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The “Rhätische Bahn” is a hundred years old

The Loveliest Railway



Circular viaduct to overcome the steep gradient near Brusio in the Poschiavo region.

On October 5, 1889 the inaugural train drove through the Prättigau region on the railway line from Landquart to Davos. That was the very first line of what is today called the “Rhätische Bahn” (“RhB”). Strictly speaking this would in English mean “The Rhaeto-Romanic Railway”, the name being

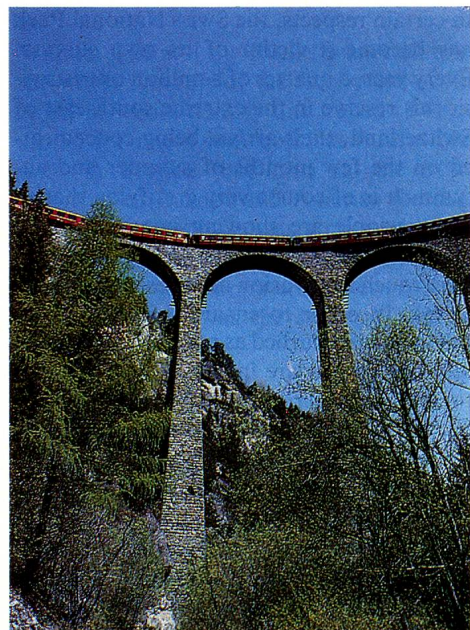
derived from the Latin “Raetia” for the Roman province that today corresponds roughly to the Canton of the Grisons. The RhB is nowadays the privately owned railway with the longest network (375 km) in all Switzerland.

In Chur, the capital of the Canton, only the

Swiss Federal Railways (“SBB”) were operating in 1889. Not until seven years later, on October 29, 1986 was the second branch line of the RhB, from Landquart to Chur, opened. The anniversary has been celebrated this year by various public functions all over the Canton. The idea of building the RhB came originally from a Dutch banker, Jan Holsboer. As a visitor to the health resort of Davos, he succeeded in raising the capital needed for initially opening up a railway in the Prättigau region. Numerous other branch lines and extensions were to follow over the years, including the tracks into the Engadine (St. Moritz) and over the Bernina into the Poschiavo Valley and on into Italy (Tirano). These stretches of line are world-famous today.

The opening up of the valleys of the Grisons by railway was primarily a reaction to the inauguration in 1882 of the Gotthard line, but it proved a farsighted investment because of the growing importance of tourist travel. It was “an expensive adventure, which gave rise to a serious crisis in the Grisons and almost ruined the Canton”: that was how Reto Mengiardi, President of the Cantonal government, summed up the situation in a speech at the celebrations. The speed at which the initial lines were built was a brave exploit in the light of the then available technical possibilities, and even today inspires admiration among visitors. Not without good reason is the RhB for many a railway “aficionado” seen as “the loveliest railway in the world”.

MZ



The RhB crosses over innumerable bridges and viaducts. (Photos: Charles Seiler)

The National Park celebrates its 75th-year Jubilee

Too Many Deer

It is 75 years ago that the Swiss National Park in the Lower Engadine was founded. Today this wild-life reserve – the biggest in all Switzerland – has almost reached the utmost limits of its capacity: every summer a quarter of a million visitors swarm around here.

On the peak of Piz Quattervals (“The Mountain of the four Valleys”), at 3,154 metres (10,350 feet) above sea level, the last remnants of the snow dazzle the onlooker under the deep blue of the Engadine summer sky. The heat is intense on the exposed moraine screes above the tree-line. But dazzled eyes search the terrain in vain behind binoculars – where in the world are the red deer?

Well, we are not in a zoo here, but in the Swiss National Park – a place where the animals do not turn dutifully up to be inspected by the tourists.

No axes and no shot-guns

Looking back from present-day society with its environmental problems, the 19th century seems at times idyllic. Such a nostalgic picture is of course somewhat illusory: indu-



The ibexes released in 1930 today form a big colony.

strialisation and population growth were already pushing Nature back, step by step, a hundred years ago.

Soon after the turn of the century however, it was felt necessary to place a more extensive territory under total protection, and in 1914 the Federal Assembly gave effect to a decision for the setting up of a Swiss National Park in the Lower Engadine. The reserve still offers, thanks to its isolated Alpine location near the frontier with Italy, a view of Nature in its genuinely fundamental and pristine state. The landscape is rugged, with mountains of bare dolomite and valleys strewn with rock débris. In this wilderness, the last bear to be killed on Swiss soil was shot in 1904, on the mountain Piz Pisoc. And from then on, the law took effect: no axes and no shot-guns.

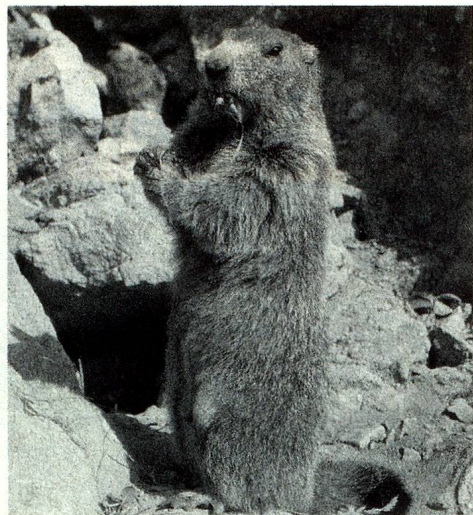
Too many red deer

Even in this desolate and remote region, it was easy to see signs of human encroach-

ment. Thus the smoke and fumes from blast furnaces did great harm to the trees (the nearby 'Ofenpass' or 'Furnace Pass' derived its name from the ore-smelteries). Even more serious was the damage done to the animal world. The ibex had already been exterminated. Likewise such beasts of prey as the bear, the lynx and the wolf were gone, as also was the golden vulture (often erroneously called the ossifrage or bearded vulture) which had not long before been found throughout the entire Alpine region: it too was missing in the newly created National Park. And the situation as regards red deer was more than lamentable: in the founding year of 1914 the park contained only *nine* stags! With the passing of the years however, the total protection afforded to these animals resulted in a population explosion. Nowadays more than 2,000 are to be found in summer in the Park. Biologists consider that to maintain a reasonable and acceptable "natural" balance, the number should not exceed some 700 to 800. As there are no big beasts of prey to effect a natural reduction, the Park authorities found it necessary for the first time in 1972 to arrange for a shooting inside the Park limits to bring the numbers down.

A second National Park?

The core of the National Park was placed under protection already in 1909, thanks to the initiative taken by a group of nature lovers. Soon afterwards, further areas were added, the official take-over by the Confederation occurred on August 1, 1914. Since then, there have been further extensions, resulting in a total area of 169 square kilometres (65 square miles). The Park is the oldest wild-life sanctuary in Central Europe. "It is more important than ever, at a time when care of our environment is causing so much anxiety, that such a truly comprehensive reserve



In spite of the protection provided in the National Park, the marmots have not increased much in numbers. Many have been victims of the golden eagles! (Photos: J. Feuerstein, Scuol)

should exist" says Dr. Robert Schloeth, the zoologist who has been in charge of the National Park since 1964.

When asked whether he is in favour of the setting up of other "total" wild-life parks in Switzerland, Dr. Schloeth replies: "Very much so - even though there is no obligation to call them 'National Parks'. One measure that is urgently needed would be the provision of complete protection for a major biotope for waterfowl, possibly on the south-west shore of the Lake of Neuchâtel.

Victim of one's success?

In certain respects, the Swiss National Park has become a victim of its own success. Every year, a quarter of a million tourists visit this reserve in the extreme south-east of Switzerland, their arrival being concentrated on the few months of summer and autumn. It is of course very gratifying that so many people are showing interest for the cause of nature conservation. On the other hand, such an invasion involves various problems. In order to ensure that Nature remains as undisturbed as possible, strict rules and regulations are indispensable. No visitor should be permitted to leave the marked footpaths. The landscape should not be subjected to any change whatsoever. There must be prohibitions against the lighting of fires, against camping, against litter, the plucking of plants - and visitors may not bring their dogs. In the height of the season, the ten park-keepers will obviously have to go all out in their endeavours to carry out their surveillance and control.

Franz Auf der Maur

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