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Autor: Stone, Bryan
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IT HAPPENS IN THE BEST OF FAMILIES!

Bryan Stone

Three Tangos at Ettingen. Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

I walked out of Basel SBB at 09.25 on a June Wednesday morning, to catch a BLT Line 10 tram from the station forecourt. A 7 minute interval service, a 26 minute ride and 5 minutes' walk, would see me home. The 'real time' digital indicator showed a 3 minute wait, but underneath was the threat: due to a 'Betriebsstörung' - a 'service breakdown' - as the route between Heuwaage to Hüslimatt (about a 14-minute run, between two points with turning circles) was blocked. 'Take the substitute bus service. Thank you for your comprehension'... At the Heuwaage outward-bound trams were being turned round and sent back to Dornach. A crowd was waiting. Mobile phones were much in evidence. Having a nose for trouble I quickly discovered that there had been 'an accident' just after 09.00, and the first bus was still on its way. At 09.50 an articulated yellow BLT bus arrived, we all piled in, and it served the roadside tram stops (some have no loudspeakers, so people didn't know). After a 25 minute trip we pulled into the yard at Hüslimatt with a crowd of passengers waiting to go back by bus to Basel. Hüslimatt is the location of the extensive and modern depot of the BLT (it would make a good SRS visit some time), and trams were being turned via a trip through the depot. All was friendly and calm, and we were soon on a turned-back tram serving the outer end of the line to Rodersdorf. But it took me 65 minutes to get home rather than 38 minutes.

We had not seen the accident, but information revealed that it was at the north (Basel) end of Oberwil station, where the double-track tram line is not at the roadside. On the long right-hand approach curve, a Line 17 (peak-hour only service) returning empty to the

depot had paused behind a Line 10 tram stopped at the station. The next tram on Line 10, a nearly new 'Tango', on a sunny clear morning with good visibility and a dry rail, following up briskly, failed to stop. A sharp, but not disastrous, rear-end collision with two slight injuries and some CHF 200,000 of damage to trams (without derailing), was the result. As the Police announced at first, 'the cause is unclear'. That was an understatement, for this was an incident that 'could not happen'! The result of the internal enquiry followed quickly; the driver of the rear tram had, despite full visibility, been caught out, misjudged the distance, and made a normal brake application, too late to stop. The enquiry said that an emergency stop would have prevented the collision, but this is often associated with risks to passengers. Since the section involved is legally a tramway, trams can follow, as in the city, on sight without absolute block. But the ability of the Tangos to stop in their length in all conditions is not in question. There remains an uncomfortable feeling. It shouldn't happen, very seldom does and, barring other possible factors not made public, can probably only be avoided by training and supervision. The emergency reaction had been very professional, and it was all cleared up, with normal service resumed, by 12.00. Even in Switzerland these things happen.

Editor's Note: Our Swiss News Editor Bryan is also a historian of the BLT's Basel - Rodersdorf Line 10 (that also crosses the frontier en-route to serve the French community of Leymen) of the former BTB, and has recently written a series of looking-back articles for his local newspaper. These recall that they used to do much more hair-raising things in 'the old days'. Bryan hopes soon to supply an English language version of these interesting articles for the entertainment of our members. 