

The Eszett

READERS AND WRITERS OF ENGLISH have been spared the use of the long-s (ſ) for a couple of centuries now, so it is with a certain amount of puzzlement that they may view the ß, a related character called the “eszett” which is used in German. The recent orthographic reforms undertaken in Germany may have reduced its frequency in the language, but it nonetheless remains a vital symbol, representing the flat, extended s-sound in such common words as Straße (*strah'-seh* = “street”) and groß (*grohss* = “large”). Eventually, the Germans may go the way of the Swiss who have dismissed it from their written language entirely, but for now its form and proportions remain a concern for designers creating type that would be of interest to the German-language market.

Does knowing the complete history of a character help when designing it? Perhaps a little, although I managed fairly well with the ß before looking into its origin. Some simple research into reliable sources and well-developed observation skills are usually sufficient for preserving a type designer from international embarrassment.

So this article is primarily for the intellectually curious; for those interested in language and history and where things come from. And in particular, it's for people like myself who never tire of creating the ß – a character with lots of character, if you ask me. It has its share of pitfalls (poorly conceived, it can dance out of line and disrupt an entire text) but also its rewards when done well.

But wait! you may say. The origin of the ß is simple, isn't it? Jan Tschichold covered it in his *Treasury of Alphabets and Lettering* with a few illustrations and a simple explanation: the ß comes from merely combining the f and the s into a ligature. Further on, the venerable master resolutely informs us that the term eszett (literally “s-z”) is a misnomer; that the z never had anything to do with it but “this was forgotten over the centuries and so the incorrect term ‘Eß-Zett’ remains . . .” Case closed, right?

Tschichold got it wrong. He apparently ignored historical and linguistic factors in arriving at his conclusion and so opted for an explanation derived from purely formal observation (which in this case could not have been very thorough. There are plenty of historical examples that refute his assertion). The story of the ß *begins with the z* in the eighth century AD.

About the author:

MARK JAMRA is a type designer, associate professor of graphic design at Maine College of Art and founder of TypeCulture, a digital type foundry and academic resource (www.typeculture.com).

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In the time between AD 750 and 1500, Old High German and subsequently Middle High German had two s-sounds:

- 1) one like the s in **G**ast [*Eng.* guest] and **M**aus [*Eng.* mouse] (long-**f** and short-**s** were both in use), and
- 2) a slightly lisped s spoken against the teeth and usually spelled with z in words like **e**ẏẏen [*contemp. Ger.* essen; *eat*] and **u**ẏ [*aus*; *out*]. At the same time, the letter z was also used to denote the “ts” sound, which is its function in German today. Therefore, in an Old High German word like **s**īẏan [*sitzen*; *sit*], one couldn’t see from reading z whether it was pronounced “sis-san” or “sit-san.” To remedy this situation, scribes began as early as the 9th century to place an f before the z to indicate the “ss” pronunciation. For example, **gr**oẏ became **gr**oẏf [*groß*] and **da**ẏ became **da**ẏf [*daß*; *that*]. These two letters were eventually combined into a ligature and thus the name “eszett” [Fig. 1]. Interestingly, the lisped s of Old- and Middle High German is no longer spoken and so the character **fz** (*fz*) is actually obsolete.



Fig. 1

Up to 1800, the f belonged in every lower case. Afterwards, it began to fall out of use and continued to do so in spite of a brief revival in the 1920s when it was included in the typefaces Futura, Orpheus and Berthold’s rendition of Bodoni. Since the tendency of most European printers was the abandonment of blackletter in favor of roman and italic types, the necessity of a roman counterpart to the blackletter **fz** was recognized well before 1800. (The Germans also used roman type more frequently but remained firm in their use of blackletter until 1943.) Eventually, the roman **ß** began to crystalize in numerous forms and was used in German interchangeably with sz and fz [Fig. 2].



Fig. 2

Jacob Grimm, linguist and one-half of the famous Brothers Grimm, contributed to the development of the **ß** when he established concrete rules of grammar in New High German and, in a particularly important essay of 1822, abandoned the use of fraktur type and had the whole thing set in roman type, giving him cause to insist upon a design for the **ß** from the printer. (He rejected this symbol later in his more significant work, *Das Deutsche Wörterbuch* [*The German Dictionary*] and instead used the letter combination sz while abandoning the f altogether.)

Throughout the years, there was plenty of disagreement on how the sound should be represented and the form of the letter(s) for depicting it, but a resolution was not cohesively sought until after the founding of the German Empire in 1871. It was then that the various German states, baronies and principalities, as well as Switzerland and Austria,

came closer to a consensus through a series of reforms concerning paper sizes, currency, the Didot typographic point system and grammar. At this time, German-language printers were still setting any one of five different forms for the same sound.

At a Berlin conference on orthography in 1876 in which changes in the use of *fs* and *ss* were propagated, a massive discussion began amongst German printers and foundries regarding the proper form of the *ß* character. Their stated goal was a consensus on the ultimate form to be used by all. By 1879, the leading trade journal for printers, *Journal für Buchdruckerkunst*, presented a showing of *ß* proposals created by various foundries for review by the general printing community [Fig. 3]. A decision was made by a committee of the Typographic Society of Leipzig and the so-called “Sulzbacher Form” was adopted as the new standard [No. 1 in Fig. 3]. This form, presented in an official proclamation in 1903, shows a kind of compromise between the *f*-*s* ligature and the older *f*-*z* ligature [Fig. 4, see next page]. Even then, general acceptance of the Sulzbacher *ß* was not immediate and only achieved through the constant efforts of its proponents.

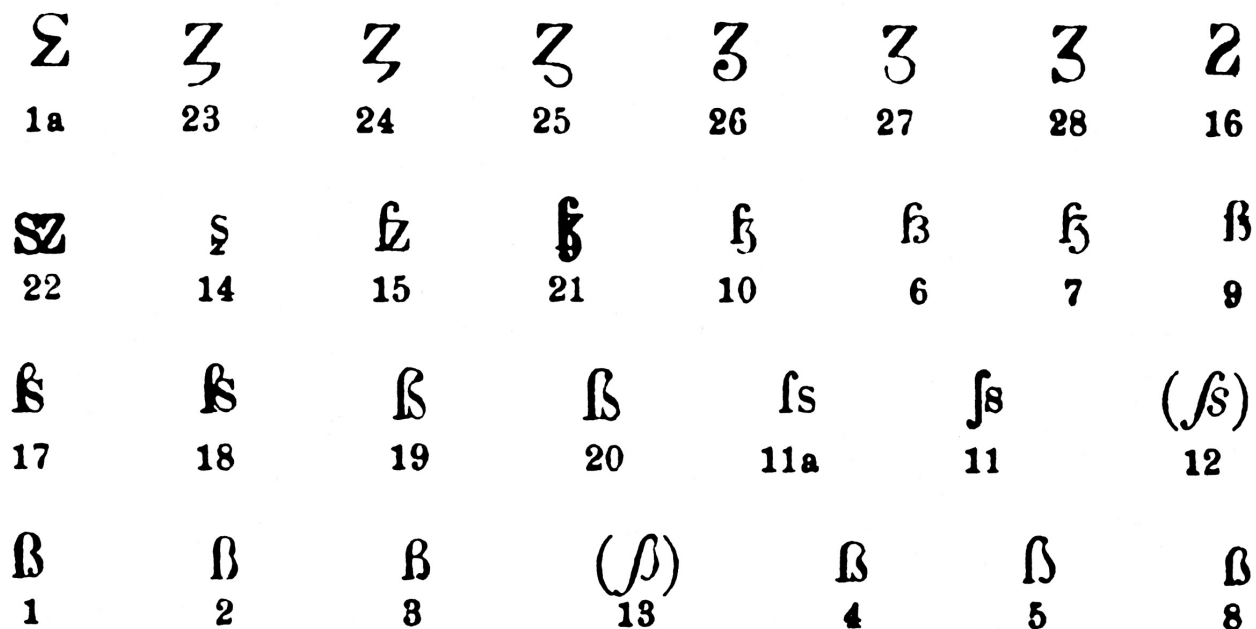


Fig. 3



DEUTSCHLANDS BUCHDRUCKER STEINDRUCKER UND VERWANDTE GEWERBE

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der Deutschen Buchdrucker-Berufsgenossenschaft und des Vereins Deutscher Steindruckereibesitzer.

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Leipzig, 9. Juli 1903.

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AMTLICHER THEIL.

An die Herren Buchdruckereibesitzer und Schriftgießereibesitzer Deutschlands, Österreichs und der Schweiz!

In Verfolg eines Versammlungsbeschlusses der vereinigten Buchdruckereibesitzer von Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz vom 12. Juni 1902 zu Konstanz trat am 25. März 1903 im Deutschen Buchgewerbehaus zu Leipzig eine vierzehngliedrige Kommission von Buchdruckereibesitzern und Schriftgießereibesitzern zusammen, um über die Beschaffung und allgemeine Einführung der durch die neue Orthographie bedingten Typen — kleines sz, Versal SZ, sowie Ä, Ö, Ü ohne Überhängen der Punkte — eine Verständigung herbeizuführen. Diese Kommission gelangte nach eingehenden Beratungen zu folgenden Beschlüssen:

I.

Als allgemein einzuführende Gebrauchsform des kleinen sz wird für gangbare Brot- und Titelschriften die von der Typographischen Gesellschaft zu Leipzig seinerzeit angenommene Sulzbacher Form mit der Maßgabe anerkannt, daß es den Schriftgießereien überlassen bleibt, diese Form den einzelnen Schriftcharakteren anzupassen. Die charakteristischen Merkmale dieser sz-Form sind die folgenden: Das sogenannte lange Antiqua-f wird oben mit einem z verbunden, im Kopfe eingebogen und läuft im unteren Bogen in eine feine oder halbstarke Linie oder in einen Punkt aus, wie die nachstehenden Buchstaben erkennen lassen:

ß ß ß ß

II.

Bezüglich des Versal-SZ soll vorläufig von der Schaffung eines besonderen Buchstabens abgesehen und die im amtlichen Regelverzeichnis vorgesehene Schreibart, d. h. Zusammensetzung der Versalbuchstaben S und Z, angewandt werden, da die aus den Kreisen der Berufsgenossen gemachten zahlreichen Vorschläge für eine neue SZ-Form die Zustimmung der Kommission nicht finden konnten und somit der amtlichen Regelung dieser Frage kein geeigneter Vorschlag entgegengestellt werden kann. Es soll jedoch der Versuch gemacht werden, durch eine Preisausschreibung eine entsprechende Form für diese Type zu finden.

Fig. 4 Presentation of the Sulzbacher Eszett (lower center)

The proclamation of 1903 informed German-language book publishers, booksellers and newspaper publishers of the results of two conferences held by the Imperial Office of the Interior, while printers and foundries were called upon to have ready an ß in the Sulzbacher form in every point size of every type on offer, basically by January of 1904. The decision regarding an uppercase form of the ß was left to a national competition, which immediately brought forth some imaginative proposals [Fig. 5].

Although none were officially adopted, some rare interpretations of an uppercase eszett can be found in types introduced at that time, including the Kleukens Antiqua issued by the Bauer Type Foundry in 1910 [Fig. 6] and the Ehmcke Rustika from the Stempel Type Foundry in 1914 [Fig. 7].

Nowadays, the officially accepted method of representing the ß in caps is to set SS; therefore *Straße* = STRASSE and *groß* = GROSS.

The proclamation of 1903 served to unify the use and visual idea of the ß, but type designers and founders did not always adhere to the Sulzbacher form in the following decades. Today, eszettts tend to fall into two main groups: one in which the Sulzbacher form and the blackletter z are still recognizable [Fig. 8] and one in which the f-s ligature is clearly visible [Fig. 9]. ❀

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Vorschläge für die Bildung einer einheitlichen Form des Vokal SZ:

- A. SZ
ÄUSZERUNG FUSZANGEL
GROSZAHN STOSZANKER
- B. ß
HAB SCHIEBSTAND BUBE
- C. §
STRASE DREISIG GRÖSE
- D. § § §
ABLAŞ FLEIŞ KONGREŞ
- E. Σ
MÄSIG FLUE ÄUΣERUNG
- F. 3
BU3E ENTBLO3EN STO3
- G. SZ S3
FLUSZEIGNER RUS3OFEN
- H. 3
BA3 STRAU3ENEI FÜ3E

Fig. 5

Fig. 6 Kleukens Antiqua, 1910

Fig. 7 Ehmcke Rustika, 1914

Fig. 8 Times New Roman

Fig. 9 Adobe Caslon