SIEMENS

Milestones in the land of the Magyars

Siemens celebrates 130 years of success in Hungary

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“Budapest will be richer by one special attraction within a few weeks,” wrote the Politische Volksblatt, an Austrian newspaper, in October 1887. And indeed, on November 22 of that same year, a new rail company jointly founded by Siemens, “Körúti Villamos Vasút Vállalat Siemens & Halske, Lindheim & Cie és Balázs Mór” began operating a trial route for

railroad

First in the world: Siemens & Halske presents the world's first electric railway in 1879

It was the Siemens & Halske company that presented the world's first electrically powered railway, at Berlin's Commercial Exposition of 1879. This was the starting point for an entirely new kind of urban mobility – electrically powered trams, and subsequently overhead and underground rail systems. But the first years were not easy. Werner von Siemens, without whose inventions the technology would not have been possible, was ahead of his time. The Berlin city government turned down his plans to set up an overhead rail line along the city's Friedrichstrasse – neighbors mobilized against the project: they didn't want to see their cityscape "blighted."

But Werner was an obstinate soul, and in May 1881 the world's first electric rail line to be used for local public transportation went into operation in what today is the Berlin district of Lichterfelde. The route – initially only two and a half kilometers long – served to try out this new type of transport. But in any case the team at Siemens were quite certain that this was a technology with a future – even if the first major order took a few more years to arrive.

Budapest goes mobile – Siemens railway revolutionizes the local transportation system

The first chance to use the new local transportation system commercially arrived in Budapest, in 1887. In the last third of the 19th century, the city on the Danube was burgeoning into a metropolis: between 1880 and 1900 alone, the population doubled to nearly 740,000. Local public transportation couldn't keep up. Although the city had had a number of horse-drawn omnibuses and a horse-drawn tram for some time, these were becoming hopelessly overcrowded. The city government wanted to act, but its hands were tied: two rail companies held a monopoly on local transportation, and fought the city fathers on any further expansion. But there was a loophole – the companies' consent wasn't required for motorized railways.

Budapest knew about Siemens' tram, which had also been undergoing testing in Vienna since 1883. Werner von Siemens acted fast. Joining Hungarian railroad engineer Mór Balász and the Austrian firm Lindheim & Co, Siemens & Halske made the Budapest city government an

offer to build an electric tram line. It would be the first large system of its kind in Europe.

From the “trial rail line” to the rail company – major steps on the way to success

The city accepted the offer with thanks, but reserved the right to start with a test phase during which a “trial rail line” would be installed. Siemens and its partners got the building permit on September 27, 1887. Moreover, Hungarian commercial law required a dedicated construction company to be founded, so Siemens & Halske and Lindheim & Co ultimately joined Mór Balász to register a streetcar company, “Körúti Villamos Vasút Vállalat Siemens & Halske, Lindheim & Cie és Balázs Mór,” in the Budapest Commercial Register. They wasted no time – work on the trial line began in October, and the tram festively went into operation on November 28, 1887, just six days after the company was finally registered on November 22.

1889: The new era arrives in downtown Budapest

On a short segment of the city’s Grand Boulevard, between the western train station and Kiraly Utca Street, two cars powered by electric motors initially traveled only between two stops. Each car had a total of 18 seats and room for 14 standees; for safety’s sake, the top speed was initially limited to 15 kilometers per hour, though the cars could handle 40. To make sure the cars kept to the speed limits, and to reassure the neighbors, during its first testing phase the tram was always accompanied by a mounted policeman.

The line was a complete success. The very next year, Siemens & Halske and its partners got a contract to build an entire tram network in the city on the Danube. The first segment, two and a half kilometers long, was completed on July 30, 1889. By 1898 the system had a total of about 60 kilometers of routes, with nearly half of the distance in the inner city powered from underground lines, while the routes in the outlying districts drew power from lines overhead.

A major draw for the public: The first tracks are laid on Budapest's Grand Boulevard in 1889

The "Budapest System" – An innovation with a future

For Siemens, the project was more than a business success – it was a genuine milestone. What became known as the "Budapest System" – specially developed for this line as a way of supplying power from underground via a channel laid under the street surface – was a technical innovation that served as a model all over the world. The system was later imitated in many cities, including Brussels, Paris, Chicago and New York. But that wasn't all. To fulfill the streetcar contract properly, in 1890 Siemens & Halske set up its own Technical Bureau in Budapest. Ten years later, this was converted to a stock company – a demonstration of how firmly Siemens was already established in the Hungarian market.

130 years in Hungary – a success story

It has been 130 years since Siemens revolutionized local transportation in Hungary. And it's still playing an important role today. Over the past 20 years alone, the country has called upon on Siemens for support in replacing part of its aging

Siemens electric locomotive "Vectron" accelerates Hungarian passenger and freight

infrastructure. Furthermore, Hungary has taken an important step into the future with major mobility projects implemented by Siemens. In manufacturing, the country has developed into an important node for European production. And it has some of the most up-to-date automotive production facilities in the world.

transport

As it has for the past 130 years, Siemens will continue in the future to contribute its expertise and experience toward the country's modernization.
The process that began in November 1887 with an entry in the Budapest Commercial Register and the opening of an initial trial route for an electric tramway has continued developing down to today, 130 years later, into a lasting, successful history of Siemens in Hungary.

Ewald Blocher

Further information

Further information on this topic can be found in our link collection.

Links

- History Site, countries, Hungary
- 1879 – Siemens presents the world's first electric railway
- 1896 – The first electrically powered underground on the European continent goes into operation in Budapest

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