

8-KALTERHERBERG

Ruitzhof, an idyllic piece of Germany in Belgium

The hamlet of Ruitzhof lies at the confluence of the Rur and the Schwarzbach. A few houses and a couple of farms form the village on its single, little-travelled street. From “Eifel-Blick” (Eifel view), a panorama on the western edge of the hamlet, you can see across the tops of trees to the “Eifel Cathedral”, Kalterherberg church. Down in the valley, at the hamlet’s frontier to Kalterherberg, the Vennbahn used to steam through. Today, Ruitzhof is an idyllic corner; one feels as if one were on an island, far from the bustling world with its hurry and deadlines. In the case of Ruitzhof, this island sensation is no mere fancy, but derives from a real cartographic peculiarity. The hamlet is one of six remaining German exclaves, this one cut off from its motherland by the ribbon of sovereign Belgian territory that carries the Vennbahn embankment.

First an explanation: Enclave or exclave?

Whether enclave or exclave depends on your territorial point of view. “Enclaves” are pieces of a state’s territory that are surrounded by the territory of another state, with no obvious access to either their parent state or the high seas. The term “exclave” is the same zone, but seen from the point of view of the parent state from which it is territorially separated by another sovereign authority. According to these definitions, Ruitzhof is simultaneously a German enclave intruded into Belgium (from the Belgian point of view) and an exclave of Germany surrounded by Belgium (from the German point of view). However, in Ruitzhof such semantic niceties as defining identity through questions of exclusion and enclosure are barely relevant today. Neither have they been for the last few decades.

The five German exclaves along the Vennbahn are a worldwide curiosity

There are about 250 localities and entities worldwide which, as separated pieces of a state, can only be accessed via the borders of another. Among the most well-known are Alaska, Guantánamo Bay and Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave. Until the end of the GDR in 1990, Berlin was a German exclave. Currently, Germany possesses six exclaves: Büsingen on the upper Rhine and five others, all of which can be found along the Vennbahn. Rückschlag, Mützenich and Ruitzhof are complete localities separated from German territory, whereas in Lammersdorf and Roetgen, only sections of the community are cut off. Due to the particular nature of the separation, being excised by a railway line, the Vennbahn exclaves are treated as a special case in international negotiations. With a surface area of only 1.5 hectares, Rückschlag near Konzen is the smallest of Germany’s exclaves, harbouring only a single house. Ruitzhof is the largest, with its 18.73km² enclosed by Belgian soil. Only accessible through another sovereign territory, it can either be reached from Küchelscheid on the Belgian ‘mainland’ or from Kalterherberg, by traversing the ribbon of the Belgian Vennbahn.

The struggle over the frontier and the Vennbahn after World War I

The First World War caused grave changes in the frontier situation between Germany and Belgium. The districts of Eupen and Malmedy were ceded to Belgium, as well as Neutral-Moresnet, the 3.4 km² area to the southwest of Aachen. The districts of Eupen and Malmedy were now completely connected to the Belgian rail network. The decision of the International Commission on Frontiers of 27th March 1920 was carried by five votes over the abstention of the German representative. It caused a storm of protest among the population of Monschau. They felt themselves deprived of a vital artery. For their part, the Belgians feared possible acts of sabotage to the Vennbahn. To this end, in May 1920, a 200-strong military unit was sent to guard the Vennbahn.

As the Vennbahn became Belgian, the five German exclaves reappeared

In 1921, the Vennbahn track from Kalterherberg running south, as well as running north to Raeren was annexed by Belgium. This resulted in 55 km² of German territory west of the tracks being cut off from Germany. The five exclaves along the Vennbahn were now reality. In total, the Vennbahn embankment created a Belgian corridor 28.5 kilometres long through German territory. As German

territory on German soil, there are only the 18 kilometres between Aachen Rothe Erde and the “new border” just after Schmidthof. The treaty covering cession to Belgium of the rail bed from Raeren to Kalterherberg and, in relation thereto, also the “regulations concerning the frontier between Germany and Belgium” was signed on 6th November 1922 in Aachen. Therein could be found, among others, the following regulation: use of the German language, including by Belgian officials; the names of stations will be retained; German currency is the valid medium of payment, and therefore all tariffs and fees are to be announced and paid in German currency; the movement of passengers, whether within, acceding to or exiting from the railway premises or the trains, shall remain free of any Belgian control. Yet the people’s perception of the Vennbahn had shifted. It was no longer their familiar German Vennbahn, but a stretch of Belgian track with which “one was obliged to travel through foreign territory”. The staff were familiar enough, inasmuch as many of them had simply been re-contracted to the Belgian Railway, but all the same, things were no longer as they used to be!

Exclaves in World War II – first back to Germany and then finally back again to Belgium

In the beginning of May 1940, German troops once again marched into France. Although initially neutral, Belgium was considered nothing more than a transit corridor. On 18th May 1940, the territories seceded to Belgium in 1920 - the districts of Eupen and Malmedy, as well as Neutral Moresnet - were brought “home into the Reich” by express decree of the Führer. Just before the Germans marched in, Belgian commandos blew up the viaducts near Weywertz and Oudler, temporarily denying the enemy the use of the Vennbahn for the advancing of reinforcements. Soon work was being carried out to repair and renovate the Vennbahn system, because “wheels must turn for victory”. Right up until 1944, the Vennbahn withstood the Second World War with comparatively little damage. But with the allied advance and the German retreat in full sway, the Vennbahn began to move inexorably into the cross-hairs. Motorised units of Wehrmacht sapper commandos blew up much of the Vennbahn infrastructure, including the viaduct near Reichenstein, not far from Ruitzhof. After the armistice was signed on 9th May 1945, Eupen, Malmedy and Moresnet once again became Belgian, once again the Vennbahn was on Belgian soil and thus, once again, the five German exclaves became reality.

The exclaves are not annexed

Belgium introduced demands for reparation after the war. The territorial demands, which were introduced in the Council of Foreign Ministers at the close of 1946 to 1947, involved small changes to the border along the Vennbahn. The goal was to dissolve the German exclaves through annexation. But by mid-April 1949, opinion was changing. Belgium suddenly, and surprisingly, renounced the majority of its territorial claims. Despite the border reforms, the inhabitants of these areas would, at least in the foreseeable future, remain German nationals. This renouncement was not so much the result of ongoing protests from the government of North Rhine Westphalia, but more a bending to economic realities: since the Vennbahn was going to require enormous sums over many years for its reconstruction, the government wished to distance itself from the idea of taking on any further costly responsibilities for the exclaves.

Living together: inhabitants and border guards reach a silent consensus

Hedwig Pauls was born in 1926 in Ruitzhof, five years after the hamlet became a German exclave. She doesn’t remember experiencing any particular daily difficulties under German “special status”: “One never really had the feeling of being separate from Germany”. After the war, there was a certain amount of mutual teasing among the kids at school when they met one another “down in the valley on the bridge”. German children would be called “Bosche” or worse still “filthy Bosche”. This defamatory word for Germans used by the French originated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 [*translator’s note: may come from “cabosche” the original French word for cabbage, presumed favourite food of Germans and also used to designate someone stubborn*] The German children would tease the Belgians as a “hungry rat pack”. With their own compatriots, customs officers and border guards, the situation could have led to tensions. These guardians of national sovereignty held

a rather ambivalent position with regard to the local population: on the one hand, they were there to serve the state, on the other they did not want to be perceived by the locals as strangers. But Hedwig Pauls remembers that “there was seldom any problem, because we all knew one another”. This meant that the German border guards would close an eye when cigarettes or coffee were brought home illicitly from the little shop across the Belgian frontier zone. But it also meant that the locals would not be hypocritical of those officials who ensured a supply of cigarettes for themselves in the same way. However, the neighbour on the other side of the fence took care that the bands of friendship should not grow too strong between locals and border guards. It would sometimes happen, when the guards were comfortably installed in some friendly back room in Ruitzhof on a dreary, wet or snowy day, that they would be alarmed into alert and bustled out the door by their Belgian “colleagues”. Border formalities for those travelling into Ruitzhof took about 15 minutes. This was often resented by visitors as a barrier. As a result, they seldom had visitors, according to Hedwig Pauls. “Although, if you knew who was on duty, you could usually arrange for things to be streamlined”. Today, the free movement of people and goods across the strip of Belgian Vennbahn is not only entirely problem free, but even has some advantages. As Hedwig Pauls resumes, “Because since there are no more shops in Küchelscheid, small businesses in Kalterherberg profit from the extra trade of their Belgian neighbours.”

Customs and border officials leave the crossing, but the exclave of Ruitzhof remains

Belgium and Germany were among the first nine countries to enact the new Schengen Treaty implementation agreement on 26th March 1995, by which border control formalities were abolished. This ruling was named after the Luxembourg town of Schengen on the Mosel where the treaty was signed in 1985 by representatives of five Member States of the European Community: Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. It was there that they agreed on the step-by-step reduction in the formal controlling of persons crossing internal European borders. The foundation for this is the principle of “personal freedom of movement”, one of the four founding liberties of the European internal market. At the time, this not only meant the removal of frontier controls on internal borders, but also the development of mobile border zone surveillance systems, improved police cooperation within the community and stricter controls of Europe’s external borders. This signalled, in the spring of 1995, the end of controls at the German-Belgian border crossing at Kalterherberg. But the border itself, as traced by the Vennbahn corridor, would remain.

In terms of everyday coexistence, borders neither are nor ever were much of an issue

The inhabitants of Kalterherberg, Küchelscheid and Leykaul always got on well together. Norbert Rader, village representative of Kalterherberg, says they all held to the motto once attributed to Konrad Adenauer: “We know each other, we help each other out”. Everyday coexistence between Germans and Belgians has been problem-free for decades now. The little pub on Belgian ground, down by the Schwarzbach, was regularly visited by both nationalities, particularly at New Year. “Where you came from was never an issue here”, says Norbert Rader. One could almost believe that borders only existed in theory. The Pauls family sees the border issue with similar equanimity. They run a hotel. Herr Pauls has noticed that the mentalities of these two national neighbours tend to become similar over time. He winks when he says: “Even the Belgians are a bit German.” Since the removal of frontiers, new borders appear for cell-phones and GPS. Since the removal of border controls at the former Vennbahn crossing between Kalterherberg and Küchelscheid in March 1995, the Belgian-German border to the enclave of Ruitzhof is no longer noticeable. For the locals, this was no major event. The border control hut at the level crossing, together with its state insignia, is also long gone. For Vennbahn cyclists, the border, to all intents and purposes, no longer exists. Unless you knew, it would not cross your mind that you are currently entering one of the five German exclaves on the Vennbahn. Yet this specific border situation is still very much a subject for many of the guests staying at the Paul family’s “Wanderer-Biker-Rider-Station” up on the plateau. The reason for this lies in the problems people have with their cell phones when trying to connect with their appropriate national provider or roaming provider. In other words, although the old system of borders, with the striped poles, the huts, the officers and their controls is gone, and thus no longer a physical reality for



those who live here, yet for those attached to their new information technologies, there are still borders, ones which lead to a new appreciation of the political geography of the region. For cyclists using smart-app navigation systems, a special way to experience the Vennbahn, and not only in Ruitzhof, but also the other, smaller exclaves, is to watch for the change of nationality, for those invisible borders, which are now only noticeable on one's digital display.