

Navigation on the Rhine river

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1974)**

Heft 1694

PDF erstellt am: **19.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688629>

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NAVIGATION ON THE RHINE RIVER

The Rhine River has always been open to navigation on vast stretches of its course, since it has a relatively smooth flow and seldom freezes. In Roman times barges were used to exchange goods between the Italian and Teutonic provinces. Regular mailboats handled postal and passenger traffic on the way to the imperial town of Trier on the Mosel, whereas fast rowing military ships guaranteed the safety of the waterway as far as the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages, navigation on the Rhine served commercial interests as well as the fishing industry and established close contacts between allied cities. Traffic was rather brisk. The Rhine thus became the main artery of a flourishing culture.

Until the advent of steam power in the nineteenth century, there was little change in Rhine shipping. Boats were propelled by sails or oars; on their way upstream, they had to be towed along from the shore. In 1815, twelve horses were necessary to drag mailboats, whilst above the town of Speyer, some sixty to ninety men were needed for pulling.

Shipping on the Rhine was not always an easy matter and free of danger. Near the "Binger Loch" (the Hole near Bingen) beside the Rock of the Loreley, the Rhine forces its way through slate cliffs. According to one legend, a beautiful siren sits atop the rock and lures rivermen to their deaths in the treacherous narrows below. Deceptive currents, shoals and reefs in the narrow river bed have indeed many a time sent ships and crews into the abyss. To prevent such accidents, passengers and valuable goods were usually transferred to

the shore when reaching this area and then transported by land. Time and time again efforts were made to level these dangerous rocks. During the last century, special towing tugs — the so-called "witches" (Hexen) — helped to overcome with strong currents. These were small boats, which advanced with the help of a special winder attached to a steel cable on the river bed and thus wound themselves upstream. Only with the blasting of this obstacle in 1832 and the construction of a "New Channel", it became possible to eliminate this bottleneck.

The considerable drop of the Upper Rhine (Oberrhein) — 115 metres (about 350 feet) difference of altitude between Basle and Strasbourg alone — is now alleviated by the nine locks of the "Rhine side channel". This channel opened up the Basle area to modern navigation. Today, the Rhine is navigable for small sea-going vessels as far as Cologne, for barges and passenger boats up to Basle-Rheinfelden. Through connections with scores of major rivers and canals, it forms the central artery of the inland waterways of Europe. Today, the Rhine is the world's busiest river.

The prerequisite for intensive utilization of this ideal waterway was the development of still more powerful boats. The very first paddle-steamers were soon replaced by cargo crafts with powerful diesel engines. The biggest among them, the Swiss boat "Unterwalden" could easily push eight tugboats of about 8,000 tons upstream. These ponderous convoys could reach a length of more than one mile. This ship has since been taken out of traffic. Great motorless Rhine barges and powered ships have replaced most of the old tugboats, considering the fact that, for equal tonnage, only one third of the average tugboat crew is needed to man them. Diesel cargo ships, some carrying 2,000 tons, are also navigating on the Rhine.

In 1919 the first Swiss shipping company "Schweizerische Schlepsschiffahrtsgesellschaft" (Swiss Tugboat

Corporation), now the "Schweizerische Reederei AG" (Swiss Shipping Company Ltd., Basle) began operating a general freight transportation service on the Rhine. Today various Swiss shipping companies operate a fleet of 484 Rhine ships, representing a total deadweight tonnage of 521,102. There are some 250 motor-cargo ships and 107 tankers. For Switzerland, the Rhine is in a sense, the front door to the high seas. One fourth of the total Swiss trade is shipped on the Rhine. Every year, about 12,000 ships touch the two Basle ports. Half of them are sailing under Swiss flag. The yearly turnover of goods in the Basle ports averages about 8 million tons, the equivalent of a medium-sized harbour. The most important products imported upriver by Switzerland are oil and oil products, metals, corn and coal, whilst Swiss exports downstream consist mainly of machinery, pipes, steel-plates, gravel and chemicals.

A number of problems and difficulties are arising with the development of the navigation on the Rhine. The problem of competition from rail and road transports is at times intensified by periods of low water level. Freight rates tend to increase substantially during such periods, since the holds can no longer carry capacity loads. Pipelines compete with tankers. A shortage of qualified personnel forces the shipping companies to examine constantly their operations with a view towards rationalization and modernization. Big efforts are needed to maintain the competitiveness of navigation on the Rhine. How varied and never ending these efforts are can best be seen on board of one of the modern passenger ships, which offer leisurely trips between Basle and Rotterdam and vice versa.

(By courtesy of Fragments — Swiss Volksbank).



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