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Autor: Della-Gana, Giles
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The Early Lines

by Giles Della-Gana

The first railway on Swiss soil was a cross border extension of a French line, the Strasbourg-Bale, opened to Basel St.Johann on 15 June 1844. As most members will know, the first Swiss railway was a line from Zurich to Baden opened in 1847. A "Zurich Railway Committee" was formed as early as 1836 to draw up plans for a line from Zurich via Winterthur to the Bodensee. On 23 October 1837 the Zurich Chamber of Commerce, which had been investigating a Zurich-Basel line, convened a railway conference. The Cantons of Aargau, St.Gallen and Graubunden were invited. The two Basel Cantons declined as they wanted a line via Olten towards the Gotthard. A committee was formed to raise the necessary funds and a Zurich-Basel Railway Company was formed on 19 February 1838.

The route was to follow the rivers Limmat, Aare and Rhine. Things seemed to be going well, government recognition was given and the services of Joseph Locke were obtained. However the continued hostility of Basel and the failure of the share issue (only 4% of the required SFr.15 million being forthcoming), caused the company to be wound up on 5 December 1841. Such property as the company had obtained was sold to Martin Escher-Hess for SFr.3600. This gentleman, known as *Dampfescher* (Steam Escher) did not want the project to die and on 16 May 1846 the *Schweizeische Nordbahngesellschaft* was formed to build the line from Zurich to Basel.

It was what was intended, as the first section of this railway opened on 9 August 1847 from Zurich to Baden. The inaugural train was driven by Nicholas Riggensbach, then a budding young mechanical engineer, today best remembered for his rack system. The line became known as the *Spanisch-Brodli-Bahn* (Spanish Bun Railway) as it allowed the people of Zurich to obtain rapid delivery of the well known buns produced in Baden.

The original timetable provided four trains each way per day with an extra train on Sundays and Holidays in fine weather. During the first week of operation 9000 passengers were carried but many had come out of curiosity and custom fell off to such an extent that the Company was obliged to cancel one of the four daily trains and provide lower third class fares. As many shareholders were unable to meet calls on their shares, it was decided not to extend the line to Aarau for the time being. The previous objective, Basel, had been abandoned due to further hostility and disturbed political conditions.

During the 1840s a strong movement had grown up, mainly in the Protestant and more "liberal" Cantons, for the strengthening of the authority of the Central Government. This was opposed by the more traditionally minded Catholic Cantons. Matters came to a head in 1847, when after elections and rioting, the then twenty-two cantons split into two opposing groups, thirteen Protestant and seven Catholic, with two remaining neutral. The Catholic group called itself the *Sonderbund*. With Austria, France, Piedmont and Prussia, who would have profited from the collapse of the Confederation, threatening invasion, the Federal Government struck. With a 100,000 strong army (the *Sonderbund* only mustering 70,000), General Dufour, who was later to play a major role in the building of the Gotthardbahn, first encircled the Canton of Fribourg, compelling its surrender on 14 November 1847. He then moved against the main force of the *Sonderbund*. A brief action was fought at Gislikon, near Lucerne, with light

casualties on both sides and the resistance of the *Sonderbund* collapsed. The war had lasted just nineteen days.

Though no more railways were to be opened in Switzerland for the next seven years, in 1849 the Assembly asked for a national railway plan to be drafted. The following year Robert Stephenson prepared a plan for 640 kilometers of line to serve the country's commercial and military requirements. A trunk line was to run from Geneva to Lindau via Lausanne, Yverdon, Lyss, Olten, Baden, Zurich, Winterthur, Romanshorn and Rorschach; with a cross route from Basel via Olten to Lucerne with branches from Lyss to Thun via Bern and from Rorschach to Chur via Sargans. The lines were to follow the main rivers, no crossing of the Alps was envisaged.

On 28 July 1852 the first general Railway Law was issued, giving the Cantons the right to grant concessions, a right they were to retain until the passing of a second Railway Law on 23 December 1872. Though much development was thus to meet local needs, commercial considerations led to a linking up by amalgamation. By this process, together with further construction, the five large standard gauge companies that were to form the Schweizerische Bundesbahn emerged.

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