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Ferrovia Mesolcinese

Christian Ammann explores the current situation on this line

AG2 Association at Cama taking parts from Appenzellerbahn Motorcar No. 2 for their historical ABe 4 4 30. All photos: Christian Ammann

In the March 2014 *Swiss Express* we reported on the “Last Day” of operations (the 27th October 2013) on the Ferrovia Mesolcinese (Ex-RhB) tourist line operated by SEFT (Società Esercizio Ferroviario Turistico) between Castione-Arbedo and Cama in Cantons Ticino and Graubünden. It will be recalled that this volunteer-operated museum railway had to cease operations due to the Federal Office for Streets (ASTRA) wishing to use some of the railway alignment for highway improvement schemes. Canton Ticino had also requested that the railway be closed as its continued operation would not allow them to complete the redevelopment of Castione-Arbedo station for TILO services. Following this big event, when some 763 individual trips were made on SEFT, all its friends started a period of hope and prayer that the Federal authorities would have a change of mind on the situation. As they had to assume that the closure would go ahead it was decided to bring all the rolling stock that remained at Castione up the line to the workshop area at Grono, and this move took place on 17th December with the operation of the longest train to run on the line.

Although the concession for regular and professional passenger transport expired at the end of 2013, the Federal concession for construction and work on the infrastructure still allowed a restricted operation of trains until such time as its expected cancellation by the Federal Council took place. This decision took time, because it was the first time in the history of Swiss railways that a concession was to be cancelled against the wishes of its holder, and it would set a precedent for other possible cases in the future with the potential for various indemnities having to be considered. ASTRA were

becoming impatient, as they wished to start work at Roveredo, whilst SEFT was in the situation of a totally uncertain future. Also on the political side ecological organisations were asking that all the railway alignment be kept free for a later reconstruction of the 7.3km Castione – Roveredo section at standard gauge for a future extension of TILO-trains to San Vittore or Roveredo. They also wished to preserve the museum railway, as it was one of the few touristic operations in the valley. By now ASTRA were waiting to gain access and SEFT could no longer operate ‘public’ trains. However on 10th April and 27th May 2014 it operated one pair of ‘private’ trains between Castione and Grono. Finally the last run between Castione and Grono took place on 7th June when ABe 4/4 No.5 (ex Biasca-Acquarossa) finally returned to the Grono depot. About one week later, ASTRA started to remove tracks and catenary at Roveredo Station working towards Grono. From this moment all of the line was cut-off from the rectifier/converter sub-station at Roveredo meaning that none of the motorcars could move. SEFT was able to recover 27m of track at Roveredo and in July used this to install a second track inside of the Grono depot. This new track is isolated from the other tracks and is used for stabling all the rolling stock that cannot be used for operations. Due to the lack of power all movements around the depot now have to be undertaken using road vehicles and ropes.

On 4th August the Federal Council took the decision to cancel SEFT’s concession on the lower part of the line between Castione-Arbedo and the Calancasca bridge south of Grono, in order to allow the road construction to go ahead. However SEFT retains the concession, which is valid until 2020, for the

3.5km of line from Grono to Cama, but without electric power they cannot run any trains. This has meant that the only public activity SEFT could organise in 2014 was to invite interested people to visit the depot Grono on two Sundays in September and October. The most difficult problem facing the organisation will be reintroducing an electricity supply. Although possible, to relocate the old mercury converter to Grono (it dates from 1907 and was already removed from Cebbia near Mesocco in the 1960s) would not be an optimal solution. Keeping the power equipment at the existing location and running an underground cable link would be very expensive. Use of a diesel generator at Grono would not be possible on the grounds of noise and pollution from the exhaust, as well as other associated technical and financial difficulties. So SEFT needs a second-hand converter from another railway company that is modernising its power supply equipment.

In practice SEFT has not decided on its future strategy. This may be still with its remaining infrastructure in the Valle Mesolcina, or it may be operating their collection of historic trains elsewhere. It may decide to simply become a museum exhibiting its rolling stock collection. In the interim safety installations (such as level crossing equipment) and parts of catenary on the closed section have been removed to the depot area of Grono for eventual use on the northern part of the line. If SEFT intends to get a new concession for regular and professional passenger transport the Federal Transport Office will need to inspect all installations and infrastructure. Another problem is the requirement to have all level crossings modified and upgraded before the end of 2014, something that will not be possible within the time scale.

On the plus side, the section of recovered track laid in Grono depot now allows all the important coaches and railcars (ex RhB/BM and BA) to be kept inside: BDe 4/4 No. 6 (ex RhB 491); ABe 4/4 No. 5 (ex BA); B 51 & B52 (historical BM coaches from Ringhoffer); D 11 (ex RhB D 4002 'Chocolate factory Dangio'); Z 57 and B 12 (both BA and needing restoration). Railcar No. 2 ex Appenzellerbahn has been scrapped after recovery of spares by association AG2; Railcar No.1 has been donated, together with the flat wagon Kkl 69 (in time to be assigned as a wagon for cycle transport) to the company Censi in Grono; coach Bt 29 (ex trailer SZB/RBS) may go to the Vivarais railway in France. For Xkl 81 and 82 (ex RhB) the Blonay – Chamby Museum Railway may be interested.

Since 1995 SEFT has had to confront very difficult situations and had many problems to solve. During many years the little preservation group tried to save the 13km touristic line between Castione and Cama and kept going until the decisions of the Federal Administration Court and the Federal Council were implemented. When this article was being written it was not clear if SEFT will continue, restarting operations on the remaining section of its track. This is now an isolated short line without its former direct connection to the historic Gotthard route, which in future is to be used for touristic and historical railway activities! And anyway, until a solution to the lack of electric power is found, no trains could run again from Grono to Cama. A sad situation. 



1. Stock awaiting repairs Inside the works.
2. Removing the crossing at Castione-Arbedo .
3. Track lifted from Roveredo station.
4. The tracks and catenary were still in place from Castione to Roveredo.