

## Forgery or An Amazing Find? Mark Wilson

### Discovery

On September 1, 2002, for the first time in nearly a year, I pointed my web browser at EBay and did a quick search for *Czech* in the category *Stamps*. Those of you familiar with the EBay Internet auction know that the first page presented after a search is a list of items matching the search terms for which the auction is about to expire.

The second item on this list, due to expire within minutes, had the title **Czechoslovakia Unusual unlisted stamps; error** and a current bid of \$36.00. Curious, I clicked on the link. I was rather disappointed to see displayed a small piece of printers waste consisting of multiple impressions of the Hradčany 20h and 30h stamps (*see Figure. 1*). A typical EBay auction, I thought: some mislabeled printer's waste being sold as a true error to the unsuspecting at a very high price.



Figure 1: First screen.



Figure 2: Second screen.

I started to move to the next auction. As I did, part of another picture scrolled up onto my screen. It was just below the printer's waste but had been hidden from my initial view of the auction page. This bottom picture was of a homemade album page containing four gutter pairs from the first Hradčany issue (*see Figure 2*). I suspect that very few potential buyers actually saw this lower half of the auction page because after six days, there were just two bidders and the bid had reached only \$36.

I enlarged the picture and could see that all four gutters appeared unfolded and were marked **PORTO**. Since I had never seen gutter pairs used as provisional postage due stamps, I became even more interested. Suddenly, and to my shock, I realized that the 5h stamps were not reciprocal. *Both stamps faced in the same direction!*



Figure 3: Unidirectional 5h gutter pair used as provisional postage dues.

There was no doubt in my mind that these items must be forgeries. After all, the 5h unidirectional gutters are so rare they hardly show up in the literature. *POFIS 2002*, on page 16, describes the 5h unidirectional gutters as un-issued varieties.

By email I quickly contacted a far more experienced collector who advised purchase only if I wanted to collect forgeries. I decided I wanted these items as unusual examples of forged materials. I entered the auction and won the bid for a little over \$115, paying, if one disregards the piece of printer's waste, about \$20 each for my uncommon forgeries.

### Provenance

When the stamps arrived a few days later, I examined them in earnest. The seller shipped them to me still mounted on the original collector's homemade page. On the back of this page, the collector had mounted the printer's waste seen in *Figure 1*. The commentary, at the top of the page (with original punctuation, spelling and capitalization), said:

In the years; 1918-1919 several armies occupied what is now Czechoslovakia. The AUSTRIAN army ran out of or had no access to Fieldpost stamps therefore local stamps were Over Printed "PORTO" and used as postage dues to be paid by the person receiving the letter. Many excess stamps were CTO'd or are found mint.

The below examples were used at NACHOD a rather small town located in North Czechoslovakia near the German border, about 100 miles from the Austrian northern border.

The notes were printed using a low-resolution dot-matrix computer printer font, so it is safe to assume the page was created sometime during the last two decades of the past century. This marvelous piece of philatelic and historical misinformation was credited in

handwriting to the *Michel Katalog, Europa*. It is unclear why the note was printed while the attribution was in script; perhaps a different person wrote each of them. I have not yet verified the geographic information, but assume Náchod is probably where the note says it is. In any event, it is clear that the author of these comments did not know what these items were.

When I contacted the dealer who sold me the gutter pairs, I learned that the items had come from an Oregon estate sale of a general worldwide collection and that the dealer still had the source album. Although the dealer willingly provided this information, he did not provide any other details. He agreed to sell me the Czech pages for very little, which I purchased in hope of finding some additional clues.

When the loose pages arrived, they contained a very pedestrian and incomplete collection of quite common First Republic cancelled stamps. There were no other homemade pages: all of the album pages were labeled *A Vintage Reproduction Page*. I suspect the album originally may have contained other pieces of printer's waste, because the dealer, before he shipped the album to me, sent me a picture of several pieces of printer's waste which he asked me to identify and price. He said the estate agent was asking him to buy these items separately. Since there is a hinge remnant on the back of the homemade page where the *Figure 1* printer's waste was mounted, I tend to believe that additional pieces of printer's waste had been removed from the page before the sale.

Were I to venture a guess on the provenance of these items, I would say that in all likelihood the collector obtained the provisional postage dues and the printer's waste at the same time, perhaps already mounted. It is clear that both the estate agent and the selling dealer believed the printer's waste to be more valuable than the gutters. Perhaps the collector thought the same, relegating the postage dues to insignificant back-of-the-book status.

### **Description**

Let me describe the stamps. The stamp paper appears white, very old, and bears a clear to yellowish gum. Some of the pieces have small creases, are lightly soiled, and are in unfolded condition. Every item on the page is diagonally hand stamped, sometimes inverted, with the word PORTO framed at either end with a silhouetted star. The CTO pairs bear a round cancel from NÁCHOD 4b with a date that appears to be 19-II-19-2 (see *Figure 3*). Although the month and year are quite clear, the day indicated on the cancel tends to have parts missing or to be very faint in most of its impressions. It was clear that whoever mounted these pieces on the homemade page also applied their first hinges, as there was no sign on any of the pieces of the disturbed gum or hinge remnants that would indicate repeated mounting.

I decided to do a bit of investigation. As already mentioned, POFIS discusses the 5h gutters, but does not mention any provisional postage-due use. I reviewed Karásek's *Československé poštovní známky a jejich padělky 1918-1939*. Surely the counterfeiting of such an uncommon stamp would be mentioned there. I was surprised to see on page 43

that the only counterfeits listed for the 5h were the reciprocal, not the unidirectional, gutter pairs. Nor was there any mention of these stamps in his section on postage-dues.

As for the 5h mint with the wide left margin, the control number indicated that the pair had been taken from the left-most position on the sheet. I turned to the *Monografie (Dil I)*, and reviewed the Hradčany printing forms described on pages 100-105. On page 103, *illustration 140/A1* described the plate layout for this 5h gutter pair. On the left side of the form **TD II** was placed over **TD I**, and on the right side, **TD III** over **TD IV**.

I assumed that the wide margins came from the left side and not from the center of the printing form, which meant, according to the *Monografie* illustration, that the top stamp had to be **ZP II/91** and the bottom stamp **ZP I/1**. As it happens, I have both of these full sheets in my Hradčany collection.

I retrieved sheet **TD I** first and compared its **ZP 1** with the lower stamp in the gutter pair. **ZP I/1** has a distinctive marking: just at the end of the tail of the **5** is a small, elongated dot. Both my sheet and the lower stamp of the gutter pair have the same small dot (see *Figure 4*).

I next examined my **ZP II/91**, but was unable to quickly locate a distinguishing mark within the stamp itself. [*Help here from more experienced collectors would be greatly appreciated.*] However, the **-50** control number is appropriate for **TD II** in that it lacks the decimal point. In point of fact, the lack of this decimal point is the distinguishing mark for **TD II** (*Figure 5*).

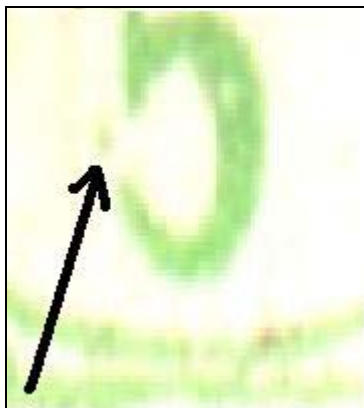


Figure 4: Dot after 5.

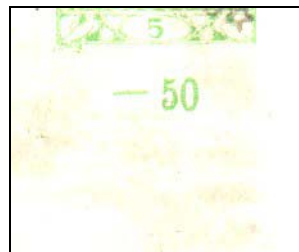


Figure 5: No decimal.

All four stamps measure 26 x 22.5 mm. The gutters on the mint and cancelled pairs differ in size. The gutter on the mint pair is 34 mm, but the gutter on the cancelled pair measures 35 mm. There is yet another measurable difference between the mint and cancelled pairs. The lower stamp on the mint pair appears to be offset 1 mm to the left of the upper stamp, while the two stamps on the cancelled pair appear to be aligned. Clearly these differences in gutter size and alignment are important signals.

The *Monografie* illustration shows the gutter to be 35 mm and indicates no offset between **TD II** and **TD I**. If both gutter pairs are genuine, one is lead to the conclusion

that the description in the *Monografie* must be incomplete. The only situation that could account for the differences between the cancelled and mint pairs would be if the cancelled pair, unlike the mint pair, came from the right side of the printing form and there was an alignment difference between the left and right sides of the printing form. Of course, I simply may have made incorrect measurements, but the most likely account is that the forger got it wrong.

It also would be helpful to know if the cancellation was actually possible for these gutter pairs. Was this cancellation in use when the 5h gutters were printed? Is the date valid? Is the date appropriate for a provisional postage due? I do not own the *Monografie* volumes dealing with cancellations so do not have access to any of this information about cancels.

The other stamps in the set are worth description. The 10h pairs have the same provisional postage due marking and the same cancel. The mint pair has a small mark in the color of the stamp (red) at the lower left, while the cancelled pair has part of the next stamp's inverted *Mucha* and a thin sliver of the next stamp at the lower right. As with the 5h pairs, these stamps are unfolded and appear to have been hinged for the first time when mounted by the collector (*Figure 6*).

Note that the 5h and 10h cancelled pairs have the same jagged trim: a shallow indentation that extends from the bottom of the pair to just above the lower stamp. When placed one upon the other, the 5h and 10h indentations nearly coincide.

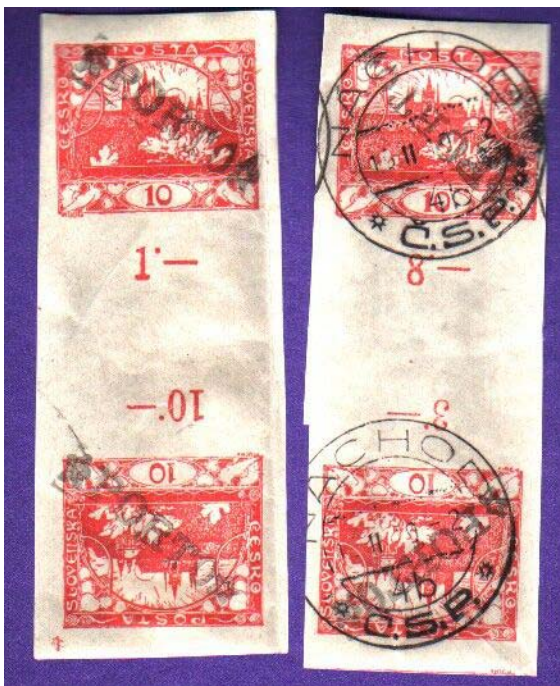


Figure 6: 10h gutter pairs.



Figure 7: 20h pairs.

The two 20h pairs have the same provisional markings and cancellation. As before, the cancelled pair shows a slight indentation along the left margin, but in this case alongside

the top stamp. Their hinges also appear to have been applied by whoever first mounted them to the homemade page (*Figure 7*).

The **PORTO** has been applied inconsistently. Most often it runs from the top left to the bottom right in a diagonal across the stamp. The 5h mint gutter has the hand stamp upright but it is inverted on the cancelled 5h pair. There are several scenarios that could account for this difference: there may have been two gutter sheets, the hand stamping could have occurred at different times, or the hand stamp device may have been inverted while being re-inked. It might even be that the person doing the stamping may have wanted variation for variations sake.

The 10h pair shows another inconsistency. As with the 5h pair, the provisional mark has been applied differently to the mint and cancelled pairs. While the 10h mint pair provisional marks resemble those of the 5h mint pair, the cancelled stamps show the markings applied to opposite diagonals on the upper and lower stamp. The 20h mint pair are marked in the same manner as the 10h cancelled pair, while the 20h cancelled pair resembles that of the mint gutters, but is inverted.

### Questions

Are these stamps forgeries? After only two years of collecting, I certainly do not have the expertise to determine whether they are or not. The odd thing is that I bought them believing them to be forgeries and have had that conviction shaken by the stamps themselves. Of course, the objective of the forger is to do just that, to put us off guard. If they are forgeries, the forger did his job very well indeed. By making what would be a very valuable piece a little less valuable (stamping it **PORTO**), the forger beguiles us into believing the object might be real. By setting details that can be researched (postmarks, etc.), we believe even more.

The difficulty I have with the forgery thesis is that the items are too strange to have escaped earlier notice. A more likely story is that they are favor pieces done by a local postal worker for an avid collector. The fact that (if they are genuine) the cancellations were all done on the same day and in the same place supports this thesis. I do note that the set lacks the then current 3h and 25h values. Perhaps those values, perhaps also in gutter pairs, are still out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered.

Since forgeries are far more common than amazing finds, I expect that the result of a professional examination of these stamps may well come down on the side of forgery. But no matter what the outcome, some notice needs to be taken of them. If they are genuine, they need to be reported and cataloged. Likewise, if they are forgeries, the literature needs to warn against them.

However it turns out, I cannot complain. If they are not genuine, I got just what I bargained for, some interesting additions to my Hradčany forgeries. But if they are genuine, I appear to have acquired a unique set and usage of my very favorite stamps, the first design of the Hradčany issue.

I commented to one of my correspondents that it would be a fine joke indeed if the forger took genuine stamps and in a misguided attempt to increase their value applied forged provisional postage due markings and cancellations. I have to wonder if these stamps eventually might be called *The Náchod Favors*, *The Náchod Forgeries*, or *The Náchod Follies*.

Does the collecting community have any information about these pieces for me? I invite correspondence via the email or postal address below.

Mark Wilson  
[hradcany@adelphia.net](mailto:hradcany@adelphia.net)  
316 Devland Drive  
Winchester, Virginia 22603 USA