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Autor: Stone, Bryan
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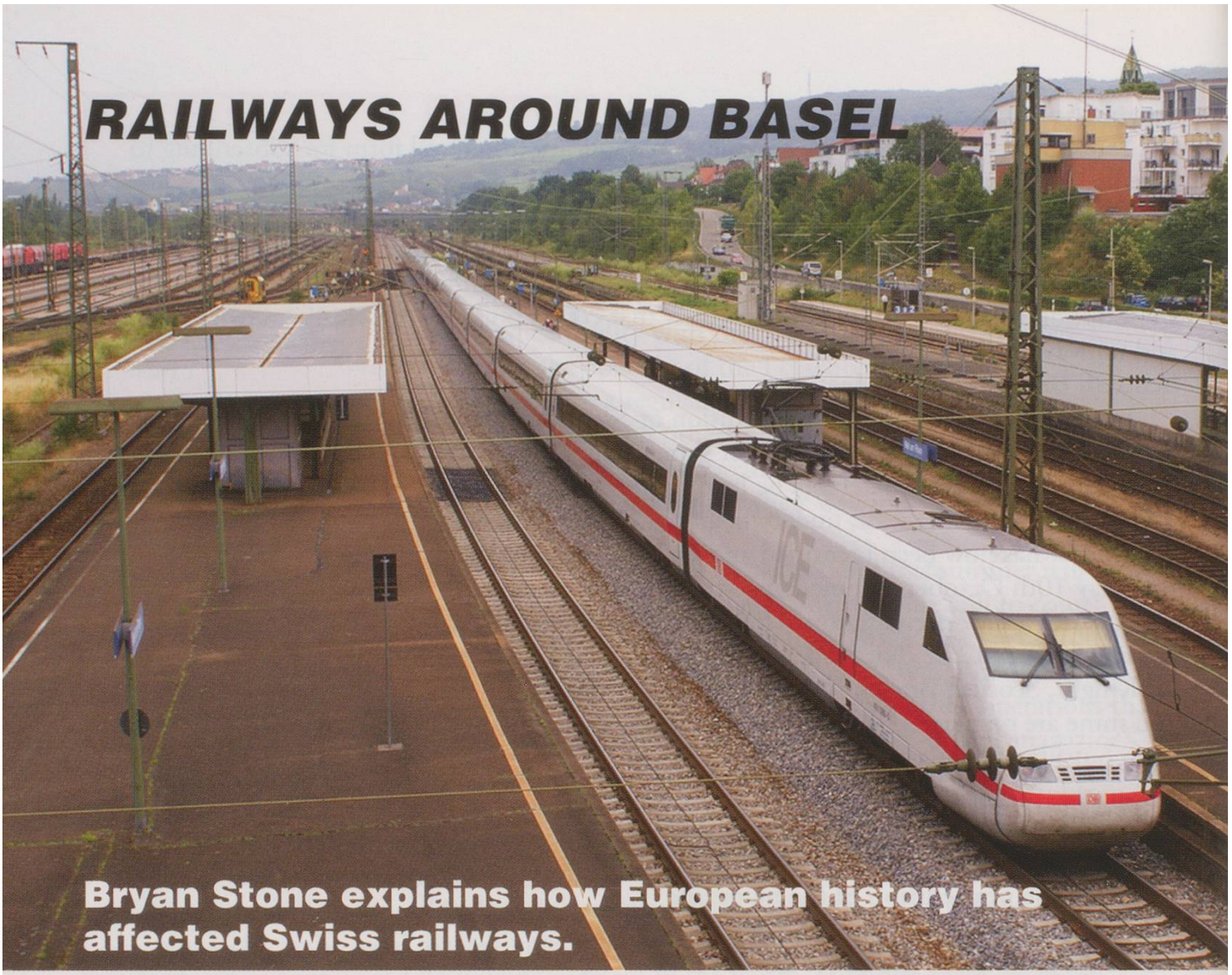
RAILWAYS AROUND BASEL



Bryan Stone explains how European history has affected Swiss railways.

Weil am Rhein, with 401 class ICE passing northwards at speed. This huge station was once called Leopoldshöhe, and was the end of the Baden State Railway line to Basel for some 5 years, until the extension to the Badischer Bahnhof was agreed. Most of the platforms are redundan. Today as only a modest local service stops here.

ALL PHOTOS: Bryan Stone

As the TGV from Paris sweeps into Basel, few think of 150 years of torment and tactics, war, occupation and pain, and railway history reflecting fear, jealousy and political mistrust. Four times in 100 years Prussian or German armies were on Switzerland's northwest frontiers. Alsace changed hands four times. The ripples reach widely, even to the BLS, built in 1912.

A few days around Basel, on one of Europe's great frontiers, looking at railways is an education in political history. Why, for example, do the Basel – Geneva trains reverse in Delémont? Why does the BLS own an 8 km-tunnel between Moutier and Grenchen, which it hardly uses?

The first railway into Basel was Strasbourg – Bâle, used by today's TGV, opened to St Louis (France) on Oct 25th 1840. In 1844 it reached St Johann BS, but Basel was walled and gated; the city fathers took to December 1845 to breach the wall (with a new gate) and open a station near today's city hospital. This first Swiss rail line (forgetting Zürich's claims about the Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn of 1847) was used, among others, by Charles Dickens in 1846. It lasted until 1860 when the connection to the first Centralbahnhof (today's SBB station) was built. The 1860 alignment, replaced in 1903, is now part of the city streetplan. In the meantime the line from Paris to Mulhouse (the Est main line for 150 years) was completed in 1858, and the SCB (Swiss Central) Hauenstein line, Basel to Olten, built by English contractor Thomas Brassey, also opened in 1858, after a disastrous tunnel fire. This line, replaced by a base tunnel, is (just) in use today, with locals

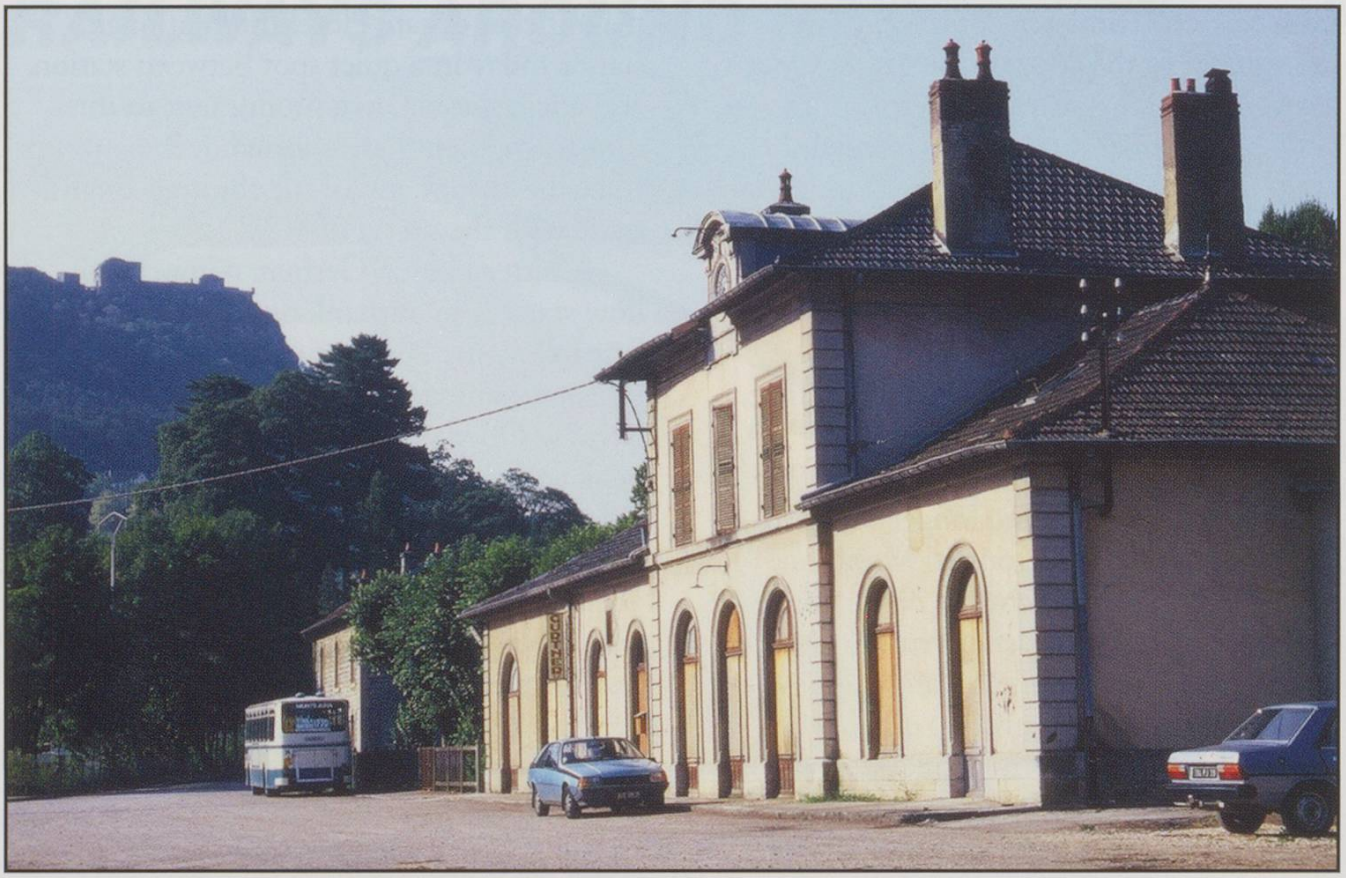
from Sissach. Trimbach churchyard has a monument to the 63 dead. In 1868, Queen Victoria went this way to Luzern.

The Baden State Railways opened their main line to Leopoldshöhe (Weil) in January 1851, and extended it in 1855 to the first Badischer Bahnhof.

It looked as if Basel's international network was set up, albeit belatedly. However, in 1870, Prussia invaded France, and after a 6-month campaign. Alsace became Prussian, remaining so until 1918. The Est railway could no longer reach Basel, but stopped at a new frontier, Montreux-Vieux, between Altkirch and Belfort, to exchange with the Imperial Prussian Alsace-Lorraine Railway Administration. This it, and the French Government, disliked. In haste, a line was built from Belfort to the nearest point in Switzerland, through Delle to Porrentruy, avoiding Prussian territory and opened in 1872. Porrentruy is however cut off by the heavy Jura terrain from the rest of Switzerland, and so became a railhead. The magnificent ornate Hotel International stands today in a quiet spot between station and ancient town, as a monument to this time, its opulent halls sheeted over, bankrupt since the abrupt end of the through English trade with the on set of WW 1.

A bitter Franco-German competition now started, to outflank one another. We first follow the Porrentruy link. The Est Railway wanted to reach Basel and the Bernese Oberland, and became (with French bank support) heavily involved in the Jura-Bernois, a railway supported by Canton Bern for its own reasons. This, after heavy engineering, opened the Delémont – Basel line in September 1876, Delémont – Biel, and Delémont - Porrentruy in 1877. Now the new Est main line from Calais and Paris to Basel and the Engadine, and to Interlaken and Italy, ran from Belfort, through Porrentruy, and the facing junction at Delémont was of course just right. Porrentruy became Switzerland's 4th biggest freight station, and by summer 1914 eleven

SNCF ex Est 4-6-0 230-B-862 at Belfort, on the through Bern – Paris coaches of the 09.15 from Bern, attached at Belfort to an express Basel – Paris Est. This was the last manifestation of the main line opened via Porrentruy after the Franco Prussian War in 1870, when Germany occupied Alsace.



Station building, Ferrette, and fortress in background. After closure 1965.

regular express trains were booked daily this way. We have jumped, of course, to the time when the Lötschberg tunnel and Simplon railway were opened. If Bern wanted a western alpine route, France wanted an assured route to Italy. The Lötschberg might never have been built without French capital and government guarantees, and part of the story was a French demand that the direct route to Bern should include a short-cut from Delémont. A holding company was financed in France and Switzerland to build the tunnel from Moutier to Grenchen connecting at Lengnau for Biel and Bern, opened in December 1915, and vested in the BLS. Alas for its promoters' ambitions, WW1 was raging, traffic had collapsed, and after 1918, Alsace reverted to France. The old route to Basel was now again open, and the Delle route, with its vast sidings, customs houses, stations and administration, slept on. However, BLS publicity for many years showed Delle, not Basel, as the main line north. An international agreement required that a train Bern – Paris was operated, continuing until 1982, when Delle – Belfort was closed. I took this train once and was delighted by a Belfort 230B at Delle for the gentle 30-minute run, with a baggage car and a SBB 1st/2nd Composite, to Belfort, continuing with the lunchtime express to Paris-Est.

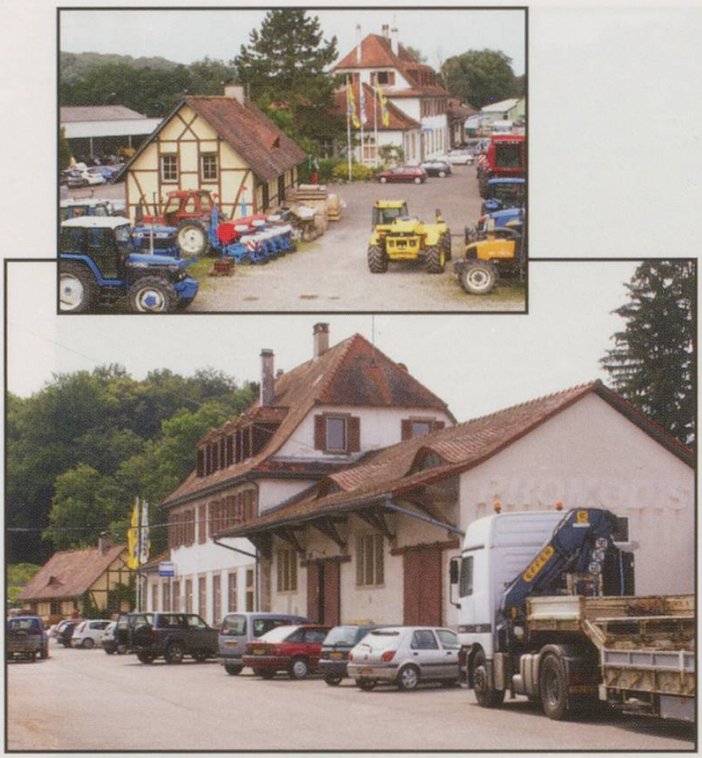
But that isn't all. The Prussian motives were always more military than commercial. To secure their post-1870 empire, they set out to fill the frontier zone with strategic railways. A branch leads today from Porrentruy to Bonfol, 10 km, opened by a local railway in July 1901. The CJ today run local electric trains. What you don't see is the monumental station house in Pfetterhouse, just over the Alsace border, built in 1910, under an agreement between Bern/Prussia, for an international route to Dannemarie on the Belfort – Mulhouse main line. Cross-border passengers stopped in 1946, but freight was exchanged until complete closure in 1970. At the last, one SNCF 'Michelin' ran daily each way between Mulhouse and Pfetterhause.

Another company extended from Ferrette, near the Swiss border, to Altkirch, near

This is the only operational bit of the Strategic Railway, a 3 km section from Weil am Rhein to Lörrach Stettin, now operated with an hourly local by the SBB. The irony is that the Strategic railway was originally planned and built so that German military trains could move across southern Germany without touching Switzerland.

Mulhouse, and from an intermediate station, Waldighofen, to St Louis, just outside Basel. These lines were opened in January 1892 and in April 1915 respectively (the latter built by the German army) and closed in the 1960s. In had still in pre-WWII days they still had 4 or 5 daily trains with connections. Ferrette was a military fortress. The alignments can still be found here and there in the area.

St Louis on the Mulhouse-Basel Line was seen by the German Government as a strategic springboard. It commissioned an new line from St Louis, through Huningue, across the new Palmrain bridge over the Rhein to Weil-Leopoldshöne then to extend east through the Black Forest. There were railways in the valleys but no-one lived in these hills. However the object was to keep some distance from the Swiss Frontier across the whole area to the Bodensee rather than use track that crossed the Swiss border both at Basel and Schaffhausen. This was to be the German "Stratigic Railway", built for military purposes as Switzerland's neutrality could be an embarassment if the existing trackage was used. It was laid-out to stiff specifications for military block-trains to use without assistantance. A maximum grade of 1 in 100 with 300 m minimum radius curves, and crossing stations every 8 km, involved heavy engineering. It was built, 6,3 km, from Weil to Lörrach Stettin on the Wiese line, then 19,7 km, from Schopfheim to Säckingen, on the Rhein, and 44,6 km, from Weizen to Immendingen. It was completed in 2 years, opened in 1891, heroic, costly and only justifiable to the German military mind. Today it lies in ruins, except for a part today



Waldighofen (F) station, now used by an agricultural business. This was the junction for Altkirch-Waldighofen-Ferrette, and St- Louis – Waldighofen (this latter built in WWI by the German Army) and closed in 1965 .

Huningue station, rail side.

operated as the Pigtail (Sauschwänzle) Museum Railway, near Weizen and Blumberg, north of Schaffhausen. It did carry trains in WW II on an all-German link between Alsace and Bavaria.

Unfortunately, as a public railway it was ill-conceived, and local traffic was minimal. However, when in 1912 there was an urgent need to test electrification, the Baden State Railway proposed the Wiesental Line (Basel Badischer Bhf to Zell) and the Wehratal Line (Schopfheim – Säckingen) for trials at 15Kv, $16^2/_3$ Hz, with some rustic prototypes. This system then became the German standard, as in Sweden, Switzerland and Austria.

These lines near Basel have all come to an early end. However, the rails still lie from St Louis through Huningue (where the station stands) to the Rhein harbour. Services over the Palmrain bridge to Weil started in 1878 (and were even then often empty), they stopped in April 1937 when the bridge was demolished. Alsace had again become French in 1918, and so in 1922 this little used link got a 12-track yard and customs shed in Germany at Palmrain, near Weil, to which the French Alsace-Lorraine locomotives penetrated.

One last anecdote: in 1943, in the worst time of WWII, the La Croix-tunnel on the SBB main line Delémont-Porrentruy collapsed. During the 6-weeks of closure, Porrentruy was served by road, but heavy and non-urgent freight was sent out by rail. Agreement was reached with the German military rail authorities that Swiss wagons without military significance could be sent by daily freight train (the locomotive, a Prussian T18 4-6-4T) via Porrentruy – Pfetterhouse – Dannemarie – Mulhouse – Basel. SBB Historic has some pictures of this incident.

Station building Pfetterhouse, line Dannemarie – Pfetterhouse/Bonfol - Porrentruy. Still open to freight in 1970, and in the distance the line to Bonfol (CH).