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Autor: [s.n.]

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The first Swiss state railway

s'Murmeli looks at the 150th anniversary of the Bern – Langnau line.

465 001 at Luzern Bhf. *Photo:* s'Murmeli

Looking at the map of railways around Bern it is difficult today to detect the pattern of their building. The reader needs to know that for the proud and historic Canton Bern, the fear of being marginalized by the big private railways was a real threat, so measures were taken already in the 1850s to protect Bern's interests. These did not coincide with those of Zürich, which Bryan Stone looked at in the context of the Nationalbahn in SE116, nor Basel. In Bern Basel's Swiss Central Railways (SCB), which had almost by-passed Bern with its line to Geneva, was the opponent, and the emergence of an SCB north-south policy based on the Gotthard, agreed internationally in 1870, showed Bern's weaknesses again. Bern's needs were therefore expressed in its own network of local lines, later known as the Decree Lines, with strategic routes to Neuchâtel, Biel and Luzern. The last, through Konolfingen and Langnau, built in direct competition to the SCB's direct line Olten-Bern, has long been one of my favourites. However it always seemed, for a link between two major cantons and the national capital Bern, curiously rural, a winding, steeply graded, single line meandering past farmhouses and hugging riverbanks through the foothills. I only learned later how many factors had been at play.

Principally the object was not to link Bern and Luzern, which were two cities as diametrically opposed as could be. Protestant versus Catholic. Long term rivals with grand ideas of their historical vocation. Bern had been newly chosen as Capital of the Confederation. Luzern was in 1850 still smarting after its defeat in the Sonderbund war of 1848, a Catholic civil war of secession led by Luzern against Zürich and the protestant cantons. But for Bern to reach the main north-south transalpine corridors, Luzern was the key. A private company with Bernese encouragement was formed, the Ost-West-Bahn, which obtained a Berner concession in 1857 to build the line to the cantonal boundary in Kröschenbrunnen, just beyond Langnau. The concession also included the line between Biel/Bienne and Bern. Another concession provided for the Luzern section from there to Zug. However, before the line to Langnau could be opened, the Ost-West-Bahn was bankrupt. In 1861 the Bernese Parliament took over the concessions for the lines Biel – Bern and Bern - Langnau and built them, becoming Switzerland's first state-owned railway. Federal Counsellor Jakob Stämpfli of Bern, who had fought for a National network, against the

TOP LEFT: Sihtalbahn stock stabled at Langnau. *Photo:* David Adams

LEFT: 465 003 at Wolhusen with a Luzern train. *Photo:* s'Murmeli

private capital interests of Zürich, and lost supported this project that was opened to Langnau in 1864 – 150 years ago. Naturally, Bern – Langnau could not pay; nor did it reach the proposed Gotthard. Here the SCB tried a 'dirty trick' by planning a cut-off line from Langenthal to Wauwil, north of Sursee on the SCB main line Olten – Luzern. This would have left Bern sitting on its useless and costly stump. The SCB got its concession, and work began. A financial crisis soon obliged the SCB to give up, but there are still some remains of this out in the fields.

After more infighting, the Bernese voted to finance the extension of the line from Langnau to Luzern. In 1870 Bern also voted financial support to join the Gotthard project, thus giving up their hope of a Grimselbahn referred to in the article in SE 115 about Interlaken's Bödelibahn. The former concession from Luzern to Zug had been sold in 1861 to the Nordostbahn, which thus obtained its access to Luzern, very busy today and also used by Gotthard trains from the south. On completion of the through Bern – Luzern line, cheaply built as today's alignment shows, Bern had to realise that it could not be profitable. In 1877 it was bankrupt again. But by now there was a new factor. The Prussian army had occupied Alsace in 1870. Basel was no longer on the French frontier, or on the preferred route from the Channel ports and Paris to the south. Bern, however, was. It sat on the new route from Paris via Belfort, Delle and Porrentruy, partly with its own state-promoted network, which would later feed the Lötschberg. For the moment it saw a chance to gain transit traffic to the Gotthard from the North. The Jura-Bern-Luzern Bahn was formed to promote the link from Bern to Luzern, and also built the Brünig line, opened in 1889 from Brienz to Luzern. In 1890, through a range of widespread mergers, all this became part of the Jura-Simplon, the biggest Swiss private railway, but (as should now be apparent) not the most profitable. The JS had a lot of 'lost causes', including Bern – Luzern, to nurture. In 1903 again, the JS became, with other private railways, part of the SBB.

The strategic role of Bern – Langnau – Luzern with the Gotthard was never realised. Before WWI the Simplon and Lötschberg lines took away its residual significance, and it remained a rural route between two very different cities. It was electrified in 1934, but lost out repeatedly in the post war planning. In 2001 the SBB gave passenger service operations (but not infrastructure) to the BLS; and since 2004, with the high-speed line Bern-Olten and the renewal of the 'strategic curve' Rothrist - Zofingen, the regular interval Inter-Regio trains go that way – shades of the SCB's long-forgotten Langenthal – Wauwil project, its embankments slumbering out in the country to the south. So today the SBB works some freight, while BLS works various S-Bahn services on sections of the route, including connections with its Emmental lines. But you can still take a semi-fast from Bern to Luzern via Langnau and, as we all should, enjoy the 95km ride. Motive power, for a short while yet, may still be a BLS Class 465 'Big Blue'. The watershed between Emme (Bern) and Entlebuch (Luzern) is at Escholzmatt, 852m above sea level. Up from Luzern there is a 20 km climb on a 1 in 45 grade. On the south side there are striking mountain views up the side valleys, but the real charm is in the intimacy of the villages along the way. It is still as beautiful as ever. ✚

1. BLS 465 001 and SBB 460 059 on the buffer stops at Luzern HB. *Photo:* s'Murmeli

2. *On a sunny day, a RM Bahn train stops at Wolhusen.* *Photo: Phil Weaver*

3. 465 011 at Langnau with RE 271109. *Photo:* s'Murmeli

4. The photographer gets a suspicious look from a local as a BLS train pulls into Konolfingen. *Photo:* Bremgarten