1918 Budapest-Vienna Route
Start of Hungary's Airmail

By Victor G. Berecz

On July 4, 1918 Hungary's first airmail route was opened with a flight from Budapest to Vienna, Austria. The two overprinted airmail stamps issued for this service (Scott C1 and C2) make Hungary the fourth nation in the world issuing official airmail stamps, after Italy, Austria, and the United States.

The Budapest-Vienna airmail service of July 1918 was an outgrowth of the Vienna-Cracow-Lemberg-Kiev military airline that began operation in March 1918. The Vienna-Kiev route was established to permit speedy contact with the military establishments on the "Eastern Front" where hostilities had just ceased in accordance with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

By April 1 this airline was opened to the public for private mail, as well as official correspondence.

The military value of the Budapest-Vienna leg of the airline was negligible. But, an extension to Odessa on the Black Sea, via Ujvidek, Craiova, and Braila, was contemplated and this would have had considerable military usefulness.

The 21 days of operation netted 39 successful one-way flights, two crashes, and just over 9,000 letters carried. Most of this mail was philatelically inspired. The operation was obviously unnecessary, and was terminated after the Vienna-Budapest flight of July 24.

The equipment used on this military airline was 165 200hp unarmed biplanes. Many were of the Brandenburg 369.00 type. Twenty-two planes and about 30 pilots and observation officers were available.

The first crew consisted of Capt. August Raft-Merville (the commander of the Austrian non-combatant air fleet) and Lt. Emil Varga. Lt. Varga was killed in a crash on July 13.

In all, the record shows that 2,411 regular letters were carried on the daily Vienna-Budapest flights from July 5 - 24. The flight of July 22 was canceled.

The regular and 2,390 registered letters carried. Of these, the ultimate destination of 403 was Cracow, and 192 was Lemberg.

Budapest-Cracow covers are scarce in the U.S. and I have never seen a cover to Lemberg.

The flights of July 13 and 21 resulted in crashes in which all the mail was lost.

On the first flight of July 4, 820 letters were carried.

The rate structure was based on the Budapest-Vienna service being a leg of the larger airline.

In addition to the normal postage and special delivery ("expresse") fee, a 1 Korona conveyance fee (for a speedy auto trip to the airport) and a 1.50Kr airmail fee (per 20 grams for each airline leg) was charged.

This means the franking for an ordinary letter to Vienna would be a 1.40Kr airmail stamp (Scott C1) and 1.80Kr in regular postage stamps. It is not only that the only origin where registered mail was permitted on the entire airline was Budapest.

In addition to Budapest, Vienna, Cracow, and Lemberg, there were 22 cities in Hungary and 12 in Austria to and from which airmail could be received and dispatched.

Mail to and from these other cities (which is very scarce—I have never seen an example) was handled by surface means as special delivery mail except for the air route portion of the trip.

Airmail dispatched from Budapest between July 4 and 14 should bear the normal "BUDAPEST 4" cancellation. The ink used was a distinct blue-black shade.

After the 15th a special cancellation reading "REPLO POSTA / IND. / BUDAPEST" was used. A similar receiving mark was used with the "IND" replaced with "EZK". The receiving marks at Vienna, Cracow and Lemberg were double circle types, each (except Vienna) having both German and Polish text.