

Memories of a former ITJ correspondent

A conference call from Tokyo

International reports have always been at the heart of our journal. Former ITJ correspondent Axel C. Scherrer worked in Japan from 1967 onwards – and provided fascinating impressions from the region. That time was characterised in particular by reports on the former Far Eastern Freight Conference.

The path to Japan actually started in Norway. After an internship with the Wilh. Wilhelmsen shipping line I applied for a transfer to one of its agencies in the Far East. My request was honoured with a posting to Tokyo.

In 1967 I therefore started my journey to Japan – on a freighter, naturally enough. Five weeks on the high seas, as a traveller on the maiden voyage of the *MS Taronga* – this was indeed a unique experience. Back then the vessel could take twelve passengers on each journey, accommodated in great comfort. Dinner in the officers' mess was standard at the time. The celebrations held in every port on account of the fact that we were on the *MS Taronga's* maiden voyage were rather special. My fondest memories are of the festivities in Cebu (Philippines).

Things turned quite lively at the shipping line's agency in Japan. Soon after my arrival Wilh. Wilhelmsen and the Swedish East Asia Company merged to become the new joint Seaco-Wilhelmsen service. Later Denmark's East Asiatic Company (EAC) was added, the result of that merger was called Scandutch. But today all that is history. The EAC was absorbed into Maersk Line, while Wilh. Wilhelmsen shifted its focus to car carriers and ro-ro ships. Seaco became part of the Broström group and finally ended its liner shipping activities altogether.

From Tokyo to Basel

Under these circumstances there was so much news every day that I didn't want to keep it all to myself. So I took the opportunity of a visit back home to speak to Franz Rittmann, the founder and then-owner of the *ITJ*, the journal you are now holding in your hands. Together with the editor for maritime shipping at the time, Robert Federspiel, we agreed that in addition to my main job we would try out a role as correspondent on the side. The

work consisted of collecting media reports and providing international transport news. Accreditation as a journalist with the Japanese foreign ministry was one of my perks. Back then, only two Swiss newspapers had the honour – the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) and the *ITJ*. Membership of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan was possible, and its first-class Western business lunch represented the icing on the cake.

Our main agency for Japan was also involved in the politics of the shipping industry, so that I managed to acquire some of my information for the *ITJ* during my daily work. A nice change from my job of booking hazardous goods and heavy lift cargo.

Weekly report

This gave me access to basic information, however, which allowed me to write a weekly report for the newsroom in Basel. A particularly interesting task was my work for the former Far Eastern Freight Conference (FEFC). At that time, the figures for the shipments on each service were collected manually. The information concerning tariff classification thus had to be checked extremely carefully.

Back then, the most expensive rates were based on ad valorem, that is, a percentage of the value of the goods. As a result, the information about what the goods were worth was both very sensi-



Photo: Axel C. Scherrer

Axel C. Scherrer was an ITJ correspondent in Japan from 1967 to 1972. He sailed to his job on the «MS Taronga», whose maiden voyage caused some headlines.

tive and also difficult to verify. In addition, there were also so-called deferred rebates. If a shipper remained loyal to a conference for a specific period of time, he benefited from a rebate. What complex work! The activities of the outsiders – shipping companies that were not members of the freight conference – had to be tracked and analysed too. It was fascinating to observe the machinations of Asia-Europe shipping politics.

Shipowners could generate good yields and survive on the basis of their efforts in the FEFC in those days. And today? Recently the trade press reported that the panamax rates are continuing to decline dramatically. My how the times have changed!

Axel C. Scherrer