

The underground railroad post office in Postumia Grotte 1872–1945¹

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The first cavern to achieve worldwide renown as a showplace was Adelsberg Cave, located near a village of the same name in Austria. From 1872–1945, it had three other names: Adelsberger Grotte, Postumia Grotte and Postojnska Jama (Figure 1).

Exploration began as early as the thirteenth century, but the cave received only modest attentions until 1818, when a decision was made to commercialize the cave. Workers cleared away rubble and climbed rickety ladders to install torches for light. In the process, one laborer happened upon a gap in the cave's far wall, some ninety feet above the floor. Crawling through the opening, he found a new section far larger than the first with fantastic dripstone formations.

Local officials reasoned, if the problems of access could be conquered, the public would find it irresistible. Workers continued to level paths through the chambers, built a wooden bridge across the cave's underground Pivka River, and chiseled stone stairways into the walls made safer by wooden handrails. The crude torches were eventually replaced with chandeliers and oil lamps, and guides were trained.

When the railway linking Ljubljana and Trieste via Postojna was opened in 1857, access became easier and interest in the cave even greater. On March 11, 1857, Emperor Franz Joseph and Empress Elisabeth stopped in Adelsberg to visit the cave on their way home from Italy.

Adelsberg Cave was soon drawing 1,000 visitors a year, and by the 1870s the annual number of tourists had soared to 8,000. After visiting Adelsberg in 1881, a reporter from the *New York Times* (1881) wrote in awe of the "stalactites of unequalled splendor," and the "fantastic architecture in the cave," and concluded "though it possessed neither the mighty expanse of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, nor the delicate beauty of the Blue Grotto at Capri, every part of it is filled with a stern and gloomy grandeur which is indescribably impressive."

To avoid confusion, and keeping in line with naming conventions, all references in this article to locations in the cave will be in Italian (also found on the map below). However, most places have alternative names in both Austrian and Slovenian.

1. Between 1872–1945, the cave had three names Adelsberger Grotte / Postumia Grotte / Postojnska Jama because different countries (Austria, Italy and Yugoslavia) occupied the surrounding territory.

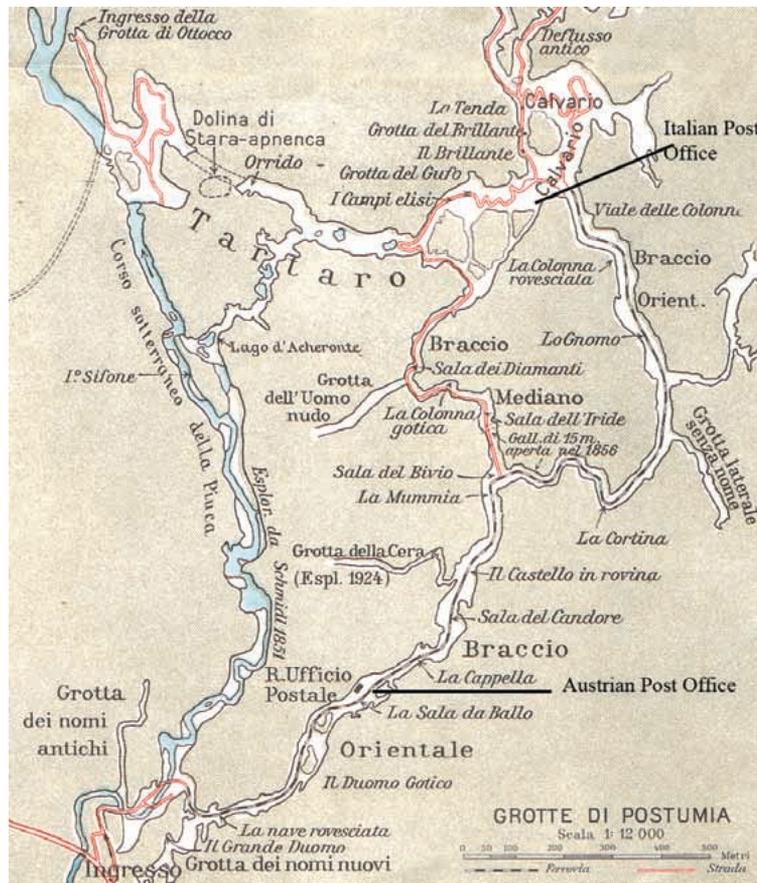


Figure 1. Postojna, Slovenia, is located about twenty-five miles from Trieste, Italy.

THE TRAINS

The problem of making visits more comfortable, safer, easier, and more comfortable was resolved in 1872, when the Cave Board decided to install rail tracks into the cave 1.4 miles to Calvario (Figure 2). Since the path through the cave did not have many changes in elevation, the Board decided that the carriages in the cave could be driven by manpower.

Figure 2. Map of Postumia Grotte showing Railway (Ferrovia—dashed line) and Walkway (Strada—red solid line).



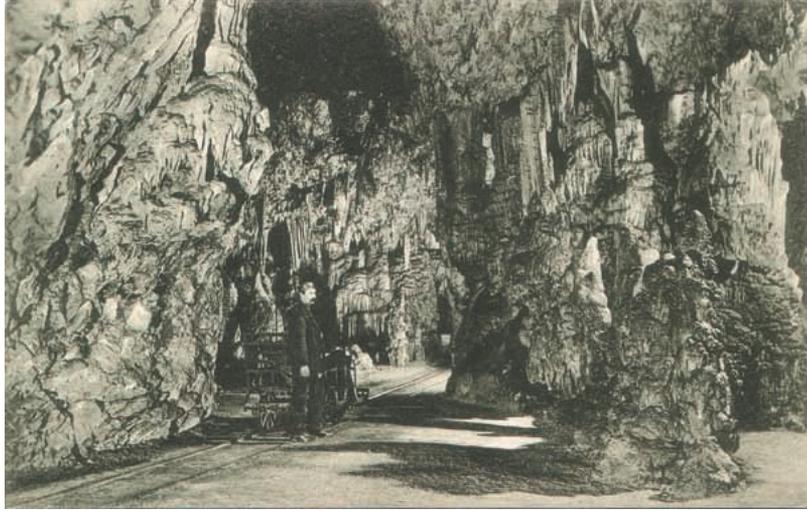


Figure 3. The Faeton, photograph by M. Šeber, Postojna.

The first underground commercial railway in the world began operation on June 16, 1872. The part of the cave it originally took visitors half an hour to explore could now be seen in five minutes from the elegant double-seated carriages called “Faetons” (Figure 3) (*Slovenski* 1872). Visitors could use the carriages in one or both directions, into and out of the cave. The round-trip ticket cost 1 florin, a one way ticket 70 kreutzers. In 1920, entrance into the cave was 15 lira and a roundtrip train ticket was an additional 5 lira (Figure 4).²

By 1914, the small, manually operated railway became outdated due to the large number of visitors, and the cave humidity had decayed many of the railroad ties. The Cave Board contacted the Orenstein & Koppel factory and ordered a locomotive and carriages, of the type usually used in mines (Borjanè 1992). The locomotive, named “Montania,” had a one-cylinder water-cooled 6–8 Brake Horse Power (BHP) petrol engine with two axles (*Il Popolo* 1924).

2. For comparison costs at that time \$1 US was equal to 19 lira.

Figure 4. Tickets from the 1920s to enter the cave and ride the train.



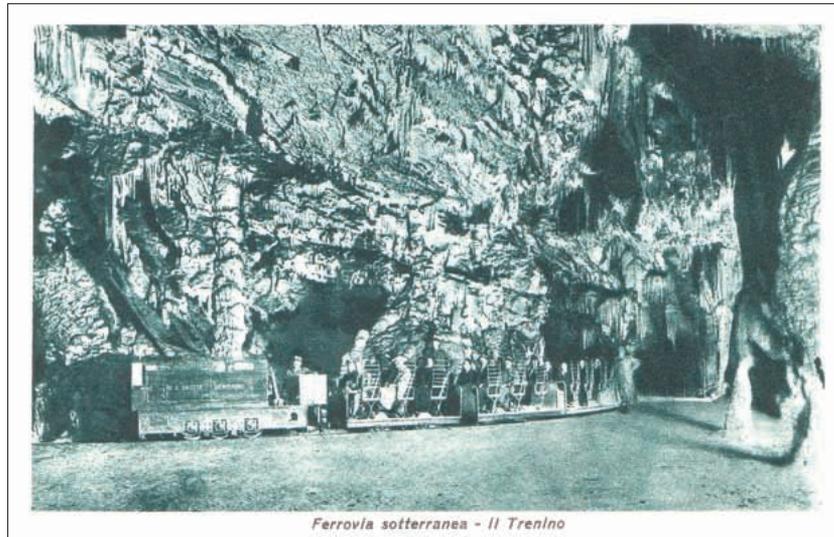


Figure 5. Montania S-10, Ufficio Postale R.R. Grotte (Official Postcard of the Royal Caves).

Plans to improve the railway were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. Then in the early 1920s, the Italians, who now controlled the area, continued improvements, including completing the railway, upgrading the electrical system, removing the monuments praising Austrian emperors, and employing foreign language speaking guides.

The Italian patriotic feelings were strong after World War I. Italians believed “the Austrian and Slovenian names of dripstones and formations were infantile” and replaced them with the names from Roman mythology, for example Franz Joseph und Elisabeth Grotte became Braccio Mediano (Shaw 2006). (Around 1945, Yugoslavia changed it to Male jame.)

The improved underground railway system from the cave entrance to Calvario was completed in 1923. Between April and June 1924 the first test-drives were performed with the locomotive “Montania No. 803.” On August 2, 1924, the new underground railway was officially opened (Čuk 2003). The locomotive hauled five four-seat carriages into the cave four times a day (10 a.m., noon, 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.).

Based on the growing popularity of the cave, the Cave Board decided to purchase additional locomotives and carriages. On March 27, 1925, Orenstein & Koppel sent from their factory in Nordhausen, a new “Montania, S-10, No. 2044” with a more powerful petrol-driven, three-axle locomotive and new carriages with six adjustable seats (Figure 5). A year later, in July 1926, the Cave Board bought a third 20 BHP petrol-driven locomotive “Cemsa, Type 20 G, No. 20-779,” manufactured in Milan. There were now three trains with thirty-one carriages which took tourists into the cave eight times each day (Čuk 2003, 235).

A journalist from the Bologna newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino*³ (1925) visited the grotto and wrote: “It is 4 p.m. The train stops on the platform in front of the cave, having passed the 75-metre long gallery, acting as the underground railway station. We boarded the train and the guide rang the bell to announce the departure of the train. Those who decided to visit the cave on foot, follow the guides. There are some elderly people and quite a lot of ladies and children on the train. The train slowly reaches Calvario, the final railway station with the turning point for the locomotives. There the train waited for the visitors who explored

3. *Carlino* is one of the oldest newspapers and symbol of the city of Bologna since March 21, 1885, when it was first published.



Figure 6. Station platform in 1929 with the CESMA locomotive and carriages. *Ufficio Postale R.R. Grotte (Official Postcard of the Royal Caves)*

further and took them back to the cave entrance along the same route. On its way back the train stopped near La Sala da Ballo, by the old post office where the visitors posted their postcards during a ten-minute break”

In 1928, there were significant changes to the entrance of the cave with the construction of the Cave Board Administration Building, the entrance platform with the railway station, and the reception area (Figure 6). Now located between the headquarters and rock cliff was a new, visitor-friendly railway station with two tracks and a raised platform offering a safer and more comfortable access into the cave. This entrance was used for visitors wanting to see the cave from the train, while those who wanted to visit it on foot continued to enter through the main entrance.⁴

THE POST OFFICES

In 1899, the Austrian Ministry of Commerce agreed to the Cave Board’s proposal to build and operate a post office inside the cave. The post office (Figure 7), built of stone, was about 13 feet long by 6.5 feet wide, with a low-pitched roof. There was a door at the north end, two window openings for sales counters and a slot for mail. It was built about 1,650 feet from the cave entrance (Figure 2).

Its customers were regular tourists and those attending the special twice-yearly festivals called Grottenfests held in the La Sala da Ballo with the dance hall specially illuminated. In 1910, Juvanec⁵ reported that there were tables and seats outside the building for visitors to write their postcards.

For the Whit Monday (Pentecost) Grottenfest, the postal authorities authorized a special “Adelsberger Grotte / Postojnska jama” cancellation as seen in Figure 8. The postal authorities allowed the special postmarks to be used throughout the season from March first to November first, starting as early as 1899 (Adelsberg 1912). The other Grottenfest was held at different times in the autumn months.

4. The visitors could choose between visiting the cave by underground train or on foot until 1963. After that year all visitors were required to use the underground train.

5. His photographs of the cave and its surroundings were used as illustrations on many postcards of the day.

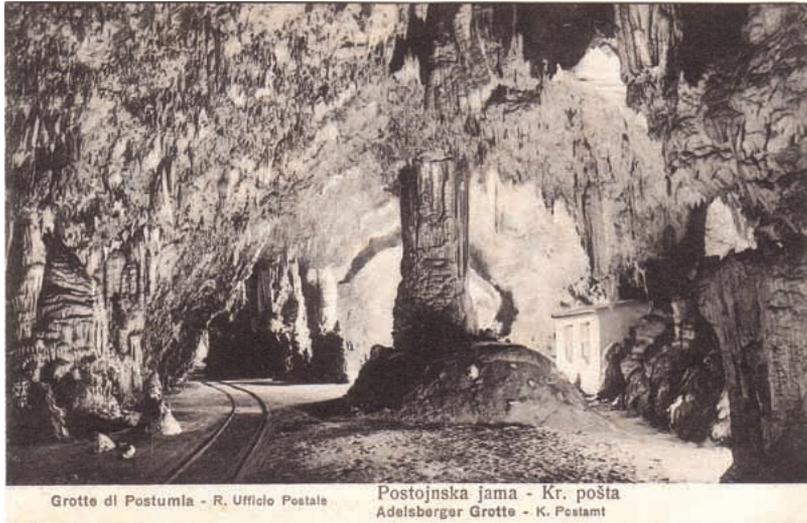


Figure 7. The Austrian post office in 1900 as seen on a multiple language post card, photograph by M. Šeber, Postojna.

There was a special cancel, a forerunner of a slogan cancel, for the 1912 Grottenfest when the Liedertafel Choral Society from Währingen performed in the cave (Figure 9).

There were several handstamps which had been applied in the cave on postcards. It is not known if the Austrian postal clerks applied these handstamps or if the handstamp and ink pad had been available at the counter for visitor use (Figure 10).

At Christmas 1915, two special military field post office postmarks were used—K. u. k. Grottenfeldpost 81. Kriegswihnachten 1915 (Imperial and Royal Cave Mail 81. War Christmas 1915) and K. u. k. Grottenfeldpostamt 81. Kriegswihnachten 1915 (Imperial and Royal Cave Field Post Office 81. War Christmas 1915) (Figure 11). All military field post offices

Figure 8. Postcard mailed on Whit Monday, May 20, 1907.

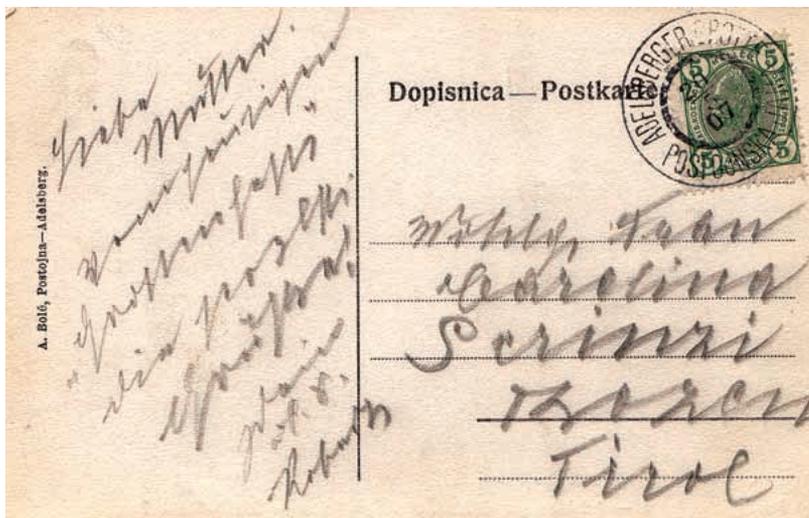




Figure 9. Grottenfest in ADELSBERG Währinger Liedertafel [Choral Society] (Van der Pas 2010). (Courtesy of The Speleo Stamp Collector).

Figure 10. Unique handstamps.

were numbered and, although their locations were not fixed, number 81 was at Postojna in 1915 and 1916 (Rainer 1995).

This post office building remained in use until 1927 (with the Italian “Postumia (Grotte)” postmark used after 1922), when it was replaced by a new building located 1.4 miles inside the cave (Shaw and Čuk 2003).

THE AUSTRIAN / ITALIAN POST OFFICE

At the end of World War I, on September 10, 1919, the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye was signed recognizing the independence of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs. Parts of Austria were incorporated into the newly created states of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia (the “successor states”) and Trentino, South Tyrol, Trieste, Istria and several Dalmatian islands were ceded to Kingdom of Italy. Then in 1920,

the Treaty of Rapallo, between the Kingdom of Italy and the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), was signed to resolve additional territorial disputes. According to this treaty, the western part of



Figure 11. Austrian army field post office postmarks for the cave at Christmas 1915.

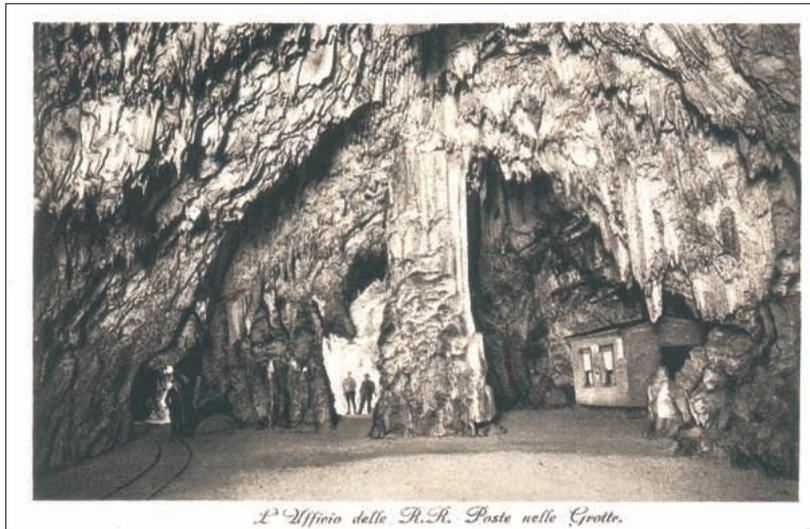


Figure 12. The Austrian post office with rubble cleaned up showing a letter box between the two windows. The Italian Postal Administration reprinted the Austrian postcard and added “L’Ufficio della R.R. Poste Nelle Grotte (The Official Post Office of the Royal Cave).” *Ufficio Postale R.R. Grotte (Official Postcard of the Royal Caves).*

the former Duchy of Carniola territory, including the town of Postojna, was ceded to Italy. Adelsberg Cave now came under Italian control and was renamed Postumia Grotte.

The post office seems to have been resurrected between then and September 17, 1922, the official reopening of the cave at the traditional autumn festival (*Il Resto* 1922). The cave continued to operate on a regular, non-festive basis.

Figure 13. Examples of the grotto cancels.



While a 1924 guidebook indicated the old post office was open only during the traditional cave festivals, postcards put in the letter box on any day were dispatched with the special Postumia (Grotte) postmark. Because of the ten-minute train stop at the post office, many tables were occupied by hundreds of people daily who were in a hurry to write postcards purchased at the nearby post office counter (Perko and Gradenigo 1924). The post office was refurbished in the first half of 1924, and soon after roofs were erected over the visitor tables to shelter them from the dripping cave ceiling occurring after long periods of rain. By this time there were four clerks working in the post office (Figure 12) (Urbani 1925).

The “POSTUMIA (GROTTE) ★” cancellation used, between 1923 and 1926, was 28 mm in diameter. Another cancellation of the same size, “POSTUMIA GROTTA ★ TRIESTE ★” (Figure 13), was used only in 1927.

Exactly when the Austrian post office ceased to be used during Italian occupation is not known. However early in 1927, a large, newly built post office was opened in Concert Hall in the Calvario, and both post offices operated together



Figure 14. The post office opened in 1927 in the Concert Hall. The illustration on the postcard shows a letter box on the far wall, a visitor writing at one of the tables with glass umbrellas, and a postal clerk standing in one of the three windows. *Ufficio Postale R.R. Grotte (Official Postcard of the Royal Caves).*

for a period of time. Newspapers of 1927 and 1928 each refer to two post offices, although a report for 1927 indicated the Austrian post office was demolished in 1927 (Shaw 2003).

THE NEW ITALIAN POST OFFICE

Early in 1927, the new Italian post office was built 1.4 miles from the cave entrance, more than twice as far into the cave as the old Austrian post office (Figure 2). Large and modern in style, with many tables outside beneath colored glass umbrellas (Figure 14), it was built in the southeast corner of the Concert Hall in Calvario not far from where today's visitors catch the cave train back to the surface at the end of their tour.

An Italian language guidebook of the same year (Postumia 1927) describes the post office. "On the right [of the Concert Hall], a vast cavity opens on this fine hall. The Post Cavern, in a pretty construction, also unique in its way, the postal service of the R.R. Grottoes is carried on. All about, large umbrellas of colored glass, casting around a delicate light, invite the traveler to repose. From this point start daily thousands of postcards, with greetings from the unknown world (Figure 15)."

Outside the cave, a newly constructed building opened on October 28, 1928, containing another post office as well as the ticket office, cloakroom, administrative offices, restaurant, and the station for the underground railway (Figure 6). The administrative office used the regular Postumia town postmark as well as the Postumia Grotte postmarks for its mail up to the end of May 1935 (Shaw 2003). It is likely that tourists' mail posted at the administrative building received it too, making the true underground mail indistinguishable for the next few years.

Several administrative handstamps can also be found on postcards. It is not known if the Italian postal clerks applied these handstamps or if visitors used the handstamp and ink pad available to them at the counter (Figure 16). In June 1935, a new 31.5 mm diameter "POSTUMIA GROTTA ★ TRIESTE ★" postmark (Figure 17) was in use at the underground post office.

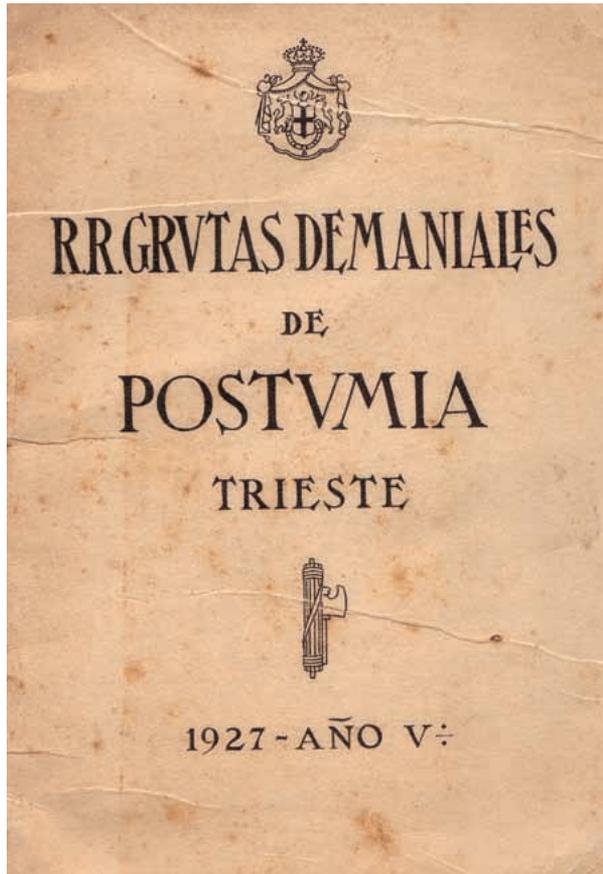


Figure 15. 1927 Italian language guidebook.

Between 1931 and 1939, Italy widely distributed a series of postal cards of different images of popular Italian places. These postal cards were specifically designed for tourism propaganda and for both internal (30c) and foreign (75c) mail. The imprinted stamp was an image of King Victor Emanuel III. Postumia Grotte had six different 30c postal cards, one of which is shown in Figure 17 (Sopracordevole 1994).

The cave post office applied other markings to postcards and letters, like the “T” for postage due (Figure 18) and the “Postumia Grotte Registration Label” for registered letters (Figure 19).

AFTER WORLD WAR II

The Italian-built structure survived for many years after World War II, but for most of this time it was closed. When the cave was reopened to the public on August



Figure 16. Administrative hand-stamps (second from the top courtesy of Speleophilately International) (Van der Pas 2001).



Figure 17. Italian Tourist card with a new cave postmark introduced in 1935 (31 ½ mm diameter).

15, 1945, a special new red cave postmark (Figure 20) was used that day to cancel the first four stamps issued by the Yugoslav Military Government for use in Trieste Zone B of the former Italian-occupied part of Slovenia (The Istria and Slovene Coast) (Kloetzel 2006).



Figure 18. Postage Due “T” handstamp.

Figure 19. Postumia Grotte registered letter with cancellations and registration label.





Figure 20. Red “POSTOJNA-JAMA” cancel used on August 15, 1945.

CONCLUSION

Postumia Grotte is unique in having had an official underground post office (at one time two), which sold stamps and picture postcards that were accepted into the mail system. Authorized postmarks for the cave show dates from 1899 to 1945. The post office was included in the Universal Postal Union’s list of world post offices (Union Postale Universelle 1937), though not in all the later editions. The first building, erected around 1899, remained in use until about 1927, when another was opened even further inside the cave. The old Italian-built post office was finally demolished in February 1983, so the present souvenir building could be erected before the tourist season began (Shaw 2003). Today the post office is located in the town of Postojna, with only a collection box outside the cave entrance.

The underground railroad operated and serviced both post offices. Today, 130 years after the first double-seated carriages pushed by the cave guides were introduced into the cave, there are ten sophisticated battery-operated locomotives and six sets of carriages, two modern railway stations, one at the cave entrance and the other in Sala da Concerti, and a circular railway line (Shaw 2003).⁶ Now called Postojnska Jama, it is one of Slovenia’s world-class scenic highlights.

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6. By 1952 the post office was still used for the sale of postcards whenever there was a concert in the cave, and by 1958, it operated throughout the tourist season, from April first to October thirtieth. Documents specifically mention mail was stamped with a “special postmark.” It is likely this was not an official post office cancellation but one of a succession of souvenir rubber stamps or slogan cancels that were in use for many years. According to Marjan Pibenik who became director and Albin Markovèie who started to work at the cave, there was no operating underground post office after 1962.

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