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ORION CLUB ZUGERLAND

Mario Gavazzi



There is a proud history of public transport in Zug - where there was even a bus service that was replaced by trams! The transport system was essentially founded to enable workers from the outlying towns of Menzingen, Baar, Unterägeri and Oberägeri (on the Ägerisee lake), to travel to work in the woollen industry factories in Zug, or to the SBB station and on to Zürich.


The first service was provided by an 'ORION' bus built by the Swiss company Orion SA - still in business but now manufacturing air conditioning equipment. The vehicle had a water-cooled opposed twin-cylinder petrol engine, with chain drive to the wooden rear wheels that used solid rubber tyres. This remarkable vehicle operated from 1904 to 1913 but was made redundant by the arrival of the trams. It owes

its continued existence to being converted to a tower wagon for overhead catenary work, a vital function that it continued to perform until 1955 when the tram system was replaced by buses. The old 'ORION' bus was sent to the Verkehrshaus Museum in Luzern for posterity, however the story does not end there. When Orion SA held a centenary celebration, the Verkehrshaus agreed to return the chassis (all that remained of the historic relic) to the company, and after the event this was sent to Zug for renovation by the eponymous club. A replacement body, as faithful a replica as possible to the original, has been hand-built using ash and other quality woods by retired craftsmen, one of whom drove the vehicle when it was a tower wagon. It is believed that this is the oldest working bus chassis in the world, a claim the club is currently trying to verify.

The Orion Club Zugerland did not start with this bus, but with a tram and a chance overheard conversation. In 1994 as, joint founder of the club, I was on an enthusiast trip on the Centovalli line, when I overheard a conversation between two participants commenting that the Langenthal public transport authority was going to scrap a worn-out "old-timer" tram that had been used for special runs and had been the last tram from the Zug system. I was intrigued, and he contacted Hugo Berchtold, a ZVB Director, to see if it might be possible to save the "Elefant" tram (so called due to its large size and the grey livery of operator ESZ), as a relic of Canton Zug's transport history. Herr Berchtold, together with Robert Bislig (at that



time a member of the Cantonal government), organised the foundation of the club that raised funds enabling the venerable vehicle to be returned to Zug. The support received is impressive; the Zug transport company (ZVB) gave the club a corner of their yard; financial support came from all the local authorities and some local companies, and a timber building was erected using apprentices. This high level of benevolent support has greatly assisted the complete and impeccable restoration of the tram to full working condition that was completed in April 1998. The club is now looking for a suitable metre gauge line to run it on. The "Elefant" was originally a goods car (Fe4/4 No.21) and ran as this from 1913 to 1916 when it was converted for passenger use, and became Cfe4/4 No.3, faithfully serving the people of Zug until the end of trams in 1955. It then went to the Langenthal system (LJB/LMB/SNB) as BFe4/4 No.9, becoming service vehicle Xe4/4 No.93 from 1974 to 1993.

The former tram system in Zug was run by two companies. These operated independently using two different voltages, 500V dc in the town, and 1000V dc on the longer route, with the trams having two pantographs - a feature that has been retained in the restoration. The ESZ (Elektrische Strassenbahn Zug) operated bogie cars on routes to Oberägeri (13.3km), Menzingen (9.6km), and a loop through Baar. The ZBB (Zuger Berg Bahn) operated two-axle cars on a route up the mountain behind the town. Both companies are still providing public transport, but with buses, whilst the ZBB operates a funicular from the former tram terminal at Schonegg to the summit of the 1039m Zugerberg. The Orion Club Zugerland currently has 125 members, and now shares an ex-army depot at Neuheim, Zug, with three other preservation clubs, including the Fire Engine Association and the Military Historical Society. Open days are held in May and September; more details can be found at www.zdt.ch. 

Editor's note. Mario Gravazzi thanks Ron Smith for his input to this article.

Photos of the 'Elephant' tram by Alfred Heer
Final photo, 'Orion', from Archiv ZVB

