Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 24 (1997)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Fifty years ago : Swissair's first transatlantic flight : pioneers of flight
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906494

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Fifty years ago: Swissair's first transatlantic flight

Pioneers of flight

Swiss civil aviation is at present in a nosedive. But its beginnings were really heroic. Contemporaries remember the days when flying was still an adventure.

The era of civil aviation in Switzerland opened at least eighty years ago. As early as 1920 the first aircraft companies such as Schweizerische Gesellschaft Compte and Ad Astra were offering the first passenger flights.

*Frank von Niederhäusern**

When Swissair was founded in 1931 the country started building an international network. But the war interrupted progress, and the pause lasted until the summer of 1945.

By 1946 Swissair was expanding again. It was then flying to Paris, London, Amsterdam, Prague and Warsaw. A year later it crossed the Atlantic for the first time.

In that year Ruth Sigrist of Zurich, then 21, boarded an aircraft for the first time. She still remembers the moment well: "I wanted to visit my boyfriend, who was working as an architect in Sweden. But in post-war Europe travelling was anything but simple. So my parents insisted that I should travel to Scandinavia by plane and not by an unsafe land route".

An absolute luxury

Something which today seems obvious and banal was then an extraordinary undertaking. "Flying was an absolute luxury which virtually only business people could afford", says well-known sports journalist Walter Wehrle. For his first flight from Paris to London he paid the horrific sum of Sfr. 160. And then there was another Sfr. 60 for the return visa. "Frontier checks were strict. In London I could only get in when the immigration officer had been told by the Sports Office that I was accredited for two ice hockey internationals".

A taxi guide by the name of Kobler at work. This signalling technique was still used at Dübendorf until 1959. (Photo: Swissair)

Crew members were also subjected to strict formalities. Paul Auberson, radio officer on Swissair's first North Atlantic flight on May 2, 1947, still tells a tale about that. "On landing in America every single person arriving had a thermometer thrust into his mouth while still on the tarmac".

Travel to the new world

The original North Atlantic route started in Geneva, since Cointrin had a longer runway than Dübendorf. Even for the crew the first flight was a voyage into the unknown. The landing in the new world came as a culture shock. "We toured the huge cities, ate in strange foreign restaurants and went on extended shopping trips", enthuses Paul Auberson, now aged 90. "We were careful about the nightlife", he says with a smile; "after all we had further training courses during the day".

In fact, brand-new DC-4s were used to fly to the United States. This 'wide-bodied' aircraft with 44 seats was easy to handle, but it had new equipment like the radio-telephone. Instrument flying and radar did not come until 1953. Navigation was by direction-finding beacons and ships at sea; often it was just a matter of looking out of the window.

Rather uncomfortable

There was not much comfort for passengers, says Ruth Sigrist: "The cabins were not pressurised in those days. It was terribly hot in the aircraft as long as we were on the ground. After take-off the condensation changed to a thin layer of ice. The droning of the engines was so loud that I had the feeling I was sitting for hours under a hairdresser's dryer".

The equipment in the passenger area was spartan. There were tiny luggage compartments above the rows of seats and two lavatories at the back. The on-board kitchen had a six-litre water tank, which was just enough for coffee. On longer flights a simple packed lunch was handed out, but passenger on short flights had to do without food distraction.

Like a family

But flying in those days was not boring for the passengers. There were regular customers who knew each other, and the crew greeted each of their passengers with a hand-shake. In the DC-3s the radio officer still sat with the passengers and simply called any pieces of news back to them. "And after landing", says Paul Auberson, "some of the passengers gave the pilot a tip".

Scarcely anyone was afraid of flying. Says Walter Wehrle: "All idea of fear was dispelled by the feeling of adventure". But there were occasional breakdowns and accidents. Paul Auberson remembers an emergency landing in Russian-occupied Poland in 1946. And when Ruth Sigrist flew back to Switzerland from Scandinavia her DC-3 landed at Frankfurt because the pilot had not been able to get a bearing on Dübendorf.

Fifty years ago flying really was still an adventure. ■

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