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INTERVIEW

The Port of Hamburg: Problems and Prospects

Interview with Dr Karl-Ludwig Mönkemeier, General Manager of the Hamburg Port Authority

IE: Hamburg is the largest German port. How has its competitive position developed in comparison with the ports on the Rhine estuary?

MÖNKEMEIER: Last year over 52 mn tons of goods were carried through the port of Hamburg — the largest amount ever — and the movement of general cargo exceeded 16 mn tons — another new record. Nevertheless, Rotterdam, and Antwerp likewise, deal with much larger tonnages, and Rotterdam in particular recorded a much bigger growth of traffic in recent years. That is also true of the transshipment of general cargo although I must mention that Rotterdam no longer publishes official figures about general cargo and Antwerp possibly uses the term in not quite the same way as Hamburg. The data available from these two ports however seem to be sufficiently precise to bear out my statement.

Distortion of Competitive Conditions

IE: Have the ports on the Rhine estuary any natural or artificially created competitive advantages over Hamburg?

MÖNKEMEIER: A look at the map shows the natural competitive advantages of the Rhine ports in relation to the industrial regions of West and South-west Germany. There is no point in pretending that they do not exist. (Hamburg also has a preferential catchment area in the wider economic region which it serves and in essential parts

of its transit traffic.) What the German seaports have been objecting to for years — albeit with little success — is the artificial distortion of the competitive conditions which, for instance, favours the inland navigation on the Rhine (Mannheim Acts, exemption of Rhine shipping from charges) and even more the carriage of goods by road vehicles. The taxes on diesel fuel in the Federal Republic are two and a half times as high as in the Benelux countries, and the taxes on motor vehicles show even wider differences. This obviously places a heavy additional burden on the route through the German seaports, quite apart from the facts of geography.

IE: How did the volume of transshipments through the port of Hamburg develop in recent years and what is Hamburg's share in the total sea-borne foreign trade of the Federal Republic in bulk and general cargoes?

MÖNKEMEIER: The volume of goods carried by sea to and from Hamburg first rose above 40 mn tons in 1969. In the following years it was always above 45 mn tons, in 1973 it came close to 50 mn tons, and last year — as mentioned — it was higher again.

That the trend in the ports on the Rhine estuary pointed even more strongly upwards is understandable after what has been said. For this reason — and because traffic across the „green frontier“ has also generally received stronger impulses since

the EC was set up — Hamburg's share of the foreign trade of the Federal Republic showed until recently a slight downward trend. Last year, it is gratifying to note, Hamburg's value share — with 11.5 p.c. — showed a slight improvement; lasting changes cannot however be expected before the distortions of the competitive situation referred to have been removed.

It is not easy to give a simple answer to your simple question about Hamburg's share of the sea-borne foreign trade of the Federal Republic because there are no precise statistical data and especially none sub-divided between bulk and general cargoes. Fairly safe estimates can be given for imports but for exports a rough guess must suffice. Taking both together, about 15 p.c. by volume of the sea-borne foreign trade of the Federal Republic may go via Hamburg; the value share is probably about twice as high. This difference between volume and value is borne out by an enquiry undertaken on another occasion which showed that the traffic passing through Hamburg consists of especially high-grade goods.

Essential Connections with the Inland

IE: The opening of the Elbe-Side Canal will result in structural changes in the composition of the goods carried through the port of Hamburg. How has Hamburg prepared for this development?

MÖNKEMEIER: When the Elbe-Side Canal becomes operational early in 1977, Hamburg will regain the traditional role which it had before World War I when it was also a big inland shipping port. According to an investigation by the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce in February 1975 the Canal may be expected to provide about 9 mn tons of extra cargo for the port.

The Chamber of Commerce estimate will have to be revised upwards in the light of the surprisingly great demand for transshipment services for iron ore and coal cargoes via Hamburg which has given rise to a notable new solution, the Hansaport Project. Accordingly we are hopeful that Hamburg may look forward to dealing by 1980 with possibly 10–13 mn tons of goods for transshipment via the Elbe-Side Canal.

Hamburg participates in the financing of the Elbe-Side Canal with DM 433 mn, which is one-third of the total cost. Obviously Hamburg has had to prepare plans for this development. A structural analysis of the goods which will be carried on the Elbe-Side Canal has shown that with the existing and planned transshipment facilities Hamburg will be able to cope with the additional traffic.

The following important cargo categories will be handled in Hamburg through the Elbe-Side Canal: Iron and coal will be transshipped by the Hansaport in the Sandau dock. The volume of potash salts to be carried on the Canal has been taken into consideration for the modernization of the potash transshipment facilities there. DM 30 mn will be spent on investments for centralizing all German potash exports through Hamburg on the Rethel. The terminal for general cargo in large parcels to be provided at the eighth berth, Burchard Quay, will allow the iron and steel products of Salz-

gitter AG and from industry in the Hanover-Salzgitter-Brunswick area to be shipped through a modern installation.

We have also prepared for increasing inland and harbour shipping as far as the water side is concerned. Including concrete extension projects, there are now handling places for 175 inland-water vessels and lighters. Besides, there are 280 waiting places in various docks and canals. As the traffic passing through the Canal builds up gradually, larger capacities will of course be required also in the port. We have projects for some further 200 waiting places "in the drawer" — in Billwerder Bucht, the Peutedock and Neuland — and we have also prepared plans for three hook-up places in the Norder-, Süder- and Lower Elbe for the growing push-tug traffic. The internal port shipping services receive appropriate attention; 1,540 waiting places are available for lighters near the docks for sea-borne shipping.

The navigation channel above the Elbe bridges will be 3.0 metres deep (MLWNT) and be wide enough to provide an efficient traffic route.

Planning of a Deep-water Port

IE: Can the Elbe be deepened sufficiently to accommodate the bigger ships coming into service?

MÖNKEMEIER: This question does not allow of the same answer for all ships. The Elbe cannot be deepened enough to take giant tankers, but for vessels of this size Hamburg could launch the deep-water project at Neuwerk-Scharhör.

The port of Hamburg can match the developments in all other sectors of the shipbuilding industry by deepening the Elbe where there is an economic necessity for it. This is technically possible and has already been allowed for in the engi-

neering work in the Elbe which has been designed for a future extension to 15 metres.

IE: Is it still necessary to build a deep-water port at Neuwerk in the Elbe estuary in order to maintain and possibly improve the competitive position of Hamburg in relation to other seaports in North-western Europe?

MÖNKEMEIER: The Neuwerk-Scharhör project is not a means of improving the competitive position of Hamburg. We regard this project rather as a joint task for the coastal regions with the long-term objective of assisting regional economic development by providing a deep-water site for industry closer to the mainland than any other locality between Skagen and the Straits of Dover.

Envisaged is an industrial complex which could include the following activities: a high-temperature reactor for the generation of electricity and supply of large amounts of heat, plant for the gasification of coal, production of iron, steel and chemicals, and petroleum refineries. A deep-water harbour to accommodate giant vessels of up to 700,000 tdw could be built at Neuwerk-Scharhör for these purposes. The natural depth of water at Neuwerk is 20–22 metres.

IE: How do you judge the chances of the Neuwerk project being carried out at present? What preconditions would have to be fulfilled?

MÖNKEMEIER: We are optimistic about the chances for the project because in view of the oil crisis priority is given to big nuclear power stations in the long-term development of the energy supply. This gives the Neuwerk project a chance, for there are hardly any possible reactor sites on the overcrowded German riversides. Besides, the supply of cooling water which

is needed for nuclear power stations is virtually unlimited at Neuwerk.

The initial excavation work could probably start in 1978/79 if concrete plans for the mentioned industries and the requisite financial means have by then become available.

Role of Transit Traffic

IE: Hamburg is also an important transit port for third countries. What trends can be observed in the development of the transit traffic with eastern bloc states and other countries like Austria and Switzerland?

MÖNKEMEIER: Of Hamburg's transit traffic of 9.6 mn tons last year 5.5 mn tons concerned the eastern bloc and 1.2 mn tons the Scandinavian countries. Austria and Switzerland are also important partners. The GDR has topped the list for years with about 3 mn tons, followed by the CSSR with about half this tonnage. Austria and Denmark were next, and then came another eastern bloc country, Hungary, which in 1974 greatly increased its foreign trade through Hamburg; Poland and Sweden were almost level on the next places.

The strength of the eastern bloc transit traffic through Hamburg is the more surprising considering that the CMEA states endeavour to route the traffic as far as possible through their own ports in which also improvements are constantly made. I am aware that Hamburg does not hold an insuperable position and the flow of traffic through Hamburg may well fluctuate, e.g. in connection with changes in import requirements due to varying harvests. By the speed of its operations and the comprehensive nature of its services and facilities — demonstrated by the availability of liner connections with 1,100 ports throughout the world — our port has devel-

oped a degree of efficiency of which these states avail themselves to their own advantage to enhance their own efficiency. This applies of course similarly to all our transit partners.

Hamburg's Links with the Third World

IE: The industry and trade of Hamburg and therefore its port likewise are linked to the countries of the Third World by a long tradition. What role do these countries play in providing transit cargoes for the port of Hamburg?

MÖNKEMEIER: The existence of many renowned shipping companies and merchant houses is evidence of Hamburg's links with the Third World. Although the ties of these firms with other places and countries may be looser today than in days gone-by, exchanges of goods with countries of the Third World still account for a considerable portion of our transshipment business. Before mentioning a few figures in this context, I should say that the statistics are apt to obscure rather than lighten the picture in some cases because any comparison is greatly affected, in one direction or the other, by the large quantities of mineral oils passing through. Nevertheless I will venture a comparison: Not only was the overseas traffic last year in absolute figures nearly three times as large as in 1936, but it accounted for 52.8 p.c. of the total — nearly 10 percentage points more than in 1936. That it has tended to decline in relative terms during the last 10 years was due to changes in the supply of mineral oils: we used to receive them directly from overseas but today they are largely transshipped through Rotterdam, Bantry Bay or other deep-water ports in Europe and thus appear in the statistics under European arrivals.

A closer look at some regions of the Third World which are not among the principal oil suppliers shows that the exchanges with South and East Africa increased notably last year. The same is true of South America, the countries on the Gulf of Mexico and in the Far East where we have quite a number of important trading partners beside the highly industrialized Japan.

IE: What will be the effects of the reopening of the Suez Canal on international sea shipping and the port of Hamburg, bearing in mind that the Suez Canal may have some influence on the sizes of ships used?

MÖNKEMEIER: To give a conclusive answer to this question, I would have to know quite a number of facts which still elude us, e.g. what will be the charges for the use of the Canal, the depth of navigable water and the capacity of the Mediterranean ports to handle a possible additional volume of traffic without delay and on attractive terms. Even if we knew the answers to these questions, we should still need notable prophetic gifts. The fact however that East Africa for instance will be reached from Hamburg considerably faster and therefore also more cheaply when the Suez Canal has been reopened will tend to be of advantage for all exchanges of goods. In certain cases mineral oils may conceivably be carried more profitably in medium-sized tankers sent directly to Hamburg than in VLCCs for reloading into smaller vessels at some intermediate port.

To put it briefly: There is nothing to suggest yet that substantial losses threaten as a result of the reopening of the Suez Canal nor is it unrealistic to contemplate certain positive elements. We shall in any case keep a close eye on the further developments.