Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal

Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society

Band: - (2019)

Heft: 137

Artikel: "Stunde Null-Stein" or zero hour stone : Boyd Misstear visits the "Stunde Null-Stein" Olten [N 47° 21.119 E 007° 54.500] and outlines its origins as the "False Zero"

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853793

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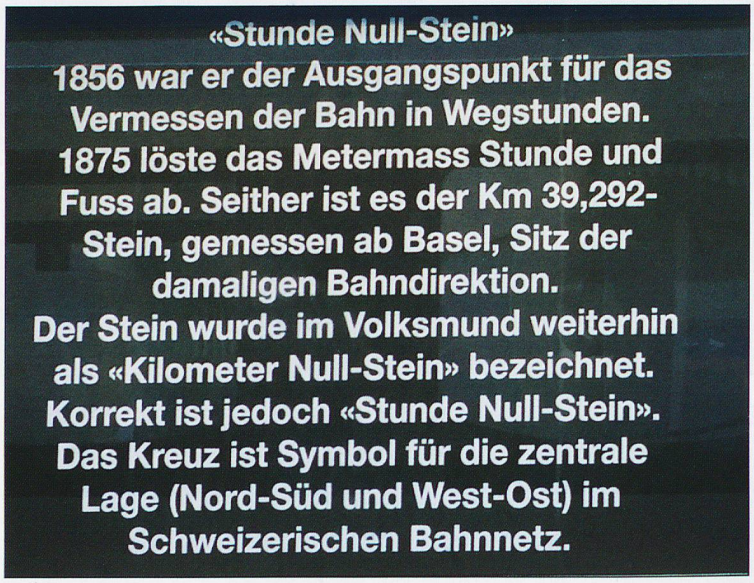
"Stunde Null-Stein" or Zero Hour Stone

Boyd Misstear visits the "Stunde Null-Stein" Olten [N 47° 21.119 E 007° 54.500] and outlines its origins as the "False Zero"

From the early days of Swiss railways, distance markers (kilometre measurement stones) were set alongside the tracks to indicate to drivers their location. These "stones" (actually markers of varying design) usually started measuring from the headquarters of the railway company. For the Schweizerische Centralbahn (SCB) this was Basel. But in 1853, when the first part of their line between Basel and Olten was completed around Olten, the company was eager to start operations before their link to Basel was a reality. And so a 'provisional' zero point was established at Olten. When the Hauenstein Tunnel was opened in 1858 to complete the connection, it was then possible to measure from Basel to Olten, a distance of 39.292 km. But apparently the effort was considered too great to re mark the route from Basel and the false zero remained!

This marker stone, popularly referred to as the "kilometre zero stone", is located at the eastern most end of platform 12 inside Olten station. However the kilometre reference is incorrect. The large zero over the cross symbolizes zero "hours" – an hour was then a distance, not a unit of time, of 16,000 French feet – equating to approximately 4.8 kilometres. This "Stunde Null-Stein" (Hour Zero Stone or Zero Hour Stone) was the official centre distance zero mark from 1856 through 1875, when the units were converted to the metric system and the SCB zero mark defined as Basel. So today the Null-Stein symbolizes the central measuring location (north-south and west-east) for the Swiss railway network, but from an SCB perspective is actually 39.292 kilometres offset - from Basel!



Two SRS members, Steve Tinsley and Steve Parsons, join our Chairman John Jesson at the stone.

All photos: Boyd Misstear

The plaque reads:

Stunde Null-Stein

1856 was er der Ausgangspunkt für das Vermessen der Bahn in Wegstunden. 1875 löste das Metermass Stunde und Fuss ab. Seither ist es der Km 39,292-Stein, gemessen ab Basel, Sitz der damaligen Bahndirektion.

Der Stein wurde im Volksmund weiterhin als "Kilometer Null-Stein" bezeichnet. Korrekt ist jedoch "Stunde Null-Stein". Das Kreuz ist Symbol für die zentrale Lage (Nord-Süd und West-Ost) im Schweizerischen Bahnnetz.

Zero Hour Stone

In 1856, this became the starting point for measuring the railway (distances) in hours. In 1875, the meter measure replaced hour and foot. Since then it is the Km 39,292 stone, measured from Basel, the former home of the railway directorate.

The stone was (is) popularly referred to as "kilometer zero stone". However, correctly is the "hour zero stone" (or Zero Hour Stone). The cross symbolizes the central location (north-south and west-east) in the Swiss railway network.