

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND.

Switzerland and her river and seagoing traffic.

Compelled to import almost all the raw materials required by her industries, Switzerland has always attached great importance to the question of transport, with particular reference to the means of access to the country.

Although the Rhine was navigable as far as Basle even at the beginning of the last century, the traffic consisted entirely of passenger boats, and services were few and far between until about the early 1840's, when they started to become more regular.

It was not until 1904, however, that the first convoy of barges transporting coal arrived at the big Rhine city in the north of the country, thus opening up an important new means of communication providing Switzerland with a direct link with the sea-ports of Antwerp, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, as well as with the big industrial centres of western Europe. From that time on, the river traffic developed rapidly and the port of Basle became known as the principal gateway to the country, a title that no one would dream of disputing to-day. In fact, the port installations at Basle, which extend over an area of some 11 million square feet with more than 6,000 yards of quays, handle nearly 40 per cent of the total volume of the country's foreign trade. 93 per cent of this amount is accounted for by imports. In 1957, for example, some 5 million tons of goods were unloaded at Basle (total Swiss imports: 13 million tons) consisting mainly of coal products (42%) and oil (24%) as well as cereals (11%). On the other hand, goods loaded on to outward-bound barges at Basle were much lower in tonnage (just under 400,000 tons in 1957), and consisted above all of ores, soils and waste (51%), of foodstuffs and fodders (20%), and finally of chemical and electro-chemical products (70%).

It is certainly no exaggeration, therefore, to state that Switzerland could not do without her river traffic, particularly as far as her supplies are concerned. However, both this traffic and her rail traffic depend to a large extent on sea transport, of which, very often, they are merely continuations. Although in normal circumstances sea transport raises no major problems, this has not always been the case, particularly during the Second World War; it was at this time, in 1941 to be exact, that Switzerland, in order not to be completely cut off from the rest of the world, was obliged to create her own ocean-going fleet, which was naturally of invaluable service to her. Since then, backed by special legislation, Switzerland's Merchant Fleet has developed well; to-day it numbers 22 ships with a total displacement of 150,000 tons and belonging to 11 private companies. All these vessels, with one exception, are of recent construction. The latest, and biggest, is the merchant ship "General Guisan" (since sold), which was launched in the middle of 1957 and is capable of carrying nearly 13,000 metric tons of goods.

At the end of last year, 677 sailors, of whom 366 were of Swiss nationality, i.e. more than half the total number (whereas five years ago the proportion was only 25%), were employed as crews on ships sailing under the Swiss flag; at the same date 13 Swiss citizens were in possession of masters' certificates.

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