

The "secret" service that sees your mail gets through

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1983)**

Heft 1806

PDF erstellt am: **16.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690011>

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Talk of Switzerland and the United Nations, and the city that immediately springs to mind is Geneva, where many specialised agencies of the UN have their headquarters.

But there's one important yet

little heard-of UN agency which has its home in the quiet, cosy capital of Berne. And it's the one which probably concerns most of us most of all – the Universal Postal Union, which this month celebrates UPU Day.



MAIL a holiday postcard from any country you care to name to the folks back home, and it will almost certainly arrive safely – thanks to an international organisation set up in Switzerland more than 100 years ago.

However violent the international atmosphere – crises, confrontations, threats and boycotts, even wars – we can still drop an envelope into our local letterbox and be sure it will be delivered to its correct destination anywhere in the world.

A Watusi tribesman in the heart of Africa can post a letter to an Eskimo on the Arctic Circle, and it will get there. It's quite a remarkable achievement if one thinks about it – although, of course, very few of us ever do. It's a service we take for granted.

Yet the management of the international conveyance of mails is in many respects a far greater feat than the modern day marvels of electronic communication.

For the world's postal connections would be in chaos and confusion if it were not for the Universal Postal Union in Berne, founded in 1874 and the oldest of the many international organisations established in this tiny neutral nation.

Of course, *private* postal services were in operation long before the UPU came into being. The early international mails were organised by imperial governments for their own official purposes.

The Romans operated a permanent system of relay posts covering their entire empire. In theory at least, the commander of the legions shivering on Hadrian's Wall could despatch a missive to his counterpart on the edge of the Sahara Desert – knowing it would not stop moving until the latter gentleman had received it.

Medieval monasteries set up a similar system for the church, while royalty and rich merchants had their own personal couriers.

The early newspapers also pioneered, again for their own purposes, some remarkable international postal services. During the Napoleonic wars for example, *The Times* of London frequently reported the news before the British government itself had received it. Journalistic legend has it that the editor knew

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the outcome of the battle of Waterloo before the Prime Minister.

And in America, the legendary Buffalo Bill Cody started his dramatic career as one of the relay of fast and fearless riders carrying the mails into California.

The first bilateral *public* postal service supervised by governments is believed to have been the one established under a treaty between England and France in 1670. Another treaty, concluded in 1713, saw the first multinational postal service and

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provided for mail to be sent on from France to points in Spain, Italy and Turkey.

But in general, those public postal services existing before the UPU were unreliable – and very expensive.

It was the Postmaster General of the United States, Montgomery Blair, who called the meeting in Paris in 1863 which led eventually to the creation of the General Postal Union (later re-named the Universal Postal Union). The founding congress was held in Berne in 1874, and the UPU has been there ever since.

The Berne Treaty was signed on October 9 of that year – a date celebrated worldwide every year as UPU Day. The founding treaty

was signed by 22 countries – the United States, Egypt, Britain, Switzerland and 18 other European nations. Now the UPU has 166 member states.

Today there are well over half a million post offices around the world. They employ nearly six million people (almost equaling the entire population of Switzerland). And they handle some 300,000 million pieces of mail every year.

That this gigantic network functions globally – despite often different and even diametrically opposed national interests – is indeed a unique achievement in these troubled times.

If proof were ever needed that the world's nations really can cooperate, permanently and successfully, on the most complicated tasks, then the record of the Universal Postal Union might well be called in evidence.

The postage stamp you stick on your letter, instantly recognisable as a *national* emblem, is yet the most international of all devices. It knows no frontiers and confers the right of transit upon the humblest communication.

So on your next visit to Switzerland think for a moment of the many millions of items of mail being carried throughout the world by trains, aircraft, ships, motor vehicles, bicycles and even horses and camels. Then give a polite nod in the direction of Berne and the Universal Postal Union – the international organisation that works for us all.