

A piece of our railway heritage

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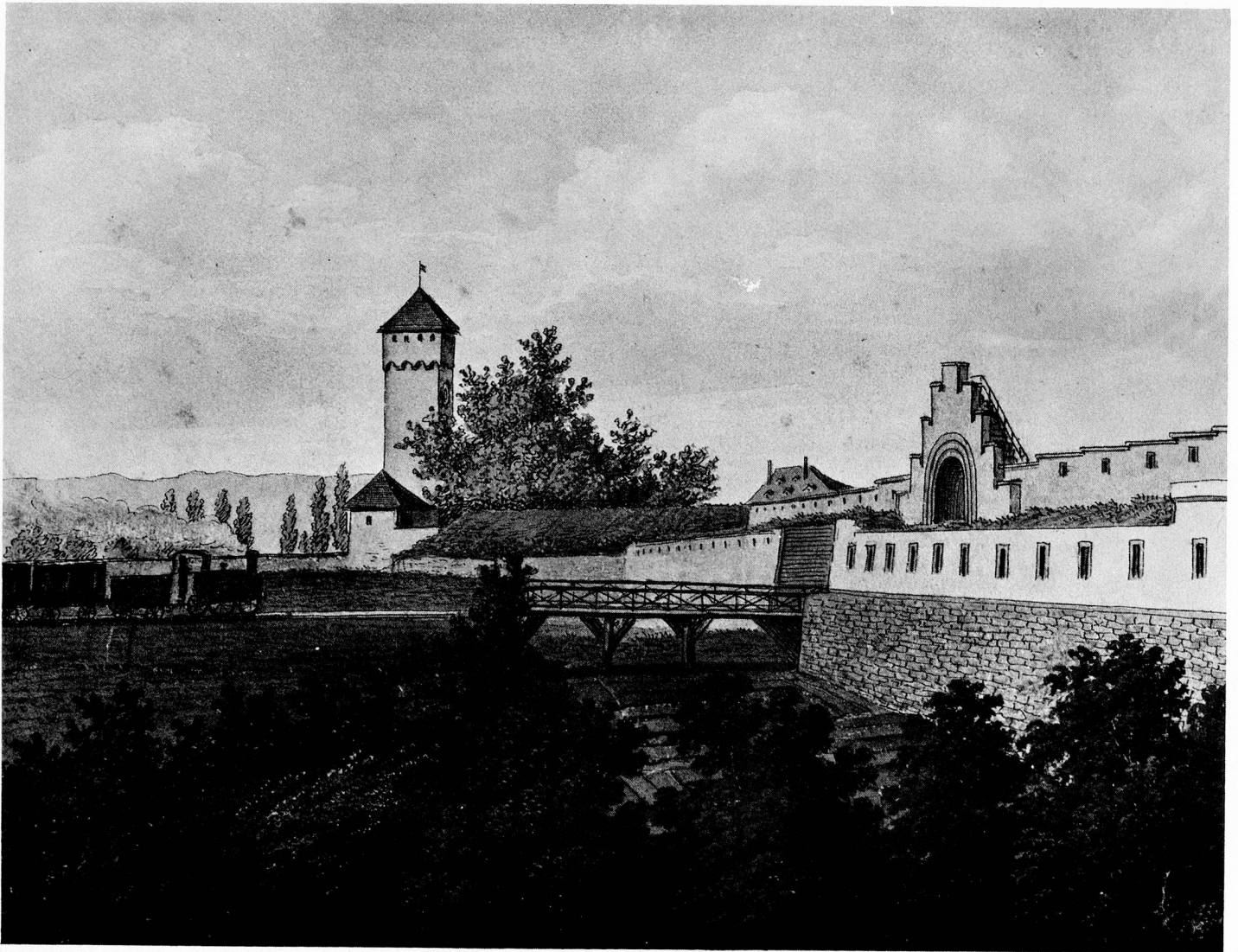


Photo by courtesy of SNTG.

A PIECE OF OUR RAILWAY HERITAGE

This was the gate through which the railway entered Switzerland – in the form of a “Trojan horse that is big with a mysterious future”, as a sceptical alderman of the city of Basle put it. Unwelcome as the statement may be to the ears of the burghers of Zürich, the first rail tracks on Swiss soil were those – 1824¾ yards long – leading from the frontier at St. Louis to Basle and forming part of the Strasbourg-Basle Railway. This might seem to invalidate the claim of the Spanischbrötlibahn, the “Spanish roll railway”, whose opening on August 9, 1847, is being commemorated this year in the celebrations marking the 125th Anniversary of Swiss Railways. The fact is, however, that the “Spanish roll railway” was the first truly Swiss line planned, financed and constructed by the

Swiss themselves, while the Swiss contribution to the Basle railway was restricted almost entirely to heated debates lasting several days in the Great Council in Basle, where the first issue was whether the new railway should be accepted at all, and the second was whether it should be allowed to enter the town walls or should not rather be stopped short outside them. The final decision, reached by a small margin of votes, was in favour of the railway and even of a railway intra muros. That meant that some of the fortifications around the city had to be pulled down and rebuilt in the form of a gate for the railway to pass through. For Basle was one of the last European cities to close its gates every night – a custom that was maintained till 1850. The supervision of the municipal

defences, including the regulation opening and closing of the new gate, was entrusted to the state-appointed Railway Commissioner and was one of his principal duties. This gateway to Switzerland today seems a trifle uninviting and a little less than hospitable. Yet in the first six months of its existence no less than 50,000 travellers passed through it, an impressive number when one considers that the population of Basle at that time was only 25,000. When the Alsace line was diverted to run into the new Basle Central Station, erected in 1860, where it connected up to the Swiss railway network, the Railway Gate had no further function to perform. In the mid-eighteen-sixties this symbol of dignified reserve in the face of a new technical age was finally demolished.