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THE SURBTALBAHN

Robert Amstutz tells the story of the railway that was never built!



A Zürich S-Bahn train approaching Niederweningen Dorf.

All photos: Robert Amstutz

In 1891 the line from Oberglatt, north of Zürich, to Niederweningen (now Niederweningen Dorf) was opened. At the time the idea was mooted to extend the line along the Surbtal through Lengnau, Endingen and Tegerfelden to Döttingen on the line between Turgi via Koblenz (AG) to Waldshut across the Rhein in Germany. This extension was regularly promised to the local inhabitants but promises remained promises. However in December 1915 a law was passed by the Swiss Parliament covering 'The building and operation of the Surbtalbahn', as it was thought the coming of a railway would encourage residents not to leave the area. However during the period of WW1, and the years thereafter, there were material shortages and construction never started. In 1926 a construction office was set up in Döttingen tasked with surveying and marking the route of the railway. The tireless local Surbtal Committee had raised some CHF30,000 towards the construction of the line. Suddenly the work was stopped on instruction of the Federal Parliament following a

request from the SBB. The reason: a new form of transport had appeared, namely the motorized Postal coach (PostAuto). The SBB had no wish to build and operate a loss-making cross-country railway. However, a law is a law, and the obligation to carry traffic remained until January 1973 when the Federal Parliament rescinded the aw.


In August 1921 PostAutos had begun to operate from Niederweningen to Baden and Niederweningen to Döttingen. This traffic operated under a deficit guarantee of the SBB. This contract operated for 50 years until 1971 and was noted in the old timetables. The introduction of PostAutos required road improvements between Niederweningen and Endingen, however since the old Surbtalbahn Law was still in force, the SBB had to contribute to these costs. In 1949 the SBB had to pay CHF250,000, which included CHF149,000 for the annual PostAuto deficit. Despite the fact that the line was never built, the inhabitants of the Surbtal did receive some benefits. Freight tariffs were calculated as if the line had in fact been built, so generations of SBB station staff had to be able to calculate the freight charges on the ASu (Autobetrieb Surbtal). Freight from Niederweningen to Koblenz only cost the equivalent of an 18km trip, not the true 50km. The passengers also benefitted from the SBB season ticket rates that at the time were cheaper than the PTT's PostAuto rates. Today the PostAuto service has no SBB deficit guarantee and the route between Baden and Endingen has a regular half hour service, and the community of Niederweningen is served by over 20 buses per day connecting into and out of the Zurich S-Bahn lines S5

Endingen Post.



and S55 that terminate at Niederweningen station. The Cantonal cross border traffic from the Zurich ZVV to the Aargau 'A-Welle' functions well and there are now season tickets covering both tariff associations.

With the Surbtal line not being built, it has resulted in the villages of Lengnau, Endingen and Tegerfelden retaining their character. The Surbtal is at times narrow and there would have been no place for the railway without extensive tunnelling or the demolition of swathes of property in the villages. The solution to how the considerable height differences that would have been encountered on the route still remains a mystery. It is recommended that you visit the area and take a trip along the Surbtal valley to Endingen and Lengnau. They were the only two villages where Swiss Jews were allowed to live in the years between 1633 and 1874, and the centres of both villages have a synagogue and not a church. In Tegerfelden you can also visit the Aargau Cantonal wine museum situated in a former Wine Press dating from 1788. Entry is free but check their website www.winebaumuseum.ch for opening hours.

In fact 1km of the line was actually built. In 1938, primarily at the initiative of the Bucher-Gyer factory, the line was extended to the present Niederweningen station, the original station then becoming Niederweningen Dorf. Unfortunately, Bucher-Gyer no longer sends any freight out by rail although there is some seasonal sugar beet traffic. The 12km branch line from Oberglatt does have one claim-to-fame. It hosted the last steam worked commercial passenger service in Switzerland with electrification not coming until 25th May 1960. 

1. A local bus to Baden at Niederweningen.
2. Service S6 to Pfäffikon at Niederweningen.
3. Sugar beet wagons at Niederweningen.
4. A Pfäffikon bound train at Niederweningen.
5. PostAuto on a Surbtal service.

