

A local train named desire

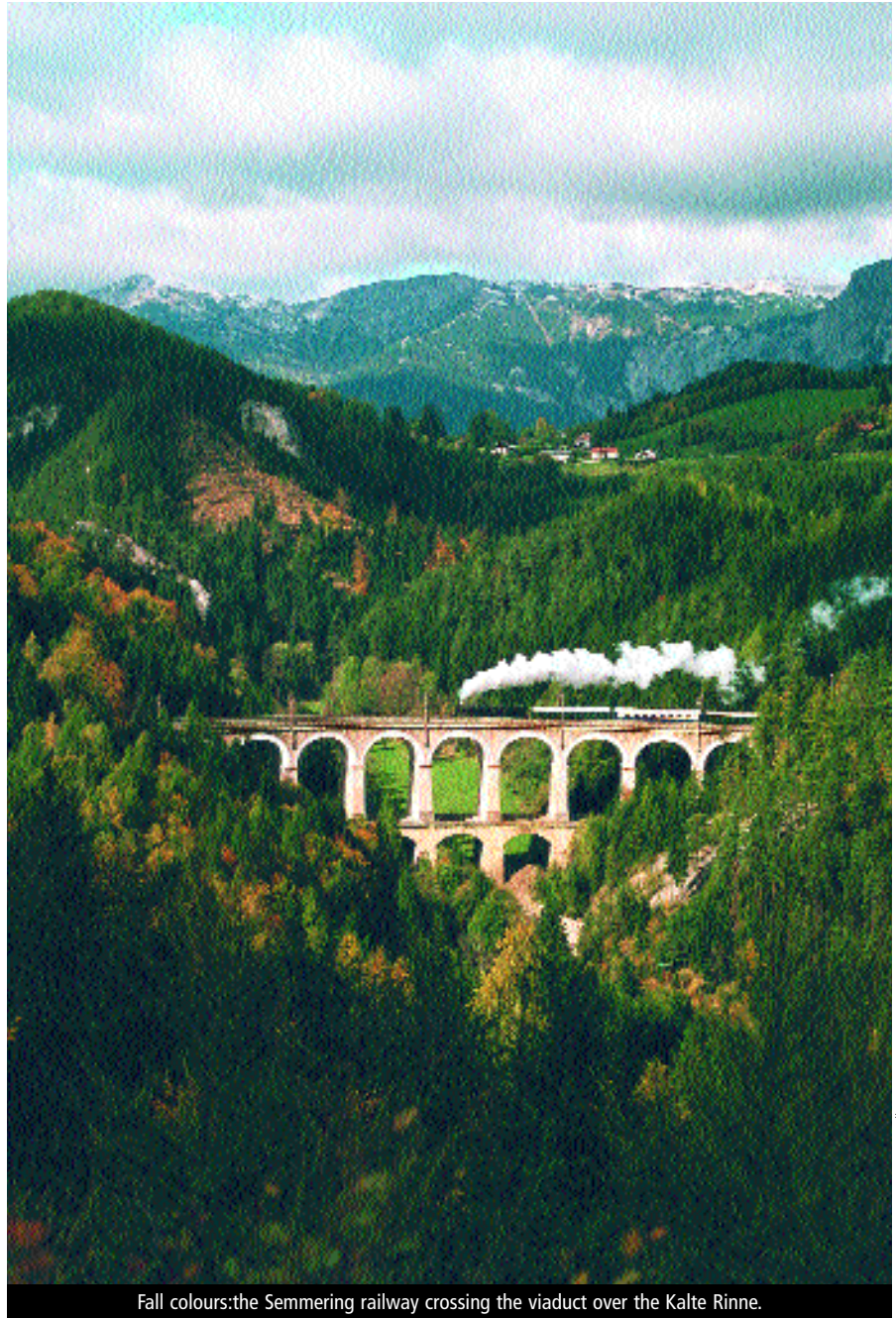
The railroad that chugs across Austria's Semmering pass is on the UNESCO World Heritage list. More than a technological achievement, this local train evokes memories of a vanished, melancholy world

SYLVIA TREUDL

WRITER, PUBLISHER AND POLITICAL
SCIENCE RESEARCHER IN VIENNA
(AUSTRIA)

It's not a good idea to visit the Semmering pass if you're sad, unless you're feeling really blue. And if you do make the journey, take the old *Semmeringbahn* railroad, which will offer much more than a winding trip through the mountains: a list of sentimental or legendary names will send chills up and down your spine. Höllental (Hell Valley), Bärensattel (Bear Saddle), Eselstein (Donkey Rock), Adlitzgräben (Adlitz Graves), Kalte Rinne (Cold Furrow). I've always preferred to cross the Semmering on this local train rather than on the comfortable express.

Once, I looked at the scenery straddling my motorcycle. The Höllental valley was cold and wet, the curves on the way to the pass scattered with sandy furrows. But even back then, I was too melancholic to admire the beautiful, strangely anachronistic scenery. What, lurking in the verdant forests, makes you cry and puts joy back in your heart? Perhaps I always chose the wrong time of year for a trip to the Semmering. When the fog brushes up against the rocks with its shreds of unhappiness and slips into the green meadows, when the gardens shoot past the train's windows, dazzling with a thousand colours, there is just one thing I want to do: shine one last time and learn to die with beauty, before the dead season comes. This mountain and scenery fill me with such sadness! Old memories come flooding back. Not mine, but those that others have told me, which they in turn had heard somewhere. Even so, they stir something in me. And I always conjugate the Semmering in the past tense, like the beginning of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time..."



Fall colours: the Semmering railway crossing the viaduct over the Kalte Rinne.

© Tourismus Region Nieder-Österreich, Süd-Alpin, Semmering

Once upon a time, then, a land on the eve of a revolution had an emperor who decided to conquer a mountain. In so doing, he resorted to a modern strategy whose purpose was to take people's minds off the problems of the day. Confronted with the revolution of 1848, he decided to send construction

workers to the area straddling Lower Austria and Styria and keep them busy on a bold project. The clever emperor killed two birds with one stone. Part of the impoverished, desperate revolutionary proletariat found itself far from Vienna, forced to do hard construction work. And the government took all the



On May 5 1842, an alpine garden party marks the opening of Glöggnitz Station (oil painting by Anton Fisher).

credit for a spectacular, courageous undertaking—in Austria, at any rate: building a railroad that defied the mountains. Workers filled crevices in the rock, built viaducts over valleys and ravines. And the result was majestic. Today, the almost Gothic arches, which stand out against the sky and mountains in some places, seem as though they had been built merely to beautify the scenery, rather than to hold up the deafening roar of tons of steel which seemed to signal nature's capitulation to industry.

A certain Carlo Ghega, who was born in Venice and has gone down in architectural history and Austrian politics under the name of "Knight Karl von Ghega," shepherded this adventure to a successful conclusion. Tie after tie, rail after rail, he tamed the rebellious landscape in heroic solitude. At least according to the undying legend, which even inspired an Austrian bank note (it's out of circulation today). On the other hand, the labourers who wore themselves out hewing the rock walls with pickaxes and spades are seldom mentioned. That's how history is written.

The work was finished in 1854. At the time, Semmering station was the highest point on Earth reached by a railroad. The passengers were just as "elevated." Lavish villas and luxurious hotels

that looked as though they might collapse beneath the weight of ornate Art Nouveau architectural ornamentation rose with the same arrogance as their counterparts on the Ringstraße, Vienna's most fashionable thoroughfare. They attracted the late nineteenth century's wealthiest people and most famous celebrities.

Silhouettes of a vanished world

Nobles, bankers, industrialists, painters, writers and philosophers felt an irresistible attraction to Semmering. Elegance, luxury and beauty, mingling with a good dose of decadence and narcissism, gradually overran the high mountain pastures. In the event of an emergency, Vienna was not far away, and the train trip was more enjoyable than travelling by horse and carriage. In summer, the area vied with the Mediterranean. In winter, it was the meeting place for a closed circle of regular visitors

That world, which is as irretrievably lost as Atlantis, was strictly off-limits to people outside the closed circle of finance, politics or the interloping sphere of culture... Shh! Isn't that the writer Arthur Schnitzler's ghost behind the tall pine tree over there? Isn't he casually holding the manuscript of a melodrama

in his pale hands? And down there, on that carpet of moss, isn't that Sigmund Freud, looking a bit under the weather, lost in his thoughts? A little further away in the undergrowth, is that a grazing deer or the poet Peter Altenberg walking forward with an energetic gait? Silhouettes of a vanished world.... Only the trees still remember these happy, sad or loving figures strolling beneath the dense canopy of foliage and needles. But for me, their presence haunts the woods, in the dark shadows of the rock walls.

I do not see any female silhouettes, as though women had never existed! Yet Wanda must have stayed near here. Or perhaps she did not have enough money to spend a summer in Semmering. She undoubtedly would have felt comfortable had she been able to afford a presentable dress. And who knows, maybe the course of her life would have changed if she could have left her unbearable husband, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, at home. But those are just assumptions and guesswork. And I'm surprised at feeling so down again.

Those ladies who accompanied those gentlemen to the Semmering took the waters there and enjoyed the change of scene. They came to chat and turn on their charm or, once their beauty wilted, while away the boredom. All of them

sank with their century without a trace. The only things left are faded captions on old photographs, like “ladies of the nobility at a charity ball in front of the champagne kiosk in Reichenau Park, probably on the 50th anniversary of the Semmering railroad, in 1904.”

Why does this scenery keep me from living with my day and age? Why does it drive me into a state of melancholy, thrust me into a past that is so at odds with my desires, a kitschy, hopeless past occasionally resuscitated on the flickering screen of a revival movie house? The emperor hunting big game; the young empress disguised as Romy Schneider, unless it's the other way round; Austria depicted as a sewing kit, filled to the brim with aristocrats flanked by their sup-

pliers! Only a handful of zealous laundrywomen, upright hunters and wary-looking poachers—against a backdrop of mountains and meadows—answer back.

A concrete jungle?

What awakens these old stories, which have so little to do with me? Is it the landscape or my passion for words? Or the dark melancholy that the Semmering makes me feel? I never see it in the full light of day, even when the sun is shining at its brightest. Though it is breathtakingly beautiful, this landscape tells me a tragic tale. No matter how much I think about the farmers, coal miners, metal-workers and small landowners who populate it, I cannot

soften this gloomy impression. Mountain life is tough.

Let's turn away from the past and look towards the future. Hikers, mountain-climbers, tourists, sports enthusiasts and railroad buffs make up most of the Semmering's summer population. Being a railroad buff myself, I am closely following the debate over building a tunnel under the Semmering—a project that fills me with dread and mistrust. If the tunnel does go through (it depends on political choices), that will be end of my magnificent, melancholic journeys.

The tunnel would let anonymous express trains zoom through the belly of the mountain, saving the 20 minutes that I so thoroughly enjoy losing in the switchbacks. The 21st century citizen that I am could congratulate herself on such efficiency and progress! But I don't. Instead I am outraged at seeing this wild yet at the same time civilized place usurped, bruised and turned into a concrete jungle. Isn't it the fear of witnessing the disappearance of these unfathomable dreams that come over me without rhyme or reason during each of my journeys in the Semmering? They wander like stray cats, wending their way through the landscape, hiding, fearful, free and untamable like nightmares.

I admire this area, but I wouldn't want to live with it.

Only visit the Semmering if you are prepared to feel sad. Unless you are really happy. ■



IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH THE LANDSCAPE

The railroad line in Semmering, Austria, which has been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1998, belongs to the “cultural landscapes” that first made their appearance on the list in 1994. A leg on the route from Vienna to Trieste, the line cuts through 41 kilometres of rugged mountain scenery between Glöggnitz and Mürzzuschlag and resulted in the world's first completely artificial tourist resort.

The 57 brick-and-stone guardhouses every 700 metres along the tracks, and the lavish villas and luxury hotels lining the route, are outstanding examples of the harmonious integration of architecture into a natural setting. The train crosses the daunting Semmering Pass at an altitude of 895 metres, travels through 14 tunnels (with a total length of 1,477 metres), over 16 viaducts (with a total length of 1,607 metres), four of which have two stories, and under more than 100 vaults. The railroad marked the start of the Alps' career as a tourist destination.

The route was divided into 14 sections, each given to a different company. In June 1848, 1,007 male and 414 female labourers started hewing away

at the mountains with pickaxes. It took six years and up to 20,000 people to finish the job. On July 17, 1854, this engineering masterpiece was complete, and the first passengers were able to board.

The rugged terrain, lack of powerful explosives and technical limitations of the time made the task especially painstaking. Project manager Carlo Ghega not only had to do a complete survey of the area for lack of reliable maps, but to develop new surveying instruments as well.

The Semmering railroad was rebuilt many times over the years, especially as the weight and speed of trains have increased. Its appearance changed the most between 1957 and 1959, when the line was electrified. These necessary adjustments, however, have not altered the almost unique harmony between nature and architecture. ■