

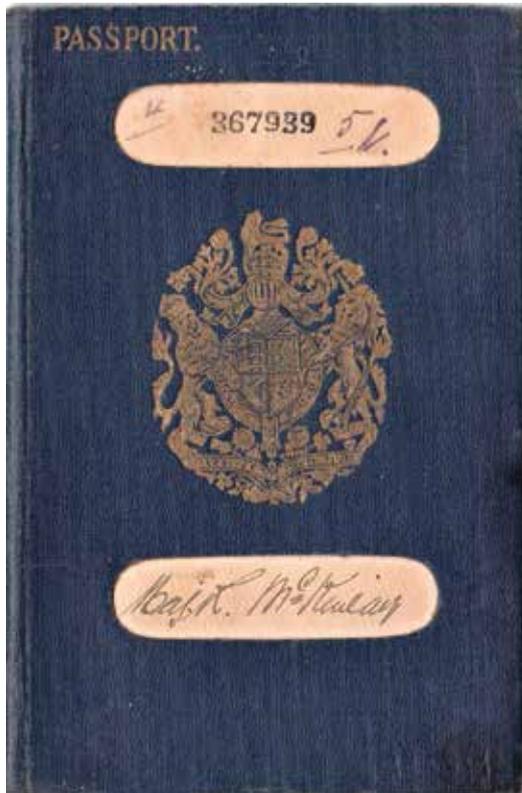
Passports now and then

By Tom Topol, editor of Passport-collector.com



Tom Topol is a member of the Ephemera Society in the UK and USA and a well-recognized expert on passports and their history, with several publications to his name. He does consulting for collectors, foundations, museums and news media agencies on this topic. A reference list is available online. His website (<http://www.passport-collector.com>) is the leading source on the topic. You can follow Tom also at Twitter and Facebook.

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Although a passport from the 1920s is still recognizable as such, the differences between then and now are huge. Here is a look at what has changed.



Nowadays passports are high-tech documents, standardized by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which recently updated one of their guidelines to make Machine Readable Travel Documents (MRTD) even more

secure. Around the globe and especially just now in Europe, migration is a huge challenge. A minority of migrants try to enter their country of desire with altered or forged travel documents. So standardisation and security features are necessary. The 9/11 tragedy triggered a significant global change in travel and document security.



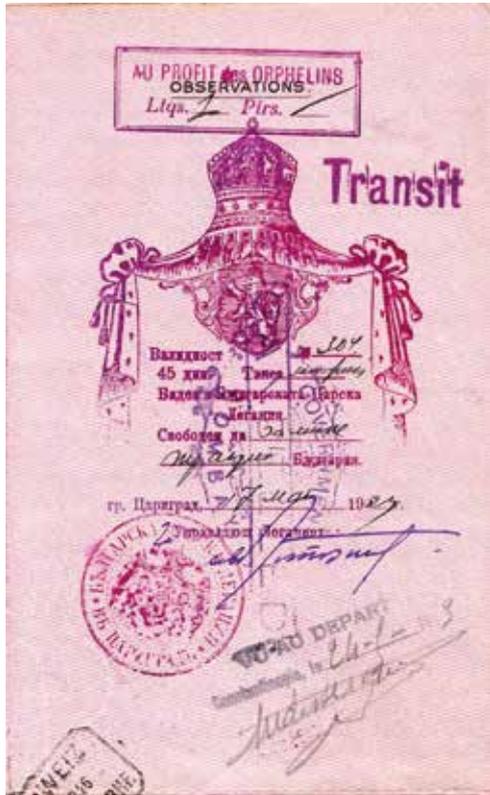
So how did the passport design and the method of verification of a passport and its bearer has changed in the last 100 years?

For me, passports of 100 years ago were art. Why? Well, let's take a look at this British passport from 1921... Firstly, there is this huge passport cover, almost double the size of a travel document today, with its impressive golden Coat of Arms. The passport number was stamped and the bearers name was written by hand. The cover just stated "PASSPORT".

When opening this piece of art, we can see that the document is one huge page folded in such a way that there are 16 "pages" for entries (plus two pages of passport regulations), including "description of

the bearer” and “photograph of the bearer” plus the same for “the wife of the bearer”.

Yes, 94 years ago ONE passport was good to travel with your wife. Today the principle “one person – one passport” rules and even a new-born would need a passport for travelling. The gentlemen here wasn’t married so we see only his passport picture, nicely with a hat. Impossible today! Passport pictures were generally introduced only in 1915.



The 1921 passport of Major R. McKinley, including (above) a transit visa from Bulgaria.

The bearer’s signature was already made on a special field in the passport application, which was then glued below the picture by the passport office and blind sealed (a security feature then). The same applies for the passport picture, which had a rubber and a blind stamp. The passport fee in 1921 was six pence (£2.65 equivalent today), which you can see on the revenue stamps. Today a British e-Passport costs £72.50 for the standard version according HMPO. A passport in 1921 was valid for only two years, nowadays for 10 years.

The gentlemen here was an army officer with the rank of a Major (according the passport description) and he travelled quite a lot, as we can see huge and colourful visas & stamps e.g. from Bulgaria, Switzerland, Italy, Greece or Constantinople.

Now, if you travel as a European only within Europe you don’t get these colourful stamps and visas any more and your travel document with 32 pages will remain most likely empty. The UK passport today is good for visa free travel to 147 countries (Source: <http://www.passportindex.org/>). Only for the remaining +- 60 countries you would need to apply for a visa where you then might get a more or less colourful visa sticker or stamp with more or less advanced security features as well. In 1921 you needed a visa for almost any country.

A border officer back then had only a very few characteristics available to verify a passport and its bearer, mostly focused on the passport picture, the signature and the watermark in the paper of

the document. The personal description of forehead, nose, chin, mouth, hair or face were not really good verification characteristic, but still there was the height, eye colour and special peculiarities. The working conditions at borders back then were also completely different, as the officer was maybe outside at night, during the rain, in poor lightning, etc. Nowadays, border crossing points are usually well equipped to support the duties of an immigration officer.

Today ePassports are high tech documents, not only because of an attractive design that changes in some passports from page to page, but mainly because of complex and multiple security features. Micro printing, holograms, UV features, laminates and watermarks are only a few of the security features. Modern MRTD can include up to 30 such features, some only known by the security printer and the relevant crime labs. Attractive design has become a security feature by itself, with some UV features displaying veritable fireworks.

It was once rumoured that the next issue of the US passport would play the national anthem every time you open its cover. Although this seems more of a wisecrack, the passport designs of some countries are increasingly displaying a very “patriotic” touch.

Old passports are truly pieces of art for me as they are indeed unique documents compared to the standardized MRTD today. My own collection contains over 600 documents, including historically valuable ones, such as an Austrian passport of 1848 for a delegate to the Frankfurt National Assembly (the first freely elected German parliament), a diplomatic passport of 1915 of German Ambassador von Wangenheim, who witnessed the Armenian genocide, the passport of Count Zeppelin or the passport of Arthur Henderson (UK, 1934, Nobel Peace Prize, Secretary of State at the Foreign Office).

Passport collecting is a most interesting, entertaining and at the same time most educating hobby. It’s about political and geographical history. You need to have knowledge of the history of a country, its political situation and geographical location at that time a passport was issued. You learn a lot about the bearer’s personal history. Why was he travelling to the Far East, India or Europe at that time? How did he travel? Which countries did he pass through, until he arrived at the final destination? Remember - just 100 years ago travelling was not as easy as it is today. So it’s also about the history of travelling.

When do YOU start collecting? ■