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SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI

s'Murmeli

Many SRS members grew up in Britain with signal boxes at every station and junction, with a calm operator, often duster in hand, moving the great levers with studied ease, ringing the block bells and often winding crossing gates. Somehow they also observed the trains, checked tail lamps and found time to write it all down in the Register, watering their tomatoes and offering tea to visitors. Switzerland worked differently. At passing stations there was a lever frame in or, in front of, the station office, and the station agent, the Bahnhofvorsteher, worked the block, the points and the signals himself. Only big stations and yards had 'boxes', out by the tracks, but these were dependent on the local train operating manager releasing trains onto the main line. Block and interlocking were not directly comparable with British practice - and nobody here in Switzerland checked tail-lamps!


Talk of local signal control is old-fashioned. Even Hinwil's little lever frame has just been replaced. The concept of station-to-station block sections has now also largely disappeared, and fixed signals may not be with us for ever. Control Centres like the one at Basel have taken over. It was built 10 years ago on a prime site high above the yards, and is the centre for several hundred km of track, run by 13 operators comfortable in their air-conditioned, shaded tower, however, they do not see the trains or track which they supervise. Basically in Basel today, the operator supervises as the timetable runs itself, but with one problem - no day is ever really normal. The system is so densely utilized that even minor, and often usual events, such as a special travel group, or a delayed connection, or a slow freight slightly longer in the section, can cause ripples. If uncorrected these would soon make trouble far away and, somewhere, defects also creep in. SBB's control centres make some 500 million switching operations daily. That means about 6,000 per second. Every day on average 200 operations are defective, and some 20 are serious enough to delay train working. The really spectacular ones are very rare, and often are the product of



Basel Stellwerk control centre.

PHOTO: s'Murmeli

our computer age when everything stops at once. Even back-up systems are not always the whole answer. Moreover the catenary power supply, with its own 'incidents', is a quite different challenge to that of managing train movements, but passenger train punctuality is around 97%.

But this superb building, designed by world-famous architects Herzog and De Meuron, that won several architectural and town planning prizes a decade ago and was even lauded in Basel's promotional literature, will be almost redundant by 2015. All operations in northwest Switzerland will be concentrated at Olten. So also will the authority for action, emergency services and repairs. On a smaller scale this is like contemporary US railroad dispatching centres where, from a NASA-like centre in Omaha or Fort Worth, trains running thousands of miles away across a continent are controlled. The Basel centre will still grace the view of the station and its yard; but it will be an unmanned point for relays, computers and message transmission, operated not from upstairs but from Olten. In Zürich the new rail control centre for central and eastern Switzerland is out at the airport, which offers interesting scope for speculation on the next step. 

Swiss Tip

Looking for an old-fashioned station buffet? In Kandersteg some things never change. Unlike so many where the Station Restaurant is now a supermarket or fast-food takeaway, Kandersteg has a real restaurant, with a salad bar, a real menu with choices, and nothing over CHF20 (soup and main course), plus cheerful village ladies firmly in charge. Even in mid-November, a seriously off-peak time, it hums; all the railwaymen, council workers, postmen, housewives, shoppers, dog-owners and occasional tourists, drop in. As it is Switzerland 12.00 is the busy time. For CHF28 you can have 'The Menu' plus a beer and coffee. *You won't need supper.* 