THE FIRST MAIL FLIGHT FROM EUROPE TO JAPAN

Following the Philatelic Trail of Bolesław Orliński's Pioneering 1926 Flight

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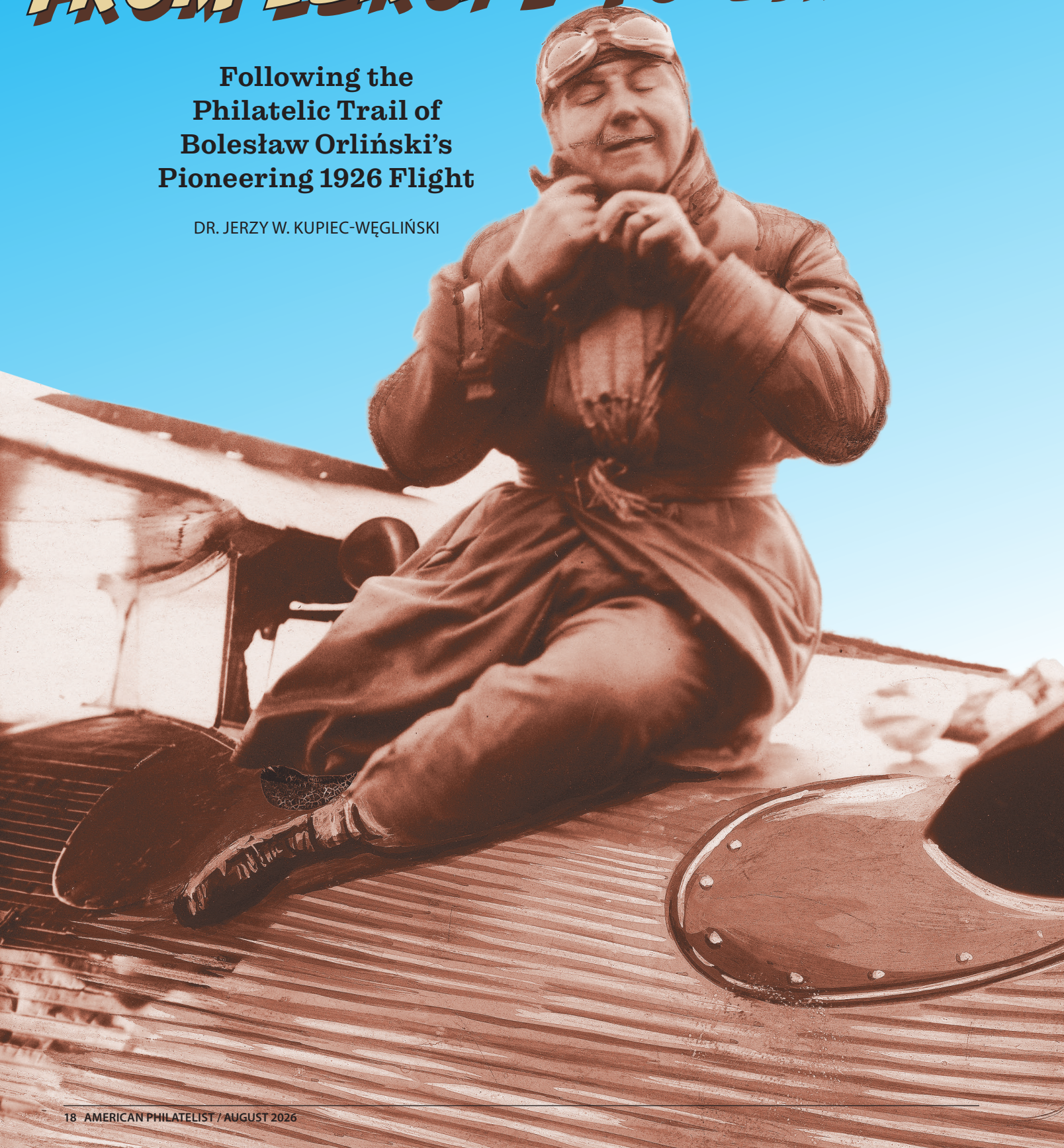

ON May 24, 1926, two Polish aviators, Lieutenant Bolesław Orliński (1899-1992) (Figure 1), an aero-acrobatic instructor at the Air Force Academy, and Sergeant Leonard Kubiak (1899-1939), an aircraft mechanic, embarked on an experimental flight from Paris to Tokyo, with a planned stopover in Warsaw. However, a malfunction in their Potez XXV aircraft's Renault engine forced an emergency landing at a military airfield in Strasbourg, an Alsatian city that had recently been reclaimed by France.

After the repairs, Orliński and Kubiak continued towards Prague, but the engine failed again near Cheb in northern Czechoslovakia, resulting in a crash landing that destroyed the aircraft. Fortunately, both men were unharmed, and returned to Warsaw by train.

The day after Orliński's mishap, a French team attempting the same Paris to Tokyo route experienced a similar setback. The May 27, 1926, edition of *Kurier Łódzki* (*Łódź Courier*) reported:

> Evidently, some curse is haunting the grand air race from Paris to Tokyo. Recently, news broke of a sudden interruption during the first leg of the journey, as Polish pilot Lt. Orliński was forced to land north of Prague due to an engine malfunction, halting the race. The second competitor, French pilot Mr. Pelletier d'Oisy, faced a similar fate when he took off from Mokotów Airport, beginning the second leg from Warsaw to Moscow. Consequently, neither aircraft succeeded in completing the flight from Paris to Tokyo.



Figure 1. Bolesław Orliński as he appeared in the 1927 Polish silent comedy film *Orlę*.

The French aircraft, while navigating around a herd of cattle at the Warsaw airport, hit a pothole caused by a grenade explosion from the recent military coup led by Marshal Józef Piłsudski. As a result, the French team abandoned their plans for a flight to Tokyo. This incident raised suspicions of sabotage between the competing teams; contaminated fuel provided to the Polish crew in Paris, which led to a crash in Czechoslovakia, may have been French payback.

However, by June, tempers must have cooled. The French team took again to the skies, this time completing the Paris-Beijing route after an uneventful stop in Warsaw.

For their part, despite numerous obstacles, the Polish flyers remained determined to complete their flight to Tokyo, and set out again three months later, this time from their home country.

On August 27, 1926, Orliński and Kubiak took off from Mokotów Field in Warsaw in a Bréguet 19 (A2), a twin-seat, open-cockpit sesquiplane powered by a Lorraine-Dietrich 450 HP engine and equipped with extra fuel tanks (Figure 2). Traveling at a cruising speed of 90 miles per hour, they stopped in Moscow, Kazan, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, Chita, Charbin [Harbin, Heilongjiang province], Mukden [Shenyang, Liaoning province], and Seoul before landing on September 5, 1926, at Tokorozawa airfield outside of Tokyo (Figure 3).

The journey was multi-stage and included the first nonstop flight from Seoul to Tokyo, covering nearly 1,000 miles in 9 hours and 10 minutes. Upon arrival, Orliński was celebrated as a hero and received the Order of the Rising Sun, an award rarely granted even to Japanese nationals (Figure 4). Promotions, Orliński to captain and Kubiak to staff sergeant, were announced via telegram from Polish President Ignacy Mościcki. Orliński was also later awarded the French Legion of Honor for this achievement.

On September 11, 1926, Orliński and Kubiak set off from Tokyo in their Bréguet, arriving in Warsaw on the evening of September 25, 1926. Their round-trip journey lasted 28 days, during which they traveled over 14,000 miles and accumulated a total flight time of 121 hours and 26 minutes. This flight is celebrated as a significant milestone in aviation history, as it marked one of the earliest air links between Japan and Europe.

Despite experiencing at least two major incidents, Orliński later recalled the flight as uneventful and even "dull." The first problem occurred over the Sea of Japan, where crosswinds nearly caused a crash by pushing the aircraft away from the shore, forcing it to land with empty fuel tanks.

On the return trip, a sudden drop in oil pressure necessitated an emergency landing in Siberia, near the Chinese-Soviet border, to prevent engine failure. While the aircraft was on the ground, a tornado struck, lifting the tail and slam-

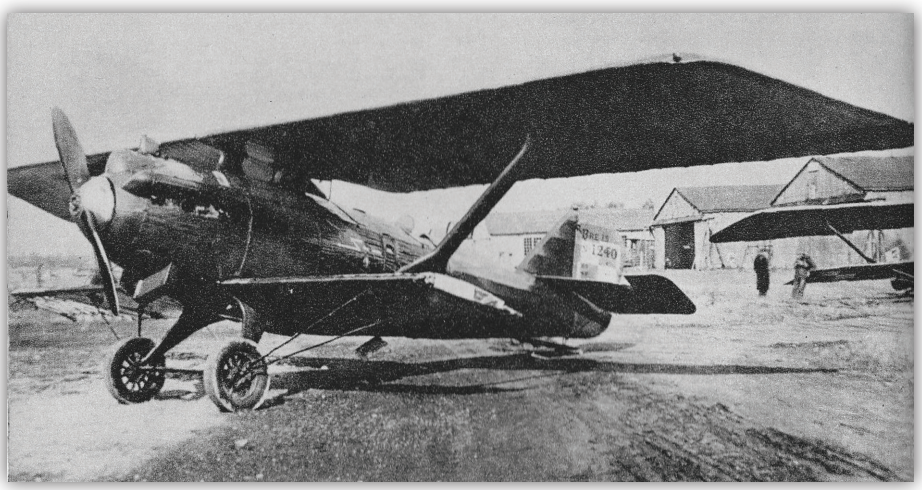

Figure 2. A Bréguet 19 (A2) two-seater, open-cockpit sesquiplane, in which Bolesław Orliński and Leonard Kubiak completed an experimental flight from Warsaw to Tokyo in 1926.

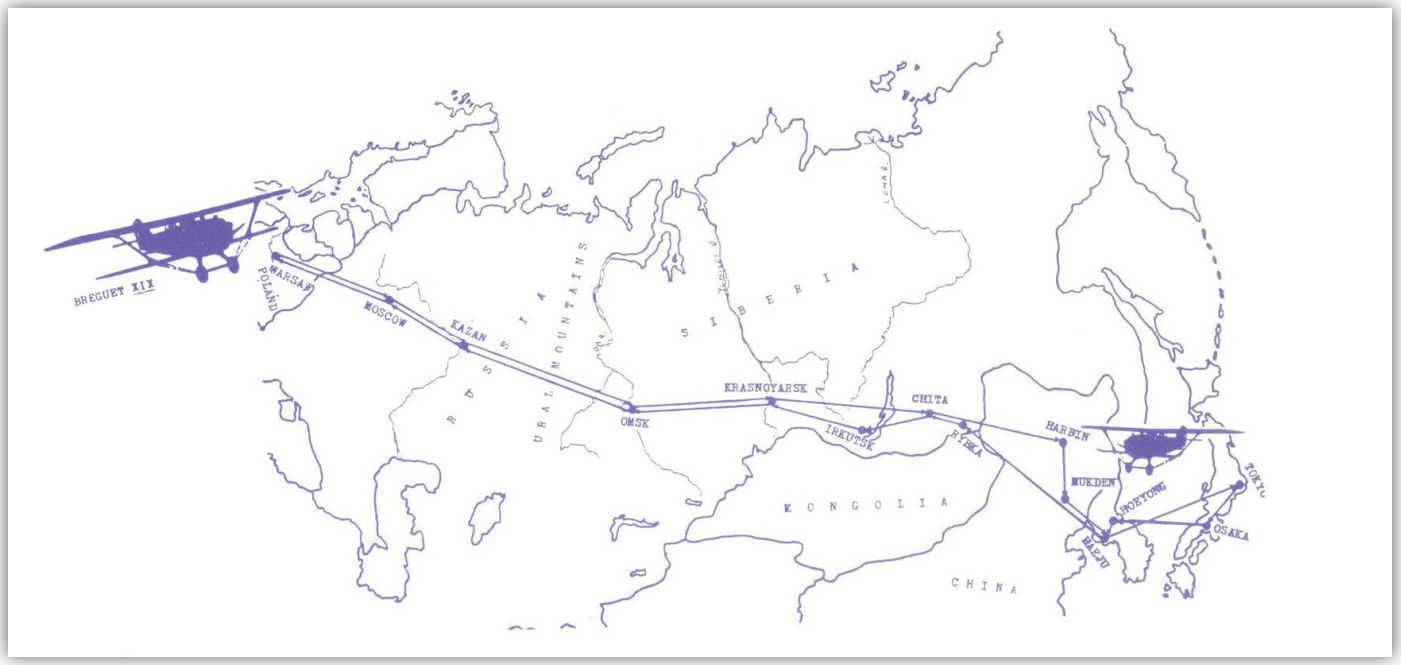

Figure 3. A map of Orliński and Kubiak's flights to and from Tokyo (courtesy of the Orliński Museum, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada).

ming it into a fence, damaging the propeller and the left wing. With the help of several Russian mechanics, Orliński and Kubiak removed the damaged wingtip by sawing it off. To keep the plane balanced, they then cut a matching two-foot section from the opposite wing; local Buryat women helped to stitch the fabric skin back together. The propeller was repaired with wood glue and reinforced with baling wire.

Upon the Bréguet's landing landing in Warsaw, a special commission discovered that most of the components connecting the engine cover to the fuselage were severely damaged, meaning that the engine could have come loose at any moment.



Figure 4. The Order of the Rising Sun medal and certificate awarded to Orliński by Emperor Taishō on September 6, 1926 (courtesy of the Orliński Museum).

Philatelic Commemoration

An interesting philatelic documentation from the 1926 experimental flight to Tokyo by Orliński and Kubiak exists. These airmail items are rare, as the majority were lost during World War II.

The flight was initially scheduled to depart from Paris in May, so a commemorative purple oval cachet, authorized by the Polish Ministry of Post and Telegraphs, with the inscription "Raid Polonais, Raid Polski / Paris – Warszawa – Tokyo / Mai 1926" was prepared.

Meanwhile, the Polish Air and Gas Defense League (*Liga Obrony Powietrznej i Przeciwgazowej*, LOPP), a grassroots paramilitary organization, issued a special semi-official stamp valued at 5 *złotych*. A total of 1,000 stamps were printed (900 perforated and 100 imperforate), in dark green on white paper, in sheets of 20 (5x4 layout), with each sheet featuring one *tête-bêche* pair. There is no indication that the Polish Post was involved in the issuance of the LOPP stamp.

Figure 5 is the only recorded mint sheet of six imperforated 5-*złoty* LOPP commemorative stamps, featuring an inverted stamp. Only five imperforated sheets with a single *tête-bêche* pair were produced.

Figure 6 shows one of the two known covers featuring a 5-*złoty tête-bêche* perforated pair, of a limited issue of 45 sheets, each containing one inverted stamp. This cover, addressed to Lieutenant Orliński on "Lot Polski" stationery from a weekly LOPP aviation magazine, was canceled on May 16, 1926, at the Warszawa 2 P.O., and bears a black oval cachet. It is franked with 32 *grosze* postage, which includes a 6-*grosz* foreign surface printed matter rate, a 6-*grosz* air supplement, and a 20-*grosz* postal administration fee. A Tokyo arrival postmark dated "27.9.26" confirms that the pilot transported this item to Japan.

The LOPP prepared its own mailings using official stationery, bearing the inscriptions "Liga Obrony Powietrznej

Państwa" or "Lot Polski." These items, addressed to Orliński and posted on May 16, 1926, at Warszawa 2 P.O., were franked with 32 *grosze* in airmail postage. However, as they lacked a special stamp, an LOPP official mandated that a 5-*złoty* surcharge be applied to all Tokyo mailings. As a result, correctly franked covers, which initially did not feature special stamps, had one affixed over the purple cachet and canceled with the same oval cachet, but now in black ink. The steep price of the LOPP stamp (approximately $1.25 at the time, or $23 in 2025 at a 3-percent inflation rate) was discouraging to many, prompting organizations such as the Polish Philatelic Society to withdraw prepaid items upon discovering the new requirement.

On May 22 and 23, 1926, a select number of cards and covers from private collectors were posted at Warszawa 1 P.O. These items were addressed to either "Legation Polonaise – Tokyo" or "Mr. Orliński – Tokyo – Poste restante." Each piece featured a 5-*złoty* LOPP stamp, which was canceled with a black oval cachet. A postal clerk mistakenly applied an "Air Mail" handstamp, creating confusion, as the affixed 6-*grosz* postage was sufficient for the surface printed matter rate.

After the first failed flight from Paris on May 24, 1926, the mail intended for Tokyo was securely stored at the Warsaw Post Office. Before departing from Warsaw on August 27, 1926, Orliński opted not to carry the heavy mailbag; instead, he took around thirty covers in his map case. The remaining items, approximately 150 in total, were discreetly sent to Japan in two parcels via the Trans-Siberian railroad to prevent any disappointment among aerophilatelists.

When Orliński arrived in Tokyo on September 5, 1926, the first batch of covers, sent to the Polish Embassy by rail, received a violet postmark reading "5.9.26" at a local post office. On that day, the aviator handed over the covers he had brought with him to the military attaché, who added them to a second batch of surface mail still waiting for arrival confirmation. However, issues of philately were quite foreign to the embassy staff, and the mail was somehow overlooked and forgotten. It was not until the LOPP intervened to collect their correspondence that it became apparent that Orliński's items, along with another shipment transported by land, had not received the postal processing. As a result, on September 27, seventeen days after the flyers departed Japan for Warsaw, all these items were stamped with a black "Tokio 27.9.26" cancellation.

In summary, genuine flown covers must adhere to certain specifications: they should be addressed in Orliński's handwriting, carry 32-*grosz* franking, and display the black cancellation "Tokio 27.9.26," while lacking the purple oval cachet near the LOPP stamp. Conversely, surface mail covers are franked with a 6-*grosz* Polish stamp and feature violet "5.9.26" Tokyo cancellation. Some surface mail covers were mistakenly mixed with those from the second batch, resulting in the presence of both "5.9.26" and "27.9.26" cancellations. The covers linked to Orliński that do not have Tokyo cancellations have remained in Poland. Ultimately, all



Figure 5. A unique mint sheet of six imperforated 5-*złoty* stamps, with a *tête-bêche* pair, issued by LOPP to commemorate the Orliński flight to Tokyo.



Figure 6. One of two recorded covers with a 5-*złoty* perforated *tête-bêche* pair of the LOPP special stamp. It was flown by Orliński to Japan.

covers sent by surface mail, along with those flown in by Orliński, were returned to Poland from Japan via Trans-Siberian rail.

The following two covers feature 5-*złoty* LOPP stamps, a more common perforated version (Figure 7; 900 issued), and a rare imperforated variety (Figure 8; 100 issued). The cover in Figure 7, posted on May 16 at Warszawa 2 P.O. and addressed to "Mr. Orliński," was correctly franked for external printed matter airmail at 32 *grosze*. This LOPP official stationery displays an oval black rubber handstamp and includes a "Tokio 27.9.26" receiving date stamp, thus meeting the criteria for flown mail.

In contrast, the cover in Figure 8, addressed to the "Legation Polonaise – Tokyo," was posted on May 22 at Warszawa 1 P.O., initially without a LOPP label and stamped with a purple oval cachet. Following an LOPP official's intervention, adding a special 5-*złoty* green label became mandatory, which was then canceled with a black cachet. This collector's mail, franked at the basic printed matter rate of 6 *groszy*, was transported via Trans-Siberian rail, despite the "Par Avion" directional cachet and the "Tokio 27.9.26" receiving cancellation.

The following three covers are interesting for several reasons. The first two, addressed to the Polish Legation in Tokyo, were mailed on May 22, 1926, from Warszawa 1 P.O., where oval purple cachets were applied. The external printed matter rate of 6 *groszy* was insufficient to qualify for an airmail concession, even though a clerk had applied the "Par Avion" directional endorsements, which was a deliberate misrepresentation. As the "Mozdyniewicz" cover (Figure 9) initially lacked a special LOPP stamp, a perforated 5-*złoty* adhesive was affixed over the purple cachet and canceled with the same oval cachet, but now in black. After arriving in Tokyo, this item was accidentally postmarked twice, "5.9.26" and "27.9.26." Despite lacking a special LOPP stamp, the second cover (Figure 10) was transported to Tokyo anyway and received "27.9.26" arrival cancellation. Hence, the illustrated covers were intended for the Orliński flight but were transported to Japan by surface mail, despite "Air Mail" and Tokyo "27.9.26" arrival postmarks.

The third cover (Figure 11) was posted on May 23, 1926, at Warszawa 1 P.O., where a special LOPP stamp was canceled with an oval cachet in black. The handwritten note inside, from Captain Benoit of the Military Geographical Institute and dated May 21, reads:

> My heartfelt wishes accompany the journey back to our homeland, where we eagerly await the return of our valiant Icarus, whose triumphant flight has conquered distant lands and seas. It is a



Figure 7. A perforated LOPP stamp on a cover flown by Lieutenant Orliński from Warsaw to Tokyo.



Figure 8. A rare imperforate variety of the LOPP stamp on a cover transported to Japan by Trans-Siberian rail.



Figure 9. This Orliński cover, despite "Par Avion" directional endorsements, was transported to Japan by surface mail and canceled twice after arrival in Tokyo (5.9.26 and 27.9.26).

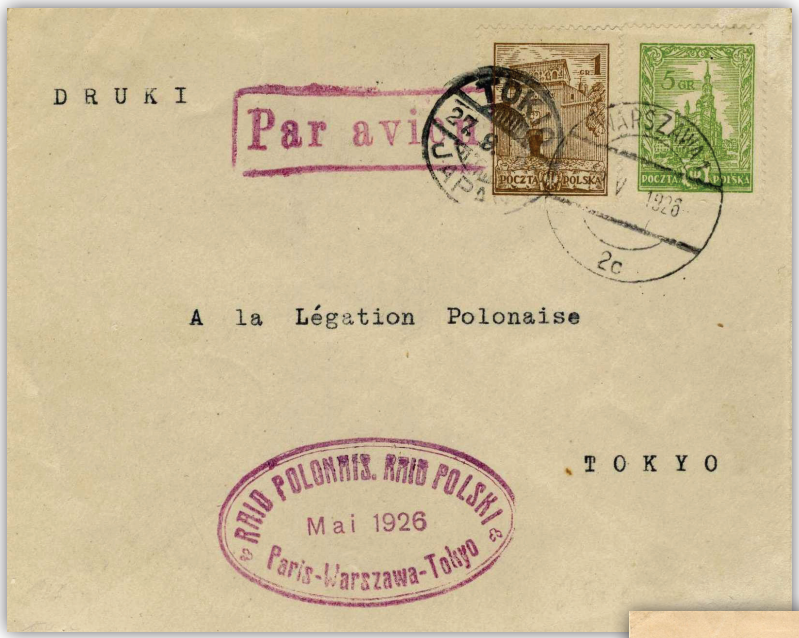

Figure 10. This cover bears a Tokyo arrival marking (27.9.26), but lacks the LOPP stamp.



The commemorative oval postmark for the planned Paris - Warsaw - Tokyo flight. It was an official postmark, as confirmed by a February 7, 1927, letter from Department VII of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs to the Polish Philatelic Society.

profound honor to recognize the courageous representative of the Polish Army!

This is one of two recorded covers, correctly franked with a foreign letter rate postage of 80 *groszy* (30-*grosz* surface letter rate, 20-*grosz* postal administration fee, and 30-*grosz* airmail fee). Despite the air surcharge paid for posting and the "27.9.26" Tokyo receiving postmark, this cover, along with other philatelic items, was transported to Japan by the Trans-Siberian Railway.

The postcard depicted in Figure 12 is rare, possibly even unique. It was sent by Mr. Włodzimierz Polański (1878-1944), a famous Polish philatelist and postal history scholar. The return address indicates his position as curator of the Warsaw Museum of Post and Telegraphs. Addressed to Mr. Umejiro Kimura in Tokyo, the postcard was intended to accompany Orliński to Japan. Posted from Warszawa 1 P.O. on May 22, 1926, it bears a purple oval cachet and a black arrival postmark from Tokyo dated "27.9.26." Interestingly, it does not include the 5-*złoty* LOPP special green stamp, and the 10-*grosz* imprint does not conform to standard postal rates. However, given Polański's prominence, this postcard is believed to be the only private piece of mail transported as a favor by Orliński from Poland to Japan in August 1926.

Figure 13 presents an unusual dispatch related to the disrupted flight to Tokyo, which started in Paris on May 24, 1926. It was sent by a military officer, Captain Ignacy Skorobohaty, and included instructions for Lieutenant Orliński about the Polish mission to acquire an aircraft for the Tokyo flight. Though the oval commemorative cachet is missing, the card displays a seldom-seen imperforate LOPP stamp. The correct postage for foreign printed matter (32



Figure 11. A cover franked with a correct letter rate postage (80 *groszy*); Tokyo arrival cancellation (27.9.26).



Figure 12. A possibly unique private card carried with Orliński from Warsaw to Japan in 1926.

grosze) was canceled on May 12, 1926, at a traveling post office (TPO) along the Warsaw-Zbąszyń rail route to Berlin. Interestingly, an additional foreign letter rate postage of 80 *groszy* was added on June 1, 1926, at Warszawa 19 Airport P.O. Despite a note requesting delivery in Tokyo, and Orliński's address in Paris crossed out, there is no sign of postal transmission beyond Polish franking and departure cancellations. This also raises questions about May 22, 1926, which has been recognized in philatelic literature since 1935 as the special LOPP stamp issuance date.



Figure 13. This cover was prepared in Warsaw for the original Orliński flight to Tokyo on May 24, 1926.

Before departing from Japan, the newly promoted Captain Orliński purchased several picture postcards, attached 6-*sen* Japanese stamps, and had them canceled with a Japanese-style date stamp "15.9.10," corresponding to September 10, 1926, during the reign of Emperor Taishō. A local typist addressed the cards, making some spelling errors that Orliński corrected by hand. Upon arrival on September 25, 1926, at the Mokotów airfield, they were canceled at Warszawa 19 P.O.

Figure 14 shows both sides of an autographed card carried by Captain Orliński on the return flight from Tokyo. Although catalogs put their number at 150, it is believed that not more than fifty were flown. The card shown here bears a Japanese-style "15.9.10" cancellation (September 10, 1926) and a Warsaw receiving postmark of September 25, 1926, on the reverse.

Figure 15 represents one of the two known private pieces of mail from Orliński's return flight from Tokyo to Warsaw, addressed to Mr. J. Godycki in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland. The envelope features Japanese postage, canceled in the traditional format of "15.9.10," consistent with the postal markings on all documented postcards from that flight. The directional endorsement reads "Lt. Orliński flight Tokyo – Warszawa 11/9 – 26." At

Genuine flown covers must adhere to certain specifications: they should be addressed in Orliński's handwriting, carry 32-*grosz* franking, and display the black cancellation "Tokio 27.9.26," while lacking the purple oval cachet near the LOPP stamp.



Figure 14. Both sides of a card autographed by Orliński from the return Tokyo – Warsaw flight in September 1926.



a 2025 auction of the late Zig Kopel's collection by Cherrystone Auctions, this item was sold for over $10,000.

After Tokyo

In 1928, Captain Orliński became a chief test-pilot for Polish-made fighter, sports, and passenger planes. He participated in numerous aviation contests, including the acclaimed 1931 National Air Races in Cleveland, Ohio (Figure 16). Figure 17 is of a recently uncovered luncheon menu that honored participating pilots, including Bolesław Orliński. The luncheon, hosted by John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company, was held at the Ritz Tower in New York. Following his victory in one of the major competitions, Captain Orliński was welcomed at a White House reception by President Hoover.

In the beginning of World War II, Orliński volunteered for the Polish Army, eventually being sent to Great Britain to assist the Polish Air Force in exile. Deemed too old to fly fighter planes, he served as an instructor until 1943, when he assumed command of No. 305 Polish Bomber Squadron, operating under the British Royal Air



Figure 15. One of two recorded private letters carried with Orliński on his return flight from Tokyo to Warsaw.



Figure 16. A postcard commemorating Orliński's participation in the 1931 National Air Races in Cleveland, Ohio.

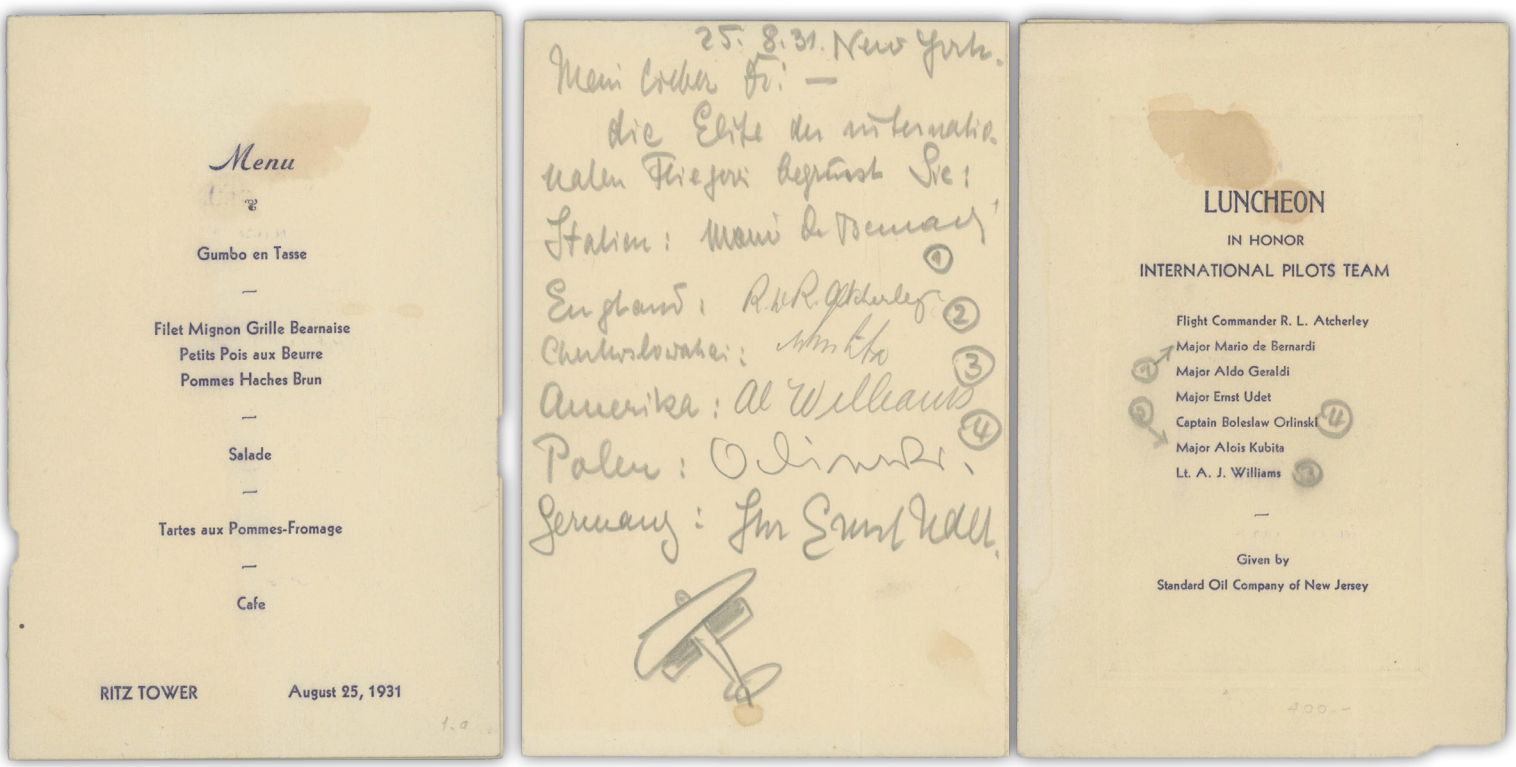

Figure 17. A menu from the luncheon celebrating the 1931 National Air Races' pilots (including Orliński) at the Ritz Tower in New York City. The reverse features the signatures of the pilots and a small drawing of a plane.



ON A NEW ROUTE : Sqn. Ldr. Orlinski, one-time record breaker on Warsaw-Tokio flight, now flies a Mosquito from Britain to Germany very frequently.

Figure 18. A photo of Orliński in the cockpit of a de Havilland Mosquito (with his navigator, Jan Lemieszonek) in 1944.



Figure 19. Orliński recorded his memories of the 1926 flight in his book *Do Krainy Wschodzącego Słońca (To the Land of the Rising Sun).* An English-language ebook is available courtesy of the Orliński Museum at aps.buzz/Orlinski.

In Japan, Orliński is celebrated as a pioneering aviator who completed a landmark flight. This achievement not only elevated Japan's global presence, but also left a lasting impact on the world of philately.

Force and based at RAF Bramcote, Warwickshire. The June 1, 1944, edition of *Flight International* reported, "Sqn. Ldr. Orlinski, one-time record breaker on the Warsaw-Tokio flight, now flies a Mosquito from Britain to Germany very frequently" (Figure 18). Indeed, he completed 49 operational sorties in the de Havilland Mosquito fighter-bomber, mainly at night.

Throughout his aviation career, Orliński flew 92 different aircraft and accumulated over 7,000 flight hours. After the war, he worked as a taxi driver for two years in South Africa before moving in 1953 to Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. In 1971, he served as the honorary chairman of the POLPEX philatelic exhibition in Chicago, where Dr. Kamieński, one of the event's organizers, noted that Orliński was not a stamp collector and had little memory of the mail carried during his historic flight to Japan in 1926. However, his recollections of the flight as a whole are recorded in his book *Do Krainy Wschodzącego Słońca* (*To the Land of the Rising Sun*) (Figure 19).

Bolesław Orliński passed away in 1992 at the age of 93 in Toronto, Canada, and was laid to rest in Wrocław, Poland. He was well-known for his philanthropic initiatives, dedicating a substantial part of his estate to create a trust fund aimed at training pilots of Polish heritage. In 2002, the Orliński Museum, which honors Polish-Canadian veterans, opened at his former home, Wawel Villa Seniors Residence in Mississauga, Canada.

In Japan, Orliński is celebrated as a pioneering aviator who completed a landmark flight. This achievement not only elevated Japan's global presence, but also left a lasting impact on the world of philately. During Orliński's life, the Japanese ambassador honored him by visiting on the anniversary of his historic flight to Tokyo, a tradition that continued until Orliński's passing. In 2024, on what would have been his 125th birthday, Japan's ambassador to Poland, Akio Miyajima, commemorated him once more by placing flowers at his grave.

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Jerzy W. Kupiec-Węgliński, M.D., Ph.D., the Distinguished Professor of Surgery at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), specializes in the postal history of airmail services in Poland. His exhibits won three national grands and four FIP international large golds. He has authored more than 100 philatelic articles, including for *The American Philatelist* (Barbara R. Mueller Award, 2012), *The American Philatelic Congress Book* (Walter R. McCoy Award, 2011 and 2012), *The Airpost Journal* (L.B. Gatchell Award, 2013), *The London Philatelist*, and others. In 2021, he published *The History of Airmail in Poland and Its Contribution to Airmail Services of Europe (1914-1939).* The book received the John Kevin Doyle Grand Award (Chicagopex 2021), the George D. Kingdom Literature Award (American Air Mail Society, 2021), and FIP large gold (Helvetia 2022). Kupiec-Węgliński is a fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society London, board member of POLONUS, and the recipient of the Luff Award for Distinguished Philatelic Research (2023).