

## **Wackelstein-Express**

# History of the narrow-gauge railway



**Waldviertler  
Schmalspurbahnverein**

### **The first plans**

by Gerhard Urban

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the construction of the main railways in Austria, Bohemia and Moravia was complete, the need to connect smaller towns to the railway system grew. Especially since the opening of the Emperor Franz Joseph Railway (Kaiser-Franz-Josefs-Bahn) between Vienna and Prague (1870), the desire to connect hardly accessible areas of the Waldviertel off the main railway grew. The government also called for the establishment of local rail companies, which involved private companies and municipalities, to help fund the construction. The railway companies were then run by the country and state.

As a legal basis the "law on concessions and privileges for local railways" was created in May 1880, followed by other laws in 1887, 1894 and 1910. To improve the unsatisfactory traffic situation of the poorly developed Waldviertel several railway lines were built based on these laws, for example Schwarzenau - Zwettl (- Martinsberg -Gutenbrunn), Schwarzenau - Waidhofen an der Thaya – Zlabings, and Göpfritz - Groß Siegharts (- Raabs).

On 12 November 1898, the Lower Austrian Provincial Committee (equivalent to today's "Landtag") received the "concession for the construction and operation of a narrow-gauge local railway Gmünd - Litschau with a branch from Alt Nagelberg to Heidenreichstein". This was announced in the Reichsgesetzblatt (RGBI). On 25 May 1899 the statutes of the corporation "Niederösterreichische Waldviertelbahn" were approved.

### **The railway construction**

by Gerhard Urban

Following this, the corporation was founded. Operations started on 4 July 1900 after the grand opening on the previous day. On 9 October 1901 (RGBI 166) the concession was extended to the route Gmünd - Groß Gerungs. Due to economic considerations as well as the proximity to the existing narrow gauge branch line Neuhaus - Neubistritz KkStB, the "Bosnian" gauge of 760 mm was used for the railway construction towards the towns of Litschau and Heidenreichschein, as well as Groß Gerungs. The same gauge was previously used in the Steyr valley in 1889. Until just before the outbreak of the First World War, repeated attempts were made to close the gap between Litschau and the present Nova Bistrica, which was about 10 to 15 km long. A decision for a gauge deviating from the standard gauge was not uncontroversial: supporters and opponents had verbal and physical disputes.

## Operation under the leadership of NÖLB

by Gerhard Urban

The economic and demographic structure of the Waldviertel has changed only insignificantly since the end of the monarchy. The most important economic areas nearby are Vienna (150 km), Linz (110 km) and, until 1918 and from 1990, Prague (170 km). The mobility of the population was hardly developed at the time of railway construction, only the industrialization impulse set in the time of Maria Theresa from about 1740 demanded a time and cost-effective transport to the economic areas of the monarchy.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the economic success of the company was in question from the outset. Both the country of Austria and the state of Lower Austria seem to have understood this situation, because apart from taking over part of the issued shares, the Lower Austrian provincial government guaranteed a dividend of 4 percent on the capital invested. Out of the total of 780,000 CZK of share capital, the state took over shares worth 400,000 CZK. Since the railway company consistently produced losses, the guarantee was always used.

The different gauges resulted in increased costs and increased time spent transshipping goods. In 1911, rollblocks were introduced to improve the situation. During the Second World War (1941) operations were further streamlined by the use of trolleys. From the beginning, the corporation handed over the operation of the lines to Litschau, Heidenreichstein and Groß Gerungs to the Lower Austrian Provincial Railways (NÖLB), which also procured the rolling stock. In September 1922, the Austrian Federal Railways (BBÖ) took over the operation retroactively from 1921.

## War turmoil and demarcation

by Gerhard Urban

After the First World War, the entire facilities of the Gmünd station and part of the northern routes fell to the ownership of ÖSR (invasion of Czech troops in the summer of 1920). Travel on the local train was then interrupted for some time, travelers had to get off at the stops Böhmzeil and Wieden and allowed to board there again. The trains travelled empty to the on the ÖSR lying local railway station (now Ceske Velenice).

Beginning in 1921, travelers were also able to travel to the local railway station, albeit against payment of a border surcharge. The completion of the current departure and arrival point (now Gmünd station Lower Austria) lasted until the beginning of the summer timetable 1923. From this point on, the former Gmünd station was officially called Ceske Velenice. The narrow-gauge trains continued to stop at the former local train station, where they turned to head north, albeit in a legal-free area. It was not until 1927 that the Czech territory was legally protected by the BBO with an international treaty, and from 1928 the change of direction became obsolete after the installation of a turning loop on Bohemian territory.

After the invasion of German troops in 1938, Ceske Velenice station was renamed to Gmünd (Waldviertel) Hbf, and in the area of Gmünd III a new stop near the "high school" was established. In addition, the line Neuhaus - Neubistritz was transferred to the Reichsbahndirektion Vienna. Maintenance of the rolling stock for this line was carried out in the depot Gmünd (formerly Bohemian area). After the end of the Second World War, it only took until 17 July 1945 for the Czech government to force the evacuation of buildings that were previously used by Austrian railway workers (boiler house, workshop and service building).

In 1950, Czechoslovakia paid the transfer of the line to Austrian territory in order to abrogate the obligations of the Austro-Czechoslovak State Treaty of 1927. No remains of the route section in the area of the current ÖSFR are left. The only remnants are the wye (for turning locomotives and cars), the relic of a dam near the road border crossing Böhmezeil and the still existing bridge Lainsitzbrücke from Gmünd to Ceske Velenice, which is used as a new pedestrian border crossing.

## Development from 1960

by Gerhard Urban

The influence of increasing motorization has been seen since the beginning of the interwar period – initially by competing passenger traffic from the railway's own bus service. From 1960, the increased road construction and higher income led to the rise in car ownerships. Since the ÖBB neither made the timetables, which have remained virtually unchanged since the opening, nor due to the lack of funding invested in more modern rolling stock (it partly originated from the opening season), passenger numbers declined.

Due to the economic development at the end of the 1970s, the volume of freight dropped as well. The ÖBB filed for the suspension of public transport on the routes from Gmünd to Litschau and Heidenreichstein. A directive of the Federal Ministry of Public Economy and Transport granted this at the end of May 1986 (due to insufficient cost recovery). This saved them from using the 5090 class railcar on the branch lines. The acquisition of these railcars came about a quarter of a century too late for this purpose.

## The first activities of the WSV

by Gerhard Urban

The Waldviertler Schmalspurbahnverein (WSV) was founded on 14 February 1987 after the discontinuation of scheduled passenger service by the ÖBB at the end of May 1986. The aim of the WSV was to maintain the routes for at least touristic passenger traffic.

From June 1987, the WSV used partly rented, partly purchased rolling stock to carry out journeys to the termini of the northern Waldviertler narrow-gauge railway, Heidenreichstein and Litschau. During almost all journeys, a visit to the Waldglashütte Zalto in Neunagelberg with an introduction to the art of glassmaking was an integral part of the program. Already in the first year of its existence, the WSV organized the unique New Year's Eve train – the first train with this name – which let its passengers experience the turn of the year with sparkling wine, fireworks and a steam locomotive.

## Track maintenance by the WSV

by Gerhard

Urban

The first serious cut was made with the cessation of the remaining freight traffic between Altnagelberg and Heidenreichstein on 29 May 1992. To ensure trains could run to Heidenreichstein in the future, the WSV had to take over the track at that point. Since then, only the WSV has been responsible for the maintenance of the route from 0.259 to 13.154 km. The ownership of the tracks and buildings remained with the ÖBB. Since a large part of the railway line runs through dense forest and is not accessible from the road, vehicles had to be procured for route maintenance. The first locomotive was a Ns2h. It was baptized "Findling" ("foundling") and used for journeys starting from 1994.

## Introduction of the touristic business

by Gerhard Urban

Starting in 1995, homemade passenger cars for passenger transport were put into operation for the Feldebahn operation, which opened on 25 July. Since that year the WSV has been concentrating its activities exclusively on the track between Alt Nagelberg and Heidenreichstein. Through the transfer of the WSV's own cars and the acquisition of other locomotives and cars a well-attended weekend train service was carried out in 1997 .

From the middle of July 1997, the locomotive No. 2, "Christa" (Jenbach DM100H14, built in 1969) was leased by the association "Friends of the Stainz Railway" and transferred to the Waldviertel to pull the WSV trains. This improved the operation of the tourist trains. From the year 2000, the trains of the Wackelstein-Express were pulled by the steam locomotive 170.1. Prior to its service, the steam locomotive 170.1 had to undergo maintenance at Ceske Velenice.

## Establishing the "Wackelstein-Express"

by Johannes Schendl

From then on, a regular operation was carried out between Alt Nagelberg and Heidenreichstein using the trains of the Wackelstein-Express on summer weekends. Special trains for events along the route and close cooperation with the local touristic companies further increased the popularity and passenger load factor. In collaboration with the Dorfwirt Weinstabl the new demand stop "Kleinpertholz" at km 12.0 was built, which allows tourists to alight directly at the inn.

Since the transfer point between WSV and ÖBB was set at km 0.259 between 1992 and 2004, it was not possible to enter with the trains at Alt Nagelberg station. Therefore, the trains could not be turned and had to be laboriously pushed from Aalfang to Alt Nagelberg. In order to be able to quickly change this operationally unfavorable condition, the WSV put the station "Altnagelberg Herrenhaus" at km 0.4 into operation in 1998. The construction of a platform and the installation of a switch allowed turning the trains by means of gravity shunting.

In order to allow additional access points for day trippers, the demand stop "Brand Süd" was opened in 1999 at km 4.1, and in the autumn of 2000 at km 1.7 the demand stop "Altnagelberg Ergo" was put into operation. Due to a lack of demand, the stop Brand Süd had to be closed again in 2011. However, stops during events at km 12.5 next to the Moor Museum have proven very successful.

By ordering tourism services on the Waldviertler narrow-gauge railway by the regional traffic organization NÖVOG starting from the year 2002, the offer in the tourism sector was further expanded. This includes the extension of the connecting line to the kilometer -0.11 in Altnagelberg. Since 18 June 2004, trains have been able to enter directly into Altnagelberg station (track 2 and 4) after 11 years of efforts. This allows not only connections from/to Gmünd but also a significant facilitation in the operation.

The expansion of special trains in the following years proved to be trend-setting. Today, in addition to Christmas trains, a moonlight train, Halloween train and Easter bunny rides are offered. For friends of the railway there were several special trains which were a great photo opportunity.

## Landesbahn again

by Johannes Schendl

In 2010, a forward-looking step was taken: the entire infrastructure and the management of the Waldviertler Schmalspurbahn were taken over by the regional transport organization NÖVOG. The NÖVOG has been operating the train traffic on the routes Gmünd - Litschau and Gmünd - Groß Gerungs since 2011.

On the route of the Wackelstein-Express, however, NÖVOG is only the owner of the infrastructure (track systems, buildings). The Waldviertler Schmalspurbahnverein continues to be responsible for running the train services and the renovation and maintenance of the infrastructure. As a first step, the station Heidenreichstein was restored exemplary. Today the station is used like in the past.

However, since the rail bed and track state is still largely from the 1950s, extensive route maintenance work is necessary for the WSV. In 2011 and 2012, rail traffic had to be restricted to the section Heidenreichstein - Aalfang. In the season 2013, fortunately, the tourist traffic was resumed again to Alt Nagelberg.

Due to the coordination with the schedules of the NÖVOG, since the season 2013, optimal connections to / from Gmünd / Litschau with the Waldviertelbahn are possible again on all days of operation of the Wackelstein Express. The internationally known "Doppelausfahrten" (two trains leave Altnagelberg at the same time - the two lines run over 1.5 km in parallel - one train to Litschau and the other to Heidenreichstein) in Altnagelberg are also held several times a week in the summer months as a special attraction.

In addition to the two- and four-axle passenger coaches, the WSV now owns a stately fleet of freight cars, which are used for internal purposes (for example for the storage of spare parts and other materials), work trains and photo rides.

Since 2013, the WSV has pursued an increased focus on the rolling stock of the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, the distinctive and for the Waldviertel typical diesel locomotive series 2091, of which three machines are owned, is concentrated in Heidenreichstein. It was also possible to retrieve the typical diesel locomotive 2092.04 and the former snow plow (type "Klima") from Gmünd again and refurbish them. Even the purchase and renovation of a historic truck for the internal transport in the WSV could be realized in 2018. With the lease of a standard gauge freight car, authentic rolling stock freight trains has been in use since the autumn of 2019.

Renovation of the rail bed and track represents one of the biggest challenges for the team of the Wackelstein-Express. For example, around 300-500 meters of track and up to 1,000 sleepers have to be renewed each year. These activities not only require the forces of the volunteer members, but the costs for the needed materials also have to be paid by the WSV.

Meanwhile, the touristic traffic has been established in the summer on Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday and during the public holidays. Separately, a number of special trains are offered, where beside the train ride an interesting supporting program (Easter bunny trains, dinner train, teddy bear train, etc.) is offered. The number of passengers has steadily increased in the last years, to more than 6,000 passengers per year.

The great cooperation with the "NÖVOG Waldviertelbahn" plays an important part for a successful future of the Wackelstein-Express.

## History Altnagelberg - Heidenreichstein

1900	Opening of the railway line Alt Nagelberg - Heidenreichstein
1922	Takeover of the company by ÖBB
~ 1940	Use of the first diesel locomotives
1986	end of public passenger transport by ÖBB
1987	Foundation of the Waldviertler Schmalspurbahnverein (WSV)
1992	end of freight traffic, takeover of track maintenance by WSV
1995	Start of tourist traffic from Heidenreichstein by the WSV
2004	the entry in the station Alt Nagelberg is possible again
2010	Takeover of the infrastructure by the NÖVOG
2011/2012	only tourist traffic between Heidenreichstein - Aalfang possible because of track maintenance between Aalfang and Langegg
2013	Resumption of tourist traffic on the entire route

## Traction units WACKELSTEIN EXPRESS

2091.02	Diesel locomotive, green, refurbished
2091.07	Diesel locomotive, red, refurbished
2091.09	Diesel locomotive, red, in operation
2190.02	Diesel locomotive, red-cream, show piece
2092.04	Diesel locomotive, red, refurbished
JW100	diesel locomotive, red-cream, refurbished
X44	Draisine, red, in operation
X614.902	Draisine, red-cream, refurbished