

# Dismantling the World Cultural Heritage Semmering Railway

*For some years now tricks have been used, on several levels, to be able to materialize the base tunnel within the internationally protected UNESCO World Heritage Site Semmering. Even the management plan provisions are opposed to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.*

**by Christian Schuhböck**

Towards the end of the 1980ies, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) recognized the fact that the pollution of soil, air and water, the industrialisation and uncontrolled increase of traffic and uninhibited mass tourism goes hand in hand with a rapid loss of biodiversity and landscape. The continuing population growth and its demands, the unplanned settlement of the open landscape and urbanization as well as the development of societies oriented towards technology and economy are leading, to an increasing extent, to the loss of traditional forms of life and to the destruction of natural and cultural values. The recent decades in particular clearly demonstrated to what extent man has lost the sense for true values and necessities and blindly chases supposed progress and economic growth; the negative spin-off of this development increasingly lead to the decay and destruction of irreplaceable natural and cultural goods.

In order to counter-act this negative development, at least to some degree, the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972 adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention). It aims at the world wide protection of landscapes of outstanding beauty and diversity as well as testimonies of past and treasures of present cultures from destruction and save them as world heritage of the entire humanity for future generations.

## **The first world heritage railway ever**

With a delay of more than 20 years, Austria ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1993; in the 1980ies one had feared that environmentalists could nominate the Donau-March-Thaya Auen as potential world natural heritage which would be opposed to the plans of government and electricity industry to build a river power plant at Hainburg. Accordingly, one avoided the ratification of the Convention for several years. The Austrian Commission for UNESCO, the Austrian Society for the Protection of Cultural Goods and other NGOs endeavoured to achieve Austria's ratification of the world Heritage Convention, their arguments, however, fell on deaf ears. Only after the organization for landscape protection "Alliance for Nature" had started to execute political pressure in the beginning of the 1990ies, President Thomas Klestil and Chancellor Franz Vranitzky signed the ratification document in 1992 and the Convention finally came into force in March 1993 for Austria. Immediately, Alliance for Nature submitted the suggestion to nominate the Semmering Railway, threatened by the Semmering base tunnel, as a potential world heritage site. A suggestion that took UNESCO in Paris completely by surprise, as one had so far only declared castles, cathedrals, city ensembles and similar valuable cultural goods as "world heritage of mankind" . A railway had so far never been discussed in this context. It was particularly Erwin Pröll, Governor of the Province of Lower Austria, who was enthusiastic about the idea of Alliance for Nature and supported the initiative. Finally, UNESCO could be convinced of the extraordinary universal value of the Semmering Railway, so that it was awarded the status of world heritage site as the world wide first railway in 1998 (meanwhile, there are three World Heritage Railways in India and two in Europe). Thus, for the first time in the history of Austrian nature protection, Alliance for Nature applied the "World Heritage" as an international protective instrument, up to that time, environmental organizations had used "national parks" as the only argument against large-scale projects (Hohe Tauern, Donau-Auen, Neusiedler See).

To make sure that NGOs and citizens' initiatives (such as the one of Wien-Mitte) would not come up with the idea of using the World Heritage Convention more often as protective instrument against large-scale projects, one trivialized the significance of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. The world heritage status was, thus the argument of the officials, nothing more than an

international credit to a national cultural or natural monument. In any case, one could not consider it a legally effective instrument for the protection of endangered natural landscapes or cultural monuments. In spite of the constant devaluation by politicians and officials the World Heritage could be successfully applied against gigantism and misunderstood progress in the cases of Wien-Mitte and Semmering base tunnel. Also in neighbouring Germany the World Heritage Convention was also applied in a spectacular case. As politicians and officials of the city of Dresden were unable to accept the fact the virginity and a child – i.e the “Waldschlösschen”-bridge (a road leading to a freeway and crossing the Elbe river) and the World Heritage Dresdner Elbtal were incompatible Germany was disallowed the world heritage title for this extraordinary river and cultural landscape. Had the UNESCO World Heritage Centre had allowed to be talked around to continue the world heritage status in spite of building the bridge, the credibility and the purpose of the World Heritage Convention would have been severely damaged all over the world.

### **National Protection as prerequisite for world heritage**

As a consequence of the settlement of the conflict in our neighbouring country, Austria is now proposing a more subtle way in order to carry out a large-scale project in a world heritage landscape protected by UNESCO. Not confrontation but shrewd agitation are meant to open the door to the new Semmering base tunnel (SBTn) with all its large-scale technical interventions into the world heritage Semmering railway and surrounding landscape.

Various measures and the long overdue management plan are so serve as means to achieve this aim. As one of the preconditions for the inclusion of a natural or cultural property of *extraordinary universal value* into the World Heritage List according to the UNESCO Convention, it needs to have the national legal protection. As concerns the Semmering Railway and the surrounding cultural landscape this basic prerequisite was given at the time of nomination. As the Semmering Railway has been under monument protection ex lege since 1923 and the surrounding landscape is, on the Lower Austria side, part of the landscape protected area “Rax-Schneeberg( since 1955) and on the Styrian side part of the landscape protected area “Stuhleck-Pretul” (since 1981). On the international level the Semmering is part of the Natura-2000 area “Nordöstliche Randalpen: Hohe Wand – Schneeberg – Rax” (since 1998). Formerly therefore the precondition of legally guaranteed protection was guaranteed on the national and international level.

Finally, in 1995, the Republic of Austria nominated the Semmering railway and its surrounding cultural landscape with a total area of more than 8.800 ha; in the accompanying documentation the mountain railway and surrounding landscape with all its charm (“magic mountains”) is praised as a symbiosis between nature, culture and technology. In December 1998 UNESCO declared the Semmering railway and its surrounding cultural landscape as world heritage and justified this decision as follows: “The Semmering Railway, built over 41 km of high mountains between 1848 and 1854, is one of the greatest feats of civil engineering from this pioneering phase of railway building. The high standard of the tunnels, viaducts and other works has ensured the continuous use of the line up to the present day. It runs through a spectacular mountain landscape and there are many fine buildings designed for leisure activities along the way. Built when the area was opened up by the advent of the railway.

*Criterion (ii):* The Semmering Railway represents an outstanding technological solution to a major physical problem in the construction of early railways.

*Criterion (iv):* With the construction of the Semmering Railway, areas of great natural beauty became more easily accessible and as a result these were developed for residential and recreational use, creating a new form of cultural landscape.”

In other words: Without the spectacular mountain landscape with its deep gorges and high cliffs no such pioneering railway line would ever have been built on Semmering. And without the development of such a harmonic cultural landscape of great natural beauty with its dainty villas (in the so-called Semmering style) and majestic hotels would never have taken place.

Taking this into consideration (*criteria ii and iv*) UNESCO declared the “Gesamtkunstwerk” of nature, culture and technology a “world heritage of mankind” – like the Republic of Austria has described it in its documentation (“The World Heritage – Documentation for the Nomination of Semmering – railway – cultural site – Semmeringbahn Kulturlandschaft, 1995”) and requested its

inclusion in the mid-nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In other words: The Semmering Railway and its surrounding cultural landscape were nominated as equally important and equally valuable. In the world heritage documentation, the surrounding landscape (“the cultural site of the Semmering was allowed four times as much space as the Semmering Railway itself. Nowadays, when talking of the world heritage, officials deprecatingly call it “Semmeringebahn”) and more or less drop the reference to the surrounding landscape.

### **Salami tactics in favour of a large-scale project**

For years now, this harmonic “Gesamtkunstwerk”, as it is called in the world heritage documentation, has been divided up in pieces and reduced step by step to a minimum in favour of the large-scale project Semmering base tunnel. Already shortly after the official nomination by the Republic of Austria, but before the actual declaration as “World Heritage of Mankind” by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, the Ministry of Culture started the bit-by-bit dismantling of the world cultural heritage Semmering Railway. By notification of March 17, 1997, the Austrian Federal Office for the Care of Monuments (under the authority of the Ministry of Culture) put the Semmering Railway between track section 75,650 and 114,820 under monument protection. Accordingly, the railway stations Gloggnitz and Mürzzuschlag are excluded from this protection. Evil to him who evil thinks – could the intention be to allow junctions for the Semmering base tunnel just after the Station Gloggnitz and just before the Station Mürzzuschlag in spite of monument protection? Whether UNESCO has been informed of this hardly noticeable but direction-giving “setting of course” is unclear. Equally doubtful is the question whether UNESCO is aware of the reduction of the protected landscape area. By notification of June 22, 1981 large parts of the landscape on the Styrian side of the Semmering had been declared protected landscape area “Stuhleck-Pretul”, a notification of March 26, 2007 reduced the area to approximately one third of its original size, just where the new Semmering base tunnel is planned to run. Whether it is possible to withdraw national protection from a world heritage area without violating one of the most important prerequisites for the world heritage status, remains to be examined. The peak of frivolous handling of the World cultural heritage Semmering Railway and its surrounding landscape has been reached with the management plan compiled on behalf of the Association of Friends of the Semmering Railway. In cooperation with the ÖBB (Austrian Railways) Infrastruktur Bau AG, the Ministry of Culture, the Federal Office for the Care of Monuments and various other public institutions the World Heritage “Semmering Railway – Cultural Landscape” is being reduced to a minimum by simply declaring only the track of the Semmering Railway as core zone with an area of just 156 ha while the formerly so highly esteemed cultural landscape of “great natural beauty” of more than 8.580 ha is degraded to a so-called puffer zone. Apart from the fact that the management plan contains several contradictory and, in some cases, incorrect statements, the construction of the Semmering base tunnel is being quoted as one of the first measures for the long-term preservation of the Semmering Railway. This, however, is in clear contradiction to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention that had been conceived with the aim of protecting extraordinary universal cultural and natural goods from large-scale technical interference such as a tunnel project of this size would constitute. The management plan also does not contain any information on the existence of state agreements or enforceable warrants protecting and safeguarding the Semmering Railway and surrounding cultural landscape in the shape in which UNESCO had declared it an internationally protected world heritage site; furthermore there is the question of how the world heritage site is supposed to be protected from the planned large-scale technical invasions by the SBTn, envisaging, i.a., a continuous mountain water outflow of up to 38 million litres of water daily.

“Should the Semmering Railway one of these days really be replaced by a base tunnel, this could lead to the shutting-down and, in the worst case, the decay of this important mountain and landscape railway. A registration in the Red List of Endangered World Heritage would be the consequence.” There is hardly anything to add to these words of the founding director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Bernd von Droste zu Hülshoff.

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