

The history of the Neptun Sea Navigation Company (1933–1947)

Abstract

The purpose of the study: The purpose of this article is to present the operation and history of Neptun Sea Navigation Company. This shipping company was the first in Hungary to attempt, in addition to ocean shipping, to connect Danube and sea shipping, which was ultimately successful, but financially unprofitable.

Applied methods: During the research, I compared archival data and findings from the literature, processing the recollections of private collectors and eyewitnesses.

Outcomes: The study presents in detail the economic operation, profit and loss of the Neptun company, the composition of the shareholders, the company's fleet and the routes of the ships.

Keywords: Danube-Sea Shipping, Hungarian Maritime History, Neptun, Burger Bernát

Introduction

In the history of commercial shipping between the two world wars, several large-scale entrepreneurs were very active in bringing the Hungarian flag back to the seas of the world. Among them, we can mark the 1920s with the name of Jenő Polnay of Tiszasüly. Polnay started many different businesses, which, however, brought with him financing difficulties due to the decrease of available capital, which was compounded by the great economic depression that started in 1929.¹ He was followed by József Bartha, who in the 1930s tried to conclude beneficial contracts through his tramp shipping companies, partly reflecting the project of the Hungarian state's new shipping company between Fiume and Smyrna, but mainly independently of it.² However, there was another entrepreneur (Bernard Burger) and his business of the era, the Neptun Sea Navigation Company.³ This became the first shipping company which made a meaningful attempt to operate the Danube-Sea shipping in Hungary.

The history of the company

Neptun Shipping Company was founded on May 26, 1933 for 5 years, with a deadline of December 1938, with a capital of 150,000 Pengő. Bernát Burger the Hungarian Royal Consul of Genoa subscribed 280 of the 300 shares with a nominal value of 500 Pengő each. The other 20 shares were divided between lawyers and friends of the Burger family.⁴ As a deposit, Bernát

¹ Pelles, M. (2023)

² HU–MNL–OL. Z. 41. 7936/6566.

³ MMKM. KEZ. 680. 11.

⁴ HU–BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

Burger transferred the 2,722 NRT Kelet (ex Tregarthen) steamer built in 1913 and registered in Budapest to the company in exchange for 140,000 P (i.e. the 280 shares already mentioned above).⁵



Bernát Burger

(Source: The collection of capt. József Horváth)

True to its name, the steamer Kelet (East) transported Hungarian grain to China in its first business year of 1933 (under the command of József Hesz), which the company generously declared as "a Hungarian ship, for the first time transported Hungarian grain to the Far East".⁶ This, if we also take into account the previous Hungarian shipping before 1914, is obviously not true, but it might even have been true in the 1930s.⁷ And the company was able to close its first business year with a profit of 663.76 P. In the same year, Burger Bernát bought the steamer Treglisson, built in 1912 in South Shields, which was identical in size and capacity to the former Tregarthen, i.e. the Kelet, and which was stylishly christened the steamer Nyugat (West), and which was placed under the command of György Bíró.⁸ After the Nyugat steamship was registered in Budapest on June 30, 1934, Bernát Burger gave the ship to the company for 200 shares, which were worth 100,000 P.⁹

⁵ Schláth, J. (2017): 288.

⁶ HU–BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

⁷ Pelles, M. (2020)

⁸ György Bíró previously obtained a maritime qualification as a scholarship holder of Atlantica Trust, and last but not least, he was the nephew of Dr. Elek Bíró, one of the directors of same company. MMKM. KEZ. 680. 12.

⁹ Schláth, J. (2017): 288.; HU–BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.



*The crew of the SS Kelet on the 2 of June 1936 (on the middle capt. Frigyes Potzner)
(Source: The collection of capt. József Horváth)*

Before concluding the deal, it is instructive to take a look at the composition of the shareholders at the beginning of 1934, because Bernát Burger was able to monetize his shares from the successfully started business, and obviously bought the later Nyugat with the income from these deals. The composition of the shareholders was as follows: 86 was owned by Cavaliere Bruzzone Attilio a resident of Genoa (represented by Dr. Zoltán Kóródi), 86 by Dott. Antonio Anfossi resident of Genoa (represented by János Polgár), 86 by Mario Bruzzone a resident of Genoa (represented by József Szász) and 42 by Bernát Burger, who was represented in Budapest by Vilmos Löwy, because he lived also in Genoa.¹⁰

At the same time, in 1934, the revised Tramp Shipping Act (Article IV of 1934) helped the company's operation, which replaced the previous Article I of 1929. amended its provisions in such a way that it extended the tax and duty exemption of tramp shipping companies from 15 years to 30 years, if the company carries out its activities with ships registered in Hungary and operates with Hungarian sailors. Despite this, the year 1934 was still a period of depression in international shipping, which was made more difficult by the fact that the grain harvest in Central Europe was also weak, so, for example, the steamer Kelet was forced to wait for six weeks in the port of Braila without cargo. At the same time, the company is credited with registering the steamer Duna in this year, which resulted in a loss of 24,613.22 P in 1934.¹¹

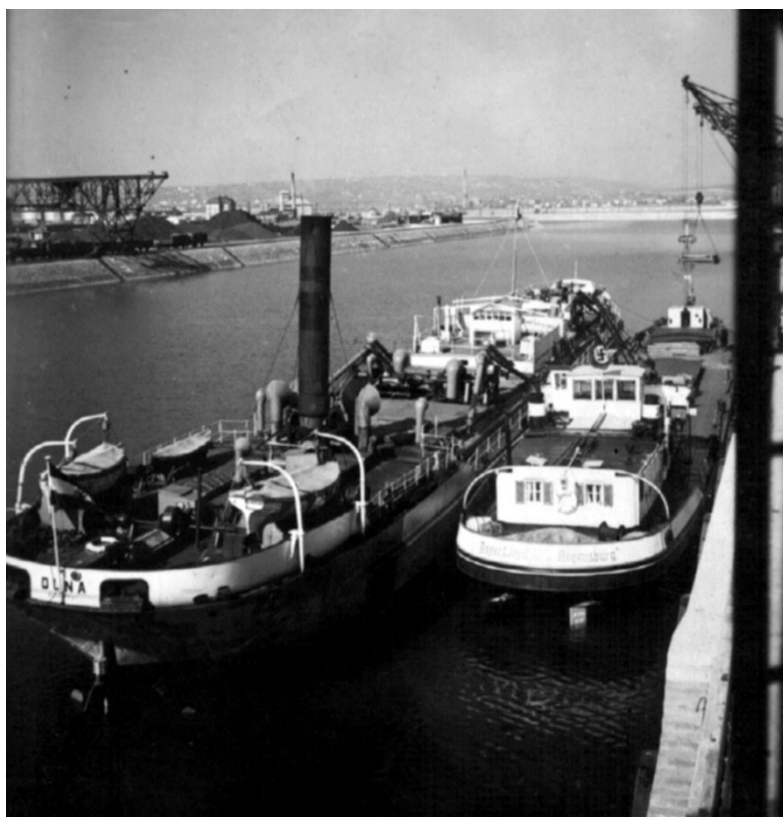
The Duna (ex Marquise de Lubersaque) was a 563 NRT coastal steamer built in La Seyne in 1910, its first commander was György Bíró.¹² And their 1934 business report explicitly stated that by putting the ship into operation, the company wanted to achieve "the realization of direct navigation on the Danube and on the sea". The equipment of the Danube steamer was financed

¹⁰ HU-BFL. VII-2-e. 35020-1933.

¹¹ HU-BFL. VII-2-e. 35020-1933.

¹² Schláth, J. (2017): 289.

in the amount of 3,500 pounds sterling by Burger M., a resident of Tel Aviv, who was probably Bernát Burger's brother.¹³



SS Duna in the port of Csepel (Budapest)
(Source: The collection of capt. József Horváth)

The establishment of Danube-Sea shipping first arose in connection with the Hungarian River and Maritime Navigation Company founded in 1894, which, however, carried the maritime epithet only in name. After that, at the turn of 1917–1918, Jenő Polnay of Tiszasüly corresponded with the Royal Hungarian Maritime Authority in Fium about whether there would be any practical obstacles to building seagoing ships in Budapest, sailing them down the Danube and selling them there, or employing them.¹⁴ Finally, the planned line between Rijeka and Smyrna between 1926 and 1929, which was not realized in the end, showed that it would be worthwhile to establish a shipping link between the Levant and Hungary, but Rijeka could no longer be a transshipment point for this.¹⁵ This was followed by the experiment with the Apollinaris III on behalf of the company established in 1933 under the name Hungarian–Egyptian Commercial Company. The experiment proved that it is possible to sail up the Danube to Budapest with smaller ships and then deliver cargo to the destination in the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁶ Danube-Sea navigation became a reality because, as Gábor Nyíró of Kézdivásárhely, the head of the Maritime Office in Budapest, pointed out in 1934, the railway to Rijeka is in the

¹³ HU–BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

¹⁴ Pelles, M. (2023); HR–DAR 46. 844-1917-I-2702.

¹⁵ Pelles, M. (2024)

¹⁶ MATE (2017)

hands of the Yugoslavs, and transshipment from the Danube to the sea could only take place in Braila, which is often impossible due to the Romanian bureaucracy.¹⁷

As an immediate response to this experiment, even before the launch of the Budapest Danube-Sea motorship, which had already been built in the Ganz-Danubius factory, Neptun Company started the employment of the SS Duna. Moreover, in addition to the Duna steamer, the company also started chartering a ship they called the Tisza steamer, for the same Danube-Sea service.¹⁸ The Tisza was built in Emden in 1905 in the name of Sajonia II; later it sailed under the name Paso de los libres under the Argentinian flag. From 1918, under the name Cadenal, under the French flag. Neptun Company, as an Italian steamer under the name Sao Paolo started chartering it in 1935. They first called it Tisza, but later in 1936, she was registered in Budapest as Albert. The commanders of the 346 NRT steamer were Tivadar Ruttkay and later Pál Korbai.¹⁹



*The SS Tisza (later SS Albert) in front of the Szabadság bridge and Mountain Gellért in Budapest
(Source: The collection of capt. József Horváth)*

Neptun's report on the 1935 business year makes a sharp break between its maritime and Danube-sea services; while the results of the former were "completely satisfactory", the maintenance of the latter demanded heavy sacrifices, since the Danube-sea service actually meant line shipping, which would have been profitable before and even then only with effective state support, since the cargo capacity of these ships was much smaller than sea with their peers,

¹⁷ MMKM. KEZ. 237.

¹⁸ HU-BFL. VII-2-e. 35020-1933.

¹⁹ Schláth, J. (2017): 291.

however, it was not possible to save on their operation. Thus, on October 21, 1935, the company decided to terminate the Danube-sea service that had begun and sold their Danube steamer to the Royal Hungarian Treasury for 100,000 P.²⁰ The amount raised in this way was completely consumed by the losses accumulated by SS Duna. And in the meantime, as I mentioned earlier, Burger bought and made the steamer Tisza available to Neptun, but this ship also made a loss of 54,000 P this year, so even with the profits of the Kelet and the Nyugat, the company's loss was 97,315.51 P.²¹

With the abandonment of the Danube-sea service, the year 1936 of the company showed a more favorable picture, as they closed the year with a profit of 10,874.53 P. In the meantime, the company's shareholders also changed. Instead of the former individuals, at the 1937 general meeting, the Geneva joint-stock company Finagra had 400 shares, Bernát Burger 200 shares, and Société Anonyme Maritime et Commerciale Geneva had 100 shares.²² In 1937, Neptun gave the Kelet and the Nyugat a time-charter, with which it managed to obtain a permanent income from them in the amount of 24,336.83 P. In addition, as they wrote: "in the past business year, our ships again visited distant parts of the world: they called at ports in India, South and North America, and Canada, and the Hungarian national flag waving on their masts testified to the people of these distant parts of the world about Hungary's will to live." And this was so true that in the fall of 1937, around six thousand Hungarians who had previously emigrated visited the steamer Nyugat in Montreal.²³ In the year 1938, the ships were still on time-charter, but due to the repair costs of the ships, the company ended up with a loss of 917.79 P. The time-charter continued in 1939, however, due to the additional necessary repairs, they were unable to make a profit even then, so they ended the year with a loss of 3,762.14 P.²⁴

In 1940, the company lost the steamer Kelet, which was torpedoed by a German submarine in the Atlantic Ocean on August 18, 1940 under the command of Frigyes Potzner (49° 40' N 21° 50' W). After eight days of tossing and turning at sea, the crew was rescued from the lifeboat by the English gunboat Wellington.²⁵

Due to the loss of the Kelet, the loss for the year was 40,673.01 P, but since Bernát Burger was already living in London at that time, which caused the postal service to be interrupted due to the war, the Budapest company was not aware of the exact position of the ships and possible further losses. By 1941, by definition, the company could not replace the steamer Kelet, and at the same time, it could not control the Nyugat, which was detained in the port of Surabaya by the Dutch-Indian authorities in April 1941. The loss for the year was thus 49,299.69 P. According to information from 1942, the crew of the steamer Nyugat was interned on the island of Java, partly in Prigen and partly in Megamendung, where, after Japan occupied the island, according to Neptun, the Hungarian sailors lived in good health, because Japan was an allied country. By 1944, the loss accumulated by the company (for example, due to the support of the families of sailors who were far away) exceeded half of the capital, the company decided to

²⁰ HU– BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

²¹ HU– BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

²² HU– BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

²³ HU– BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

²⁴ HU– BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

²⁵ Schláth, J. (2017): 288.

liquidate on February 29, 1944, which was finally declared by the general meeting held on June 18, 1947.²⁶

Other ships of Bernát Burger

The sources often link the history of several ships, otherwise owned by Bernát Burger, to Neptun. However, as we have seen, Neptun only named the steamers Kelet, Nyugat and Duna as its own ships in its company documents, and the Tisza/Albert was also only rented. In addition, at the same time, we should remember the other members of Bernát Burger's fleet. First in line was the steamer Ramóna, which was not even included in the Hungarian register. To the best of our knowledge, the ship was operated between November 1, 1932 and September 17, 1933, and then sold into a scrap yard.²⁷ It is possible that Burger later bought the steamer Kelet with the money received from it.

Bernát Burger also owned the Albert (formerly Tisza) steamer, as mentioned, until January 18, 1938.²⁸ Just like the steamers Turul and Árpád. The Turul (ex Warta) was built with 1509 NRT in 1916 in Detroit (USA) and operated from September 11, 1936 under the command of Hugó Kaplanek.²⁹ On the other hand, the Árpád was a 2523 GRT steamer built in Dumbarton in 1897, which operated from September 19, 1931 under the command of Oszkár Grósz, until it sank on January 10, 1934 with a cargo of scrap metal in the Indian Ocean (16° 45' S 88° 20' E).³⁰

The traffic of Burger's and Neptun's ships

Fortunately, the Daily Bulletins published by the Hungarian Telegraph Office have preserved for us, at least from 1936, exactly where the Hungarian ships went.³¹ Based on this, let's take a look at where Burger's and Neptun Rt.'s ships went, when and where.

After its registration in September 1936, the steamer Albert sailed from the eastern seas to Ballina, Ireland, and on October 9th we find her in Belfast. From there she went to Danzig, then on November 7th she left for Jersey and on December 5th she reached Antwerp, from where she headed for Leith and arrived there on December 19th. This was followed by another detour in Antwerp, then in January 1937 it sailed between the British, Belgian and French coasts, but sometimes also touched Scotland, and then in September of that year it travelled between England and Western European ports. It finally completed the New Castle–Oporto line between November 6–20. From the latter place, he reached Genoa on December 24.

Our information about the Kelet steam voyages begins on September 26, 1936, when the steamer sailed between Aden and Calcutta, arriving at the latter place on November 14. From

²⁶ HU–BFL. VII–2–e. 35020–1933.

²⁷ MMKM. TFGY. 14034–2.

²⁸ Schláth, J. (2017): 291.

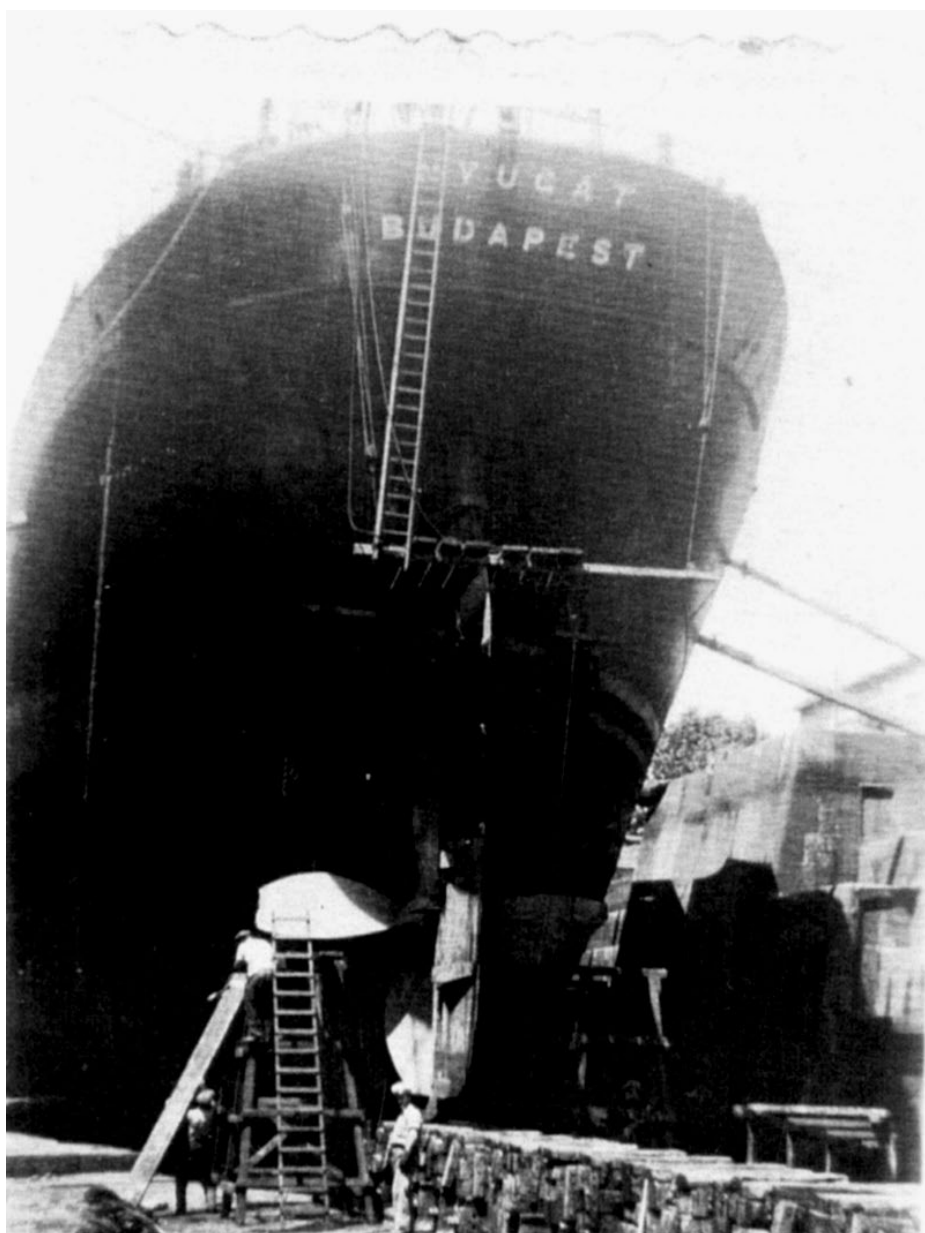
²⁹ Schláth, J. (2017): 291.

³⁰ Schláth, J. (2017): 287.

³¹ [Napi tudósítások, 1920-1944 | Könyvtár | Hungaricana.](#)

there she reached Bombay on December 5. She left Bombay on December 12 to sail to South America, touching England. On this route, it passed through the Suez Canal on January 2, 1937 and arrived in Hull on January 23. It reached the port of St. Vincent on February 27th and reached Buenos Aires on April 3rd. From there, she left for Italy on April 24, 1937, and arrived in Venice on May 29. From there, she left for India on June 12 and arrived in Karachi on July 3. From there, she headed for Europe again, arriving in Avonmouth on August 21. This was followed by the Cardiff-Rio de Janeiro line between September 4 and October 30, from where it reached New York on December 24. It left for Rotterdam on January 8, 1938, then back to Baltimore on January 22. From there she left on March 5th for St. John, from where she sailed on to Newport on March 26th. She left St. Thomas on April 16th for Portalfred (May 7th), then back to Hamburg (June 4th) thence to Montreal (June 25th), then reached Barrydock on August 6th and Baltimore on September 3rd. then sailed between North America, Canada and Scotland, finally sailing from New York on 10 December to Belfast (14 January 1939) and from there to New Orleans (18 February). From there Amsterdam followed (March 18), then Boston (April 29), Cardiff (June 10), La Plata (July 29), Falmouth (September 9), Calcutta November 7.

The first known voyage of the Nyugat steamer was from Rotterdam to Rio de Janeiro, where it arrived on October 9, 1936. After a detour in Rosario (November 7th), she arrived in Tallinn on December 5th and then in Danzig on December 16th. From there followed Buenos Aires (February 13, 1937), then Esbjerg (April 10), Montreal (June 12), Nordenham (July 3), Los Angeles (September 4), Vancouver (September 11), Liverpool (November 13). From there she sailed again to Canada (January 8, 1938), then to Manchester (January 22), then to North America (February 5), from where she arrived in Liverpool on March 12. She then sailed from Rotterdam on April 2nd, calling at Cape Race (April 16th) and arriving in Morehead City on April 30th. From there she went to Genoa (June 25), then to Garston (August 6), from where Rosario followed (October 22). It then left Buenos Aires on November 5th for Amsterdam and arrived in Rotterdam on December 10th. On January 7, 1939, she left for Buenos Aires (February 4), followed by Liverpool (March 24), Buenos Aires again (June 3), and from Rosario (June 24) to Bergen (August 12), from where to Rotterdam sailed (September 2), from which followed Keywest (October 7).



*The SS Nyugat at the docks under repair
(Source: The collection of capt. József Horváth)*

The Turul steamer left Braila for Cagliari in September 1936 (October 9), then we find it again in Braila on November 7 and in Genoa on November 28. Again at Braila on December 12th, and at Torre del Greco on January 2nd, 1937, then at Constanta on January 23rd. From there it left for Garston on February 13th (March 20th), then Cardiff (April 17th), from where it arrived at Torre Annunziata on May 1. From there she headed for Saigon (July 3), followed by Palermo (September 11). It arrived in Colombo on October 30, followed by Moji and Hong Kong (December 18) via Singapore. In the first half of 1938, she sailed between the ports of India, then between May and October 1939 between Hong Kong and Borneo.

Summary

Bernát Burger was a skilled entrepreneur who started with good sense and at the right time to establish Neptun Sea Navigation Company. It could not be said that international shipping was slow to recover after the economic crisis, nor could it be said that the Second World War made maritime shipping impossible. Despite this, he bravely started the new Danube-Shipping, which was certainly the first of its kind thanks to his Duna steamer, and later the state created the state-controlled and operated Hungarian Royal Danube-Sea Shipping Company by purchasing it.

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