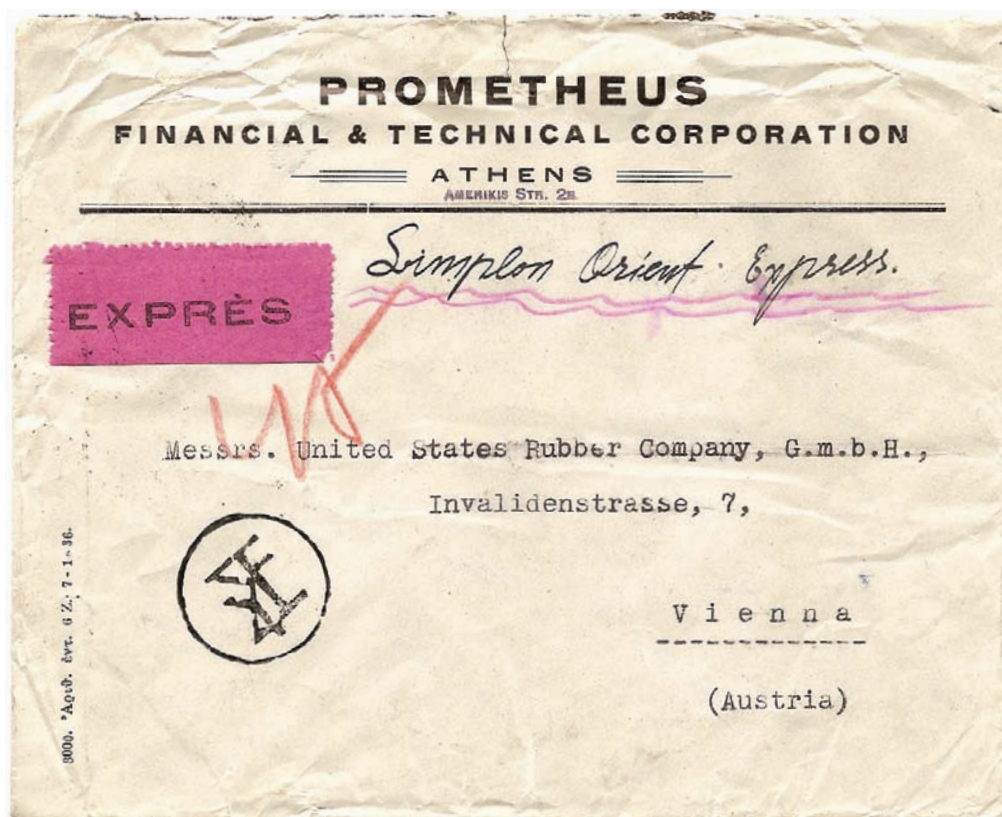


# The Orient Express

## The mail that travelled with kings and spy

by Paolo Guglielminetti



*Orient Express*: a name that evokes not only a train but also spies, intrigues and mystery. Any other train has ever had such a celebrity and, maybe, any other one has ever carried so many illustrious personalities at the time when the plain didn't exist yet and the only alternative for the great distance were the uncomfortable and long voyages.

We owe the idea of the train to George Nagelmackers, a Belgian engineer who, after the foundation of the *Compagnie des Wagons Lits* in 1872, organized the first travel of his sleeping car between Paris and Vienna. In 1872 the *Compagnie* becomes *International* taking the *CIWL* abbreviation, with which it is still known. Inspired by the services created on the American railway lines by George Pullman, Nagelmackers wants to create a rail network of great comfort with sleeping and dining cars.

On October 4, 1883 the *CIWL* inaugurates the *Express d'Orient* between Paris and Giurgewo (in Romania) via Munich-Vienna-Budapest. From Giurgewo the voyage proceeds by boat via Danube and Black Sea till Constantinople, for a total journey of about 80 hours. On board ministers, diplomatists, journalists but any woman, in the name of the scarce security of central-eastern Europe. In 1889 the train, already became *Orient Express*, is routed from Budapest via Beograd-Nis-Sofija and, for the first time, it arrives in Constantinople in less than 70 hours without transshipments imposed to passengers.

### The Simplon Orient Express

With the opening to the traffic of the Simplon Tunnel, in 1906 a new luxury train, the *Simplon-Express*, appears on the Paris-Lausanne-Milan-Venice route. Because of the Austrian veto that doesn't want competitors to the *Orient Express* via Vienna, the train cannot continue beyond Venice yet. In 1914 the service was limited to the Vienna-Budapest route due to the circulation difficulties imposed by the First World War. The *Simplon-Orient-Express* between Paris and Constantinople via Lausanne-Milan-Venice with carriages from Calais and with branches for Bucharest and Athens, was opened up again on April 10, 1919.

### The Arlberg Orient Express

In 1920 to the main linking via Simplon another one is put beside via Switzerland and Austria that starting from







tax for delivering by the *Orient Express*, as demonstrated by the application which is always near the stamp. The mail so stamped was probably entrusted to the CIWL staff, as it isn't known the presence of a postal carriage hooked to the train for the whole distance. As far as I know, labels usage is limited to the mails from Constantinople, while I never saw it on letter toward the cities of the Bosphorus. Note that the labels have always maintained the train original name (*Express d'Orient*). In the first nineteenth the practice of the labels application seems to be abandoned. The mail delivered via *Orient Express* is requested receives stamps and inscriptions indicating the route preferred. We don't know if the handstamps were originated by private costumers or applied by one or more foreign and ottoman post offices of the Bosphorus area.

The practice to indicate with a stamp the request of routing via *Orient Express* becomes current also on the mail departing from Western Europe toward the Bosphorus. In the postwar period it's not possible to find the indication on the mail of the routing request via *Orient Express*, that isn't a particularly speed service anymore, as regard to flight connections which are already well widespread everywhere.

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#### Bibliography

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*Opposite page top: Express letter from Athens (November 13, 1937) to Vienna, where it arrived on the 15, with Simplon-Orient-Express manuscript route instruction (franked on the back). Curiously the sender indicated the only Orient Express that didn't pass via Vienna, probably because the "Simplon" had daily departures from Athens.*

*Opposite page center: registered letter, machine pmk for 2.50 Itl, from Trieste to Istanbul via Orient Express (as indicated by the red handstamp). The letter was accepted from the central postal office in Trieste on November 29, 1929. The train indicated for the transportation was actually the Simplon-Orient-Express via Milan-Trieste.*

*Opposite page bottom: registered letter from Constantinople to Paris franked with a pair of the 50c., delivered by the French military post office "Trésor et Postes 506" dated February 19, 1921 with manuscript indication "Par Express Orient".*

1932 takes the name of *Arlberg-Orient-Express* from the Arlberg gallery (between Swiss and Austria). Also the services between Munich-Salzburg-Vienna start again. In 1939 the hostility declaration involves the sudden interruption of the *Orient Express* via Germany. In 1942 also the *Simplon-Orient-Express* is suppressed. After the II World War, on January 8, 1946 the service of the *Simplon-Orient-Express* till Venice starts again (the carriage for Istanbul are set up again in 1948). On April 1 also the *Orient Express* resumes the service till Linz and Vienna. From Salzburg to Vienna is melted with the *Arlberg-Orient-Express* that continues till Budapest. In 1953 the *Simplon-Orient-Express* reaches again Constantinople, became Istanbul. In Sophia there is the connection with the *Orient Express* that has been extended from Vienna via Budapest-Bucharest. The services aren't of luxury anymore because they have to cross the Eastern Europe people republics.

#### The end of the service

The "cold war" produces its effects. In 1962 both the *Simplon-Orient-Express* and the *Arlberg-Orient-Express* lose "Orient" from their name and respectively stop in Zagabria and Vienna. Only the *Orient-Express* remains, limited to Vienna, even if in 1964 the terminus becomes

Budapest (with a sleeping car to Bucharest).

Istanbul is served by the *Direct-Orient* twice weekly link only, which goes from Calais to Beograd via Milan, the old way of the *Simplon-Orient-Express*. In the age of speed this train with its 56 hours, could not be defined express anymore, and only one sleeping car is foreseen.

On March 19, 1977 the last *Direct-Orient* journey starts from Istanbul; on March 22 the last train circulates from Paris. There is no more direct railway link between Western Europe and the Bosphorus. The *Orient-Express* service continues instead between Paris and Budapest/Bucharest, then limited to the Paris-Vienna route, on which it still circulates.

#### The treatment of the mail

From a postal history point of view, the mail entrusted to the train departing from Constantinople has a label with EXPRESS D'ORIENT diagonal inscription and the half-moon with the star. The label is totally similar (in miniature) to the labels used to identify the luggage transported on the train and is known printed in salmon and black. Personally I saw mail franked in that way departing from the Austrian, German and English post offices. The interpretation is that the labels served to pay a sort of