

SYNOPSIS:

A 1940 Unopened "Box 252" Letter from Norway! Examining a WW2 Thomas Cook Undercover Mail Scheme

Attached is an article from 2020 that appeared in the philatelic magazine *The Posthorn*, published quarterly by the Scandinavian Collectors Club. (Issue 2, published 10 June 2020, pages 6-13)

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This article studies an unusual, censored but never delivered Norwegian cover handled by the British Government's WWII "Undercover Mail Scheme". This was all managed through Thomas Cook & Son, and in this case, in Toronto, Canada for people in Canada. It is also an historically interesting example of the large role escaping Norwegian ships and seamen played in helping the Allies – as seen with some research about the writers and their seamen involved family.

The British Government's "Undercover letter scheme", often much faster than the Red Cross scheme of just 25-word messages, was done unilaterally by the British and offered throughout the British world. It was very actively used in Great Britain, but also in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Faroes, Iceland, and definitely some others. Roughly a **quarter of a million letters** went through this scheme, although less than 5,000 went through the scheme set up for Canada. Overall British Scheme Reply mail is known from about 28 Nazi controlled or Nazi-allied stamp issuing places, in spite of strong Nazi censorship laws strictly prohibiting any such replies.

Historic Background:

The British Government, following their WWI experience with unilaterally creating an "Undercover Mail Scheme" for their civilian population for largely humanitarian reasons, immediately decided to set up a near identical scheme upon the outbreak of WWII in Sept 1939. The negotiations with British censorship for the rules to use and the handling mechanics, and then candidates to physically manage the outgoing and incoming mail volume, all took until Nov 24, 1939 to be finalized, and it finally started Jan 15, 1940.

The agreement with British censorship called for all outgoing letters to not show any indication of censorship, so they were delivered to censorship unsealed and without any address or text indicating they were not from the neutral country they were to be franked and mailed from. Any unacceptable letters were not marked as that would also indicate censorship – they were returned for re-writing.

Sadly, without return addresses on the outgoing covers, and usually not even the neutral country's "reply to" address on the envelope, few outgoing covers are found. Of over ten thousand of the Canadian outgoing covers mailed by Thomas Cook from New York City in 1940 & 1941, all with ordinary U.S. franking, to date none are known! All the known covers are the "replies" addressed to Box 252!

The Canadians were so careful about not widely disclosing their "reply to address" of Box 252, Grand Central Annex Post Office, NYC that it was only in some stray WWII Archival letters that the number was mentioned, and that was only found by chance well after the mention of it in the Canadian *Report on Censorship During the War 1939-1945*. This Report was released in Jan. 1946 as "Top Secret" and was only finally declassified and became public in 1984. (356 pages, of which a 144 page section relates to postal censorship – see information now provided for the Civil Censorship Study Group website.)

Only in the 1990's did confirmation and just some of the details of Thomas Cook's "Box 252" role become known to philatelists. The unusual Postal History shown here is from this Governmental created, basically humanitarian purposed, civilian "Undercover" mail service where much of the information was lost, destroyed, or discarded after the war ended.

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