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Reminiscences from Rafz.

Bob Medland

ABOVE: and W image of Swiss postman with mule.
LEFT: Feldhof.

Bob Medland's collection.
Photo: Bob Medland.



The enjoyable article about the two tramways to Gimel in December's *Swiss Express* reminded me of how my late stepmother was sent to work as an intern at the Post Office in the next-door commune of Saubraz for a year in 1937, mainly to learn French. Then aged just 15, her duties entailed working as an assistant to the local postmistress who was kindly, yet a disciplinarian. I gathered it was almost 'slave labour' as she received a pittance – plus board and lodging. I recall her telling me about how she had to deliver mail around this then very rural area in all weathers throughout the year.

The picture shows a village postman near Sion c1900. My stepmother's description of her duties and 'rounds' from Saubraz sounded very similar to that depicted, so little had changed to the Swiss rural postal services over those 30-years. She too had a mule or horse for carrying parcels on her rounds. She was required to wear a post office cap and carried a leather wallet – like that in the photograph – for carrying the essential labels, etc. as well as money collected for postage due, 'Nachnahme' (cash on delivery), etc. She recalled the considerable responsibility placed on a teenage girl and the relatively huge sums of cash with which she was entrusted, all alone in this rural area, including during the bitter winter weather that often shut the tramways as described in the article. But Switzerland was very much a cash economy in those days and the postman was sacrosanct. Very different times.

My stepmother came from Rafz in the north of Canton Zürich, literally on the border with Germany where it separates cantons Zürich and Schaffhausen. Born in 1922, those were hard times in Swiss rural communities and as a young child she was put in care with foster parents at the 'Feldhof' (Farmhouse) midway between Rafz and the hamlet of Wyl/Wil (ZH), when she was about six. She had many tales of the hard way of life, having to walk to and from school in

all weathers and then having to work on the farm when she got home, and the old farmhouse had no heating. The photograph (taken in 2016) shows the now much-changed 'Feldhof'. For me, a nice philatelic connection is a 'cover' from 1880, posted in Wil, which did not have a post office so it was sent to Rafz for a proper date stamp before being sent on its way – by TPO from Rafz station to Lausanne. Most likely it would have arrived the same day.

She reminisced how during WW2 everyone tuned in to the BBC and were always thrilled to hear the voice of Churchill – or "Khuerkhill" as they pronounced his name. Switzerland may have been neutral but mostly the people were very pro-British. She recalled how the German authorities permitted the SBB to continue running trains from Rafz through to Schaffhausen: the main line passes through Germany. At the last Swiss stations in both directions carriage doors had to be locked, window-blinds pulled down and, of course, the trains did not stop at SBB's Lottstetten and Jestetten stations. Living on the border with Nazi Germany made life interesting, especially as there were no fences or formal boundary markers. On one occasion she was riding her horse in the nearby woods along the border, when she suddenly found herself looking between the horse's ears at a 'coal-scuttle' helmet – underneath which was a German soldier. She had inadvertently strayed across the border. Fortunately the soldier was a decent sort who checked that no one else was looking and told her to get back into Switzerland "schnell" – and she did! Other villagers were not so lucky and the commune had to pay hefty fines for their return.

Bob Medland is the Librarian of the Helvetia Philatelic Society. 