

Return receipt (RR) in the Austrian Empire, to the formation of the GPU

Synopsis

THIS exhibit covers entities that were part of the Austrian Empire, or from 1867, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, until 1875. Austrian AR service, known mostly as *Retour Receptisse* (no accents) began perhaps at least as early as the 1780s [R]. It was used extensively throughout the Empire. A registered (or insured) item with RR service had a form attached (or sent in a separate mailing) called a *Retour Receptisse* (return receipt), which the recipient was to sign, and the form would be returned to the sender, via the office of origin.

Notation on covers was normally (*gegen/erga*) *Retour Receptisse*. Some RR forms in the early years were titled merely *Receptisse* or *Rezepisse* (receipt), but from the wording on them, it is clear that they were RR forms (the addressee is required to sign the form, thereby acknowledging receipt), rather than simple registration receipts (which later were denoted *Aufgabs-Receptisse*).

Organization

- **General information**, including currency, weights, and rates, as well as descriptions of generic RR forms; in this synopsis.
- **Return receipt forms**. Here we only treat RR for registered letters in the *Briefpost* (it was also possible to send insured letters and parcels with RR, but in the *Fahrpost*, which we do not cover). These are almost always domestic uses. International RR use in this period is rare.
- **Return receipt covers**. Even domestically, these are not common, but there is further difficulty in identifying them. The ones shown here range from 1808–1870, with a few to foreign destinations, arranged chronologically.

General information Most of the following is from [N].

- The expression **ĕ.ĕ.** (and variants; this is discussed in the *kuk* or *kk* subsection of [N]), that is, k.k., is an abbreviation of *kaiserlich und königlich* (imperial and royal), and appears on practically all documents of the Austrian Empire. It is an easy way to distinguish official Austrian documents from those of other German-speaking entities.
- The expression *ex officio* (and variants) means *ex-officio*, and refers to mail sent from government offices, frequently with no postage to be paid by the recipient.
- Any of *frei*, *franco*, *porto* on a cover means that the postage has been fully prepaid by the sender; the first is explained by the fact that the letter was free for the addressee (sometimes even registered letters were not fully prepaid, in which case what was left was collected from the addressee).
- *Loth* is a unit of weight, equal to 1/30th of a **Zollfund** (ſfund), which in turn weighed 500 grams; sometimes the Vienna Loth was used instead, but both are close to each other.
- The Austrian **Gulden** (in Hungary, *forint*) was divided into 60 **kreuzer**. *Florin* is the Italian name for the Gulden, and explains (?) why the abbreviation is fl, not Gu. In 1858, the Gulden was divided into 100 kr.
- A *German mile* (G-mile) was equivalent to about 7.6 km (a *very* big mile; the current Imperial mile in the US and UK, and formerly in Canada, is only about 1.6 km). This is very close to, if not identical to, the Austrian post-mile (*Meile*).

Rates

From 1817–42, domestic letter rates were based on distance (measured in the number of relays) and weight (measured in Loth). They could be prepaid or partially prepaid, or even sent completely unpaid (for the sender to pay on receipt). The office of origin was supposed to write on reverse of the cover

the charges that had been prepaid, and on the front, the remaining charges, for the addressee to pay.

In 1842, distance charges were eased on domestic mail; there were three classes, local (within the delivery radius of a post office), up to 10 German miles (76 km—these are big miles!), and more than 10 G-miles; in 1843, the 10 G-mile condition was replaced by 20. In 1848, rates for an interpolating distance of 10–20 G-miles were introduced, and in 1849, the 20 G-mile zone was extended to 30.

Registration was introduced in 1789, and in the stampless period was typically indicated by a red crayon or black pen grille, which resembles *MM* with cross-bars. Registered letters were charged an additional 2 kr if senders merely wanted a (printed) receipt (*Aufgabs-Receipte*) from 1817; until 1826, they could prepare their own, thereby avoiding the charge. This charge was dropped in 1842. However, return receipts (to be signed by the recipient and returned to sender) are more complicated.

Use of stamps [M] When stamps were issued (1850), their use was compulsory on domestic letters, and a month later, on mail to countries of the German-Austrian postal union; this was gradually extended, until 1856, when their use was compulsory on all mail.

The registration fee had to be prepaid by stamps on all mail. Until December 1865, stamps paying the registration fee to a domestic destination were to be put on reverse of the cover. They can still be found on reverse well after this date.

For RR, on domestic mail, the fee had to be paid in stamps from the outset (at least according to [M]). There are plenty of RR forms from 1850–1870s with no stamps; presumably, these were all sent ex-officio (on government service). The RR fee was to be paid in stamps on the RR form (not the registered letter).

On foreign mail, the registration fee could be paid in cash until the period in which the rest of the postage had to be paid in stamps. From 1863, parcels were subject to a tax of 5 kr.

For the stampless period (pre-1850), rates were obtained from [N]; for the period after 1850, from [H]; RR fees were obtained from [R].

17 June 1817–31 July 1842

Domestic postage for letters in the period were determined by distance, in terms of the number of relay stations (given by r in the formula below), and weight, in terms of half-Loths (given by h), up to a maximum of 6:

$$\left\lceil \frac{r \wedge 19}{3} \right\rceil \cdot 2h \text{ kreuzer.}$$

This compactly represents 2 kr for each half-Loth and three (or part thereof) relay stations. Recall that there were 60 kr to the florin at this time.

Registration (domestic) was 4 kr; a *registration receipt* from the post office cost an additional 2 kr.

This causes problems, as a marking such as *gegen Receipte* on a registered cover may not mean *Retour Receipte* (as would be indicated by *gegen/erga Retour Receipte* and variations), but could just be a request for a registration receipt, and cost an additional 2 kr.

RR Both domestic and foreign, 12 kr.

Prepayment in full or part was not required.

Procedures Rates were normally written in red crayon, until 1833. From then, main and branch post offices were *supposed to* use red ink for prepaid letters, and black for (completely?) collect. The office of origin was to indicate on the back of the cover the charges that had been paid, and on the front, the charges to be paid by the addressee.

1 August 1842–28 February 1843

Three distance zones replaced the relay charges.

Local letters (that is, within the same delivery zone, or within a city) were charged a flat rate of 2 kr, up to three Loths.

Distance \leq 10 G-miles 6 kr for the first half-Loth, and additional 3 kr for each of the next two quarter-Loths, and then 6 kr for each subsequent half-Loth, to a maximum of 3 Loths total.

Distance $>$ 10 G-miles 12 kr for the first half-Loth, 6 kr for each of the next two quarter-Loths, and

12 kr for each subsequent half-Loth.

Registration 6 kr, but now the registration receipt came for free (or in other words, the 2 kr receipt charge was folded into the former 4 kr fee).

R R ≤ 10 G-miles 6 kr, otherwise 12 kr.

One might expect that *erga/gegen Recepisse* marked on a letter would now mean *Retour Recepisse*, but it seems more likely that this was just a leftover reflex from the previous era.

1 March 1843–31 May 1848

The distance zones were increased to more or less than 20 G-miles; the rates (including those of registration and **R R**) otherwise unchanged.

1 July 1848–31 March 1849

A new distance zone of up to 10 G-miles was introduced, at 3 kr for the first half-Loth, 5 kr for up to $\frac{3}{4}$ Loth, 6 kr up to one Loth, and 3 kr for each subsequent half-Loth. **Registration** remained 6 kr. **R R** became 3 kr if local; 6 if 20 G-miles or less; and otherwise 12 kr.

1 April 1849–31 May 1850

20 G-mile zones were replaced by 30 G-mile zones.

1 June 1850–31 October 1858

Stamps introduced. In 1858, the florin was revalued, so that one florin was made up of 100 kr, rather than the former 60.

Local 2 kr per Loth

≤ 10 G-miles 3 kr per Loth

$10^+ - 20$ G-miles 6 kr per Loth

> 20 G-miles 9 kr per Loth

Registration 3 kr if local, 6 kr otherwise

R R 6 kr

1 November 1858–31 December 1865

Local 3 kr per Loth

≤ 10 G-miles 5 kr per Loth

$10^+ - 20$ G-miles 10 kr per Loth

> 20 G-miles 15 kr per Loth

Registration 5 kr if local, 10 kr otherwise

R R 5 kr if local, otherwise 10 kr

1 January 1866–30 June 1873

Local 3 kr per Loth

Domestic 5 kr per Loth

Registration and **R R** unchanged

1 July 1873–31 December 1882

Local 3 kr per 15 grams

Domestic 5 kr per 15 grams

Registration and **R R** unchanged

Retour Recepisse forms

Austrian **R R** forms come in numerous sizes, papers, colours, and with or without stamps (both possible after stamps were issued). They are typically cut (or torn) from a larger sheet, which results in varying margins. There is often a frame. The text is usually in Fraktur (*Retour Recepisse*), but the version of Fraktur varies. Sometimes the head is given in roman.

The following is typical wording for a return receipt (for registered letters, that is, in the *Briefpost*, as opposed to the *Frachtpost*, for insured parcels and letters of value). Fraktur takes a little while to learn to read. But this is nothing compared to reading *Kurrentschrift*, the now-obsolete handwriting of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Retour—Recepisse

Dass ich das, bei dem k.k. Postamt zu
am ten 184 rekommandirt aufgebene Schreiben unter Adresse:

am untengestzten Tage richtig erhalten habe, bezeuge ich mit meinter eigenhændigen Unterschrift.
den ten 184
Unterschrift:

Zur Nachricht

- 1) Die Recepissegebühr ist vom Aufgeber entrichtet worden.
- 2) Der Empfänger ist gehalten, das Datum einzusetzen, und die Namensfertigung beizusügen.

Dieses Recepisse wolle mit erstem Postsage an das obengænante Postamt der Aufgabe zuruckgesendet werden.

Some pairs of characters in the originals are ligated (e.g., $\text{t}\mathfrak{z}$ for tz , $\text{c}\mathfrak{h}$ for ch), but it was too much bother to duplicate the typography. There are also long esses, eszetts, and various other things. Wording and placement varies from form to form. Early forms use the spelling *Rezepisse*, as *c* is not a full-fledged member of the alphabet in German (it normally only appears in *ch* or *ck*). Some non-registered mail (such as parcels or letters of value [it is preferable not to use the expression *money letters* for the latter, as this will cause confusion]) could also be sent with RR, but in the Fahrpost.

A rough translation follows.

Return-Receipt

I have received from the Imperial and Royal post office of [*Office name*], a [*letter*] dated [*day*] of the [*month*] [*year*], a registered letter from the following address: [*address of sender*]

I testify via my handwritten signature that I have received it today in good condition.

Signature:

Information

- 1) The return receipt fee has been paid by the sender.
- 2) The recipient is required to insert the date, and add the name.

This receipt is to be sent via the first post to the post office of origin.

For Fahrpost, which involves packages and letters of value (as opposed to Briefpost, which carried registered letters), the forms were somewhat different.

References

- [H] Website of the Hungarian Philatelic Society of Great Britain, <http://www.hpsgb.com/special.html> (*special rates*)
- [M] Edwin Mueller, *Austria*, Mercury Stamp Journal, #15 (1950) 77–82 and #16 (1951) 102–110; downloadable from Richard Frajola's website, <https://www.rfrajola.com/MSJ/Austria.pdf>
- [N] *New friends of old Austrian letters*, website of the Austrian Philatelic Society (GB), <http://www.austrianphilately.com/altbrief/>; also some rates at <https://www.austrianphilately.com/articles.htm>
- [R] Christian Hörter, editor, *Rückschein, avis de réception, return receipt*, Munich Collectors Club, vol 5, no year. In German, with English summaries