





NOTES

1. The drawings are for the R.M.S. "Belgenland" and are not to be used for any other purpose.
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R.M.S. "BELGENLAND"
GENERAL ARRANGEMENT
DIMENSIONS 670'-0" 78'-0" 49'-6" K.B.

R.M.S. "BELGENLAND"
GENERAL ARRANGEMENT
LENGTH 670'-0" 78'-0" 49'-6" K.B.



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"BELGENLAND"
from ANTWERP for PHILADELPHIA
Wednesday, 5 August 1876

[illegible]

Mr Alfred F. M. Smith,
 Mr Wm. Brown,
 Mr Carl Danner,
 Mr Frederick Miller,
 Mrs. Kuhn,
 Mr August K. Lee,
 Mr G. M. Leach,
 Mrs Martha Lohr,
 Miss Amy Wright,
 Miss Mary E. Whittier,
 Mrs Wheeler.

Mrs. Johnnie Smith.
 Mrs. Wm. Robinson.
 Mrs. Fannie Smith.
 Master James Smith.
 Mrs. Johnson.
 Mr. George Cook.
 Mr. T. M. Cook.

Mrs. Anna Smith.
 Mr. Henry Hanger.
 Mr. A. Burmann.
 Mrs. Wright
 and two children.
 Mr. Louis Lloyd.
 Mr. Mark Lark.
 Mr. B. Levy.
 Mrs. Susan Levy.
 Messrs. Henry Levy.
 Mr. Sam. M. Lusher.
 Miss Frederick Nash.
 Mr. Louis V. Newman.
 Mrs. Susan Newman.
 Mrs. Frank Vogelstein.
 Mr. Adolph von Littke.
 Mr. August Weber.
 Messrs. Fred. Weber.

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INTRODUCTION



MILLIONS OF PEOPLE, ONE DREAM

Philip Heylen

Vice Mayor for Culture, Economy, City Maintenance,
Property Management and Worship

This is the book of the brand new Red Star Line Museum. It is a book about the museum and about the historical location where it is situated: the buildings of the Red Star Line. It is also a book about the shipping company of the same name, about the millions of passengers that it transported and about their migration history. Like the Red Star Line Museum itself, the book asks the question: what does this history mean today?

Until recently, the original buildings of the Red Star Line stood decaying at the corner of the Montevideostraat and the Rijnkaai. After the disappearance of the shipping company in the 1930s, they housed a recruitment agency for ship repairers, a garage, various theatre companies, an aid organization and an artist's workshop. In the last few decades, they have also housed a large colony of pigeons. As the harbour activities left 't Eilandje and the buildings of the Red Star Line were going to ruin, the memory of the glory days of the Red Star Line faded too, "*when the heart of the Antwerp docks used to beat on the Rijnkaai, with heavy, pulsating beats*", as *De Nieuwe Gazet* wrote in 1934.

The Red Star Line Museum gives a new interpretation and a new life to this historic site, which still breathes history today. As one of very few European migration museums, it is located in the original departure sheds where it was decided whether or not third-class passengers would be allowed to go on board, with America as their destination. Between 1873 and 1934 some two million Europeans took their last steps on their native continent. They came from all over Europe. The majority were poor emigrants who were hoping for a better life. In the Red Star Line buildings they were examined by a doctor and had to submit their papers. They were required to take a bath and their baggage was disinfected. Those who were refused had no option but to stay behind.

Who still knew about all these things at the end of the 20th century? Robert Vervoort, a retired dock worker, collected everything that was connected with the Red Star Line. In 1992 - with the support of the city - he organized a first small Red Star Line exhibition in a community centre in the Seefhoek. His large collection is now managed by the Friends of the Red Star Line,

and part of it is on display in the museum. Erwin Joos of the Eugen Van Mieghem Foundation and other associations, collectors and sympathizers also contributed towards the revalorization and re-evaluation of the history of the shipping company. Government and private sponsors began to show interest. In 2000, the municipal National Navigation Museum organized a first exhibition about emigration in Antwerp. In 2001 and 2007, the Flemish Government officially recognized (in various phases) the buildings of the Red Star Line as a historical monument.

In 2005, the City of Antwerp bought the buildings with a view to restoring them and operating them as a *lieu de mémoire* within the framework of the city's policy for the renewal of the old Antwerp dock quarter known as 't Eilandje. As Vice Mayor for Culture and Tourism, and supported by my colleague at that time, Vice Mayor for City Development Ludo Van Campenhout, I took on the responsibility of developing the project, because we were convinced both of its value and of the power of the story that lay behind it. Marc Saverys, CEO of the Antwerp maritime group CMB, agreed as a corporate sponsor to co-invest in the restoration of the buildings. Other sponsors and sympathizers on both sides of the ocean also came 'on board' to make the project a success – among them fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg and honorary ambassador Sam Fox (himself the son of a passenger on the Red Star Line). The New York architecture consultancy of Beyer Blinder Belle was awarded the commission for the restoration work and the design of the interior fittings. To this end, it collaborated closely with the Belgian engineering consultancy Arcade and scenographer Christophe Gaeta. Now, eight years later, the buildings on the Rijnkaai are the home of the new Red Star Line Museum, which brings the forgotten history of the shipping company and the stories of its passengers back into the public limelight, once and for all.

In 2007, a scientific advisory committee drew up the content contours for the museum display. In its concept memorandum - *Red Star Line | People on the Move* - the committee did not limit the notion of *lieu de mémoire* to the museum location itself, to the maritime story of the shipping company or to the signifi-

cance of the voyage for the passengers and their families. The forgotten story of the Red Star Line stands in all its singularity for something universal. Migration is a phenomenon of all ages. For centuries people have gone elsewhere in search of a better life. Today it is still taking place, more than ever before.

For this reason, this book is conceived as an archaeological 'excavation'. In fourteen essays, the scientific collaborators of the museum, together with various national and international authorities in the field, lay bare the various layers of the museum story. We start on the surface, with the history of the shipping company, the museum buildings and their (re)use. The history of the Red Star Line is a fascinating story of clever economic strategies, burning ambition, serious conflicts of interest and ruthless competition. This rivalry eventually worked to the advantage of the emigrants. The facilities in third class gradually became better and better, because the shipping companies thought that by doing this more customers could be attracted. But this rivalry could also have its downside. In busy periods as many passengers as possible had to be stowed on board and there were always people ready to cheat and deceive them.

During their short stay in Antwerp, the emigrants were part of the city. They were far from home, did not know the language and were vulnerable. And yet they were not helpless. If things went wrong, they could call on the Belgian Emigration Department and on local aid organizations for help and assistance. A few took matters into their own hands and looked for work and accommodation by themselves. At the same time, the local Antwerp residents viewed the migrants, with their weather beaten faces, exotic head scarves, fur coats and ragged appearance, with a mixture of curiosity and compassion, sometimes even fear. Even so, they served as inspiration for authors such as Emmanuel de Bom and for artists such as Eugene Van Mieghem and, to a lesser extent, Victor Hageman. Even today, Antwerp is a place full of comings and goings. The cityscape is defined by the 167 different nationalities who live here. Statistics chart the new migration flows, but behind every number there is a story which - notwithstanding the changed social context - sometimes shows surprising similarities with the situation of a hundred years ago.

Our book then digs deeper. The emigrants who embarked in Antwerp came from all over Europe. Many Belgians also emigrated to North America and they nearly all took the boat from Antwerp as well. But in the larger picture they formed only a minority. The majority of Red Star Line passengers came from eastern Europe, Russia and Austria-Hungary, from countries that disappeared from the map of 'old' Europe after the First World War. Among these migrants were many Jews, who were fleeing economic decline and the anti-Semitic violence that plagued these regions from the 1880s onwards. They arrived in the United States as part of an anonymous mass, nervously awaiting the all-important examination on Ellis Island. As soon as they reached

their final destination, they had to find an entrance into American society. Some became rich and famous, like Irving Berlin; others moved on again, while the majority worked hard to give their children the chance of a good future. They all helped to lay the foundations for the America of today. This means that the history of the Red Star Line is an important trans-Atlantic story. It connects Antwerp to New York and America to Europe. The history of European overseas emigration is still alive and well. On both sides of the ocean, genealogists go in search of ancestors or lost branches of their family. Migration museums make this history interesting and relevant to a contemporary public and actively involve that public in both the building up of the museum collection and in the museum experience. In Europe, which in recent times has changed from a continent of departure into an continent of arrival for immigrants, this raises some very specific challenges.

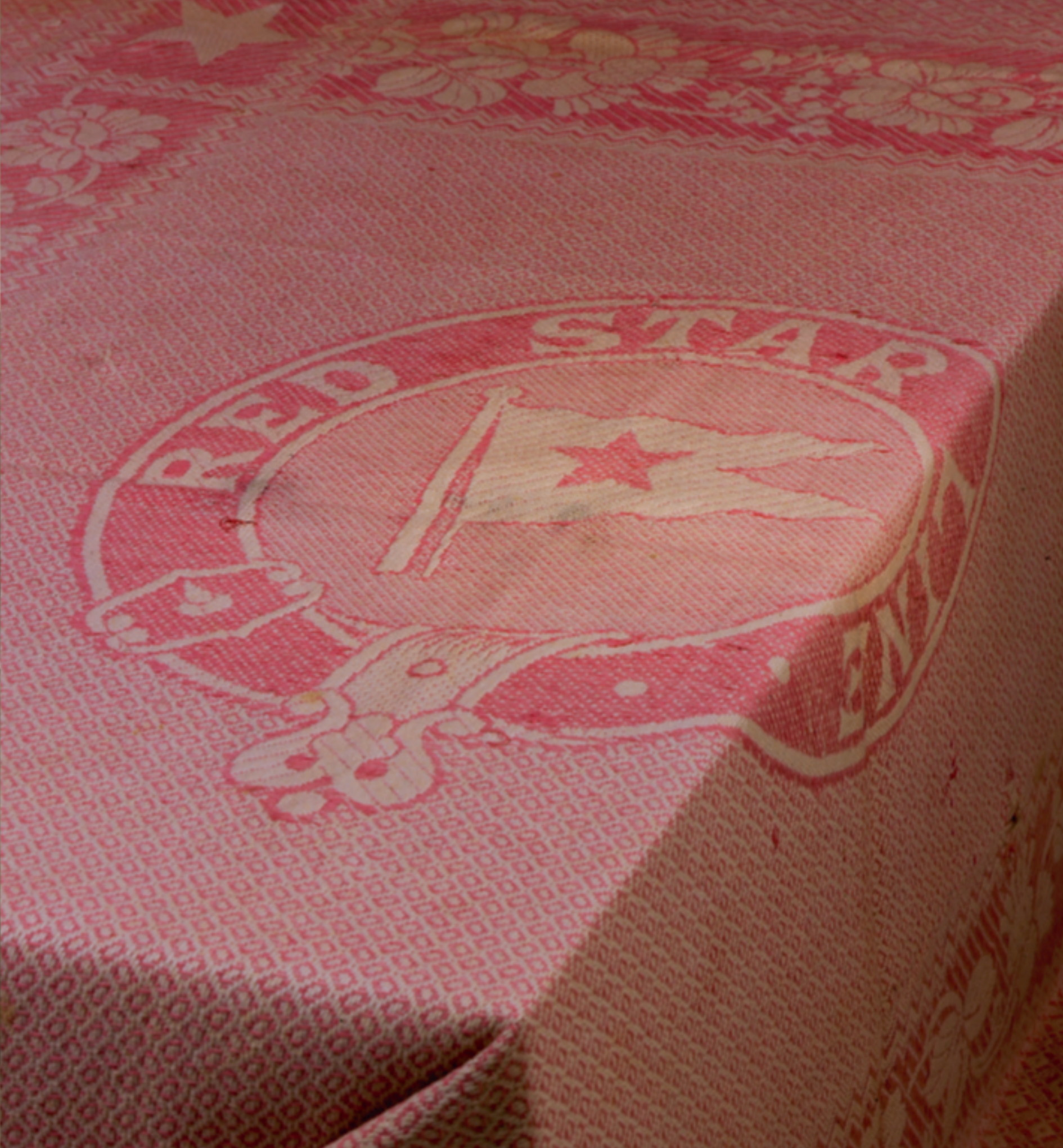
And now we touch upon the lowest layer of our excavation, perhaps its very core. The history of the Red Star Line is just one chapter of a universal and timeless story. It began when modern man swarmed out of Africa and spread over the entire world. Even today, this story is far from being fully told. The history of the Red Star Line displays all the elements of this same great story: the hope and imagination that drove people to seek their fortune elsewhere, the grief of separation, the fear and uncertainties of the voyage, the determination to reach the destination, the excitement of making a new start, the nostalgia for a former way of life and - sometimes - the mourning for a lost world.

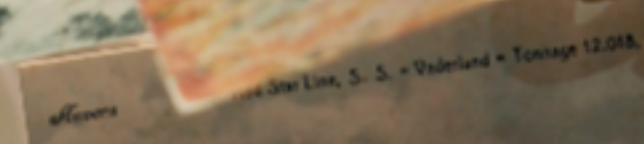
This is the essence of what we intend to do with the new Red Star Line Museum. We want to create a place of commemoration at an authentic location, where, together with the public, we can bring back to life a forgotten history that is a universal and timeless story of people, viewed from the perspective of these people and with as our central question: what does this history mean today?

This book is also a picture book. The texts are richly illustrated with powerful historical photographs and other visual material. The Red Star Line was known for its beautifully designed posters, brochures and other printed matter. For this reason, they can be found copiously in this catalogue. In addition, Bart Huysmans and Michel Wuyts, the in-house photographers of the Antwerp municipal museums, have made artistic interpretations and collages out of original images and contemporary photos of historical objects and locations.

It therefore only remains for me to wish you a great deal of enjoyment in reading this book and during your forthcoming visit to the Red Star Line Museum.









THE STORY OF A SHIPPING COMPANY



STAR BOATS: THE RED STAR LINE IN ANTWERP

Robert Vervoort and Bram Beelaert



Poster of the Red Star Line, Antwerp-New York, Henri Cassiers, 1901, Letterenhuis, Antwerp

On 1 December 1934, the ships of the Red Star Line – or the Star Boats, as they were universally known in the local Antwerp dialect – were making their last voyage. Over the previous seventy years, they had transported an estimated 2.5 million passengers, both rich and poor alike. They had brought prosperity to Antwerp, and had provided a regular liner connection with the city's main trading partner outside Europe, the United States. They had enticed emigrants from all over Europe - between 1.5 and 2 million of them - to come to Antwerp and take a boat to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. But now that was all coming to an end. The Great Depression had strangled the world economy, and the International Mercantile Marine Company had ceased all its European activities, including the Red Star Line. Negotiations were under way for a takeover in Great Britain and with the German ship-owner, Arnold Bernstein. But in 1934 the outcome was still far from certain.

*De Nieuwe Gazet*¹, a local newspaper, looked back nostalgically. "Where is the time," it sighed: "when the heart of the Antwerp docks used to pulsate on the Rijnkaai with heavy, pounding beats, never stopping, just like a human heart, day and night, summer and winter?" The Star Boats came into Antwerp harbour on Monday morning. They left again the following Saturday morning. In between, there was barely sufficient time to unload the ocean-going liners and load them again. Even before night fell on the Monday "huge pyramids of wheat were already growing, reaching high into the rafters of the grain stores, and whole streets were stacked with boxes of bacon and barrels of mineral oil." People worked around the clock; during the hours of darkness, the stevedores lit compressed naphtha in barrels to light the quay. According to the newspaper, the activities of the Red Star Line used to define the streetscape of the entire city. The rattling of the carts piled high with the suitcases and packages of emigrants reminded people that a Star Boat had just arrived, or was about to depart. "We constantly saw the streets packed with emigrants from Poland and Galicia, sombre people with sombre faces, wearing sheepskins turned inside out as jackets, with heavy boots and wailing children, who every Saturday morning

were driven in long procession down to the Scheldt by the agent of an emigration service, complete with his shoddy uniform cap.”

The Red Star Line made its mark on Antwerp for seventy years. The shipping company was an important economic stimulus for the port. It spent money and provided work on its ships, in its offices and warehouses, on the quays and with its suppliers. It filled the people of Antwerp with pride. On the quayside, there was always a rush of interest whenever one of the Star Boats steamed into the harbour. It inspired artists and authors. However, the shipping company also caused a few headaches in its time, and there was almost constant bickering with the local authorities about the poor navigability of the Scheldt and the provision of decent facilities in the city for its largest group of customers: the emigrants. It is now estimated that the company took almost two million people to the other side of the ocean. For those leaving their homeland behind them, the ten days on board one of the Red Star Line ships represented the transition between their old life in Europe and a new life in the New World. With their heads full of plans and dreams, they anxiously awaited their arrival, packed into the cramped spaces of the steerage. Perhaps they already missed the members of their family who had stayed behind, or maybe they were looking forward to seeing friends or acquaintances already in America. To pass the time, they played cards, danced, ate and slept, always hoping for a calm sea.

An initiative from Philadelphia

The Red Star Line was founded in Antwerp in 1872 as the Société Anonyme de Navigation Belge Américaine (S.A.N.B.A.), at the initiative of a group of Philadelphia shipbrokers. At the start of the 1870s, this American port was bursting with new entrepreneurship. Ambition was great: people wanted to turn Philadelphia into a major trading and transport hub, comparable with New York, which was then the largest port on the American East Coast. The United States was in the throes of full-scale industrialization, and Philadelphia was one of the access ports to the industrial heartland of the emerging nation. In addition, in the mid-19th century, oil had been discovered in West Pennsylvania, which was part of Philadelphia’s hinterland. It was through the export of oil that trading houses such as Peter Wright & Sons grew into well-respected and extremely profitable companies. But the real driving force behind the transport sector in Philadelphia was the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. At that time, this giant corporation was the largest railroad company in the world, and the railways had already been at the forefront of economic development in the US for decades. They were massive companies with equally massive concentrations of capital, suitable for large scale investments.

From 1865 onwards, after the end of the American Civil War, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company sought to consolidate its grip on the market by developing a series of long-distance transport lines around its existing railroad network. It was intended that these transport lines should make it possible to bring goods and passengers across the Atlantic Ocean and deep into the American hinterland with a single bill of lading or ticket - and vice versa, of course. Consequently, the company stimulated and funded initiatives for the establishment of a fixed shipping service operating to and from Europe. In 1871, with just a one-month gap in between, two new shipping companies were founded, with the railroad company as the main investor in both cases. The American Steamship Company, which was to sail to Great Britain under the name of the American Line, was set up under the American flag. However, the founders of the International Navigation Company wanted to set up their company under a foreign flag. In this way, they would be able to hire cheap foreign labour and have their ships built in foreign shipyards at considerably lower cost.²

The prime mover behind the International Navigation Company was Peter Wright & Sons. Their eye soon fell on Antwerp as a suitable overseas base for their shipping activities. Legend has it that Clement Acton Griscom, one of the directors, had marked Europe’s major industrial cities with a red pencil on a map in his office. These red marks more or less formed a circle. He is then said to have stepped backwards, aimed his pencil at the centre of the circle and then stepped forward again. The point of his pencil touched the map at precisely the spot where Antwerp stood. Whatever the truth of this story, it is certainly a fact that from 1796 onwards, following centuries of stagnation, Antwerp



Facilities of the Red Star Line and the American Line in Philadelphia, 1882, Red Star Line Museum

had gradually developed into one of the largest harbours on the European mainland, on an equal footing with Rotterdam and Hamburg, and larger than Amsterdam, Bremen and the French harbours. Antwerp had a large hinterland with excellent railway connections and inland navigation channels that ran deep into northern and central Europe. Among other things, grain and petroleum were imported from North America; coffee, cotton and animal skins from Brazil and Argentina; guano from Peru and nitrates from Chile. Rice was imported from British Colonial India, while wool came from Australia, and trade with the countries around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea also blossomed.³

The founding of the S.A.N.B.A. in Antwerp

In 1872, Clement Acton Griscom visited Belgium. As a result of its oil export trade, Peter Wright & Sons already had close contacts with leading Antwerp ship-owners, such as Jules Bernard von der Becke and his brother-in-law, William Edward Marsily. Von der Becke was the son of a German emigrant, who first came to Belgium in the wake of the election of a German prince as King Leopold I. Von der Becke senior soon embarked upon a successful career in the thriving harbour of Antwerp, and his son followed in his footsteps. Marsily was also a descendant of an eminent family in the Antwerp maritime sector. Together, they held discussions about the new shipping company, which was intended to run a service between Philadelphia and Antwerp. Their plans were revolutionary: petroleum was to be brought in bulk to



Portrait of Jules Bernard von der Becke, circa 1890, von der Becke collection

Europe on board huge iron steamships, which would save time and cut costs. On the return journey, emigrants would be picked up. Ever since the 1840s, Antwerp had been trying to establish itself as a port of departure for Europeans wishing to emigrate overseas, but only with varying success. In fact, by 1872 emigration from Antwerp had almost ground to a halt. But a new and regular trans-Atlantic steamer connection could breathe new life into this situation.

Not surprisingly, then, the Antwerp city authorities saw the economic potential of the new American shipping company and promised a thorough renewal of the harbour facilities. Griscom also arranged a personal interview with King Leopold II, who assured him of a subsidy for the shipping of Belgian postal traffic to North America. On 5 September 1872, the deed of foundation for the S.A.N.B.A. or the Red Star Line was finally drawn up and signed in the offices of public notary Vansulpher. Von der Becke and Marsily each received 10% of the shares and became directors. This meant, however, that the vast majority of the shipping company remained in American hands.⁴

Back in Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company built a new terminal that was capable of loading ships in bulk, with grain lifts and state-of-the-art facilities for the pumping of petroleum. The use of this infrastructure was provided to the Red Star Line free of charge. In Antwerp, the Red Star Line was assigned the Rijnkaai as its mooring point, with exemption from all quay fees. At the beginning of the 1870s, this part of the harbour was still remote from the populated section of the city. For this reason, it was the only place where the Antwerp city



Map of Europe on the reverse side of a Red Star Line brochure, 1882, Red Star Line Museum

with North America and an annual subsidy of 500,000 Belgian francs for a period of ten years. The company was duly allowed to establish a regular scheduled service between Belgium and New York. In exchange, they had to guarantee at least one departure every two weeks, and agree that all ships – in so far as this was not already the case – should sail under the Belgian flag.⁹

On 20 March 1874, the 'Cybele' was the first Red Star Line ship to depart for New York. Some ships also continued sailing to Philadelphia, but New York became the main port of destination in the 1880s. In 1890 no fewer than 27,500 of the 31,000 passengers who sailed from Belgium to the United States arrived in New York.¹⁰ The Philadelphia crossing continued to exist, but only ran once a fortnight, whereas departures from Antwerp for New York were eventually increased to twice a week.

Although it was difficult to expand a shipping company during the economically weak years of the 1870s, the Red Star Line managed to hold its own. In contrast to its sister company, the American Line, it was even able to make a profit. At least one ship each week left for the United States from the fixed moorings on quay 28 and 29 of the Rijnkaai. When these moorings were rebuilt between 1882 and 1885, the company moved to the Cockerillkaai (Cockerill Quay), but this had little effect on its operations.

In the meantime, the arrival of the Red Star Line in Antwerp had given a new boost to the popularity of the city as a port of departure for the New World. Good rail connections ensured that many emigrants from Switzerland and western and southern Germany booked their passage from Antwerp rather than



The 'Friesland' and the 'Vaderland' in Antwerp, image on a passenger list, 1891, MAS collection, Antwerp



The 'Finland' at the Rijnkaai, circa 1905, Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp

from Bremen or Hamburg. In the 1880s, the Red Star Line took around 25,000 third-class passengers to New York each year.¹¹ In the early 1890s, however, the numbers fell dramatically: from a high point of over 50,000 in 1891 to a paltry 16,000 in 1894.¹² The reason was not hard to find. America was in the grip of a major economic crisis and work was scarce. Moreover, as a reaction to the outbreak of cholera in large parts of Russia, the Americans made the entrance procedures for immigrants much stricter. In protest, the Belgian, Dutch and German shipping companies brought all emigration to the United States to a halt from December 1892 until February 1893.¹³ Rumours about the inadequacy of health measures in Antwerp meant that ships sailing from the port were subjected to strictly enforced quarantine periods until well into 1894.¹⁴

After 1900, things began to improve again. True, emigration from Germany had almost come to a standstill, but this was more than compensated by the growing exodus from Austria-Hungary and Russia, which was in full swing during this period. The same economic factors that had first forced many in western Europe to depart for overseas - the arrival of industry, the decline of traditional sectors and the large increase in population - were now also starting to affect eastern Europe. In addition, in Russia and Austria-Hungary the large Jewish community had to face discrimination from the civil authorities, coupled with an ever-present latent hostility amongst the rest of the population. This was reflected in the notorious 'pogroms', sporadic and spontaneous outbreaks of violence against Jews.

The busiest years for the trans-Atlantic crossings were 1907 and 1913. In these years the Red Star Line transported over 119,000 and 117,000 passengers respectively to and from

America. The vast majority (100,000 in 1907 and 90,000 in 1913) travelled in third class. These were not all emigrants. Several thousand people a year also made the trip from the United States back to Europe in third class. Most were former emigrants, who were now going back to Europe to visit family, or because they were fed up with life in America, or because they felt they had earned enough money to live comfortably back at home. An estimated one third of all trans-Atlantic migration in this period was temporary. In parts of Italy, some people even made the return crossing to America each year, to carry out seasonal work on the land and in factories. Moreover, in times of crisis the number of people coming back to Europe could actually exceed those travelling in the opposite direction. In 1908, for example - a year of grave economic hardship in the United States - the Red Star Line transported 29,448 third-class passengers eastwards as opposed to just 21,804 westwards.¹⁵

To transport all these thousands of people, the Red Star Line needed ships. The core fleet was first supplemented with charter ships, such as the 'Cybele' from the Donaldson Line and the 'Kenilworth' from the American Line. Red Star Line bought this latter ship in 1875 and re-named it the 'Rusland'. Just twelve days after the purchase was completed, it ran aground on a sandbank off the coast of New Jersey. All the passengers and some of the cargo were saved, but the ship itself was lost. As a result, the 'Switzerland' was the only ship available to continue the weekly service between Antwerp and New York. To avoid losing its lucrative subsidies from the Belgian Government, Griscom scrapped all voyages between Antwerp and Philadelphia for almost a year (from March 1877 to February 1878) and concentrated the entire Red Star Line fleet on the New York crossing. At the same time, efforts were made to extend the fleet. The 'Rhyndland' and the first 'Belgenland' were ordered. They were 15 meters longer than all previous ships in the Red Star Line, promising greater performance and capacity. In the years around 1880, the 'Waesland', the first 'Westernland', the 'Noordland' and the 'Pennland' were also added to the fleet. The 'Westernland', in particular, was a groundbreaking vessel. At over 5,500 tons, it was the largest ship in the Red Star Line up to that time. In addition, it was the first ship to be completely made of steel, with two funnels instead of one. Just as importantly, it was also the first ship with full second-class accommodation. Previously, the Red Star Line had only had ships with cabins for the rich and basic third-class sleeping quarters for the less well-off in steerage, the area between the cargo hold and the ship's superstructure. In second class, the level of comfort and facilities was much better than in steerage, and also much cheaper than in first class. This was a useful option for both travellers and the company alike. The 'Westernland' had 80 places in first class, 60 in second class and 1,200 in third class.¹⁶



Portrait of Clement Acton Griscom, circa 1860, collection unknown

Increasing the scale of operations and the founding of the International Mercantile Marine Company

In 1896, Jules Bernard von der Becke died at his castle in Mirwart in the Ardennes. It was a massive blow for the Red Star Line and for the entire maritime world in Antwerp. As a member of the city council, he often played the key role of a bridging figure, who defended the interests of the shipping and harbour companies in the city administration. He was succeeded in the S.A.N.B.A. by his son, Max. He was not destined to stay for long. In 1902, all the Belgian shareholders, Max included, were dismissed from the board after the Red Star Line was acquired by the International Mercantile Marine Company (IMMC), a trust that included virtually all the main North American passenger lines.

Trusts of this kind dominated a number of industries in the United States at the end of the 19th century. They were formed when the shareholders of different companies agreed to entrust a proportion of their shares to a group of administrators or trustees (hence the name). These trustees managed the assets for the shareholders, with the resulting profits paid out as dividends. In this way, companies were able to consolidate their share of the market. It was an attractive proposition for inves-

tors, but trusts were highly unpopular with the general public, since they were detrimental to free competition. Even so, by 1898 there were already 80 trusts in the United States.

Clement Griscom and his ship-owner colleague, Bernard Baker of the Atlantic Line, wanted to establish a trust of this kind to dominate the North Atlantic shipping market. In 1884, the International Navigation Company had already taken over the American Line, followed in 1886 by the Inman Line. When Baker's Atlantic Line agreed to come on board, all the major American shipping companies were united in a single conglomerate. Their ambition was as ruthless as it was daring. They wanted nothing less than to bring an end to the British dominance in Atlantic trade and to secure a monopoly on the North American shipping routes. Griscom and Baker convinced the immensely wealthy banker and industrialist John Pierpont Morgan to invest in their scheme. In 1900, Morgan had already merged a number of companies in the steel sector to form U.S. Steel. He now had a gigantic vertical trust in mind, which would connect the iron mines in Michigan with the steel plants in the eastern USA and the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. His idea was to saturate the European market with cheap, high quality iron. The only missing link was the necessary transport over the ocean.¹⁷

Negotiations were started with several European shipping companies. The trust soon acquired the Leyland Line and the Dominion Line. But the largest and brightest jewel in their crown was the famous White Star Line, which was the most profitable British shipping company of the time. The crucial figure in this purchase was Lord Pirrie, the second largest shareholder in the White Star Line, but also - and more importantly - the director of Harland & Wolff, a Belfast shipyard that made ships primarily for British shipping companies. Pirrie feared that if all these companies were bought up by the Americans, they would soon start building their ships elsewhere. By entering into an alliance with the trust, he hoped to ensure that Harland & Wolff's order books would stay full.¹⁸ The Red Star Line ships built after 1902 - the 'Belgenland II', the 'Lapland', the 'Westernland II' and the 'Pennland', were all made in Belfast. They had many similarities with the more famous White Star Line ships, such as the 'Olympic', the 'Brittanic' and the doomed 'Titanic'. The interior fittings came from the same suppliers, and the on-board services were also the same.

The International Mercantile Marine Company was huge. When it was first founded in 1902, it united six already powerful shipping companies. As a result, it had a fleet of no fewer than 136 ships at its disposal, with a capacity of over one million tons, the largest merchant fleet in the world under joint management at that time. But it did not stop there. Morgan had also concluded agreements with the large German shipping companies, the Norddeutscher Lloyd and the Hamburg



Brochure of the International Mercantile Marine Company, 1912, Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp

Amerika Linie. The go-between for these agreements was once again Lord Pirrie. He was a close friend of shipping magnate Albert Ballin, who ran the Hamburg Amerika Linie. As a part of the deal, Pirrie also acquired (on behalf of the IMMC) 51% of the shares in the Holland Amerika Lijn in Rotterdam, which meant that the trust could prevent the Dutch shipping company from becoming a serious competitor for the German lines. The North Atlantic shipping world was becoming ever more closely intertwined. The only large shipping company that continued to sail a more or less independent course was the Cunard Line. It was able to survive thanks to the support of the British Government, which granted subsidies and relaxed relevant legislative provisions.¹⁹

The major reason behind this desire to acquire a monopoly on passenger shipping was the fear of a price war. If competition was too sharp in times of crisis, this could reduce the price of tickets to such a degree that some of the shipping companies would be bound to go under. Independent of all takeovers, mergers and trusts, it was common practice amongst shipping companies to also make price agreements. For example, in 1892 the Red Star Line, the Holland Amerika Lijn, Norddeutscher Lloyd and the Hamburg Amerika Linie set up the Nordatlantischer Dampfer Linien Verband. Under this agreement, the Red Star Line received 13.5% of the traffic.²⁰ Similarly, the North Atlantic Shipping Conference was established in 1908, involving all the major British and continental shipping companies. This time, the Red Star Line received 9.71% of migrant traffic to America and 8.56% of the return traffic.²¹ If one of the parties to the agreement exceeded its allocated quota, it had to relinquish part of its profits to the other partners.



American soldiers aboard the 'Kroonland' during the First World War, circa 1917, Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp



The 'Gothland' during the First World War, Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp

With the creation of the International Mercantile Marine Company, the German Eduard Strasser became director of the Red Star Line in Antwerp. Although the Red Star Line was one of the smaller shipping companies in the Atlantic passenger transport market, it was still a major player in the city on the Scheldt. A number of new ships were commissioned. Two - the 'Kroonland' and the 'Finland' - were built in America and sailed under the American flag. Two more - the 'Vaderland II' and the 'Zeeland' - were built in Great Britain and sailed under the British flag. Later on, all four would be brought under the Belgian flag. From 1903, ships on their way to Philadelphia also called at Boston, and from 1904 at Baltimore. This was primarily to unload cargo, rather than passengers.

The First World War

When the First World War broke out in 1914, the rapidly advancing German Army soon occupied Antwerp. The International Mercantile Marine Company was determined to leave behind nothing of use for the enemy. All IMMC ships sailed out of the harbour and those that were on their way to Antwerp were diverted to other foreign ports. As an added precaution, all Red Star Line ships henceforth sailed under a foreign flag, with the exception of the 'Samland' and the 'Gothland', which continued to sail under the Belgian flag. This was possible because they were being used by the American Commission for Relief in Belgium to ship in relief goods via Rotterdam for the beleaguered populations in occupied Belgium and northern France.

Not surprisingly in the circumstances, migrant traffic slowed to a trickle and came to a complete standstill in 1917,



The 'Belgenland' arrives in Antwerp, circa 1925,
Red Star Line Museum

when the United States entered the war. Even before the war, the International Mercantile Marine Company had not really lived up to its expectations. To begin with, the trust was over-valued at its creation. To make matters worse, the anticipated subsidies from the American Government did not materialize and the economic boom around the turn of the century came to an end. Moreover, because shipping companies like the Cunard Line were able to survive independently, the IMMC never managed to gain a full grip over shipping in the North Atlantic. The drastic reduction of its trans-Atlantic services due to the hostilities simply served to deepen the crisis, and in 1915 the International Mercantile Marine Company went bankrupt. Philip Franklin was appointed as liquidator. He was able to persuade a few investors that the involvement of the United States in the war would inevitably increase the demand for cargo. And indeed, in 1917 shares in the International Mercantile Marine Company began to pay dividends for the first time in thirteen years. Many IMMC ships sailing under the British flag²² were used for the transportation of American and Canadian troops to Europe, with many others being used in convoy runs across the Atlantic, where their high speed enabled them to outrun the German submarines. Because some of the names of the Red Star Line ships sounded too German, they were re-christened: the 'Vaderland' became the 'Northland' and the 'Zeeland' became the 'Southland'. Both were commissioned by the British Government to ferry troops from America to England, the 'Vaderland' eventually being sunk by German torpedoes off the coast of Ireland in 1917. The 'Kroonland' and the 'Finland' were commissioned for similar duties by the Americans. The 'Lapland' was also intensively used for troop transport.²³

After the Armistice in 1918, Philip Franklin became the new chairman of the International Mercantile Marine Company. He returned to Antwerp to re-open the offices that had been transferred to Liverpool when hostilities commenced. Initially, the IMMC ships were only used to transport American relief goods to Europe and to take American troops home. However, in the last quarter of 1919 the emigrant service was re-started.

Fighting a losing battle²⁴

It seemed at first as if the Red Star Line would be able to continue its activities with the same vigour and intensity as in the pre-war years. During the early 1920s, the company tried out several new ports of departure for its emigration crossings: Libau in Latvia, Danzig on the Baltic coast in Poland and Hamburg in Germany. On the other side of the ocean, Halifax in Nova Scotia (Canada) became a new arrival port. But just as prospects seemed to be brightening, the IMMC was hit by a new blow: at the end of 1921 the United States put a curb on immigration. The number of emigrants fell dramatically, almost overnight. In 1920 and 1921 the Red Star Line was still transporting over 60,000 passengers; by the following year, this figure had been reduced by more than half.²⁵

Yet even with the storm clouds gathering, in 1923 the fiftieth anniversary of the Red Star Line was celebrated in fine festive style. The new 'Belgenland II', the largest ship in the fleet, made a triumphant entry into Antwerp. The Rijnkaai was awash with



Brochure for show boat cruises on the 'Belgenland', circa 1928
Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp

a veritable sea of people. Cardinal Mercier was invited to bless the new ocean giant in a solemn ceremony that was recorded for posterity on film. The 'Belgenland II' was the largest ship ever to have sailed into Antwerp up to this point in time, and she was the ninth largest in the world rankings. The ship was launched in 1914, but building was suspended when war broke out, until peace resumed. In 1922 a number of new decks were added, together with an extra funnel. This third funnel was more for show than for anything else: it was thought that it gave the ship a more imposing appearance. The festivities put up a false appearance. The 'Belgenland II' required a crew of over 550 and was expensive to maintain. It had space for 500 first-class, 500 second-class, and 1,500 third-class passengers, but it almost never made an Atlantic crossing fully booked. The ocean giant was a relic from a bygone era. Because it was patently unprofitable, it did not take long before the ship was periodically removed from service and laid up.

A new use was eventually found for this unemployed titan of the waves, this time as a cruise ship. To counteract the effects of falling migration levels, the Red Star Line began to explore other avenues of potential revenue, including tourism. The rising middle class formed a potentially important new sales market. In addition to its traditional first, second and third classes, the Red Star Line - like many other shipping companies - also experimented with a tourist class. This offered affordable sailings with a degree of comfort, aimed at the less affluent tourists or better-off emigrants who were able to afford it. The 'Belgenland II' was quickly converted for this purpose, and was given a new swimming pool and an artificial beach with sand from Ostend! On 7 December 1924, the ship left New York on the first of a total of seven world cruises, a voyage which lasted for 133 days.

Other opportunities to generate income were sought creatively. And some were more creative than others. While the 'Lapland' also toured the Mediterranean Sea on a series of traditional cruises, the Red Star Line sought to profit from the introduction of prohibition (the banning of alcohol) in the United States by organizing 'booze cruises' to Bermuda, again using the 'Belgenland'. People left New York for Halifax in Canada, where the necessary drink was taken on board. They then travelled lazily down America's east coast, to Bermuda. As soon as international waters were reached, the bar was opened and the forbidden liquids started to flow!

In addition to tourism, the Red Star Line also tried to specialize in the transportation of certain types of cargo, such as cars, which were rapidly turning into a mass consumption product. However, the competition in this market was fierce, even within the port of Antwerp. At the end of 1929, a Jewish German shipowner named Arnold Bernstein arrived in the city to set up a fixed service to America. He had developed a method for bringing fully-made cars across the Atlantic, at a time when it was still



Advertisement for a world cruise aboard the 'Belgenland', 1924, Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp



Programme, 1925, Friends of the Red Star Line, Antwerp

standard practice for car parts to be shipped separately in boxes for assembly in Europe.

As a result of this and other setbacks, the decline in the Red Star Line's fortunes could not be halted. The fleet was continuing to shrink and the number of crossings were reduced. In the winter, there was now only one departure every two weeks. The fleet was cut back to just five ships: the 'Westernland II' (a former White Star Line ship) and the 'Pennland' formed the backbone. The 'Lapland' and the 'Belgenland' remained laid up for increasingly long periods. The badly-aging 'Samland' was sent to the breaker's yard in 1931. Two years later the 'Lapland' and the 'Belgenland' were also sold. In 1933, this once proud and mighty shipping company transported just a meagre 13,000 passengers.

The end was now in sight and the coup de grâce was given by the Great Depression. The stock exchange crash of 1929 brought emigration from Europe to a virtual standstill. When the American president Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched his New Deal to revive America's economic fortunes, one of the conditions was that all American shipping companies with interests abroad were obliged to cease their overseas activities. With the joint revenue resulting from this measure, the US Government would support a new shipping company - the United States Lines - whose ships would all sail under the American flag with all-American crews.

This was the revival of the age-old ambition that had been the motive behind the foundation of the American Line in 1871 and the International Mercantile Marine Company in 1902. Even so, this time it sounded the death knell for the origi-

nal Red Star Line. In the autumn of 1934, the 'Pennland' and the 'Westernland' made their final voyages. In December of the same year, *De Nieuwe Gazet* wrote its retrospective piece on the Red Star Line, quoted above. The Société Anonyme de Navigation Belge Américaine went into liquidation at the start of 1935, with just a few members of staff remaining in place to take care of day-to-day business and round off the sale of the warehouse assets.

Epilogue

The rest, as they say, is history. Negotiations were held with the Holland Amerika Lijn, Arnold Bernstein and the British shipping magnate Colonel Frank Bustard. On the very day that S.A.N.B.A was dissolved, Eric Sasse founded a new company for Arnold Bernstein, under the name of ... the Red Star Line. Bernstein wanted to exploit the name of the famous shipping company, which was known and respected around the world. The fixed moorings were also taken over, so that a new and seemingly similar company arose from the ashes of the old - but now under a German swastika flag.

As a Jew in Hitler's Germany, Bernstein was living on borrowed time. In 1937, the Nazis arrested him on suspicion of fraud involving foreign currencies. By now, he had become the owner of the largest Jewish company in all Germany. The Nazis seized his property and sold his Red Star Line service from Antwerp - the 'Pennland', the 'Westernland' and the company name - to the Holland Amerika Lijn, which continued to run a Red Star Line service from Antwerp.

Two years later, Bernstein was allowed to leave Germany after paying surety of 30,000 dollars. He hoped to work for the Holland Amerika Lijn as an agent, but his request was turned down flat. All the shipping company was prepared to offer him was a free passage to the United States. He left Europe on the 'Nieuw Amsterdam' on 24 August 1939, just days before the Second World War erupted. In America he soon found gainful employment in the maritime world. After the war, he began proceedings against the Holland Amerika Lijn, which he alleged had unlawfully acquired possession of the old Red Star line in Antwerp. The legal bickering lasted until the mid-1950s, when the Holland Amerika Lijn paid compensation to Bernstein, although for an amount far below the original claim.