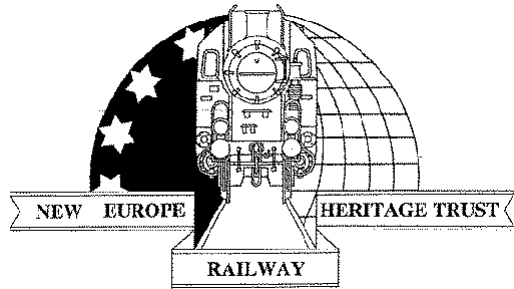


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NERHT and the Borzhava Valley Railway



The special train of 19 December

Photo. Frank Cooper

NERHT was invited to attend the centenary celebrations of the Borzhava Railway in western Ukraine, which took place just before Christmas 2008. On 16 December Frank Cooper and John Jones travelled to Budapest and the following day it was intended they would go by train across the border to Ukraine. Unfortunately MAV, the

Hungarian national rail company, was undergoing strikes that during that week closed almost the whole system. Following much effort, time and some ingenuity the two crossed the border during the night and were greeted by Denys Dobra who had valiantly awaited their arrival.

On 18 December the NERHT delegation was invited to meet the Mayor of one of the three district councils. In Ukraine the mayor's functions are like those of a chief executive in the United Kingdom so he is able to decide policy in person, subject to ratification by the council. The discussion about the virtues of the railway for the future of the region, especially in respect of tourism, was animated. Mayor Oleg Lyubimov was rapidly convinced and decided that he would support a press release to take the form of a declaration of intent by the three local authorities supporting the railway in some form as and when the Ukrainian State Railway decides to suspend its support. This is quite likely in the near future. The declaration of intent has been sent also to the regional division responsible for rail operation situated in Lviv.

The following day on Friday 19th December a special train was assembled at Berehovo. Before it departed the declaration was signed and then made available to local reporters covering the train. The journey covered the section to Irshava, much of which is no longer used for public transport. A group of primary school children joined the enthusiasts who had come, including visitors from the Czech Republic and Hungary as well as the NERHT pair. The children sang loudly and clearly and tunefully. Naturally their songs attracted the attention of Saint Nicholas, who stopped the train to give them each a bag of sweets. Clearly heritage trains now have supporters of a new generation.

Once the group arrived in Irshava it was time for the adults to be greeted. A reception was held at the secondary school, where a display of materials relating to the history of the railway and its development was well assembled. Following that there were refreshments. NERHT's friend and supporter, Mrs Nataliya Khymych then invited Frank Cooper and John Jones to a meal at her home. The following day these two returned to Budapest using many modes of transport and seeing many small places in northern Hungary. Their thanks go out to those who helped get them back notwithstanding the strike.

All in all, this celebration of the anniversary of when the Minister of Finance came from Budapest in 1908 to inaugurate the railway's first one hundred years was undertaken with great panache and support at the local level. It is to be hoped that the support given by NERHT has been in some measure responsible for bringing forward the hope that there will be another hundred to follow.

J J

Lithuania and the 'Sweet Narrow' (part two)

(David Allan concludes his account of the conference and exhibitions with a description of the special train)

...By now the diesel-electric loco at the head of the train, fittingly powered by an engine said to have been 'retrieved' from a Soviet tank, was tooting impatiently – the Rev Awdrey could well have made something of this! In automated response to the 'toots' everyone boarded the luxurious narrow-gauge carriage and were greeted by an accordion man playing, not unexpectedly, accordion music, plus two smartly uniformed lady attendants (*below*) who plied us with welcome libations of red wine.



The journey on the 2ft 6in was surprisingly smooth – no rocking and rolling to upset the stability of the wine glasses. Leaving the station, the train passed through the complex network of points, trailed past the rail-based factory site mentioned earlier, clattered across the pointwork of a disused and overgrown branch line aimed intriguingly at a distant landscape. The train was now on an

embankment, a rare sight in this predominantly flat country, and passing through a wooded area of pines and silver birch with an undergrowth of other saplings. Gaps in the trees provided fascinating glimpses of the countryside with 'Hansel & Gretel' farmhouses here and there in an otherwise empty landscape.

The smooth ride continued, enhanced no doubt by the excellence of the track and the well-sprung coach - the rails themselves being supported by a mixture of wooden and concrete sleepers. Several halts were passed where perhaps only a battered nameboard suggested that it was indeed a stopping place. There were plenty of level crossings, all ungated. In answer to the obvious question, the guide merely made a 'pulling-the-whistle' sign and pointed to his eyes. This was interpreted as the safety precautions being a blast on the whistle and woe betide any car driver who didn't keep a sharp lookout. Cheap and effective!

The lady attendants continued to fill empty wine glasses, the accordion man played on, and the train arrived at the intermediate station of Troškunai. The station building was of the now familiar horizontal wood-planked type, but the interior had been restored with numerous old photographs displayed on the wall complemented by ceiling-high plans and maps. Gintaras, the general manager, provided an enthusiastic commentary. Unusually he chose to use a handheld microphone with a loudspeaker hanging from his shoulder. Unusual because he was standing next to us and we could have heard him quite easily anyway! He

spoke in Lithuanian, but our ever-ready interpreter, Birutė, was on hand with a splendid English translation. The station included a richly furnished room, which we were told had been provided for the former president of Lithuania; this did not go unnoticed by Fedecrail President Morgan! Coffee was taken and then we were back on the train, but not before the goods shed, now devoid of its supporting line, had been added to the camera's memory card.



More wine, more music and more of the familiar sound of metal wheels on steel rail produced a difficult-to-resist soporific effect. But another station was approaching, and sleeping was not an option. Surdegis (*above*) was another two-storey affair in the now familiar pattern, but with added bonus of a newly-restored, narrow-gauge loo. The conference earlier had been shown a picture of this initiative, which had prompted some good natured ribaldry – lavatory humour is universal.

The station staff, attired in the floor-length, wrap-round aprons favoured by French waiters, provided a vast array of food and drink. Morgan was enjoying himself, toasting former narrow-gauge employees with vodka, which also had the unusual effect of breaking the language barrier. Keylock and Allan were inspecting the wonderfully preserved station building that had cleverly retained its aura of age and Wiggs, a teetotaler, was complaining that all this food would put him off his dinner. I have to report that in the event it didn't!



There was some interesting lineside equipment (*left*), but photography was becoming difficult as the light faded, so it was back on the train for the final leg to Panevezys station. By now General Manager Gintaras was in full swing, and he began to tell us more of the line's history. His *piece de resistance*, however, was a high bridge on which the narrow gauge simultaneously crossed a straight-as-a-die road and an equally straight-as-a-die

standard-gauge railway line. It was almost unique, this three-way crossing, or so Gintaras said.

By now the train was paralleling a standard-gauge line (5 ft Russian-style) as it entered the suburbs of Panevezys. The line passed a wobbly-looking, gated crossing where traffic lights held up a line of impatient cars. Both the narrow and standard gauge fanned out into a vast array of sidings and loops, goods yards and factory lines. A retired steam locomotive (*right*) is on view here. The train slowed to a stop in the isolated narrow-gauge island platform of Panevezys station – a concrete built, flat-topped affair that looked as if it had been designed by the Health & Broad Bean committee of the local Soviet Commissariat. But at least its utilitarian outlook was softened by the tiny but stylish Panevezys narrow-gauge station with the familiar wooden planking



A wonderful afternoon, marvellously friendly people and unrivalled hospitality.

(The subsequent event, the 'Train of the Hats,' will be described in our next issue)

International hand trolley tour. Jörg Hänsel (haensel.dresden@T-online.de) is organising a two-day hand-trolley excursion on broad-gauge lines, twice crossing the Latvia-Lithuania frontier. The price from Kaunas and including the one hotel night is 310 euros. Physical fitness is required. The proposed date is 18-19 April.

News from Estonia. *Mehis Helme writes:* There is a plan is to remove the museum to Türi in central Estonia. Although there is a possible problem with state lands, the Turi municipality is very interested. There is a 12km mixed gauge track between Turi and Karevere. Meanwhile locomotive TU2-094 has been acquired from Panevezhys in Lithuania and will be restored with the help of the Estonian Railway Culture Foundation. A second locomotive is also being acquired from Lithuania. The existing TU4 diesel locomotive will be re-powered. Steam locomotive Kch-4-332 is expected back from Gulbene in late April, with a first run at Lavassaare on 16 May.

Latvian Topics

LATVIAN EMBASSY BOOK LAUNCH. On 15th January members of NERHT, the British Latvian Association and distinguished guests gathered at the Latvian Embassy in London to welcome Toms Altbergs and Andris Biedrins who travelled from Riga for the launch of the new English edition of their book *The Vidzeme Railway* (see review below). Our thanks go to the Latvian Ambassador for providing the venue for an enjoyable evening. A record of the book launch made it to You Tube, a first for a NERHT event!

BOOK REVIEW. Toms Altbergs and Andris Biedrins. *The Vidzeme Railway*. Hardback A4 size, pp101. English text. Many colour and black and white photos, maps and plans.

This volume, a new and enlarged version of the bilingual English-Latvian booklet issued in 2000, describes the history of the Gulbene-Aluksne Railway (known as "Banitis") and other narrow gauge lines in the Vidzeme province of Latvia which have not survived. The two authors, now directors of the operating company, are old friends of NERHT. We have been involved with Banitis since 1997 and the book itself contains much of the story of our organisation, with pictures of all sorts of events and activities in which we have taken part. These illustrations indeed provide something of an antidote to the often negative press coverage of Eastern Europe. It is uplifting to turn from the sombre early photos of war damage, occupation and desolation to the modern pictures depicting happier scenes of restored trains, festivities and the rebirth of the line as a successful community railway and a major tourist attraction, a flagship in terms of railway preservation in the New Europe. The book also includes photos of the surrounding countryside and local tourist attractions which show that Vidzeme is well worth a visit quite apart from the narrow gauge railway. S W

Publication of the English edition of this volume has been made possible by sponsorship from NERHT. Copies may be purchased from NERHT sales at £20 plus postage.

PROPOSED STEAM TRIP. There is a proposed steam trip in Latvia in September, involving the Banitis narrow-gauge line in which NERHT has long had an interest. For this it will be necessary to bring back the Banitis steam locomotive from Lavassare to Panevezys. Return of the steam locomotive will also enable Banitis to offer a more varied programme of trips. Further details from <http://www.farrail.com/pages/touren-engl/narrow-gauge-steam-Latvia-Lithuania-2009.php>

The Sibiu-Agnita Railway restoration project

Project history and next steps

1. Short history

After connecting major cities with standard gauge main lines, the Budapest parliament (Transylvania was under Hungarian rule until 1918, as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire) decided to encourage local companies to build branch lines in order to also develop the rural areas. Thus, in 1895, the Sighisoara-Sibiu Local Railways Company started building the 48 km length of narrow gauge railway between the cities of Sighisoara and Agnita. After completion in 1898, plans were made for the next 62 km towards Sibiu and another line southwards connecting Agnita to the Sibiu-Brasov main line near the village of Voila, thus serving the important military installations at Cincu. By the end of 1910 the Agnita-Sibiu line was finished, together with a branch line from Cornatel to Vurpar, but due to the imminence of the First World War the Cincu line was never completed.

After the war, the operation of the line was taken over by the Romanian Railway Company (CFR), and in 1948 the whole railway was nationalized.

In 1965 the Romanian state decided that buses and trucks were the future of transportation, and thus the most obviously economically unviable stretch between Sighisoara and Agnita was dismantled to make way for the road. Rails were also lifted from the streets of Agnita and a new Agnita station was built in a rural location 3 km outside of town towards Sibiu. The remaining Agnita-Sibiu and Cornatel-Vurpar lines were modernised to the standards of the day, with an emphasis on freight handling.

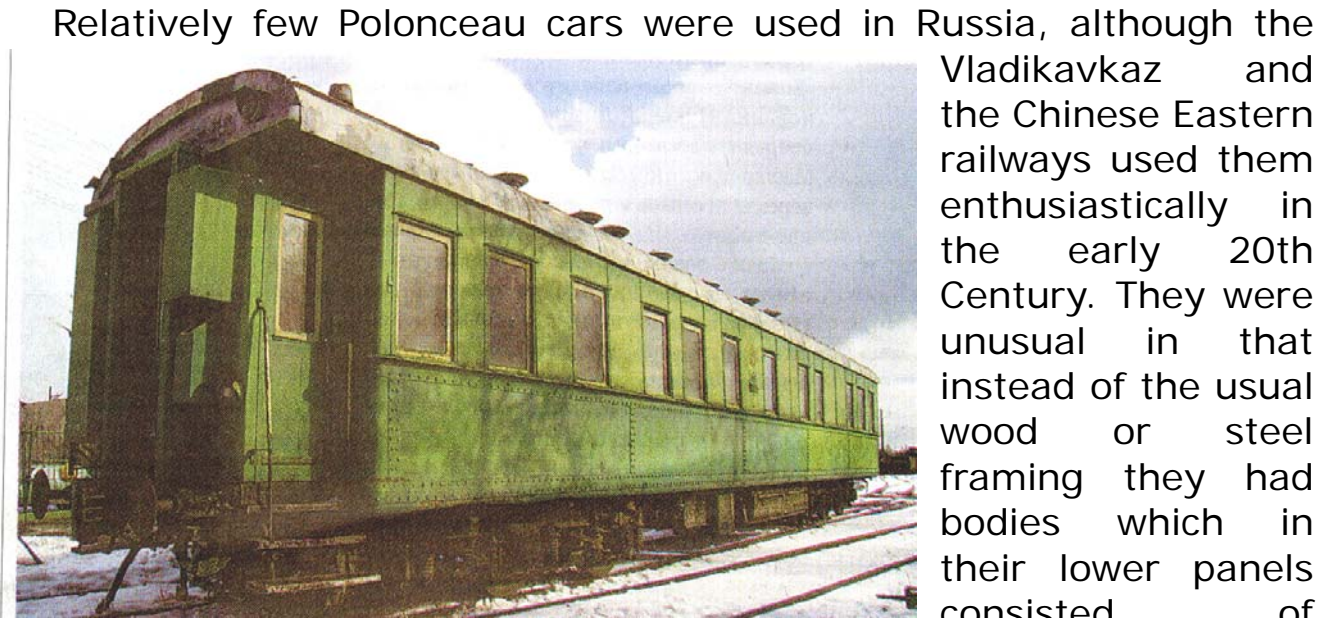
The fall of communism in 1989 brought the decline of all railways in Romania, including the SAR. Though it was the last operating CFR narrow gauge railway in Romania, in September 2001 traffic stopped, due to lack of funds for both rolling stock and track maintenance. The line was officially under conservation, but the truth is that nobody did anything about it. Theft increased in station buildings, the rolling stock became prey for the scrap collectors and homeless people, while the track bed continued to deteriorate without any maintenance or weed-killing. In 2003 90% of SAR's rolling stock was scrapped to help revive other parts of CFR.



(To be continued in our next issue, with an account of the current project. Thanks to Mihai Blotor for this material, and for this picture showing present-day volunteers working on a station restoration)

A Relic of Beria?

The October Railway Museum recently extricated from storage in Georgia a 6-axle passenger car of the former Vladikavkaz Railway. This vehicle, a Polonceau-type car, is said to have been used by, among other Georgian notables, Beria, but some research will be needed to confirm this.



Vladikavkaz and the Chinese Eastern railways used them enthusiastically in the early 20th Century. They were unusual in that instead of the usual wood or steel framing they had bodies which in their lower panels consisted of

load-bearing steel plates.

The car is now at Shushary, where the Museum has some restoration facilities, and in due course will be transferred to the main exhibition site at St Petersburg's Warsaw Station. This photo is by Yury Ilyin.

Book Review

Zoran Veresic, *Steam in Serbia 1882-2007*

This book is an extremely comprehensive account of the steam traction and railway history of Serbia and former Yugoslavia going back to the Austro-Hungarian period in the Hapsburg Empire. Very much effort and research has gone into the production, with much material from the author's extensive photographic archive. Many photographs are in colour and the English text is generally excellent. Running up to 2007, the book is virtually up-to-date with the current preservation scene concerning the surviving steam locomotives as well as their continuing use in industry, all covered in much detail. A well worthwhile publication on a subject about which comparatively little has been published in the past. R G T

(see p.10 for purchasing information)

Visitors from Abroad

NERHT had hoped to arrange a visit to England and Wales by the proponents of the Minsk children's railway project, but repeated bureaucratic problems have prevented this. Our NERHT chairman hopes to visit Minsk shortly and, it is hoped, a renewed invitation will become possible.

Meanwhile Mihai Blotor and two colleagues from the Agnita-Sibiu project in Romania are likely to enjoy soon the hospitality of the Burry Port and Gwendraeth Valley Railway. NERHT is grateful to the BPGVR for its cooperation; this South Wales project has useful parallels with the Romanian scheme.

John Hett

John Hett, known to many as the long-serving General Manager of the Midland Railway Trust Ltd, Butterley (MRT) and Vice-Chairman of Heritage Railway Association, was also a consultant to our New Europe Railway Heritage Trust. After a sustained and protracted battle with cancer John died on New Year's Day at the tragically premature age of 54.

Apart from his well-recorded activities with MRT and HRA, John was also involved with the European railway heritage scene through Fedecrail and NERHT, with MRT being one of the partners in the EU's Steam RailNet programme managed through Fedecrail; this resulted among other things in securing EU funds to restore the steam locomotive from Lavaassare which went to Gulbene. John attended meetings in Europe with the other partners and visited their operations and projects as well as receiving them while managing the MRT's own RailNet projects, the restoration of an 0-4-0ST from Castle Donnington power station and new buildings and a footbridge for Swanwick Junction station. Tributes to him have been paid by colleagues from 'Banitis,' the Gulbene-Aluksne railway in Latvia and from the Musée des Tramway à Vapeurs et Sécondaires at Butry-sur-Oise, Valmondais north of Paris. They expressed much appreciation of John's help and good work as well as the high esteem and respect in which John was held. Deepest condolences are offered to his wife and family. R G T

STOP PRESS - ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING . We are pleased to announce that our guest speaker at the AGM will be Wolfram Wendelin, the Austrian expert on Ukrainian railway heritage and writer on Carpathian narrow gauge railways. Wolfram will give an illustrated talk on the theme of *Ukrainian Railway Preservation - a Critical Appraisal* which will be followed by a discussion on the challenging situation in Ukraine, where NERHT has supported various projects.

Book Sales Update. Richard Tapper (01635 30464) advises that the following are now available:

Tomas Altbergs, Andris Biedrins, *The Vidzeme Railway* (Gulbene-Aluksne Banitis) English text. Hardback £20.00 (A Latvian-language version is also available and can be ordered on request)
Zoran Veresic, *Steam in Serbia 1882-2007*. English text. Hardback. £35.00

These prices do not include postage and packing; details from Richard on request.

Electronic Delivery. *Eastern Star* can now be e-mailed to readers and we are hoping that as many as possible will opt for this version as it eliminates postal expenses and offers earlier delivery, easier storage of copies and colour illustration. To make this change, please send your e-mail address to jnwestwood@tiscali.co.uk

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