

# Swiss vs the rest : comparing travel - an individual's view

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Easing our way across the complex tracks from Zürich Hauptbahnhof on the EC 1333 Maria Theresia, I felt no jolts, heard no noise apart from the faintest sibilants of the air-conditioning. My comfortable first-class seat in the Schindler Panoramawagen assured me of a smooth and pleasant hours ride to Sargans, first stop on the long journey to Vienna. No, I had no idea of the engine number (although as a teenager I collected them), but I did know that our departure from track 9 had been three or four minutes late.

Almost at Thalwil, I felt something gently over-riding our speed. Then at once the Lokfuhrer's announcement in German over the p/a system: "Sorry about that; We are just behind the stopping train to Ziegelbrücke". In a few moments we passed the other train, which had left on time just before we did. Now it was picking up passengers at Thalwil while we sped by. Despite our late departure we arrived at Sargans on time, and in a few minutes I took my connecting train to Bad Ragaz where I would soon be immersed, in one of the hydrotherapy pools, in water known to European civilisation for a thousand years.

The Panoramawagen, spotless and elegant, was clearly respected by its occupants and I knew that the same was true of second class coaches further down the train. I mused on the standard class of my local line in London, where young men and women put up their dirty shoes on the upholstery opposite and threw their not-quite-empty bottles and cartons down on the floor. I mused on lines from "Africa", a Latin epic by the love-poet Petrarch who had filled the fourteenth century with his legal authority and international power: *Poterunt discussis forte tene-*

*bris...* "Only when the shadows of ignorance have been dissipated will our grandchildren return to Man's pure and pristine radiance. Then will you see Helicon bloom once more with a new generation; then will lofty minds and noble souls rise again, and fuse their glowing faith with the ancient love for the Muses."

That same legal love-poet always maintained there was no such thing as an accident. Act of God, yes; accident, no. I wonder what he would have made of British Rail, with fifty serious accidents in fifty years? He might have claimed they had their hands too deep in the till. (Juggle shares and become an overnight multi-millionaire!) Why no timely track-maintenance or automatic train-protection? Railnews, the monthly newspaper for railway staff, invariably flaunts headlines screaming of thousands and millions spent on this or that feature, from train sets to hostess uniforms. Does too much money go on the wrong things?

Is there too much boasting? Sir Railtrack told us that in only a few years we would have the finest railway in the world. Doesn't he know that this accolade has been given to the Swiss for the past fifty years at least? In 1912 we boasted of the unsinkable liner, and the gods (overhearing this hubris) promptly sank it. When will we learn? A Swiss friend often reminds me: "You British forget too soon!"

Why no national time-table like the Kursbuch, for which the Swiss queue up on the day of issue? A miracle of precision and organization, it has no counterpart whatever in Britain. No railway magazine for the clientele? Nothing corresponding with *Via* in Switzerland or *Amicotreno* in Italy? Our various and varied companies would say "Waste

of money. The customers would throw it on the floor!"

Do you remember, when Railtrack floated its shares, their telling phrase: "We will try to ensure that fewer trains pass red signals"? Substitute "car" for "train" and tell it to the Ministry of Transport! But Railnews admits that 22 tricky signals were passed at danger five times in the past nine years. There were 643 "Signals passed at Danger" last year alone!

That is what happened on the day of the Ladbroke Grove crash on 5 October 1999. A relatively young and inexperienced driver ignored warnings, silenced a cab hooter and sped on through a danger signal. Seconds later the crash occurred, claiming many lives and causing enormous damage. A Swiss friend, in charge of rail transport in Bern, said: "Never give free rein to an inexperienced driver: put him on shunting for a year AND WATCH EVERY MOVE HE MAKES."

I wrote to the Deputy P.M. in September. Please fly to Zürich and travel for four days on the Swiss system: you might find out how to run a railroad! Needless to say, he didn't go, but continued to drop french fries into his upturned mouth in a public restaurant. Are these people really in charge of us? Look at Railnews again. Where do railway men go on holiday? A supplement tells all: Blackpool, Spain, Florida. Anyone for Switzerland? Not likely, mate!

If among our thousand-odd members there are one or two who have railway jobs in England their point of view would be more than welcome. But as things stand, there is a feeling that technical knowledge is lacking on the British side, but very competent indeed in France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy. When our engineering planners abandoned hope for a tilting train some years ago,

it was only a matter of weeks before Mr Fiat said; "You want a Cisalpino/Pendolino? I have one. Come try it some day!" One of the trains jumped the rails in Italy shortly afterwards, but apart from this incident they have been running well - so well in fact that if I want to enjoy Gotthard or Lötschberg scenery I take the slower trains. Although the Germans copied the Italian prototype, the canny Swiss have developed a tilting system based not on hydraulics but on electronics. Say, if you like, that some of the best brains left Britain long ago and you may be right, but as a regular reader of Railnews I find the intellectual element swamped by the boasters.

Continually and anon they write of "slamming on the brakes". Yes, this meaningless phrase recurs in every issue of the paper! Do they imagine that BR drivers are in charge of a bus? Don't they know that if their driver were in the cab of a Swiss Re450 he would have to know that emergency brake application would not bring the train to a standstill for several miles, if it were doing full speed? In the cab of a TGV deuxième generation he would know that stopping length is much longer. In other words, never get into such a situation!

***This train will now be diverted for a short space.***

*I am an amateur rail enthusiast and a professional musician who has conducted many times in festivals at Geneva, Gstaad, Zürich, Basel, Bern, Lugano. My ensembles also appeared in England, at the Proms for instance. But in England it is difficult to persuade audiences to think properly. Some years ago a new portrait of an old Italian composer was discovered. I pointed out in several journals, learned and popular, that the portrait was not of the composer, but of a contemporaneous actor. Did anyone take notice? No. They went on repro-*

*ducing the "wrong" picture in full colour on covers of journals, record sleeves, programmes. The "new (and false) discovery" CANNOT be eradicated! There is no national machinery for correcting the situation. I could write to the papers, but none of them would print it.*

***Back on track again.***

Once I cross any Swiss border, I feel a distinct impression of great security. Do others among our members feel this? For me, it is not a sudden impression, but one that has built up over the years, for I have travelled on Swiss railways for more than half a century. If I write to a Swiss official, he replies with courtesy and concern. If I write to Railtrack their replies are late and evasive. A short while ago I asked them why a Eurail Pass purchased in America (where I lived for many years) could not be used in England although a dozen other countries accepted it. What was the reason? "We didn't sign the agreement". You mean all the others signed, but you didn't? So I invested in Britrail Passes one summer and brought my family. Since the day we arrived coincided with a railway strike I requested a postponement or a refund. "Nothing doing" was the reply. "You bought the passes, it's your funeral."

Am I mistaken, or do the Swiss have the edge on us for honesty? In the past few years I have lost two raincoats and a word-processor on British Rail, and repeated trips to an almost hidden lost-property office failed to resurrect them. If I lose something on Swiss Railways, it bounces back the same day, usually to the ticket office. Once there was a slight delay when one of the family left a pair of new binoculars at Lauterbrunnen. A phone call to the station-master, and yes, they had been handed in. On your breakfast table tomorrow morning: two francs please! Usually money is rarely mentioned and years of reading *Via* and its predecessors have hard-

ly ever hinted at financial costs. Vast projects like the Gotthard basis-tunnel proceed, and all we are ever told is the completion date. Same with Amicotreno: money is a no-no topic, for what matters is that a task is done and done quickly and efficiently. January's Railnews has now moved on from millions to billions, and next month it will be trillions.

The odd thing is that when safety improvements are mentioned, Railtrack screams "too expensive!" When their building was attacked by "anti-capitalist" rioters in December 99, should we have read "anti inefficiency rioters"? Automatic train protection, for instance. An intelligent schoolgirl could invent a simple system that would not cost zillions. "Molly, tell us how it should be done." "the solenoid activating the yellow or red track side signal also activates a lever that strikes a rotary on- off switch at the side of the driver's - cab. It applies the brakes BECAUSE IT DOESN'T KNOW WHETHER THE DRIVER IS DRUNK, DAFT, OR DEAD". "Thank you Molly: tell that to Railtrack."

Our drivers certainly need the latest improvement on TGV's TVM 430, which could allow a three minute headway between trains running at up to 250 mph. Swiss and French commuters pay much less for a first-class general-abonnement than we pay for a three-hour point-to-point season, at the end of which some nasty accident can take place. Where is the security? Where is the comfort? I sometimes travel from Waterloo to Cobham to visit a relative, and the workout I get as the train bumps up and down or sways from side to side, is every bit as good as the gymnasium provides. That is why I love floating down from Kandersteg to Spiez, or from Airolo to Bellinzona on a pair of Swiss Railway skis, silent and tremorless. "You British: you forget too soon."