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Cover

From the mountains to the sea: since the Second World War our country has operated its own merchant marine. Formerly deployed in times of war or crisis, its importance has now extended to the economic sphere, allowing land-locked Switzerland to act as the base for major shipping companies and sail the high seas.
(Grafik: Niklaus Troxler, Willisau)

I M P R E S S U M

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Their names are Romandie, Silvretta or Schwyz, yet they are neither locations, mountains nor cities. These appellations refer, in fact, to ships: sea-going freighters that can swallow tonnes of fruit, vegetables or grain destined for millions of Swiss kitchens, and transport cargoes harvested from Swiss soil and sent overseas for further processing.

This industry was born on the eve of the Second World War when, responding to a time of need, our country purchased expensive second-hand ships to ensure the national supply of provisions. At first ridiculed, then admired, Switzerland has since operated the largest merchant marine of all land-locked countries. Yet with its miniscule share it remains a minnow in the maritime shipping market.

Under international maritime law, running a fleet without a port calls for not only swimming with the stream but taking the lead. Switzerland does this within the framework of its negotiations on international law. Our country has pledged to show the flag by implementing first-class standards.

The diplomatic rationale is supplemented by emotional factors. Switzerland has long been looked on as a land of milk and honey. Yet at times that has apparently not been enough. During the youth riots of the early 80s young Swiss citizens angrily cried: "Down with the Alps! A clear view on the Mediterranean!" This was more than just a political slogan.

The high seas seem to exert an enormous fascination on interior nations. It is their very otherness that excites us. The sea changes all our normal perceptions and opens up new horizons in the truest sense of the word, allowing us to expand our thoughts, spin seamen's yarns and discover new ideas. Roger de Weck, editor-in-chief of "Zeit", wrote: "Both the mountains and the sea make us small. When we gaze upon them they remind us of our weaknesses and give us strength."

Anyone who knows someone who has been bitten by this strange bug will have no hesitation in confirming that

land-locked Switzerland has a passionate love affair with the sea. In 1984 myself and a dozen Swiss and French colleagues boarded four motorised dinghies and set off from the River Aare that loops round Switzerland's capital, with the aim of proving that Berne is situated on the sea. Thirteen days, 1200 kilometres and 157 locks later we arrived in the ancient harbour of Marseille. The strenuous trip brought home to us the fact that the Rhine, Rhone, Aare and Reuss transport their silt to the North Sea, Mediterranean and Black Sea and that their waters return to us as clouds. The concept of Europe had become tangible under our hulls.



In Basle, the start of the umbilical cord with the Mediterranean, other contemporaries set off in one of the 1600 ocean-going yachts registered under the Swiss flag. Often the crews leave relatives, work and home behind in order to sail the sparkling foam-flecked seas of the world. Our red passport seems to offer no protection against this particular form of sea sickness.

Swiss industry, too, plays a major role in the shipping world. For 100 years Winterthur-based Sulzer built the largest and best diesel engines for ships. These products were so innovative and sophisticated that no seafaring nation could afford to do without them.

The sailor's love of the sea appears to be as great as his nautical expertise. Exactly what makes this passion last longer than a liaison with a sweetheart in port was a puzzle to us at "Swiss Review". We set out to answer this question and found a country that, despite its small dimensions, has big dreams.

Finally, a quote from Goethe, taken from Faust, Part 2, Act 5: "The open sea frees the spirit." May this become true for all of us.



Alice Baumann

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