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SWISS RAILWAYS IN 1980

Bryan Stone



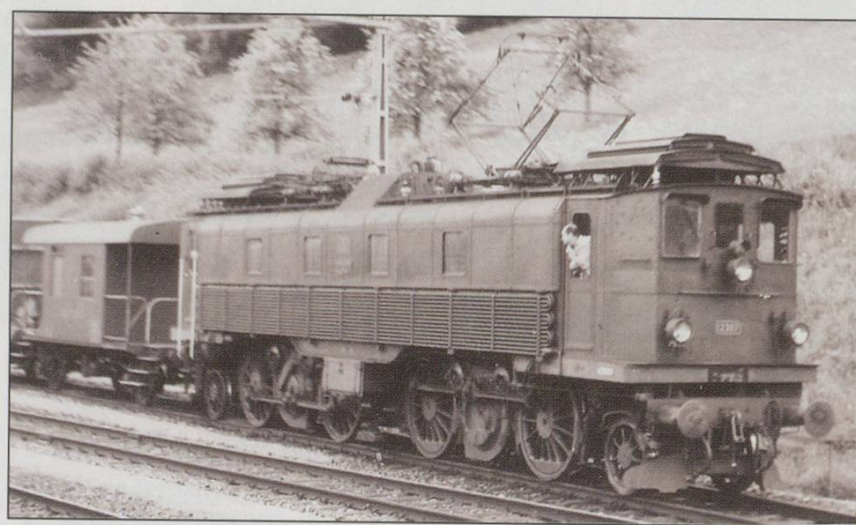
Ae8/8s 271 and 274 at Brig shed, where we always hoped to find them! August 1976.

In 1996, the late Harald Navé and I wrote in the introduction to his book “Bahn Panorama” – “Hardly anything is as it was, TEE, *Swiss-Express*, Ae3/6 and Ae4/7, pick-up freights, colour schemes, have slipped into history”. In fact the change is even greater, deeper, more radical. And yet the Swiss railways retain something we know, love and recognize. Let me catch, at least selectively, what it is, as change over the 30-years since 1980 comes to life for you.

My notebooks, photo and timetable collections, and many books, have helped my increasingly intermittent memory. I missed much; but one milestone stands out: 1980 was ‘pre-Taktfahrplan’ - Staehli’s concept of an integrated timetable was implemented in 1982. That changed the whole picture, service concept, organization and political outlook, right down to the last Postal Bus, and its success led to today’s consolidation in major building works, investment of all kinds, and to broad public acceptance. The ripples are still spreading. But a start was made. New power and rolling stock; the Heitersberg line had

arrived in 1975; the Zürich Airport line in 1980; BLS double track to be finished in 1989; these were making a mark. Traffic had reached record levels in 1973, but oil crisis and recession hit hard, with much railway infrastructure still out-of-date. There was however a lot of spending on other means of transport. In 1980 the Gotthard Road Tunnel was opened together with its autobahn approaches. The expectation was that it would only be used by cars as in the previous year the SBB’s Göschenen - Airolo shuttle had carried half a million of these and numbers here were growing. The new tunnel was soon discovered by the road haulage industry and the consequence of this in its turn sowed the seeds for the NEAT projects. However in 1980 the Taktfahrplan was the new vision.

Let’s start with the Kursbuch of 1980, a handy little book, with all public transport in it, and those familiar tables: 40 was Lötschberg (Delle – Brig); 50 Bern – Zürich; 70 Luzern – Chiasso, the Gotthard. The trains were erratic, infrequent, and contained many through cars.



TOP: BLS Ae6/8 206 (SLM 1938) at Spiez on a pick-up freight in September 1969. My daughters started young.

MIDDLE: Be4/6 12307 (SLM 1919) shunting at Eglisau on 051/05/964.

BOTTOM: Ce6/8^{III} 13315 (SLM 1925) on a mixed freight at Olten, mid 1967.



International trains rolled day and night over the mountain lines. I counted over 40 regular booked sleeper trains, often the heavyweight Wagon-Lits cars, and many more trains with couchettes. The Gotthard had fourteen 'night' trains each way, not counting extras and seasonals; in total twenty-six internationals crossed the Gotthard each way daily, and twelve more the BLS still, remember, single line on the south ramp. From Britain to Basel ten services ran via Lille, Dieppe, Belgium or Holland. The Arlberg Express had 10 different through sections on its Swiss leg. Little remains; the typical international train, 12 to 16 cars of different colours, shapes and sizes, has disappeared, and nocturnal shunting in Basel is correspondingly calm. Switzerland had six TEE trains; express trains ran through Vallorbe, Les Verrières (the

famous Paris-Interlaken) and Delle; the station clocks in Basel and Geneva still showed Swiss and French time, in summer then one hour different.

Now let's look at the motive power. In 1980 much had gone, but some veterans were still there alongside SLM's newest. There were Crocodiles (introduced 1919) - of 51 built six were working; 14276 lasted to 1986. Thirty one of 114 Ae3/6^I, built in 1920, had gone; the last went in 1994. These, and the majestic Ae4/7 of 1926, were to many of us the 'face' of SBB from our youth. Only two Ae4/7 had gone; they lasted in heavy freight, but also in unlikely places on 3-coach branch and local trains, until 1996. Odd Ae3/5 and Ae3/6^{III} were still

around in the west, but only briefly. Seven Ae4/6s (built in 1941) were in Bellinzona, and sometimes got to Luzern. The last two went in 1983. Also gone are the 50 Re4/4ⁱ, built from 1944, the last one working the Basel carriage washer until 2004. The SBB's 1960s showpiece, the 4 current TEE Rae sets, would become the "Grey Mice" in 1988, with the last withdrawn in 1999. The 120 Ae6/6, built from 1952-65, were just being displaced from the Gotthard; today at least half are scrapped or stored. The BLS was still working all eight of its Ae6/8s. They were withdrawn between 1981 and 1995. Also still active were the pioneer BLS Ae4/4s (Nos.251/2/7/8) until 2005 in the Simmental, and the five great Ae8/8s. Two would be burned out in the Spiez dépôt fire; the last ended up on Lötschberg base tunnel spoil trains.

But alongside was now another generation like the 89 Re6/6, built 1972-1980, reminding me of the 'Shire Horses' of my youth, the standard Gotthard freight and passenger engine with an astonishing 10,600 hp. Meanwhile the Re4/4ⁱⁱ and Re4/4ⁱⁱⁱ, with 329 built from 1962 to 1985 (and a few extra for private railways) had become the "standard" engine, everywhere from Basel and Romanshorn to Genève and Bellinzona. The BLS had again excelled itself with a thyristor Re4/4, with 35 examples built 1963 to 1982 - the now familiar "Brunelis" (little brownies). So change was in the air. New motive power finally came in; four prototype Re 4/4^{IV} (10101-10104) appeared in 1985, and led to the universal Bahn 2000 locomotive, the Class 460 with 119 examples. In 1994 BLS had a more powerful variant, Class 465, surely Switzerland's most expensive engine. But in 1980 such power only helped in the mountains.



TOP: Sun and fog in the last days of Weesen old station, with Ae4/7 10916 (SLM 1927) on a local from Sargans to Ziegelbrücke, 02/03/ 1968.

MIDDLE: This TEE-RAe from Bruxelles is coasting, between SNCF and SBB catenaries, into Basel SBB station in summer 1970. Note the clock; Switzerland had not yet adopted summer time.

BOTTOM: Merzario (Italy) was an Italian forwarder and big early user of Intercontainer. This is a Milano-Zeebrugge train, with SBB locos, entering the north ramp near Kandersteg, in the mid 70s.





TOP: Snow at Brünig-Hasliberg, 1978 : Local with DeH 4/6 (SLM 1941) waits for the incoming express to Luzern, with HGe 4/4 I ('Muni') 1992 (SLM 1954).

MIDDLE: Wil SG had in 1986 one of the last of these semaphore gantries, as did Renens.

BOTTOM LEFT: The 'Lorelei' had the afternoon through Basel coach to Hoek van Holland for Harwich. The 'Rheingold' left 2 hrs later but was 1st Class with supplement. The indicator was an SBB trademark.

The network was inadequate. The Taktfahrplan made clear that an hourly pattern, with connections at all nodal points, would need more capacity and speed. In 1980 there was no direct line from Olten to Bern (built later in three sections); no direct Bussigny curve, so trains from Basel to Genève went via Lausanne taking 30 minutes longer; there was single line on the BLS south ramp and at

Kandergrund, while the NEAT Base tunnel to Visp was 27 years away; there was no Adler Tunnel near Liestal giving a direct route into Basel; and no Luzern curve at Roggwil. Most stations still had block posts, many with mechanical frames on the platform or in the station office. There was a long way to go.

If the Taktfahrplan had not succeeded from the start, and caught popular attention, there may have been no new high speed lines. It took two referenda (both securing majority popular votes) to secure first the financing of the Bahn 2000, aimed at realizing the full Taktfahrplan with all associated short cuts and new alignments, and second the financing of the two base tunnels, the NEAT lines under Lötschberg and Gotthard. These in turn also reflected another popular vote to enforce by all legal measures (in harmony with the EU) the displacement of highway trucks to rail. The legal securing of long term finance (not without some

opposition from the right wing), and the political mandate which this has created, are the basis for the Swiss railways we see today.

But still, much had to go. Not many lines have closed, though in 1980 you might have travelled to Wasen im Emmental; Pontarlier; Basel to Winterthur direct (and faster than today); Gletsch (by Glacier Express); or Beromünster. Many passing stations are closed, including some classics: Wassen; Gurtellen; Blausee-Mitholz; Choindenz; Gwatt; Alvaneu;



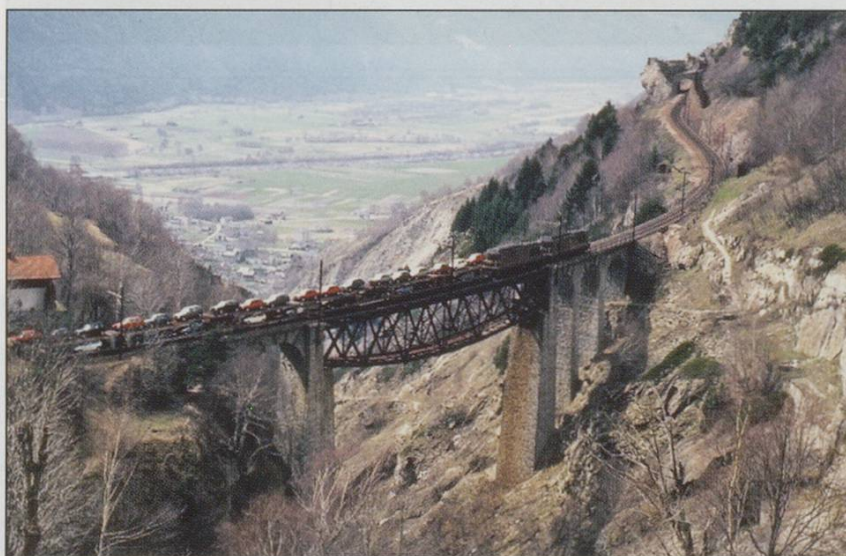
Soyhières; Solis - overall dozens. Many more have lost their staff as signalling was centralized and tickets were sold by machines. I miss those rustic, well-kept country stations, often surprisingly busy, with milk churns and post-bags, the inevitable station barrow, and kiosks, buffets and toilets. Just try Brünig-Hasliberg for a rude awakening. Many others have been ruthlessly modernized, sidings torn out, buildings removed, and concrete applied with vigour.

A word on freight, for there is a lot of it. There are still classic freight trains, marshalling yards (much cut back), and industrial sidings, but the intermodal and piggyback block trains - like the blocks of oil tanks, automobiles, or even timber - have become the modern norm. Lost are the long trains of Interfrigo wagons, from Italy to Germany, winding down through Wassen, each with three Ae6/6s; that market was lost to road in the 1980s. Open access means that now various operators turn up: Deutsche Bahn; BLS (competing very successfully); Crossrail; and various others, all of them chasing new traffics. Be pleased that it is so. Even in the recession freights stream over the Gotthard and through the BLS base tunnel already at its capacity limit of 110 trains per day. In 1980 there were still many mixed trains, now all disappeared. We hope to take up this unusual theme another time.

Passengers too: the SBB's own tilting trains, Class 500, of 1995 are very popular, but the Pendolini are a catastrophe, and one longs sometimes for a good honest express to Milano. This year, because of the Pendolino scandal, there were for the first time in 120 years no direct Basel - Gotthard -



TOP: BLS Ae8/8 271 climbing up from the Rhone Valley near Eggerberg, 16/10/1972.



MIDDLE: Baltschieder bridge and Victoria tunnel, two Ae 4/4^{II} on a northbound freight in October 1972.

BOTTOM: 'Bruchsal' lever frame, at Cossonay station, 17/10/1968.





Milano trains. But now the country is crisscrossed with fixed formation trains, push-and-pull, double deck and at high speed, often at 2 or 3 minute headways. New signalling, including ETCS Level 2 on the high speed lines, is creating new capacity and setting new punctuality and safety standards. A single statistic: in 1981 the SBB ran 67 million train kilometres, and in 2004 109 million, 63% more, and passenger-km increase by around 5 – 7% per year. The

trains are full, on many lines the Takt is now 30 minutes, the introduction of S-Bahns in all the big centres have created integrated local services networks, and politicians and planners only argue today about how to do more.

But it's still Switzerland, and although I have not here dealt with the MOB, or the RhB, or the AB, or the BOB, you will still find branch lines, farmers and schoolchildren, as well as mobile-phoners, tourists and bankers, and a professionalism, which is still, somehow, how you knew it would be, even 30-years on.

However, perhaps the most remarkable story of all was far away in the mountains; in 1980 the Furka-Oberalp ran summer only, and the Glacier Express called at Gletsch, in sight of the fast disappearing Rhone Glacier. Two years later, late and at twice the budget price, the Furka base tunnel was opened, giving all-

LEFT: Re 4/4 10002 (SLM 1944) in Locarno on a Bellinzona local train, 1977.



TOP: TEE 'Edelweiss' RAe 1053 from Zürich to Antwerp, at Bruxelles Nord, 13/01/1975.

MIDDLE: Ae4/7 10986 (SLM 1931) on mixed goods and Be 6/8^{III} 13302 (SLM 1925) returning to the sheds, at Olten station, 4/04/1973.



year service. It allowed abandonment of the mountain section, with its snow, 1 in 8 grades, and demountable bridge. Within 20 years original Furka-Oberalp steam engines were recovered from Vietnam, refurbished and the track restored, and today you ride again by steam from Realp to Gletsch, and soon through to Oberwald. Today's multiple Glacier Expresses flit year round through the tunnel, but see no glaciers.

Author Profile. Bryan was born, grew-up and educated in England. At the start of his career he joined BR as a Management Trainee. In 1968 he was posted to Basel to work for the Intercontainer Company that was being set-up by a consortium of European railways. His short secondment finished-up as him becoming its Strategy Director. Forty-years later he still lives near Basel, is a Swiss citizen, and although now retired is still involved with railways. He is a patron of the Rail Collection at the Luzern Verkehrshaus; a Member of the Brienz-Rothorn Bahn and of La Traction, a Swiss preserved steam operation in the Jura; a local historian and is involved in community affairs in his local Gemeinde. He has recently joined the SRS and we welcome his input to Swiss Express.



TOP: A rare bird: Ae 3/6^{III} 10264 (SLM 1925) on 16/04/1969, on Delémont local in Basel SBB.

MIDDLE: The classic local train. Ae3/6 I 10693 (SLM 1927) in Lyss on Herzogenbuchsee local via Solothurn, on 12/06/1987. This route is now closed throughout.

BOTTOM: Frenkendorf station: Bruchsal lever frame, with Hasler route and block instruments, as they were in almost every station. Sometimes they even stood in the open.

RIGHT: The semaphore protecting the Delémont line junctions outside Basel. The signal alongside might suggest that ahead there are new colour light signals, but is actually a road sign.

