

## 1923: FREE CITY OF DANZIG (GDAŃSK) and MEMEL (KLAIPEDA)

INTRODUCTION: The presentation that follows represents a concatenation of events, the purchase of two, seemingly unrelated, unimportant philatelic items. Both are dated January 1923; both originate from the Baltic region at the time in political and socio-economic turmoil



BACKGROUND: The Free City of Danzig was a semi-autonomous city-state that existed between 1920 and 1939, consisting of the Baltic Sea port of Danzig (now Gdańsk) and nearly 200 towns and villages in its surrounds. It was created on 15 November 1920 in accordance with the 1919 Treaty of Versailles which stated that the region was to remain separated from the Weimar Republic and from the newly independent Second Polish Republic. As was the case with the Territory of the Saar Basin, it was supervised by the League of Nations.

Danzig issued its own stamps between 1920 and 1939. The first stamps were issued on 14 June 1920 and were overprinted German stamps. The first true Danzig stamps appeared on 31 January 1921, with the last being released on 29 April 1939. On 2 September 1939 the Free City of Danzig and the Polish corridor was annexed in an act of war by the Third Reich.



The important Baltic port of Memel and its surrounding territory, was part of the state of East Prussia, within the German Empire, until the end of World War I.

Terms of German surrender were ultimately agreed and codified in the Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June, 1919. *Inter alia* Germany was forced to give up territory to its neighbours in Europe as well as all of its foreign colonies in Africa and Asia.

In the case of East Prussia, a large portion of land was allocated to the newly independent Poland, Danzig (later Gdansk) became a Free City and Memel, was given the name "Territoire de Memel" (German: "Memelgebiet") (later Lithuanian: Klaipėda) was made a protectorate of the League of Nations, its management assumed by "Council of Ambassadors", in reality France..

Harping back to the Napoleonic Wars, the populations of both Germany and Eastern Europe found this French military occupation intolerable. Increasingly, the concept of an independent state of "Memelland" was mooted amongst local inhabitants. This move prove unacceptable to the government of the newly-created Lithuania, who viewed the area as part of their own.

On 9 January 1923, the Lithuanian-instigated Klaipėda Revolt broke out, militia of mixed nationality entering Territoire de Memel largely unhindered from Lithuania. Occupied Memel was renamed Klaipėda. France, distracted by its concurrent re-occupation of the Ruhr following Germany failure to pay agreed reparations, took insignificant counteractive measures against the rebels.

On **19 January 1923** the territory was effectively annexed by Lithuania. This action was eventually confirmed by the Council of Ambassadors in 1924, the League of Nations on 25 August 1925 and by Weimar Germany in 1928

Reference: 1/ League of Nations: SAAR Basin and Free City of Danzig. Information Secretariat, League of Nations, Geneva, March 1924. 2/ League of Nations: Memel Territory. Information Secretariat, League of Nations, Geneva, 1 December 1923



**1923: FREE CITY OF DANZIG (GDAŃSK) and MEMEL (KLAIPEDA)**

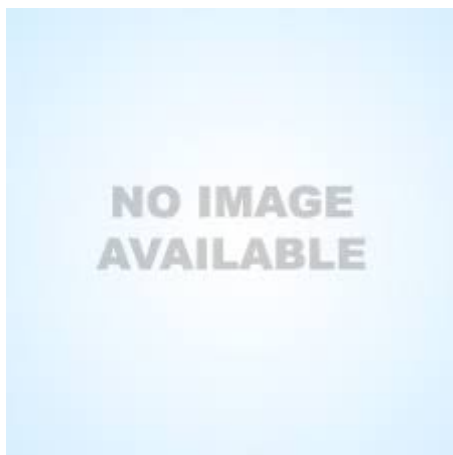
POSTAL HISTORY

DANZIG Issued November 1922 5pf green (SG O116) 10 pf orange (SG O118) Cancellation DANZIG 2.1.23.

The last stamps to be issued in Danzig were those of the anti-cancer Campaign 29 April 1939.



MEMEL French definitive 4 Dec 1900 (SG 303) opt. Jan-Apr 1922 (SG 66). Cancellation MEMEL 18.1.2023 (not shown)



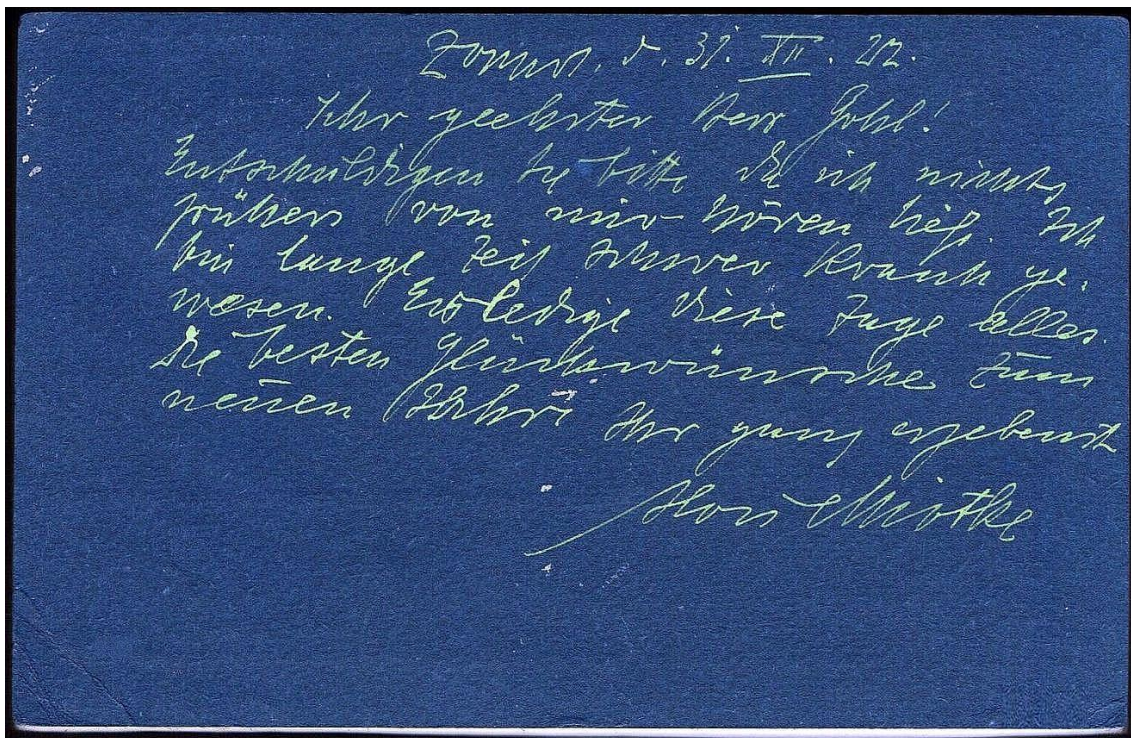
The first LITHUANIAN OCCUPATION KLAIPEDA stamps were issued on 16 April 1923.



## 1923: FREE CITY OF DANZIG (GDAŃSK) and MEMEL (KLAIPEDA)

COMMENTARY: At first pass, neither of the two items presented here are of particular interest. Though both are dated December 1922 (31.xii.22) / January 1923 (2.1.23), thereby representing a concatenation of events, they are unimportant as philatelic items. The cheap postcard from Danzig was used postally, bears two low-value definitive stamps exceeding the then postage rate. The text is as follows:

Basically, the writer is saying to Herr Gohl **please forgive me that you have not heard earlier from me** ('Entschuldigen sie bitte daß sie nicht früher von mich gehören habt'). **I have been very ill for a long time** ('Ich bin lange zeit schwer krank gewesen'). (I) **Finish everything these days.** (Ich) Erledigt diese Tage alles. **Good wishes for the new year.** Die besten Glückwünsche zum neueren Jahr. **Your devoted servant.**



Of the author, Alois Horst Mitke, we know nothing; but it transpires that the recipient, Leo Gohl of Charlottenburg, was a well-known German artist who seemingly specialised in painting Oriental scenes, gouache on paper. (see the picture essay that follows)

Passing to the Memel postcard, it bears a French definitive stamp overprinted Memel, is cancelled to order, and dated 18.1.1923. That was a momentous day for it marked the end of the Klaipėda Revolt, was the last date that Memel was governed by the French occupying forces (all be it ineffectually) and the stamp was legal postal tender, and precedes the day that the city was annexed by Lithuania and became Klaipėda. This innocent item memorialises these historical events.



A fascinating addition to this story was the discovery of an earlier advertisement dated 2 Feb 1921 in a local newspaper, Memeler Dampfboot (Memeler und Grenz-Beitung).

It reads: Gebrauchte Briefmarken von Memel aus dem täglichen Verkehr nicht fortwerfen. Sammler erbittet Zusendung gegen hohe Vergütung (über  $\frac{1}{2}$  bis vollen Nennwert). Leo Gohl, Charlottenburg, Nehringstr. 28.

**Do not throw away any used stamps from Memel that circulate daily. Please send to collector who will pay a high refund (over  $\frac{1}{2}$  up to full nominal value). Leo Gohl, Charlottenburg, Nehringstr. 28.**

(Ref: Postal Rates Danzig 1919-1945 [http://www.sijtzeurich.com/postal\\_rates\\_Danzig.html](http://www.sijtzeurich.com/postal_rates_Danzig.html))

Translation (without access to actual document): Dr Denise Kotzé and Dr D A E Pelteret

**LEO GOHL (German watercolourist: early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dates unknown)**  
record of all known sales that are published

**Monte Sarmiento, Constantinopel** Gouache auf Papier, 28 cm x 42 cm. Links unten signiert "Leo Gohl" sowie rechts unten bezeichnet "Monte Sarmiento in Constantinopel", Rahmen. (Monte Sarmiento, Constantinopel: view across the harbour ) Sale Date: 6 September, 2008 Düsseldorf, Germany

**Konstantinopelansicht (View of Constantinopel)** Signed lower right. Gouache on paper 27,5 x 38 cm. Provenance: Schloss Ahlden, Ahlden, Sale Dates: Sale Date: 25 February, 2011, 2 October 2011, 21 January 2019, April 2019 & 18 June 2019.

Dogenpalast und Campanile in Venedig, 1929 (Doge's Palace and Campanile in Venice, 1929) Sale Date: 19 November, 2013

Reid's Hotel (now Belmont Reid's Palace), Madeira Sale Date: ?

Orientalische Gasse mit Menschen (Oriental alley with people) Sale Date: 6 November 2017 Bilsen, Germany

Spitzbergen, Waggonway-Gletscher, rechts unten signiert, 27 x 36,5 cm, hinter Glas, Silberrahmen, verso Papieretikett der ersten Rahmung, dort betitelt (1st half of the 20th century, gouache / paper, "Spitzbergen, Waggonway glacier", signed lower right, 27 x 36.5 cm, behind glass, silver frame, verso paper label of the first framing, titled there) Sale Date: 24 August 2019

