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BERG UND BAHN — A Swiss Miscellany

By John Jesson

After the excitement of last years holiday in the aftermath of the storms, this years was bound to be on a rather lower key. Nevertheless, it was most enjoyable, and while the weather prevented some of the walks that my friend and I had planned to tackle it did not prevent our railway activities.

Swissair and the S.B.B. were both, as usual, exemplary, but the tone was slightly marred by the B.L.S., who were somewhat lethargic in providing a locomotive to haul our train from Bern to Kandersteg. This was to set the pattern for our first week, as the punctuality of the B.L.S. was not to the usual Swiss high standard.

Although our main occupation was intended to be walking in the mountains, we combined walking with railways for our first outing and had a leisurely day on the B.L.S. south ramp path from Hohtenn. I have done the walk before, but my friend had not, and anyway I wanted to see how the railway has been altered through the double-tracking project. I am pleased to say that the walk is as pleasant as I remembered it.

Good progress is being made with the second track, which looked to me about a year from completion. Ausserberg to the tunnel below the Baltschieder viaduct was ready for the second track to be laid. Those who have done the walk will recall the strategically-placed cafe from where the trains can be watched while taking refreshment. There are now two routes on from here. The old path 'over the top' gives an aerial view of the Bietschtal bridge before crossing the gorge higher up and returning to pass under the bridge. Now, a path also runs round the spur of rock, through several short tunnels and comes to a sudden stop at one end of the bridge some distance beneath the tracks. A flight of steps leads to a new walkway across the bridge and joins the original path at the other end. Handrails separate walkers from both the trains and the rather awesome drop to the bottom of the gorge. As the walkway is of a grid construction, looking straight down as you cross gives the impression of walking on air!

We ended our walk at Eggerberg, which is at a tunnel mouth. Warning of a train approaching downhill is given by the gale issuing from the tunnel, felt even before the train can be heard. Our train back to Kandersteg, alerted to our presence by the push-button operated warning light (Eggerberg is a request stop), was a 3-coach push-pull set powered by a B.N. railcar.

A couple of days later we headed for Lausanne in sweltering heat. At Montreux was one of the Golden Mountain Pullman cars, presumably bought back from the Rh.B., and now resplendent once again in blue and cream. The purpose of visiting Lausanne was to photograph the twice-weekly Russian sleeping car on its long journey from Geneva to Moscow. The train duly arrived at the southernmost platform with the sun behind it, but some useful photographs were obtained nevertheless. A great deal of interest in the vehicle was apparent from both passengers and railway staff. One day I intend to build a model of this coach, although the corrugated sides will present problems.

Our return to base was via the M.O.B. and Spiez, a journey at once uneventful, tardy and very crowded. Unfortunately, there was no sign at Montreux of the Pullman car, which had presumably been tucked away somewhere safe. Both our M.O.B. train and that from Zweisimmen to Spiez were composed of a 2-car railcar and a couple of coaches, and were hopelessly inadequate for the number of passengers.

A walk over the Gemmi pass, although not of railway interest, did contain some things worthy of note, such as the path cut through 7-feet thick ice, showing that Switzerland's summer has been much like ours in Britain. At Schwanden, an isolated hostelry in a rather cheerless dry valley, we were pleasantly surprised by the provision of free beer and food, courtesy of a well-known brewery, in connection with a visit by members of the Sherlock Holmes Society, who later arrived in fine style, complete with period costumes. Thus sustained, we continued towards Kandersteg, but instead of taking the cable car from Stock, we branched off on a path marked 'Kandersteg - the steep way'. It is. Great care is needed as well as strong legs, but the reward is well worth the effort, as with so many Swiss walks.

(to be continued)

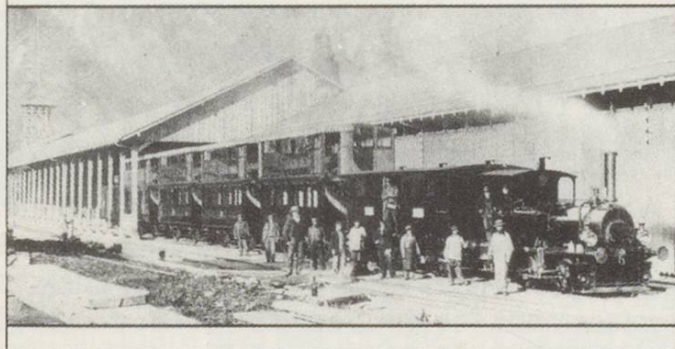
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