

A pioneer with vision

A portrait of LEMACO Prestige Models in Loki Spezial, May 1998.

Switzerland, as a Mecca for brass model manufacturers, in large part owes its position to the driving force of this branch of production: Urs Egger.

The actor of Lemaco is particularly highly regarded by lovers of fine brass models in all gauges.

By Urs Häni

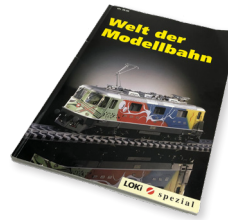
He is a pioneer, quite simply the pioneer where the production of European brass models is concerned. Urs Egger (63) is a champion, trailblazer and trendsetter in one. "Leader of brass" would suit him well because he is certainly the European who has been involved with brass production for model railways for the longest time and with the greatest intensity. He was only 22 years young when he was hired by Fulgurex as an accountant in 1956. Egger then seized the opportunity when he flew to Japan for the first time in 1961. "It was like landing on the moon," jokes Egger, founder and owner of what today is Lemaco SA.

The clock for trips on this scale ticked somewhat differently in those days than it does today. The trip took 36 hours, and there were only a few hotels in Tokyo, and the few that existed were fully booked. Much was primitive and improvised, not just "different countries, different customers", but rather a completely different culture awaited the adventurer from Switzerland.

Rocky path

As for many railway modellers who stayed in Tokyo, Tenshodo was the first port of call. However, this start was not very promising for one who set out to discover Japan's brass manufacturers. According to European business practices, Egger scheduled a week for this mission, after which he had only amassed a hotel room and a few addresses. Only a few Japanese people spoke good English, and they were decades away from the high-tech nation we know today. Good things take their time, and after three weeks, Egger had achieved something that could be called a serious business relationship. But a number of tricks were needed to do so.

At that time, a few manufacturers worked predominantly for the American market and produced primarily raw brass finished models. Egger knew: in order to be successful in Europe, the models had to be delivered painted, lettered, with the windows glazed, and the headlights fitted with lights. This request fell on deaf ears because the Japanese wanted nothing to do with painting, particularly not for these quantities which he planned to produce. At the time, they were significantly below those of the Americans, who accepted their models in raw brass, with no paint, no lettering, no windows and no lights.



At this time, the manufacturers were working with many subcontractors: one for the cast parts, one for the drives and another for the etching technology etc. Finally, he found one who wanted to give painting a go. Egger was thus able to fly home reassured for the moment. The seeds for the first production in HO gauge had been sown. The harvest consisted of a 200-piece run of the 141 R in a fuel version, for a final price of 290 Francs. The first Swiss model, 300 each in brown and green of the Be 4/6 at 300 Francs, followed in 1963. An era to be shaped by Egger for around 35 years thus began. All of the legendary locomotives from the traditional railway countries of Europe have been taken into account for brass production. Only England got a raw deal here when you consider the railway tradition in Great Britain since interest in English models was limited on the continent.

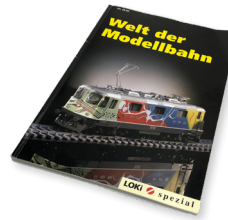
For many years, Toby and Fujiyama were the main Japanese producers for European models and Hideo Niimoto from Tenshodo likewise remained a prominent contact. Egger also remembers the Swede Bengt Ranert, who brought the first brass model to Europe with his Sweden steam locomotive and thus aroused the curiosity of the Fulgurex makers. What he was to unleash with this could not be predicted by even the boldest forecasters.

Egger suddenly laughs and remembers: On his first visit to Japan, he stopped off in Hong Kong. The apparent chance to land a fish already unexpectedly opened up when he saw "HO-Manufacturing" above the door of a classy office building. Nothing ventured nothing gained, he thought. The receptionist explained to the impetuous businessman from Switzerland: "HO" was the family name of the business owner.

Korea, the alternative

"1967," Egger smiles, "I accomplished another moon landing, in Korea this time." The problem: various Japanese manufacturers had died and there was very little new blood. Truly astounding for the otherwise so long-sighted Asians. The price trend was also setting off the first alarm bells. However the conditions in Korea were much more difficult than in Japan because none of today's manufacturers existed yet at the time or at least were not yet active in the model railway sector. Egger had to leave empty-handed.

Samhongsas, the best known and today probably the leader among the Korean manufacturers, has been discovered by the American Zev Goldberg, owner of GEM, a few years later. The Korean manufacturers still had to build their know-how from the ground up first, with support from their customers who were able to contribute their experiences, and indeed had to do so. Obviously, the quality of the first models left something to be desired, whether in the soldering technique or in the running properties. Egger watched the GEM products closely anyway. ►



A further disadvantage of Korean production also had an impact: Korea had no railway tradition, which the Japanese very much did.

"I never had to explain to the Japanese what a railway is," says Egger, and he therefore invited the Korean staff to visit a Swiss locomotive depot multiple times. The Koreans ran brass production as pure business, the vital passion was provided to them by Egger with his contact with the true railway. That was only a marginal problem in Japan. Egger: "Mizuno at Micro Cast, for example, was a railway enthusiast, which could also be seen in his models."

By the way: the first model produced in Korea was the "Tigerli" in O gauge. It was delivered to Switzerland only as a brass finished model at the time and was painted here by Twerenbold. The cast parts were also produced in Europe and then sent to Korea for the assembly.

Egger also provided support for Aster's change of industry, because the company produced cash registers before it got into model railways. As the business trend in its hereditary field steadily worsened, Mr Fujii of Aster was looking for a way out. The prerequisites were good because the Aster employees' knowhow in dealing with fine mechanics could also be brought into the production of model railways. The live steam scene saw a renaissance with Aster models.

Such models were suddenly available to buy for a scene, which remains very popular today. "Live steam models", Egger knows, "are rather difficult to produce". Aster also optimised its models more and more over the years.

The new start

In 1985, Egger set another milestone in his career. Because he was not able to agree on a holding in the company with Fulgurex which was acceptable to both parties, he started over with Lemaco SA. Well, not quite. Because what he had built was a network of relationships in the production countries, the trust of business partners and the bonus of customers. His newly founded Lemaco SA quickly found its feet and developed successfully. In the last twelve years, Lemaco has produced 56,000 models in 460 variants, in the gauges Nm, N, HO, HOm, O, Om, I and II. Today, 18 employees contribute to the success of Lemaco SA – which also operates as a trading company for technical toys. By the way, the name Lemaco comes from "Lac Lemán" and "Compagnie", an homage to the region which Egger would not miss any more.

In addition: in 1956, he had a choice between a position with AHV and the then extremely small company Fulgurex SA. It is hard to imagine what railway modellers would have missed out if Egger had opted for AHV. He chose Fulgurex





in order to learn French for a year. Since then, Egger has lived in French-speaking Switzerland for more than 40 years. He speaks German, French, English, Italian, and has even enjoyed lessons in Japanese as a gesture to his business partners.

He maintains a professional relationship with his partners, whether manufacturers or customers. Quality control is still a delicate point today. Here, Egger does not miss a trick, as every model received is unpacked and, depending on the gauge, tested on the various test tracks from Nm to IIm. The test tables can be levelled so that real inclines occur. The locomotives must be able to cross sets of turnouts from various manufacturers without a problem because they are running much more often today than they were 20 years ago, when the models mainly disappeared into display cases. An experienced engineer who prepares, analyses, rectifies all kinds of faults and whips defective models back into shape also works at Lemaco. Koreans even come to Ecublens sometimes to put the finishing touches on the models.

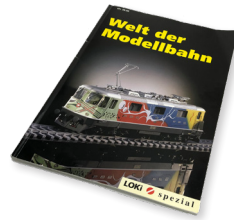
Little boxes in nominal sizes with corresponding model names can be observed in a large cabinet. "All spare parts," says Egger and continues: "we have the most important parts for every model here." By now, he knows what is in demand for a model, even if not everything is in stock. "In extreme cases, we can even recast certain parts," explains Egger, "because the tools are available for around three years". Then, however, they are being destroyed. Firstly, storage is very space-intensive because European models have very few standard parts in comparison with American models. A Westinghouse pump remains a Westinghouse pump. Additionally, new tools would be produced for a later remake anyway, because the state of production never stands still.

The high standard today is not a matter of course, however. Egger points out the twelve-hour days and the weekends which he has spent in the company and continues to spend. He also knows that nothing works without his team, whether the Lemaco crew in Ecublens or the many "staff" in Switzerland and abroad who support him and provide the necessary information and documents for the models. These are historic details about models and plans in order to be able to produce these models appropriately for their era. "That's not always easy, in Italy for example," Egger knows. Italian models have always had a firm place in the range of his productions.

The journey is the reward

Despite the high level of effort, inconsistencies sometimes cannot be entirely avoided. Ultimately, despite the work in series, they are handmade individual pieces, which does not rule out the possibility of small differences in the production. However, the actual production standard is something to be proud of. Even HO steam locomotives are today equipped with functioning inside running gears and freewheel gearing as this was likewise the case on the





prototype, have now long been standard. Whenever you believe that the peak has been reached, another breakthrough is announced in one field or another, whether this means even finer detailing, accurate wheel standards, better running properties, traction or more silent running.

At any rate, Egger committed to quality at a reasonable price in the statement of his mission. He does not want to produce only two and a half locomotives in three years, but rather offer a reasonable spectrum for all of the major European railway countries in both the standard and narrow gauge categories. Here, quality is a matter that does not stop with the vehicles. By now, his models are delivered in a packaging in which they survive without damage in a fall test from a height of one meter. "It was a long journey, and this test is not always easy with the larger gauges," he certainly knows.

Anyone who now thinks that Egger is a top businessman above all is only partially right. It is indisputable that he is an excellent businessman. However, anyone who sees the fire in his expression when he talks shop will without any doubt also recognise the railway enthusiast.

He was never able to live out his childhood railway dreams as a youth. He remained with his nose pressed against the shop windows of relevant speciality stores. He grew up during the Great Depression and the war. At the time, his father had to fill the plates for his wife and three children. There was nothing left over for model railways, and the middle of the three boys therefore lived out his dreams in the production of brass models. Asked about his favourite model, he says: he likes the imposing steam locomotives best, whether it is a Big Boy or the larger steam locomotives from Germany and France.

Visionary in all respects

Another dream has also faded. He would have liked to open a kind of museum with the former Giansanti collection and the new production in which the development of the model railway could have been displayed. Interested parties could have had the opportunity to try out model making in a form of workshop. Active engagement with the model railway for families. Youth development par excellence. Unfortunately, the Giansanti collection was sold to different parts of the world. So much for the dream. But a number of Lemaco models lie in various cupboards, along with a few other delights. Anyone who has met Egger knows that these will not remain in cupboards forever.

Model railway, a difficult business in a difficult time. Egger radiates confidence. He considers the selection of prototypes to be most difficult. When it comes to what is popular, practically everything has already been produced. He follows through with his philosophy, from N to I, as long as another manufacturer does





Lemaco
prestige models

not get to a gauge in the meantime. Certainly, he would no longer make a BLS Ae 6/8 in HO once he had seen the Roco model. So now it is also time for reprises and exotic options.

When it comes to the future, Egger thinks that he can envisage producing small series in top quality at reasonable prices and finding customers for them for as long as the possibility exists, he sees no problems for the continuity of Lemaco and for possible successors. But it is difficult to envisage Lemaco without the maker Egger. The industry would miss the highly individual character.

*Urs Egger today, right in his element.
He can be proud of his life's work.*



*The Swede Bengt Ranert brought the
first Japanese brass locomotive to
Europe in 1958, Ranert (right) talking
to Urs Egger.*

