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Before Lemberg: (Part 1)

The Development of the Mail System in Central Europe and the Beginnings of the Postal Service in Lwów (Lviv)

By: Dr. Ingert Kuzych

Editor’s Note: This is the first of three parts of a most interesting article on the history of the post in Central Europe, including the city of Lwów for the Polish, Lviv for the Ukrainians, Lvov under the Soviets, and Lemberg for the Austrians and Germans, all of whom laid claim to this city over the span of the past six centuries. Part I will cover Early European Mails and Getting Organized in the Habsburg Dominions; Part II will cover Early Post in Poland; and Part III will cover Starting up the Particular Post in Lwów (Lviv, Lemberg). Postal Intrigues, and Earliest Postal Insignias from Lwów and Lemberg. We are grateful to Ingert Kuzych for contributing this article to Polonus. A brief background of Dr. Kuzych is included at the end of this article.

Early European Mails

Life without the mails seems almost inconceivable to us today, but postal services took a long time to evolve. In ancient times, ties between people and countries were kept up by couriers, who would transmit messages either orally or in written form. In the Middle Ages, royalty, the ecclesiastic hierarchy, larger monastic orders, and lay orders of knights all set up their own messenger services. In the 12th and 13th centuries universities established a separate communication network with punctual, dependable, and speedy couriers operating between the Italian universities in Bologna, Salerno, and Naples, and the French universities of Toulouse and the Sorbonne.

With the growth of towns and cities, urban courier services were set up, especially in the larger cities of Italy and Germany. The couriers, who were run by the town councils, delivered correspondence for the councils and for city inhabitants and received payments according to a fixed price.

The word “post” comes from the Italian “posta” and is a shortened form of the Latin “statio posita,” which means a place for the changing of horses. The first such specially organized equestrian postal stations were set up in Germany and would, for a fixed price, would carry not only correspondence, but occasionally passengers.

Sometimes, with the concurrence of town magistrates and merchants, a separate post was set up through a tradesman’s syndicate (guild), for example the butcher’s guild in Germany. This so-called Metzger Post began in the 12th century and continued until 1637, when the Thurn and Taxis monopoly took over (see below). The Metzger Post functioned as follows. As butchers journeyed to farms, livestock fairs, and markets throughout Europe (usually traveling on horseback), they would carry the letters from friends and loved ones. Upon arrival at a town, they used a horn to announce the arrival of the mail and thus created a commonly recognized emblem for postal services.

Getting Organized in the Habsburg Dominions

A system of posts was established in northern Italy by the family of Thurn and Taxis (Torre e Tassis), from the district of Bergamo, in the mid-15th century. In 1490, the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (r. 1486-1519) took things a step further and set up the first extended European postal linkages (Figure 1).

Surviving records of three things that occurred in that pivotal year make it an appropriate starting point for European postal services:

1. a communication dated 11 July 1490 from Emperor Maximilian to the town of Speyer ordering it to found both a mounted and a foot post for the Imperial Service,

2. an entry in the Raitbuch of the Tirol Exchequer Chamber of 11 December 1490 concerning the payment of 300 Rheinischen gulden to a Johannetn Daxen, Chief Postmaster, and

[Figure 1 – A portrait of Emperor Maximilian I completed not long before his death in 1519.]
Before Lemberg: (Part 1) (cont.)

3. an entry in the Memminger Chronik of 1490 that states that in that year the postal service came into existence.

The following year the emperor named Franz von Taxis (Figure 2) as Postmaster and tasked him and his brother John Baptist to set up posts connecting the Imperial Dominions in Lombardy with those in Austria.

In 1500, Franz was named Hauptpostmeister (Chief Postmaster) by Philip I, Duke of Burgundy and son of Maximilian. In 1504, Philip concluded an agreement with Franz to provide a postal connection with his court in the Netherlands and those of Maximilian in Austria and Germany, and to link these with the courts of France and Spain (Figure 3).

In 1512, Maximilian raised the family of Thurn and Taxis to the ranks of the imperial nobility.

In setting up these arrangements, Taxis created a network linking Habsburg possessions throughout Europe: in the Holy Roman Empire (today Germany, Austria, Italy), Hungary, the Low Countries (now the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), and Spain (Figure 4). Initially it was the royal families and nobility that took advantage of the postal system, which often involved the transport of valuable jewels and treasures (since bandits were a persistent threat). Nevertheless, the Thurn and Taxis standards were very high and the mail generally went through safely and quickly.

The mail delivery men were known as coursers, a name given to professional couriers dating back to Roman times. The horse relay system that was created not only shortened the transit time for mail but made its arrival predictable. Taxis coursers – wearing the imperial yellow and black livery – were able to travel from Brussels to Paris in 44 hours in the summer and in 54 hours during the winter. Travel time for a letter between Innsbruck and Brussels was 5 ½ days (6 ½ days in winter). Other delivery times in 1505 were: Brussels-Blais 2 ½ days (winter 3 days), Brussels-Lyon 4 days (winter 5 days), Brussels-Toledo 12 days (winter 14 days), Brussels-Granada 15 days (winter 18 days).
A decade later (1516) saw a new agreement negotiated with delivery times reduced and some of the cities in the network changed. Brussels to Paris now took 36 hours (winter 40 hours), while the Brussels-Innsbruck route became a 5-day journey (winter 6 days). The Brussels-Toledo and Brussels-Granada routes were dropped in favor of a Brussels-Burgos connection of 7 days (winter 8 days). Two new Italian cities were added: a Brussels-Rome link of 10½ days (winter 12 days) and a Brussels-Naples route that required 14-days in winter.

Taxis hired many relatives to operate his vast network. Over time, more and more mails were accepted from anyone who could pay the fees. In essence, what the family accomplished was to lay the foundation for the development of an international postal system (Figure 5). In 1615, Emperor Mathias rewarded the services of the family by making the position of imperial postmaster general a hereditary right in the male line of succession.

While the family competed with (and frequently out-competed) other courier services, it was not averse to occasionally working in conjunction with other delivery tradesmen. With the rise of national mails in Europe in the second half of the 19th century, the Thurn and Taxis monopoly was steadily reduced and the family sold its postal rights in 1867.

In addition to mounted couriers, Thurn and Taxis employed the first horse-drawn mail coaches in Europe since Roman times. They began using this new conveyance in about 1650 from the town of Kocs (in present-day northern Hungary) and thus gave rise to the term “coach.” With the expansion of mail coach use in the 17th and 18th centuries, passengers also began to be carried in addition to the mails (Figure 7). With the passing of time, loud blasts of the post horn became more familiar sounds and would signal passage through a city, town, or village, or the approach of a rider or coach at a postal station. Post horn soundings also served another purpose by allowing locals to warn a courier or postilion of bad roads or dangerous passages. The post horn remains today a symbol for a number of European postal administrations.

At its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries, Thurn and Taxis had upwards of 20,000 employees and monopolized postal transport from the Baltic Sea southward to the Straits of Gibraltar (Figure 6). While the above text has focused on the more celebrated mounted postal delivery system, the more mundane foot post continued to be used extensively from the 15th into the 18th century for less urgent and for private delivery of mails. Postal deliverymen would venture forth on their rounds bearing a leather pouch with a large flap that protected the letters, and wearing a hat, cloak, or cape to fend off the...
elements. Frequently they went lightly armed with a sword and/or a spear. The latter could serve not only as a weapon should the messenger be attacked, but also as a walking staff. Austria Post has presented postal foot couriers a number of times on its stamps (Figures 8 to 10).

Footnotes:

1 In 1990, the Austrian postal service celebrated the 500th anniversary of European postal connections by issuing a 5-schilling multicolored stamp showing an engraving entitled “The Courier” by Albrecht Dürer. It was part of a joint issue with the three German entities of that time: the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), the Democratic Republic of Germany (East Germany), and Berlin, as well as with Belgium. All these entities recognized 1490 as the foundational year for their postal systems.

2 The imperial Habsburg colors of yellow and black were incorporated into the uniforms that the couriers wore: a yellow jacket with black lapels. The distinctive colors not only aided in identifying the couriers, but also lent them an air of imperial prestige. Yellow remains the color of the Austrian Post (Österreichische Post), the German Post (Deutsche Post), and the Italian Post (Poste Italiane).

Biographical Sketch of our Author:

Dr. Ingert Kuzych-Berezovsky is of Austrian and Ukrainian extraction and has made a profound impact on the philately of both countries. He has written close to 400 articles for dozens of philatelic publications, written or edited several books dealing with Ukrainian philately, and served as editor of the Ukrainian Philatelist Journal.

Dr. Kuzych is a member of the American Philatelic Congress, Past-President of the Ukrainian Philatelic and Numismatic Society, and currently its Vice President. He was formerly the Vice President of the Austrian Philatelic Society. One of his collecting specialties is the postal history of Lemberg-Lviv-Lwów, and he has assembled a popular Habsburg-era exhibit: “Lemberg: Cosmopolitan Crownland Capital of the Austrian Empire” (awarded numerous Gold and Special Awards). Dr. Kuzych plans to release a book in the near future featuring all of his Lemberg exhibit pages, as well as additional material. Leading off the volume will be an introductory chapter that will be an expansion of this article.