

75TH. ANNIVERSARY OF SWISS MARITIME SHIPPING

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On April 19th, 2016 we celebrate 75 years of Swiss maritime shipping. For the occasion we wish to make a short review of these events. During the darkest hours of World War II, in spring 1941 Prof R. Haab of Basel produced in great hurry a maritime law, which was accepted by parliament on April 9, 1941. Already 10 days later, on April 19, 1941 the Swiss flag was hoisted for the first time on the CALANDA of the Swiss Shipping Company (SRAG, Schweizerische Reederei AG).

Together with the 3 vessels belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross a total of 14 ships were registered under our flag until the end of the war. Also the federal government purchased 4 vessels, managed by KTA, Kriegs Transport Amt (war transport office) in Bern. Except the SAENTIS, the only motorship, all these ships were coal burning steamers. Three vessels were lost through war actions, a few crewmembers lost their lives.

The freighters were owned by the Swiss Shipping Company, founded in 1919, the LUGANO, the largest ship belonged to Nautilus SA in Glarus / Lugano, which gave her to SRAG for management. The only modern ship, the ST-CERGUE was owned by Suisse-Atlantique, Lausanne. Gottlieb Duttweiler, the founder of Migros operated with some partners the Maritime Suisse, their property were two very ancient steamers. The Foundation of the Red Cross had 3 vessels, operated by SRAG.

During the war the KTA made all the commercial planning and deployed all these vessels. The shipping companies, especially the SRAG looked after technical and personnel matters. For this reason the SRAG had an own office in Lisbon, at the time the most important transhipment port for Switzerland.

After the war our fleet was renewed and developed with the help of the federal government. In these years some privileged companies even received loans at very favourable interest rates. New shipping companies emerged, some stayed only for a short time in business, others remained for decades, for example Reederei Zürich (Migros), Suisse-Outremer Geneva / Zurich und Keller Shipping Basel.

In the fifties two substantial scandals gave plenty material for the journalists and filled the news papers with many articles about these topics. The first incident was the bankruptcy of the Maritime Suisse in Geneva and the ensuing legal proceedings against Marc Bloch. He was a partner in the company and his case had repercussions far into the local politics in Geneva. Also the so-called "Nautilus Affaire" created massive impacts in the media, the culprits were well-known politicians from the Ticino, amongst them also council of states Bixio Bossi. For Keller Shipping, Basel this was most likely a stroke of luck, they took over the Nautilus ships. They could continue to operate the "Nautilus-Line" and enlarge their shipping business.

Already during the war, the Swiss Shipping Company (SRAG) trained deck hands for the river barges on the Rhine and sent them also on sea-going vessels. Some of the well-known captains came from this environment. During the war Swiss radio officers were widely employed on our ships, after the master, the most important man on board, as they ensured and controlled correct communication with the home base. Soon other Swiss citizen were hired for service in the engine and as cooks and stewards. However the majority of the crews were Portuguese, Belorussians and others with a neutral passport.

After the war many young Swiss were attracted on board. In the fifties and sixties about 600 to 700 men were sailing. At the times many young men choose seafaring for adventures, not from economic necessity. At the time, no cheap charter flights were available, therefore one went at sea for some time to see the world. A few selected shipping for their profession, worked themselves up the ranks to captains and chief engineers. Some sailed until their retirement, others joined the office organisation of a shipping company.

In the eighties a big change took place in our shipping industry. The former shipping companies of the founding days were unable to adapt to the new requirements and closed down. Only Suisse-Atlantique, Renens managed to survive and celebrates its 75th. anniversary this year. At the same time new companies emerged, coping with the challenges of a new epoch and are still in business today.

With these changes Swiss seamen became less and less, on one side ship owners preferred to hire cheap labour from Eastern Europe and from Asia to keep their running costs down. On the other hand, the Swiss became choosier and prefer an easy job with regular working hours and a generous vacation scheme. Anyone can fly today for little money to the end of the world for his holidays and plenty of opportunities are offered to spend the leisure time. With wage contributions from the federal government, paid out as from 1990 this decline was retarded for a while, but already in 1994 the government cancelled this little aid for economic reasons. The profession of a seafarer lost its prestige and the percentage of Swiss seamen diminished rapidly.

Today 49 freighters and tankers sail under Swiss flag, but no more Swiss seafarers are on board. With almost 1,5 Mio. Tonnes DWT (carrying capacity) the fleet has reached a size as never before and is number one amongst the landlocked countries. Most of the crews come from Croatia, Ukraine and from the Philippines. Since the end of the war all ships sail for the account of their owners and operate in a free and global market. In the case of a grave disruption of our country's supplies, the federal government can requisition the vessels to serve the needs of our national supply chain. At the time the freight market, especially for bulk carriers is extremely low, which does not allow any profit.

The federal government still grants guarantees to obtain loans at a favourable interest rate. These guarantees are the only support from our government, contrary to the EU, distributing subsidies very liberally. Currently, in the wake of the Swiss corporate tax reform III, the provision of a tonnage tax is under consideration in the federal parliament in Bern, which could give ship owners some reprieve. The tonnage tax is already in use in many countries, including some of the EU-countries.

How will shipping look in the future? Same as after World War II, when the change-over from coal burning steamers to diesel- and heavy fuel burning motor ships was completed, we see now the beginnings of a switch to gas burning (LNG, methanol etc) and for certain applications electrical propulsion (for example ferries). But the big changes will arrive in a few years with the advent of unmanned vessels. Technically it would be already possible today, but maritime laws and insurances have to be adapted and many other items need to be clarified .

And what happened to the Swiss mariners? A few young people may still sail somewhere, scattered on ships of different nations. Despite a good maritime training, it will be difficult for West Europeans to find a suitable job. Seafarers from the third world sail for less money. The big remainder of our seamen are old men, enjoying their retirement. Many of them are members of the SCS, Seemanns-Club der Schweiz (Swiss Seamen's Club), spinning seaman's yarn about long bygone times. However these old sailors in the SCS deserve an acknowledgement, they were the driving force to celebrate this anniversary in Basel in an

appropriate manner. Swiss seamen played a role in a short epoch in our history, an epoch unfortunately already vanished in the past.

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