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NAMING TRAINS



Photos; s'Murmeli

Even with the demise of loco-hauled stock, where there was a good chance that once a 'named' engine could haul you, today when travelling around Switzerland the EMU that you will probably be riding in may well be named after a local community or a famous Swiss person. It is inevitable that on the smaller railways the names will have simply some local significance and the rolling stock that bears them will obviously not stray far from the area. However, although the SBB may try to keep certain named units in their specific locales, others can travel far and wide across the country and some of the individuals commemorated may be less than familiar to visitors. Let us look at two named trains that you may come across in your travels.

"La Petite Gilberte". If you are travelling in the Jura, around Basel or Porrentruy, watch out for FLIRT No 521 027 "*Gilberte de Courgenay*", as this one is special. Readers may consider that Switzerland has no wars and no heroes, but that is far from true; and Gilberte was a 'heroine', albeit not quite in the usual mould. Born in March 1896 in Courgenay (BE), where her parents also kept the Café de la Gare, she was the daughter of a watchmaker, Gustave Montavon. This café still stands, across the yard from Courgenay station, on the line from Delémont to Porrentruy. Gilberte spent a year in service in Basel, learning German, and then, in the Great War, went home to help in the Café. It was very necessary, because a threatening German army was just up the road in Alsace, and the Swiss Army was mobilized to man the frontier and protect the Ajoie region around Porrentruy. Thousands of soldiers were there, and Courgenay's café was a welcome haven. Gilberte became a popular favourite, and a soldier from Uri, Hanns In der Gand, wrote a song for her that went into Swiss folklore. Gilberte later married and moved to Zürich, where she died in 1957. However, the German invasion of France in WWII again brought soldiers to the Ajoie, and Gilberte was again remembered, but this time as a figure to rally the whole country. A book and theatrical play were an instant hit in 1940, and the film '*Gilberte de Courgenay*', produced in 1941, and naturally using Hanns in der Gand's song, has remained a part of Swiss life. For the actress, Anne-Marie Blanc, who played Gilberte, it was the role of a lifetime. She died recently; of course we all saw the film and heard the song, '*C'est la petite Gilberte*', again.

Gilberte is still seen by an older generation of Swiss as a symbol of comradeship, patriotism and civil courage in distress. Courgenay (now in Canton Jura) is a very quiet little corner. The café fell on hard times, however in 1998 a foundation was created to ensure its renovation and upkeep. It houses a museum collection about Gilberte and the 1914-18 period. The trains stop at the door every half-hour. Dropping in is a strangely unworldly experience today, but many still make the trip. It was an inspiration to name 521 027, which works throughout the whole district, after Gilberte. For many Swiss it needs no further explanation.

"Arthur Honegger". If you are riding the line along the base of the Jura through Neuchâtel line it will probably be on a Class 500 ICN and recently these popular units have taken over many of the workings on the Gotthard. They are all named after individuals and there is a little plaque near the doors, which tells you when they lived, and for what they are famous. You may not know these individuals, and many Swiss may not know either! With 500 038 it's easy. You are reminded of him every time you take out your purse or wallet, for Arthur Honegger is immortalized on the red CHF20 note. There is more to it than that. His picture on the note is supported by a driving wheel and Westinghouse pump, obvious components of a steam locomotive, as well as a trumpet and musical notation. Honegger, born 1892, was Swiss, the son of a Zürcher family. Since the father was a coffee merchant in Le Havre, Arthur spent most of his life in France, but studied music at the Conservatory of Zürich. There has always been French-Swiss rivalry about his true allegiance. He composed over 200 works, not all successful, but won fame in 1923 with his tone-poem '*Pacific 231*', a symphonic piece describing the music of a steam express engine hauling its train, it is supposed, between Paris and Le Havre. The work has been set to a dramatic film documentary about the locomotive, and is a classic. This is what the Swiss CHF20 note takes up in its symbolism. However, closer inspection shows that the engine the designer used as a model must have been either the preserved SBB B3/4 No.1637, or Eb3/5 No 5819, which shared the same standard components. A French '*Ouest*' Pacific it is not. Honegger died in Paris in 1955 but his named train, electric not steam, daily graces the rails of his native country. 