

# The Cover Story

## Carpatho-Ukraine and I by Robert J. Fisher

Many of you know that one of my primary collection areas is a little-known corner of the world known as Carpatho Ukraine. Unlike many of you, I did not collect stamps in my youth. It was while I was in the U. S. Army stationed in the Panama Canal Zone and bored to tears. Don't get me wrong; Panama is a beautiful country, and I would dearly love to return, but as a soldier with limited means and little in the way of transportation the primary sources of entertainment were either drinking in the local bars or gambling in the many casinos. Then a friend introduced me to the world of philately, and I have been hooked ever since.

I started with a large H. E. Harris album and several boxes of kiloware. Eventually I tired of soaking and mounting stamps of little value and decided to specialize. I found stamps of the Canal Zone and Germany to be especially attractive and ordered a White Ace album for the Canal Zone and a Scotts specialty album for Germany. I decided to go with mint singles for both.

My Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was as a radio voice intercept specialist and required foreign language training at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, CA. I had spent several years as a Spanish linguist but had changed to German to avoid being sent to Ft. Hood, TX. The army had other ideas and after only 12 weeks of the German course, I was told to switch to Czech. Being a philatelist, I checked my Scotts catalog for Czech stamps and was not impressed by all the boring political dross that the average Communist state emits. At the end of the Czech section in Scotts was single but attractive Czech stamp from Carpatho-Ukraine with a lot of Cyrillic lettering. My curiosity was aroused since the Czech language uses the Latin alphabet. After some research I decided to collect this area. I mean, a complete collection in one stamp? Amazing! Little did I realize that I would wind up with eight volumes of stamped and stampless material.



Historically, Carpatho-Ukraine has had an interesting yet tragic and blood-soaked past. Prior to the year 1000 A.D. it was mostly a place to be crossed by tribes of people who were on their way to somewhere else but did add several ethnic groups to the area. Even the Golden Horde invaded it during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, managed to depopulate most of it, but did not stick around; nothing there but poor peasants scratching out a mean existence among the rocks.

The Hungarians finally decided to control the area primarily to protect the more gentle and productive land to the south of the Carpathian Mountains. They guarded the only four passes through the mountains which were mostly impassable during the winter. The Hungarian nobility used what they called Transcarpathia as a recreation area for hunting and other noble pursuits. The northern two-thirds of the area was only useful for timber and salt. The southern part contained the only arable land and even boasted some excellent vineyards. They divided the land into four counties: Ung, Ugocsa, Bereg and Maramaros.

In 1526 the Kingdom of Hungary was at war with the Ottoman empire, and the King of Hungary was killed at the battle of Mohacs. The Austrians and Turks divided Hungary between them and a large part of Hungary became part of the Austrian empire. For a time, Transcarpathia was attached to Transylvania and under control of European nobles who bore allegiance to the Ottoman empire. With the decline of the Ottoman empire, Austria took control of the entire region including Transylvania. Hungarian nationalists tried to throw off the Austrian yoke in 1848 but were soundly defeated by Russian forces when the Austrians requested help from the Tsar. Hungary was finally given autonomy in 1867 with the creation of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Austria-Hungary entered World War I with much bravado and little military talent. They fought the Russians in what is now southern Poland and Western Ukraine. The Russians pushed them south to the Carpathian Mountains where both sides suffered over a million casualties due to indifferent leadership. Austria finally asked the Germans for help and received two divisions which stabilized the front. After the war, Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia were carved away from Austria-Hungary to create Czechoslovakia. Later Transcarpathia was renamed Sub Carpathian Rus or Ruthenia and added to the eastern end of Slovakia.

The Czechs granted Ruthenia limited autonomy and proceeded to bring the area slowly to the twentieth century. Progress continued until the Munich Accord in 1938 when the Czechs were forced to cede the Sudetenland to Germany and agreed to talks with Hungary over the fate of Ruthenia. Talks broke down and both countries mobilized for war until Germany and Italy met in Vienna and awarded the arable part (the southern third) and all the major cities to Hungary.

Things were at an armed stalemate until Hitler forced Slovakia to secede from Czechoslovakia on March 14, 1939. He then invaded the Czech lands on March 15<sup>th</sup>, which forced Ruthenia to declare independence on March 15, 1939. The Ruthenian diet, created by the Munich Accord, changed the name of the country to Carpatho-Ukraine then formed a legislature, wrote a constitution, elected a president and released the blue Carpatho-Ukraine stamp at the Chust (now the state capital) post office. This lasted a few days until Hungarian troops overran the new nation. A scan of a cover mailed on the first day **[Figure 1]** is found on the first page of the newsletter.

Like the rest of Europe, Carpatho-Ukraine suffered under the Axis powers. About 90% of the Jewish population was shipped off to concentration camps from which very few returned. Members of the general population were conscripted into the military or labor camps.

Life was hard until 1944 when Carpatho-Ukraine was liberated by the Red Army ... then things got worse. Teachers, clergy, intellectuals and other educated people as well as people with German and Hungarian heritage and Gypsies were forced to work in Soviet labor camps or sent to prison in Siberia. In 1946 Stalin forced the restored Czechoslovakia to cede Carpatho-Ukraine to the Ukraine SSR, thus giving the Russians a common border with Poland, Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Russians used this land bridge to put down the anti-Communist revolts of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Communists renamed the area Transcarpathian Ukraine and remains today as the westernmost "oblast" of Ukraine. Groups occasionally demand independence, but most of the population are satisfied to be Ukrainians and prefer the status quo. It remains to be seen what will happen once the current Ukraine-Russian war ends but I suspect that everyone will be too exhausted to demand any changes.

*[Editor's note: The late and great Jim Pullin used to refer to himself and me as "stampless collectors".]*