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The Blausee-Mitholz Disaster - Christmas 1947

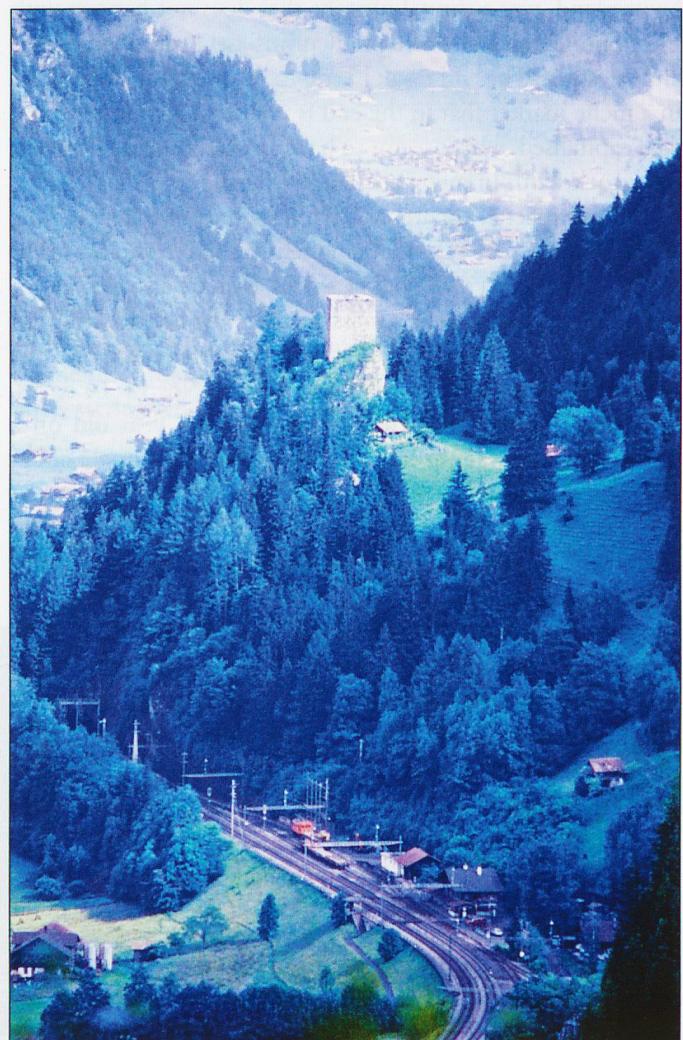
Bryan Stone

ABLS De4/5 motor luggage van No. 794 waits at the station.

All photos: Bryan Stone unless stated

Blausee-Mitholz was a station on the old Lötschberg line between Frutigen and Kandersteg, an attractive large chalet-style wooden building with stationmaster's residence and railway office. It was busy at times, with the Blausee tourist attraction a short walk away. On 30th May 1987 BLS buses on the valley road replaced the local train service, although the closed station remained and is still there. It is even more peaceful now with only an hourly 'Lötschberger', and occasional diversions from the Base Tunnel, passing through to raise a little dust. There are three tracks through the station, one just to serve the sidings north and south of the station building, today mainly used for occasional works trains. Your northbound train from Kandersteg travelling down the 1:37 grade to Spiez will first pass high on the cliffside above the station, giving a glimpse of Felsenburg Castle ruin, and perhaps of the Blausee in the woods below. Then it reverses direction in a 180° tunnel to run southwards through the station, for this, like Wassen on the Gotthard or Chamby on the MOB, was a station where the right train went apparently the wrong way. After this a great sweeping right-hand 180° curve restores order again. Watch out here on the left, where a partly hidden siding takes off from the station yard, directly southwards, towards the next cliff-face. This siding introduces my story.

It is 20th December 2016 as I write. On this day 69 years ago Blausee-Mitholz suffered a disaster, today practically forgotten. Around midnight, a tremendous explosion shook the valley. Further blasts followed; they would go on for over a week. Nine persons at least were dead, as were some farm livestock. Many were injured. The station building had disappeared. The single-track main line, the road in the valley and some twenty houses in the village of Mitholz were buried



Kander valley: Blausee-Mitholz station, Felsenburg and in distance, Frutigen.

in rubble. What had happened?

The siding from the station led to a series of underground caverns, carved some 150m into the cliff, entered through a tunnel mouth. The caverns housed about 7,000t of military explosives, laid-up since WW II. It was estimated that at least 3,000t exploded in waves, bringing down the cliff face and scattering rocks, bombs and shells over the valley. Debris fell up to 1.8km distant. Most of the munitions thrown out did not detonate, or damage might have been much worse. There was mercifully no passing train at the moment of explosion. The blast took two main directions. One was directly outwards from the cliff face towards Mitholz and the valley floor. The other, disastrous for the buildings and stationmaster (he and his son were both killed), was directed as though by a cannon out of the siding tunnel directly at the station some 250m away. It was reported that he had always feared such an event.

Contrary to some reports I have read, there was no cover-up; the press were present the following day and there were many gestures of sympathy. This was not a wealthy place and relief supplies for the injured and homeless were sent from all over Switzerland. Accommodation was found at Kandergrund outside the danger zone, firstly in small hotels and then with farmers and residents. The still existing charity organisation 'Glückskette' raised CHF80,000 at once (then a substantial sum) and more later. The total damage to buildings alone was estimated at CHF1,650,000. Today it is interesting that a Commission was set up immediately to ensure rebuilding in the regional chalet style, fitting the needs and setting. This commenced in late 1948. Today much has changed as spoil from the BLS base tunnel was deposited in the area, and road and the Kander river diverted. Mitholz is however still a sleepy corner, and the cliff stands in witness above the railway curve. The station was rebuilt as new by the BLS, and the siding, tunnel and underground store are still there. Two years later the investigation described the cause as a 'copper acid detonation' – the deterioration of a detonator after time. It wasn't the only similar explosion; another at Dailly on the shore of La Leman near Vevey also had destructive results. But Blausee was the one that shook the Swiss - and the BLS. 



TOP: Te2/2 No. 93 shunting on the spur. In the background is the entrance to the munitions store in 2002.

MIDDLE: Ae6/8 No. 207 on a local at Blausee-Mitholz in 1967. It shows a train to Kandersteg, houses of Mitholz, great cliff and debris, and also siding and door to munitions store. On the platform are my wife Joy and daughter Helen.

BOTTOM: A pair of BLS Re4/4s pass the station.

Photo: Geoff Dunster

LEFT: Blausee-Mitholz station (the Passat is one of my earlier ones) in 1992.

