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Autor: Bachmann, Hans R.
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A look back at the founding era of the Swiss merchant marine

The Swiss flag on the high seas



Although Switzerland is a land-locked country, seagoing vessels flying the Swiss flag can be encountered in all the world's ports. The foundation of the Swiss shipping fleet goes back to 1941, when national provisions were threatened due to the war.

The desire for a Swiss flag for merchant ships was first expressed 150 years ago when James Funk, a Swiss émigré to America who reached the rank of Captain, applied to the Federal Council for permission to fly the Swiss flag on his ship, the "William Tell". The government commissioned the Federal Military Department of

*Hans R. Bachmann is a former deck officer and foreign correspondent. In 1966 he published a book entitled "Schweizer Schifffahrt auf den Meeren" and currently works as a journalist/editor in Greifensee.

Defence to have the flag made. An American who had named his boat "Helvetia" was granted the same privilege.

*Hans R. Bachmann**

The flag was a very sensible precaution, since the nationality of a ship could protect its occupants from pirates, and in times of war cargo ships registered under a neutral country could count on recognition of their status by the naval powers. It was only in 1921 that the transportation conference in

Barcelona recognised the right of land-locked countries to fly their flag on the high seas.

Precautions on the eve of the War

Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War Switzerland still believed it could manage without its own merchant fleet. On 1 April 1938 the Federal Assembly passed a law empowering the Federal Council to implement precautionary measures for transport in the event of war. The result was the creation of the Office of War Transport (KTA, Kriegstransportamt) within the Department of the Economy, with the aim of organising the requisite import of goods from overseas. The KTA chartered 15 Greek freighters – all large, modern ships flying under the flag of their neutral homeland.

At that time only two shipping companies were operating in Switzerland. The Lausanne-based André & Cie. trading company had operated a modern grain transporter, the "St-Cergue" (7600 dwt) since 1938, sailing under the flag of Panama, while the Basle-based

The changing face of Swiss shipping

The Swiss merchant marine currently comprises 13 freighters for bulk transport, a multipurpose freighter and three freighters for the transportation of wine and chemicals. Several of Switzerland's five shipping companies also sail ships under a foreign flag. At the end of 1998 a total of 319 sailors were employed on Swiss ships, of whom 27 held Swiss nationality (8.5 percent). At the same time there were four Swiss captains, and of the 48 deck officers five had a Swiss passport. The engineers – once a practically exclusive Swiss domain – boasted only four Swiss among their 53 officers.

Why the lack of interest in the navy as a profession? Nowadays people can travel to distant lands at very little cost. Freighters generally stay in port only a few hours and, moreover, are usually berthed in unattractive industrial zones. Sailors have to work long and hard in all weathers and their low pay is dictated by economic globalisation.

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The two dozen or so oceangoing vessels sailing under the Swiss flag have a cargo tonnage of around 800 000 tonnes. (Photo: zvg)

Schweizerische Reederei AG operated a fleet of Rhine ships and held a share in two small motor ships, the "Albula" and the "Bernina" (413 dwt each), registered under the Dutch flag. In the spring of 1940, with the participation of the Association of Swiss Gasworks, Schweizerische Reederei AG purchased two more freighters registered in Panama: the "Maloja" (built in 1906, 2650 dwt) and the "Calanda" (built in 1913, 7400 dwt).

Following Italy's entry into the War and the fall of France, the Allies blocked off all seagoing traffic to our country. For more than six months 21 freighters with cargoes destined for Switzerland lay in Funchal (Madeira) and other ports. The British requisitioned five of the Greek steamships but permitted the rest of the fleet to ply the Atlantic route. Italy, on the other hand, after the attack on Greece at the end of October 1940, laid down the condition that ships leased from Switzerland had to sail under a neutral flag. The Federal Council was forced to react, and on 9 April 1941 the "Decree on shipping under the Swiss flag" came into force.

Casualties of war

War losses were inevitable. The Greek steamship "Mount Lycabettus" chartered by the KTA was torpedoed in the Atlantic on 17 March 1942 and went down with all 30 crew. The "Maloja" was sunk on 7 September 1943 off Corsica. Three sailors died. Until her demise the "Maloja" had transported over 40,000 tons of goods for Switzerland on a regular route between Lisbon and the Mediterranean ports of Genoa and Savona. On 22 April 1944 British airforce planes attacked the "Chaseral". When the Germans bombed the harbour at Marseille in November of the same year, the "Albula" was so badly damaged that she sank. The "Generoso" ran into a mine, killing her Russian captain.

The "St-Cergue" was more fortunate and remained active in the service of the KTA for the entire duration of the war. On 15 April 1942 she picked up ten survivors from the wreck of the Norwegian tanker "Koll". On 27 June 1942 she rescued 209 survivors of the Dutch ship

"Jagersfontein", and on 25 March 1943 she saved 22 sailors from the Swedish freighter "Industria".

At the end of the war the fleet numbered nine vessels. Because most of these were very old, slow ships, the key question arose as to whether Switzerland should continue to operate a merchant fleet under its own flag. A survey produced positive results, primarily by reason of the post-war economic situation, and on 23 September 1953 both houses of Parliament passed the "Federal Law on Shipping under the Swiss Flag". ■

The "Swiss Review" on the high seas

Sailors are among the "Swiss Review's" readers: According to Urs Haenggi, Diplomatic Attaché at the Swiss Shipping Office in Basle, 80 Swiss sailors on active foreign service currently receive our magazine. The copies are sent to five major Swiss shipping companies who forward the latest edition by courier to ports where Swiss sailors are destined to lay down anchor. LS

Interview with Jean Hulliger, Director of the Swiss Office of Maritime Navigation

Swiss merchant ships charting a steady course

Not many people know that our country operates a merchant marine. Do you have a secret to hide?

Our outlook is obscured by the mountains... Seriously, it is a well-known fact in maritime circles that there are five major Swiss shipping companies operating in Basle and Western Switzerland. With around a dozen ships they transport a gross tonnage of 800 000 tonnes (800 000 dwt). Also in these locations you will find international shipping management companies that operate ships registered under various different flags. The prerequisite for Swiss registration is the ship-owner's entitlement to a Swiss passport.

How practical is it for Switzerland to operate a merchant fleet?

It's no longer just a matter of supplying our country with essential products. Nowadays Switzerland is regarded as a sound location for ship management companies. Put more explicitly, we are not just operators but also providers of services. Our activities are important in times of peace as well as in times of war.

So nowadays the Swiss merchant marine is important to the economy?

Yes, because among the benefits we offer domestic and foreign shipping companies are the legislation, financing (the government used to give loans, nowadays it acts as guarantor to the banks), and telecommunications. The social partnership between shipping companies and trade unions is also ideal. As far as I know, there has never been a mutiny on board a Swiss ship, even though the pay is low.

How much does the merchant marine cost the Swiss public?

Not a cent. The shipping companies are self-sufficient. They benefit not from state subsidies but from ideal boundary conditions; our legislation is very liberal. That is what distinguishes our fleet from practically every other fleet in the world.

What goods are transported under the Swiss flag?

The interviewee



Jean Hulliger is Director of the Swiss Office for Maritime Navigation, part of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (EDA). Because the

Rhine is Switzerland's umbilical cord with the sea, his office is based in Basle.