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GRANDMOTHER’S MISSED TRAIN TRIP

Walter C. Meyer, AG®

There is a parlor game where one person, without letting others in the room hear, whispers a message to the person seated next. This person then relays the message quietly to the next person and so on until it has gone around the room. The messages as originally sent and as finally communicated receive comparison - often with much hilarity when large discrepancies exist. Are family history stories immune or does the same thing happen to those passed down from one generation to another over sometimes lengthy periods of time?

A rather spectacularly ending story in my own family history piqued my imagination. The story about my grandmother, Josephine Weinmann (1864 - 1926), involves a Swiss train accident. Between the time my grandmother turned twenty (1884) and prior to her marriage (1893) she was to take a train from Rorschach in the northeast of Switzerland, to Basel in the northwest. To reach the train from their home in Goldach, a village near Rorschach, my great grandfather transported her in a horse drawn buggy. As they were going down a hill, they noticed a wagon wheel roll past them, which of course made them curious about its origin. The story, from my father’s life story written in 1965 –

“Grandfather Weinmann had to slow down in order not to drive over that wheel and as the speed of the buggy was reduced the buggy lowered itself on one side on the rear and both Josephine and her father realized that it was their own buggy wheel that had passed them. Grandfather, being a rather stout person, along with the momentum of the buggy kept it upright while in motion and their predicament became obvious only at reduced speed.”

“After replacing the wheel, and having had to walk up the hill to find the nut to fasten the wheel, they continued to the station in Rorschach to see the train leave just as they arrived. That train broke through the bridge crossing the river Aare and not one person, passenger or crew, survived the disaster.”

Now the idea of a stout person balancing the side of a buggy is rather cute, but knowing my great grandfather was large enough to do so is perhaps discouraging. Surely everybody is familiar with arriving late at something - that is not significant, but a train accident in which “not one person” survived is spectacularly significant.

Was there a Swiss train accident that killed so many people? Such a major disaster must have historical references. An earlier life story (1931), wrote, “the train broke through the bridge near Brugg (Canton Aargau).” What aspects of the story were factual and what parts embellished? Over the 60 to 75 year period, it is quite possible, or even probable that alterations had taken place.

The story did not relate the exact location and time of the accident. In addition, it did not state whether grandmother was going to the city of Basel, to Basel-Land (the surrounding area) or whether Basel was just a transfer point to another place. It did not state
whether her ticket would have placed her on 
the accident train or whether she might have 
been on the train and it did not say whether 
she took a later train. If the story were indeed 
true, where and when did the accident occur? 
Where to, and for what purpose was the trip? 
Pertinent items of the story would need to 
match the historical facts to show that it were 
true. These are: 
1. Significance: A disastrous or major train 
accident; 
2. Time: Before her marriage in February 
1893 (1884 to 1893); 
3. Area: In the northernmost part of 
Switzerland 
4. Location: A bridge from which a train can 
fall into a river (preferably the Aare River); 
5. Cities: Related to Basel or Brugg in some 
way 
6. Casualties: Multiple passengers and crew 
killed 
In checking books dealing with world 
catastrophes, some containing reports about 
major train accidents, there was nothing 
resembling such a disaster so the next step 
was to write to Switzerland. Correspondence 
ensued, relating the story and requesting 
information, to several different places in 
Switzerland: 
Die Schweizerische Bundesbahnen 
(SBB), the Swiss National Railways 
in Zürich, 
Tages-Anzeiger, a daily newspaper in 
Zürich, 
Brugg Rathaus - the city hall in 
Brugg, 
Brugg Bibliothek - Brugg public 
library, 
Historical Department of the Swiss 
Government in Bern 
Other places in Switzerland received 
redirected letters, but my letters rewarded 
four responses:

Figure 2 View of the Münchenstein disaster from the village side of the Birs River looking north towards Basel.
SBB in Zürich, SBB in Bern, Stadtbibliothek (City library) in Brugg and Stadtarkiv (City Archives) in Zürich.

Subsequently correspondence began with additional SBB offices and e-mail correspondence occurred with the Staatsarchiv (State Archives) of Baselland in Liestal, BL, Switzerland.

Information coming from the Switzerland responses:
A) A five-volume work entitled One Hundred Years of Swiss Railways, published in 1947. The Swiss Railway system started less than 20 years before my grandmother was born in 1864. When grandmother was young, the system was also still young.

B) The Stadtarchiv Zürich and the SBB headquarters in Bern were very helpful and included in their responses photocopies of several pages of articles, some photographs and a list of all the significant train accidents during the hundred years (1847-1947).

C) Railway schedules from that period indicate that some trains stopped briefly in Zürich then proceeded on to Basel but most required a transfer in Zürich. If the missed train traveled through to Basel, an accident involving that train could have happened anywhere between Rorschach and Basel. If on the other hand there was a transfer at Zürich, an accident with that train must have occurred between Rorschach and Zürich. A second or even a third transfer could be possible on the trip, as long as grandmother’s schedule from the first train would have placed her on the train of the accident. If she had changed trains in Basel, the accident train must have been going away from, not toward Basel.

D) The list of railway accidents in Switzerland indicates only four during the specified period 1884 to 1893:
   1. 8 Jan 1885 at Seebach, in which one person was injured.
   2. 20 Oct 1885 near Arth on the Rigi-Bahn in which the conductor was killed and 9 people seriously or slightly injured.
   3. 17 Aug 1891 at Zollikofen with 18 killed and 118 injured.
   4. 14 Jun 1891 at Münchenstein in which two engines and several cars went through a bridge killing 71 people and injuring 171.

An examination of each of the four accidents fitting the time requirement reveals that:
1. Seebach is a suburb on the north of Zürich. It fits the geographic requirement, but a solitary injury does not expand into "all passengers and crew killed."
2. The Rigi-Bahn is a railway going to the top of Rigi Mountain near Luzern in the central part of Switzerland. This is too far south to fit the geographic requirement. As well, trip up the mountain would be a side trip, not part of a journey ‘to Basel.’ One death and nine injuries do not equal ‘no survivors.’
3. Zollikofen is quite close to Bern, the capital city of Switzerland. This also is too far south to fit the geographic requirement and is not part of the route from Rorschach to Basel. Eighteen dead and 118 injured is a significant number but this also does not seem to relate to ‘no survivors.’

In none of the above did trains fall into a river nor have a bridge collapse. It would appear that the above three accidents do not match the story. However, the fourth is noteworthy. The information received about this accident included: 1) a two-page article from the 100 year history; 2) a six page newspaper article (including photographs) dated 20 Jun 1891; 3) a nine page article; 4) some photographs and a report from a more recent book, “The Swiss Railway Saga - 150 years of Swiss Trains;” 5) photographs and lithographs of the accident from the Baselland Staatsarchiv; and 6) railway schedule pages from June 1891. The accident attracted much attention both at the time and in historical retrospect.
Münchenstein is a small village about five kilometers south of the city of Basel on the rail line to the Jura and on to Bern in the central part of the country, however it is not on the line from Zürich to Basel. The railway crossed the river Birs on a 42-meter iron bridge about 500 meters north of the village. A regional music festival scheduled in Münchenstein for that day attracted many visitors. Because of the increase in passengers, the Jura Simplon Railway added a second engine and two carriages to this train. Three additional trains ran earlier.

The train, carrying 500 to 600 people, with its two locomotives and twelve cars arrived at the bridge close to 2:30 on that fateful Sunday afternoon, June 14, 1891.

The bridge collapsed after the first locomotive had just about finished crossing, dropping the two engines and five cars into the river. Thanks to the automatic ‘Westinghouse-brake,’ the last five 3rd class cars carrying about 300 passengers remained on the embankment but unfortunately, the destruction of the 1st and 2nd class passenger cars following the engines resulted in most of the fatalities. The next two cars were baggage cars, which if they had been passenger cars, would have greatly increased the mortality and injury rate.

Observers of the accident reported different things. One said the girders collapsed somewhere in the middle of the bridge just behind the second engine. Others saw the first carriage derail. Observers suggested a “tragic lack of coordination” between the two drivers because as the first engine entered the bridge it braked while the second appeared to accelerate causing a derailment. It is possible that the ensuing misbalance of the weight caused one side of the bridge to collapse with its catastrophic results.

The accident of course was news worthy locally and nationally but also internationally. The river was in a flood stage because of the spring run-off from the mountain snows and because of heavy rains from a recent storm. This flooding hindered the rescue attempts immediately following the accident and caused significant problems in the retrieval of bodies and the removal of debris during the subsequent days. Two days after the accident, bodies lay on the river bottom. Newspapers published photographs of the disaster at the time. Since publishing photographs was still not easy, artists drew spectacular drawings, printed to illustrate the accident.

One picture particularly shows the rescuing of multiple people out of the swollen river. (Figure 1) The London Times reported that the festival was, “abandoned as soon as news reached the village of the calamity, and the villagers were called from their merry-making to assist in the work of rescue, while help was urgently demanded and promptly sent from Bâle (Basel) and other towns in the district.” People looked for their spouses and parents for their children after the dead went from the river to a nearby orchard.

There are a number of pertinent facts related to the accident. Following the accident, not only were all the Swiss railway bridges checked and upgraded but the “horror message” of the accident “decisively influenced the debate over the nationalization of the railways in Switzerland.” The parliament voted in favor of nationalization seven years later and in 1902, the nationalization of most of the private railway companies became the SBB (the Federal Railway Company). Since then, the country avoided additional bridge accidents.

Long lasting lawsuits ensued, mainly against the private railroad company, the “Jura Simplon Bahn,” which had run the train, owned the railway line and the bridge. Alexandre Gustave Eiffel of Eiffel Tower fame designed the bridge in 1875. However, he was not involved in the lawsuits because the “Jura Simplon Bahn,” had upgraded structural details of the bridge in 1890. The government’s Post and Railway Department had monitored all installations of the private railways since 1878. A flood in 1881 eroded the abutment on one side, however the bridge along with all others in the country received inspection in 1880 and
1882 and it had passed the railway department inspection in 1890 after the upgrade to accommodate heavier locomotives. Shortly prior to 2:30 p.m. on June 14 a heavy freight train had passed over the bridge without incident yet the bridge caved in on this Sunday afternoon as the passenger train, estimated at less than half the weight of the freight train, was passing over.

The accident occurred in the Canton of Baselland, thus the archives there contain the records of the cantonal government’s dealings about the accident and the records of the lawsuits in the cantonal courts. The list of the dead published in newspaper articles includes the causes of death of many. About 10 or so died of injuries, such as fractured skulls, fractured ribs, or bleeding to death.

In some cases, they were able only to recover body parts. In four cases, the victims' remained unidentified, while ten days later eight people were still officially missing. One report indicated the retrieval of a horribly mutilated body. Some bodies possibly were swept down river by the flooding waters and never located. Ten of the victims were children and it would appear that a whole family was among the victims. Out of the 71 deaths, 52 were by ‘erstickung,’ suffocation or asphyxiation. Because of the high water in the river, many victims drowned, confined by the destroyed railway cars and bridge debris.

A minor fact related in the book, “The Swiss Railway Saga 150 years of Swiss Trains,” is that both engines were salvaged, repaired and served for 27 and 33 additional years, the latter being retired only two years prior to grandmother’s death in 1926.

The subsequent enquiry did not conclude whether the accident was due to bridge construction, excessive weight, or faulty driving; however, it is interesting how hindsight affects judgment. The report ordered by the government and published ten weeks after the accident gives a different impression of the bridge condition than that received from the inspections of 1880, 1882, and 1890. The two professors who did the investigation blamed the excess load for the
accident. Their report gave the following six points:

“The bridge had been too weak from the start and had faults in its design. The iron used did not correspond to the requirements in either firmness or tenacity. The flood of 1881 thoroughly damaged the bridge. The reinforcements, made in 1890, did not cover the bridge as a whole.

There was no derailment before the collapse of the bridge. The main cause of the collapse was the insufficiently strong middle spurs.”

Comparing the “pertinent facts” of the family story to the accident that happened in Münchenstein:

1. Significance: A disastrous or major train accident; it was the worst train accident in the 150 year history of the Swiss railway. The New York Times reported this as “one of the half dozen worst railroad accidents that ever occurred.”

2. Time: Before her marriage in February 1893 (1884 to 1893); June 14, 1891 – grandmother was 26 years old at the time.

3. Area: In the northernmost part of Switzerland; Münchenstein, 10 kms south of the Swiss-German border where the Rhine River turns north to enter Germany, is almost the farthest north that one can be in the country.

4. Location: A bridge from which a train can fall into a river (preferably the Aare River); It was an iron bridge crossing the Birs River - unfortunately not the Aare River.

5. Cities: Related to Basel or Brugg in some way; Five kilometers south of Basel is a close relationship. It wasn’t near Brugg but the Birs River starts with the same first letter.

6. Casualties: Multiple passengers and crew killed; Seventy-one dead and 171 injured is not ‘all’ but surely a significant number. Another report said 73 dead and 133 injured. According to the number of dead, it was the seventh, and the number of injured, fourth in severity in the world. This accident matches the pertinent facts of grandmother’s story, but the further question remains: why was she to travel to Basel?

A) My grandmother had an aunt who, with her husband and family, lived in Kleinhüningen, a suburb of Basel. It is possible she could have intended to visit them; however, that suburb is on the north of Basel and not related to the train going south from Basel.

B) My grandmother played the zither very well so perhaps her trip has relation to music. Perhaps she was a performer at the festival, or perhaps her teacher, who was famous for his zither playing and composing, had scheduled to participate and she was going for that purpose. Unfortunately, the newspaper articles advertising the event do not give any information about zither players or other instrumentalists being involved. They only list the participating choirs and the program.

C) Perhaps she was a member of a choir from her area, scheduled to participate in the music festival and she intended to travel with them. After review of Rorschach and Goldach death records, there was no discovery of anyone else from those towns involved in the accident. The newspaper reports of the deceased do not include any from the eastern part of Switzerland. The list of choirs scheduled to participate in the festival included many from the northwest of Switzerland but there were none far distant from Basel.

The festival was a regional one not covering the whole or even a large part of Switzerland. It appears the reason for her trip must remain speculative. In order to be on the accident train grandmother would have left Rorschach at 6:07 am that Sunday morning arriving in Zürich at 9:00 am, transferred to a second train, left Zürich at 9:30 am, and arrived in Basel at 12:15 pm. The accident train was to leave Basel at 2:15 and arrive in Münchenstein at 2:26 pm. It left five minutes late because of adding engine and cars.

The festival was only the one day, Sunday morning and afternoon with the afternoon session to start at 2:00 pm. Why were so many people traveling to the festival from Basel, after the morning session was finished,
planning to arrive even after the afternoon session had started? Likewise, if grandmother was going to the festival why would she have planned to arrive so long after the festival had started? She may not have been attending the festival. Perhaps, though, this is evidence that she had a specific task to accomplish, like playing only at a certain time without earlier necessity of arrival. There were other trains later in the day but all later trains that day would have arrived too late to allow participation in the festival. Probably after missing the train, there was no further resumption of service, for just after 2:30 that afternoon all railway stations in the country received notice of the accident by telegraph.

Whether or not her ticket could place her on the accident train is impossible to know. There are no records available of who purchased tickets or where passengers traveled, so it is not possible to find out if she actually purchased a train ticket or of its use.

Apparently there were countless episodes, “in newspapers, magazines and calendars... why this or the other person had been able to reach only one of the rear waggons (sic)... and therefore had stayed alive.” Perhaps one of the correspondents from Switzerland may have been accurate with his suggestion, “that because of the seriousness of the accident, her good fortune, the knowledge of the geographic location and of the people, your grandmother may have said – ‘Thank God I was not traveling to Basel, otherwise I might have been involved with this accident.”

Although there are two things that do not match (lack of survivors and the name of the river), and unknown things remain (the why and exact place or her intended travel), there surely are several matching or corresponding historical facts indicating the Münchenstein train catastrophe as the one referred to in the story related by my father. For the present at least, grandmother’s missed train trip will remain part of my family’s history.

Endnotes:

ii June 1891 Swiss train schedules, photocopics of four pages from the Historic Department of the SBB
iii Personal correspondences with the SBB in Bern.
iv The Swiss Railway Saga - 150 Years of Swiss Trains, p. 112, photocopics of pages courtesy of the Historic Department of SBB, Bern, Switzerland,
v E-mail 3 Mar 2003, from Michael Blatter of the State Archives of Basel-Land in Liestal, BL, Switzerland.
vi Ibid
vii The Swiss Railway Saga, op. cit.
viii The London Times had reports daily for over a week. The New York Times had two reports, one on June 16 and another on June 21, 1891. Reports carried the Paris and Swiss newspapers.
ix The London Times June 16, 1891 page 5 col b, June 17, 1891 page 5 col b, June 22, 1891 page 5 col f.
x The London Times June 16, 1891 page 5 col e.
x E-mail 25 Jun 2003, from Michael Blatter, op. cit. The picture was an illustration from the front page of a Paris newspaper Le Petit Parisien. supplément littéraire illustré, 3me année, Nr. 123, 28.6.1891.
xii The London Times June 15, 1891 page 5 col d.
xiii The London Times June 16, 1891 page 5 col b.
xiv The Swiss Railway Saga, op. cit.
xv Ibid.
xvi E-mail 19 Feb 2003, from André Zahno of the Passenger Traffic division, Swiss National Railways (SBB).
xvii E-mail 17 Mar 2003, from Michael Blatter, op. cit.
xviii Ibid.
xix The Swiss Railway Saga, op. cit.
x The Email 27 Aug 2003, from Christoph Manasse, a private researcher at the State Archives of Basel-Land in Liestal, BL, with a copy of the accident death list published in June 1891 in Zürich, Switzerland.
xii Ibid.
xiii Ibid.
xiv The London Times June 16, 1891 page 5 col e.
xv New York Times, June 16, 1891 page 2 col 2. A paragraph in the New York Times report gave a graphic description of the carnage: “As the wreckage was cleared away the bodies of the dead and dying were found crushed together in ghastly confusion amid the almost inextricable mass of debris. The whole night long the rescuers toiled, gleaning an occasional survivor out of the ruins. The moans of the injured heard in the early hours of the night ceased as death or rescue reached them. Most of the bodies recovered were dreadfully mutilated. A dead mother was found holding in her arms her lifeless baby while another child lay across her body. Several other family groups were seen joined by a common fate.”
xvi The accident death list op. cit.
xvii The Swiss Railway Saga, op. cit.
xviii Ibid.
Enclosed were copies of two newspaper clippings from the "Basellandschaftliche Zeitung" (12 June 1891, Nr. 70, Liestal). One announced the time and listed the choirs scheduled to participate, the other listed the program and times of the festival events.

Parish records in FHL film #948671 Katholische Kirche from Rorschach, St. Gallen; FHL film #939590 Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche from Rorschach, SG; FHL film #948676 Katholische Kirche from Goldach, SG.

The accident death list op. cit.

E-mail 6 Oct 2003, from Christoph Manasse, op. cit.

1891 train schedule, op. cit

E-mail 6 Oct 2003, from Christoph Manasse, op. cit.

E-mail 12 Mar 2003, from Michael Blatter of the State Archives of Basel-Land in Liestal, BL, Switzerland.

Photographs:

Figure 1 - Photograph of an illustration from the front page of a Paris newspaper of 28 Jun 1891 "Le Petit Parisien. supplément littéraire illustré, 3me année, Nr. 125, 28.6.1891” Courtesy of the Baselland Staatsarchiv in Liestal, BL, Switzerland.

Figure 2 - Photo by an unknown photographer showing the engines and bridge debris in the river with the last cars on the embankment. Obtained from the web site www.fwmuenchenstein.ch (click on Einsätze then Einsatzberichte then 14.06.1891 Eisenbahunglück - HTML)

Figure 3 - The train engines and the collapsed bridge in the Birs River because of the Münchenstein catastrophe. Courtesy of the Baselland Staatsarchiv in Liestal, BL, Switzerland.