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St. Gotthard railway line – its mythological meaning for an independent state of Switzerland

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Introduction

On the level of nation building the history of the Alps and the Gotthard Mountain is one of the core themes of Swiss history. The following article will discuss the social and cultural construction of technology of the Gotthard railway line. It not only transported goods and passengers through the Alps, but shaped the self-image of Switzerland. The presentation will discuss how a railway line could support the process of defining Swiss independence within Europe.

In second half of the 19th Switzerland began to be surrounded by new big nations such as the German Empire, the Italian Kingdom which unified the areas with German and Italian language. Switzerland with its German, French and Italian speaking areas came under pressure defining its nationhood and role. There was no race, language, religion which could be of a defining element. Two mottos appear since the late Middle Ages in the discussion about Swiss identity. The history of gaining independence from the Holy German Empire with its mythological tales such as William Tell, successful battles against the Habsburgers, the German Emperor, the Duke of Burgundy. Secondly the Alps were treated as the place of living, backbone and fortification. In the 18th century the discussion about Swiss identity began to concentrate on the Gotthard Mountain. It was mentioned as the mythical European place where rivers started in all directions toward north, south, west and east. With the opening of the railway line 1882 the Gotthard Mountain began to be the core element of national identity.¹ Modern Swiss nation, founded in 1848, made of peasants, craftsmen, hunters became the neutral keeper of the most important transit line through the Alps. Gonzague de Reynold, a conservative philosopher, promoted the Swiss nation 1909 as the “keeper of the St. Gotthard”.² The role of a transport service provider became beside the humanitarian role one of the core element of the defining Swiss nationhood. This myth had its

¹ 17. Guy P. Marchal und Aram Mattioli. Nationale Identität – allzu Bekanntes in neuem Licht, in: Guy P. Marchal und Aram Mattioli (Hg.) Erfundene Schweiz – Konstruktionen nationaler Identität. Zürich 1992

² 120. Guy P. Marchal. Schweizer Gebrauchsgeschichte. Geschichtsbilder, Mythenbildung und nationale Identität. Basel, 2006

culmination during World War II. The Swiss army would have retreated in the fortified Gotthard areas to defend its independence. Dead pledge would have been the railway line.

In the following discussion I will focus on two phases, the period from the opening 1882 until the nationalization of the line in 1909 and the period between the two World Wars. These two periods are least looked upon but of crucial importance for the social and cultural construction of the railway line as a core element of national identity.

View from outside

The railway line was a big success. The line with its length of a little bit more than 200 kilometres transported 1900 nearly one million tons of goods. 1910 the St. Gotthard railway line transported about 10% of all goods in Switzerland which were shipped by rail. Passenger transportation made up nearly 40% of the turnover of the Gotthard Railway Company. The first class passenger played a very important part. They counted for 5% of the passenger but made up for 22% of the turnover in passenger transportation. In addition they travelled much longer distances; in the average 120 km.³ The tourists travelling on the mountain line mainly came from Germany. The journey from Lucerne to the south of Switzerland was very intriguing. Although the line was planned as a transit line, the journey was an event like a ride on a rollercoaster, as Judith Schueler states: "The eyes enjoyed the sublime view on technology and landscape; the body felt the turning through the tunnels; the tunnel air and sound tickled the nose and ears: and the Gotthard's intangibility as a divider and unifier of contrasts stirred mind."⁴ Lucerne as one of the main tourist regions in the Alps got an additional attraction which was fostered by the railway company itself but also by independent travel book writers. 1889 the St. Gotthard Railway Company commissioned the building of a relief in scale of 1:25'000 which shows the running of the line from Lucerne to Bellinzona through the alpine wilderness.



Part of the Gotthard relief in the Glacier Garden, Lucerne (Kilian T. Elsasser)

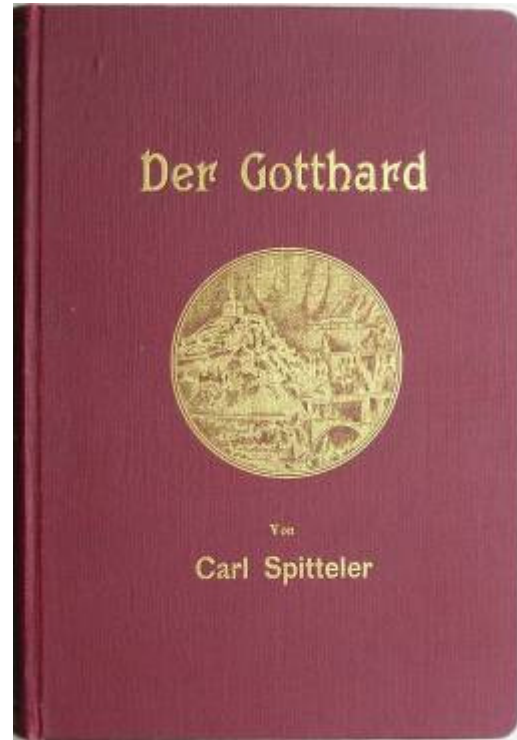
The relief was shown at the World exhibition in Paris. The relief was built by the famous relief builders Xaver Imfeld and Fridolin Becker. It has a size of 4.5 by 3 meters and can be seen in the Glacier Garden in Lucerne. It should animate for a journey to Lucerne and Central Switzerland.⁵ The red line symbolizing the railway would confidently find the way from north to south through the numerous valleys and mountains and underneath the Gotthard Mountain. The numerous travel guides presented the Gotthard railway line not only as the swiftest but also

³ 48. Thomas Frey, Die Gotthardbahn boomt 1882-1914, in: ViaStoria und Kilian T. Elsasser (Hg.) Der direkte Weg in den Süden. Die Geschichte der Gotthardbahn. Zürich, 2007.

⁴ 107. Judith Schueler. Materialising identity. The co-construction of the Gotthard railway and Swiss national identity. Amsterdam, 2008

⁵ 100. Madlena Cavelti Hammer u.a. (Hg.). Xaver Imfeld 1853-1909. Meister der Alpentopographie. Sarnen, 2006.

as most impressive transit line in Europe and as the ultimate holiday destination.⁶ The travel guides presented the ‘wonders of technology’, the ‘magnificent mountain scenery’ and the journey through the birthplace of the Switzerland. Carl Spitteler, the later winner of a Nobel Prize in Literature wrote in his travel guide ‘Der Gotthard’ which was commissioned by the Gotthard Railway Company: “The Gotthard railway line takes us right to the heart of Switzerland, through two of the three most important founding cantons of the Swiss confederation (Schwyz and Uri). Tell and Stauffacher, Rütli and Hohle



Travel guide (left) from George L. Cattlin, US Consul in Switzerland. Lucerne, 1890. The travel guide was first published in English later translated in French and German (left) Travel guide by Carl Spitteler, 1897

Gasse, Altdorf and Bürglen are familiar names.”⁷ The many travel guides reflects on the importance of the line. Foreign tourists read these guides and brought back their ideas and impressions about Switzerland and the Gotthard to Switzerland. Through the lens of the foreign bourgeois tourist, the question they asked, the ideas they mentioned and the meaning they gave to Switzerland shaped what Swiss people thought about their identity. This view from the outside was interrupted in 1914. With the beginning of World War I the constant flow of mainly German tourists came to a complete stop. The promotion of the travel through the heart of Switzerland by the most spectacular railway line in Europe during nearly 30 years had its deep influence on the perception of the Gotthard Mountain and railway. With the beginning of the 20th century Swiss people began to call their country as the “Gotthard Nation”.⁸

⁶ 83. Judith Schueler. Materialising identity. The co-construction of the Gotthard railway and Swiss national identity. Amsterdam, 2008

⁷ 17. Carl Spitteler. Der Gotthard. Frauenfeld, 1897

⁸ 17. Guy P. Marchal und Aram Mattioli. Nationale Identität – allzu Bekanntes in neuem Licht, in: Guy P. Marchal und Aram Mattioli (Hg.) Erfundene Schweiz – Konstruktionen nationaler Identität. Zürich 1992

The view from within

Gotthard railway line was constructed as an international line. It was financed by Switzerland, Italy and Germany. Many German, French, Italian and Swiss engineers planned and managed the building of the line and the tunnel. The actual works was mainly done by Italians. Italy and Germany got as a return on investment the guarantee of an open transit line through Switzerland. The line was a strong impetus for the standardization of railway technology. German and Italian rolling stock would travel through Switzerland. The Swiss Government

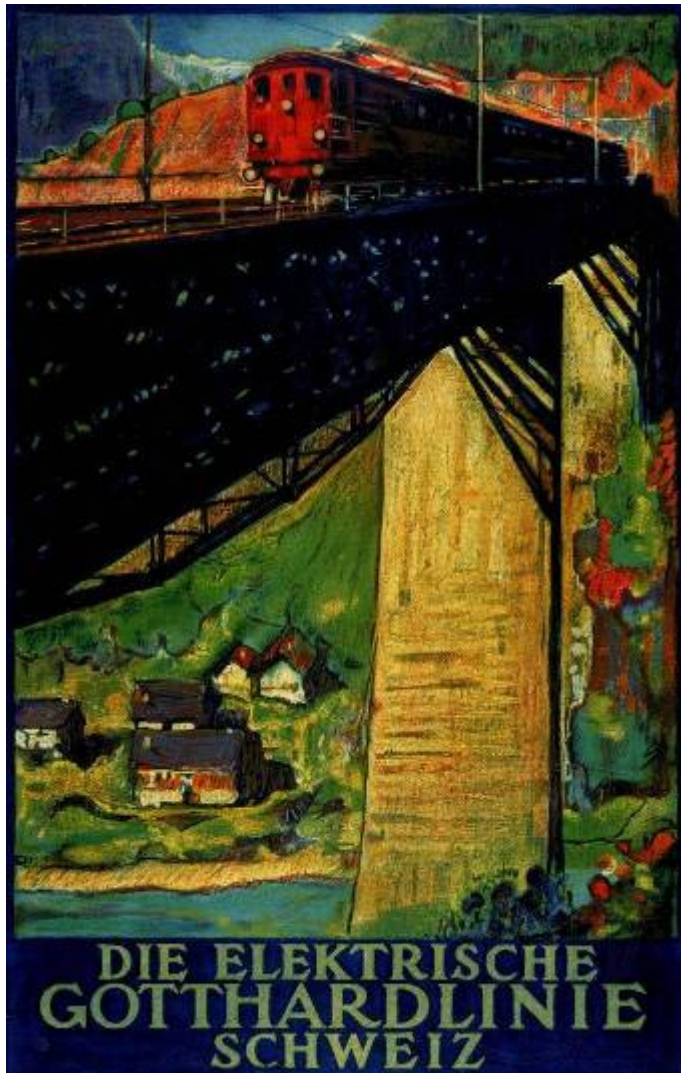


Poster and Time table Gotthard Railway Company, 1899. The poster stresses the international meaning of the railway line connecting Germany with Italy. (Courtesy Swiss transport museum)

organized in the 1880's the first conference for standardization of railway technology which was followed by an international treaty determining technical standards such as the height of the buffers and so on.⁹ At the beginning of the 20th century the international railway line was nationalized. 1909 the Gotthard Railway Company became a part of Swiss Federal Railways.

⁹ Waldis, Alfred. Internationale Eisenbahnorganisationen und die Schweiz, in: Burri, Monika, Elsasser, Kilian T., Gugerli, David. (Ed.) Die Internationalität der Eisenbahn 1850-1970. Zürich 2003. S. 245-256

In the early twenties of the 20th century the line was electrified. Now the line not only belonged to Switzerland but was also run by electric energy produced in the Swiss Alps



Poster from the Swiss Federal Railways, 1924, designer: Daniele Buzzi. (Courtesy Graphische Sammlung Nationalbibliothek Bern)

The perception of the Gotthard railway line changed. The line became a unifier of the different regions and classes within Switzerland. In the 1920s Swiss Federal Railway did not anymore present Switzerland as beautiful landscape but picked out as a central theme the electrification. The national railway company presented itself and Switzerland as nation capable producing powerful state of the art products which stressed with its use of electric energy the independence of Switzerland.¹⁰ After this first campaign promoting the powerful und reliable image Swiss Federal Railway began to seek new clients. Foreign tourists did not come back after World War I. The railway company focused on Swiss passengers. The 50th anniversary of the opening of the Gotthard railway line 1932 Swiss Federal Railways promoted the discovery of the different Swiss regions to the Swiss people. They offered for example inexpensive tickets and places to sleep for schools on the Gotthard line.

¹⁰ 114. Kilian T. Elsasser. Einheimische „weisse“ statt deutsche schwarze Kohle, in: ViaStoria and Kilian T. Elsasser (ed.) Der direkte Weg in den Süden. Die Geschichte der Gotthardbahn. Zürich, 2007

Gotthard railway line as a unifier

In Airolo, the southern end of the Gotthard tunnel, a monument for the numerous victims of the tunnel construction was inaugurated. The monument was meant as reconciliation. The workers and victims of the tunnel construction became a symbol for the suffering of all working class people in Switzerland. It was a sign of the bourgeois government integrating the Socialist party into the political system of Switzerland. The Socialist party accepted 1935 in exchange the existing organization of the Swiss government and approved the need for national defence.

In the same period many novels radio and stage plays about the construction of the Gotthard tunnel appeared. The numerous novels popularized the main aspects of national identity. They stressed the two elements collective identity, Gotthard Mountains and technological change.¹¹ In opposite to the accounts in the 19th century the heroes of the account were mostly Swiss. On the one hand the entrepreneur Louis Favre from the French part of Switzerland created a



The life of Louis Favre was portrayed like Jesus Christ. As a boy he worked with his father as a carpenter (above left). As the entrepreneur he cared for the tunnel worker (above right). With his suffering he was alone (below left). He died during a tunnel inspection. Series of about 12 images which were first published in 1900. Drawings by Henry van Muyden. (Courtesy Swiss Transport Museum, Lucerne)

¹¹ 117. Judith Schueler. Materialising identity. The co-construction of the Gotthard railway and Swiss national identity. Amsterdam, 2008

path between the German and Italian speaking regions of Switzerland.¹² On the other hand Swiss from the cantons Ticino and Uri were the working heroes risking their lives in the darkness of the tunnel although mainly Italian had worked in the tunnel. With their relatives and friends they fought about how to settle with the new economic possibilities and threats of industrialization. Finally the novels synthesize the period of pre-industrialization symbolized by the road over the Gotthard Mountain and the period of industrialization symbolized by the construction of the tunnel as a fight against the mountain. “To the existing national imagery of the Gotthard Mountain and its habitants the novels add the central role of technology. Swiss values survived the transition to modernity and they materialised in the tunnel, especially those themes central to Swiss national identity such as freedom, Christianity, social solidarity, love for the Fatherland and work ethic.”¹³



On the left hand side the strongest Locomotive of the world at the National Exhibition in Zurich 1939 (Courtesy Swiss Transport Museum, Lucerne)

At the entrance of the National Exhibition 1939 in Zurich the visitors came across a large map of the Gotthard with the explanation: “The focus of our country – symbol of our history and geographical position.”¹⁴ The exhibition was visited by more than 10 million people and was a big success. It opened just before World War II and ended at the end of the same year. The exhibition met the need of self-assurance of the Swiss people in a difficult period. The exhibition consisted in two parts. On one side of Lake Zurich traditional Switzerland was present. On the other side modern Switzerland was shown with its modern products. One of the key objects was the strongest locomotive of the world Ae 8/14 Nr. 11852 which was

¹² 121. Judith Schueler. *Materialising identity. The co-construction of the Gotthard railway and Swiss national identity.* Amsterdam, 2008

¹³ 137. Judith Schueler. *Materialising identity. The co-construction of the Gotthard railway and Swiss national identity.* Amsterdam, 2008

¹⁴ 119. Judith Schueler. *Materialising identity. The co-construction of the Gotthard railway and Swiss national identity.* Amsterdam, 2008

produced for the Gotthard railway line and first presented at the exhibition in Zurich.¹⁵ The locomotive became a symbol of strength in a possible war against Nazi Germany. The railway line changed from an international project to a national symbol serving Switzerland within war torn Europe.

Conclusion

In comparison to the other alpine railway lines such as the Semmering, Brenner, Mont Cenis and Lötschberg-Simplon no one did generate such an important national symbolic meaning. The Gotthard railway line is probably the only technical system in Switzerland which transported a cultural and social construction of technology of national importance. The mythical meaning of the railway line was not created by this mode of transportation. It was based on the symbolic meaning of the Alps and the Gotthard Mountain centuries before. The railway line synthesized the agrarian with the industrial way of thinking. The fight against the mountain kept going on. The railway line renewed and strengthened the role of Switzerland as an efficient and independent service provider for Europe.

Biographical dates

1956, earned a M.A. in Public History, Northeastern University, Boston USA. He worked as a curator of the railway department and as a head curator of exhibition at the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne, Switzerland. He was among other the project manager of the permanent exhibition about Swiss railway history and the Gotthard tunnel show. Today he is an independent consultant, researcher and exhibition planner (www.museumsfabrik.ch). He wrote and published about railway history, conservation of technical artefacts and about exhibition issues such as the exhibition catalogue *Kohle, Strom und Schienen – Die Eisenbahn erobert die Schweiz*, Zürich 1997. He was author and co-publisher of 'Die Internationalität der Eisenbahn 1850-1970, Zürich 2002 and 'Der direkte Weg in den Süden - Bau und Betrieb der Gotthardbahn'. Zürich 2007. He is part of the comitee preparing an application of the St. Gotthard railway line as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

¹⁵ 293. Kilian T. Elsasser. Die stärkste Lokomotive der Welt. In: Verkehrshaus (Hg.) *Kohle, Strom und Schienen. Die Eisenbahn erobert die Schweiz*. Zürich, 2007