

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2019)
Heft: 137

Artikel: Different times - 1951. Part 1, Geoffrey Bryson recalls his first trip to Switzerland in 1951
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853790>

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Different Times – 1951 (1)

Geoffrey Bryson recalls his first trip to Switzerland in 1951



E3/3 No.8480 at MuttENZ.

All photo: Bryan Stone

I started work in a City Merchant Bank in 1950 at sixteen. My parents were great travellers. My father by then worked for British Railways, having had a career that started with the Great Central Railway, then progressed with the LNER, before being absorbed into the staff of the nationalised railways in 1948. By 1950 privilege quarter-fare tickets had just become available on some West European Railways (the SNCF and SNCB were two - others only allowed half-fare) as things steadily became more normalised after the disruption of WW2. We obtained Blue Passports, signed by Ernest Bevin as Foreign Minister on behalf of King George VI, a joint one for my parents with two photos, and no visas required. I am now on my passport Number Eight.

The passports were marked by our bank for travellers cheques and Swiss Francs, which were limited to £50 per person, and for Switzerland had to be applied for early as there was a British Exchange Control limit on how much in total one could obtain. This followed the 1949 devaluation of sterling when the Swiss franc went down from 18 to 12.25 to the pound, suddenly making Switzerland very expensive. Fortunately travel tickets bought in Britain did not count against the £50 limit.

My mother had been into the Swiss Tourist Office in London seeking ideas on the real Switzerland and was recommended the Küssnacht-am-Rigi, plus the Gotthard Railway to Lugano for something special. So on Saturday 26th May 1951 we joined our 2nd Class carriage on the 2.30 pm steam-hauled boat train from London Victoria to Folkestone Harbour where we disembarked and boarded the ferry. Once

on-board there was a 'tannoy' announcement - "Mr Bryson return to Customs Hall". We had not realised that registered bags had to be cleared outbound! A smooth crossing to Calais where the Maritime Station still had no buildings or roof following wartime damage. Two trains waited at the low platforms with Blue Wagon Lits sleepers and diners headed by massive looking 2-8-2 American-built Class 141 steam locos, with all the pipes and fittings outside so unlike the Gresley locos we were used to. One was heading an express to Paris with through coaches heading for the Simplon route.

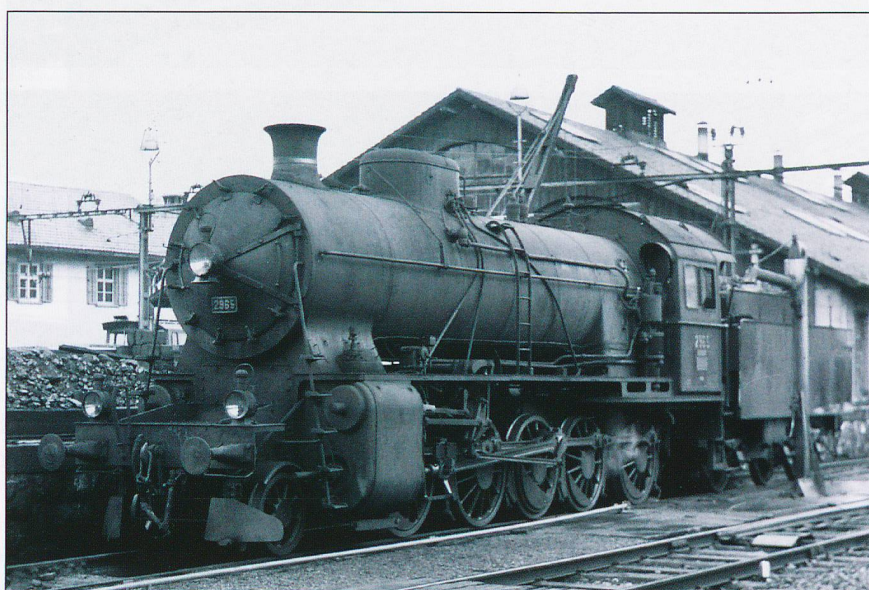
We boarded an SNCF 2nd Class Couchette coach on the 'Anglo-Swiss Express' for Basel and beyond, and after a picnic supper we had a reasonable sleep, though I remember peeping out at several places. Arriving in Switzerland at the Basel Elsässer Bahnhof (although SNCF, the name referred to the once separate Alsace railways) 'Basel Els Bhf' was stamped in our passports before we made our way to our SBB train. The majority of the Swiss railway network was electrified by 1951, although there was still steam operation of some freight workings. We joined a Gotthard-bound train, so clean, for Luzern where we had to wait for Customs to open. Then we took the local to Küssnacht-am-Rigi and a walk to the Hotel Hirschen with its wood-lined interior. The main dining room was being used by one of the town's 'Zunft' - Guilds, so lunch was served in the bar. We explored the church, lakeside, etc. and were back in time for dinner. Again this was in the bar as the 'Zunft' was still going on with speeches and singing. The bedrooms had floors that sloped, and the beds had enormous feather duvets so unusual

for us coming from 'Blanket Britain'.

In the next few days we walked along the lakeside; went part way up the Rigi; travelled to Hohle Gasse and Tell's Chapel, and towards Meggen to the 'Astrid Kapelle'. This was the site of the 1936 car-crash that killed the beautiful and popular Swedish-born Queen of the Belgians when King Leopold III was speeding - the start of his troubles. One day the station booking office (that is now scheduled for closure) helped us to go by local train to Arth-Goldau and on to Zürich Hauptbahnhof. In the city we marvelled at the food on display at Co-op St Annahof on Bahnhofstrasse (the UK was still suffering rationing), and changed money at Bank Leu by the Paradeplatz, little thinking that in eight and half years time I would be working there on a six-month secondment!

After a few days we again took the local train to Arth-Goldau, where the staff put us on the Travel Agents Special Calais-to-Chiasso service instead of the regular express. Like others before and since we marvelled at the complex tunnels as we ascended to the Gotthard Tunnel. We had a leaflet describing the route, and I recall that we enjoyed a picnic lunch that was bought at the bakery under the Hotel Hirschen. Arriving at Lugano station the Tourist Office told us the town was very busy with a National Bakers Convention, but we found a room at a small Pensionne - again part-bakery. In the 1980s, while lunching with one of my several Lugano banking contacts at the top of his building, I could see the corner shop and he said he used to buy cakes, buns, etc. there as a boy. Small world.

After exploring the town we had a ride from Paradiso up on the two-stage funicular to Monte San Salvatore. We also walked east to the foot of Monte Bre and the pretty villages on the lake. Taking an FLP metre-gauge electric train to Ponte Tresa, where after an exploration we showed our passports to cross over the international bridge into Italy and discovered rusting tracks and a derelict station of the 850mm-gauge local railway to Luino that had closed the previous year. On the 4th June, my 17th birthday, my mother and I left my father (who was feeling unwell) and used the remainder of our international ticket going to Chiasso, glimpsing 'Swissminiatur' as we crossed the moraine that divides the lake. At Chiasso Mum showed the joint passport (officially not valid for her alone) said "Him sick" and it was duly stamped several times. The passengers on the wonderfully



TOP: Ae4/7 No. 10987 at Spiez on a Bern train.

MIDDLE: C5/6 No. 2965 on Luzern shed.

BOTTOM: Glattfelden (ZH) a typical rural 1950s Swiss station.




TOP: No.10402 at Zürich HB.

MIDDLE: No.10682 at Lausanne on a local passenger working.

BOTTOM: SNCF 141R No.179 at Calais Maritime in 1951.

named trolleybus line the 'Società Trazione Elettrica Comense Alessandro Volta' (Volta was a native of Como) were happy to take good Swiss coins in exchange for lots of Italian lire notes for the fare, etc. Sadly this company closed down in 1955. We explored Como, looked at the famous lake, picniced, indulged in a Gelato, and then rode back on a trolleybus uphill to the station. Here the wonderful Blue Passport worked its magic again, stamped four times in total before re-entering Switzerland, allowing us to travel back to Lugano.

Moving-on we headed back over the Gotthard to Brunnen. In those days you could change an international ticket for a steamer ticket on Vierwaldstättersee. The paper international ticket was stamped "Nicht Gultig Flüelen – Luzern", and as we were on platform at Brunnen the train conductors shouted at us as the train departed. Whilst staying here we walked lakeside to Gersau, and in the other direction to the beginning of Axenstrasse, and also visited Schwyz, its museum and Kantonal buildings. On Friday 8th June, complete with luggage, we took a morning steamer to Luzern and our Basel train, marvelling en-route at the Bürgenstock lift and spotting the Rigi Bahn at Vitznau. While waiting at Basel for our train, mother had a conversation in English with a German war widow from Dusseldorf who apparently was escorting a party back to Germany after an Italian Riviera holiday. "Where were the party?" she asked. "Searching Basel for real coffee beans!" was the reply. Meanwhile I tried to talk to her son, the first German I had met. Our couchette accommodation on the 'Arlberg - Orient Express' took us back to Paris Est for a Saturday exploring the city; the first of many between overnights both ways on subsequent trips to Switzerland and other destinations. Then in the evening we rode in the ordinary coaches of the 'Night Ferry' to Dunkerque. On the steamer dad bought a bottle of brandy from the bar steward. There were no duty free shops then! Mother carried the bottle in triumph across the long footbridge from the ferry dock to Dover Marine Station, the Customs Officer asking, "Is that ALL your luggage, madam?" So ended the start of my adventures and my love affair with Switzerland. 

Editor's Note. Unfortunately Geoffrey did not have a camera to record the trains he travelled on. We have tried to source some images from the era for this nostalgic article.