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A Tunnel to Nowhere

s'Murmeli explores the forgotten Wasserfallenbahn



In the Jura village of Reigoldswil, a cave - full of water - and a sawmill, plus a few small features, are all that remain of a railway tunnel that was started but never completed. In the village of Mümliswil, above Balsthal, a residential district is called 'Linie', a reminder of a forgotten embankment. These were the two ends of a Swiss railway controversy that ended in defeat for all concerned.

In 1872 the Schweizerische Centralbahn (SCB) decided to construct a direct railway from Liestal, on the Basel - Olten main line, to Oensingen on the line between Olten - Solothurn. Several factors were in play. One was the extension over the Rhein in Basel of the Baden State Railways main line from Karlsruhe. Until then it had terminated in Weil-am-Rhein, but had a branch to Waldshut along the north bank of the river where there was a bridge to Switzerland. Another was the Jurabahn planned after the Prussian occupation of Alsace, which would connect Basel to Delémont for Porrentruy and the French railway network. Finally, there was the Gäubahn, a direct Olten - Solothurn line along the base of the Jura that would soon be realized. The SCB was aware that it was at a disadvantage with its circuitous route to the west through Olten, and a long 1 in 50 climb from Sissach to the Hauenstein Tunnel at Läfelfingen. It chose a new alignment, better grades and a direct route, shorter to Bern and the west than all others, because tariff rules thus determined the routing of traffics. The main feature of the new railway would be a 4.5 km tunnel between Reigoldswil (BL) and Mümliswil (SO), either side of the Passwang massif of the Jura, at a point known in Reigoldswil as the 'Wasserfallen - Waterfalls'. Today this is a favourite hiking and excursion region, with a small cable car to the ridge above, a sledge run, and a superb view on good days of the Alps.

Just above the cable car parking space, the entrance to the tunnel heading survives, something none of the visitors are probably aware of. It is full of water and extends just 60m into the hillside. A few paces away, across the stream and road, is a sawmill that was built by the SCB and its contractor, Schneider Münch und Jerschke, a German company. Work on the tunnel had started in 1874. In Reigoldswil 500 workers were recruited, English, German, French and Italian for the most. A boom set in, with lodgings, restaurants and tools, and a rapid rise in land prices. Many took credit to plan for the coming good fortune. In Mümliswil, the tunnel has collapsed, but the heading had been driven 1360m. Here some 300 were at work, and the scene was repeated. Then,



TOP: The tunnel at Reigoldswil. BELOW: Reigoldswil mill.

on September 28th 1875, the bailiffs came to Mümliswil, stopped the work and impounded the petty cash. The SCB was unable to continue; the workers were paid off. Many local people were bankrupt, and over 25 families were forced to emigrate. In Reigoldswil the contractor went bankrupt, and the hardship was worse. The SCB had a Concession and should legally have continued the work, but in 1879 the Canton of Solothurn (in which Mümliswil lies) released the SCB from any further claims, so the Confederation followed suit.

The whole period was marked by a serious financial crisis, in which the failure of the Nationalbahn (that was featured in an article by Bryan Stone in an earlier *Swiss Express*) was involved. The railways threatened by the SNB had launched projects, which they were unable to finance, and from which they pulled out. However, with the threat of a Wasserfallenbahn the SCB achieved one end: it made a deal with the Jurabahn to pool receipts for freight between Basel and Biel and Lyss an arrangement that then made the Wasserfallenbahn redundant. In 1880 Liestal did become a railway junction, but to the 750mm Waldenburgerbahn that ran up a parallel valley to the community in its name. Later, in 1899 a short standard gauge branch line was opened from Oensingen on the Olten - Solothurn line, through the narrow gorge of the Dünneren, and this survives today as the OeBB.

All that remains are the sites at each end, and a few curious locations where land had been reserved to build stations, etc. Today the trains take the fast line through the Hauenstein base tunnel to Olten, and few in Switzerland are aware of the line that never was, and the entries to the tunnel to nowhere. *S'Murmeli (The Marmot) is a Swiss railwayman.* 