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SWISS TIMETABLES OF THE 1930s by Victor Isaacs

The present high standard of Swiss timetables is not of recent origin. A study of a Swiss timetable of the 1930s indicates even then - by the standards of the time a very fine production. The 'Indicateur Official/Amtliches Kursbuch/Orario ufficiale' of 15 May 1931 comprises 764 pages and measuring 185 x 120 mm. The explanatory pages are in the three main Swiss languages, but, as now, for each timetable only the language of the area concerned is used. The timetable was produced jointly by the Federal Railways and the Postal administration. A list of contents identifies which organisation was responsible for production of each part of the publication.

The timetable is divided into the following sections:

- Pink pages - Index
- White Pages - Swiss railways (including lists of urban tram services) and lake/river boats
- Green pages - Tariffs
- Gold pages - Railway crossing the Swiss border and close by in neighbouring countries.
- Pink pages - Long-distance international railway connections
- Gold pages - Air services
- Green pages - Rural buses

An amusing blemish is the curious typography whereby lettering often changes in the middle of station names so that the word can be fitted into the timetable column.

When studying any country's timetable of this period, this author is struck by the generalisation that local services then were more comprehensive than now, but long distance services much worse - being both slower and very much less frequent. Perhaps uniquely, however, one notes that in Switzerland while the long-distance services have as elsewhere very greatly improved since 1931, the local services are - with a few exceptions - as comprehensive as now, and in fact improved in frequency. There are, of course, some local lines even in Switzerland that have closed, in particular in canton Ticino, the rural tramways around Lausanne and Geneva (including those across the French border) and trams in smaller towns (trams were in towns as small as St. Moritz). The map on the back cover indicates which lines in Switzerland were electrified. It is interesting that by 1931 the majority of Swiss railway lines were already electrified.

A particularly interesting feature are the tables showing air services at an early stage of development. There were of course no intercontinental services. The further points from Switzerland mentioned are Barcelona, London, Amsterdam, Budapest and Warszawa. Companies include Swissair, Luft Hansa, Air-Union, Alpar and Ostchewiz Aero. These pages, like the bus service station, were compiled by the Postal administration.

Comprehensive postal information is included. This includes a feature I have not seen elsewhere. That is, for services, within Switzerland there is an indication of what type of postal traffic is conveyed and by whom for example (in loose translation) "Travelling official responsible for 11 types of posts", and "Transport of postal sacks, except those of value, by railway, boat or bus personnel." Symbols also indicate when postal traffic is to be exchanged at stops e.g. 'every day', working days'. etc. (At least as late as 1956 the Swiss timetable was also available in a postal edition).

At this time, as now, an excellent map complimented the official timetable. The map comprised two sheets. One showed Switzerland. While being an excellent map in geographical detail, it also acted as an index to the timetable. The other sheet showed the European rail network, and around the main map a number of small maps of Swiss cities and towns showing local lines, including trams.

Another 1930s Swiss timetable is of interest - this one not because it is typical of the period, but because it is so unusual. This timetable is undated, but was apparently prepared at the end of the decade as a war emergency issue. It was to be brought into operation only when advised. In fact, it was used from 2 September to 7th October 1939 (at the outbreak of the war) and from 11th May to 8th June 1940 (when Germany invaded the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium and France). The timetable shows Swiss railway services at slightly reduced levels. There are however no services on lines solely of tourist interest, such as beyond Wengen and Grindelwald to Scheidegg and up the Jungfrauoch. More importantly in contrast to Switzerland's usual role as a transit point for European transport, there are no international services or even connections. The sole exception is where the Zurich-Schaffhausen mainline crosses German territory for a few kilometres. (On the other hand, the services provided by the German State Railways in this part of Switzerland are not included. In other words, Switzerland became a self-contained railway system for those short periods. The emergency timetable comprises 16 pages (green) of general information and index, 106 (white) of railways, and 29 (yellow) of buses. Compared to the usual Swiss timetables it was quite an economy production. There were no frills and much information squeezed onto each page.

The 1931 timetable has been republished recently by Kursbuch News Pottfach 207, CM-9202, Gossau (price Swf 94) and a facsimile of the war emergency timetable was published in 1977 by Minirex, Luzern.

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