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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 "Chasseral". 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". ■

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?

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.

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

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?

All sorts of goods except for oil and arms. We have tankers for wine or chemicals and containers full of wheat or bananas. The possibility of Swiss oil tankers is not excluded but they are only permitted under the strictest of conditions. In principle the merchant marine can transport everything except fast-moving consumer goods like newspapers and flowers as well as medicaments. During the Gulf War Swiss shipping companies were asked if they would be willing to supply the US bases in the Gulf with fresh water.

Where are the cargoes unloaded?

Everywhere. In principle Swiss ships have no fixed routes and their itinerary is contract-specific.

Are passengers allowed on board?

Only a few. Up to twelve paying passengers are permitted on large ships. There are no real passenger ships sailing under the Swiss flag.

Why does your Office belong to the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (EDA)?

For a traditionally land-locked country like Switzerland, international shipping is a form of transportation that cannot be compared with road, rail and air

transport. Our diplomatic and consular representatives abroad act as an extended arm of the shipping office, monitoring and safeguarding the interests of Swiss ships and their crews. Because our Office deals with international law and security policy, it makes sense to incorporate it in the EDA.

Our merchant marine has a good reputation. Are we better rather than cheaper?

I don't say that we are the best. But the fact is that Swiss shipping merchants know their stuff. Many were sporting a captain's hat long before they scaled the ladders of top management. And Switzerland is, after all, a typical service economy.

The competition on the high seas is relentless. What's your view?

There are too many ships seeking too few cargoes. Some countries operate only one merchant navy for prestige reasons. Their massive government subsidies distort the competitive factor. Switzerland is in favour of cutting back such subsidies. To be fair, however, I must admit that the competition has caught up.

How, then, can our merchant marine keep pace?

It continues to enjoy major confidence and trust. I know American companies that will only ship their goods under the Swiss flag.

Will the plane replace the ship as a mode of transportation?

Absolutely not. The sky is too crowded. Besides, two-thirds of the world consists of water. A large proportion of our imports and exports are conveyed over the world's seas and oceans. Ninety percent of all goods reach their destination over water. Nowadays, with road and rail construction reaching saturation point, Rhine shipping is gaining in importance. Rather than regarding the different modes of transport as separate entities, you should look on them as complementary.

What nationalities work on the ships?

Mainly Croatians and Filipinos. They have a world-wide reputation as the best sailors. Sailing seems to be in their blood. Fewer than ten percent are Swiss.

How does a sailor get on board a Swiss ocean-going vessel?

To become captain, a Swiss national has to undergo a naval officer's training in the UK, Germany or Italy. Engineers can study abroad for an additional maritime qualification. And would-be sailors are trained by Swiss shipping companies following completion of their professional training.

Are women permitted?

Naturally women can take up a nautical career. There are even female air force captains. But I only know of one woman who worked as an officer on a Swiss-registered ship.

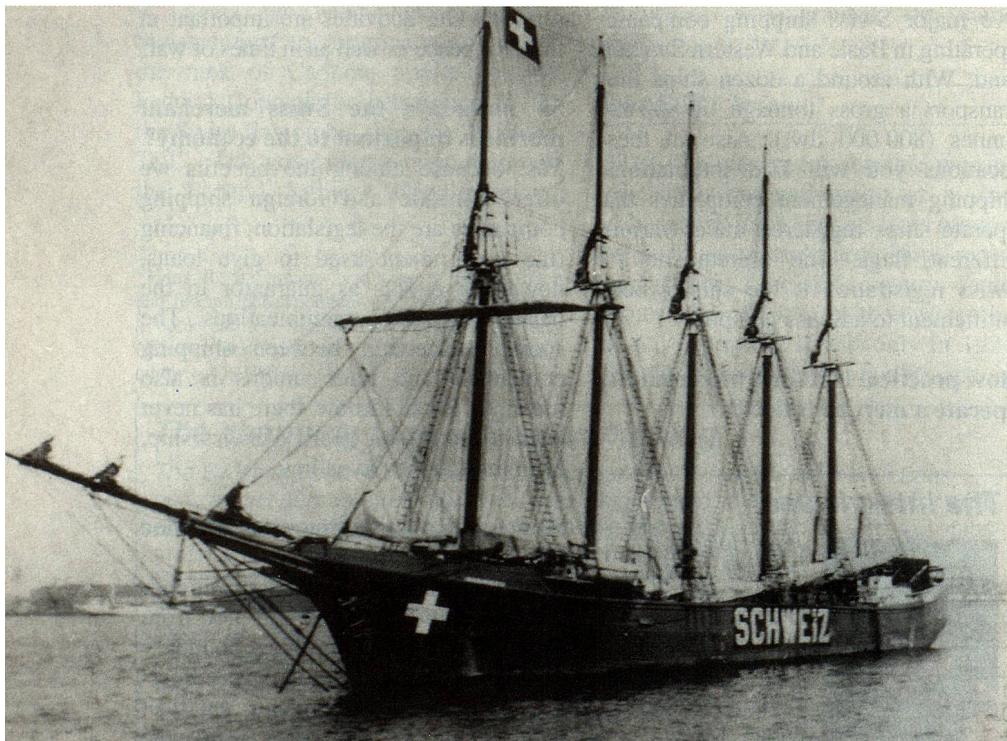
People are constantly reading about piracy in Southeast Asia: is this a danger to Swiss ships, too?

Piracy has declined but the weaponry has become more brutal. In some cases the entire crew was killed. Thank God Swiss ships have so far been spared such horrors.

Will Switzerland continue to operate a merchant marine in the next millennium?

Sure! If you doubt it, you might as well ask if Switzerland will still exist then.

Interview: Alice Baumann



During the First World War American sailors also transported goods across the ocean for Switzerland. Their vessels flew a Swiss flag from the mast and bore the inscription "Schweiz" ("Switzerland") on their flanks.
(Photo: Hans R. Bachmann archives)