Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2019)
Heft: 140

Artikel: A quick trip on the 'Rütli'
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853848

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A Quick Trip on the 'Rütli'

Philip Champion

'Rütli' at Vitznau at 1.15 pm on September 12th 2016 on a replacement service for bus route 2 disrupted between Gersau and Vitznau by roadworks!
Photo: Stefan K-50678/WikiCommons

One of the pleasures of Switzerland is to ride on their lake pleasure boats. The modern ones are often stylish with plenty of room, plus, at-seat refreshments. The paddle steamers are a delight with their elegant lines, toot on the whistle, swish of the paddles and sight of the piston rods in action. However, even a trip on a more modest motor vessel can be interesting and worth doing.

The boat in question is M.S. '*Rütli*' of the Schiffahrtgesellschaft Vierwaldstättersee (SGV -DGV until 1960) which says it is the largest shipping company in Switzerland. Like other early diesel boats it was small compared with the big paddle steamers. Thanks to websites like the SGV's, **Robertbayard.ch** and '**Luzerner Zeitung**' we can discover its history. The DGV wanted another motor boat for services in Luzern bay and the Küssnachtersee - the next stretch of the lake on the left from Luzern to piers such as Meggen.

'*Rütli*' was built in 1929. The hull was built by Gebruders Sachsenburg of Rosslau an der Elbe in Germany, about 80 miles south west of Berlin, using the plans for the *'Reuss'* which they had built for DGV in 1926. This was compensation for the problems with PS '*Stadt Luzern*' built by them for the DGV. After its first two sailings in June 1928 it broke down. Examination showed the compound steam engine was not up to specification. Over a year later the vessel sailed - with a new Sulzer engine. The superstructure of the new motor boat was built by DGV -Luzern Werft.

At 140 tons '*Rütli*' was larger than the other motor ships, *'Reuss'* (135 tons) and '*Rütenen*' (60 tons). Length is 22.4m. width 4.9m, power is 160kW. Like most other boats in the fleet it is named after locations around the lake. Rütli meadow was where the legendary Rütli oath was taken in 1307 founding the Old Swiss Confederacy, by representatives of the three cantons Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden. This is below Seelisberg, opposite Brunnen and at the start of the Urnersee -the far end of the lake from Luzern and in fact at the opposite end of the lake from where it would sail.

'Rütli' at its berth in Luzern at 6.40 pm on September 15th 2018 with four paddle steamers behind including "Gallia".
Photo: Matthias Brüllmann/WikiCommons

The boat was rebuilt by SGV in 1988. In 2003 the hull was coated with silicone, the rear saloon refurbished, new upholstery fitted and a new audio system installed. Currently, it is the smallest and oldest (*'Reuss'* was sold to a private individual in 2014) boat in the 20-strong fleet. Prospective skippers start on'*Rütli* before going on to the larger boats.

Though small, surprisingly it can accommodate 140 people. Boarding is half way along either side into a roofed area with standing space. In front is a short bow section. After the roofed area is a saloon with three bays of seats each side. Behind is a short open aft section with wooden seating. Under the bridge is a small three-window saloon with perimeter seating. The vessel has a crew of two. When we sailed on it the Master was on the bridge with the other crew member standing at the top of the steps leading up to it from behind.

I believe we had a one hour cruise on '*Rütli* from Luzern in 2006 on a day visit there as part of an organised group. Now such sailings have gone up market with the stylish panoramic boat *'Saphir'*. As well as Luzern bay services it is used as a relief boat whereas '*Reuss*' did the same at the other end of the lake (Urnersee) at Brunnen and Flüelen. On September 12 2016 *'Rütli'* was used for bus replacement sailings between Vitznau and Gersau. It reached the Urnersee on July 31 2009 visiting Flüelen for a special fireworks event. It can also be hired for special trips.

For our 2019 holiday our hotel was a couple of miles along the lake overlooking the small Hermitage pier. One afternoon we arrived back in time to see a small boat- *'Rütli'* - approach the pier, tie up, sail away then come back about a quarter of an hour later but now facing towards Luzern. A look at the SGV timetable revealed it was the last of four daily short trips in the summer timetable. They left Luzern at 12.30, 2.00, 3.30 and 5.00 pm. Each trip took 44 minutes outward and the same back after a one minute turnaround at Meggenhorn. The route was from Luzern along the right shore in the direction of sailing to Tribschen Next it was across the lake to Verkehrshaus-Lido, back to Tribschen, over the lake and along to Hermitage, then continuing along that shore to Meggenhorn. We sometimes saw the last arrival at Hermitage with one or two people joining or leaving. One day I saw a couple with suitcases disembark at Hermitage from the 3.30 sailing.

We had decided to sail on *'Rütli'* on the penultimate day after a (very hot) day out in Bern. Unlike the main Luzern or Verkehrshaus piers, which are solid Hermitage's narrow one is of traditional wooden construction with metal railings on either side. However, it slopes towards the lake on the last section so we waited a little further back. As with the other SGV piers a notice tells people in other boats that it is reserved for SGV vessels. '*Rütli*' soon appeared from across the lake. One of the crew threw the ropes onto the very useful hooks (which they don't have in the Lake District) on the mooring bollard to moor the boat. He slid open the gangway door and the Master came from the small bridge to secure the gangway. With a greeting from him we walked onboard.

Walking through the small saloon we went to the perimeter seating on the short aft deck. As the boat left the pier a loud noise could be heard from the engine as we got underway. It was sunny and warm but with a bit of a welcome breeze. The boat sailed fairly close to the shore, giving on the left a good view of the different styles of houses along the shoreline and on the right views of the other, larger SGV boats. Next I saw something rather striking, which you probably won't notice from the large boats sailing further out into the lake on their longer trips. It is a tall statue of Jesus standing on a small headland overlooking the lake. Later Internet research showed that it was built in 1900 for Schloss Meggenhorn which is set up higher above the lake. Built c1870 it was inspired by Châteaux Chambord in the Loire Valley according to **swiss-castles.com**. One caption says "Jesus blessing the lake". A seat is placed in front of the statue. A minute or so later we passed close to a very small 'beach' which was more stones than sand. About a dozen people of all ages were swimming here.

Next to the 'beach' was Meggenhorn's small wooden pier. Just as we found a few days earlier on the Zürichsee one of the advantages of a short trip rather than a non- stop cruise is calling in at piers. We had noticed all week a swell which caused small boats at the other Hermitage moorings to rock. I decided to go to the covered saloon to watch us tie up. The boat was now rocking as there was a fair swell. One gentleman boarded. Walking back to the aft deck was a bit of a zig-zag!

Very soon we were back at Hermitage and disembarked. Off to our hotel room to relax. The next day we sailed - at my wife's request - on paddle steamers from Luzern to Beckenried and back. We had liked our trip on *'Rütli'* the previous day so we did it again after we got back to the hotel and got even more value from our Swiss Pass!

We'd like to go to Luzern again. I think another trip on '*Rütli*' is likely.

The statue of Jesus overlooking the lake at Meggenhorn.
Photo:
Philip Champion

ooking at the narrow Hermitage pier from M.S. '*Rütli.*
Photo:
Philip Champion