

15-BORN

The Freiherr-von-Korff Viaduct – military bridge-building in World War I

The entrance to the village of Born is marked by the 285-metre-long Vennbahn viaduct with its eleven arches. The purpose of the viaduct was to provide an undisturbed flyover passage of the roadway below. The viaduct leads away from the Vennbahn bed towards Vielsalm. This 23-kilometre westerly section connecting the Vennbahn with the line from Luxembourg to Spa was constructed in 1916. The reasons were military, as towards the middle of the First World War, goods and troops had to be transported towards Liege and Flanders. In just eight months, using 19,000 m³ of concrete, this unusual structure was raised up. The viaduct is named after Friedrich Freiherr von Korff, who served as Landrat of the Prussian district of Malmedy from 1908 to 1920.

The fate of the Born Viaduct

Until 1920, the name of the man who had it built, the “Freiherr von Korff”, was chiselled into the face of the viaduct. Times change. Following the Treaty of Versailles, with the overthrow of the former territorial power, the Freiherr’s name was eradicated by the Belgians. The same fate befell the patriotic verse engraved on its surface in 1916: “Krieg schallt es laut, als diese Bahn erbaut. Mit starker Hand and Manneskraft und trotz dem Feind war’s bald geschafft.” (War thundered mightily when this railway was built with strong hands and the zeal of men until, despite the efforts of the enemy; it was completed in record time). In the Second World War, following the German invasion in 1940, the bridge was blown up by Belgian sappers, as was the Hermanmont viaduct at the other end of the section, to slow the arrival of German troop reinforcements. The Freiherr-von-Korff Bridge had been provided by its military builders with charge chambers for this very purpose, but for some unknown reason these were not used. The demolitions had little effect in the long run, as immediately after the war, the line from Born to Vielsalm was anyway taken out of service.

Friedrich Freiherr von Korff, the last Prussian Landrat for the district of Malmedy...

The man who gave his name to the viaduct in Born, Friedrich Bernard Hubert Freiherr von Korff, was a scion of German nobility from the Münsterland. He was born in 1865 in Wesel on the lower Rhine. He began his training as an officer at the age of 19. Thereafter he studied Law in Bonn, gaining practical experience in various courts along the Rhine. His early career took him to Cologne, Potsdam and Lauenburg. His wife Maria came from Aachen. The couple had three daughters, Pia, Maria and Toja. On 5th June 1907, he was provisionally appointed as Landrat of the district of Malmedy, which was part of the Prussian province of the Rhine from 1916 until 1920. After elections in December 1907, his post became official on 12th February 1908. This appointment lasted twelve years, until the area was ceded once again to Belgium by the Treaty of Versailles. Freiherr von Korff was thus the last Prussian Landrat to serve the Malmedy district.

...then Chief of Police in Aachen until his dismissal by the Allied Powers in 1923

After this, Freiherr von Korff returned to the Rhineland. He was appointed Chief of Police in Aachen. By 1923, the political situation had become critical, as French and Belgian troops began to occupy the Rhineland. This was the French and Belgian way of ensuring that Germany fulfilled its war reparations obligations (coal, etc) fully and punctually. German civil servants in the Rhine and Ruhr were ordered by their government in Berlin not to obey orders from these occupying powers. Among the senior administrators in Aachen who passively resisted the occupation by refusing to countenance orders issued by the “Interalliance Rhineland Commission” was Friedrich Bernhard Hubert Freiherr von Korff. He refused to carry out the orders of the president of Aachen’s municipal government, Wilhelm Rombach (who was himself refusing to carry out orders). Together with other refuseniks, he was briefly arrested and then freed, but only under the proviso that he would never again enter the Aachen district.

Following the vague traces of Friedrich Freiherr von Korff today

For the next two years, Freiherr von Korff was Chief of Police in Bielefeld. His last directorial posting for the Police was from March 1925 in Kassel, where he died on 8th March 1928 while on duty. According to Jobst Freiherr von Korff, the von Korff family genealogist, the von Korffs moved in the same social circles in Kassel as the Henschel family of industrialists, who at the time were among the foremost manufacturers of locomotives in Germany. By 1923, the Henschel works in Kassel had already built over 20,000 locomotives; from 1925 they also built lorries. The Vennbahn had its share of Henschel-Locomotives, and diesel shunting engines from Henschel still stand on the sidings at the old station in Walheim. These were built in the 1950s. Jobst Freiherr von Korff knew two of Friedrich Freiherr von Korff's daughters. They were his second cousins. In the post-war years, he would often visit a von Korff aunt in Bütgenbach. She was Prioress of the Carmelite Cloister at the time, which was taken over by the Franciscan order in 1985. That the viaduct in nearby Born was named for Friedrich Freiherr von Korff was news to Jobst Freiherr von Korff. Probably the name has fallen into disuse over time. Since it was chiselled away after the First World War, it has gone missing, not only from the arches of the viaduct, but also from the memories of those living nearby.