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“THREE GO TO SWITZERLAND”

In the year of the BLS Centenary
Bryan Stone looks back
to the early 50s



In black and white days, one of the BLS large articulated locos hauls a freight through Kandersteg.

Photo: Bryan Stone

Your correspondent rides over new railways in Switzerland, France, Germany, even Britain, and takes them largely as given. Yet it still seems to him today remarkable, that at his first view of the BLS in 1951, it was still only 38 years old. The railway from Spiez to Brig was still single track. Of the 13 great 1E1 locomotives (Class Be5/7) Nos.151 – 163, with which the railway started from scratch in 1913 on Switzerland's first mainline electrification, and despite their inherent snags, only five had been withdrawn. One 1E1, ex-No.161 now numbered No.151, stands in the Verkehrshaus in Luzern. Trains were long and frequent and most of the British connecting traffic, in summer several trains daily, still ran not through Basel, but via Delle and Porrentruy and were steam hauled across France on the old Nord-Est main line via Tergnier/Laon. That was the BLS 'main line', including the Grenchen tunnel, which the BLS still owns. The 8 Ae6/8 locos Nos. 201-208, first built in Italy in the late 1920s, were by now the stars of the show, and the 8 Ae4/4 locos Nos. 251-258 were new pioneering Bo-Bo high-speed machines that led the world. The porters' smocks, the drivers' striped blue overalls, the smart station masters, the post and baggage trolleys, all completed a harmony, in which freight cars from all over Europe, great blue Wagons-Lits sleepers, blue or red restaurant cars, through passenger cars from many railways, and the BLS' own heavy day-cars, were the players.

As a 13 year old I did not know much of this, but what I knew was well supported, for 'Trains Annual'

always featured articles by its Editor, Cecil J. Allen, on Swiss railways, and he loved the BLS - I still do! So those endless viaducts, cliff-hanging ledges and great brown engines, and the (to British postwar eyes) beautiful stations at Spiez, Blausee-Mitholz or Kandersteg, with their geraniums and their light and shade, and the backdrop of lakes, forested slopes, Rhone valley and Blümlisalp, were already icons of the Switzerland we thought we knew, long before I came to live and work here in 1968. Today the BLS celebrates 100 years of operation of its key mountain route and tunnel. Today it's much quieter in Kandersteg, for apart from the Automobile shuttle to Goppenstein there are only the hourly stoppers, normally 'Lötschberger' railcars, and an occasional freight for which the new base tunnel has no path. This is always full of today's trains, which are incidentally nothing like the old ones.

Kandersteg was somehow the classic British destination. Some of the blame must go to a lady who wrote some 130 young peoples' books, one of which was the unforgettable 'Three go to Switzerland', published in 1953. This was Mabel Esther Allan (1915 to 1998) born in Wallasey, who wrote surprisingly progressively for 1953, to champion self-discipline and freedom of thought for young people. This shows in 'Three go...' as the three teenage girls, going with mother for family reasons to live in Kandersteg, each find their way, grow up and by the end the oldest starts to fall in love. But my fascination for this book is not only admiration of her educational principles, but her

command of the railway, the journey and the environment. Her details are perfect; she knows those trains, and a Kandersteg still recognizable today.

First, on the Wirral, the bags are labeled, Kandersteg via London Victoria, Folkestone, Boulogne, Delle. *“Mother explained that we were going all the way to Kandersteg by through train, for, although it is only a small Alpine village, Kandersteg is on the famous*

Lötschberg line and a great many International trains stop there”. Yes, they did, right up to 2004. The family stays overnight in London, and they seem to have taken the 16.30 boat train from Victoria to Folkestone, for the story picks up at Boulogne, still in ruins after the war. *“There isn’t a dining car”* says mother, correctly, but they have coffee and sandwiches with them. The cases were chalk-marked by an indifferent douanier (remember that?) and a porter took them to the reserved seats (these were obligatory), on the 20.30 from Boulogne Maritime. The seats were *‘near the back of a very long black train’*, just two cars labeled *‘Lötschberg Line Boulogne - Brig’*. There was a sleeper but that was not for this family, who slept fitfully, as so many did, in their seats. In the night they awake stopped *‘in some big, empty echoing station’*, where they finished mother’s coffee flask, perhaps Laon where engines were changed. From here the engine was usually an Est 241A. They awake again after dawn in Belfort (probably at 04.49!) where they buy croissants and coffee from a platform trolley, and then at Delle *‘the French Customs came... and stamped passports, and then we reached Porrentruy and the Swiss ones came’*. Mother had to go to identify the trunk, registered from Victoria and now in the Fourgon, and *‘the station seemed dismal and anything but romantic’*. Nothing has changed! My 1953 timetable shows that the Boulogne – Brig cars which had left Delle at 06.00 after a 20 minute stop, stood again for 21 minutes during this exercise in Porrentruy. *“Somewhere,”* says 14 year old narrator Hanni *“probably at the frontier, we had got electrified”*. Clever girl: this was also at Delle, to which the SNCF 241A could run. *“We could see hills’ but no snow yet. Just the glimpse we had of Bern looked lovely”*, this would be from the Lorrainebrücke by the station. The train reversed here and would again have been taken apart and re-marshalled, as the timetable shows an assortment of through cars, Paris and Boulogne via Delle to Brig and Interlaken, Paris via Pontarlier to Interlaken, Basel to Italy, and so on, which set off after a 27 minutes’ stop,



SBB 460 063 calls at Kandersteg on 28th September 2006, still with a loco hauled passenger train . Photo: Mark Barber

in two great caravans, five minutes apart. *‘When we got to Spiez the station was very gay, with geraniums and petunias all over, and a very important looking man with a red top to his hat and a red leather satchel ... and they then are spellbound by a glimpse of snow through the morning mist. This could be the Altels, above the Gemmi pass behind Kandersteg. They stop at Frutigen for the Adelboden passengers, and then suddenly, they are climbing alongside the Kander river with its tunnels, steep cliffs and reverse curves at Blausee, and ‘shot out into a green valley, with chalets dreaming in the sun, and the train stops as a porter shouts Kandersteg’*, probably at about 10.28. It had been a 14 hour journey from Boulogne. The rest of the story, though they make excursions to Interlaken, Mürren and so on, need not concern us, but when I read this account today in 2013 it is strikingly authentic in all details, and I am back there in Kandersteg, with my parents, watching the BLS, over 60 years ago. We were two years ahead of Hanni, and her mother and sisters, but they were certainly there. Perhaps they still are? ☞

Whilst much of Kandersteg will have changed over the years, the church still remains as a constant reminder of times past.

Photo: Tony Bagwell

