



EMPIRE STATE
POSTAL HISTORY
SOCIETY

APS UNIT 28

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POSSIBLE PILFERAGE OR AN INNOCENT MISTAKE?

By Maris Tirums

Besides collecting the postal history of various areas of New York State, I am a long time collector of Latvian stamps and postal history.

The cover which is the subject of this short article was acquired from ESPHS member and treasurer George McGowan in 2008. Its features should be of interest to the postal history collector of Latvia as well as of New York State.

The envelope was mailed in Riga, the capital city of Latvia, and postmarked on December 26, 1931, at the Riga railroad station post office. Postage was paid with a 35-santimi Latvian coat-of-arms definitive (Scott No. 149). This was the correct postage rate at the time of mailing for foreign letters weighing up to 20 grams. It was addressed to Herrn (Mr.) Walter R. Benjamin in New York City. Sometime after that, bad things started to happen to this piece of mail.

The envelope was opened by an unknown person and then placed back into the mail stream. We could guess that the opening was an innocent mistake, but I do not believe this was the case. Alternatively, we could guess that the contents were intentionally examined and possibly pilfered.

Once the envelope reached the New York City post office, the damaged condition of the envelope was observed and duly processed. The envelope was resealed at the top with a post office seal (Scott No. OX21) and handstamped "RECEIVED IN BAD CONDITION / AT / N.Y.P.O. – G.C. Sta. Div. of Mails." It then would have been delivered.

Walter R. Benjamin (1854–1943), the addressee, was a graduate of Union College in Schenectady and a well known dealer in autographs of famous people. He started his autograph business in 1887.

The letter from Latvia could very well have contained a paper item autographed by a celebrity, and may have been sent to New York to sell to Benjamin. His reputation could well have been known to many people between Riga and New York, and may have targeted the cover for pilferage. ■

