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THE SWISS NATIONAL RAILWAY 1875 – 1878

Bryan Stone



523 004-0 is at Zofingen.

All photos: Bryan Stone

A Swiss National Railway? As *Swiss Express* readers will know, there is no national railway in Switzerland. The Swiss Federal Railway SBB/CFF/FFS is national in law and in spirit, but doesn't go everywhere (who knows which Canton is not served by SBB?*). Around half of the network is provided by private and Cantonal undertakings, with often very different ideas. But since we tend to think that the Swiss are rational people who often get things right, let's look at a disaster. But first, what is a national railway? The SBB was created out of the leading private railways, with a law published in 1897

after approval by both houses of the Federal parliament and endorsed by a popular majority of 68% in February 1898. With legal and financial transition complete, the SBB was inaugurated on January 1 1902. The success of the vote was very properly seen at the time as a victory of 'The people' against monopolists and speculators, - a not unfamiliar thought today as well – and the SBB has proved a most successful arrangement. The underlying sentiment was also that of the first Swiss National Railway, the Schweizerische Nationalbahn (SNB). This too set out, in 1875, in the face of bitter political disappointment over the



then very powerful private railway companies, to restore the common interest. It was, however, a total failure, leading in 2-years to bankruptcy. Moreover, the private companies reacted badly to the SNB debacle, engendering widespread economic depression and still failing to meet public expectations. Twenty five years later, the electorate would take its revenge. Whatever was going on?

The SNB was a political creation, supported by the region of Winterthur and by many towns, and people, who felt that they were being ignored by the private railway companies - above all by the Nord-Ost-Bahn (NOB) and its chairman Escher-Wyss. The reproach that 'Zürich and its dividends' was the NOB's only concern was perhaps justified, as was the claim that arch-conservative banking Zürich ignored radical, i.e. socialist, industrial, Winterthur. There was ignorance on both sides. But it was foolish to ignore that the NOB's 9% dividend had to be earned. The NOB was one of the seven private railways of more than local interest, that had emerged prior to the new Railway Law of 1872, which took railway regulatory affairs from the Cantons and put them in the hands of the Confederation. In 1871, the NOB had 213km of route and its 9% dividend was on a capital of CHF75m. Equally prosperous was the Basel-based Swiss Central Railway (SCB) with 239km of track, and also a 9% dividend on a capital of CHF86m. At the other extreme was the Suisse-Occidentale (SO) that later became the Jura - Simplon with 328 km of route, capital of CHF144m but a dividend of only 1.24%. Clearly the NOB and the SCB, with big cities, transit traffic and an early industrial base, while much of Switzerland was still poor, were doing well. But the SCB also had an excellent public reputation; the NOB did not.

Here were the explosive ingredients for an uprising in Winterthur. The industrialist Jakob Sulzer, also Winterthur's Mayor, together with the Berner railway populist Stämpfli, set out to build a new 'railway of the people' and teach the NOB a lesson. They would connect up the country from northeast to southwest, on a



SBB 520 class is on the main line at Oberentfelden whilst the track in the right foreground leads to the goods yard.

new route, independent of Zürich, Basel, Luzern, etc, which were in the hands of their 'public enemies'. The obvious problem was that this didn't leave very much to go on. The planned extremities were Singen and Kreuzlingen (near Konstanz, Germany) and Vevey in the Vaud, and the route was to pass through Winterthur, Baden, Lenzburg, Suhr, Zofingen, Solothurn and Payerne. Branches were planned, but with hindsight someone should have asked where the traffic might come from. The SNB management was also good on dogma and polemic, but lacked railway management skills. This would show up later. Building railways also needs a lot of money. The institutional private shareholders were

The perfectly surviving station house at Oberentfelden with rollböcke on the meter gauge which were all sent for scrap when the freight service was officially stopped in Dec 2012.



reluctant to build a line to compete with their own profitable companies, but the communes, especially those left aside by other lines, were driven by the political aims of the promoters. Many took up shares; some made substantial loans; capital of CHF31m was raised.

The 74km eastern section was built first and opened in 1875 from Singen and Kreuzlingen to Winterthur. It was built to a low standard, but cost much more than planned despite following a circuitous single-track route. However, it made a profit of CHF316/km in the first year. This was the only bright note. In October 1877 the 85km western section from Winterthur to Zofingen was opened, in part as a roadside single line. The SNB made a loss of CHF3,435/km in 1877, meanwhile the NOB earned a profit of CHF14,900/km. The SNB was now carrying some 7,300 passengers/km of route; the NOB carried, and at higher fares, around double this. By early 1878 suppliers, and the bond interest, could not be paid. There was not enough even to pay for the train service. The Federal tribunal imposed liquidation on the 20th February 1878. The vested interests jeered. A supreme irony was that the appointed administrator was a director of the NOB. In 1880 the NOB bought the SNB assets, land, buildings and plant, which had cost CHF31m for CHF3.1m! Those communes, which had guaranteed CHF9m for the western section of the line lost CHF8.5m. Winterthur had guaranteed CHF8m and would not pay off its debt until 1954, seventy six years later. However, for the railways as a whole, the challenge of the SNB was to have disastrous consequences. In order to protect their interests, the NOB and the SCB hastily applied, and obtained, concessions for a number of lines in the districts concerned. These then had to be built, but were a severe strain upon the companies concerned. For example, the SNB had been authorized to build on from Zofingen through Langenthal and Herzogenbuchsee to Lyss, some 62km. This project was a victim of the SNB's bankruptcy, but the SCB had by then undertaken to build the Gäubahn



between Olten-Oensingen-Solothurm-Lyss, on its own account. The NOB built new lines around Eglisau, Bülach and Baden, and both undertook to build jointly the Bötzberg Line from Pratteln, near Basel, to Brugg. There were other repercussions, but all fell in a period where the economy collapsed, and several companies, now over-committed, became dangerously close to insolvency. The big companies never really recovered, investments were neglected, services were cut back, and the popular sentiment was such that the nationalization of the big companies in 1898 was almost a foregone conclusion.

However the SNB did not disappear. The NOB took over its concession and continued to operate it under its own rules. The eighteen engines, twelve 2-6-0Ts for passenger trains; four 2-6-0Ts for freight trains, and a further two 0-6-0Ts, were small but competent, entered NOB service but did not survive the century. The track





was only suitable for a secondary service, and that is just what most of it became. Passenger trains and local S-Bahn services still use parts of the erstwhile SNB: Lenzburg - Suhr - Zofingen - Wettingen-Effretikon; Wettingen - Seebach; Winterthur - Ezwilen - Konstanz, and a long these lines a number of original SNB station houses survive. Aarau-Suhr is now used by the metre-gauge AAR. Between 1905 and 1909 the Oerlikon Company was loaned the Seebach-Wettingen section to test its first electric locomotives and equipment, which would evolve into the system today, used by SBB and throughout Central Europe and Scandinavia. Some sections of the SNB were closed, but two features are still of interest. One is the line from Etwilen to Singen, the only SBB line never electrified. It is closed, but is used by a museum railway, between Stein-am-Rhein and Ramsen. This section includes the SNB's great lattice steel bridge over the Rhein at Hemishofen, which is now a national monument. The other is the real surprise, for between Gruemet (Wettingen) and Lenzburg, on the Heitersberg cut-off, used by the heavy traffic to and from Zürich, you are also on a section of line originally built by the SNB. The long-dead promoters must be rejoicing in their railway heaven. 

* *The canton not served by the SBB?*
Appenzell (Innerrhoden).

Opposite Page.

TOP. Obviously a busy bike day at Suhr SNB Bahnhof.

BOTTOM. The flat crossing at Suhr.

This page.

TOP. Stammheim Bahnhof.

MIDDLE. The station building at Etwilen.

BOTTOM. The track side of Stein am Rhein Bahnhof.