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Autor: Feller, Beat
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ZWEISIMMEN – LENK

As this line reaches its centenary we recount its history and survival



Title photo: Maximum effort; train run for a youth camp in Lenk. Photo: Beat Feller

Inset photo: Lenk train at Zweisimmen 1969, (with the photographer's daughters) Photo: Bryan Stone

In 1882 the Gotthardbahn was opened, and the Bernese realised that their Canton risked losing its position in North-South traffic, unless they could create a connection to Italy via Valais. In place of a project by French-Swiss promoters that favoured a metre-gauge steam route Vevey – Bulle – Simmental – Thun, the standard gauge railway from Spiez to Erlenbach was opened in August 1897 and extended to Zweisimmen in 1902. To secure a connection from Lake Thun to Lake Geneva, the Bernese electorate approved a 60% share in a new metre-gauge line to cross the pass at Saanenmöser to reach western Switzerland. This proposal would ultimately become the MOB and originally the two companies had separate stations in Zweisimmen, connected by a street. The opening of the MOB in July 1905 proved an immediate success, with the Lenk hoteliers quickly demanding that the line should be extended to their village. This project gained momentum following two further applications for railway concessions, both of which took Lenk as their starting point. One was a line to Adelboden over the 1,995m Hahnenmoos pass, while the other planned to reach Sion in the Valais with a 2,800m tunnel, at an altitude of 2,050m, under the Rawyl-massif. These projects both failed to raise the money required, so their applications lapsed, but the easily graded 12km metre-gauge line to Lenk went ahead, opening in April 1912.

Trans-shipment of goods at the change-of-gauge in Zweisimmen proved to be a costly obstacle. In 1913 four 'Rollschemel' transporter units, allowing standard-gauge wagons to be carried on the metre-gauge, were ordered from SWG in Schlieren, and a connecting track to the standard-gauge station was built. A further 'Rollschemel' unit was obtained in 1944 to allow the military traffic, for Switzerland's Alpine Réduit, to be handled more efficiently. After WW II the growth of private transport impacted upon the operations and financial results of the Lenk line. Fortunately a boom in both winter and summer sport




holidays in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in agency chartered trains from France, Germany and Belgium running direct to Zweisimmen and these brought the line a sudden and welcome bonus.

Soon, however, there was a new threat. A proposal to build a Motorway down the valley and through the Rawyl-massif to the Rhône Valley would mean the end of the railway. In view of the landscape and cultural damage being done elsewhere by highway construction extensive opposition to such schemes was growing in Switzerland resulting in the most controversial proposals (including this one) being held back for re-examination by a Parliamentary Commission. In the meantime the 1912 track and the rolling stock were deteriorating fast, leading to a suspension of passenger traffic between Zweisimmen and Lenk in June 1975, although freight traffic continued. In the Bernese parliament two factions supported different projects for the railway; one wished to modernise the metre-gauge line, whilst the other argued for its conversion to standard-gauge giving through running at Zweisimmen. In 1977 Canton Bern decided on a complete renewal of the metre-gauge track and the catenary; modernised technical installations; renovated stations, and new rolling stock. After some 4 years without passenger services the reopening was inaugurated with celebrations in September 1979. At the same time the MOB introduced a very successful air-conditioned "Panorama" train between

Montreux – Zweisimmen – Lenk, the first in what has been an on-going development of these operations.

And yet in January 1982 all again seemed lost. The Commission charged to examine the controversial highway projects approved unconditionally the construction of the Rawyl motorway. The story then becomes more complex. A campaign was started by a leading environmental activist, Franz Weber, which eventually led to a Federal Initiative being introduced; the Swiss people voted one Sunday, and the Initiative preventing the Motorway being built was carried. However it is less well known that a trial heading for the motorway tunnel had been driven under the mountains and it was convincingly demonstrated that this had caused geological damage that endangered the big dam and reservoir overhead. People - politics and engineering had again avoided closure of the little railway.

Moving on to 2000, with the new millennium the MOB, BLS and the Brünig Line (then SBB, now ZB) agreed upon a new shared trade mark for their through route “Goldenpass Line-Best of Swiss Panoramic Trains” and a common house style. Connections in Zweisimmen and Interlaken were improved, but the Panorama trains then no longer ran to Lenk. This, together with other factors, resulted in passenger numbers again falling so Canton Bern commissioned yet another study into the future of the line. This produced three options: a) Abandonment, with substitute bus services - claimed to be cheaper, but probably requiring un-costed long-term road improvements; b) Conversion to standard gauge with through running of new BLS trains; c) Retention of the MOB-metre gauge line, but with adoption of contemporary standards. In April 2009 the Cantonal Parliament approved with a comfortable majority the last proposal, and the modernisation of the line is scheduled to commence this autumn. Over the years the Lenk line has been like a reed bending in various winds - and there is something really Swiss in the story - but its future again seems to be secure. 

This is based on an edited version of an article by Jean-Claude Cochard and Martin Gut that originally appeared in Eisenbahn Amateur. It is reproduced with permission and has been translated, with additional information added, by SRS member Beat Feller.

Top: Lenk train strengthened with borrowed GFM set.

Middle: The Lenk freight arrives at Zweisimmen on the ‘old line’, that is now re-aligned.

Bottom: Typical MOB oldtimer on the Lenk branch works train.

Photos: Beat Feller

