

Bayerisch Eisenstein's Historic Train Station **(The Bavarian-Bohemian Frontier Station)**

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Bayerisch Eisenstein (Photo by SAM, 1998)

Whether arriving by car or by train, visitors to Bayerisch Eisenstein or nearby Zelezná Ruda shouldn't miss the train station at Bayerisch Eisenstein. This building at the edge of the village has the distinction of being the only train station in Europe that straddles an international border. This station and the connecting rail line have a long and interesting history.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Bavaria and Bohemia began to consider building a rail line which would link the Bavarian rail system with the Bohemian railway network. It was expected that this would stimulate local industry and improve commerce between the two countries. It was also suggested that this line would become a major rail line between Munich and Prague. In 1872, the Bavarian Eastern Railway Company was given the concession to build a railway line from the existing line in Plattling to Bayerisch Eisenstein. The construction of the new line proved to be exceedingly challenging because of the steep climb from the Danube River valley to the Bavarian forest and because of the number of valleys to be crossed. Construction was begun in 1873 and completed in late 1877. At Bayerisch Eisenstein, a seven-track turntable house with granite walls was constructed in the style typical of the East Bavarian Railways. This roundhouse remains today and houses the Bavarian Local Railway Museum. At the same time in

Bohemia, the rail line from Pilsen to Markt Eisenstein (now Zelezná Ruda) was finished and put into service, following the completion of a 1747 meter (2 km-long) tunnel through Špičák mountain. This tunnel, built between 1874 and 1877, was the one of the first train tunnels to be built in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It remained the longest train tunnel in Bohemia until 2008. This was the final link which would connect the Bohemian railway



Interior of train station, Bayerisch Eisenstein (Photo by SAM, 1998)

system to the Bavarian rail line that ended in Bayerisch Eisenstein. There would be a total of six railway stations and two tunnels erected between Pilsen and Markt Eisenstein.

According to the state contract signed by the Bavarian Eastern Railway Company in 1873, the train station was to be constructed so that the border divided the building into two equal halves. A symmetrical two-story edifice with wings in Bavaria and Bohemia and a common middle section was thus erected. On October 20, 1877, the building was officially opened by the Emperor of Austria and his Bavarian royal counterpart. It was known as the “Eisenstein changing post” or the Frontier Station. The waiting rooms were ornately decorated in the style of the era. To this day, the railway station has the distinction of being the only train station in Europe with an international border running through it.



Bayerisch Eisenstein Railway Station (Photo by SAM, 1998)

As early as 1880, the travel writer Karl Baedeker was mentioning the rail line and border station in his Handbook for Travelers in Southern Germany. He observed that “The railway from Deggendorf to Eisenstein, traversing the Bavarian Forest has had many engineering difficulties to encounter.” Baedeker described the last leg of the trip to the Bavarian-Bohemian border thus, “Above Zwiesel, the train again crosses the

Regen (River) and then the Kolbersbach by a lofty viaduct. The line ascends the west bank of the Regen, running parallel with the road to Bohemia and reaches Ludwigsthal, with numerous glass and smelting houses and the Bavarian and Bohemian frontier station Eisenstein which affords an admirable view of the imposing Grosse Arber, rising to the S.W.” In his 1895 edition, Baedeker describes hiking excursions in the area. Of Markt Eisenstein, he says that it is “prettily situated at the confluence of the Regen and the Eisenbach, with a fine view of the Arber [Grosse Arber, the highest peak in the Bavarian-Bohemian mountain range]. It is a station on the railway to Pilsen and is frequented as a summer resort, affording opportunity for many agreeable excursions.” He noted that the distance from Eisenstein to Pilsen is 69 miles and the rail journey takes between 3½ and 4 hours.

The railway line clearly brought economic opportunity for some of the villagers living at the edge of the Bavarian-Bohemian forest. However, just as in the rest of Germany, many families living in the Eisenstein valley in the late nineteenth century believed that their futures and fortunes lay in emigration to



Train Station at Bayerisch Eisenstein, Czech side (Photo by K. Jähne, 2012)

America. For these German-Bohemians, the railway line and train station might well have evoked other images and feelings. The station would certainly have been the scene of many tearful partings. Here the would-be emigrants would embark on the first leg of a long journey that would take them across Germany, across the Atlantic Ocean, to a new life in America. They knew that they would never again set eyes on family left behind. So hope must have been mixed with a good measure of sadness as they boarded the train.

Rail traffic between the two countries continued through the first half of the twentieth century. Then cross-border traffic came to an abrupt halt at the end of World War II. In 1953, Czechoslovakian authorities cut the train tracks and superimposed a fence of barbed wire across the train yard. German trains ran up to a buffer stop at the border fence at Bayerisch Eisenstein. The Czech line ended at a small station on the outskirts of Zeleзна Ruda (formerly Markt Eisenstein) a couple of kilometers away. A solid brick wall divided the station building, with Germany using the southern half. The northern half fell behind the Iron Curtain. Armed guards patrolled the area.

On June 2, 1991, following the fall of the Soviet Union, the border crossing at Bayerisch Eisenstein was re-opened. After a short wait, travelers can change from a German train to a Czech train traveling on to Klatovy and Pilsen. Beginning in the summer of 2006, one can take the train directly from Plattling, Germany to the Czech station at Spicak and back.

On June 2, 2011, in ceremonies marking the twentieth anniversary of the re-opening of traffic between the two countries, Michal Šnebergr, the mayor of the Czech Železná Ruda, would note that *“The construction of the railway brought a big change to this area. It was a big turn in history. It created an infrastructure and thereby attracted many tourists to this region, and of course connected Bavaria and the Czech lands.”* He would add that *“In a way, this train station was a symbol for the division of Europe, in the same way that the Wall was a symbol in Berlin, this was our symbol of that in the Bohemian Forest.”*

The spirit of cooperation and collaboration between two countries which marked the initiation of cross-border rail traffic at Bayerisch-Eisenstein in the 1870’s again prevails at the start of the twenty-first century.

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