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Hupac - Part 2

Ron Smith continues his review of this Swiss Intermodal Company



Hupac facilities at Busto Arsizio.

All Photos: Ron Smith

As global container movements increase, and container ships grow ever larger, ports become congested. It is vital that containers are swiftly moved from the ports to inland clearance destinations. This is a growth market that favours “company trains”, and Hupac plan to increase their market share. However, to handle this traffic it has identified that there is a need for more intermodal terminals across Europe. This shortfall is acute in northern Italy especially east of Milan. Traditionally Italian industry had clustered to the west of Milan, but with today’s growth as far as the Venetia, so there are too many road deliveries trying to negotiate congested roads around Milan. In the 2018 – 2020 timeframe Hupac (with its partners) will have developed new terminals at Milan, Piacenza, Brescia as well as at Basel North and Düsseldorf – Holthausen, plus an entirely Hupac-owned

one at Brwinów near Warsaw. However this is not easy. Planning permission takes a long time, and there are ever growing levels of resistance from protestors concerned about climate change, environmental issues, property demolition, etc. Paradoxically these objections ignore the fact that large numbers of HGVs are causing more environmental damage each day! Servicing these new terminals will also need suitable connecting railway lines to handle 2,000t, 750m long trains, at P400 profile clearances.

It is unfortunate for Hupac that it carries no Swiss domestic traffic, it is all transit or completely in other countries. This means that business is conducted in currencies other than the Swiss Franc (CHF). Now that the Franc has been uncoupled from the Euro, Hupac sees its business growing in turnover, but decreasing in profit (down 19.7% in the year) – due solely to the Franc’s strength. Its gross profit was CHF100m, cash flow unchanged CHF41.3m, while capital expenditure rose 46.3% to CHF24.6m. In the next five years Hupac plan to invest around CHF280m in terminals, wagons and IT systems. It is ironic that Swiss prudence and financial good management has resulted in their currency being one of the top three in the world, which gives problems to Swiss companies like Hupac who trade outside Switzerland.

The busiest freight corridor in Europe is from the North Sea ports down through Germany and Hupac coach and Mercedes artic at Freiburg im Brisgau.




Switzerland to Italy and there are no indications that this will change as there are always growing numbers of containers to move. There are political, social and environmental pressures to move more freight traffic by train and this is reflected in the Swiss investment in its trans-alpine rail routes such as the Gotthard Base Tunnel. This was inaugurated on the 1st June and will be fully operational by December, but is a mixed blessing for Hupac who has successfully run test trains through it. Freight trains cannot run as fast as passenger trains, so to maximise capacity, freight trains will be held at the approaches, then run through in "flights" of three. The tunnel will improve reliability: it has less safety issues than the mountain route; less weather implications; has ETCS Level 2 giving more reliability; reduces the distance by 30km and transit time by 30 minutes. Current Gotthard Mountain Route maximum loads are 1,600t north to south and 1,300t south to north both requiring three locos. The base tunnel will require just one loco meaning: fewer stops for loco changes; less energy consumption and less wear and tear on the rolling stock. However, the space that the extra locos take-up still cannot be used for adding more wagons, as three locos will still be needed to haul the train over the Ceneri, until its base tunnel is completed in 2021. When this opens, the overall route savings will rise to 35km and 60 minutes. The route is now limited to 600m long trains - this will rise to 750m, 2,000t, trains when completed. With both tunnels open the route will rise from the current P384 profile to the P400 profile (this allows for 4m at the corners of semi-trailers on wagons). Today, there are 180 daily freight paths over the 'old' Gotthard, with the new base tunnel this increases to 220/day, and when Ceneri opens 260/day will be possible. Even with these improvements there will be rail infrastructure constraints in Germany and Italy for at least the next 5 years. Even after 2021 the bigger trains will still only be able to reach Milan, as most of Italy is still restricted to 500m, 1,600t, P360 profile operations. Even parts of Germany will still be restricted to 700m trains.

Away from its trans-alpine traffic there are several growth areas for Hupac including East – West traffic. For social and economic reasons the Chinese Government is doing a lot to encourage its industry to locate in its western provinces and this gives opportunities for trans continental rail traffic. Export goods bound for Europe can take 10 days to transit China to its eastern ports, then the shipping time is in weeks from there. By rail Hamburg can be reached in around 14 days - a great time saving. Of course this is not easy, working through so many countries with different gauges and operating systems, but Hupac is achieving it. Also Poland is a growth market, as their economy is growing and more and more containers are moving from the North Sea ports in this direction, and also

onward into Russia.

Another growth area of Hupac's business is the "company train". For one company alone it has seen business grow from the odd container to full trainloads. With the "company train" Hupac takes charge of the complexities of paths, tariffs, track access, locos, drivers, wagons and maintenance while the customer takes responsibility for filling the train. It is proving a very attractive offer for many larger businesses especially as Hupac has an enviable reputation for reliability. One aspect of this is that it maintains two complete trains of wagons in reserve, one in Germany, one in Switzerland. Recently there was a problem in Germany, tracks closed, trains severely delayed. Hupac mobilised the spare train set of wagons and ran them into Antwerp harbour to pick up the containers. The customer didn't know the difference. Of course, having idle equipment "in case" is expensive. Hupac has always operated an "open book" system with their customers, so if they do not want to pay for this "insurance" set of wagons, they do not have to. With passenger trains, speed is a selling point, vital to compete with airlines and autobahns but with freight traffic, speed is secondary to reliability. Customers want their goods at specific times and through various initiatives Hupac achieves this successfully, although this is not easy.

Hupac is the oldest of the original intermodal companies, and the only remaining one that continues to be independent, all the others have been bought by liberalised railway companies keen to ensure that they capture the haulage of the trains. This independence is appreciated by the customers and pervades the ethos of Hupac. Being totally focussed on its core business and very customer orientated, it will continue to be a force in intermodal transport for a long time to come, and all from its base in Chiasso, the south of Switzerland town that has the border with Italy running through it, just a few hundred metres from its offices. It faces a difficult few years while the railway infrastructure in neighbouring countries is rebuilt, causing disruption, but Hupac's investments, focus and dynamic management will see it grow and develop, and continue to be the first choice for combined transport across Europe and beyond. 



Hupac coach on the tail of a train at Erstfeld.