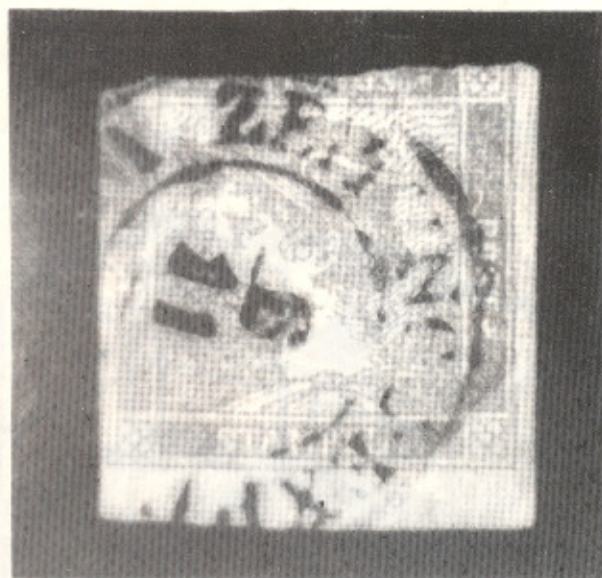


THE AMATEUR PHILATELIST of any age or background will eventually face the same puzzle a detective faces when trying to solve a crime. He might, one cold and rainy evening, find himself gazing at a particular piece of evidence from the scene, a single stamp in an old forgotten auction shoe box full of stamps. A pale blue stamp cut from a card of stamps like the very earliest stamps. It is worn with age and bears the profile of the Greek messenger Mercury wearing a winged helmet and the markings, "Zeitungs" and "Stampel." Then a realization blossoms . . . "Who printed this? . . . Oh, what great distance it must have come, to me here on this awful night! But what does it mean?"

Good friend, such a thing happened to me last winter as I sat late sipping coffee at my stamp table! I had seen this stamp somewhere years before when I pored through catalogs and dealer brochures to start my 19th-century collection. Again, I began searching. After thumbing a few old catalogs and auction booklets I located a similar profile of the stamp on my table. The stamp was Austrian in origin, a newspaper stamp used around 1860! The red version of the stamp, the "Red Merkur" (red signifying prepayment) was extremely valuable. The color of the stamp on my table was blue, and by philatelic standards it was quite shabby. The color of the "Lylac Merkur" was selected by the State Printing Office in Vienna to offend as few people as possible. So it was a newspaper stamp! A stamp used on a wrapped newspaper and delivered somewhere in Austria in the mid-19th century. There was a cancellation mark across the stamp. "Zeitung ? 6/11." The delivery date was Nov. 6. Of what year? Probably in the late 1860s but it was impossible to know exactly.

What was cooking in Austria around 1860? A quick check in an

RIGHT: The "Lylac Merkur" newspaper stamp. **BELOW:** Note the clarity of the staff on the "Kruezer" stamp. The government of 19th century Austria even selected stamp colors thought to be least offensive to the annexed territories.



The Blue Merkur



By
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old 19th-century world history book indicated that 10 years earlier, a radically changing Italy lay on Austria's southern border. Austria, under Emperor Franz Joseph, had marched on Hungary and Italy, emerging the victor. There was a long and complicated story about the rise and fall of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire in which Russia was a key player, but I was content to know that the newspaper beneath the binder and stamp that lay on my table probably bore quite troublesome news about war to a lot of Austrian and Italian folks in the 1860s.

One answer leads to yet another question. There is an envelope in

BELOW: Perfectly engraved cockreel taken from a large Czar bank note dated 1905; Romanov coat of arms.



ABOVE: Double-Headed Cockreel on the coat of arms of the Czar of Russia, printed in St. Petersburg in the late 19th century. The staff and cross are clearly engraved to show the coat of Czar Nicholas.

this same collection that was post-marked around 1861 and addressed to someone in the Italian town of Mogliano, and originating in Sardinia. In the last century, Sardinia was an Italian state, an island off the west coast of Italy. Why does the two-headed cockreel, the family crest of Czar Nicholas of Russia, appear on the pastel pink stamp glued to the envelope? (Remember? Before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1914, the long line of Czars ruled. Monarchy was very "in" during the 1800s.)

It seems that amid the distress that flourished with the movements of these royal ridge runners, regal friends were essential, and a powerful feather in Franz Joseph's crown turned out to be the support of Czar Nicholas on the new Austrian acquisitions. If you are a king, how do you let everyone know who's got the "big guns"? Well, for one, print a hundred thousand stamps showing the two-headed cockreel!

The rain had stopped. It was one

o'clock in the morning and an icy wind began to howl in the trees outside my study. But what about the 1860 stamp on that old Tuchovsky letter addressed to No. 26 Bischofstrasse in Berlin? Or the Austrian envelope from about the same time. Are the cockreels exactly alike? No! The Tuchovsky envelope clearly bears a cockreel holding a staff and cross, symbols of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Lombardy to Venetia, Sardinian stamped envelope (a lovely specimen) seems vaguely engraved; the staff and cross are not as distinct as printings used on the two other envelopes, or particularly the prime example in the coat of arms printed on an old Czar banknote. Perhaps the vagueness was intentional.

After all, one of the hot issues that typified these regional sensitivities erupted in the streets of Milan in 1848. Occupying Austrian officers ignored a majority Italian boycott of Austrian tobacco, a major source of revenue for Austria,

and simply lit up on the street corner! A brief skirmish in Milan followed. Martial law was declared. Riots broke out in villages and towns across Italy, and the King of Sardinia, King Victor Emmanuel II, declared support for liberation from Austrian rule. King Victor received the keys to the throne from his defeated father in 1849 during the last hours of the battle of Novara when Victor resigned and walked unrecognized through enemy lines, and proceeded on to his exile in Portugal. The Vatican sided with young Emmanuel at first, then reversed its position. It is possible that the vagueness in the design that celebrates the Austrian and Russian alliance was intentional to avoid worsening an already nasty situation. Only possible, though.

I switched off the lamp and chuckled to myself. All of that in a shabby old Austrian newspaper stamp. ■