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BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Der Beobachter reviews the Gotthard closure

No. 185 599 is in the 'waterfall' directly past the immobilized DB freight (think of that double-slip she's hammering through at 60 km/h, and cringe, while retreating).
All photos: Der Beobachter

Since the opening of the Gotthard railway in 1882, respect for its mountain environment, part of the legend, has never lapsed. Snow, avalanches and rock falls, washouts and floods were always closer than one wished to think. Perhaps the incidents were more frequent 100 years ago, but summer and winter, they have never stopped. Ernst Mathys of the SBB compiled a list for them in 1941. Typical entries were: 15/2/1888 - Wassen, 4 avalanches, 6 dead, 2 days blocked, the Grand Duke and Duchess of Baden stranded in Luzern; 30/3/1888 - Avalanche from 2,600 m, snow up to 15m high, 435 labourers to dig clear; 28/10/1928 - Bridge destroyed, 3-days interruption; 6/2/1933 - Sisikon, gallery destroyed by rock fall, service maintained with steamship shuttle Flüelen – Brunnen; 1940 - Wassen, avalanche, train derailed, 100m track destroyed. Added to these examples were floods down the Reuss valley, more occurring in 1977, 1987 and 2005, that destroyed farms, embankments, roads and rails. A dramatic, half-fictional account featured in a famous classical novel, *'Der Nachtzug' – 'The Night Train'* by Isabelle Kaiser, writing in the 1890s when steam and single track were the reality. She describes the platelayer in Sisikon, who hears the storm, goes out into the night to find a huge fall blocking the line, and runs desperately to warn the southbound express, collapsing and dying as the engine, its brakes holding, grinds to a stop. A great story, but too often reality.

Despite many years of precautions, galleries and alarm systems, the risks still went on. After serious incidents near Gurtellen in January 1951 a series of slides then blocked the south side for 9 days. On December 21st 1962 the Italian Christmas traffic was at its height, with 35 southbound passenger trains scheduled in seven hours overnight. Three small avalanches near Wassen were followed by a big one,

which derailed a northbound parcels train. Ten trains were standing on the north ramp, whilst on the south several trains of empty stock were heading north with the next day's trains. The chosen solution was to move them back and route them over the Lötschberg, then still also single line and with its long mountain ramps of 1 in 37. In two days 64 trains were diverted, in the circumstances an achievement. A pointer to 2012 was that in Italy the FS had to sort out the motive power, personnel and routings from Domodossola onwards. So much for history. What happened in 2012?

A heavy rock fall at Gurtellen on the 5th June caused one death, and a 28 day closure, the longest the Gotthard has ever known. This included time to clear the fall, appraise the source, blast the mountainside for future safety, and rebuild a double track railway. This time the contemporary, competitive intermodal and block freight train traffic was the greatest priority, not the passenger traffic. That was shuttled by bus between Flüelen-Göschenen taking an hour or two longer on the trip. Last summer the Brenner line was closed for renewal whilst the Mont Cenis was not really useful. There was only the BLS Lötschberg route, running typically 90 trains a day and, in emergency by using the old line, able to handle up to 135 trains/day. However the Simplon was single line, as one tunnel bore is undergoing a two-year renewal and the FS were rebuilding its long-neglected southern approach. The Achilles heel was at Domodossola where TrenItalia and FS Infrastructure had to sort out and run the extra trains; this let down some noble efforts elsewhere. The record on the Lötschberg route was 113 trains/day. However, the 'traffic operator' plans of the BLS, SBB Cargo, RAlpin and Federal Transport Office BAV, meant that trains ran as far as possible at maximum load, with priority for dangerous goods forbidden in the highway tunnels, but an important share o

intermodal cargo. Just moving the trains was only part of the job: paths; locos; crews; route knowledge; banking engines over the old line; all had to fit. The accountancy afterwards is another nightmare with SBB and the BAV suspecting that it all cost well over CHF20m. An interesting question is where some of the regular traffic went. It was not conspicuous on the Gotthard Autobahn, where police offers to escort urgent or dangerous cargo were not taken up, and hardly any was routed elsewhere by road. Some 'pipeline' products, or raw materials, were probably held back with customers using their stocks; some was substituted by other sources; some taken by sea. It was also just before the summer holidays, when some industries were quieter.

On June 25th, a rainy Monday, I went to Spiez, to see what was going on. Trains were everywhere: passenger; classic BLS freights, and diverted Gotthard loads. Engines of various liveries and types, sometimes in odd pairings, hauled long freights through the station. Classes Re4/4, 185, 421, 465, 485, 486; BLS, DB Cargo, Crossrail, SBB Cargo, MRCE; blue, green, red, black or (Crossrail) just dirty; in twos, threes and fours. There was a lot of traffic, and I thought of that mostly double-track from Spiez to Bern Wankdorf over which everything, including S-Bahn and Intercity passengers, had to pass, and again beyond Olten to MuttENZ. Things were not made easier by a full-length southbound mixed freight that normally used the Gotthard to Chiasso, standing on the Spiez 'back roads', with DB-Schenker and BLS locomotives and a disconsolate driver. His train had some flat wagons of steel pipes from Germany, which, given the heavy rain, had been thoughtfully sheeted over. String, however seemed to be in short supply with the oddments holding the sheets of little use. In 2011 a loose wagon sheet shorted-out the catenary, causing the destructive fire that blocked the Simplon Tunnel. Now people are a bit sensitive, so an orange-waterproof-clad examiner with a bale of string was out there, in the rain, redoing all the lines. It was a terrible job, taking at least two hours, having to stop for example when a northbound Crossrail freight came down like a waterfall off the main line and thumped past on the adjacent track. The work was inspected periodically by two supervisors. This is not good when you are trying to get 130 trains a day through this eye of a needle. After lunch, the train had gone, taking its chance now for a path and engine in Domodossola. Before I left it had stopped raining and I was cheered by a block train of Norfolk Line containers, a familiar sight on the Gotthard, pulling out cleanly for the south under clear signals as if to say, 'That's how we do it'.

Apart from the spontaneous co-operation of the usually fiercely competitive operators, which certainly got more cargo through, a major political wish has emerged. Open Access and competition for train paths are working fairly well in much of Europe. What is totally missing, despite warnings several years ago, is any form of strategic overview of the international routes. This was made worse by simultaneous



TOP: 485 504 is a Norfolk Line load with its impressively symbolic green lights.

MIDDLE: 485 001 just shows the congestion at this time.

BOTTOM: 'Pulling the strings' for the pipe wagons (there were more down the train); it was a big and dirty job.

major track work, closing key parallel routes, and by a significant lack of co-operation between different infrastructure owners. The European Rail Network of the policy makers was too weak. It's difficult, and resources are always limited; but June 2012 showed that things could be much better. That's one for the EU and the European Rail Authority. 