

The Swiss Postcard

BY CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN

Linked to the beginning of tourism as well as to postal developments in neighboring Germany and Austria, the postcard appeared early in Switzerland. This is not surprising since the postcard has always been inexorably combined with travel.

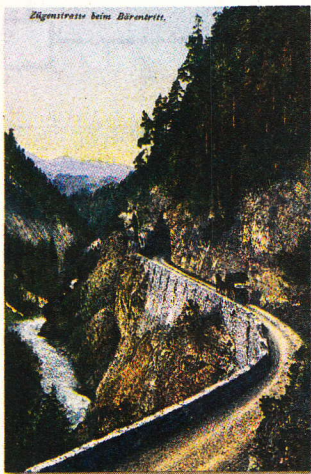
From early on, the wealthy enjoyed the pure air of the majestic Swiss alpine scenery, first for health reasons and then as part of the Grand Tour to the great cities of Europe. In 1834, the luxurious Hotel des Bergues in Geneva marked the beginning of lakeside tourism; by the 1860s, hotels with "Grand," "Palace," or "Royal" in their names crowded many of today's well-known mountain destinations in the Valais, Bernese Oberland, and Graubunden regions. Their imposing, grandiose structures emphasized picturesque views and expansive ornamented grounds. Although mainly enjoyed by the privileged, foreign travel quickly became within reach of the ordinary tourist. English tourism companies in

particular were busy sending many of their countrymen to Swiss lakes and mountains for leisure travel. When Thomas Cook arranged the first European organized tours in the 1860s, his travelers to Switzerland came from a growing middle class. "Switzerland is so overrun by tour-ists," exclaimed writer Alphonse Daudet in the late 1800s, "that it has become one great health resort, open from June to September." Indeed, Switzerland, today's

world-famous vacation land, can lay claim to being the cradle of modern tourism.

So it follows that the ingenious Swiss took immediately to the concept of the postcard. What better way to show friends back home the places they were visiting than by a picture postcard? Utilitarian, inexpensive and artistic – it was the perfect vehicle to illustrate beautiful alpine panoramas, exotic customs, and flower-laden architecture. According to historian Otto Wicki, the first cantonal (likened to an American state) envelope with imprinted stamp was published around 1846, leading the way to the introduction of the official postcard on Oct. 1, 1870. Valid only in Switzerland, the Carte-correspondance had an imprinted five rappen stamp in the upper left corner.

In the same year the post office also introduced postal cards like today's money order with which one could safely send money. It is hard to believe today that the postcard could be controversial; but some argued against it,



Top and above: Early Swiss postcards on the subject of postal history and transportation (Courtesy of Museum for Communication, Bern)



So fehlt die Zeit mir heute sehr, Dafür ganz sicher Nächstens mehr.

Souvenir of Berne (French spelling of Berne although the rest of the postcard is in German), General View of the City around 1896.



Typical "Gruss Aus" postcard advertising the Grand Hotel des Salines on the Rhine River (Courtesy of the author)

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A diversity of Swiss postcards. (Courtesy of Museum for Communication, Bern)

believing the postcard made it easy to read other people's mail, leading to loss of privacy or perhaps to defamation of character.

Nonetheless, the march of progress could not be stopped, and in 1872, the first privately-printed card with six small, colored views of Zurich on a single card, designed by Carl Rorich, and engraved by Zurich publisher, J.H. Locher, appeared. In the same year Locher issued a set of Zurich views, printed in Nuremberg, considered among the earliest known pictorial postcards. Soon, view cards became widely popular as the idea of scenery on postcards was promoted not only by villages, towns, and cities but additionally by hotels and restaurants that understood their positive advertising potential.

By 1875, more than 100 different pictorial postcards could be purchased in Switzerland and Germany. The World Post Foundation was created in Bern the same year. Unfortunately, the Franco-Prussian War prevented further meetings, however, the Foundation formalized regulations for mailing postcards among member countries and overseas.

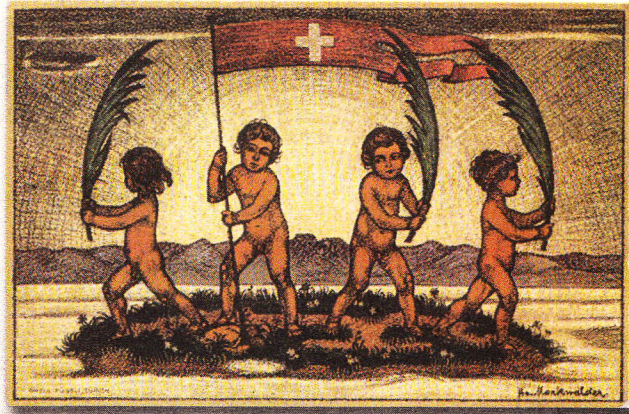
By 1879, the inventive Swiss Post originated the "doppel," or foreign answering postcard with two cards in one. The recipient would separate the second card, fill it out, and reply to the sender. As the postcard became more and more popular, it was widely collected.



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The First Swiss Postcard, 1870. Note the imprinted stamp is on the left side. This would change in 1907 when the stamp was moved from left to right. (Courtesy of Museum for Communication, Bern)



Bundesfeier Postcard for 1916 illustrated by the celebrated Swiss artist, Hans Markwalder (b.1882 d. 1951). (Courtesy of the author)

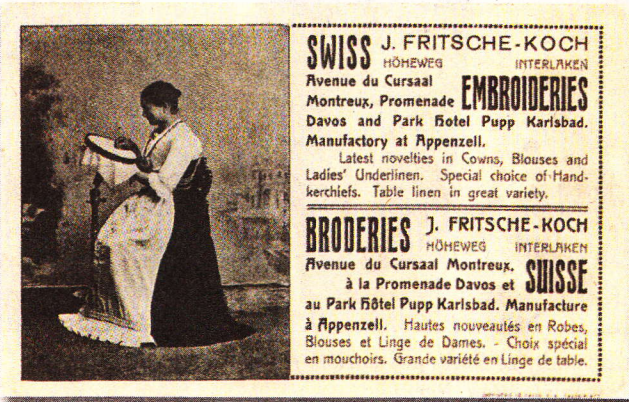


The back of a 1901 postcard showing two postmarks, from the sender's location and from the recipient's location. (Courtesy of the author)

In 1902 some 22 million postcards were mailed in Switzerland while its inhabitants numbered only three million. And, it is interesting to note that, according to Wicki, only eight million of these cards were actually printed in Switzerland.

One popular format included an elaborate ornamental framework often bedecked with clusters of flowers, with the words, "Gruss Aus" meaning "Greetings From" followed by the name of the postcard's location. At first such cards were printed in one color, then two colors, usually brown and blue, but soon multiple colors became common. Up to about 1907, each card was postmarked three times, twice leaving the sender's post office and once by the recipient's post office.

When the first patriotic Bundesfeier postcard was published in 1910 to raise money for people who had suffered in floods, more than 300,000 examples of that first issue were printed. Artists competed for the honor of having their artwork illustrated on the card once a year, until the series' end in 1960. Gradually, however, in 1945, there was a deterioration of printing and paper quality in the average Swiss



An advertising postcard in English and French produced for the J. Fritsche-Koch specialty stores located in the tourist destinations of Interlaken, Montreux, Davos and Pupp Karlsbad. Their embroidered articles were made in the canton of Appenzell, known since 1850 for finely-embroidered textiles. The image of a girl in typical tracht (Appenzell regional costume) working at her embroidery hoop or frame emphasizes the fact that articles in this store were of high quality, painstakingly made by hand. (Courtesy of the author)

postcard. Postage rates increased and the more technologically advanced communication of the telephone became the favorite mode of communication. Moreover, from 1930-1960 there was a wave of destruction throughout Europe as avid philatelists cut off collectible stamps and discarded or burned handwritten letters and postcards.

Now, however, there is a renewal of interest. Architects and architectural historians are finding that postcards are often the only available image of old buildings. The canton of Zug bought postcards for their own archives just for that purpose, and collectors find postcards valuable for their artistic, cultural, and historical values. According to Johannes Müller, cartophilist dealer in Bern (johannes.mueller@smile.ch), whose stock ranges from 20

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centimes to 500 francs, cards illustrating small villages are most in demand with transportation-related cards coming in second place.

Although there is no specific museum for postcards in Switzerland, the Museum for Communication (Bern), National Library special collections (Bern), History Museum (Luzern), and Swiss National Museum (Zurich) own many postcards. There are undoubtedly small local collections throughout the many regional Swiss museums, but as Bernard Schuele, former president of the Swiss Museum Association told me, they are usually not individually catalogued or on permanent display.

The Museum for Communication in Bern began as the PTT Museum (post and transportation museum) and owns about 20,000 postcards. Many deal with post transportation but include collections of the Engadine Press 1890-1940 and the Gabler collection of the Bernese Oberland (Interlaken) 1880-1920. There is a small but fascinating permanent installation on view to the public that includes a complete set of Bundesfeier illustrated postcards. Curator Rolf Wolfensberger (r.wolfensberger@mfk.ch) finds that postcard images are becoming more and more in demand for exhibition signage because they are often the only known image of a particular place or thing.

The postcard as an historical document is becoming more and more important in Switzerland as demonstrated by

recent museum exhibitions that treated postcards in a scholarly manner. The Maison Tavel, a branch of the Museum of Art and History in Geneva, mounted a 2004 exhibition on the Jaeger family, Geneva's postcard dynasty for three generations. Their production began in 1908 and ultimately revealed Geneva and its surroundings to the rest of the world as only postcards can. Today the Jaeger archives are owned by the city of Geneva.

In 2003, an exhibition about the Rhine River organized by the National Library in Bern used postcards as a major component to describe and illustrate the Rhine River and its importance in popular culture through the decades. In addition, Gruss aus der Ferne (Greetings from Foreign Lands), a traveling exhibition organized in 2001 by the Ethnology Museum of the University of Zurich included many early views from exotic lands, such as Guatemala, South America, Japan, Africa and India. These trailblazing museum exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues demonstrate that in a country known for watches and chocolate, Switzerland's postcard history is becoming more and more significant. Perhaps in the future Switzerland will also be known for its postcards?

— Cynthia Elyce Rubin is a frequent contributor to Postcard Collector. As a curator, she organized, "Swiss Folk Art: Celebrating America's Roots" and "Bread and Chocolate: Culinary Traditions of Switzerland."