THE FIRST PICTURE POSTCARD?

August Schwartz (1837–1904). Photo dates from around the turn of the century. This is the "illustrated card" that Schwartz mailed on July 16, 1870. The card was sent from Oldenburg to his cousin in Germany. The card is cut off at the top, but it shows a small military vignette with artillerymen. (coll. J. van Hasselt)

THE POSTCARD ALBUM #21

No one can be perfect...

This was and is still only too true. Even modern high-tech computer controlled production processes don't guarantee 100% quality. But items not meeting the quality standards are usually automatically or by hand rejected and do not come into circulation. How was the situation 100 years ago during the "boom years"? During the first firm, quite primitive production means means into account, the quality of the many million of postcards was good to excellent. Especially when you learn more about the production and working situation in the factories at that time. But the final control of the cards before they were packed up and delivered to customer wasn't that "perfect" as the number of standard cards still found today proves. I show three categories of mistakes which even run parallel with production stages of postcard printing.

Pre-Press Mistakes

Orders for PPC printing came to the factories via travelling salesmen, overseas branches and their network of agencies or wholesalers. Most of the orders were sent by mail. The customer had made his choice by viewing printing sample cards of the different processes and bookcards available. The parties agreed upon a certain price, with or without additional fees. The customer had proof copies or printed proofs (gla plates) together with instruction which portion of the photo to be used, necessary retouches and most important of all, which text to be imprinted (publisher line and captions). Printers always asked to write clearly or use block letters, but the imprints were a constant source of mistakes. Mis- spelled because the manuscript was (partly) illegible or because the customer could not read foreign languages, geographic names, etc. I am talking here about the mass of cards with topo views made from photos to be supplied by the customer and printed by colotyping or halftone process.

The procedure with chromolitho "Grau oss" type cards was different as in this case the lithographer had to create something entirely new. The customer might have supplied printed previous cards or other views, sketches. Usually customers ordering (explo- sive) chromolitho cards did receive a proof print first and had a chance to make corrections, especially with the colouring or size arrangement of images. Delivering time was usually 3 months and longer.

You might have noticed misprinted captions on some of your cards. Most postcard print- ers in Germany like C.G. Röder, Stengel & Co. Röttmers & Jonas placed adverts in print- medicae eg "Papererzeugung" looking for per- sons with good command of English, French and Spanish language. Not only to take over correspondence but to control imprint text on postcards of foreign custom- ers. These jobs were well paid but meant a lot of responsibility. Talking about cap- tions. On cards printed with text platen type the text was imprinted at final stage of produc- tion on a letterpress machine. When you know that postcards were printed on colotyping presses with huge printing format with 32 or up to 60 different views per sheet, you might understand that the chance of making mistakes with caption imprints found on a wrong card was quite high. Not all printers had same printing format colotyping and letterpress machines available and the sheet had to be cut up to fit into smaller press. Another potential source of mistakes. Suddenly a landscape view from Dresden received a caption of Central London. To arrange a printing form for letterpress imprint can also be tricky. Everything is mirror faced and mistakes with positioning type are common. A matter of constant problems and complaints was the colouring. As mentioned be- fore, customers of chromolitho cards usu- ally received a proof print when they ordered a new design and not a reprint. However, sometimes the cards did come out different due to various reasons. Printers offering machine coloured cards (overlay colours) often used a colour scheme, so that the cus- tomer or his photographer could add in- structions fuse colour 12-yellow for body (col. green) shade. To order a specific colour or no colour photography around. Stencils- and hand-colouring was even more difficult to handle and for high/very valuable orders "proof prints" were given to customer. Often enough the printing result was not as desired, so with customers living in far away places.

Colotyping printing process as well as bro- mide photography by the milieu often showed mistakes. Because the basic principle of printing was sensitive to temperatures and humidity and bromide photo process with its developer quickly dried out after exposure the customer might be disappointed by the print quality if the colour scheme and other washout chemicals produced poor quality when the constant move of the printer and cold or hot temperatures was irregular. Sorting out by hand all cards too dark or bright, with dots, scratches or what- ever fault was a must not take a while. So the Second World War, Fortis Green (GB). Monochrome colotype with (handwritten) caption scratched into negative. Publisher line applied by letterpress, but the publisher name only. The cards were round. The imprint "should" have been noticed quickly. Card no. 83 published by E.L. & J. Clarke, East Finchley, P.U in 1911. (coll. Chris Ratcliffe)

By the Editor

I never made a secret of my dislike of the discussion who 'invented' the picture postcard or who was the first to send something looking like a picture postcard through the mail. This matter of dispute is around for over 100 years al- ready. News of early picture postcards mailed before the official date postal authorities allowed private persons to send postcards turn up quite regularly, and usually fetch high prices at auctions. Also I don’t understand why I should call myself dellitophil, philatelic expert. Or why collecting non-official picture post- cards should belong somehow to philately, only because the card was transported by the postal service, carries a regular postage stamp and postmark. I don’t need a classification, no pseudo-expert genre. I collect postcards only and information on printers and publishers.

As said above I try to keep away from the very early years of picture postcards history = postal history. But now I received force again) a request from an US reader wishing to learn more on the so-called ‘inventor’ August Schwartz from Oldenburg, a per- son often found/referred to in literature.

Dr. Heinrich von Stephan had first the idea of issuing a postcard (form at a German postal congress in Karlsruhe on 13, 14, 15. August 1860 - March 2, 1866), but his suggestion was dropped. Austrian Dr. Emanuel Hermann, a professor at a Military Academy wrote an article (published in January 1869) on "new means of correspondence by post". And the Austrian were the first to introduce the newly invented "Correspondenz-Karte" on Oct. 1, 1869. Of course there were a couple of other people who claimed to have invented the ‘postcard’ earlier. The German States issued their 'Correspondenz-Karte' on July 25, 1870. Not surprising that some cards came in circulation a couple of days before.

Then came war, the war was over, the once declared war on the German States on July 19, 1870, and great quantities of ‘Feldpost- Correspondenz Cards’ were produced and mailed. These cards were printed by private firms too, and a number of them were illus- trated with heart vignettes, various greetings, imprints and sketches. The often referred to card of August Schwartz belongs to this genre although it was mailed short before the outbreak of the war.

Well, I don’t understand why the ‘mobila’ card of Schwartz is said to be the first picture postcard. It is a unique specimen, and the illustration is on the reverse – the front side = of the postcard according postal regulations. Schwartz himself took this matter not too serious according articles he published in his own publications and almanacs/ calendars. He saw himself as inventor of il- lustrated postcards because of the two sets of 25 cards each with woodcuts on this time on the reverse published in 1875. But in the meantime a number of other people had issued ‘picture postcards’ already.

The major problem with the first picture postcard (in Germany) is, that there were too many other postcard like items around already. From May 30, 1875 on it was allowed to mail out printed "advice-notes" of commercial nature, price-lists, advertising etc. These required a 1 Pf postage stamp to be placed at upper right corner position. Besides the address following handwritten parts, were accepted: name and address of sender, place, date and signature. To me, the com- bined sheet (first issue already) prehistory of the postcard (under this matter) looks already very much like a picture postcard, especially when the illus- tration was imprinted. Always, such sam- ples turn up as first picture postcard from time to time.
German troops in occupied Malmedy (Belgium) in WWII. Fieldpost card p/u June 1946. Publ. by Verlag für allgemeine Wissen, Berlin, gravure (sepia) printing by Knackstedt & Co, Hamburg. Card in pretty used condition, but I keep it anyway and not only as Knackstedt & Co sample but because of the notice (in German) seen on the house wall. Speed limit for cars 20 km and shut exhausts! Sounds a bit strange today, but automobiles/trucks at that time had more power with open exhaust.

Another card in rather used condition, real photo, not p/u only with almost faded rubberstamp imprint on address side of photographer Fotolegie, Prusa II. Huge stadium filled with great number of soldiers doing gymnastic exercises (some don't look happy!). Could be an opening show of a bigger sportive event. The photographer imprint makes me believe that this stadium was found in or near Prague. This card is difficult to date, could be from 1920-1930's. But what bigger event took place here! And when?

Well, this is something to be filed nowadays under 'Macabre' or 'Caricature'. Perhaps this motif has also a political background. The card is slightly bigger sized as regular cards (141 x 95 mm), half-tone printed in reddish-brown ink. Published by art publisher Gustav Liersch & Co from Berlin as no. 275. Details on Liersch are found in TPA # 18, p. 12. The caption 'Beurer-Ringer' could be translated best as 'Swindler'. Cigar smoking skull dressed in suit and coat, with sort of distinctive 'scarf' around the neck. Think this 'scarf' represents something typical in this case. The 'Beurer-Ringer' poses in a self-confident way. The 'Greetings from' imprint with space for location gives this unusual card another odd note. Card is not p/u but dates from around or more likely pre-1900 time. There must had been a good reason for Gustav Liersch & Co. to publish this card and expect people to buy it. Wonder if Liersch had any other similar cards on offer.

Since the early days of the postcard boom, publishers were faced with the problem of obtaining new motifs and pictures. Consumers expected to find new cards on offer in always shorter intervals. This led to the practice of re-cycling the same picture, to save money and time. Usually with some retouches, in different colours or printing styles, mirror-faced and so on. I did not expect to find such examples still around in the 1960's. Here were two such cards published by H.S. Crocker & Co, San Francisco, in his registered 'Mirror-Krome' process. Based on the same photo two cards were produced, even with different captions in same series. Wouldn't be surprised to find a third version one day.

The First Picture Postcard

First Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor, is shown on the earliest p/u card I managed to find in my boxes. Columbotype printed by Stengel & Co, Dresden in series III, no. 0042. Message dated Dec. 1890, postmark Berlin Dec. 14, 1890 and arrival postmark Dresden Dec. 15, 1890. Same handwriting on front and reverse, historically correct (Bismarck had the lease the political stage in March 1890 and lived on his estate Friedrichshain / Sachsendorf near Hamburg). But something is wrong with this card (in very good condition). The address side design does look like late 1890's. I don't know... And at that time Stengel & Co. was Stengel & Markert... (?)

The earliest p/u card in my printing trade collection is a "Gross aus Wittenberg" (Dresden) view of the printing house Glück (established 1816). Two colour (blue/brown/green) printed but really bad register, card in used condition. P/u in July 1893, with typical "Deutsches Reichspost, Postkarte" imprint on address side.