town was en fête, with a small exhibition at the station. After a break of 45 minutes, we set off for the return journey, all five ships gathering off Brunnen and carrying out further manoeuvres all the way to Luzern.

Most of the tickets for this years parade are allocated to people who have supported the restoration of the Schiller and the only steamship taking members of the general public is Stadt Luzern and even on this priority will be given to members of the Friends of Lake Luzern Steamships. Brunnen will be the centre for official celebrations on 15th April, between 15.00 and 15.50.

Anticipating that many people will wish to ride on the DS Schiller, SGV has scheduled her to operate daily between 16th and 24th April, visiting a variety of different piers Kussnacht, Fluelen, Gersau and Stansstad, as well as making evening round trips from Luzern on 17th and 20th April.

If you are visiting the area later in the year, in 2000 SGV plan to use paddle steamers on

the Fluelen departures at 09.15, 11.15 (Suns), 11.20 (May to Oct) and 13.15, as well as the 15.20 to Vitznau. In July and August the 10.15 and 14.00 departures to Alpnachstad are also scheduled to be paddle steamers. In addition to the normal daytime services, which include an express and a semi-fast working (lake timetables get more like railways all the time!), several evening cruises will be on offer with a variety of menus, dancing and other entertainment. On one of them people celebrating their birthday go free!

Apart from appreciating the convenience and frequency of lake steamers all over Switzerland, for me they bring back happy childhood memories. Our house overlooked

the River Avon in Bristol, from whose windows in 1945 I watched the fleet of Campbells paddle steamers limp home from war service and, surprisingly quickly, saw most of them return to pleasure travel - sporting their traditional white funnels. We frequently travelled between Bristol Channel piers in all kinds of weather and I greatly regret the demise of the fleet, though the saving of Waverley and Balmoral is some compensation. We must be thankful that the Swiss were not so quick to discard this reliable and leisurely method of transport.

Information about SGV and its services can be found on their web-site, <http://www.lakelucerne.ch>.



Demonstrations by Swiss unions are still quite rare - we get plenty by foreign activists in Bern, against Kosovo, China, the USA and others, the price of being the capital and housing all the diplomatic missions. On the 16th of November 1999 a press conference, 300 days SBB AG, was used by the rail union SEV together with the railway vehicle construction unions to demonstrate against the very high handed announcement by the Daimler Transportation (ex ADtranz, ex ABB) management of the closure of the Zürich-Oerlikon (Tramont) and Pratteln works. All this with the loss of several hundred jobs, which in Swiss terms is a catastrophe. The very orderly demonstration wanted the SBB to put pressure on the firm to reconsider. SBB is a very large customer in Switzerland. Unfortunately the Swiss market is less than 2% of Daimler's world wide market, quite apart from the fact SBB would have a hard time finding another supplier at short notice. In other words, tough.

Photo: George M. Hoekstra