

Laszlo Biro: Inventor

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An article on the relationship of postmarks dated before early 1946 and addresses on postal covers written with a ballpoint pen was recently published by Yacov Tsachor (*The Israel Philatelist*, Fall 2020). Tsachor points out that covers postmarked before early 1946 addressed with a ballpoint pen are suspect because the time would precede the availability of commercial ballpoint pens.

The first patent for a ballpoint pen was issued on October 30, 1888, to John Loud for marking rough surfaces like wood or leather. The patent was followed by a ballpoint patented by Van Vechten Riesberg in 1916, but neither of these products was exploited commercially.

First Commercially Successful Ballpoint Pen

Laszlo Jozef Biro or Ladislao Jose Biro (born Laszlo Jozso Schweiger) was born to a Hungarian Jewish family on September 29, 1899 in Budapest. After completing his education, Biro became a journalist. Frustrated by the time he wasted filling fountain pens and cleaning smudged pages from ink, he noticed that the ink used in newspaper printing dried quickly, leaving the paper dry and smudge-free. Biro worked with his brother Gyorgy, a chemist, to develop a better ink and a tip consisting of a free ball to turn in a socket. As it turned, it would pick up ink from a cartridge and then roll it to deposit the ink's writing on the paper. Biro patented his invention in Paris, France, in 1938, and also in several other countries.

Flight to Argentina

During World War II, in 1943, Biro and Gyorgy fled Nazi-controlled Hungary to safety in Argentina. On June 17, 1943, they filed another patent in the United States and formed Biro Pens of Argentina (known as the Birome). A collage from a 1945 Birome advertisement is shown in Figure 1.

In 1945, Marcel Bich bought the patent for the pen from Biro. The ballpoint pen soon became the number one product of his BIC Company. Milton Reynolds introduced his company's version of the ballpoint pen to the United States market in October 1945. The Reynolds pen avoided fringing on the Biro patents, but its reputation for leaking did not favor it.

These reports suggest that Tsachor's estimate of early 1946 for postal covers should be pushed back to 1945, depending on when the ballpoint pens became available in that country.

Biro's Legacy

Laszlo Biro died at age 86 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on Oct. 24, 1985. Argentina's Inventors' Day is celebrated

every year on Biro's birthday, September 29. The ballpoint is widely referred to as a "biro" in many countries including Ireland, Australia and countries in Central and South America. He is honored on stamps from his home country as well as his adopted country. Hungary issued a stamp with a portrait of Biro on June 21, 1996, Scott 2530 (Figure 2). Argentina featured a portrait of Biro in the upper left corner of a souvenir sheet issued on Oct. 1, 1997, Scott 1845 (Figure 3). The next time you pick up your favorite ballpoint pen, think about its clever inventor, Laszlo Biro. ■



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

References

- Tsachor, Yacov AIEP, 2020. The Ball-Point Pen and Philately. *The Israel Philatelist*. Fall 2020:33
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