

10-SOURBRODT

A former Vennbahn stop is now its show-piece building

When the section of rail linking Malmedy to Monschau was being planned, only a simple shelter with a stop was envisaged for the village of Sourbrodt. The nearest houses were anyway about a kilometre from the tracks. Yet things were to develop differently. In 1889, four years after the first train arrived in Sourbrodt, a station was built. It would become a regional show piece for the period. Today, the brickwork over the doors and windows as well as the stucco decoration on the gable gives us an idea of the quality of construction. Together with the station building, two apartments were built for railway personnel, because the station staff mostly came from further inland. In the immediate vicinity of the apartments was a stall for small livestock, such as goats.

Points and signals, after the Belgians take over the Vennbahn in 1921, trains still run on the right

Even prior to the upgrading to two-track running, the points and signals, as well as the two signal boxes were ready for twin track operation. Points and signals were set via levers, pulleys and cables by the operator in the signal box. He also had to announce the up and down-coming trains to his neighbour stations of Weywertz and Kalterherberg. The signal man from Sourbrodt was especially preoccupied with the points controlling the line to Kalterherberg, because that was the site of military loading ramps, sidings and an extensible rail section for shunting engines. Particularly hectic were those days when military trains were on the move, especially in the season of NATO manoeuvres. Operating the gates at level crossing Nr. 78 was also part of his job. In 1921, the Belgian state railway company NMBS/SNCB took over the running of the Vennbahn. Rail traffic in Germany ran on the right, all signals and signs were therefore also on the right side of the track. In Belgium, however, trains ran on the left. But the new Vennbahn owners decided to provisionally maintain the right traffic rule. This “transitional signalling” remained - not surprisingly - until the last train had run its last journey on the Vennbahn. This meant that every Belgian engine driver, whether he ever rode the Vennbahn or not, had to know the German system for signals and signs.

Offices, waiting rooms and a restaurant create a little village

On the ground floor could be found the offices of the station staff: one each for the station master, the train dispatcher and the signalmen. Passengers were served at two ticket counters, and there was also a left luggage office and, most important, a station cafe. The bar of the cafe separated the 3rd class waiting room from that of 2nd class passengers. Above the door of the latter could be read: “2nd class waiting room - access only for holders of a valid 1st or 2nd class ticket”. The platform conductor regularly checked the tickets there to root out any interlopers. The 3rd class waiting room was for anyone. Newspapers, sweets, cigarettes and tobacco could be bought at the ticket office. This little shop still operated until 1970. Upstairs lived the station master with his family and also the publican of the station cafe. The latrines, some 50 metres beyond the main building, were still in use until 1960. Later, a room was furnished on the ground floor for use as a telephone and telegraph office. From a mast at the level crossing, the telegraph cables ran in every direction along the rails. There was always something going on in the station cafe, especially when there were manoeuvres at Elsenborn barracks. After the war, Joseph Comès from Sourbrodt (father of the famous comic book author Didier Comès) ran the cafe. Like his successor, he also ran a taxi service. In 1970, the station cafe, the last of its kind in East Belgium, was finally closed down.

Sourbrodt station – heavenly blessings and the perils of hell

The Vennbahn was the region’s first major employer. According to the parish register of 1887, the crossing keeper Hubert Etienne-Decourty was the first villager from Sourbrodt to be employed by the railway. The construction of the military camp at Elsenborn (1885) and the Rurhof (1901), as well as the peat works founded in 1895 by Oberst von Giese, all helped to create an expanding labour market in the following years. In addition, more and more businesses set up in the area. The population of the once isolated village began to grow substantially, as did the number of businesses catering to visitors. The soldiers from nearby Elsenborn barracks came up with the “Fiery Elijah”

when they were on furlough. This narrow-gauge train was originally designed for the transport of oats, barley and straw for military horses. But it could also serve for passengers and benched wagons were available. At its height, there were over 20 hotels and cafes catering to guests in Sourbrodt. Some of them were of rather ill repute. The Reverend Pietkin castigated the youth of the village in a sermon quoted in the newspaper (*Echo de Malmedy*, 5.5.1989): "This is the railway to hell!" Today, one can book a Railbike ride to hell, or at least from Kalterherberg to Sourbrodt station. These vehicles are a special symbiosis between rolling-stock and bicycle. Today, Sourbrodt station harbours but few vestiges - such as the restored station building and a signal box - of those golden years when there was so much coming and going of visitors and soldiers and goods at the height of the Vennbahn era.

The Vennbahn as employer

In 1887, the crossing guard Hubert Etienne-Decourty was the first villager of Sourbrodt to work for the railways (see the "Vennbahn" exhibition, photo from Rudy Giet). Thereafter many from the area would find work with the Vennbahn. A new and welcome experience for most was receiving a pay-packet every fortnight. The money, which during Prussian rule arrived from distant Berlin, "trickled down among the common people". The once impoverished village began to show signs of modest wealth. Many foresaw a bright future. But then came a sobering experience to show them that not everything would always be so rosy. On the Vennbahn, air operated brakes were introduced to replace the traditional hand-cranked system. This meant that, for every single Vennbahn train, between five and eight brakemen, who used to take their signals from the engine driver, were no longer required.

The Sarlettes, a railway family

The Vennbahn was the first large-scale employer in the Fen region. With its arrival, many families in East Belgium were able to secure themselves a solid existence, such as was the case with two generations of the Sarlette family from Weywertz. Peter Sarlette, born in 1892, was initially employed as a clay worker in the Sourbrodt brickyard. Gradually he could see that working with the railway would offer better long-term prospects, was not such back-breaking work as digging clay and would secure a more regular wage. So he made the change to the Vennbahn as a track-laying gang worker. One year later, he was called up for military service. Then, in 1914, just 40 days before he was due to be demobbed, World War I broke out and he was drafted into service. Peter Sarlette spent the war years in Verdun before returning to the railways. In 1955, with the Vennbahn gradually being wound down, he went into retirement.

Like father, like sons ... both of them

After World War II, Peter Sarlette signed his son Gottfried up for a job with the railways. He was a simple rail worker. Thanks to courses and training opportunities, he ended up as a station master in, among other places, Eupen and Raeren. According to his brother Richard, he had a weakness for steam locomotives. He helped set up the Vennbahn exhibit in the "Museum Zwischen Venn and Schneifel" (Museum between Fen and Snow Eifel) in St Vith. One of his particular concerns was cross border cooperation between the Belgian and German railways. Richard Sarlette was only 14 when he began to walk in his father's footsteps. He began work as a courier, responsible for delivering the message that someone's package had arrived at the station office. That was a beginning, because, if one successfully passed the right training courses, one could advance from such a courier job to become a rail-worker or rail-clerk. After passing his secondary school certificate and doing his military service, Richard was promoted in 1955, the year his father was pensioned, to a managerial post at Sourbrodt station. He stayed in this position until his retirement at the end of the 1980s. Richard Sarlette's service with the railways was marked by an expansion of military rail traffic. The Belgian army, in its NATO role, was regularly involved in extensive manoeuvres around Camp Elsenborn. He particularly remembers the frequent loading of military transports at Sourbrodt station: "For NATO manoeuvres taking place on the military firing range in Elsenborn, we sometimes had to work right through the night." Work at the high-altitude station was particularly tough during



the harsh winter months when the thermometer could drop as low as minus 20°. “Changing frozen points was a real challenge every time!” He is well-aware of the value of the Vennbahn for people in the region. It meant an economic boom for Sourbrodt, and at last “people were earning a regular wage.”