Eugen Roth's witty philosophical poems are very popular and frequently quoted in Germany. The following translation of one of his short stories shows that as a prose writer, too, he is a fine and humorous observer of human nature.

THE STAMP

By EUGEN ROTH

WHEN we were boys, we collected everything. I do not know whether this is still the case nowadays, but when I went to school in Rosenheim stamp-collecting was the craze. Of course, we had no idea yet that one could also buy stamps; only Otto Perlmoser, the notary's son, sometimes brought along one of his father's catalogues, and we read in it that the black one-pfennig was worth a hundred marks and the blue Mauritius fifty thousand marks. Then we boys would get drunk with longing and enthusiasm and hunt through waste-paper baskets and attics. And we would write the most polite letters to all our aunts and godmothers, so that they must have been amazed at so much affection unless they tumbled to the reason for this demonstration. For in every letter occurred at least once the sentence: "If you happen to come across any stamps, please do not forget your grateful nephew!"

We managed to get together some nice stamps, too. Although there were no black one-pfennigs or blue Mauritius, each of us had some rarities. But in spite of the catalogue, the actual price of the stamps did not interest us very much. There were simply stamps which were famous among us: the American ones with the large head, and the Columbus stamps, and the triangular ones from the Cape of Good Hope. For the latter, I gave my daily apple for six months.

Old Perlmoser, the notary, was a passionate collector himself. He often invited us boys together with his Otto for a cup of coffee on Sunday afternoons and made himself out to be our fatherly friend and benefactor, presenting us with stamps and looking at our own worthless stuff merely as a favor. Then he would suddenly give a little bleating laugh—he looked like an old goat anyway—and pick out a stamp and examine it from all sides. "Not bad!" he would say and pretend that that was all there was to it. And then he would act as if he had just remembered that this very stamp was missing in his set. And, of course, it was the merest fluke, and it really wasn't worth anything, and he could easily get it from elsewhere, but as we just happened to have it there. . . .

Over and over again he fooled in the same way, which each of us already knew by heart. We often firmly made up our minds that this time we would not fall for it, but then we were as helpless as rabbits. And if it happened that he really did not manage right away to tear a rare morsel out of our hearts, then he melted it out by appealing to our pity: he would say he was an old man and would soon be in his grave anyway and he couldn't take along anything with him, could he? All he wanted was to give away his stamps, and his Otto was not to imagine that he would get all the stamps, it was up to him to see what he could collect on his own.

Then he would fetch a fat album out of a special drawer, and we had only to tell him what we wanted. He was suspiciously generous; one could really almost have believed that he had lost interest in the treasures of this world. And we actually did believe it, because for a single stamp we could take home a dozen or more, Chinese ones with a dragon and African ones with a camel rider and a great big one with the Shah of Persia. On each occasion he made a point of asking whether we were satisfied. And of course we said yes. And with a great pretence of nonchalance he would then pick up our stamp with his pincers and quickly slip it into a little envelope.

ONCE my uncle in Bern sent me a Swiss stamp with a pigeon on it for my birthday. He had got it from his father, our grandfather, and he wrote that I should take care of it, that it really was something special, a stamp I could show off and which would make many people envious.

The first person I showed it to was Perlmoser, the notary. He looked at it very carefully, and so did I; it was a two-and-a-half-Rappen stamp of the local post of Basel. The pigeon was white in a red coat of arms with a sky-blue border which I liked particularly.

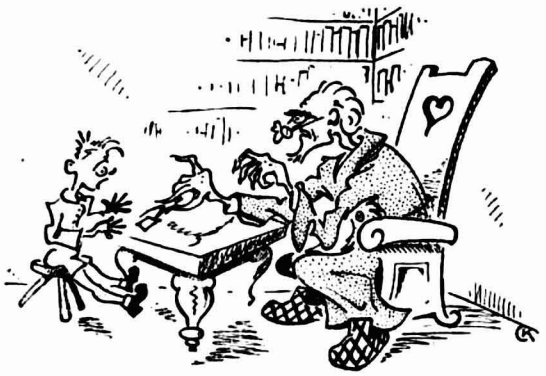
The notary said it was a fine specimen, although, of course, it was not one of the valuable old Swiss stamps of which I might have heard; but still, I was lucky to have it. And what did I want for the stamp?

I was standing beside him, I remember it as if it had happened yesterday. He was sitting on his revolving chair, and as he turned toward me now his yellow face with its almost white little beard and its long horse teeth seemed to plunge into my own face, and I turned crimson with fear and disgust, especially at his cunning, greedy eyes. And also because I did not want to give up my stamp, not at any price. But

I almost did surrender it after all, only not to have to say that I did not want to give it to him.

But then I swallowed deeply, and when I was still unable to bring out a single word I simply held out my hand silently for my stamp.

"So you won't let me have it?" the old man said sharply and changed his mind at the same instant, turning friendly so quickly that his annoyed expression could hardly catch up with him. He said, ever so sweetly: "You're right, my young friend, you're a little hold-tight, you'll go a long way in life. By the way,"—and he did not let go of the pigeon, the pigeon stamp, which he was holding on to with his small silver-plated pincers as if with claws—"by the way, it is, of course, foolish for beginners like you to want to keep a dull but



perhaps rare stamp—that's to say, hardly rare, in Munich or Berlin the dealers have dozens of them in their drawers, you can be dead certain of that; it is simply that the man who is the only one all around to have planted a pumpkin does not know that elsewhere there are as many pumpkins as acorns here—so let us say a fairly good stamp, and yet they don't have a single one of the Bulgarian set and not even a shred of a stamp from the entire continent of Australia. And you could easily have them in exchange for it. But," he said, as if thinking better of it, "far be it from me to persuade you; man's sweetest of dishes is that which he wishes, and why should an old man like me be keen on a new stamp? I have more than enough of them, and when I'm in my grave I can't take any of them with me, neither the Bulgarians nor the Australians nor that thing there either."

I was thinking: 'Now he is at it again, now it won't be long before he has grabbed the stamp.' But I was firmly determined not to give it up.

Meanwhile, Perlmoser pushed his spectacles down to the tip of his nose, then he pushed them back onto his forehead. Finally, he even drew a magnifying glass out of a drawer in his desk and inspected the stamp very closely and shook his head with a worried look. Suddenly he held it out to me with a nasty laugh. "I can thank my lucky stars," he bleated, "that I didn't swap with you. Do you know it is a reprint?"

I turned quite pale. "What?" I stuttered, "the stamp is forged?" At that moment I had entirely forgotten that my uncle had written that the stamp was from my grandfather. I felt crushed.

The notary was still turning the pigeon this way and that. "Not forged," he said with wisdom and benevolence, "a reprint, I said. You know, it sometimes happens that the genuine old plates are still there and perhaps even the same paper, and then someone later, perhaps twenty years later, prints exactly the same stamp again. But, of course, it isn't worth anything any more. . . ."

The old man became increasingly benevolent the more I collapsed. He got out his catalogue: really, there was something about reprints, I could read it with my own eyes. But he was cautious, he would not dare to condemn the stamp on his own. He would send the stamp to a friend in Munich, a professor, an expert of world renown, and he asked me whether I agreed to that.

A boy of fourteen is not exactly stupid, he can even be suspicious, more so perhaps than later; but he is helpless before the grownups, a schoolboy before a notary, a dwarf before a giant. At any rate, I did not say anything. Perlmoser came with a new suggestion. He would take the stamp on the risk of it being only a reprint. In any case, he would let me have twenty overseas stamps, I could pick them out from among his duplicates. The two from New Zealand and the three Panamanians which I had always been so keen on would be among them. These stamps I would not have to return under any circumstances. But if my Swiss stamp should really prove to be only a reprint, then he would be allowed to choose five more stamps out of my album. My word of honor that I would meanwhile not exchange any!

The notary had achieved his object. He quickly buried the two-and-a-half-Rappen pigeon in his drawer, I picked out my twenty overseas with burning cheeks and walked off, trotted, ran through the cool house, over the summery street, up into my little room.

I at once stuck ten newly acquired stamps in my small album. For some of them no place had been provided, I had to stick them where they did not belong; I did not feel quite as pleased any more. I had a dark, indeed, a black feeling of having been cheated. I thumbed through my book: there were my treasures—the black Saxony, the brick-red unperforated Württemberg, the lemon-yellow Austria, the night-blue England, the velvet-brown Thurn und Taxis. An icy paralysis rose up through my body: those are the ones he is

going to grab, the cunning old fox, those five rare stamps which I had guarded like Fafner his treasure; those are the ones he will take, slyly, with a pleasant smile he will carefully take hold of them with his pincers and tear them out.

I did not breathe a word, either at home or at school. I never even asked Otto Perlmoser whether his father had received a reply from the world-renowned professor in Munich. For if the stamp was genuine, not a reprint, it must never be revealed, not to my uncle nor to my mother—my father had been dead seven years at that time—nor myself that I had let myself be done out of it, stupid fool that I was. And if, on the other hand, it was not genuine, then one day the notary, the mean old Shylock, would come and, with a sure hand, snatch away my five rare treasures. So I was silent and never entered the cool, dark house again; and the notary was silent, too, and never invited me again to visit him.

It remained a dark secret whether the pigeon was genuine or a reprint. During that summer I went fishing and swimming and made out to myself that I had lost all interest in stamps. But it still gnawed at me that I had not had enough courage at least to have asked at the time to be shown the stamp in the catalogue, so that I could have seen how much it was worth. I could still have gone to Neuhütel, the grocer, he was also supposed to have a catalogue. But now the stamp was gone I shuddered at the thought that I might find in the thick, narrow volume: Basel, two and a half Rappen, white pigeon on carmine coat of arms in pale blue field, very rare, one hundred marks. . . .

I tried to forget the stamp, and on the whole I succeeded quite well. But fate did not forget the stamp.

At Christmas my uncle stopped over in Rosenheim on his way to Vienna. He found all kinds of things to criticize about us. Otherwise, however, he was not unkind, and for me especially he had brought along some more stamps, from his own boyhood collection, and there was even the black one-pfennig among them. This present left me with mixed feelings; I had a bad conscience about the pigeon that had flown away.

That same evening, while he was sitting with my mother and me, he began himself to wax enthusiastic about stamp collecting and had some funny stories to tell about his brother, my father. And then it came as I had been seeing it coming all along with a beating heart: I had to show him my album.

He looked at it fondly, and he praised all those stamps I treasured most highly. I tried quickly to turn over the pages with Switzerland, but I made a mess of it. I had to admit that I had swapped the pigeon. My mother immediately began to wring her hands, that was the way she was; perhaps she was only afraid of my uncle, worrying that this might have lost us his favor. My uncle himself was not at all upset; he even consoled my mother, saying that swapping was the main thing in stamp collecting, and then he asked me whether I had any idea how much the little pigeon was worth? And I was to show him how much I had got for it.

I eagerly showed him the twenty overseas and three Panamanians and two New Zealands. He began to frown, and his frown deepened as I went on. "Is that all?" he asked. In my fear I added a few more, but I did not get very far, my lies made me blush to the roots of my hair.

"For thirty years," my uncle thereupon said very solemnly, "for thirty years I have not looked at a stamp. But I still remember enough to know that either you are an ass who should be whacked over the head with his album instead of being given good stamps or that whoever swindled an honest, respectable old Swiss pigeon out of your cote in return for a few Hottentot and Dago shreds is an arch-scoundrel."

In my panic I said the stupidest thing I could have said at that moment. "Uncle," I said, "it was probably only a reprint."

At this my uncle got up and stood there like an avenging angel: "Whoever said that will have to answer me! Didn't I write you, you frog-eyed dunderhead, that your grandfather had this stamp, and then the fool lets himself be persuaded that it is a reprint? Tell me the name of the villain, the young scamp, who had the cheek to insinuate such a thing!"

My uncle apparently thought that it had been one of my school friends. He stormed long and lustily. In any case I was glad that he had deviated from the outright question as to who it had been into the jungle of angry generalities and stamped and trumpeted around in there like an elephant.

That was exactly what he looked like, the huge, heavy-boned man, as he stamped around with his gray beard, his hands in his beard, his gray hair, gray suit, and huge feet. It didn't help me much, he came out of the jungle again, advancing toward me with small, cunning eyes: "Who was it?"

I told him then. "Mr. Perlmoser, the notary," I said, and with that I felt as if the entire responsibility had been lifted out of my boyish sphere into that of the grownups. I suddenly felt relieved; I felt sure that my uncle would be quiet now or would say, 'In that case, there is nothing to be done about it,' for how was anybody to take any steps against old Perlmoser because of a boy like me and because of a stamp? My uncle did become quiet, but quiet in an entirely different way from what I had expected. He became uncannily quiet. "Perlmoser?" he said, "Perlmoser?" And it seemed as if the fire of a far-distant past began to glow in him again. "Isn't he a fellow with a little pointed beard, a face sort of like a goat, with a yellow skin?"

It was Perlmoser the notary: yellow skin, goat's face, pointed beard.

It must have been an old account my uncle drew out of his memory at this moment, an account the nonpayment of which was still rankling.

He had intended to leave the following day, but he stayed on; he cleared up the old account.

OF what happened now, I did not understand much at the time. I only felt that a war had broken out between two grownup men and that the pigeon had been anything but a dove of peace.

My uncle made me hand over the stamps I had got in exchange for that one stamp. He put them in a letter and had them sent to the notary by messenger. Whether the letter he wrote was unacceptable, or whether the notary, feeling confident in his right and blinded in his lust of possession, showed himself unyielding, I cannot say. Jurists, who are versed in all the tricks of the law and who do not have to pay for a lawyer if it comes to a lawsuit, are often more obstinate than other people. But it may also have been that fate itself wished to challenge the old man to a duel, a duel—let it be said here—which was his last and in which he was not the victor.

At any rate, the notary sent back the stamps at once and quoted the civil code to prove that there was nothing illegal about the exchange. My uncle, who could not stay any longer, went to see a young lawyer who had few clients and was only too glad to be given a chance to attack the notary. The value of the Swiss stamp was officially appraised, as was that of the twenty overseas, and I was questioned by the lawyer. When he heard the story about the reprint and that I had to promise my five best stamps in case it should prove to be one, he said that it was a case of malicious fraud.

Then came a succession of lawsuits, but the old fox was not to be caught so easily. My uncle had long since left again, but the lawyer had to keep him informed by mail how the case was proceeding. For me it was a bad time, and I feared a meeting with the notary or even with his son Otto as much as the fires of Hell.

The whole little town held its breath over this struggle being waged in the darkness of law chambers, files, and nasty letters. The more reasonable among the people shook their heads at the sight of an old man in a respected position risking everything for a stamp. But then it had long gone past the stage of the pigeon in the red field: it was war between two men determined to win and force the other to his knees. There were also voices raised against us and against my uncle who had come and thrown dirt at a dignified old gentleman who should have been allowed to pursue his hobby without interference. But others opposed this view, and rumors were added to the effect that he had been about to plunder my collection, no, my grandfather's valuable collection, that my stamps were worth many thousands of marks, and that only the fact that my uncle had happened to arrive had stopped the greedy old fellow from carrying out his intention.

All of a sudden, several parents showed a lively interest in their children's collections and checked up whether their children had had any dealings with the notary and what these dealings had been. And the old man—how sorry I still feel for him, the incorrigible, fanatical collector with his cunning smile, the blissful hoarder turned into a hissing dragon!—the old man suddenly received one, two, and God knows how many nasty letters containing the most stupid and insolent reclamations. There may also have been some justified and polite ones among them, but the old fellow had been roused and was obstinate; not a single stamp did he hand over, not an inch of ground did he give way, he lashed out in all directions, at first wickedly and accurately, then more and more wildly, without regard to the spreading atmosphere of ill feeling against him.

He did not live to see his possible victory or his final defeat. Our lawyer who, in spite of his rabid zeal, had something fishlike about him, especially when one touched his cold, clammy hands, had just informed us that he felt confident of getting the better of the recalcitrant old goat, that the latter was sure to lose the civil case and that, if necessary, he, the lawyer, would not stop at a criminal prosecution. Three days later, my mother met me at the door as I was strolling home from school: Perlmoser was dead, he had had a stroke just before lunch; he had been found in his room amidst all his stamps.

My mother was a quiet, delicate woman. This death caused her a lot of suffering, and all that evening we went over the events in our minds and tried belatedly to discover how we could have avoided this end, perhaps by more love, perhaps by a visit, perhaps by a

ruse. But when tough, grown-up men who hated each other were locked in combat, what could a woman and a child have done to help? Nevertheless, we had a feeling of guilt, my mother and I, and this feeling did not diminish when a registered letter arrived the following day with the printed death announcement: "Almighty God has been pleased to summon our beloved husband and father, the Counselor of Justice Karl Borromäus Perlmoser, notary public, at the age of 61. . . ." and attached to it, carefully enclosed in a transparent little envelope of the kind used by stamp collectors, the white pigeon in the red coat of arms with the forget-me-not-blue border, two-and-a-half Rappen of the local post of Basel in Switzerland. Nothing else, no apology and no accusation.

THE lawyer, bitterly disappointed at being thus deprived of his certain victory, importantly pointed out that we would now also have to return the stamps originally given in exchange. He offered to send them in a registered letter with an appropriate accompanying letter to the widow. My mother, however, following a better impulse, took me by the hand, and together we went across that same afternoon to the big, cool house which I had not entered for so long and which now smelt everywhere of incense.

The widow who, as we could not help overhearing through the door, had at first wanted angrily to refuse to see us, suddenly changed her mind and came into the reception room and, in a flash of understanding for the courage of this visit, embraced my mother with tears in her eyes. The two women quickly agreed that the unyielding struggle had been caused by a fatal obstinacy and, as could be gathered from the widow's hints, an old enmity. The woman, who cared nothing for stamps, not only refused the little package we offered her, smiling tiredly as she did so: she even invited me to drop in one day and to recompense myself for the unpleasantness this tragic affair must have caused me by taking a nice handful of stamps from the box of duplicates.

As often as I was seized by the longing to enrich myself in this way, I could never bring myself to go there again. Incidentally, we as well as the notary's family moved away from Rosenheim not long after. In our case, not one of the least important of our motives was that, soon after the solemn funeral of the notary, ugly voices were raised to the effect that the old man had taken poison, that we had driven him to his death. The lawyer, who was not able to benefit greatly by the passing away of his opponent and older colleague—he had been confronted everywhere by a wall of antagonism, indeed, of open hostility—immediately offered to prosecute these slanderers. But my mother only had a pitying smile for his zeal.

I soon gave up stamp collecting, in spite of the many and often rare stamps my uncle continued to send me from Bern. I believe he even bought them secretly, for once I discovered the remnants of a figure through my magnifying glass; but he was never able to take away the bitter taste. He himself did not write a single line about the whole affair; but I heard later, after his death, that, at the news of the sudden uncertain end of his enemy, he is supposed to have said that now the at first so dilatory debtor had suddenly paid too much, and that only to hurt him again, as he was now no longer able to give back anything. And perhaps it would have been better if fate had not presented him with that unpaid bill again after thirty years.

As a student, I sold my stamps because I needed the money and happened to come across a collector who would not leave me in peace. I did not allow myself to be cheated so badly this time, but I am sure that the other fellow had the best of the bargain. I had originally intended to take out the pigeon and keep it, not as a stamp, but as a sort of votive tablet. But then I saw the same greenish sparkle of greed in this collector's eyes as I had first seen it in those of old goat-face. And he let loose the same entreaties, pretexts, allurements, and threats upon me, altered according to circumstances, so that I was as helpless again as I had been as a boy with cunning old Perlmoser. So once again I sent out the stamp into the dangerous atmosphere of stamp collectors, those vicious, pitiable fools who give their money, their reputation, and even their lives, for an earthly object, for a piece of paper one-and-a-half inches square.

Incidentally, that same collector told me, with much cursing and lamentation—for he had not shared in the blessing or only been able to gather up a few miserable remainders—about the inglorious end of Perlmoser's great collection. His son Otto had squandered the entire stock of stamps. There were specimens in that collection—the man trembled as he told me about them—which do not appear on the market for many years at a time. "I saw part of the collection," he moaned, "but what is the good of seeing them, at a big stamp dealer's, at fabulous prices! Old Germany, Austria, England, Switzerland, all complete, not a stamp missing!"

"Switzerland?" I asked casually, and he said: "In the Swiss set there was a single stamp missing, strangely enough, a rare stamp, the Basel. . . ." and he remembered the white pigeon in the red field which he was just trying to coax from me. All expression died out of his face, and he said: "Not actually a rare one, really a comparatively insignificant stamp. . . ."