

Applied Philately 009 - Jáchymov and its Uranium (by F. Kruis)

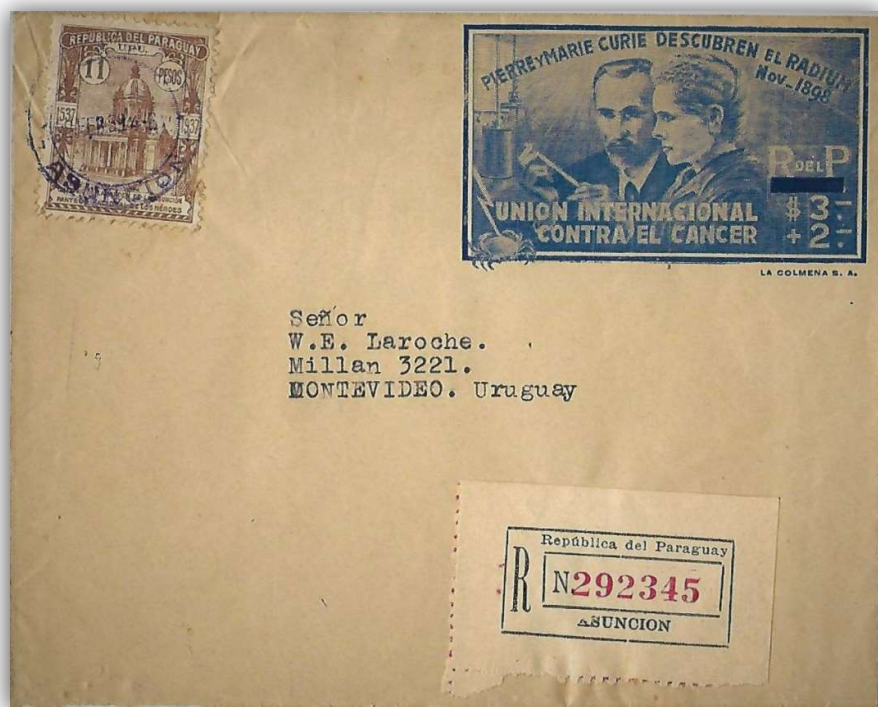


At first sight, this old postal stationery from 1938 (?) from Jáchymov (German: Sankt Joachimsthal - a town in the Karlovy Vary Region in the Czech Republic) shows a view of an idyllic landscape where you might have just spent your vacation. Accordingly, the card also says "Get to know your homeland - promote its beauty by mail" at the top and bottom. The postal stationery has a stamp of 50 heller (haléřů) imprinted with the image of Tomáš Masaryk, the co-founder and first president of

Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia had been founded in October 1918 after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

If we look a little closer at the picture, we can see the Radium Palace hotel in Saint Jáchymov, and less known, we can just see the building of the Jáchymov uranium dye factory on the right side. These two buildings are part of the exciting history of Jáchymov - with its ups and downs.

In today's world it is completely unthinkable that a hotel chain would choose such a name. For the hotel, which opened in 1912 and was



then known as a large and very luxurious hotel, this name was quite natural and a crucial part of what we would call a marketing strategy today. Radium was the most expensive material in the world at the time and unprecedentedly popular; people even spoke of a radium euphoria. Especially for the treatment of their joint problems, wealthy customers from all over Europe and even the United States sought their salvation in the treatments offered with the radioactive element radium. In addition to the baths, which were considered beneficial, drinking cures and radioactive mud packs were also offered. One of

the clients was Tomas Masaryk, who frequently visited this hotel and the doctors in Jáchymov for relief of his

rheumatic complaints. Marie and Pierre Curie made their sensational discovery of the elements polonium and radium from the ore of the Jáchymov mine and part of the fame of these two exceptional scientists also radiated to the mountain town on the southern slope of the Ore Mountains. In 1936, proud Jáchymov celebrated the fact that the hundredth gram of radium was extracted from this Svornost (meaning “unity”) mine.



However, nothing made Czech President Tomas Masaryk and his successor Edvard Benes (see adjacent postal stationery: shown on stamp of additional franking on again a postal stationery) suspect that this mine and its radium production would hang over the Republic like an evil cloud.

With the annexation of the Sudetenland by Nazi Germany in October 1938, Jáchymov came under the control of the Hitler regime, and on the same day the radium objects were occupied by German troops. The regime immediately banned all exports of radium products outside the German Reich.



A few weeks later, the discovery of nuclear fission by Hahn, Strassmann and Meitner turned the uranium mined in the mine into a raw material of great strategic and political importance.

After the end of the Second World War, another drama took place around the troubled mountain town - again because of the uranium from Jáchymov. The mountain town was again occupied, despite agreements for complete withdrawal by both Americans and Russians. This time the Red Army was in charge. Under great pressure, the Czechoslovak

government, finally with the approval of President Benes, concluded a top-secret agreement with Moscow in late 1945 to deliver all mined Czech uranium to the Communist government in the Soviet Union. A coup d'état by Stalinists brought an end to the republic in 1948, and a communist government under Klement Gottwald (pictured on stamp (1948-1953) on following letter) was no longer in Moscow's way.





For the necessary manpower, the means of forced labor in its most horrible form were used. The daily reality of these (political) prisoners can be compared to the stories we know from the Gulag. One of the very last rights of these prisoners was the right to mail. They could send and receive censored mail only very rarely. The various camps had no local postal organization, but the collected mail was censored in Ostrov and stamped with. Cteno" = "Read" (letter above).

Not a very happy ending for what started as a friendly vacation snapshot, but in situations of ultimate power politics, the rights and interests of citizens are sometimes ruthlessly set aside.



The story of the Roman god Janus, the two-headed god of beginning and end, of opening and closing, has thus become a metaphor for two-faced situations here as well.

Hopefully, philately will keep reminding us of the choice we have as righteous people.