

BELGIAN CONGO



STUDY CIRCLE

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BULLETIN 118

DECEMBER 2000

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CONTENTS

PAGES

VP COLUMN	R.H. Keach	2-3
Interesting Curiosities of the 1921 10c/5c		
Postal Stationery		
The 1922 Surcharged Postal Stationery Cards		
1959 Ruanda Urundi Postage Dues		
BELGIAN STUDY CIRCLES-EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN		3-4
UNUSUAL PERF. COMBINATION		4
5c Brown of 1895	E. M. Lavitt	
NEW MEMBERS		4
CONGO BELGE 1894-1923	Leo Tavano	4
New Literature-a Study of the 5Fr issues-reviewed by R.H. Keach		4
VARIETIES IN THE 1912 VUE CARDS	E. M. Lavitt	5
A 'NEGRO' GUARANTY MARK ON THREE FORGERIES		5
furnished by Xavier Verbeck-----EML		
SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE		5
THE RAILWAYS OF BENGUELA	E. Hoorens	6-12
PAQUEBOT MARKS -FURTHER DISCUSSION		12-13
	Edwin Lavitt	
EDITOR'S NOTES	EML	14
SEQUEL BEHIND THE STAMP	Michael Round	14-17
courtesy Allan Little and Tony Grant of the BBC		
PRICES REALIZED SEPTEMBER AUCTION		subsequent pages
AUCTION LOTS FOR THIS ISSUE		

THE V.P. COLUMN

Interesting Curiosities of the 1921 10c/5c

I have before me two copies, one unused and the other used, which are quite abnormal and of considerable interest.

One copy is position No. 26 in the sheet, from the sixth horizontal row of stamps, but its surcharge is of the 'type' normally applied to the fifth and tenth rows of stamps and is probably No. 21 in the sheet although this cannot definitely be confirmed.

The other copy is position No. 27 in the sheet (again sixth horizontal row of stamps) and the surcharge of the 'type' normally applied to the third and eighth rows, probably No. 12 or 37 in the sheet.

How can such errors in the surcharging have occurred? Small displacement of these surcharges, horizontally or vertically, is common enough and doubtless occurred because of careless insertion of the sheet of stamps into the surcharging press but that a sheet should have been positioned incorrectly by one or more rows of stamps is hard to believe. It would have necessitated the time-consuming operation of separately surcharging one or more rows of stamps in the sheet.

An alternative explanation is that not only complete sheets but also part-sheets were surcharged with two or more part-sheets assembled to produce a sheet of 50 and with not all stamps in their correct positions. Such blocks of stamps could have been the unsurcharged parts of sheets faultily surcharged as suggested in the previous paragraph.

It is impossible to say how rare these 'errors' are. No collector in the ordinary way checks his stamps for such curiosities. If a stamp is submitted for certificate and the surcharge therefore studied in detail the error will become apparent but who will submit such common stamps for certificate on such an off-chance? With the 1921 centimes values, each with its five different 'types' of surcharge, it is usual when trying to position a stamp first to ascertain the 'type', thereby reducing the number of possible positions from 50 to 10, and it is probably only in such a procedure that these errors become apparent.

The 1921 10c/5c is not the only Congo stamp exhibiting such curiosities; I have seen them on others of the 1921 and 1922 Boma issues.

Postal Stationery

It has always, I believe, been the very reasonable practice of post offices to sell their postal stationery at price in excess of the values of the stamps printed on the post cards etc.

I do not recall ever having seen in the literature, even in copies of 'Calendrier Postal', the prices charged by, the Congo post office for its stationery and I wonder if any of our members have any knowledge of them.

Such information is of no philatelic importance but it would be a good thing for us to publish any knowledge that we now possess. Having in 1957 bought supplies of the then current Congo and Ruanda post cards and letters cards at the Brussels post office philatelic counter I should be able to provide a little information on the subject but the was a long time ago and my memory fails me.

The 1922 Surcharged Postal Stationery Cards

Before me is a copy of the 1922 surcharged pictorial card Stibbe No. 53/54 which bears one strike of the surcharge and two strikes of the 15, one on top of the 30 and the second above it and this is by no means the of example of such a card that I have seen in the past.

It appears clear that some post office - that which held the Type 3 '15' surcharging stamp - had a shortage 15c cards and a surfeit of the 30c and decided to revalue some of the 30c cards by cancelling the '30' by one strike the '15' and adding the new value by a second strike. This would have revised the value of stocks held by the F office and must have been approved by the central authority.

If such multiple surcharges are authentic, as I believe them to be, and not forgeries or the result of some office official providing curiosities to order they are entitled to catalogue status as revalued cards.

118/2

1959 Ruanda Urundi Postage Dues

A member sent me for inspection and informal opinion several blocks of the 1959 Ruanda Urundi postage due stamp with misplaced surcharges and study of them showed that there were several different 'types' of the overprint. genuine or otherwise, the types resulting from the differing shapes of the letters U.

Studying for the first time my solitary complete pane of 50 (5 wide by 10 high) of these stamps, a 10c, pane I found variation in the letters U confirmed, there being two types, one with a small serif at bottom right and the other without the serif thus:

U and U

All stamps in the left and second vertical columns of 10 have a bottom right serif on the U of RUANDA and serif on either U of URUNDI.

In the third vertical column the top three stamps (Nos. 3, 8 and 13 in the pane) have a bottom right serif on the U of RUANDA and on the second U of URUNDI but no serif on the first U of URUNDI. The bottom seven stamps (Nos.-18-,2:3 etc. have the serif on each of the three U's.

In the fourth vertical column the top three stamps (Nos. 4, 9 and 14) have a bottom right serif on the second U URUNDI but no serif on the U of RUANDA or the first U of URUNDI. The bottom seven stamps (Nos. 19, 24 et have bottom right serifs on all three U's.

In the fifth (right) vertical column all ten positions have bottom right serifs on all three U's Thus there are four slightly different 'types' of overprint.

The 1957 Congo postage dues were printed in four panes of 50 stamps with pane number, 1, 2, 3 or 4, in the selvaige to the right of stamp no. 30. The stamps may have been printed in sheets of 100 with the four panes in line horizontally and separated by a line of selvaige of width equal to the horizontal spacing of the stamps but, more likely in two sheets of 50, each sheet comprising two panes, side by side. It is not known when, in 1959, these Congo stamps were overprinted for use in Ruanda Urundi, the overprint was applied from a plate of 50 to the individual panes or if a larger overprinting plate was used and applied to full sheets of the stamps but with the help of other members we may be able to find out.

Will any member who has a full sheet or large block of any value of these Ruanda Urundi postage dues preferably a value other than the 10c because of the difficulty in studying the black overprint on the brown stamp. kindly study the individual overprints and see if they conform to my observations of the pane that I have.

RHK

BELGIAN STUDY CIRCLES-EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN

We have been asked to publish a notice concerning the Belgian Study Circle in Europe which has its principal "headquarters" in Europe which notice follows:

The Circle has world-wide membership of about 80 plus and caters for all stages from beginners to philatelists of world renown. The majority of members are resident in the UK but we have strong links with Belgium where occasional meetings are held. Monthly meetings are held during the winter at Regent's College in London. During each meeting displays are provided by members in a friendly and informal atmosphere and these are generally supported by relevant material from other members' collections. An annual lunch is held each year in the spring at a London venue; latterly this has been in conjunction with the AGM and Circle auction.

The Circle arranges a conference week-end to which spouses, partners and guests are welcome. Typically, three auctions are held each year in conjunction with meetings with both room and postal bidding; there is also an exchange packet for members wishing to participate. The Circle's award-winning publication "BELGAPOST" is distributed four times per year and addresses all aspects of Belgian philately. A documented archive is available.

Further information is available from the Secretary:

C. R. Howe, Little Park, Winterbourne Steepleton, Dorset DT2 9EA

Telephone 01305 889481 or 889959; e-mail chdshowe@Skanderbeg.fsnet.co.uk

118/3

There is also a Belgian Study Circle with its "headquarters" in the United States (of which your Editor is a member)

The American-Belgian Philatelic Society was founded in 1983 and is comprised of stamp collectors with a common interest in the philatelic material by and for Belgium and its former colonies.

It fosters fellowship among the Belgian collectors and, through its mail auctions, provides the means for members to share philatelic material and it maintains a library for members benefit.

It publishes a journal, *The Belgiphile*, quarterly in March, June, September and December which includes articles concerning the many facets of Belgian philately, including from time to time articles taken from the BCSC bulletin on the Congo and on occasion, original articles concerning Belgian Congo material.

Its membership is open to all who have an interest in the field. (*parenthetically many of our American members are also members of the ABPS*). The annual dues year runs from July through June of the following year. The annual dues are currently US\$7.50 in the USA, US\$8.50 in Canada, and US\$12.50 in the rest of the world.

For those interested contact the Membership person: Kenneth L. Costilow, 621 Virginius Drive, Virginia Beach VA 23452-4417 whose E Mail address is: klc32@juno.com.

AN INTERESTING PERFORATION COMBINATION-5c BROWN OF 1895

Your Editor recently purchased a used pair of the 5c brown of 1895 (CO 15) plate positions 2 and 3. Upon checking the perforations I found the top horizontal line to be 15.75 and the vertical perforations to be 14. The bottom line of perforations is irregular 15.75. This combination is not common and Mr. Keach conjectures that it is the result of the following: The printers, in checking the production run, found a sheet with missing lines of perforation. Rather than destroy the sheet they put it into a perforating machine and completed the perforation process. It was of no consequence to them that the perforator was a different one than the rest of the sheet. They saved the sheet.

The change of perforations is, however, of 'consequence' to this collector. An uncommon- interesting item and a welcome addition to the collection.

EML

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members:

Lawrence Bestow of Chester England

Alex Whigham (who is 8 years old and becomes our youngest member) sponsored by his father Thomas Whigham of Watkinsville GA USA,

Charles Temple of Baguio, Philippines

Bernard Harris of East Sussex, England

John Henk of Littleton CO USA

CONGO BELGE 1894-1923 - EMISSION "MOLS-VAN ENGELEN" - Etude du 5Frs. "CHEF BANGALA" et 5Frs. OCRE, reconstitution des planches - L. Tavano

Mr. Tavano has produced his second book on the Mols stamps, this time covering all the 5 F values. He has combined into a single volume all the published information on the stamps to which he had access and has added to it the fruits of his own considerable researches.

Of special value is the author's research work on the 1915 5F of which, for the first combination of plates HI+A3, he describes and illustrates the imperfections in the designs that permit each of the fifty stamps in the sheet to be identified. For the re-entered centre plate A4 in combination with the frame plates III and 112 he has been very nearly as successful. The 1915 5F, to some extent due to the light colour of the frame, is one of the most difficult Mols stamps to 'plate' and Mr. Tavano has done a magnificent job with it.

The book is an excellent 'read', beautifully illustrated, full of useful information for the 'general' Congo collector and an essential reference work for the specialist. It is strongly recommended to all.

Copies of the book are available from the author, L. Tavano, Rue Wazon 26. 4000 Liege, Belgium. The price is 700 FB plus postage.

118/4

RHK

SOME VARIETIES IN THE 1912 5c VUE CARDS

Stibbe #42

It is clear that the legend on each of the cards was printed separately from the printing of the view. Card number 15, is a vertical view entitled, (in the French legend), 'Vue sur le fleuve à Banana'. On the card which I examined the legend was printed so far to the left as to omit the 1 of 15 so that the number appears as if the card were number 5.

I compared the above card with a normal one to make sure that the variety was not the result of the left side of the card being cut too close to the legend. Both cards examined were exactly the same size and the points of the palm trees matched exactly. Clearly it is a variety, which, incidentally, is not described in Stibbe.

The second anomaly which I noticed was on card number 62. Here the top of the 6 is flattened and there is a minuscule dot of ink at the top left so that when one picks up the card the impression is not that it is 62 but rather 52. View 62 is that of the port at Leopoldville and view 52 is a hunter standing over a dead Zebra.

This may, in fact, be a variety as a result of some damage to the 6 or it may simply be an anomaly due to a bit of ink on the printing plate. I ask that members check their cards and tell me whether they find a repeat, in their collection, of this peculiarity.

Edwin M. Lavitt

A "NEGRO" GUARANTY MARK ON THREE FORGERIES

Our member, Xavier Verbeck, has sent for examination and study a 5c green CO number 16 with a forged handstamped Congo Belge overprint, a 10c carmin CO number 19 with a forged handstamped overprint and a 15c ochre CO number 20 with a forged typographed overprint. Each of the stamps has a guaranty stamp on the back—the name "negro". The 5c has the mark in capital letters thus: **NEGRO** (as close as I can get it) approximately 6 ½ mm long and 1 ½ mm high and the other two with the mark as follows: **NEGRŌ** (again as best I can get it) which is again approximately 6 ½ mm long with the letter **N** 1 ½ mm high and the subsequent letters 'egro' about 1 + mm in height and a line extending horizontally from the top of the right leg of the **N** over the letters 'egro', as illustrated.

Why the forgeries? All the stamps submitted are beautiful mint copies—the 10c in particular absolutely perfect. The value of the stamps with or without the overprint about the same. One can only conjecture that they were created to satisfy the demands of buyers when the genuine were unavailable.

Now back to the marks. They are attributed to the stamp dealer Gailly—the one who published the *Negro Guide* which I reported in a previous bulletin. However, like the Nysten guaranty marks, discussed in a previous bulletin, one cannot presume that all stamps which bear the mark are bogus. Some are bogus and some may be genuine. But, were I to look at an overprinted stamp with the 'negro' guaranty mark I must say I would be highly suspicious and I suggest that each member exercise the same caution.

EML

SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE

You are reminded that subscriptions, as set at the annual general meeting of May 2000, are now due.

They are:

USA and Canada \$15 which may be sent to E. M. Lavitt PO Box 900 Rockville, CT 06066;
Belgium-BF300 which may be sent to Emile Hoorens Ave. Eugene Ysaye 105, Boite 1, Brussels;
The United Kingdom £8, the rest of Europe £8 and the rest of the world £10 which may be sent to
Stuart S. Smith Lychgates, Pinfold Hill, Curbar-Calver, Hope Valley S32 3YL, England

Please help the Hon. Treasurer by sending in your subscriptions promptly.

118/5

118/5

THE RAILWAY OF BENGUELA

Those who are interested in the postal history of the Belgian Congo have often heard of the railway of Benguela. spoken of.

Since the beginning of our colony, almost all mail to the north left by t packet-boats connecting the Belgian Congo with Europe, and later by plane of the regular (air) lines. Two periods, however, form an exception to the rule: the years 40-45 (second World War) and 60-63 (the secession of Katanga). During these two periods the mail was routed by way of Angola, either for transfer to Portugal, a neutral country, and afterwards to Europe, or to mitigate the complete disorganization of the postal system after the independence of the Congo. One finds very little about the mail entering or leaving the Congo by the railway of Benguela outside of these two periods.

In the same way as the railway lines to the Congo or as the lines of the south to the north, the railway of Benguela can be considered as an important route of penetration to the heart of Africa. This line traverses all of Angola from Lobito to Teixeira de Sousa at the border of the Belgian Congo. Dilolo is the first Congolese locality where a junction is made with the railways of Katanga (C.F.K.). and, later, with the line B.C.K. (Lower Congo-Katanga) at Tenke.

With a length of 1384 kilometers, the railway of Benguela reaches an altitude of 1851 meters at VILA NOVA in order to descend afterwards to 1098 meters at Teixeira de Sousa. Construction began March 1, 1903 and the first section between Lobito and Cubal was placed in service in 1908. The subsequent sections were placed in service on the following dates:

October 7, 1910	Cubal - Cuma
July 31, 1911	Cuma - Lepi
September 21, 1912	Lepi - Nova Lisboa
October 18, 1913	Nova Lisboa - Chiunquar

At this time, the line had a length of 516 kilometers. Interrupted or moderated during the first World War, the work resumed to reach Silva Porto on January 31, 1924, and the Luau River, beyond Luso, on August 28, 1928. The completed line from Lobito to Dilolo and, afterwards, to Tenke and Elisabethville, was inaugurated in June, 1931.

The average duration of the trip was about 39 hours, 44 minutes, as follows:

Lobito	day A	17 hours
Guerra Junqueiro		23 hours, 46 minutes
Nova Lisboa	day B	8 hours, 59 minutes
Silva Porto		14 hours, 34 minutes
Luso	day C	1 hour, 50 minutes
Teixeira de Sousa		8 hours, 44 minutes

In 1930, statistics give us 257,984 passengers and 270,554 tons of freight and, in 1960, these figures increased to 850,904 passengers and 2,770,106 tons of freight, the latter number being due in large part to the Mining Union.

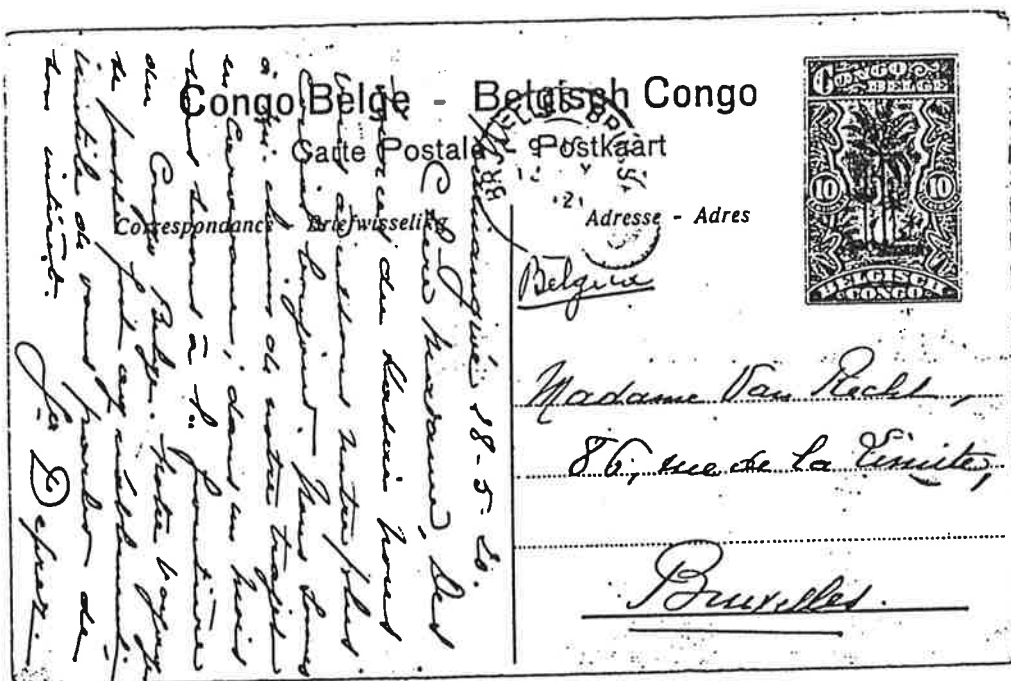
Now let us look at several documents relating to the railway of Benguela:

118/6

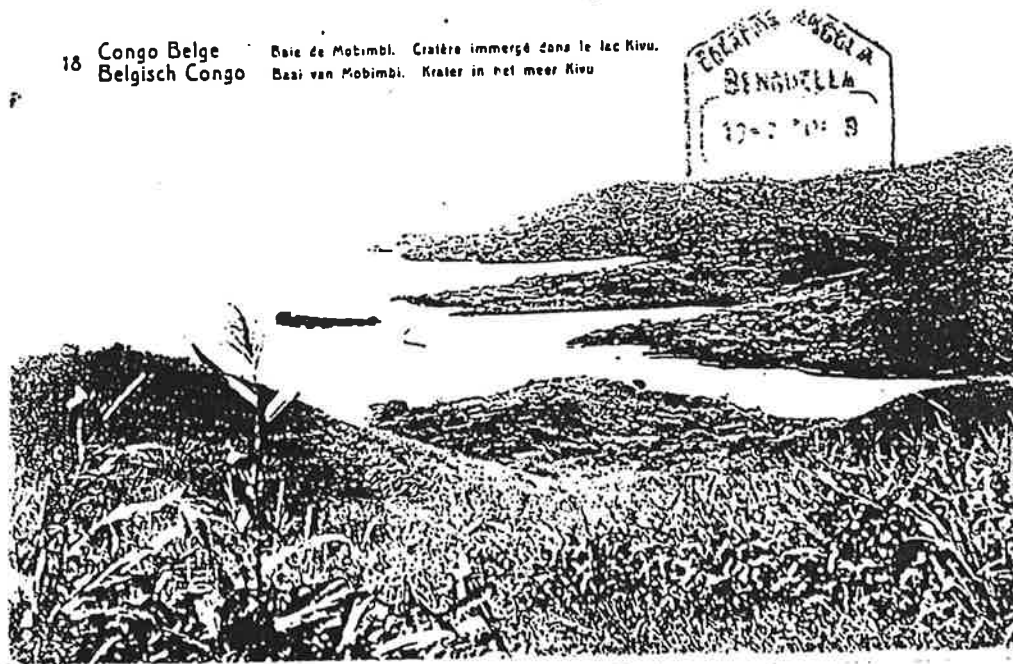
Lignes portugaises
voie de LOBITO

1920

FIG 1



18 Congo Belge Baie de Mobimbi. Cratère immergé dans le lac Kivu.
Belgisch Congo Baai van Mobimbi. Krater in het meer Kivu



Entire of the Congo, written at Muniangwe/Angola on May 28, 1920, addressed to Brussels, where it arrived September 12, albeit 3 1/2 months late; trans by Benguela on July 10, 1920.

Written by a Belgian going to Katanga, via the route from Lobito/Angola faster than that from Boma:
we are half-way from our journey by caravan; in a month we will be at the border of the Belgian Congo".

118/7

CUNGU BEEU

SA HAVANESA
MPORT. - EXPORT.
irão & Vidal
ELEOR. SEDRUOL - CAIXA POSTAL N.º 28
ILYA PÔRTO - (ANGOLA)



FIG 2
reels

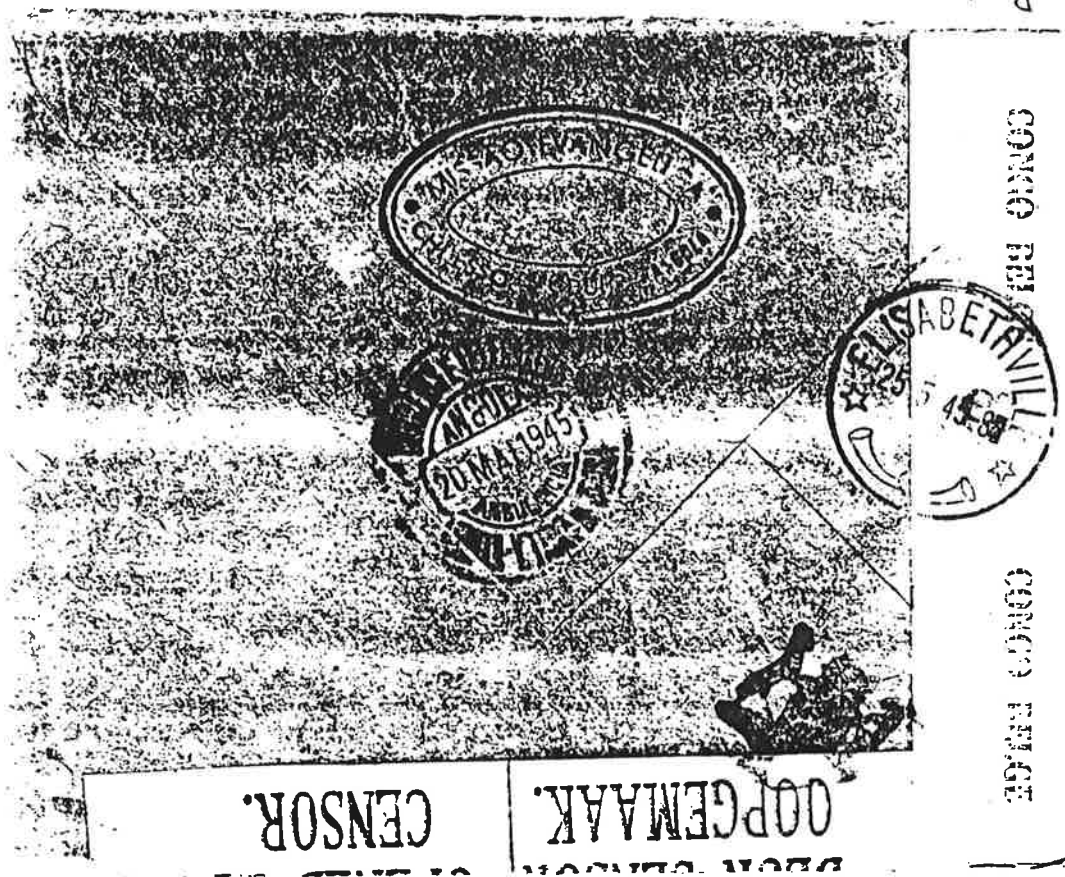
MISSO. DATE.
M. NEUMUN, M. I.
90 West street

NEW YORK, U. S. A.

AMERICA DO NORTE

CUNGU BEEU

615



Verso

"Letter of 1945 from Silva Porto to the U.S.A. and transmitted via Elisabethville with transfer to Leopoldville and the airline to the United States",

8/8/11

CENSURE



*fig 3
verso*

Mr. Harvey Meeken
120 Bedford Street
Boston, Mass. U.S.A.

CENSURE

E.U. DA AMÉRICA DO NORTE

U.C. S. (Medium.)

U.C.S. (Medium.)

DEUR SENSOR | OPENED BY

EXAMINED BY EXAMINER

CENSURE

CENSURE PRICE

*fig 3
verso*



CENSURE

CENSURE PRICE

"Letter of 1945 from Silva da Porto to the U.S.A. and transmitted via Elisabethville and transfer to Leopoldville and the airline to the United States.

118/9

State of Katanga
ROUTES OF DEPARTURE
EXIT VIA ANGOLA



*Provincia de
Lobitola
65, rue des-Chatons*

*Liege
Belgique*

**BY AIR MAIL
PAR AVION**

lie



Airmail letter sent from Kolwezi H September 20, 1961, addressed to Liege dispatched by railway via Dilolo D on September 24, 1961, Teixeira Sousa/Angola on September 25, 1961: Angolan border town opposite the line of the Benguela/Katanga railway.

Less common departure route, determined by the postal service it-self, since the letter had no indication of route. Basic letter rate before 1962: 6.50 Fr.

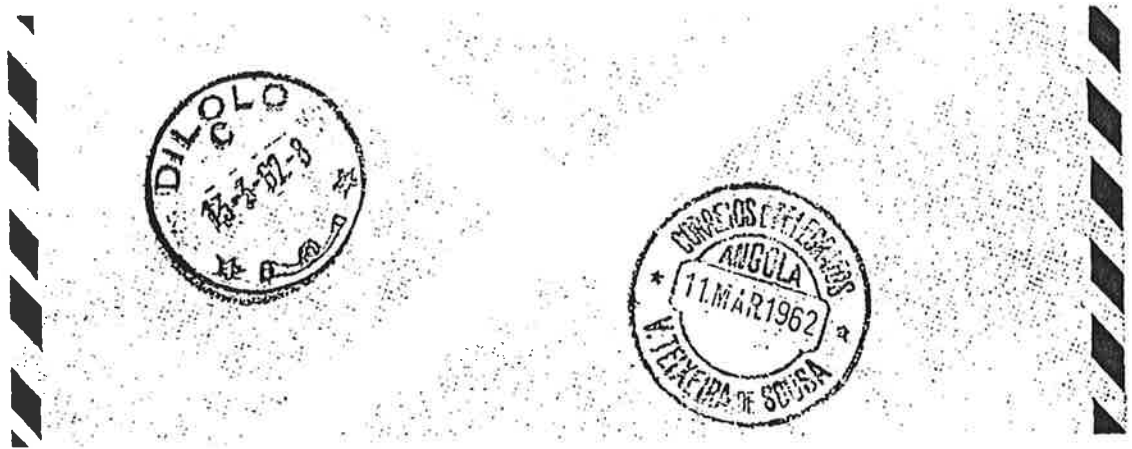
Postage payment: 1.50 Fr. "Independence" surcharge.
5 Fr. "Katanga Art"

118/10

voies d'acheminement
 entrée via Angola
 plis taxés

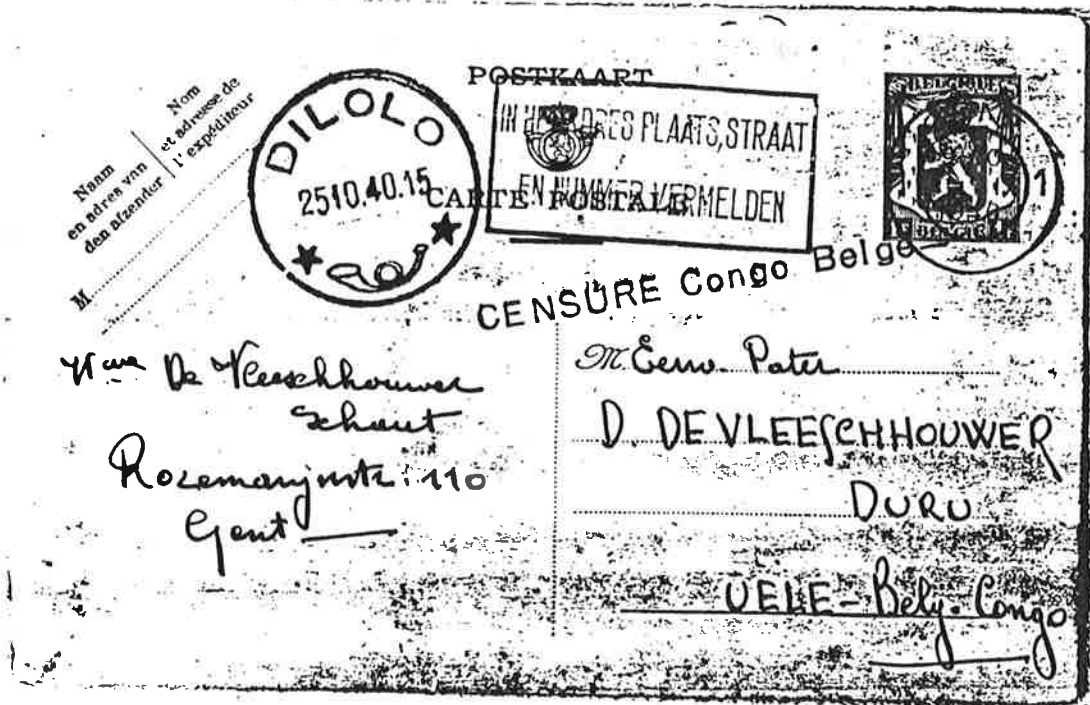


fr 5



Airmail letter sent from Ghent D3D on March 1, 1962 addressed to Mme. Buls c/o Mr. Paes de Saissa/Teixeira de Sousa/Angola: Angolan border town opposite Dilolo, on the line of the Benguela/Katanga railway, where it arrived March 11, 1962.
 Forwarded to Kolwezi, transiting Dilolo C on March 13, 1962, and a second final forwarding to Kamina, where it was taxed March 22, 1962.
 Taxation at Kamina A: 10 Fr. for forwarding Angola/Katanga, without doubling
 Tax stamps: 4 Fr. and 6 Fr.

118/11



This postcard was sent from Brussels to Belgian Congo on 1.9.1940 and reached the colony at Dilolo after traveling on the Benguela Railway through Angola, despite the fact that the final destination was located in the Uèlè Province in the North East of the Belgian Congo.

Emile Hoorens

The above article was translated by our member Donald Campbell. Your Editor is most grateful for the translation assistance.

THE PAQUEBOT MARKS DISCUSSED FURTHER

In the last bulletin on page 7 your Editor showed two stamps with genuine Paquebots marks improperly used and then went on to state that these marks on the Vloors stamps were not known to have been known POSTALLY used.

I am happy to report that, although I have "egg on my face" for an erroneous statement two members read the remark and promptly sent copies of such postal use.

Danny Vanderhauwaert sent the top items on the following page. The mark on the King Albert stamps and those on the 1F rose 'Vloors' (together with the 'COURRIER DE HAUTE MER ELISABTHEVILLE') and on the Leopard stamp of the Palms issue all appear to be genuine usage.

He goes on to state that he does have many stamps with the marks improperly used and raises a question—he has a number of Vloors stamps with apparently the Matadi marks but they measure about 2mm smaller. Does anyone have any knowledge concerning these marks. Please let us hear from you.

Hal Hoyte sent the "Coosar" cover shown on the next page. It would appear to be. He states it is number 361 in the Hosking catalogue. He further states that the boxed PAQUEBOTS mark is listed in Hosking, number 1266, as having been used at Albertville in 1931.

He refers to PAQUEBOT CANCELLATIONS OF THE WORLD BY Roger Hosking, M. A. published by the author in 1977 and states there is a later edition.

Conclusion: properly used Vloors and Palms with Paquebot marks do exist but are not common.

Editors' thanks to our contributing members.

EML

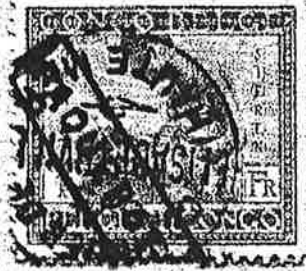
118/12

CONGO BELGE

ADMINISTRATION GÉNÉRALE DES POSTES



MONSIEUR R. REISDORFF



Mons. A. Cossar,
43 Bryson Road,
EDINBURGH, Ecosse.

118/13

EDITOR'S NOTES

In the next Bulletin we will include a complete inventory of all known covers with the TOMBEUR overprint as prepared by M. Frenay. We will also publish an article, discovered by M. Hoorens, of vehicle and truck transportation in the Congo in 1927 as well as new surprises from our contributors.

Congratulations to Michael Round, the contributor of the next article, the newsbit reporting his success is reproduced here:

In the annual competitions of the Wimbledon and District Philatelic Society (1999/2000 season), the Patrick Cup for postal history was won by member Michael Round, with an entry entitled **Zaire : the Inflationary Spiral 1990-99**, which in its statutory 12 sheets displayed a range of covers to the U.K. with frankings ranging from 150z to 120,000NZ. Given that 1 NZ = 3 million old z's, this is a near 3-billionfold price increase !

As usual your Editor urges—keep those articles coming.

EML

THE SEQUEL BEHIND THE STAMP!

Located by Michael Round

The following story, though of only tangential relevance to Belgian Congo collectors, is nevertheless - I hope - entertaining enough to share with all members. It was originally broadcast on 19th April 1997 as part of BBC Radio 4's consistently excellent "From Our Own Correspondent" programme, and I am grateful to contributor Allan Little and producer Tony Grant for allowing us to reproduce it. Those of you wanting a picture of the protagonists need only look at the 450+450 value of the 1939 Leopoldville Zoo set (COB 212) : those of you who enjoy copious writing-up can now, with reasonable confidence, add the names of Simon and Antoinette to your album-page !

We thank Michael for the story and also to Allan Little and Tony Grant. Not only does it provide a background for a stamp but a penetrating insight into relatively present attitudes and conditions in the former Belgian Congo. Ed.



118/14

ALLAN LITTLE - FOOC 19.04.97

Every foreign correspondent I know has at some time in his or her working life filed at least one story about a zoo. I have come to believe in zoos as barometers of social coherence in societies that appear to be falling apart. Earlier this year I was in the southern Zairean city of Lubumbashi and happened to drive past the zoo gates. My companion warned me that the zoo had become a no-go area. As in the rest of Zaire, the civil service had collapsed. The zoo had fallen into disrepair, the animals had escaped, the predators had eaten the herbivores and then themselves died from starvation. A few days before my visit someone had wandered into the zoo by mistake and had been eaten by the only creatures still alive, the crocodiles. The army had been ordered into the compound with automatic submachine guns. The crocodiles were suitably dispatched. The zoo compound was safe and accessible again, it was the talk of the city.

Crocodiles are the most ancient of species, their ancestry reaching back into the age of the dinosaurs. They have had more time on this planet than just about any other animal and there are consequently much better adapted. They can live for well over a year without eating. They are well equipped when in captivity to survive civil wars and the collapse of civil society. There is a zoo in Beira, in northern Mozambique, which during the civil war there suffered a similar fate. Refugees fleeing the Renamo guerrillas in their villages poured into town and took up residence in the empty cages. All the animals had died except for the crocodiles in the crocodile pit. Refugee children would amuse themselves by throwing stones into the pit to annoy the crocodiles. After many months the crocodiles grew hungry and bad tempered and the pit became perilously shallow by the gradual build-up of stones until one day the crocodiles escaped. The refugees had to lock themselves into the cages while the agitated crocodiles moved menacingly from cage to cage. Africa's graphic revenge on human folly.

ere are two magnificent Nile crocodiles at the zoo at Kinshasa. They are ed Simon and Antoinette and their keeper assured me that they answer eir names. They have been together a long time. They have been wing in the same crocodile enclosure since they were brought here in y. There are no safety restrictions at Kinshasa zoo and if you care to, cro) put your whole arm into the leopard cage or climb into the seem enclosure because no-one will stop you. Simon and Antoinette e too lethargic to be threatening. They have lived obliviously

118/15

through the days of the Belgian Congo, the turmoil of the anti-colonial struggle, the bright happy promise of independence and its quick betrayal. It now seems, incredibly, that they are about to survive into another era altogether.

Increasingly the people of this city are convinced that they are living the last days of the Mobutu despotism, that one of Africa's most notorious and corrupt dictatorships is coming to an end. The regime is under pressure as never before. Military rebels in the east have seized more than half the country now. This is astonishing. I remember attending a press conference in November last year after their first military victory. It was the first time I had met the rebel leader, Laurent Kabila. He claimed that day to have taken the rural area of Masisi, about forty miles from Goma. This was greeted with immense incredulity by the western media reporters gathered there. Masisi was a garrison society that had suffered terrible fighting for years. We didn't believe he could possibly take it.

When I look at the map on my office wall now in the light of the rebels subsequent victories, that remembered incredulity seems absurd and reveals how little we knew six months ago about the hurricane that was about to sweep this country. Mr Kabila now controls all of the wealth-producing areas of Zaire. He is coming to Kinshasa and the city is waiting for him. There are airline companies in this city advertising destinations that no longer exist. Lubumbashi, Kisangani, Mbuji Mayi, Goma -- all taken by the rebels and no longer accessible from the capital which is now the last major city still in government hands.

There is a private mobile phone company -- the mobile phone is an essential accessory for the Kinshasa elite. The domestic telephone system has long since collapsed through lack of investment, so the rich few and the foreigners rely on a private sector which is not available to the masses of the people. At the front desk of the telesales office the staff keep a map which they alter everyday to show the progress of the rebels and the areas of the country that can still be reached by telephone. It is diminishing fast. Someone has written 'long live the revolution' on the map.

What is happening in Zaire is characterised as a war but it is the oddest of wars. It is a war with almost no fighting, a war in which one side advances and the other side runs away. it is in reality a peoples uprising. And yet the old dictator seems increasingly oblivious to the reality that is closing in on him. When you have watched yourself on the television news every night descending from heaven to earth on a cloud, which is how the state-

118/16

controlled news used to open here, you must over the years build up a conviction that you are indestructible. To Mobutu, he and the state of Zaire are inseparable. The name he gave himself after his first few years in power, Sese Seko, is a Lingala term meaning everlasting. He belongs to the age of Africa's great despots and time has run out. The nobel laureate, Wally Soyinka, called the generation of rulers that emerged in the 1960's and 70's the Toad Kings of Africa because they betrayed the promise of independence.

But the sun is setting on the day of the Toad Kings. Change is coursing through this continent. The post-colonial era is over. The earthquake that is toppling Mobutu Sese Seko is an aftershock from that which toppled the Berlin Wall and brought down the Soviet Union. When the cold war ended, the United States pulled the plug on the dictators it had sustained in power because they were anti-Communist.

Kinshasa zoo is in the heart of the city and most of it has succumbed to the great dereliction that has been the fate of this country under Mobutu. It is overgrown with vegetation and most of the buildings and animal houses has collapsed. But you can see that at its construction by the Belgians seventy years ago it represented an aspiration to grandeur and prosperity. There remain about fifty primates and three leopards. They are cared for by a small but remarkable group of Zaireans who used to be staff but have not been paid for seven years. They collect scraps from the international hotels where the priveleged elite and the foreign businessmen eat so that they can feed the animals. The zoo keeper tells me with bitterness that as recently as the 1980's Kinshasa zoo was home to a family of pigmy chimpanzees, man's closest relative. They are native to the rainforests of upper Zaire and practically nothing is known of them. 'We used to attract researchers from all over the world' he said, 'but now they are gone'

Zaire is the squandering of an extraordinary national wealth. Kinshasa zoo, like Kinshasa hospital, like everything, like the country itself, keeps going because of the remarkable efforts of ordinary people in the face of the immense destitution to which the country has been reduced. 'We will keep going,' the zoo-keeper says, 'until the end of the dictatorship and then we will rebuild'.

118/17