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RAILWAY BLACKOUT SHOCK!

Phil tells of his experiences the day the WHOLE network shut down



Above and below, detraining at Bern Wankdorf during the blackout. 22.06.05.

All photos in this article: Phil Weaver

Imagine... an idyllic hot summer's day, seeing the best Switzerland has to offer by first class train and boat. Starting from Spiez we take the BLS train to Brig. Here we transfer to the MGB to Göschenen, then take the train down the Gotthard North ramp to Flüelen. This is where we take a leisurely 3-hour cruise on Lake Luzern taking in lunch on board. On arrival in Luzern we have about a 40 minute wait before our connection for a fast train that whisks us to Bern, then a quick change here enables us to get back to Spiez and our hotel, for a well deserved beer and dinner.

Well, that was the plan, but the SBB had other ideas...

All went according to plan until about half way through Grauholz Tunnel on the approach to Bern. We began to slow down, almost reaching a crawl. I thought our six-minute connection at Bern was getting a bit tight. We eventually emerged and increased speed slightly. Just before the junction with the 'old' line we passed a stationary 'regio' and crossed onto its track. We passed the junction of the Bern 'avoiding line' and then drew to a halt alongside another IC. An announcement was made in German only. Knowing next to no German, it did not make much sense although I did hear a word with 'strom' in it, so I guessed it was something to do with either power or pantographs. There were further announcements made and after the third there was laughter and sighs of disbelief from our fellow passengers. We had been stopped now for about 25 minutes when we noticed the passengers on the other train alongside us getting up and moving forward. Some then started disembarking onto the track. Our guard then entered our coach and made an





Stationary trains all over,
Bern Wankdorf. 22.06.05

announcement. The other passengers began moving forward. He spoke English, and told us that there was a complete power failure of the railways all over Switzerland, and that we had to get off the train and catch a bus. We were about three or four coaches from the platforms of the new station of Bern Wankdorf. We made our way along the train, out of the station and over to the bus station. Here we joined the throngs waiting for a trolley bus to Bern HBhf, where we would try to resume our journey home. The trolley bus soon became reminiscent of a sauna. I didn't realise how many people could get on one before, and at each stop even more tried to get on! A soldier on board spoke to us in perfect English explaining that a power fault on the Gotthard line in Ticino had caused the problem. He was trying to get to his unit in Geneva. We arrived at Bern HBhf. at about 7.00pm, and I

Waiting for the trolleybus at Bern Wankdorf.
22.06.05

was immediately reminded of a line from The Kinks song Waterloo Sunset... 'Millions of people swarming like flies 'round Waterloo underground!' We fought our way onto the main concourse to find out what was

happening. Information points were being set up and we enquired 'What is happening?' 'Come back in an hour' was the reply. 'Are any buses being laid on?' 'No, not yet!'

We went back outside and noticed the Post Bus station. We went up and looked at the timetable. Nothing to anywhere I recognised as being anywhere near where we wanted to go. A quick look inside and we saw lots of buses stabled for the night. Just what was needed by the SBB, but they obviously hadn't thought that far ahead.

I had noticed a bus stop outside for Bern airport. 'Perhaps we could get to the airport and then try our luck from there' I said. 'Are

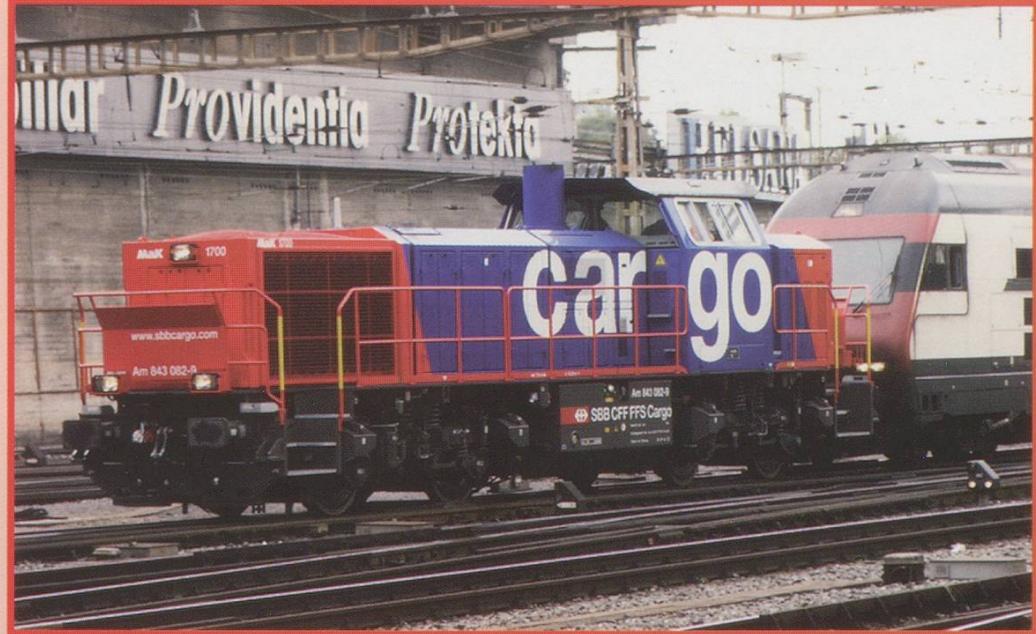


you going to the airport?' someone enquired in perfect Mancunian behind me. I turned round and saw Dave Howsam! Of all the people stranded in Switzerland at that time, the first person who spoke to me was someone I knew! Dave was trying to get to Basel airport to catch his flight home.

It was a very 'Brief Encounter'. I believe he got a taxi and arrived at Basel in time, but with a very large hole in his wallet!

We went back to the concourse. No news! No help! No nothing! Even the girls STILL had to pay to use the loos!! I decided to visit the platforms and see what was going on there. Trains were moving...being hauled in dead by 'cargo' Am843s. An announcement was made saying a train would leave shortly for Olten via the 'old' line using diesel haulage. I worked out that this line must have been cleared of 'dead' trains. There was a mad rush to platform five. Ten minutes later the train was cancelled. The doors wouldn't close! It just wasn't SBB's day.

It was now about 8.00pm so we decided to check the information point in the concourse again. The staff there could tell us nothing! We then went out to the bus and tram station outside, where immediately we heard a member of staff, with a loud hailer, announcing a bus would be departing for Thun soon. Talk about left hands and right hands! We joined the rush to the bus and just about got on. This was another travelling sauna. We were by the doors this time and managed to get a slight breeze from them. This journey took about an hour, during which we were treated to the back streets of the Ostermundigen and Gümligen sub-



SBB Am843 082 During 'Black Out' at Bern Hbf towing in a 'dead' train.

urbs of Bern for about half of our journey, yet nobody wanted to get off at any of these points. When somebody did get off the driver made an announcement in German. I jokingly translated to my wife and friends 'the crew would like to thank you for travelling on this SBB bus. We trust you enjoyed the journey and hope you will travel with us again soon!' Quite a few people must have understood English as there was quite a bit of laughter around us.

We arrived at Thun at about 9.25pm and immediately transferred to a coach (what a luxury). We actually sat down for the first time in three hours, and arrived back in Spiez at about 9.50pm. I had called the hotel to tell them of our predicament, and to keep them in touch with our progress. We got to the hotel soon after and the first beer didn't touch the sides! Dinner was served soon afterwards. We eventually got to bed at around midnight.

What a day. It was really absolutely sham-bolic, but then again I suppose we were part of history! The SBB did announce that they would issue 'Sorry - Rail Checks', SFr10 for second class and SFr15 for first. We obtained our 2 x SFr15 valid until the end of 2010!

By the way, the next day the trains were running normally as though nothing had ever happened.