

Perfin Stamps with Special Reference to the Present-Day Territory of the Czech Republic Dai Pring

I blame my interest in perfins on CPSGB Packet Manager Bob Allard who slipped a few perfins into a Society packet a few years ago. The stamps themselves were of no great interest but I thought the the holes punched in them might be of significance. A search of *Czechout* offered no information but soon a club auction enabled me to purchase the first edition (1972) of Vojtech Maxa's catalogue *Perfins of the Territory of Czechoslovakia*. I was hooked and thought that I might at last accumulate a decent specialist collection. As I learned later it was not to be as inexpensive or easy as I initially thought!

Perfins are stamps perforated with the initials or emblems of businesses as a security device. The term comes from *perforated initials*. An earlier term, which is no longer used, had been *SPIF* (Stamps Perforated with the Initials of Firms). The term perfin was first used by an American, Mr Hallock Card, in his 1944 edition of the *Homestead Hobbyist* and was soon widely accepted.

In 1840 when the first Penny Black was produced a pint of gin cost two pence, a quart of beer one penny, a cheap meal around two pence and the same would get a shared bed in a lodging house. An errand boy's wage was often not more than a penny a day and so it is not surprising that dishonest office workers and errand boys supplemented their meagre wages with the theft of postage stamps.

Many perfin collectors will know of the case reported in the *Manchester Examiner* on 21 February 1868 when a provision dealer, John Howarth, was charged with receiving 7,820 stamps at the value of £35 19s 2p from errand boys and junior clerks in exchange for bread and cheese. It should be noted that at that time the Post Office undertook to repurchase unused stamps and so this form of theft proved particularly lucrative.



*The German House, Brno.
Postcard franked with a stolen perfin?*



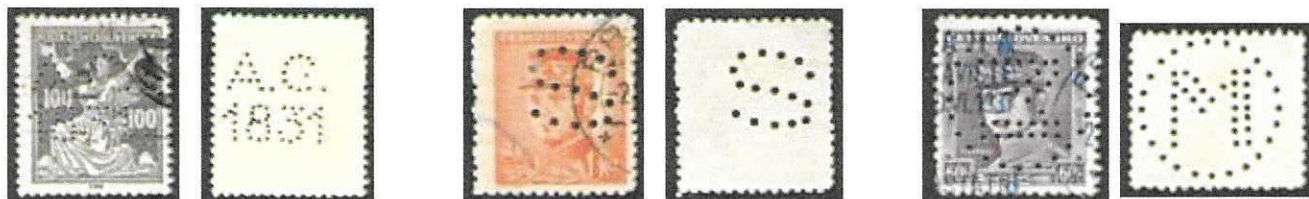
The above is a postcard sent from Brno but stamped with a Viennese perfin used by Fischer and Sonnensheim, a money institute. Was this theft by an employee on holiday to Brno?

The resale of stolen stamps was a considerable concern for many businesses and other organizations. In 1859, the Oxford Union Society was the first to be given permission to overprint their stamps by adding an emblem or inscription to the stamp subsequent to the original printing. By 1867, over 60 businesses favoured *underprinting*, printing the firm's name on the gum on the underside of the stamp. This proved to be an insecure method as the underprinting would be washed off when the stamps were first wetted before use.

Although Sir Henry Bessemer (1813-1898), who invented the first process for producing steel inexpensively when aged only 20, had suggested perforating revenue stamps instead of embossing them, it is generally accepted that the first successful attempt to prevent pilfering was the perforating

The relative difficulty in building a decent collection will be apparent when we see the number of different perfins already identified: for Great Britain 23,500, for Germany 12,600, and for the United States perhaps some 6,000. Maxa suggests the following ratings:

- A – the most common 200 + copies known
- B – 100 to 200 copies known
- C – 50 to 99 copies known
- D – 25 to 49 copies known
- E – 6 to 24 copies known
- F – 5 or fewer copies known



Left: *Assicurazioni General v Tertsu (Insurance)*, Prague 1900-1930 – Category A.
 Centre: *Svoboda Publishing and Printing House*, Prague 1945-1951 – Category C.
 Right: *Matador (unknown)* Prague 1929-1938 – Category D.

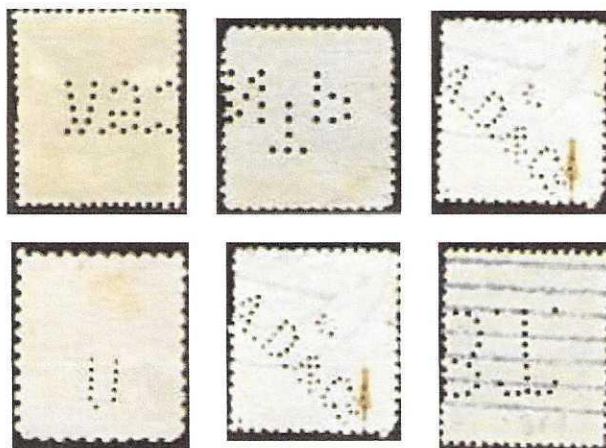


Krejci a spol (Exports),
 Zatec 1930-1938 – Category E.



Herz (unknown), Brno 1916-1925 – Category F [rare].

The rather tedious task of perforating the stamps usually fell upon an office junior who often fed the stamps into the perforator in a haphazard or perfunctory manner. Thus perfins may be found face up, face down, inverted, at an angle (either because of a deliberate die design or through carelessness) or have doubled or incomplete impressions.



Close on 1,000 different perfins have been identified as originating in the lands that now make up the Czech Republic, many identified as the result of research by Maxa, Fejtek, and Janáček. Around 690 different perfins have been found on Austrian stamps up to 1918, but nearly 230 of them disappear after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



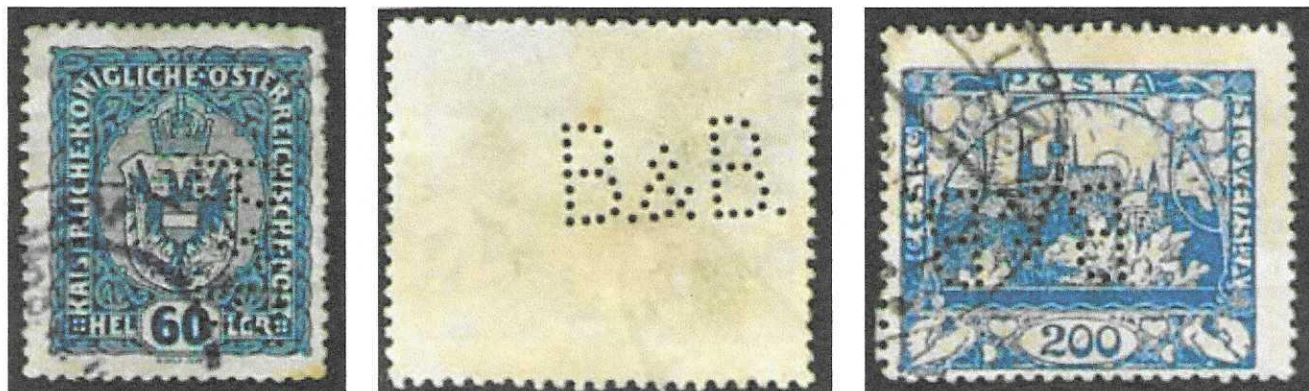
Firms that perished with the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Left: Tormarystwo wzajemnych ubezpieen (Insurance), Brno 1899-1918 – Category B.

Centre: Akciová pojišťovna (Insurance), Prague 1904-1918 – Category C.

Right: Vit Furth & Son (Chocolates), České Budějovice 1904-1919 – Category D.

The new Czechoslovak Republic inherited over seventy percent of the existing Austro-Hungarian industries intact, much of which was situated in Bohemia and Moravia. The new nation ranked tenth in world industries almost overnight. Many of the industries that survived used their old dies on the new Czechoslovak stamps.



Same die used on Austrian and Czechoslovak stamps.

Blass & Bondi (Spirits & Yeast), Čáslav 1904-1936 – Category B.

For the years 1918 to 1938 a further 300 perfins have been identified, but the 1929 Wall Street crash, the annexation of the Sudetenland, and finally the creation of the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia & Moravia meant many businesses disappeared altogether. The annexation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 meant that firms operating there used German stamps, mostly of the Hindenburg type. Once the rest of Czechoslovakia had been annexed, over 120 companies switched to either Bohemia & Moravia or German stamps.



Czechoslovak dies used on German stamps.

Left: Josef Riedel (Glass products), Dolní Polubný 1899-1944 – Category A.

Centre: Moric Schnitzer (Textiles), Varnsdorf 1929-1944 – Category D.

Right: E J Weinmann (Coal merchant), Ústí nad Labem – Category A, [poorly punched, artificial perfin display].

On 9 May 1945 the Czechoslovak Republic was restored but the Communist Party came into power in 1948. By 1949 90 percent of Czech industry had been nationalised. Fewer than 40 businesses continued to use perfin after the war and that number soon dwindled. By the 1950s perfin usage had declined dramatically and was replaced by metered mail.

Only the Orbis publishing house continued to use perfin into the 1970s and is one of the few perfin to survive in relatively high numbers, making it possible, for example, to study destinations, perfin positions, and stamps with worn or broken pins.



1926

1929

1930



1932

1929

1935



1936

1945

1948



1951

1954



1974

Missing and worn pins on the Orbis company die 1926-1974.

What then are the possibilities for the collector of perfin from the Territory of Czechoslovakia? For me it is first to collect a perfin and then to find as much as I can about the business itself, their geographical location and how they were affected by the political upheavals in 1918, 1938, and 1945. Others may choose to collect entires or perfins relating to companies dealing in certain products or to collect perfins of a particular person or city. Another person might collect flaws, errors, or perfins with damaged or missing pins. Then again, one might simply seek to collect a particular perfin found on as many different stamps as possible. The possibilities are limited only by one's imagination and the material available.

