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Interview with Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) director-general Benedikt Weibel

The Swiss railways set their points for the future

Swiss Review: In 1997 the Swiss railways will be celebrating 150 years of history with 150 different events. What do you, as a senior transport chief, expect to gain from the anniversary?

Benedikt Weibel: Throughout 1997 we want to show what our public transport system is doing and how this incredible network came into being. Looking back over the years we see that some problems recur. The lines through the Alps were just as controversial in the past as they are today. The creation of the Swiss railway network was a gigantic step forward in the age of manufacturing and communications.

The success of the railways is obvious. You carry 700,000 passengers a day.

But in spite of that, with a turnover of Sfr. 3.7 billion in 1996, you still had a deficit of Sfr. 293 million. Can the railways really afford these celebrations?

Thanks to intense lobbying our budget of about Sfr. 20 million will be covered by sponsors. And naturally we hope to make a profit from the extra travelling of those who visit the events.

Every Swiss travels an average of 40 times a year by train and covers 1,762 km. This is by far the highest railway figure in Europe. The SBB even claims to have the best railway network in the world. Is that true?

No other country has a timetable which is as regular and as dense as ours, nowhere else can you get to such remote regions of the country by buying a train ticket. It is a great advantage which, thanks to federalism, we have inherited with our history.

The Swiss railway network is over 5,000 km long. 3,000 km are SBB, while the rest belongs to 56 private railway companies. Where does the future lie?

The SBB carries 90% of the traffic. And one thing must be added. The private railways do not belong to individuals, but to cantonal and municipal authorities. But the real competition will come from outside as we open up our track to foreign railway companies.

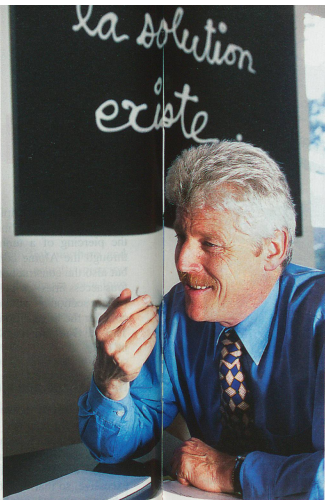
Holland, Germany, Austria and Italy are still threatening to route traffic round Switzerland. Could our country become isolated from other rail networks?

We consider opening up as a fact, and we are working on it. If Switzerland should be isolated from the EU, that would be not only an economic

but also a political disaster. This is not a matter for the SBB, however, it is up to the politicians.

The SBB is still steaming ahead. From June the number of kilometres travelled by Swiss trains will rise by 4,000 a year. Why are you still expanding, when countries like the United States and Canada are closing unprofitable lines?

The expansion has nothing to do with the anniversary, it is part of the Railway 2000 project. As to overseas countries, the USA and Canada left railways to the free market. This meant that lines simply disappeared because of the cost. In Los Angeles rail is coming back, and



(PHOTOS: MICHAEL STAHAL)

it will be paid for with a transport levy on petrol of five cents per gallon. If we took the risk of privatising the form of transport most used by commuters, our economy would suffer an immense setback.

So it is unthinkable that the SBB, which was founded in 1902, should ever be privatised?

Yes, because without subsidies no railways could exist.

Today people want to travel in comfort. In Germany, for example, there are InterCity trains where second class is more comfortable than our first. Is the division into classes not out-of-date?

No, not at all. Every airline has the class system. Admittedly the German IC flagships look splendid. But our average standard is higher. In addition, with the new double-decker trains we can carry 1,400 more passengers at once. The German figure is only a little over half, and that increases the cost of each seat.

More than half the government subsidy, between Sfr. 1.5 and Sfr. 2 million, is for trains in the remote areas. How long will Switzerland be able to afford little-used lines to isolated places?

Cantonal authorities make decisions

about the network, not the SBB. But experiments have shown that it is not a question of rail or bus being cheaper. Usually both cost about the same. Our motto for saving is to make the existing infrastructure more efficient.

In what ways are you trying to increase the attraction of the SBB?

By having trains every half hour from Geneva to St. Gall, and by getting new trains onto the main lines. All with the slogan "more often, quicker, more direct".

For decades the railways were the embodiment of punctuality. Now passengers often complain about late trains. Should this not be dealt with before even more passengers get their cars out?

Punctuality is a permanent problem. Our network is so heavily used that we are always near capacity. The tiniest delay can lead to many trains coming in late. We had a lot of problems in this area at the end of last year. But things have now returned to normal.

Small stations are being closed, it now costs money to make telephone enquiries, machines are replacing ticket inspectors, a central rather than a local office sells tickets – are you not worried that the railways are losing their soul?

Someone complaining about loss of personal contact is like a mountaineer sticking to his grandfather's boots. The fact is that we have entered a different age, as witnessed by the fact that up to 30,000 enquiries are made every day on the Internet.

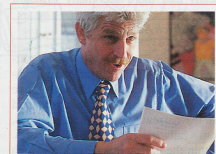
Wage reductions and restructuring are also the order of the day with the SBB. You are going to get rid of 9,000 jobs over ten years. What are you doing for the welfare of your staff?

Ours is probably the only company in the world to guarantee the jobs of its staff by contract. We have never made anyone redundant, only changed their functions.

The SBB and the Lötschberg Railway want to improve the services they provide for transporting heavy traffic. From the year 2000 several hundred thousand heavy trucks will have to be trans-

ported through the Alps. How can the railways deal with this problem in technical terms?

By a regular timetable of shuttle trains, by trains twice as long, by good rolling stock, by efficient terminals at home and abroad, by the diversion of some passenger trains.



Benedikt Weibel is aged 50 and possesses a doctorate in business management. In 1978 he became secretary to the chairman of the SBB's Board. He was later promoted to senior management as head of passenger marketing. He has been director-general of the SBB for the last seven years and chairman of the Board for the last four. He is a member of the Social Democratic Party.

And how will the new trans-Alpine lines be financed?

We will need a gigantic subsidy. This will have to be covered by a petrol levy of three to five centimes per litre, a tax on heavy vehicles crossing the Alps, and even then we will have to take on debt to the tune of 25%. We are awaiting parliament's decisions with the greatest eagerness.

Interview: Alice Baumann



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