

Swiss Official Stamps for the International Refugee Organization, 1950-1952

SYNOPSIS

OBJECTIVE & SCOPE

This one-frame exhibit takes the traditional approach to present the eight stamps issued by the Swiss Post, Telephone and Telegraph (P.T.T.) for the International Refugee Organization (IRO), an agency of the United Nations (UN). The stamps, overprinted Swiss regular stamps, were issued February 1, 1950. Postal validity for the set ended just two years later on January 31, 1952.

BACKGROUND

The IRO constitution was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 15, 1946, and after the establishment of a Preparatory Commission (PCIRO), the IRO officially started August 20, 1948. As the successor of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the IRO's main purpose was to provide assistance to refugees to either repatriate or to find permanent homes in new countries. With headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, the IRO maintained offices in many countries, including the UNRRA offices in London and Paris. The IRO was established as a temporary organization. It went into liquidation March 1, 1952, ending operations in September 1953.

TREATMENT

Unfortunately, no essays or proofs of the overprint are known in public hands for these stamps. The exhibit starts by demonstrating the format of the overprint plates and the format of the base stamp panes. The story continues by showing the plate varieties, first day P.T.T. items and concludes with examples of official use. While the stamps were sold to the public, they were not valid for use outside of the agency headquarters.

The main story text, using the Times New Roman font, is included in single-line boxes. Auxiliary information will be italicized and without a box. Key information will be highlighted with bold text.

Key and important items will be highlighted by being placed in a red double-line frame.

This is the most comprehensive exhibit from the largest known collection of the IRO stamps.

Given the short period of postal validity, the very small quantity of stamps issued, and the rarity of official mail, the study of the IRO set is appropriate for a one-frame exhibit.

IMPORTANCE

While its existence as an agency was brief, the significance of the IRO was immense, tasked with the monumental job of settling millions of refugees around the globe. In terms of the size of its staff and the number of field offices, the IRO was the largest of the UN agencies.

It has taken this collector over 40 years to gather enough appropriate material to present this one-frame exhibit. Other collectors, both Swiss and from various countries, as well as thematic collectors, have pursued this material, but this is the first time that critical mass has been achieved.

KNOWLEDGE & RESEARCH

This material has been keenly scrutinized by both Swiss and UN collectors alike. Detailed listings of the stamps, their varieties and uses can be found in the Zumstein Specialized Catalog or in United Nations Philately (see References). Nevertheless, this exhibitor enjoys "flyspecking" and has discovered a plate variety not listed in either Gaines or Zumstein.

The exhibit demonstrates the exhibitor's understanding of the process by which the base stamps and the overprint were produced. The rates and markings on each cover are accurately described.

RARITY & CONDITION

These stamps were issued in very small quantities, ranging from 29,000 for the high value 2 Franc stamp to just 24,000 for the lowest value 5 centime stamp. Printed in panes of 50 stamps, only 580 to 480 panes of stamps were produced. The number of position pieces (e.g. control number blocks, plate position blocks, etc.) are likewise limited.

RARITY & CONDITION (cont.)

Given that the overprint was added using a plate of 25 positions, and applied twice to each pane, quantities of plate varieties range from a low of 960 to a high of 1,160 for a given variety on a given stamp. Sets of the varieties are limited by the lower number. These figures are for the maximum potential volume of each variety, as some defects developed as printing progressed. This exhibit shows complete sets of all listed plate varieties, plus examples of a variety not listed in either Gaines or Zumstein.

Use of these service stamps was restricted to official correspondence and personal mail of delegates and agency employees. Thus, there are NO philatelic examples of use. All covers are official by nature; almost all with agency corner cards. IRO covers are considered "hens teeth". This collector has amassed the largest known group of them - just 13 covers. All 8 stamps of the set are represented on the covers shown. The largest known multiple of the 1 Franc stamp (a block of 9) is shown on a cover sent to Venezuela. The center stamp exhibits the short R variety.

NOTE: The inexplicably low prices for covers franked with IRO stamps quoted in catalogues implies that the covers are not that rare. However, this exhibitor would gladly pay the listed prices, but dealers rarely have any to offer and have as much difficulty acquiring IRO covers as we collectors do.

The condition of the material shown in this exhibit, including covers, is the best available.

REFERENCES

United Nations Philately, Arleigh Gaines, ed., R & D Publications 1980 w/updates through 1997

This massive loose-leaf specialized catalog contains the best English language reference on this material. The section on the IRO can be found on pages 1301-1310.

Spezialkatalog Schweiz, Band 2, Zumstein & Cie, 2000 (latest ed.)

The definitive (German language) catalog of Swiss stamps. The section covering the IRO can be found on pages 979-980.

For information on the base stamps see

Spezialkatalog Schweiz, Band 1, Zumstein & Cie, 2000 (latest ed.)

Low Values (Technik und Landschaft) pp. 316-321

High Values (Historische Bilder) p. 335

For postal rate information, the following German language (with some French) references are excellent. The tabular format of the rate information makes them readily understandable to those who only speak/read English.

Die Posttaxen der Schweiz ab 1862: Band 1 – Inland, Kommission für Jugendphilatelie, Zack-Sonderdruck 1990

Die Posttaxen der Schweiz ab 1875: Band 2 - Ausland, Kommission für Jugendphilatelie, Zack-Sonderdruck 1995

Die Schweizerischen Flugpost-Zuschlagtaxen ab 1919, Roland F. Kohl, Postgeschichte-Verlag 1997

All references are available from the American Philatelic Research Library.