

BLS 100 : a moment of reflection

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BLS 100: A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

s'Murmeli

Gasterntal - Kander. © Marmot

Switzerland's great Alpine Tunnels often had a sad legacy of loss of life, with the tunnellers often being the chief sufferers. Many of them came from Italy, searching for work and known as hardworking. Mountain churchyards, as in Göschenen, Trimbach, Airolo and Kandersteg, have many a sad memorial to those who never went home again.

The Lötschberg tunnel was struck by two disasters, the first on the 29th February 1908. In Goppenstein the contractors had built a veritable small town of some 14,000 sq. m., with barracks, hospital, workshops, school etc. On the site of the present station was a hotel in which 30 people were eating, which was carried away that evening by an unexpected powder snow avalanche. Twelve died. It was soon clear that warnings from local people about the location of the construction camp had been ignored, and that no precautions had been taken. The Canton intervened to have the huts removed to a safer location, and avalanche protection installed. Work stopped for a month while this was done, but otherwise no action was taken. Years later, a memorial was erected on Platform 1 at Goppenstein station. It is still there.

The second disaster followed soon after, and caused 25 deaths. The tunnel alignment from Kandersteg was approximately east-south-east, and after 2.7km should have been under the Gasterntal, the then remote valley of the upper Kander, between its glacier and the Kandersteg valley. However, the tunnel today, after 1.5km, turns left through 30°, and 200m deep underground, follows the north bank of the Gasterntal, for 1.4km before taking a right turn through some 50° to take a course almost due south. Some 4km from the south portal, the tunnel bears left again to take up the original alignment towards Goppenstein. Sitting in a modern 'Lötschberger' train you can follow these events by watching through the

length of the train as it follows the bends. What was it all about? A 30kg dynamite charge to blast at Km 2.67 had been prepared, and 28 tunnellers had retreated 300m into supposed safety. Unfortunately for them, the surveyed alignment had ignored the true depth of the Gasterntal at this point; the flat valley floor concealed that it was geologically a deep V-shaped ravine, full of glacial stones and water from the river above. The blast broke through to the bottom of the V, and the tunnel at once flooded. Just three escaped. Although the BLS wanted the planned alignment to be respected, a return to the site was impossible; the tunnel was walled up, with 10m of stonework, and the detour to the east, which my account describes, was a desperate attempt, as a diversion, to get above the deepest part of the Gasterntal, in order to try again. For the twenty five killed CHF102,300 compensation was paid jointly by BLS and the contractors. The Lötschberg tunnel is now 800m longer than the original survey and still has three quite sharp bends. I have often wondered which unsung genius figured out the surveying, which ensured that they still met, as they did on March 31 1911. The last official measurement gave a length, including galleries at the portals, of 14.612km.

These were the most serious incidents. The building of the Lötschberg line and tunnels altogether claimed 112 lives. Some 5,500 workers, mostly Italian were, at any one time, employed on the north and south ramps, and up to 3,250 in the Lötschberg Tunnel. It is recorded that they sent CHF9m back to Italy during the work. One hopes it was, for them, worth it. We, however, have a deeply dramatic alpine crossing, which is still, 100 years later, well worth the extra time it takes to go 'over the top' between Brig and Spiez. ☒