

100 YEARS OF PERFINS IN AUSTRIA ————— by Vojtech Maxa

Officially it all started on April 4, 1877, when a decree was published in Vienna in the Official Gazette authorizing "firms or other persons to provide their stamps with small perforated letters or other insignia" to safeguard them against pilfering.

That means that April 4, 1977, was the 100th birthday of Austrian Perfins and of the Perfins of all those countries which grew out of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I. These new countries merely "accepted" most Austrian postal regulations as their own.

But in the Austro-Hungarian Empire-- unlike Great Britain--the acceptance of Perfins as the safest means of protecting stamps was not easy. On the contrary, Austria, lacking anyone as enthusiastic for the idea as England's Sloper, waited nearly a decade before copying the Perfins idea from Great Britain.

Stamps were first used in Austria on July 1, 1850. And the Austrians did not have a "penny post" as did Great Britain: Austria's first issue was in denominations from 1 to 9 kreuzers. The inland letter fee was 3 kreuzers and it was a sum tempting to office clerks who carted mail to the post office.

The Austrian post office never bought stamps from the public as did the post office in England, but this wasn't a handicap to the office clerks. They merely took their stamps to tobacconists who were the main providers of stamps to the Austrian public. The tobacconists bought stamps from the post office at a mere 1 percent discount and resold them at face to the public. But they bought from the sticky-fingered office clerks at a much greater discount.

In an effort to stop the pilfering, several Vienna business firms instructed their clerks to write the addresses on the envelopes after the stamps had been affixed and in such a manner that part of the fancy and ornate handwriting went over the stamps. Others instructed their clerks to apply the firm's cachet (a rubber stamp giving the name and address of the firm) in such a way that it partly cancelled the stamps.

These practices had been in effect for nearly 10 years when finally, on June 18, 1860, a postal circular confirmed that it was legal to protect stamps by writing part of the address over them. My theory is that some eager postal official did not want to accept such a letter, its sender complained to the authorities, and an official decision resulted.

Letters with the stamps partly overwritten by the address are scarce; much more common are letters with the firm's cachet employed for protection. Obviously the latter method was quicker, easier, and more effective. A pen stroke on a stamp could easily be removed and the stamp used again -- it is not difficult to write a new address in such a way as to match up with the pen strokes of the old address.

On April 11, 1863, the postal authorities

reaffirmed that the overwriting of the address was legal, but said that stamps partly cancelled with a cachet must be regarded as no stamp and dealt with accordingly. It should be noted that I have yet to see such a letter bearing postage due stamps.

Still another method of security endorsement was tried, but only rarely. That's a small relief print in the shape of an oval, some 5 by 10 millimeters, bearing the name and address of a firm. I have one example of this in my collection and it appears that there were very few such relief prints used since it was quite an expensive method of protection.

We know that Joseph Sloper tried personally to sell his perforating machines on the continent and it is quite certain that he succeeded in at least one case. Messrs. Paget & Company used a Perfin which bears the definite signs of Sloper's "signature" (Figure 1). Not only the layout -- which evades the monarch's head -- but also the typical Sloper ampersand -- mark the Paget & Company design as Sloper's work. Another Perfin -- M & Company, Vienna -- has the same ampersand and could also be the work of Sloper (Figure 2). The distinctive ampersand was not used later when Austrian firms began to produce perforators.

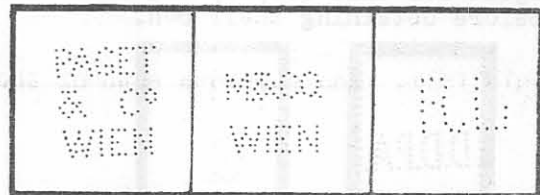


Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

The earliest dated Austrian Perfin I have seen is from May 5, 1879, two years after the official approval was granted by the government. But I have Perfins which appear older, although they have illegible dates. One is an RL, probably belonging to R. Lechner, Vienna, on the 1874 Franz Josef 5-kreuzer stamp (Figure 3). The Perfin design is rather crude and it is possible that some local craftsman tried -- without success -- to match Sloper's skill.

I am quite certain that Perfins were actually used in Austria before April 4, 1877, although I cannot provide dated copies to prove it. There is, however, indirect proof.

On June 2, 1886, the Post Office enlarged its original decree of 1877 to permit the use of Perfins on post cards and other stationery. Curiously enough, it was Messrs. Paget & Company who had applied their Perfin to post cards as early as January 1881 -- a full five years before such use was sanctioned. It is easy to draw the conclusion that the Austrian government was, on April 4, 1877, merely giving official sanction to what had been a practice for some time.

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Austrian Perfins are neither studied nor collected in the country of their origin. Austrian philatelists are still under the influence of the philosophy that considers stamps with holes to be worthless. All the credit for what we know about Austrian Perfins goes to Dr. Robert L. Moore of Dallas, Texas. Dr. Moore has compiled an impressive collection and catalog of Austrian Perfins. He has so far isolated some 1800 patterns and has identified many of them.

I am very grateful to Dr. Moore for his kind permission to continue his work and to update and enlarge his catalog. We in Czechoslovakia have good conditions for such work. There is still considerable Austrian kiloware here which is the ideal hunting ground for new patterns. My colleagues and I hope to be able to add new patterns and identifications to the work Dr. Moore has started.

We also hope to have the masters of an Austrian catalog ready for publication sometime before the end of this year. That, we think, will be the best possible tribute to Austrian Perfins in their centennial year.