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100 YEARS YOUNG – LITTLE KNOWN BUT ESSENTIAL

There are probably not many of you, who are familiar with the CIT organization - yet most of you have benefited from its work. So what is it all about? Well, CIT stands for Comité international des transports ferroviaires – the International Committee for Railway Transport. It is responsible for the uniform application and realization of the legal and liability framework in the field of international rail transport. This transport is governed by multilateral agreements between governments. Anybody, who has ever bought a railway ticket for a journey across a national border – with the symbol of the superimposed letters I and C on it – has profited from legal and liability agreements worked out by the CIT. The same is true for all freight, from the carriage of unaccompanied baggage to wagonload traffic. The “COTIF” (Convention relative aux transports internationaux ferroviaires international) is the most important agreement concerning international railway transport. Keeping it up to date in today’s ever-changing environment is one of the main tasks of the CIT. In the beginning, ten countries signed the first agreement – then only covering freight transport - on the 14th of October 1890 in Bern. It thus became known as the Berne Convention and became operational on the 1st of January 1893. One of the products of its agreements, the square key used to lock many railway locomotives and carriages, is still internationally known as “the Berne key”.

The formation of the CIT itself, agreed in Milan, Italy between 26 - 28 April 1902, was the reason for this year’s centenary celebration. Over 170 delegates – both lawyers and operators - came to Luzern on the 30th and 31st of May. Your correspondent was

one of only a handful of invited European journalists.

The CIT office, with its seven employees, is still in Bern. The Austrian railways (then the Imperial-Royal Austrian State Railways), which were instrumental in the forming of the committee, held the presidency until the outbreak of the First World War. After the war, the State Railway of neutral Switzerland took over the presidency, since 1922 on a permanent basis, re-confirmed in 1956. The CEO of the SBB, Benedikt Weibel, is its current president. Today 41 countries, in eastern as well as western Europe and North Africa, apply the conventions worked out by the CIT. The organization has no capital. Its budget, considering the huge workload, is an amazingly low 2.2 million francs (0.9 million pounds) and is mainly generated from membership fees.

The liberalization of rail transport brought about by the EU will mean a huge additional workload for the organization: its framework of legal and liability agreements now must cover not only national railways, but a whole host of new players, from full fledged railway companies, subcontractors, locomotive operators and lending companies, infrastructure operators and so on. Hopefully, most of them will become members. On the horizon, there is even a totally new player, the “authorized applicant”. The legal eagles are still trying to agree on an exact definition, so I won’t even try. Also, I will not bore you with the intricate legal arguments... I just wish the centenarian a long, vigorous and above all successful existence in the future: international rail travel and transport would come to a grinding halt without the security of its agreements!