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'Boudu sauvé des eaux'

by Hans Matti

This is the title of an old film, where that famous Swiss actor, Michel Simon performed the main role. What has this to do with Bugatti, you wonder, well read on and you will find out.

In 1998 we celebrated in Switzerland the centenary of the Swiss automobile club (ACS). Among many other celebrations the ACS organized the 'Grand Prix du Centenaire' in Lugano between 27th and 30th of august 1998. This meeting was open to all kinds of historic cars, but many of them were Bugattis. I entered my faithful 35B (4956/211T) and it was one of the better meetings among all those which I have attended for the last 40 years. One of the events was a race on Ascona airfield. On this occasion, some-one attending that race said to me *'we have also a Bugatti here in Ascona, however it is sunken down in lago maggiore and it is a target for the local divers of our live boat society'*. The idea of a Bugatti being hidden under water was amazing enough and I wanted to know more about it. Having been living at the lake-side town of Rolle (lake of Geneva) for many years, I am also a member of the live boat society, which is an organization covering the whole of Switzerland. So I called my colleagues of the live boat society at Ascona to learn more about that mystery Bugatti and I was told that some pictures had been taken underwater of the remains. Finally, Pasqualino Trotta from the 'Societa Svizzera di Salvataggio, Ascona' (live boat society Ascona) sent me 4 pictures, taken during the seventies, showing the visible parts of the car, mainly the wheels only, since most of the car being now buried in the sludge. From these pictures (picture number 1) I could confirm that it was indeed a Bugatti, the typical fixation of the rear spring was clearly visible. The car had wire-wheels and the rear end of the chassis was straight. Therefore it had to be a touring Bugatti, certainly not a GP, but at that point it was not possible to identify the type, at that point I thought it could be a type 40.

Nothing else happened until recently. During Locarno carnival festivities on 1st of February 2008, Damiano Tamagni, was cowardly attacked by three young hooligans and beaten so heavily that he died unfortunately from the injuries which he had suffered. He and his father were members of the Ascona live boat and divers society (Centro Sport Subacquei Salvataggio Ascona, CSSS). After this tragedy, his family and friends decided to create a foundation with the aim to prevent juvenile rioting and violence (Fondazione Damiano Tamagni, www.damianotamagni.ch). In order to rise funds for this trust, it was decided to rescue the Bugatti and eventually later to sell it. Jens Boerlin, who runs a firm for underwater work (lavori subacquei), took over the task to rescue the car, which had been resting for more than seventy years at a depth of 53

meters, mostly hidden in the sludge. Jens and his colleagues dove many times down to the car, cleaned it as far as possible and took more underwater pictures, some of which he sent to me. One of these new pictures (picture number 2) enabled me to identify the car as a Brescia modifié, type 27. Indeed on this picture one can make out the rear-end of the 4 cylinder engine, with the exhaust manifold and the steering column. The exhaust being on the same side as the steering is only the case for Brescia's, all other Bugatti's have the exhaust on the opposite side of the steering. Other pictures showed the wooden frame of the body and the axles with four wheel brakes, typical for late Brescia's.

On 30th of June Jens Boerlin and Renato de Lorenzi took the time to visit my place where I showed them my own Brescia (2651), which is also a type 27, chassis type 22 (2,4 meters wheelbase). I showed them especially where to find the chassis number. The next morning, Jens dove again and he quite easily found the chassis number as being 2461.

A phone call to my friend Norbert Steinhauser revealed the following factory-data. Brescia type 27, engine number 879, chassis type 22, number 2461 (wheelbase 2,4 meters), twin plug engine, carburettor Solex, rear axle 12 x 45, tyres Michelin. Invoiced by Bugatti to the agent Chèvre at Nancy on 22nd of April 1925.

Pierre-Yves Laugier took up the trail and came forward with more information. On 11th of April already, the car was registered at Nancy with number 8843 N 5 for its first owner, Georges Paiva, 49 Rue des Dominicains at Nancy. However at this Adress used to be located the garage-atelier of Raymond Apparuyt, who had owned Brescia Bugattis since 1922. He used to race them in local events. He even came 3rd with a Bugatti in the class of 1500 cc cars at the second 'Grand Prix du Salon', held at Monthléry on 16th of October 1927. This may well have been 2461.

But how did this car get from Nancy into lago Maggiore ? The car bears a little plate giving the following name: Georges Nielly, 48 Rue Nollet, Paris, which must have been one of the subsequent owners, if not the second owner, in France. Local research in Ascona has found at least one witness (Oliviero Barra, now well in his eighties) who has known the car before its disposal into the lake. The story had it, that a young architect, Max Schmuklerski was the owner of the car, However this proves to be not correct. Since the story of the recovery of the Bugatti has been largely published, the daughter of Max Schmuklerski told us that her father never had owned a Bugatti, instead he was the proud owner of a small French cyclecar made by Bignan.

Meanwhile, another individual has come out, claiming that his father was the owner of the Bugatti at Ascona. This person can prove the fact by showing the French logbook, which has miraculously survived and which is still in his possession. This individual regrets that the car has been recovered and he does not wish to be known, however his identity is known by the author.

The Bugatti was run at Ascona on its French plates and papers, later it was stored in the yard of building contractor Barra, still showing its French plates. The Swiss customs knew of the existence of the Bugatti and they finally insisted to have it imported officially and the corresponding custom fees to be paid. This happened somewhere between 1936 and 1937 when the car was already quite obsolete, well used and of little value. The customs fee may well have been much more than the actual value of the car. In Switzerland (and probably anywhere else) in case of non-payment of the customs fees, the car has to be

destroyed, this was decided upon and the simplest way to get rid of the car was to dip it into the lake. However it was attached to a chain, in the case someone would recover it, but with time the chain rusted through and the car sank to the ground of the lake, where it rested at a depth of 53 meters for the last 73 years.

After the war the local people of Ascona did still remember the Bugatti in the lake, while at the same time the sport of diving got more and more popular. The diving equipment was also greatly improved permitting ever deeper dives. During the sixties the members of the local diving club (Centro Sport Subacquei Ascona) decided to search for the Bugatti and finally Ugo Pillon located it on 18th of August 1967, as registered in their Diving Register. Subsequently it became an appreciated target for the local divers and during the seventies some underwater pictures were taken from the visible remains of the car.

July 12th, 2009 was the great day when 2461 was finally retrieved from the water after all those years (pictures number 4 and 5). A small delegation of the Bugatti Club Suisse (BCS) assembled at Ascona for the occasion bringing 5 Bugattis along (types 13 Meier, 22 Matti, 35B Gantner, 37A König and 43 van de Velde). I took my Brescia 2651, which is the same chassis as 2461 to show the two cars side by side (picture 6). This was a memorable event, the weather was nice and warm and the lake was calm. There was a huge crowd, maybe more than thousand people, assisting the event. The Bugatti had been transferred by the divers under water within the reach of a big mobile crane, attached it to the crane and lifted it out of the water at 10.30 am. Speeches were performed by Luigi Pedrazzini (minister of Ticinese government) and Maurizio Tamagni, the father of Damiano and president of Fondazione Damiano Tamagni in order to explain the aim and sense of the salvation of the Bugatti.

The Bugatti was transferred onto a big trailer, for the crowd to be inspected. Many pictures were taken and videos turned. 2461 was all original and in working order when it was drowned. It has a continuous history and is matching numbers. However its long sojourn in the lake has largely deteriorated it, especially the steel parts. In the lake, the car had been lying on its side, the left side hidden in the sludge, the right side in the open water. The iron and steel parts were quite well preserved in the sludge, but not in the open water, therefore we have the left side of the car in quite good shape while the right side is largely deteriorated. Other materials like wood, aluminum, brass, rubber, tires etc. have resisted very well.

Later during the day the Bugatti was removed from the lungo lago (lake front) and brought to the work yard of Boerlin lavori subacquei at Magadino, where Jens Boerlin and his friends began to clean the car from the remaining sludge. On Monday morning, 13th of July, I went to Magadino in order to inspect the Bugatti closer and to check the numbers. It corresponds in all points to the factory data, the only difference being the carburetor, which is the standard Zenith one and not a Solex as stated by the factory. Unfortunately the brass chassis plate is missing, but all the other numbers are there at the usual places. The chassis number 2461 on the right front engine leg, the engine number 879 on the cam box and on the front end of the crankcase, the gearbox number is 964, the differential housing has no number, but the ratio of 12 x 45 is stamped in the usual place. The radiator is Chausson, and it has a second plate reading 'Garantie 244 921' and a third one, probably from a reconditioning firm, reading 'A 3210 26'. On the car were also still the front and rear French registration plates, unfortunately they were partly rotten away and the whole number could not be read, however part of the number seems to read RE 1. This registration was issued in Paris between May/June 1930, probably when Georges Nielly got the car from Nancy. This was also the occasion

to take many pictures of the car, without being hindered by the crowds.

Of course this whole event has largely been commented in Internet and thus the whole world was instantly informed. Some Bugatti researchers have soon found out that there is another Bugatti Brescia claiming the number 2461. This car resides today in Japan with Minoru Kawamoto, but it was a Swiss car owned in the sixties by F. Hintermüller in Zürich. This car has engine number 1168 and figures in the 1973 Hugh Conway sen. register W3 and in the 1994 Japan register by Shotaro Kobayashi. It always figures as chassis 2461, engine 1168. However, according to the Molsheim factory data, engine 1168 corresponds to chassis 2761. 2761 was imported into Switzerland on 10th of October 1927 and stayed in Switzerland until F. Hintermüller sold it abroad during the seventies. Thus the real 2461 is the car of the lake without the slightest doubt.

Recently the promoters of this project have entrusted Bonhams to sell the car at one of their well known auctions. This shall happen at Retromobile at Paris in January 2010. We hope that someone out there will take on the task to preserve this car for the posterity. By doing so he will also support a highly important charity (Fondazione Damiano Tamagni). In my opinion it is possible to restore the car, but no more than circa 20 % of the original substance can be saved (half of the chassis, most aluminum casings), thus one will the end up with a car 20% original, and 80% recreation, the unusable parts most certainly getting lost in time. Therefore I suggest to keep the car as it is now just preserve it with the right treatments to prevent further deterioration and put it on static show as such. This is and will always be the yard-stick of what an all original, but well used Bugatti Brescia would have been in 1936. Besides one can built an absolute accurate replica of the car for use on the road. All the details are still visible and one can recreate an absolute precise replica which would hopefully not cost much more than the restoration of the original car and it would, most important, save the actual car in all its original splendor and glory. This is the one occasion where the construction of a replica does make sense.

The journalist Renato de Lorenzi has covered the whole story with a film which has been shown on Television Ticinese (RSI 1) on 23rd of July 2009.

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