

Swiss Mail Across the Mediterranean During the Nineteenth Century

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In any examination of postal traffic in the Mediterranean, it would be rather natural to overlook landlocked Switzerland as a contributor to this traffic. However the Helvetic Nation generated a surprisingly significant amount of traffic, especially during the latter half of the nineteenth Century.

During the Napoleonic Wars and until about 1848, there was a great deal of political unrest with several periods of civil strife throughout Switzerland, which tended to isolate her from the rest of Europe. However with the establishment of the Confederation of the 22 Cantons in 1848, a new and stable period began in the country. This stability supported by its Constitution, encouraged commerce, tourism and great economic growth, which all led to increased postal contact with the rest of the World.

From about 1840 onward, mail to foreign destinations received a dated routing hand stamp, indicating the foreign rail connection to the Foreign Transit Bureau. For overseas mail this would be the port of shipment, or the next point of transfer.

For mail to Mediterranean, Middle, or Far Eastern destinations, Switzerland offered a choice of routings. The overland route via Vienna and on down the Danube served Constantinople and beyond. However the most frequently used port of exit was clearly the French port of Marseille on the Mediterranean coast. Trieste on the Adriatic was an occasional alternative, as was the southern Italian port of Brindisi that became heavily used in the early 1870s after the port facilities were improved, since this shortened the sea journey to Alexandria (and the Suez Canal) very considerably.

This is not to say that examples of mail carried on the Mediterranean route during the pre-stamp era do not exist. Of course they do, although they don't seem to be plentiful. A very attractive example came recently to my attention (Figure 1; illustrated in *Postgeschichte* no. 50 [May 1992], published by H. Schwarzenbach in Zürich). The cover, which was addressed to Henri Zollinger in Java, had routing instructions 'via Marseille' and 'Par l'entremise de Messrs Jos Aubert & Co Alexandrie' and was mailed by 'Mssr. Huni & Fierz in Horgen' via Zürich, where it received the 'ZÜRICH 6 FEBR. 46 ST. LOUIS' (Grp. 170, 3014a in *Abstemplungen*) circular date stamp.

It arrived at Marseille on 9 February. The French *Administration des Postes* had started a service from Marseille via Malta to Alexandria using government packets in 1835. The service was operated monthly, transit time being 16 days. The service was not economically viable and was reorganized in 1846 with the insertion of Beirut as a port-of-call between Malta and Alexandria. With the help of faster ships, the scheduled time remained at 16 days. The frequency was increased to three sailings per month – on the 4th, 14th, and 24th. The letter probably sailed on the 14 February on the *Louqsor*, arriving at Alexandria on 1 March. As instructed on the cover, Mssrs. Jos. Aubert & Co., Alexandria, acting as forwarding agent, paid the Mediterranean postage and arranged for the letter to be carried overland to Suez. The Honourable East India Company was running a packet service to Bombay, with a stop at Aden. The letter was rated '8 As' (1/-) steamer postage, the 'INLAND DO' (ditto) was amended by hand to 'SHIP' and rated '2 As'. (Figure 2)

The letter continued to Java, where it arrived on 12 April, after a fast journey of 62 days. Arrival in Batavia is noted by a label which states:

'Aangebragt per Land-Mail

Te betalen porto f2 16 koper.

BATAVIA, 12/4 1846'

(It was rated F 2, 16 kop. [Guilders 2.16], to be collected from the addressee.)

The time of the issue of the Sitting Helvetia imperforate stamps of Switzerland – 1854 – marks the approximate beginning of the increase in overseas postal traffic, including the Mediterranean routes. However if one judges from examples appearing for sale in various Swiss stamp auctions, there seems to be very little mail intended for destinations via the Mediterranean Sea route, before about 1859. By comparison the overland route, through Vienna and along the Danube to Constantinople, was used much more.

An examination of more than 100 auction catalogues for sales in Switzerland, over the last 12 years, was made, and relevant items appeared in 26 of them, with a total of some 50 items, covering the period from 1859 to 1874. One could conclude that the number of surviving covers is not large, though new archives do surface from time to time.

I was rather pleased therefore, to discover, among a group of covers I had hoarded away, one that was addressed to Alexandria, Egypt and posted in Zürich, '25 IX 1868' (Figure 3).

The folded letter illustrated, was written on 25 September 1868 to a Georg Riecken in Alexandria, from Bosch & Denner in Zürich, concerning a business transaction, but also enclosing a personal note, all in handwriting now barely legible. This letter is fairly typical of the period. Franked 0.60 Swiss Francs with the 20 cts and 40 cts values of the Sitting Helvetia perforate issue of 1862, for the single letter rate to Egypt, and mailed 'ZÜRICH / 25 IX 68 VII' (the day of writing). While in transit (possibly in Neuchâtel, where this mark is known to have been used), it was determined to be overweight and marked 'AFFR.INSUF.'. The 'PD' mark applied in Zürich was deleted with a blue pencil and script '8/2' applied. (French regulations began the double rate at 8 gr., whereas Swiss practice was for over 8 gr.)

Arriving 'GENEVE / 26 SEPT 68 3S', it was transferred to the French rail system and routed to the partially completed Mont Cenis railway line ('SUISSE-AMB. M-CENIS / 26 SEPT. 68').

In a postal treaty with France in 1850, 12 exchange bureaux were established where mail to France was checked for franking and any shortages were noted by means of "black ink on the address of the unfranked letter - the numbers indicating the amount of tax to be paid at destination." In the treaty of 1 October 1865 new postal rates were established.

The figure '18' indicates the amount of tax due in décimes per 10 g. Thus 18 décimes is due, (equal to S.Fr. 1.20), or the double letter rate to Alexandria via Marseille (see Valko). On the Mont-Cenis line, the letter reached Lyon where it was rerouted to Marseille ('LYON A MARSEILLE / 27 SEPT. 68'). From Marseille it went by steamer to Egypt, where it received the arrival stamp 'ALEXANDRIE / EGYPT / 2 OCT. 68'.

During this period (about 1868), the French "Ligne V" was operating a regular service from Marseille to Alexandria on the 9th, 19th, and 29th day of each month. Under this schedule, the run took ten days, which eliminates this line as a possible carrier of the letter, given the Alexandria arrival date of 2 October. This establishes the P&O *Ceylon*, destination Hong Kong, as the probable carrier of the letter. This ship sailed from Marseille on 27 September, arriving in Alexandria on 2 October, both dates being consistent with the circular date stamps.

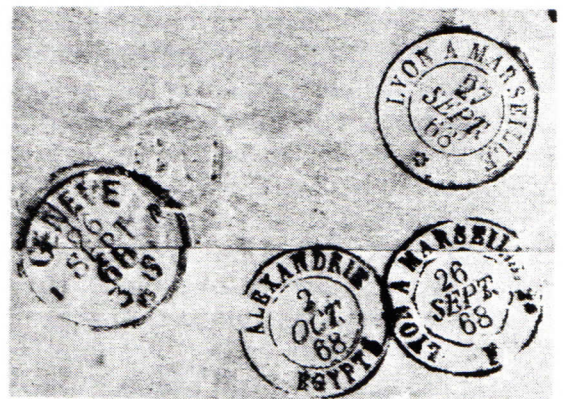


Figure 3 - Zürich to Alexandria, 25 September 1868





Figure 4 – Lucien to Cairo, 16 December 1886



Another cover originating somewhat later in the 19th century also serves to illustrate the handling of mail to Mediterranean destinations (Figure 4). This cover, from the Standing Helvetia stamp issue period in Switzerland, was written in Lucien on 16 December 1886 and posted in Geneva the next day ('GENEVE / 17.XII.86'), addressed to Cairo, Egypt. It was franked for the single foreign rate with the 25 cts Standing Helvetia (1882, perf. 11¾, printing with wide control mark); arrival backstamp 'ALEXANDRIE CAIRE / AMBULANT / 23 DE 86 TU'.

In all likelihood this letter was routed in Geneva via Marseille. The *Océanien* of the "Ligne N" sailed from Marseille for China on 19 December. While Salles does not give dates for intermediate ports-of-call, study of letters of the period indicates a transit time of five days between Marseille and Alexandria, which would correspond with the Alexandria arrival stamp of 23 December.

References

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