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DIMINISHING STANDARDS - Part 2

David Hitchen continues the story

SVB 605 + 324 on Bern's Kirchenfeldbrucke in November 1985.
ALL PHOTOS: Neil Wheelwright

In comparison with Zürich the story of the "Swiss Standard" tram in Basel is much simpler as they appeared to let the larger city carry out all the pre-production developments, thereby reaping the benefits of a tried and tested design when they ordered their first batch in 1948. Basel also ignored the option of pedal control altogether, preferring to adhere to the familiar hand controllers for all deliveries, i.e. all being VST Type 1b.

Nos.401-415 arrived in 1948 followed in 1949 by 416-422. In 1950 423-427 were delivered, followed by a much larger batch (428-452) in 1951. All were built by Schindler Waggonfabrik, Pratteln (SWP), with Brown Boveri & Cie, Baden (BBC), electrics. 401 – 452 were easily distinguishable as they had a single piece side window without ventilators so they could be slid down a few centimetres. Curiously the first batch of trailers (1401-1403) were built a year before the first batch of power cars in 1947! A further series (1404-1415) followed in 1948 to form 15 complete tram/trailer sets. These trailers were all built entirely by Flug und Fahrzeugwerke A.G., Altenrhein, (FFA). No further Swiss Standard (VST Type A) trailers were constructed until 1961 (1416-1424) and 1962 (1425-1435) when FFA and SWP jointly built another 35 trailers.

Basel, like Zürich, subsequently purchased more modern versions of the "Swiss Standard" with 1958 seeing the introduction of four trams from SWP/BBC, and Nos. 457-476 came from the same companies in 1967/8 with the added involvement of Siemens.

BVB 473 + 1446 at Basel Bruderholz, May 1985.

It is interesting to note that this batch of tram/trailer sets was introduced even after 58 articulated trams had been operating successfully for many years. Seventy trailers (1436-1506) of a later design came from FFA/SWP in five batches between 1967 and 1972. This gave 106 trailers for 76 power cars, so many trailers were also attached to articulated trams and, for a period, some power cars hauled two unpowered trailers.

A number of modifications have taken place during their long life, ranging from removal of the conductor's desk originally installed, to the installation of multiple unit control on 466 – 476. Cars 453 – 476 averaged 2.3 million km over their 43 years in service. The last bogie trams for Basel, but with a more angular body style came in 1986/7. Numbered 477-502 these came from a consortium of SWP/BBC/Siemens/SIG (Schweizerische Industriegesellschaft, Neuhausen-am-Rheinfall). However, these are not "Swiss Standards" although they could be said to be modern derivatives.

In June 1997 No. 401, the first of the type, was to be seen at Wiesenplatz depot shunting twelve units awaiting collection for scrapping. Whilst by late 2001 all of the earlier batches (401-456) had been withdrawn and, in most cases scrapped, the last batch remain in service although it can be assumed, not for very long. A set comprising either power car 413 plus a trailer (often 1430, but not definitely preserved) has been preserved by the operator Basel Verkehrs Betriebe (BVB). The trailers seem to have faired better with only eight having been scrapped. Numbers 1401/5/7/10/2/5/24/5/6/7

1. BVB 432 + trailer at Basel, Schützenhaus in Novemeber 1978.
2. SVB 103VBW BDe4/4 No.35 at Bern Helvetiaplatz in October 1982.
3. SVB 621 + 321 at Basel Marktgasse in May 1987.
4. BVB 409 (+ 1471) in SBB advert livery as 'loco and coach', BaselBahnhof SBB in September 1985.

have gone to Beograd, whilst 1404/8/16/7/9 have been acquired by Baselland Transport and 1402/3/6 have moved to Bern. In the late 1990s thirty five of the remaining trailers were completely rebuilt with low-floor entrances and air-conditioning and are likely to be around for a while yet, usually running with the later bogie cars 477 – 502. Orders for multiple section articulated trams (Combinos and Stadler Tangos) will see more being scrapped or sold to distant tramways in the near future. At the end of their life the "Swiss Standard" tram/trailer sets have mainly been used on Routes 2, 3 and 15/16, the route that traverses a circuitous itinerary through the delightfully wooded section south of the city. The city of Basel will never be quite the same without these sleek trams.

In Bern, the Swiss Capital, the requirement for "Swiss Standard" tramcars was significantly less as the area of the city, and the size of its tramway, is much smaller than in either Basel or Zürich. It was not until 1947/8 that the first of this type of tram was introduced with fifteen (101-115, VST Type 1 ab) being built by Schweizerische Wagons und Aufzugefabrik AG, Schlieren, (SWS) whilst BBC and Maschinenfabrik Oerlikon (MFO) both provided the electrical equipment. These trams were later renumbered 601-615. A second batch (121-130, VST Type 1b) was not procured until 1960/1 and came from the same set of manufacturers. These ten were subsequently renumbered 621-630. This gave Bern a fleet of 25 "Swiss Standard" power cars. The second batch could be distinguished from the former as they had sliding ventilators at the top of the side windows.

In 1951 FFA were called upon to provide ten unpowered trailers (321-330) to couple to some of the first batch of power cars resulting in some of the 15 trams running solo. Then SIG/SWS collaborated to simultaneously build another batch of trailers (331-340) to match the 1960/1 power cars so that these could enter service as two car sets.

BVB trailer 1446 interior as in 1986.

By 1997 ten of the first series of power cars had been withdrawn (601-603, 606, 608-612,615) but all the 1951 trailers remained. The second series of power cars were all still in service at this time but five of the later trailers (332,333,336,338,339) had been withdrawn. Trams 607 and 621 trailer 337 are preserved. The remainder of the first batch had been withdrawn by the end of 1999. Trams 622-630, and some appropriate trailers, were retained later than expected as the new "Combino" articulated trams were found to have serious body faults and had to be returned, one by one, to the builders for rectification. As this programme has now been completed the remaining trams have been dispatched to Lasi, Romania, although a few trailers continue in use attached to some of the 1973-built articulated trams. This is only a temporary reprieve as further new vehicles are on order that should see the withdrawal of these articulated trams. Bern's "Swiss Standard" tram/trailer sets were latterly used exclusively on Route 5, Ostring to Fischermatteli, but once the "Combinos" arrived the older sets became used in a general fashion. The Stadische Verkehrsbetriebe Bern (SVB) has changed its name to "Bernmobil" whilst adopting a rather sombre all-over red livery but the "Swiss Standards" retained the rather elegant dark green and cream livery to the end.

Editor's note. Apart from supplying photographs from his extensive collection Neil Wheelwright has been kind enough to assist in editing this article, as well as Part 1 that appeared in the December magazine.