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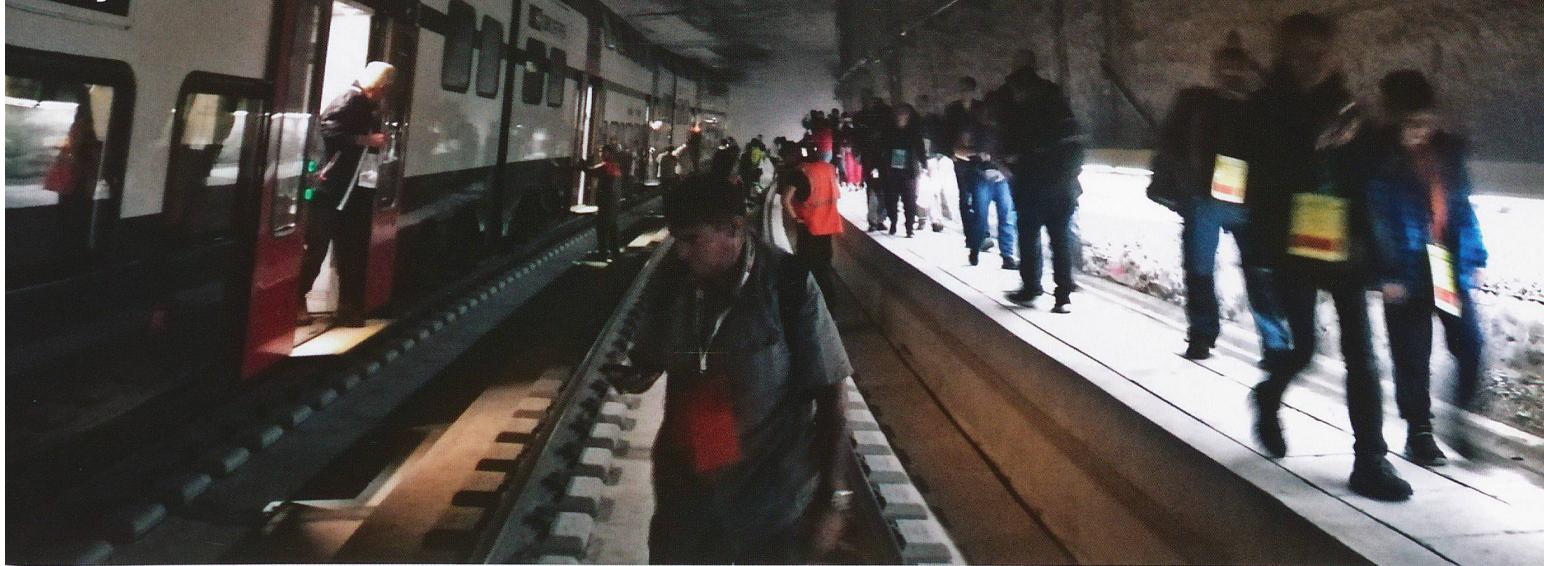
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Léman Express Evacuation Exercise

by Ilkka Huotelin

All photos: Ilkka Huotelin



On Friday 13 September a railway nightmare became reality – a packed *Léman Express* train heading from Genève towards Annemasse collided with track maintenance equipment inside a tunnel with hundreds of passengers onboard. That was the scenario being played out to test the emergency response, ahead of the planned opening of the line in December. To make the exercise as complex as possible the chosen site of the simulated accident was on the Swiss-French border requiring authorities of both countries to work together, (or alternatively the planning team had been watching too many crime TV shows, where the body is always found on a bridge/tunnel connecting two countries).

I was one of the 1200 volunteers who gathered early morning at the Stade de Genève stadium to get ready for the doomed journey. Our group included people of all ages and some with reduced mobility. Those who had been preselected to become walking wounded or immobilised received scary looking make-up for their injuries. And after several cups of tea and croissants, we were escorted to board our RABe 511 train from the Stade de Genève platform. This stop is used only very infrequently for special trains on sports occasions, and I was glad to finally travel from it. Some 400 guides and security personnel were deployed to make sure none of us got lost or hurt for real during the day.

After reversing at La Praille freight yard, we headed to the CEVA tunnels and passed the almost finished stations. Then the train stopped and we waited and waited (probably as the current was securely switched off etc.), until the driver announced that there had been an accident and we should evacuate the train. Everyone, except those designated unable to move, got out either onto the narrow platform by the tunnel wall or directly onto to the tracks and started looking for an emergency exit, while frequently stopping for selfies. To make this more authentic, smoke was released at one end of the train. As we looked for a way out, we were filmed by some of the 100 observers documenting the emergency response.

Following the crowd, I found one of the emergency exits

built every few hundred metres in the tunnels and got out next to the former Ambilly halt on the French side. A convoy of TPG buses then transported us back to the stadium, where a lunch and a questionnaire awaited us. As we left the accident site, the first police cars and ambulances started arriving and during the day first aid and command sites were set up. My participation ended around noon, but some were involved till the evening as they were transported to a hospital or interviewed by the police.

There were 900 emergency service professionals from 30 services involved. As the structures and the practices vary between the two countries, one of the objectives was for the forces to learn how to work and communicate together. As any new railway line needs to be certified before opening for commercial traffic, the relevant authorities from Bern and Paris were also doing their assessment of the readiness and hopefully issue the required certificates.

While walking on the rail tracks in a dark tunnel and climbing a narrow staircase was interesting this time, I was thinking how would it be if we were in a real accident? It certainly would be quite different, if genuinely injured, in shock or panicking. This episode made me appreciate the emergency exits along the line, whose construction work I had sometimes found annoying. 

