



## LAURENZ KOSCHIER AND THE CONCEPT OF THE STAMP

It is now 100 years since Laurenz Koschier died in Vienna. During his life, he stubbornly maintained to be the inventor of the Stamp. History has a way of sidetracking important events and people who had something to contribute to society. But then it depends on who is writing history and for whom.

Considering the standards of that time, the outward course of Koschier's life cannot be called particularly remarkable. The son of a farmer, Laurenz (or Lorenz) Koschier was born on July 29 1804 in Unter-Luscha near Bischoflak, in the then Upper Carniolan area. Between 1819 and 1925, he attended the secondary school in Laibach, (today known as Ljubljana). Soon after leaving school, he was employed for a short term at the Office for Military provisions in Laibach, proceeding to the civil service as an accountant at the Venetian Government Accountancy. He was subsequently active in Klagenfurt, Villach, Agram (now Zagreb) and Milan, as well as at the Court Postal Accountancy in Vienna.

To live in the metropolis, with residency in Vienna, and work at the postal administration, was of prime importance to the ambitious and ingenious civil servant Laurenz Koschier. In Vienna, he formulated and presented his life-work — an entirely new concept for the payment of postal charges.

On December 31, 1835, Laurenz Koschier approached the Minister of Finance of the Austrian Government and presented him a report on the running of the postal service. In the report, Koschier included several reformatory ideas and plans concerning the then very complicated letter handling, and proposed among other reforms, that the postage on letters be paid by using "letter tax stamps".

(It is believed that Rowland Hill's inspiration to draft his paper proposing the use of postage stamps, occurred in the late 1830's after reading of the strong criticisms in Parliament of the state of the Post Office in Britain. The principal cause of political and indeed of public unrest was the high cost of postage).

However, Laurenz Koschier's propositions, epoch-making innovations with the improvements they were to render, did not meet with the slightest understanding by the Austrian Minister of Finance. A reformer of his stature was to his superiors obviously irritating and unwelcome. Thus, the Viennese authorities arranged a transfer of the, in their view, overzealous official.

So in 1851, Laurenz Koschier took up post at the Royal and Imperial Government Accountancy Office for Croatia and Slovenia in Agram, where six years later he reached the peak of his career with the appointment as vice-government accountant. In his private life, he found little happiness in Agram. In 1872 he was, for political reasons, forced to retire. Within a short period he lost his wife and both his children. Disappointed in his private life, unrecognized for his ingenuity by his authorities, Koschier moved to Vienna where he died lonely on August 7, 1879.

For a few decades it seemed as if with Koschier's death, his lifework too would be forgotten. But, fortunately, the tireless inventor had never kept his ideas to himself but again and again had them publicized in applications, petitions and newspaper articles. Postal historians of our century could therefore clearly defend Koschier's inventions and contributions towards a better postal service.

The 1835 reformatory plans are not Koschier's only efforts to the Austrian Post Office. In 1849 Laurenz Koschier developed a new concept for the sale of stamps and invented what we today call as "stamp booklets". After stamps had been introduced officially in Austria in 1850, Laurenz Koschier designed postage stamps in the form of transfer pictures, to prevent later manipulations such as detachments from the cover and reuse. In fact, some postal historians argue that postal cards, which were introduced for the first time, in Austria in 1869, were an invention of Laurenz Koschier.

There can be no doubt that Laurenz Koschier, in spite of his personal failure, can be numbered among the first pioneers of the stamp. This fundamental concept for which understanding was lacking in Austria, became in 1840 a reality at the British Post Office. Austria lost the opportunity to claim for itself the title or the privilege of issuing stamps without its name appearing on them.

Incidentally, as soon as Great Britain issued the first stamp, Koschier immediately claimed that his idea had been exported to Britain by an English merchant on frequent visits to Austria. However, this important statement has until today, neither directly nor indirectly been proved, because none of the known written documents contain any evidence to support the claim.

The question, whether Laurenz Koschier is indeed the author of the concept of the stamp, or whether Laurenz Koschier is indeed the author of the researchers who believe in several independently working "inventors" and talk of a "parallelism of ideas" owing to time and circumstances, can possibly never be solved with any certainty. Whatever the truth, the dates and facts speak for themselves. There the merits of this intelligent, creative and inventive Austrian accountant should no longer be neglected. A place of honour in the history of Austrian philately has been secured for him when the Austrian Post Office on May 4, 1979 issued a single stamp paying homage to Laurenz Koschier. The stamp shows a portrait of Laurenz Koschier and the wording on top "Pionier der Briefmarke" (Pioneer of the Stamp). The stamp was Austria's offering in the "Europa" series, which this year, had as a theme "The History of the Postal Service and Telecommunications". The single stamp is indeed a befitting tribute and converges all the attention on this man for whom destiny had obscure offerings. ■