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COMMERCIAL NEWS

Some indications about the Swiss merchant fleet.

The difficulties encountered during the last war made Switzerland realise how useful it would be to have a merchant fleet sailing under her own flag. A Swiss maritime law was then drawn up, which came into force on April 9th, 1941.

When the war ended, it was unanimously decided that this fleet should be maintained and placed in the hands of private enterprise. Since the outbreak of war in Korea, it has even been found desirable to increase its size still further. This made it necessary to modify the existing maritime law. That is why a new bill has been drafted and will very shortly be submitted to the Federal Parliament. This bill places the Swiss merchant navy under the supervision of the Federal Council, and makes Basle the place of jurisdiction. The owners and builders must be Swiss, resident in Switzerland and with their main offices in that country. Similarly all shareholders and partners in the owning companies must be of Swiss nationality. These strict provisions have been laid down because it was wished, should hostilities ever break out again, to avoid the neutrality of the Swiss flag being contested by the belligerents with any reasonable cause for complaint.

At the end of 1949, the Swiss merchant fleet had a total gross tonnage of 61,000 tons. When the Korean war broke out in 1950, the Confederation asked ship-builders to make an extra effort and double their tonnage with ships capable of sailing on any seas. In order to achieve this result, the Confederation agreed to grant reasonable loans, which made it possible for ship-builders to carry out the programme envisaged.

Thus the Swiss merchant fleet to-day numbers some 35 ships totalling more than 200,000 tons. Out of these 35 ships, 20 have been built since 1948, which means that they are modern ships, equipped for travelling at fast speeds. 22 of them have displacements of more than 6,500 tons and are therefore suitable for sailing on the high seas.

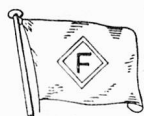
Once a ship is launched, Swiss ship-builders may run it in one of three ways, either as a tramp, a regular line vessel, or on a time-charter basis. Ships chartered as tramps go anywhere in the world, taking a full load for a destination indicated by the charterer. The regular line vessel has its obligations and must make a certain number of trips per year and all over the same route. The third possibility is the time-charter — where certain Swiss ship-builders hire out the ships they have built to other ship-builders who handle their commercial exploitation. The choice of one of these possibilities is a difficult one to make as fluctuations in freight charges are liable to be both sudden and large.

During the war, Swiss foreign trade overseas was carried out first and foremost under the national flag. In peace-time, Swiss importers and exporters are entirely at liberty to transport their goods under any flag they choose. The Swiss merchant fleet therefore works with the main international markets.

A serious problem for the Swiss merchant fleet is that of crews. At the present day, approximately a thousand men sail under the Swiss flag, only 25% of whom are Swiss nationals. Ship-builders are working to train still more men, for it is of the greatest importance to prepare a nucleus of Swiss sailors against troubled times. It is also interesting to give the greatest possible number of young Swiss boys the opportunity of taking up a difficult but varied career.

International Sugar Conference.

The United Nations have invited all countries interested to participate at an International Sugar Conference which began on July 13th, in London with a view to come to an agreement assuring supplies of sugar to importing countries and markets for sugar to exporting countries at equitable and stable prices. Switzerland also has accepted this invitation and the Swiss Federal Council has designated Mr. V. Umbrecht, Counsellor in Charge of Economic Affairs of the Swiss Legation as Swiss Delegate to the conference.



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