

# Spiez in 1929

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BLS 6/8 207 at Spiez. September 1990. The loco partly visible to the right is probably 401 mentioned in the article.

Photo: Paul Russenberger

If you visited Spiez any time before the 1970s, you would have found much of it very similar to my first visit, though modern electric signalling had replaced those fascinating large shunting signals that had an X position and a straight up and down one. They changed position with a clank that told you something was about to happen.

In 1929 there was an abundance of local freight and engines had to run round their local passenger trains, unlike today's e.m.u.s. The huge long Be 6/8 class electric engines hauled the expresses; I had never seen the like of those before, and they hauled freights as well. The passenger trains had some 1E1 engines with coupling rods. I recall my last trip behind one from Brig to Thun in 1954 when I had to dash home from Venice, something I am repeating today without, I think, quite such a crisis awaiting my arrival. I have

not learnedly looked up anything; you know all the types already.

SBB engines, mostly Ae 4/7s, hauled many of the Interlaken trains but BLS alone handled all the Lötschberg traffic. It was unheard of to pool the engines as now. Highlight at teatime was the non-stop Brig Express, just a sleeper for Rome and a diner to Domodóssola or possibly Milan. The chef was always at the door, which opened inwards, during the Spiez stop. My father explained that it joined onto a train from Geneva, as important as Bern to the Italian diplomats, because the League of Nations was based at Geneva.

It was the fly shunting that astounded me, all carried out at nearly 30 km/h, which was an artistic performance. The orchestra was pipe-whistles. Shunting engines had a platform for the shunters to travel on and often there would be three, each going off with his particular

wagon, or wagons. The shunters all wore blue smocks and either peaked hats, like passenger guards, or those wide brimmed hats that beat the weather, worn by permanent way staff too. The shunters were amazingly agile. The points and crossings are at the east end of the station, for access to the yard furthest from the main building and the Lake of Thun, from both the main line and that from Interlaken. At the other end were access points back to the main line and the branch to Zweisimmen. But the shunting was done with wagons and coaches hurtling through the station, quite as fast as approaching trains.

After the war the BLS had No. 401, which was a standard Ee 3/3 with shiny chrome numerals, for shunting. On the rare occasions when it was unavailable, I believe they used a Be 3/5. The Lötschberg main line was built as an electric railway, but in 1929 they had No. 76 instead of 401, and No 76 was... Steam! On enquiry some years later I was given to understand it was the Frutigen Branch engine long before I was born and this became the start of the Lötschberg main line. No. 76, which like all SLM engines go on for ever if treated right, seemed to go on forever, except on Fridays.

Friday was boiler washout day and a more elderly version, something nags at me to say it was not an 0-6-0 but an 0-4-0, appeared on Fridays. It did not have such quick acting steam brakes, so shunting was generally slower, and the great shame for a fly-shunter was if his wagon failed to reach its allotted destination. They never failed in the four weeks I was there.

Mostly all the engines had only numbers and none of the initials of the various lines in the BLS group, once again painted out from the e.m.u.s. Spiez hooked me for life on Swiss trains. On high days a station visit began on the tram, a bogie vehicle during the day, a four-wheeler morning and night, which was one franc any distance and which my father thought expensive. In those balmy days there

were 12 Swiss francs to the pound. [Editorial note: Surely this is the 1950s rate; can anyone quote the rate in 1929?]

As a small boy I knew all the Lake Steamers by their whistles, such as the *Lötschberg*. And then those bells which the Swiss found so embarrassingly intrusive, whereas pre-war at Brig, when after dark you heard them, they reassured you that Mussolini's minions had been left behind.

Why we were allowed such a lovely long holiday I am not sure. The Schloss Hotel, Schoenegg was one of those posh Victorian hotels with an ancient lift, which my father preferred. This one was also cheap. Its early Victorian plumbing behaved in a manner known only to itself, without warning showering with icy water the kind soul who looked after me, in evening dress ready for dinner as soon as she had assisted with my bath and put me to bed. Remarkably few people stayed in it. The Hotel Eden, still going strong, was then, I think, brand new.

One adverse change occurred since. They have turned the Terminus Hotel into a Migros Store. In 1929 it had a tearoom where you could watch the trains. Later I was frequently there up to 1979. That time some Americans, who insisted in knowing what I was doing, were amazed when I explained I was making a Golden Jubilee of visiting Spiez instead of going up the Jungfrau.

I shall always be grateful my father chose Spiez. I think Thomas Cook made the choice for him, as I do not think he realised what a splendid place it is to watch trains. All in all it has not changed much; the Aeschi bus still plying on both routes, rather farther now the road has been extended. We had to walk to see the wonderful view of the Niesen, the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. Technically the BLS now has electric engines, but it is a compact system where everyone knows everybody else.