

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 13 (1986)  
**Heft:** 4

**Artikel:** Transport policy : the break with a taboo spreads ripples  
**Autor:** Brugger, Erika  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907876>

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# The break with a taboo spreads ripples

**Swiss transport, traffic and communications policy is stuck in a cul-de-sac. For years traffic experts have been hatching up conceptions to establish a balance between rail and road. But few deeds followed the stack of paper. What was unsuccessful with conceptions nationally, however, led meanwhile to appreciable success regionally. The pioneer is the Basle Environment Protection Season Ticket: the new outlook soon infected other towns and now challenges the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) to new ideas.**

Switzerland – the country of railways, criss-crossed with one of the densest rail networks in the world: hardly a mountain where there is no cableway swinging up; scarcely a town which is not thrown open, right out to its suburbs, by a tram. The SBB and their proverbial punctuality are part of the shingle of the tourist land.

Yet the proud railways which in the past opened up Switzerland to traffic are losing their passengers. Still by 1950 every second mile was being covered by rail. But by 1965 the share of the railways of total traffic had sunk to 22 per cent, and today is 12 per cent.

## One-sided relationship

Over the past few decades more and more people have preferred the private motor car to public transport. Growing prosperity has made the family's own four wheels attainable: today, statistically,

every Swiss household accounts for one car. The national road network, financed by taxes on petrol, offers ever-faster communications. Since the sixties four to five times less investment has flowed into the infrastructure of the railways than into that of the roads. From the viewpoint of price, too, is the railways-roads relationship one-sided: the railways have continuously increased their prices; motoring, however, has become *de facto* increasingly cheaper.

It was in the seventies, however, that traffic policy makers began to ring the tocsins. Not least, it was the 1973 oil crisis which made it clear how seriously «individual» traffic was affected by its dependence on petrol – and how vital the railways are. Public transport must be promoted, went the new credo.

## Compulsory measures impracticable

At the national level the credo remained to a large extent on paper. The «Co-ordinated Traffic Policy» (*Koordinierte Verkehrspolitik*) a successor paper to, and originating from the GVK (*Gesamtverkehrskonzeption*, or overall traffic conception) of 1978, remains today. The few former measures hardly mitigated the road-rail conflict, for it turned out that only through compulsory state measures – for instance by the rationing of petrol – could the traffic-policy competing spears of rail and road be kept the same length. And such state interventions are politically unworkable in Switzerland.

How, then could people be induced, without compulsion, to change from motor to rail vehicle, and buses? The national concept «Rail 2000» is aimed at a long-term realization of these questions (see box).

## Environmental protection compels action

But what has to be done in the short term? The question calls urgently for realizable answers, for the Swiss forests are ill, and experts and political parties alike are now agreed that road-vehicle exhaust gas emissions form a substantial part of the causes of the dying forests. The issue of protection of the environment has given the credo of the seventies on the promotion of public transport a new urgency.

Basle, December, 1983: two managers of the transport undertakings of *Basle-Town* and *Basel-land* are brooding over their passenger figures. After being able to count on a regular increase of one to two per cent for years, they



Fair shares for road and rail: building a motorway in Basle

were having to note that there was a decline of five per cent for 1983.

### The success story of «U-Abo»

What was to be done? *Umweltschutz-Abonnement* (environmental-protection season ticket) was the name of the solution. Three months later the «U-Abo» was already on sale for SFr. 35.– a month, or an average SFr. 60.– less than previous season tickets. Never before had the two Basle cantonal governments acted so quickly in a decision concerning public transport (in this case, subsidized to the extent of SFr. 20.– per season ticket).

The two-and-a-half-year-old history of the «U-Abo» reads like the success story of a branded product which ventures into a hitherto unknown market: up to 1986, passenger figures rose by over ten per cent. In the peak months, almost three times as many «U-Abos» were sold than originally forecast. According to estimates, about 15,000 private car owners changed over to tram and bus. In the past operating year the transport undertakings were able almost to make up for the revenue shortfall due to the lapsing of the earlier, more expensive season tickets. And today, in the long run, and in spite of the subsidy, no costs arise for the state: this is made possible by the local system of deductions from the individual tax declarations.

### The spark ignites afar

This is not the end of the success story, however. Since 1985 motor vehicle traffic in the region of north-western Switzerland has decreased, or at least not increased, after having previously increased, year after year, by between two and six per cent. Today the number of motor vehicles in the Basle region is far below the average for Switzerland. According to latest reports the air quality

Basle *Tarifverbund* (fares pod): left, Basle tram; right, crush at the ticket machines



has slightly improved. A single ticket for all public transport, for both suburban and longer-distance traffic (i.e. including the SBB's trains and the PTT's postal coaches) is planned for the region, effective from the middle of 1987.

The spark has even sprung over to other Swiss towns: Berne, Lucerne, St. Gallen, Olten, Solothurn and Zurich have introduced similar systems.

### The break with the taboo

One thing is certain: without the comfort and convenience that the transport undertakings of both Basles already offered – the key words are: a bus or tram every six minutes, a dense network, comfortable cars – an environment protection season ticket would have had no success. Moreover, traditionally the Swiss swear by suburban and short-distance public transport, the frequency of which is above the European average.

Still, the new environment season ticket marks an about-turn. A cheap season and simultaneous private-sector advertising and supply strategy break a taboo. For years the short-distance transport undertakings and the SBB adhered rigorously to the principle that no increased traffic frequency whatsoever was to be achieved by reducing fares. Country-wide, the «U-Abo» strategy could well lead to a turning point.

A beginning has been made by the SBB with a half-fare season ticket costing only 100 Swiss francs (hitherto SFr. 360 a year) which should already be on offer in 1987. The new Federal Railways vision has broken away from traditional rail thinking, has moved on to consumer-oriented passenger correlativity. The volte-face is directly attributable to the taboo violation by Basle. ●

*Erika Brugger,  
free-lance journalist*

### The «Bahn 2000» concept

«Rail 2000» is based on a timetable idea: in the large centres, trains should come in regularly a few minutes just before the full hour and should go out again just after the hour. This regular interval, or fixed frequency, timetable gives passengers who must change trains good connections and short waiting times. To realize the idea, the train times between railway junction stations such as Zurich, Berne, Basle, Lucerne, Lausanne, Biel and St. Gallen must be reduced to less than one hour. Thus, it is necessary to build new lines which will allow higher speeds. Railway capacity will be considerably increased by such new lines and other improvements, and so it is planned to compress the present hourly interval (frequency of Intercity and express trains) on some main connections, to a fixed-cycle timetable of half an hour. The financing of the SFr. 8.4 milliard project by the Confederation is currently being debated in parliament. Above all, it is the choice of routes for the new line to be built between Olten and Berne that is still disputed.