

# Philatelic Genealogy Update

## An Initial Assessment of the Genealogical Value of Old Envelopes and Postcards

by James R. Miller

WHILE INHERITED FAMILY LETTERS AND ENVELOPES are an established source of genealogical information, the Philatelic Genealogy website (*Philgen.org*) explores how envelopes and postcards from postal history collections can reveal an exact place of origin for European immigrants to the United States and Canada.<sup>[1]</sup> Some preliminary results from the website, introduced in the spring 2009 *NEW ENGLAND ANCESTORS*, can now be summarized.

Postal history vendors and collectors are sharing photographs from their collections with *Philgen.org*, and I catalog them with key genealogical data and auction catalog references, when available. From the initial 3,000 items seen, 261 were legible, non-commercial, postmarked envelopes and postcards, sent either from Europe to the U.S. or from the U.S. to Europe, from approximately 1850 to 1930. I researched each U.S. recipient and sender in a U.S. census or similar source, looking to match street addresses, when known. Online family trees on *Ancestry.com* and *RootsWeb* were checked for the names of recipients and senders, and I emailed the genealogists who submitted the matching data. I also placed notices on surname and locality message boards requesting assistance in deciphering handwriting and locating persons named in source documents.

Nearly nine of ten (87%, 227/261) envelopes and postcards were linked to someone in a census or similar source. In almost half (48%, 124/261) of the cases, a European postmark or address consistent with the person's or parents' nationality in a census or other source indicated a possible place of origin. Among 124 items with potential origins, thirty-five listed the person's or parent's birthplace or residence before immigration as confirmed by a U.S. passport or citizenship application, ship passenger list, published genealogy, or World War I or II draft registration.

Postmarks on three of the six examples featured in the spring 2009 *NEA* article correctly identified the recipients' birthplaces.<sup>[2]</sup> Correspondence on postcards occasionally contained interesting family information, including a marriage and death. Often envelopes and cards sent from outside the United States and written in a language other than English originated from the recipient's birthplace. Some envelopes and postcards

were written by children of immigrants many years after immigration — in one case eighty-two years after the parents arrived.

Contacted genealogists were pleased. In several cases, these envelopes and postcards offered the first indication of an ancestor's birthplace — or of an ancestor's handwriting or maiden name. Because some items were for sale, several genealogists purchased envelopes or postcards for their family collections.

Creating an online, philatelic genealogy database appears both feasible and worthwhile. Old envelopes and postcards are readily available and most can be linked to people in U.S. censuses. In addition to providing genealogical information, envelopes and postcards have value as personal documents written and handled by our ancestors. An envelope or postcard links an ancestor in a specific location and time with another person and place. Used in combination with other sources, the old envelopes and postcards on *Philgen.org* can be a valuable genealogical resource. I encourage genealogists to submit photos of inherited envelopes and postcards for posting and welcome volunteers to help add and research material on the site. ♦

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James R. Miller, "Philatelic Genealogy: Old Envelopes, Postcards, and Immigrant Origins," *NEW ENGLAND ANCESTORS* 10 (2009) 2: 37–38.

<sup>2</sup> Frida Körner was born January 26 and baptized February 6, 1881 in Steinheim an der Murr, Germany (baptism #3, 1881, FHL 1,187,117). Jacob Bloom was born in Gravyo, Poland (World War II draft registration card U992, Kings County, New York, roll WW2\_2369377; viewed on *Ancestry.com*). Carl Gronenberg was born in "Saelskor," Denmark (U.S. passport application 11615, 23 November 1915, NARA M1490; viewed on *Ancestry.com*).

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