

The Stamp Collection

by Karel Čapek (1890–1938)

Translated by Paul Selver

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karel Čapek (kär' əl chäp' ek), the youngest child of a Czechoslovakian doctor, maintained a lifelong close relationship with his brother, Josef, who illustrated many of Čapek's works. Čapek attended universities in Prague, Berlin, and Paris, taking a degree in philosophy. Although of suitable age to serve during the First World War, he was rejected by the military draft because of a chronic spinal disease that plagued him all his life. He began to publish while still in university and throughout his lifetime produced short stories, novels, memoirs, and dramatic plays. In 1917, he became the cultural editor of the publication, *Narodny Listy*, while at the same time he was editing the satirical newspaper, *Nebojsa*, with his brother. In 1920, he resigned from the *Narodny Listy* in protest of the paper's politics, and wrote his most famous play, *R.U.R.*, which introduced the word *robot* into the languages of the world.

FYI

The word "**robot**" was coined by Čapek to describe mechanical "men" that are built in factories and that plan to revolt against mankind. The word has its root in the Czech words *robota*, compulsory labor, and *robotnik*, a peasant who owes compulsory labor to the landlord. In the play, a scientist devises a method of creating mechanical beings that are more efficient than human beings. The creatures — robots — later plan to take over the world, but their plan is foiled. The play has been seen as a satirical reaction to mechanization. In the play, the people of the world have become alienated from others of different nationalities and can no longer understand one another.

In 1921, Čapek and his brother became editors of the prestigious newspaper, *Lidove Noviny*. Čapek also served as the dramatic advisor to the Kralovské Vinohrady Theater. By 1922 Čapek's apartment had become a meeting place for intellectuals, a tradition that continued every Friday until

his death. Čapek was elected to the Czech Academy of Sciences, but he resigned because he felt that the position should go to a more outstanding author. In 1927, he and his brother won the Czech national drama award. Čapek's works often satirize human faults as he attempts to uncover underlying motivations for his characters' actions.

Čapek had a personal relationship with the Czech president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and published a series of interviews with him. Čapek, like Masaryk, was a strong supporter of democracy, human liberty, and justice, themes that are reflected in his fiction. As a well-known author and cultural advisor, Čapek used his celebrity to call attention to organized Nazi activities that he recognized as threatening to Czech autonomy, and he wrote fiction in which he urged Czechs to unite against the Nazi threat.



Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937) was one of the founders of modern Czechoslovakia. A professor of philosophy, he began his political career in 1889, working for the establishment of a state independent of the influence of Austria-Hungary. During World War I, he outlined his goals, which included a democratic government, Czech-Slovak unity, division of Austria-Hungary based on ethnicity, and new states to be established between Russia and Germany to provide a buffer against German imperialism. After the war, Masaryk was elected president of Czechoslovakia, a position he retained in subsequent elections. He spoke out strongly against the Nazis, expressing concern for the safety of Central Europe. He resigned in 1935 due to ill health, and died in 1937.

When parts of Czechoslovakia were ceded to Germany on September 30, 1938 under the terms of the Munich Agreement between England's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Nazi Germany's Chancellor Adolf Hitler, Čapek was offered the opportunity to leave his country. He refused, stating that he would not desert his native land even though he knew his decision would lead to his death.

Following a severe bout of the flu and inflammation of the kidneys, Čapek died in December 1938, a little less than a year before the outbreak of World War II. He had lived long enough, though, to witness and comprehend the perfidy of the Munich Agreement. Sadly, he did not survive until 1939, when Britain finally realized that the Munich Agreement was nothing more than a smoke-screen for Hitler's imperialistic ambitions.

COLLECTORS AND STAMPS

The collecting of items can become a harmless hobby or a driving obsession. Man is acquisitive by nature, and the drive to collect items of value has flourished for many centuries. Very often, since market forces definitely play a role in the collection process, the rarer the item the more interest it generates. Some collectors, however, may take pleasure in accumulating objects simply for the sake of their beauty or for the sake of building a sizable collection. Milk glass, crystal miniatures, first-editions of literary works, rare jewelry, teddy bears, Chinese porcelain, artworks, baseball cards, coins, and stamps are included among the almost countless categories of items that are collectible. The list can go on *ad infinitum*!

Adhesive postage stamps to *prepay* for mail delivery were developed in England in 1840. Unlike today, the *recipient* of mail prior to 1840 had to pay for letters or parcels that were delivered. Sir Rowland Hill devised the idea of prepaid stamps in the course of standardizing postal rates, and the first postage stamp, issued in 1840 and known as the "Penny Black," featured a portrait of Queen Victoria. Postage stamps were initially printed without perforations or glue. Each individual stamp was then cut from the printed sheet and pasted onto a letter. In retrospect, it is interesting to envision how we would feel today if we would be responsible to pay for all our incoming mail! Certainly much extraneous material would never find its way into our homes.



A CLOSER LOOK

Perforations are holes bored or punched through an object either randomly or in a specific pattern. In the case of a postage stamp, perforations located on the four edges of each stamp assure ease of separation of individual stamps from the larger group. Today most stamps are available pre-gummed and pre-cut, and thus perforations are no longer necessary.

Stamp collecting began as soon as the first stamps were issued, and became a wildly popular hobby. Both children and adults participated in this new craze, first known as *timbromania*, from *timbre* (French) = stamp + *mania* (Greek) = madness), but later called *philately*, from *phil-* (Greek) = loving + *ateleia* (Greek) = tax exemption, a word coined by Frenchman George Herpin, who resented paying what he considered a tax on his received mail.

The graphics on stamps often depict significant events and important people related to the issuing nation's history and culture. In the United States, only individuals who are no longer living may be portrayed on stamps, which also often mirror state pride, reproduce national emblems, or highlight historical events. Stamps are produced in varying shapes and sizes, such as the unusual triangular stamps that were issued by the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa and that are considered rare and very valuable today.

Stamp collectors preserve their collections in albums, in glassine envelopes, or in boxes, but the one thing they all have in common is an interest in these minuscule "messengers" that hint of exotic lands and distant times. The true stamp collector feels a sense of romance and excitement as he or she reverently handles a stamp postmarked more than a century ago. The rarity of a stamp is evaluated by its age, by the clarity of the postmark, and by the integrity of its perforations. If the perforations are damaged, the stamp loses value. First Day Covers — stamps that bear the postmark of the date on which they were first issued — are usually quite valuable. A stamp from a distant land, or from a country that is no longer known by its original name or that has a changed political status, is also highly valued.

ABOUT THE SELECTION

This selection is almost entirely a **dramatic monologue**, in which the protagonist reveals information about himself in a "conversation" with an unknown person. The reader becomes aware of episodes in the past that have had a significant impact on the speaker, irrevocably changing his personality and affecting all his future interactions. As you read, think about the way personality is

formed, and how we are affected, even without realizing it, by the actions of others.

The narrator suggests here that the very act of collecting is a human adventure, no matter what it is that is being collected. However, Čapek's choice of a stamp collection as the central symbol of the story adds another dimension. First of all, as the narrator makes clear, stamps are linked to adventure. Put a stamp on an envelope and that envelope may soon be delivered to a strange and exotic place. When a collector touches a stamp, he or she "is delivered" in imagination to the farthest, most interesting corners of the world.

Moreover, stamps can be symbolic of human connection. In the days before telephones and email, letters were the most important means of communication between people, the way to keep relationships alive over time and distance. When the narrator loses his stamp collection, he loses his sense of adventure and of life's potential. Even more tragically, he loses his connection to those he loved best — his family and his best friend — as well as his capacity to connect to others.



We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results.

— *Herman Melville*

A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.

— *John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)*

