

Shipping as Public Transportation in Budapest from Earliest Times to the Present Days

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Abstract: Local shipping in the history of public transportation of Budapest is the oldest story and I believe, the overview of this story can help us to analyse the role of shipping in the public transport system and establish recent and future challenges in this field. When proper laws, finance and shipyard capacity were present, local shipping was a rather integrated part of the public transport system of the Hungarian capital. Nevertheless, many other acts (e.g. building the inner-city, development of road traffic, local problems in intermodality) cause difficulties to organise the local shipping system. Although, the first Danubian steamship was operated in Budapest (then Pest and Buda) in 1820, the local shipping lost its importance in the transportation within this approximately 200 years. These months there is a significant improvement in progress in the local shipping system in Budapest supported by the European Union.

Keywords: *Carolina, DDSG, BKV, EU support*

1. Introduction

In this article I try to summarize local shipping in Budapest, on the one hand, and I point out those past-rooted problems which caused and might cause difficulties in this system on the other hand. It is widely known that the Danube as an option to transport and shipping plays a key role in the interregional connections and in the local transportation in the Danubian cities and it offers a relevant alternative to green demands in the bustling big cities connected by international trends. In addition, Budapest has a particular geographical location, with the words by John Lukacs, the famous American-Hungarian historian “It is the only large city on the Danube through which that majestic river flows in the middle. Five-sixths of Vienna are to the south of it (the same is true of Belgrade); you can spend months in Vienna without being aware of the great stream. Budapest is almost evenly divided by it. (...) As in the case of Venice or New York, in 1900 the best and also the cheapest way to arrive in Budapest was by boat. (...) It is as if the Danube had been invented for the esthetic purposes of the city, which, of course, is not the case.”[1] Moreover, the river flows through the historical and UNESCO heritage inner-city, so it connects imposing landscapes, sights and some

old districts. Although, the Danube counts as an excellent facility of Budapest, it has barely any role in public transportation. We believe that history can help find the causes of this as some journalists made complaints about the poor traffic on the river as early as over 100 years ago.[2]

The suburbs of Budapest consist of approximately 80 towns and villages and make up 2,538 square kilometres. Almost one quarter of Hungary's total population live in this region which means 2,451,000 inhabitants.[3] Despite this factual data, shipping does not offer alternative public transport service either to inhabitants of Budapest or to residents who live in the suburbs. When the chances of potential investments are examined, it is not unnecessary to overview historical aspects and past-rooted problems of local shipping in the region and show relevant statistical data.

2. Local shipping in Budapest from earliest times to the establishment of BKV

During the 400 years of Budapest's Roman history there existed local shipping in the region of Aquincum and Contra Aquincum.[4] Although the further flourishing of the Roman city was hindered by barbarian invaders, the area was not uninhabited. In addition, in the Middle Ages, after the Mongol invasion of 1241-1242 in particular, the city started to develop during the reign of Árpáds. The importance of local ferrymen proves they privileged guilds from 1268.[5] In the life of the developing capital crossing the Danube counted as the oldest transport challenge. It is by no accident that the first modern vehicle appeared in the field of river crossing, well ahead the appearance of omnibus in 1832 in Pest.

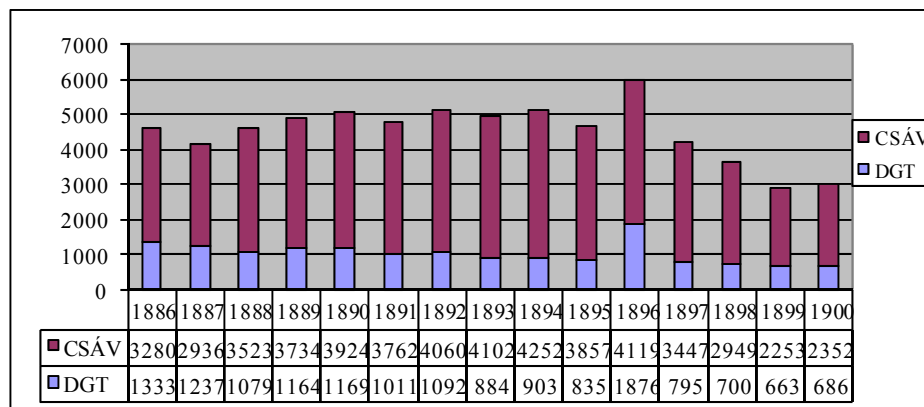
It is widely known that Robert Fulton built the first commercial steamboat in the USA in 1807. Later, he offered his invention to European countries as well and similar inventions were encouraged in Austria which owned the significant part of the Danube. The latter encouragement was discovered by a Hungarian born inventor Antal Bernhard who built his own steamship only 10 years after Fulton's ship. He built the first European tugboat named Carolina after the empress consort. The steamship was launched in 1817 and was operated in 1820 as the first modern public transport vehicle in Budapest (then Pest and Buda) but she was in service only until November 20.[5] A company who operated a pontoon bridge in the city reached with authorities that the passenger of Carolina had to pay not only the fare of ship but tan amount for he possibility of river crossing also. Both charges were too expensive for passengers thus Carolina did not operate further in the city. [6]

A new steamship appeared in the city only 20 years later when János Girczy, a Hungarian entrepreneur, operated the Hoffnung in 1844. At the same time the rich, Habsburg privileged Austrian company, Erste Donau Dampfschiffarts Gesellschaft (DDSG, First Danube Steam Navigation Company) discovered the possible benefits of the lines, so DDSG established its local shipping in the Hungarian capital. This company owned Óbuda shipyard, the biggest Hungarian factory at that time where, among other ships, the company built some special ships for its local shipping service.[8] Only within a few years DDSG carried almost 500,000 passengers yearly, while approximately 150,000 people lived in Pest, Buda and Óbuda.[7] In 1849 the new

competitor appeared, the first permanent bridge across the Danube between Pest and Buda. Beyond the Chain Bridge other bridges were opened in the following decades and coaches, horse-drawn trams and pedestrians appeared on them.

In the meantime, in 1872 Hungarian entrepreneurs and engineers established a new company under the name of Budapesti Csavargőzös Átkelési és Hajózási Rt. (Budapest Propeller Steamship Co.) The company, the name of which was abbreviated as CSÁV, operated relatively small, economically operable ships, which carried 1.8 million passengers in its first fiscal year and in the second year, this number reached 3.6 million. The Hungarian company seemed much more successful as compared to DDSG. With the unification of west bank Buda and Óbuda with east bank Pest in 1873, Budapest became a new big European capital, which developed immensely and spectacularly. The population tripled between 1873 and 1900 and the need to travel soared. First in Europe, a tram network was built in Budapest in the inner-city and more than 67 million passengers travelled on the trams in 1900, while DDSG and CSÁV carried together only 4.4 million people that year.[9] It was a huge and sudden change because the first tram appeared barely a decade (in 1887) earlier in the city. During the development of the city the connection with the river deteriorated due to the construction of imposing buildings near the bank of the Danube.[2] It is fairly interesting that on the location of today's Nagykörút (Grand Boulevard) a canal for local shipping was planned but plans were dismissed because of the rapid development of the tram network.

Table 1. Number of Passengers Carried between 1886-1900 (1,000 passengers)

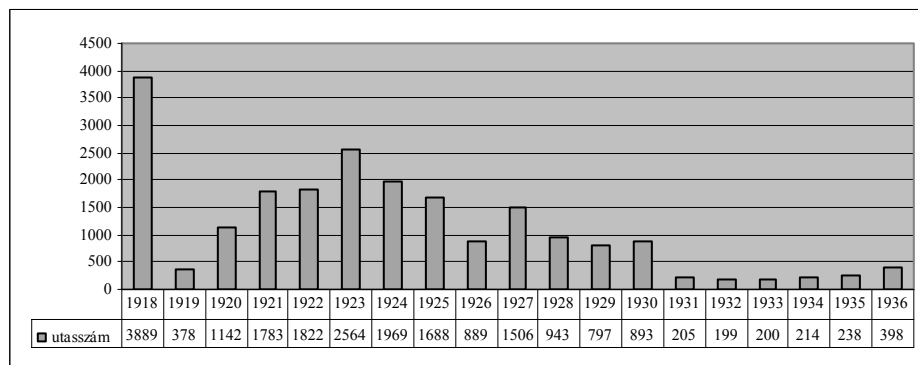


During World War I Austrian DDSG as well as Hungarian CSÁV gave up local shipping service in Budapest. DDSG operated its ships in the city for over 70 years, while CSÁV stopped its almost 50-year service and sold ships to a Hungarian company established in 1894, Magyar Folyam- és Tengerhajózási Rt. (Hungarian River and Sea Shipping Co.) in 1917.[10] Despite subsidy by the government the company was not able to upgrade the local shipping fleet and infrastructure due to the hardships after the lost war. The company had to pass almost half of its ships to the winners and the subventions were of no value due to inflation, so MFTR gave up local shipping in 1925. The Ministry of Commerce urged to restart the service because of the importance of

tourism, but the city was not able to offer its part of the necessary subsidy. In addition, in the 1920s bus transport reached a significant role in the public transport of Budapest with more than 2 million passengers in 1929 and also taxis became more popular than earlier.[9]

In 1928 motor vessels appeared in Budapest as watertaxis, however, it seems this service was a secret attempt to develop the Hungarian Danube navy. It is certain that approximately 300,000 passengers travelled on ships in Budapest, while only on the marvellous Zsófia yacht alone more than 130,000 people travelled, mainly tourists.[11] The figures show that local shipping started to turn towards tourism instead of public transport. Upcoming changes were predictable even before WWI, when the busiest stops were in the inner-city, next to the baths and on the Margaret Island.[12] Between the WWI and WWII, city-planners planned a North-South high-speed rail and highways on both banks of the river instead of further developing the shipping service.[14]

Table 2. Number of Passengers Carried between 1918-1936 (1,000 passengers)

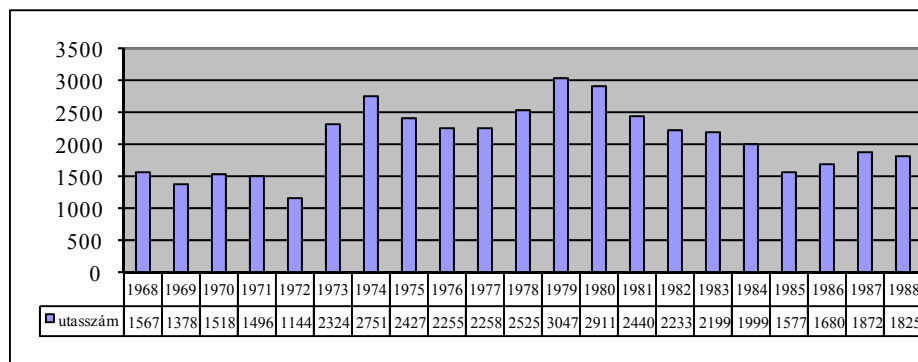


After the siege of Budapest in 1944-1945, not surprisingly because of the exploded bridges, the significance of ships suddenly rose.[14] Some years later, in 1949, the operation of MFTR was stopped and the time of nationalization and Soviet models in Hungary began. That year an act was accepted about the expansion of the borders of Budapest and in 1950 some formerly independent suburban territory, with a lot of residents was attached to the capital. After that new measures were taken to organize public transportation. In 1957 the Fővárosi Kishajózási Vállalat (FKV, Shipping Company of the Capital) was established under the control of city administration. In the 1960s similar statistics could be seen in the number of passengers as before 1914 due to the tremendous subsidy. The number of carried passengers reached 2 million yearly.[9] The FKV owned 26 ships and 3 ferries.[15] To modernize the fleet the company ordered 9 new ships in 1958 and 1959. These ships later became popular elements in the marketing of local shipping with their names coming from famous fairy tales (Hansel, Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, the names of the seven dwarfs, etc.) In 1959 an old ship, built in 1895, by the name of Margitsziget (Margaret Island) was renovated, renewed, and renamed to Hófehérke (Snow White). In the 1960s seven new ships and three waterbuses were purchased from the shipyard in Vác in order to modernize the service.

3. Shipping service of BKV till the present days

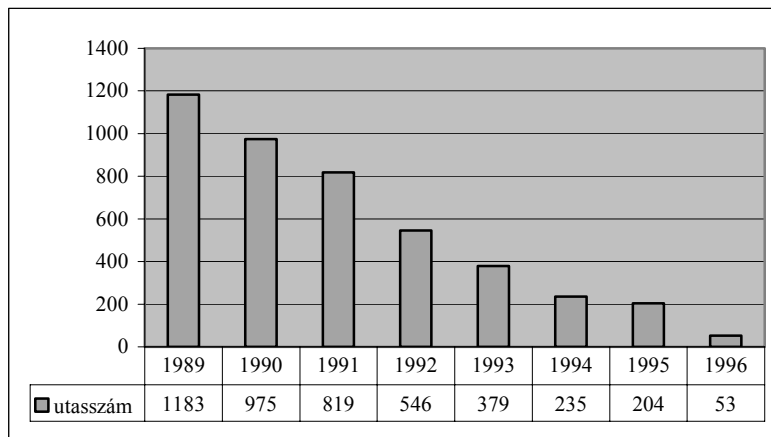
Four company – including FKV – were merged on 1st January, 1968 under the name of Budapesti Közlekedési Vállalat (Budapest Transport Company, BKV). At that time 23 ships, including 21 motor vessels and two ferries were under BKV flag.[15] In the first fiscal year the number of passengers carried reached almost 1.6 million.[9] The company operated 9 ferry lines and scheduled ship services in the city from 1st May to 30th September.[9] Between 1973 and 1983, over a decade, the annual number of passengers carried always exceeded 2.0 million (in 1979 even exceeded 3.0 million) and in 1984 reached almost 2.0 million. The BKV placed its ships next to Jászai Mari Square in the summer and in the Újpest bay in the winter. BKV had a little workshop in Népsziget, with a floating dock, and a filling station in Garam Street. Some articles emphasize the importance of tourism, instead of public transportation at that time in local shipping. Future plans counted on tunnels and bridges across the Danube.[16] To rationalize the shipping service, BKV introduced new organisation models in 1972, when 130 people worked for shipping services.[17] In the same year the metro line (M2) was finished under the Danube and connected Pest and Buda. It seemed a new competitor for shipping, however, only the Kossuth tér to Batthyány tér ferry service was closed. The local shipping service made up 0.1% of the total number of passengers and this number did not change after introducing the new metro line.[18] Although surprisingly, instead of the supposed role in public transportation, the popularity of tourism-related lines to Margaret Island increased partly due to the ban of cars on the island. The weekly number of passengers was basically realised at weekends.[17] While BKV operated 29 stops in 1981, there were only 24 stops by 1987. Many experts emphasized the importance of coordination between BKV, PKJV (Pest Megyei Kishajózási Vállalat, Ferry Company of Pest County) and MAHART (Magyar Hajózási Rt., Hungarian Shipping Co. Ltd.) in favour of shipping as a means of public transportation in the city and in the suburbs.[19] In 1981 fares were doubled and in 1985 and subsequently in 1987 prices went up again. As a peculiar form of rising fares, using BKV bus and tram tickets on ships was banned, thus shipping as public transportation lost its former importance, which can clearly be seen in the statistics.

Table 3. Number of Passengers Carried between 1968-1988 (1,000 passengers)



It is characteristic to the regression of the passenger km performance indices that while statistics indicated 10,722 thousand passenger kms in 1988, this number amounted to a mere 138 thousand in 1996. The place km performance was 18,489 thousand place kms in 1988 while it decreased to 1,074 by 1996.[20] In 1988 BKV had 19 ships and two ferries.[17] In 1996 BKV had 15 ships, one ferry, 15 stops and 12 captains. Around that time BKV established BKV Hajózási Szolgáltató Kft (BKV Ship Ltd.). In the following years, besides the necessary repairs, mainly refurbishing and the improvement of catering facilities, as well as building a new promenade deck seemed important on ships in favour of fulfilling the new role, namely tourism.

Table 4. Number of Passengers Carried between 1989-1996 (1,000 passengers)



In 2004 BKV initiated the dissolution of BKV Ship Ltd.[21] In the following years BKV started to develop the ship service, including daily operated ships and they also increased the number and length of services at weekends. Last year (2011) ships were operated with predictable and dependable time tables; services run with labels V1, V2 and V3. V1 and V2 operated daily from 30 April to 29 August, V3 only at weekends. The connections to ships from other BKV services appeared in the passenger information of BKV, for instance on tram No. 4/6.

The oldest ships in the current fleet are the waterbuses, which were built in Vác shipyard in 1966 and 1967. The floating dock was launched in Újpest, in the MAHART shipyard. The great majority of ships were built in Balatonfüred, among the last products of the shipyard near the bank of the Lake Balaton, after 1980. Firstly the H-01 types carrying 100 people arrived in Budapest in 1982, and in 1987 larger ships (H-06 carrying 150 people). A valuable part of the fleet is the above mentioned Hófehérke (ex Margitsziget), which was launched as a steamship in Újpest shipyard in 1895. However, she was rebuilt; her original hull is a remarkable heritage of Hungarian shipping and shipbuilding. Besides these, there is a 16-ton ferry and a shuttle boat, which was built in Horány in 1978.

The significance of ferries and shuttle services has been dramatically decreasing for decades. These services were operated by MAHART in Hungary and by PKJV in

County Pest and by BKV in Budapest. Shuttle service is still operating between some towns and villages in the suburbs of Budapest, but PKJV, which coordinated the services outside Budapest in the county, was closed in 1993.[22] Nowadays, shipping services between the capital and suburbs are a common issue in the Hungarian media. In Budapest, there were some shuttle services as well, but only one service operates by now. Some services were closed due to the closing of significant factories, such as Csepel Művek, which supported a shuttle service to help its workers' transportation to the factory.[10] After 1989 the number of cars and car owners dramatically increased in Budapest and simultaneously the subsidies to shipping services dramatically decreased. Some years ago, in 2008 and in 2009 the importance of the shuttle service was easily observed, when the Northern Railway Bridge, which was also used for pedestrian crossing, was closed due to restoration. A BKV water shuttle stop was deployed barely 500 m from Gyöngyösi utca metro station. Nowadays, only one BKV ferry operates from Soroksár to Csepel every day from 6 am to 21 pm, considering the connection to bus No. 148. Many kinds of tickets and passes are available and lorries of more than 3.5 tons can use this service.

The local shipping service of BKV is upgraded by EU support. This year 3 new stops are built (Újpest, Árpád híd, Millenniumi Városcsözpont) and 5 stops are renewed (Meder utca, Jászai Mari tér, Batthyány tér, Petöfi tér, Boráros tér). According to the plans, ships will operate between Újpest and Millenniumi Városcsözpont (Millennium City Centre) every 20 minutes in the rush hour. The whole 11.2 km route will take 45 or 60 minutes depending on the direction. The whole investment cost 493 million forint, which includes 90% EU support and consists of other developments apart from the stops, e.g. partial accessibility, bicycle transportation, WIFI. One of the most important item of the project is that the passenger information will be connected to the BKV new traffic control and passenger information system (FUTÁR project). Unfortunately, the investment will not affect the ships.[23]

4. Conclusion

Modern local shipping service in Budapest started only approximately 10 years after the invention of the steamship. The first European tugboat operated as public transportation in Pest in 1820, well ahead of the appearance of other modern public transport vehicles. During dualism (between 1867 and 1918) a fascinating city-planning swept through Budapest with huge constructions, even though these imposing constructions closed the Danube from the city and better transport connections seemed none too important. Later, financial opportunities and the decrease of significant shipyard capacity caused difficulties in local shipping in Budapest. Particularly, though not singularly, due to these changes local shipping lost its importance before WWI. In the 1960s and 1970s the annual number of passengers carried was above 2 million again, thanks to the heavy government subsidy.

The remodelling of local shipping as a means of public transport can affect a vast number of areas, such as legislative and financial background, shipyard capacity, new workplaces, tourism, ecotourism, EUROVELO international bicycle lane or green projects. As a matter of course, there is an abundance of challenges as well, such as intermodality, modern ships, accessibility or e-tickets. To manage all these issues, close

co-ordination is needed in the state, local, regional, economic, corporate and civil sector as well. Demands come from the same sectors and form international transport and city-planning trends. Currently there is an important development ongoing in Budapest in local shipping thanks to EU support. Hopefully, other new investments will be implemented in the near future.

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