

The Clandestine Mail – The Cyprus Route



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While ago, I bought from a vendor in Cyprus a huge accumulation of more than 500 covers which were all mailed from many different locations in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip to the postmaster in Nicosia, Cyprus.

BACKGROUND

The covers contained letters in addressed envelopes to be mailed to relatives and friends in other Arab countries. This method we call

CLANDESTINE MAIL. The Cyprus route is one of two routes known to collectors. The other known route is through the postmaster of London, England. These two roundabout routes were regularly and systematically used by the Palestinian population to circumvent the absence of postal services between the Arab countries and Israel. This was begun after the 1967 Six Days War.

The vendor from whom I purchased this material told me that he was an acquaintance of the Nicosia post master and that he bought all these covers directly from him.

COVER DESCRIPTIONS

What is very interesting about these covers is that more than 90% of them carry all kinds of handstamps, cachets and markings. Furthermore, many of them have been censored, and thus have a light brown “Opened By Censor” label or a red double circle cachet with the text “Passed Censor Cyprus”. Some of the covers carry also a red single-line handstamp reading “RETURN TO SENDER” (Figure 1).



Figure 1

In addition, some of these covers carry a small circled “L” cachet and a “REGISTERED/NICOSIA S.B.O.” handstamp. (Figure 2). I wrote to the postmaster general of Nicosia inquiring about the meaning of these two markings. The reply I received stated that the circled “L” stands for “a letter item” while the S.B.O. stands “South Branch Office which is the Eleftheria Square Post Office in Nicosia.”



Figure 2

This of course raises the

question of why were these envelopes stamped in Nicosia with a “Registered” handstamp? And what was the reason for their being registered in Nicosia upon their arrival? Is this a forced registration? And if so, why?

Some of the covers have only one of these markings; some have a combination of them, while others carry them all.

PALESTINIAN CACHET

A puzzling feature of some of the covers is the presence of a small two lines cachet depicting names of Palestinian villages, towns and cities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Often, such names were spelled different and sometimes even wrong such as:

- TIBEHAS GOLDEN HEIGHTS / VIA GAZA 3
- BET ZEHEAR (Beit Sahur??) / VIA GAZA 3
- HALHU / VIA GAZA 3

(Figure 3). I shall further discuss these strange markings later in this article.



Figure 3 Route markings blown-up.

CONSULTATION

I have been corresponding with Dr. Josef Wallach in Rehoboth, Israel and we have been exchanging ideas regarding these very interesting but rather very puzzling handstamps. As the readers know, Dr. Wallach is one of the very few specialists on the topic of the West Bank postmarks and markings. He was very delighted to see some of these covers and was also faced with the question of how to explain them.

At one point, his reaction was to consider the unorthodox idea of the “fabrication” of this material or at least part of the cachets and handstamps. He also was surprised by the censorship markings. He shared with me the question of why were some of these covers censored? He was very sure that the glued censor label was NOT applied in Israel. This leaves Cyprus of course. But WHY? Was that at a time of an alarm or an alert of certain terrorist activities which necessitated the examination of the contents of the covers?

The enigma of the red “RETURN TO SENDER” handstamp is also enormously important. Were such covers provided with this marking because the address of the enclosed envelope was not clear or legible?

Or was this handstamp used when the required International Reply Coupon (IRC), needed to pay for mailing the envelope to its final destination, was missing in the parent envelope?

I myself do not believe that these covers were “fabricated” for the simple reason that there is no need to do so, for although the clandestine covers via the Cyprus route are less common than those via the London route, they are neither expensive nor difficult to find. Also looking at their shabby features, handwriting, and the senders’ addresses leave no doubt that these were all genuinely mailed to Nicosia carrying within them addressed envelopes to be remailed to different destinations in Arab countries.

OBSERVATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Now let us do a detailed examination of these covers. After a very thorough study of each cover and after a statistical survey of the 520 covers, we come to the following conclusions:

1. All letters were mailed between January 1969 and December 1972.
2. The covers came from more than 40 different localities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, starting from Al-Nuseirat and ending with Yata.
3. All covers carry Israeli stamps and were cancelled by Israeli postmarks.
4. About one third of the covers were mailed from the West Bank and two thirds from the Gaza Strip.
5. 131 carry the NICOSIA arrival postmark on the back, (Figure 4).
6. 166 covers have the light brown “OPENED BY CENSOR” label which measures 61 x 35 mm. The labels were unglued so they were glued to seal the opened envelopes. That is why there are dark brown stains on and around the labels.
7. 211 covers carry the red double circle, (21 mm) “PASSED CENSOR CYPRUS” handstamp. The inner circle has



Figure 4

random numbers running from 1 to 19. According to Dr. Josef Wallach, the censorship definitely did not happen in Israel. But why did Cyprus find it necessary to censor these covers? And what were the Cypriot postal authorities looking for? Is it, as Dr. Wallach has suggested, in accordance with a request from Israel to do so for fear of an act of terrorism, or something else?

8. 182 covers carry the small circled letter “L” in blue, violet or light brown color. According to the Nicosia postmaster, the letter “L” stands for a “letter item.”
9. 184 covers have the two lines blue handstamp “REGISTERED/ NICOSIA S.B.O.” The last three letters stand for “South Branch Office” at the Eleftheria Square in Nicosia. The question that remains unanswered here is: why did the postal authorities in Cyprus use such a marking while there are no registration labels nor any registration signs on the covers? And why did an unregistered letter need to be registered upon arrival in Nicosia?
10. 168 covers carry the relatively long (103 mm) all capital letters red handstamp reading “RETURN TO SENDER” (figure 1). Here again: why was such a marking applied to some of these covers? What is more intriguing is the fact that such letters were NOT returned to their senders for two reasons:

- Not all covers having this handstamp have a return address,
- All these covers came from the postmaster’s office in Nicosia, which means that they were never returned to their original senders because they remained in his possession.

A speculation on my part is that maybe they applied this cachet to envelopes that needed to be returned to the sender because these envelopes did not contain the required International Reply Coupons to pay for forwarding the enclosed letter in the outside envelope. But, due to the absence of a proper return address, the inside letter was mailed anyway and the outside envelope remained at the post office in Nicosia.

Another explanation might be the partial or absence of the name and address of the sender.

TOWN & CITY NAME

Now I come to the biggest puzzles, which is the presence of a small two lines blue or violet handstamp depicting towns and city names (Figures 3, 5). I have never seen this handstamp and I know for sure that until now, nobody has reported seeing or illustrating anything remotely similar to it. Close examination of the 183 covers with this cachet shows city and town names (from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) such as:

- AL NUSEIRAT 2 / VIA AN1 (mailed in Al Nuseirat)
- BANI SULEYLA 2 / VIA Bs1 (mailed in Bani Suheyla)



Figure 5

- DIR EL BALAH 2 / VIA DEB 1 (mailed in Deir El Balah)
- BET ZAHUR / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in El-Arish)
- AZUN / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in El-Arish)
- BET ZEHEAR / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in El-Arish)
- GABALY / VIA G1 (mailed in Gabalia)
- TIBERIAS GOLDEN HEIGHTS / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in Gaza)
- GAZA 4 / VIA G3 (mailed in Gaza)
- ATIL 2 / VIA A1 (mailed in Gaza)
- YURA / VIA Gaza 3 (mailed in Gaza)
- BET GALA / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in Gaza)
- HAUARA / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in Gaza)
- INDUSTRIAL GAZA STRIP / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in Gaza)
- BIR ZET / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in Gaza)
- HEVRON 2 / VIA H1 (mailed in Hebron)
- HALHU / VIA GAZA 3 (mailed in Jerusalem)
- HAN YUNES 3 / VIA HY1 (mailed in Khan Yunes)
- RAFIAH 3 / VIA R1 (mailed in Rafah)
- TUL KAREM 1 / VIA TK2 (mailed in Tul Karem).

What attracts our attention to these strange handstamps is the sometimes very unusual spelling, for example: BET ZEHEAR for Beit Sahur, TIDERIAS for Tiberias, etc...

SPECULATION

The first question that presents itself here is: where were these markings applied—in Israel or in Cyprus? One idea is that the cachets were applied in Israel to indicate the place of origin of the

inside covers and the route it followed before leaving for Cyprus.

For example, if the parent cover carries the handstamp “GENIN / VIA GAZA 3,” this means that the inside cover originate in Jenin and was mailed in or via Gaza and not in Jenin itself. Maybe a United Nation carrier or a private travel agency carried the cover with some mail from other places in the West Bank or Gaza and mailed them together at the Gaza post office.

Of course, we still have the question as to why take the covers to Gaza to be mailed when they can be mailed locally at the many post offices and postal agencies present in almost every single town or hamlet in the area?

CONCLUSION

I believe that we are definitely dealing with extremely interesting Clandestine Mail from the early seventies. As there isn't much published material on this particular field of philately, we are still faced with many puzzling issues and questions.

The purpose of this study is to serve as an eye opener by showing some very unusual and definitely very interesting and not commonly seen items. I would like to encourage and stimulate greater interest in collecting and studying such material in this area and era. And finally, my aim is to raise some hard questions, most of which remain unanswered. That is why I am calling on my fellow philatelists to:

- look for and to show similar covers, and,
- to offer some answers to the raised questions in this article.

Any answer will be more than welcome, even if it is a mere speculation. The road is still long and bumpy and we are in dire need of more research that might lead to some satisfying answers.

My special thanks go to Dr. Josef Wallach for his continuous encouragement and for his valuable comments and arguments, but most of all for his thoughts and his opinions. His deep study, interest and his many publications are very much appreciated in this special field of philately. ■

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Postscript

Before mailing this article to **The Israel Philatelist** for publication, I sent the draft and the illustrations to Dr. Josef Wallach for his opinion and his remarks. Before expressing a final opinion, he asked me to send him more photocopies of as many covers (fronts and backs) with the many markings discussed in the article as possible. He said that this would help him tremendously in forming his final opinion.

After dispatching photocopies of more than 409 of these covers, and after his thorough study of the material, he e-mailed me his reaction and his conclusions. He also gave me permission to publish whatever I see fit of his reaction and his remarks.

Here is almost verbatim, what Dr. Wallach had written in his response.

The covers were all genuinely posted from the Territories to Cyprus. Some covers upon arrival in Cyprus received arrival postmarks. The enclosed cover with the message was handled by the Cyprus postal authorities according to their routine procedure and mailed to the final destination in the Arab countries. At this point the second stage “processing” started (in my opinion).

A person at the Nicosia post office (or a friend), which I will call from now on “THE CLEVER GUY,” collected the outer envelopes. They were no longer needed and were discarded. I believe that he **added additional cachets, censor labels and other markings to the covers**. I believe he found some in the Nicosia post office. The reason was to make them MORE attractive to collectors and to gain monetary profit of the newly “cooked” covers. (We know about similar schemes from the past regarding some 1948 HAGANAH “secret” covers).

He also produced and applied the two-line rubber town routing handstamps such as “Gabalya/ via Gaza 3” with many with distorted names. Many of the handstamps bear names from localities in the West Bank which in my opinion, NEVER went to the Gaza Strip nor the post office INSIDE Gaza city. Covers which did originate from the Gaza Strip DID sometimes receive a genuine Gaza 3 transit postmarks.

This fact provided the “clever guy” with idea of making his

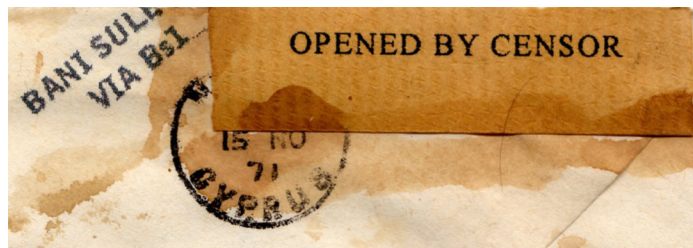


Figure 2

PRIVATE fake two-lines handstamps, as he thought that ALL covers went VIA GAZA (wrong)! For example, one cover was sent from Gabalya in the Gaza Strip which has a sender’s return address (rare) in the Gaza Strip. The “clever guy” proceeded to add his cachets and handstamps of a locality in the West Bank which makes NO sense whatsoever.

In your photocopies, of Figure 2 (page 128), you can see that the censor label (false?) is covering/overlapping the Nicosia arrival postmark which is genuine.

There is one point that I cannot validate for sure at this stage. The censor labels and cachets are for SURE NOT Israeli and, in my opinion, WERE MADE UP TO DECEIVE the interested collector. The single letter cachets, for example the “L,” are a different story, as they are used by Israeli censors. Therefore, one has to check the originals to validate if all were genuinely applied by Israeli censors OR added by our “clever guy” to increase the attraction of the covers.

What adds to my critical opinion is the fact that NO other covers, other than the ONE group you have, had any ADDITIONAL markings, cachets, or labels or even remnants of marking. Other collectors have covers which were sent to Cyprus WITHOUT any of these additional cachets and/or labels.

I repeat my preliminary opinion: the first part of the covers’ trip is genuine, including the Cyprus arrival postmarks on some of the covers. The “clever guy” started his artistic project of producing attractive collectors “exhibit” items. I repeat this occurred after the covers arrived in Cyprus and the Nicosia post office properly handled the third countries messages. ■

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