

The Mystery of the Blue Lion (Ten questions about the Legionářské 1919 Issue)

Introduction

My first encounter with the Blue Lion (the 50h Legionářské) happened in the rural northern Maine town of Presque Isle. My wife Deborah and had I spent the night there on the return leg of a driving tour of Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula. The next morning Deborah noticed some interesting regional shops in the downtown area and I was left to fend for myself. I happened upon a stamp store, dropped in, and asked about early Czechoslovak material. The shop owner, who had retired from one of the large and now defunct New York City stamp firms, at first had nothing to offer me, then suddenly remembered some "worthless" items that had been sitting in his storage vault for many years. He fetched the items and spread them out on the counter – three full sheets of Czechoslovak stamps from 1919. He was happy to exchange them for a \$20 bill.

The stamps were from the dual purpose Legionářské issue of 1919 – dual purpose because they celebrate the first anniversary of Czechoslovak independence and also were to raise funds to support the orphans of Czechoslovak Legionnaires. A lion was the subject of two of the sheets offered, while a mother and child were shown on the third. These were the first full sheets of First Republic stamps I had ever owned and I liked them so much I had them framed when we returned home. They have hung on the wall of my home office for a couple of years now.

They might have remained hanging on my wall forever had I not decided to start a translation of the second volume of the *Monografie*. The Legionářské issue is treated in the first chapter of that volume, so it became the first topic I translated. In attempting to satisfy my curiosity with respect to issues raised in the *Monografie*, I discovered ten mysteries associated with the Legionářské issue.

Mystery 1

Why were no proposals submitted for the Jubilee and Charity Issues?

In May of 1919, The Ministry of Posts invited Czechoslovakian artists to submit proposals and designs for new stamps. This invitation took the form of two juried contests, the first to expire on June 1, 1919, the second on August 1 of the same year. The rules for these contests implied that the government proposed to undertake the release of two issues. One issue was to be the first Czechoslovakian commemorative stamp, a jubilee celebrating independence, while the other was to be a charity issue in support of the orphans of Legionnaires killed in World War I. It is unclear which of the two contests was directed toward which goal, or if they were combined in some way, but in fact, on the June 1 expiration date, the jury was dismayed to learn that no proposals or designs had been submitted for the first contest.

Mystery 2

How did two originally separate issues become united into one?

We may never know the answer to Mystery 1, but we may hazard a guess at the solution to Mystery 2. In something of a state of panic after receiving no entries for the first contest and with the independence anniversary deadline fast approaching, the Ministry specifically invited seven well-known artists to submit proposals or designs:

Benda, Brunner, Hynaise, Kupka, Kysel, Mucha, and Obrovsky. This appeal had only limited success, for on June 18, 1919, the jury considered the eight designs submitted by the three of the invited artists who responded. Although, as we shall see in a moment, the jury was presented with some astounding designs, this limited response may have in part pushed the government into combining the two issues, the first commemorative issue and the first charity issue, into a single entity. This thesis is plausible and reflects the changing stance in contemporary information published about the two issues – later the single issue – during 1919. For additional theories about the combination of the two issues, see Mysteries 3 and 4.

Mystery 3

Why were the runner-up and an also-ran chosen rather than the contest winners?

Again, we have a partial answer, sort of. Consider first the second prizewinner, one of four submissions by the artist Jaroslav Benda (his later magnificent contribution to Czechoslovak stamp design was the Dove issue of 1920). His prizewinning entry was “The Passion of the Marne”, a representation of a Legionnaire caught in stylistic explosions at the Battle of the Marne. The stamp clearly met thematic requirements for the Legionnaire stamps set. However, the stamp provoked severe public criticism and presented substantial technical problems for a printer. Thus, although Benda’s stamp reflected the taste of the jury, it was not to be used in the realization of any stamp.

The first prizewinner is familiar to any collector of First Republic stamps. A symbolic representation of the republic as a woman bursting out of chains, it was later to be used in a modified version – with the date of independence 18 X 1919 removed – as the beloved Liberated Republic (affectionately known as the Chainbreaker).

Thus, both the first and second prizewinning designs were not really eligible for the combined commemorative-charity release the Legionářské was about to become. The first prizewinner may have been disqualified because it was too good to be “wasted” on a short-lived issue – later it would be used in the regular issues of Czechoslovakia for many years; and the second prizewinner was disqualified because it could not readily be technically rendered as a stamp.

This left the third prizewinner, Jacob Obrovsky, as the only winning candidate with a design that could be used for the Legionářské issue. His submission, with the pulse-quickening title “Postage Stamp”, was used for the higher-denomination stamps in the series. A second stamp submitted by Obrovsky, one that did not win at all, was selected for the lower-denomination stamps in the series.

Here we need to take a small digression, for in selecting these specific stamps for the Legionářské, the jury tipped its hand as to the combining of the two proposed issues into a single set. As was said earlier, two issues had been contemplated – a commemoration of independence and a charity issue in support of the orphans.

The non-winning Obrovsky design selected for the lower denomination stamps in the series was called “Lion Breaking out of Irons” and illustrated a bold two-tailed Bohemian Lion slipping out of its manacles. In text above and behind the lion is rendered the republic’s independence date “10 X 1918.” Clearly, these stamps commemorate Czechoslovak independence.

The winning Obrovsky design, re-entitled “Mother Republic caring for Orphan Child,” was selected for the higher-denomination stamps in the series. It is an obvious

charity stamp in support of the Legionnaires' orphans – indeed, the legend at the top of the stamps says, “Our Legionnaires’ Orphans.”

These two designs, although created by the same artist, have nothing – not style, nor presentation, nor theme – in common. The joining of two so incompatible designs in a single issue demonstrates better than anything else that the Legionářské issue was cobbled together on the fly from two separate sets of stamps invoking two separate themes.

Mystery 4

Why select stamps that *prima facie* require different printing techniques?

Zdeněk Moliš advances a theory – perhaps tongue-in-cheek – as to why Obrovsky submitted two so different designs. Moliš reports that in 1919 Czech Union Graphics had two departments that were constant rivals of one another: the typographic (letterpress) printing department and the photogravure printing department. He says that perhaps Obrovsky was aware of this rivalry and deliberately submitted two designs of which only one would be suitable for each of those departments.

Another theory could be advanced: perhaps the jury knew about the two departments and that the typographic department was already overburdened with the printing of stamps. Perhaps they addressed this problem by farming out some of the work to one department, the rest of the work to another.

But I suspect that the real reason was one of pressure and convenience. Earlier, the conjoining of the commemorative with the charity issue was discussed. If the jury made the decision to combine the two issues, then they needed two designs, one that spoke to each theme. With the other designs out of the running, the only stamps, Obrovsky’s two designs – however differently rendered – were the only possible choices.

Actually, there is a sub-mystery component here. In all of the literature, we are told that three artists submitted a total of eight designs. Brenner’s single design, the four by Benda, and the two by Obrovsky are always pictured in the literature. That accounts for seven of the eight submissions. We are left to wonder what the eighth design was and who submitted it. Could it possibly have been Benda’s Dove, the one he submitted to another contest less than a year later? What a sweet piece of irony that would be!

Mystery 5

Why was their period of validity the shortest on record for the First Republic?

Here Moliš ventures an opinion I am inclined to agree with. Once the two issues had been combined into a commemorative-charity issue [Moliš suggests the name Jubilee and Charity Issue of 1919 replace the venerable Legionářské name], the ground rules for the charity issue took over for both sets. The idea was that the government would only put up for sale about 1.5 million sets at post offices. The remaining 3.5 million would act as a grant-in-kind for the Legionnaire Aid Committee; the committee would be able to market the stamps as special mementos once they were no longer available for postal use. Thus, their charitable purpose would be best served, so it seemed, by their having only a brief appearance as valid postage.

Another sub-mystery looms up at this point. These stamps, the very first commemoratives ever issued by the new republic, and its first-ever charity issue, slipped

out without true formal public notice. The information for postal clerks appeared only in *Official Acts of the Board*, but not, as the Hradcany had been announced, in the *Bulletin*.

Mystery 6

Why were they only valid for domestic mails?

Here is an opportunity for the enterprising philatelist. In all my research, I have found no reason, not even a guess, as to why the stamps had limited legal use.

They are clearly marked with the name of the issuing country and their value. The one possibility that springs to mind is that the Ministry neglected, because of time constraints or in the general confusion of joining the two issues, to submit specimens to the Universal Postal Union. Whether or not such an oversight – if it even occurred – would disqualify the stamps from international usage is a question best answered by those readers who know more than I do about international postal treaties.

Mystery 7

Why were four plates made for the 75h stamp when all the others had only two?

The author of the chapter about the Legionářské in *Monografie II* throws up his hands at this question. He reports that the stamps were intended to be sold in sets, and clearly that did happen quite often. But individual stamps were sold, so some sets were broken. Could there have been a need for 75h stamps that did not exist for the other denominations in the set?

Moliš thinks so. I find his idea far-fetched at best, but he accounts for the two “extra” 75h plates as follows. He says that at the time the Legionářské were released the tariff for an empty domestic registered letter was 75h [forgive me, I do not know what an “empty” registered letter is; I assume something like an aerogramme]. The fact is the extra two plates were never used to produce “extra” stamps. According to most sources, 5 million of each denomination was printed, no more and no less, so this theory seems less than tenable.

But it brings us to another sub-mystery. Plates for printing stamps were placed in a matrix – often referred to as a printing form. Sometimes the plates are upright with respect to one another; sometimes they are inverted and produce tête-bêche printings. The typographic presses used to produce the Lion stamps were capable of printing two colors, but only one color for each plate. That is, the two plates on the right side of the form could be printed in one color, the two plates on the left side of the form in another color.

Every rendition of a printing matrix shows similar plates above one another, whether inverted or not. However, the only pictures I have ever seen of the 15 and 25h-printing form always places the plates side-by-side. I suspect that this is one of the little foibles of Czechoslovak philatelic literature – one author copying another’s mistake *ad infinitum*. If anyone can demonstrate to me that the actual relationship of the plates was side-by-side, I would be most grateful.

Mystery 8

Why, and when, was the 50h Blue Lion Plate II repaired?

Clear evidence exists that Plate II of the 50h Blue Lion stamp underwent repairs before it was etched. Dr. A. Šnoflák first reported this fact in *Filatelie*. He notes that every stamp on Plate I shares a similar trait: the very first shading line on the lion’s

shoulder has a gap near its center. However, on Plate II, for almost every stamp this gap has been repaired. Dr. Šnoflák terms the stamps with gaps in the shading line Type I stamps, while those without gaps are Type II. The repairs are clear and unequivocal.

Evidence exits that the repairs were deliberate and done by hand; two stamps show botched repairs (positions 55 and 57) and two were missed completely (positions 84 and 86). Moliš designates the two botched repair jobs as subtypes ‘a’ and ‘b’ of Type II – they are as different from one another as they are from both Types I and II.

The oddest thing is that only Plate II of the 50h Blue Lion was repaired – the other five lion plates contain pristine and unaltered Type I stamps. One cannot imagine a technical reason for the repair. Certainly, it does nothing obvious to the appearance of the stamps and the Type I could in no way be called unattractive.

But the repair to Plate II of the 50 Blue Lion does share the same timeframe at Czech Union Graphics as the famous repair to the upper left spiral that occurs on some denominations (but not others) of the Fifth Design Hradcany stamps. Since neither repair actually enhances the stamps technically or aesthetically, one is drawn to two possible alternative theories.

The first – and sinister – theory sees the corrections to both issues as a plot to create valuable variations, perhaps conceived by an unscrupulous dealer or collector and carried out by a willing Czech Union Graphics employee in the typographic department. Since neither “connived” correction to the plates was discovered until many, many years after the First republic ceased to exist – thus immediately invalidating the sinister plot aspect – vindication for this theory could occur only if some influential collector or dealer was alive at the time the plates were created and died before the stamps bearing the variant forms were released, thus taking the information with him to the grave.

A second – and to my mind a far more likely theory – is that a bored employee carried out the corrections on his own. Some support is lent to this theory by the stamps that were missed on corrected plates, or those that were botched. Chances are the skips and botches occurred when the employee was interrupted for official work.

Mystery 9

Why does Kovarik describe three, not two, plates for the Blue Lion 50h stamp?

There is more about Kovarik under the next Mystery, but for the moment let us consider just his claim. He must be mistaken, for with the exception of the very large Hradcany issues (the Fifth Design 15h stamp used seven plates) or the very small ones (the 300 and 1000h stamps used a single plate), Czech Union Graphics always created, because of the requirements of the printing matrices, an even number of plates.

If a “third” plate ever existed, I suspect the following. Consider for a moment the 200h Hradcany issue. Its plates were used for a day without plate marks, and then marked to distinguish between the two plates for subsequent printings. Kovarik describes the third 50h Blue Lion plate as having no plate marks, and describes the other “two” plates as having the plate marks we know today. A plausible explanation is that his third plate is actually an unmarked version of either of the other two plates. It was pressed into use for a short period, marked, and put back into use as one of the “known” plates.

I have some small and inconclusive evidence to support this theory. I mentioned at the beginning of this article my first encounter with the Blue Lion and that I subsequently began the translation of the *Monografie* that led to writing this piece. In

support of that work, I acquired by various means several more sheets of Legionářské stamps. Among them were six sheets of the Blue Lion 50h stamp.

The six sheets were easily identifiable as being either Plate I or Plate II because of the distinctive shading line on the shoulder mentioned under Mystery 8. There were four copies of the Plate I sheet and two copies of the Plate II sheet. The four Plate I sheets were peculiar in that they could be subdivided again into two pairs. While all four sheets shared some plate flaws in common, there appeared to be two pairs of sheets that shared flaws among themselves but not with the other pair. That is, I could categorize my four Plate I sheets as being either a Plate Ia or a Plate Ib sheet.

Frequently typographic stamps will show a change in some flaws as the plates are removed, cleaned, and replaced in the printing matrix for further printing. The common practice, for instance with the Hradcany issue, was to print 40,000 sheets and then to perform the cleanup and rebuilding of the printing matrix. Consider for a moment that only 5 million Blue Lion stamps were printed – at 200 stamps per printed sheet, that is only 25,000 passes of the press, a number well below the normal 40,000 sheet cutoff. Thus it is doubtful that cleaning could account for the differences observed in the two pairs of Plate I stamps.

Thus, perhaps by accident, I had acquired two copies of the sheets produced by Kovarik's missing "third" plate. Unfortunately, I cannot demonstrate the fact either way. Let me explain. Remember, Kovarik identified his third plate by saying that all of the control numbers were "normal." For Plate I, that means the decimal line in the control number **5**.— would be 4 rather than 2 mm long. The pair of Plate I sheets that differ from the other Plate I sheets were purchased with their selvages already removed – thus no control numbers. Perhaps were the selvage still present, the normal **5**.— would be there, perhaps not. So we have yet another unsolved mystery of the Blue Lion, which brings us to the 10th and final mystery:

Mystery 10

Why have over 55 years passed since the last Legionářské article in the *Specialist*?

When I started researching the mysteries of the Blue Lion, I began with the index to the *Specialist*. Imagine my surprise when I found no entries under Legionářské in the entire index. I tried the English equivalent "Legionnaires," but to no avail. Finally, I went to the Society website and searched the electronic version of the index for the word "Legion," a search that took seconds on the website but which would have required me to read every line of text in the paper version.

I struck gold! Misfiled under the index heading **Field Post – 1918-1920 – Siberia** was a November 1949 article by F. J. Kovarik entitled "The Legionnaire Issue of 1919". It was the only direct reference to the Legionářské 1919 stamps I found in the index, although I did stumble across two other short articles from September 1942 and December 1944 issues of the *Specialist*. Amazingly enough, the foremost Czechoslovak philatelic periodical in America appears to have completely forgotten about the republic's first commemorative issue (the Lions) and its first real charity issue (The Mother and Child). True, from time to time you read about the rare perforations used on these stamps, but little else.

I next turned to the Czech language philatelic literature and encountered almost the same situation. In 1977 and 1985, Šnoflák wrote in about these stamps in *Filatelie*, as

did Moliš in 1987, but between 1919 and 1977, 58 years passed during which precious little that was valuable was written about an issue that should have been second only to the Hradcany in philatelic importance.

In my own research I have determined, for instance, that all of the plates of the Blue Lion were created using the same negative (peek at the upper frame between the T and A of POŠTA on the stamp in the upper left hand corner of any 50h sheet for a hint of why this must be true). I have plated much of the issue and have found even more mysteries unmentioned here.

Clearly, the Legionářské present a rich opportunity for research for even the most amateur philatelist (and I count myself as most amateurish of all) that the overworked Hradcany and POŠTA ČESKOVENSKÁ issues will never be able to offer. Open your albums and take a really hard, first look at these beautiful lions. I promise you, they will never look the same again.

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