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How the Swiss saved Eurovision!

EUROVISION – the European television programme exchange – is this year celebrating its 30th anniversary. The service was launched in the Swiss lakeside resort of Montreux in 1954 by eight countries, including Switzerland and Britain. Now there are 34 member-countries. **Frank Tappolet**, who was Switzerland's first ever TV producer and who has just retired from the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation after nearly 40 years' service, recalls its history.

NEITHER television nor its offspring, Eurovision, is as old as the gods, but both do already have their mythology.

One of the legends of Eurovision mythology concerns the birth of this service and, though it is probably no more factual than Greek or Roman mythology, it could contain some grain of truth. Anyway, I believe it deserves to be told, so I'll leave you to judge for yourselves:

The world soccer championships were to be played in Switzerland in 1954. Several experts figured that an international television network for the live broadcasts of these matches across many European borders would have wonderful value as promotion for the continent's growing television industry.

The network was to be based on temporary electronic bridges across these national borders and it was christened Eurovision by a British journalist on a press visit to the Chasseral relay station in the Swiss Jura mountains.

Already battling for the respect of the intelligentsia, these television pioneers were not going to run the risk of criticism by allowing sports and games to dominate this new service. So they decided to precede the soccer by a week of cultural exchange which, they hoped, would appeal to those not entirely thrilled by ball games.

To arrange for this special week, the directors of all interested television companies gathered to discuss the programme. But, according to the legend, their meeting was a difficult one.

The British delegate was thrilled by the whole idea and he demonstrated his willingness to cooperate with an offer of that colourful British pageant, the Trooping of the Colour, as the opening programme.

What a fine idea, the others murmured. And the French delegate was particularly enthusiastic. There was, however, just one small worry, he said. He wondered whether it was right to launch the service with a festival that could be interpreted as a tribute to



Frank Tappolet – "pioneering Swiss spirit still survives". (Photo: Farmer)

British militarism. Perhaps, he said, a gala night at the Paris Lido would be more appropriate and tasteful.

Bravo, said the Italian delegate. Wonderful idea. But there could be a small problem, he mused. Was it, all things considered, quite right to begin with a programme featuring so many near-naked women. Nothing wrong with that, you understand, but the Pope... Now wouldn't that be rather more appropriate.

An opening blessing from Pope Pius XII. Ja, Ja, applauded the German delegate. Excellent. Things are shaping up perfectly but, with so many Germans being Protestants, he wondered about the Pope (wonderful man, mind you).

But perhaps a visit to the youth festival on the banks of the Rhine. Now that could not offend anyone. Prima, said the Dutch representative, perfect. There's just one thing...

Seeing the way things were going, the president adjourned the meeting a while to let everyone think about the problem. When they reconvened in the smoke of cigars and the comforting bouquet of their liqueurs, they realised that the Swiss delegate had yet to comment.

Well now, this poor man was feeling dreadfully embarrassed for Switzerland had no Trooping of the Colour, no Lido, no Pope and no Rhine festival – just a small and unassuming little amateur flower festival in Montreux. It was nothing really, not worth thinking about even...

But everyone was agreed. What could be better than a simple, unpretentious Narcissus

festival? In a flurry of relief, it was decided that the Montreux Narcissus Festival would open the international exchange week on June 6 from 3.30 p.m. to 4.30pm.

After that, on the same evening, the Vatican visit would be broadcast, followed later in the week by the Trooping of the Colour, the Paris Lido, the Rhine Festival and all the other special cultural features of that opening week.

A flower had saved the infant Eurovision from an untimely death.

Believe the story if you wish. Even if you don't, it is an attractive tale. Nonetheless, the Narcissus Festival was to be broadcast and the Swiss TV-men faced the daunting task of organising everything. Television was new to Switzerland and almost unheard of in Montreux, so it was going to require patience and tact to get everything ready.

A few Montreux locals seemed to understand the significance to their town of this event and added their weight to the TV-men's appeals. But there were problems. Where to put the cameras, for a start.

"This seems to be the best place".

"But that is impossible, sir. These are the best seats".

"Right, that's exactly why we need them".

"But these are the seats for members of the municipal council. You can't have them".

A compromise was reached. The TV-men and all their equipment would be put on a special rolling platform in the market square – an unheard of luxury at the time.

The weather was perfect on that first day, but it deteriorated during the night. It was pouring by morning and a "war council" was called.

Someone said the parade could not be held in this rain and with empty stands. But another local, who had been to America and appreciated the value of television exposure, insisted the parade would go ahead – rain or no rain, with the stands empty or filled.

Television made quite an impact on the people of Montreux during that time. By the end of the saga some seemed to wonder whether television could perform miracles: the rain stopped just before the broadcast began and renewed with added force when it was all over.

No doubt people still wonder how those clever Swiss managed!

This, with the other features of that opening week, was the first faltering step of Eurovision.