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The Zentralbahn saves the Day

Rosemary and Colin Stone recall an efficient Swiss incident response



ABOVE: You can see the rear of the train and its proximity to the level crossing.

RIGHT: You can just make out the remains of the car behind the fireman on the right

PHOTOS: Colin and Rosemary Stone

In September 2010, whilst staying in Wilderswil we went to Luzern for the day electing to return on the 15.55 Brünig line service for the 2 hour journey to Interlaken Ost. This gave a fairly tight connection for the 5 minute trip on the BOB back to Wilderswil in time to relax before our evening meal. Having joined the train, and found seats in the second coach behind a Class 101 loco, departure was prompt. After passing through Horw, we were traversing the then recently doubled section of line towards Hergiswil, when suddenly the driver gave a prolonged blast on the whistle, and the brakes were applied – hard! There was a soft thud on the outside of our coach, and the train gently came to a stand. We had hit a car at a level crossing. The locomotive had collided with the car, and pushed it to the left of the track, where it bounced back off a stout steel electrification mast coming to rest fouling the train. Fortunately there was no one in the car at the time of the impact, as it appeared that the occupant(s), having stalled on the crossing, then made good their escape when the barriers were lowered trapping their vehicle.

Within a couple of minutes a female member of the train crew came through the train to ensure everyone was uninjured and to advise us - in both German and perfect English - that we would be there for a while. Nobody was hurt, as there was no jolt to the train at all. The local emergency services were quickly on the scene and in about 10 minutes single line working had been set up with trains passing the scene at low speed. After about 20 minutes, the lady returned to the coach asking us to make our way to the rear of the train where we alighted from the last door of the rear coach,

helped down by two firemen. Walking along the track to the level crossing we were ushered past the remains of the car and onto waiting buses that returned us to Horw station.

Here the departure indicator boards were showing the next Interlaken train was the 16.55 service from Luzern, delayed by 20 minutes, and stopping additionally at Horw. It was unclear if the train was delayed because of the single line operation, or whether it was done to ensure we had all safely arrived at Horw to catch it. At the predicted time it duly arrived, we all piled on, and as we resumed our journey thoughts returned to time of arrival for our evening meal, as after around 19.00 trains to Wilderswil are only hourly. Due to our late running any opposing trains were already waiting for us at each passing point, so with smart station work particularly at Meiringen, time was gradually clawed back. Arrival at Interlaken was about 4 minutes late, connections were maintained, and our arrival back at Wilderswil was exactly one hour later than planned. Impressive, or what? I have a feeling that if a similar incident had happened in the UK we could have been trapped on the train for hours.

Editor's Note. If the incident had involved a fatality I think even the Swiss response may have been slower! In defence of UK railways such an incident has to be classified as a crime scene by the Police, requiring a high level of on-site investigation and all operations being curtailed. Our rules would also not allow you to have walked back to the crossing on a 'live' railway. As someone who, in his professional life, had to deal with the aftermath of such incidents I think you got away lightly.