

August Eduard Pensa, an Estonian philatelist in Germany and the USA

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During my research on displaced persons' camp mail (DP Camp Mail), I repeatedly came across the name August E. Pensa as the sender and recipient of letters and postcards in connection with the Augsburg DP camp, and sometimes also that of his son Allan Pensa. As a very active philatelist, he left several traces of his activities during his time in Germany and the USA, which I would like to explore here.

August Eduard Pensa – also known as Pents – was born on September 25, 1898, in Kärevere (German: Kerrafer), Tartu County, Estonia, the son of Jakob (1872 to 1918) and Liidia Pensa (1875 to 1942, née Wissmann), both from Laeva, Estonia. He had two much younger siblings: Oskar (born 1903) and Armilda (later Krass, born 1910).

He attended school in Tartu and, as a young man, went to work in the big city of St. Petersburg to support his mother financially, who was a single parent after the early death of his father. He returned to Tartu from St. Petersburg at the beginning of the revolution.

When the Estonian War of Independence began in 1918, he joined the Sakala partisan battalion and remained in the unit after the war as an economic supervisor. He then

worked for over 20 years in the police service of the Viljandi district (including during the German occupation).¹⁷

In 1924, he married German teacher Hilda Tiido (1903 to 1979). Their only son, Allan, was born in 1926.

Allan was already an active philatelist as a teenager; the membership lists of the international collectors' association 'Estonia' from 1938 and 1940 list him as youth member no. 466, residing in Viljandi.

Before the Soviet army invaded Estonia, August E. Pensa fled to Germany with his family in 1944. All three spoke German well at the time.

In Augsburg-Hochfeld and in the DP camp there, he began to devote himself once again to his hobby from his youth, philately.

On October 8, 1975, August E. Pensa wrote an article about his experiences there in the Estonian-language magazine Meie Kodu (Our Home), published in Australia, under the headline 'The Estonian Philatelic Society in the USA turns 25', from which I quote below:

"After settling in Germany as refugees, we immediately took up philately at the end of the war in the Augsburg-Hochfeld camp. Aleksander Vahter, a postal official from Pärnu, became head of the post office in the UNRRA camp. He had three employees and three postmen under his command. He was allowed to issue three stamps and three overprinted stamps. These stamps were used for sending parcels, money and letters, but alongside German stamps."

"In 1946, Harald Plaks exhibited his Estonian stamp collection at a large exhibition in Altenstadt (May 24 to June 16, 1946, ed.). We had a special stamp made in English for the exhibition. On the orders of the friendly camp commander, Captain Wischik, two German officials came to stamp the post and organise the shipments. Rumour has it that 7,500 letters with special stamps were sent all over the world."

„Over a hundred philatelists were present. Among them were Tallinn stamp dealer Evald Eichenthal and his brother Villem, Dr Hugo Salasoo, Valter Pohlak and many others. In the evening, we went to the hall where the stamp auctioneers had gathered. At the meeting, the founding of the philatelic association "Baltia" was discussed. The Lithuanians had had their own camp post stamp printed, but unfortunately it did not arrive in time for the exhibition."

"Shortly afterwards, we called a meeting of all philatelists in the camp. At that time, there was correspondence with G. Mieländer, who lived in Berlin and travelled to the meeting. He was elected chairman of the founding meeting. Aleksander Vahter, the head of the post office, was elected chairman (of Baltia, ed.), with Lithuanian and Latvian philatelists as assessors. I was

¹⁷ From the obituary in 'Vaba Eesti Sõna' (Free Estonian Voice) March 1, 1979, available online at URL: <https://dea.digar.ee/cgi-bin/dea?a=d&d=vabaeestisona19790301.1.11>

elected to the board as organiser of the exchange days and as the person responsible for the premises."

Even back then, philatelists produced documents relating to special events and sent each other letters (some of which remain unopened to this day) or had envelopes stamped with camp postmarks as souvenirs. The philatelists active here in exile were no exception. In any case, there is still a great deal of philatelic material from the Baltic Philatelist Days available today.¹⁸

"We were often given new rooms in the camp that we had to tidy up. The evening before, I had already noted on the posters where the exchange day would take place in the block. Early in the morning, the young philatelists came to help me and heat the stoves. Then the philatelists arrived by train and from the camps (there were several camps in Augsburg) and the exchange day could begin.

People sat at long tables and lined up the stamps they wanted to sell. Some organised auctions and sold large quantities of stamps.

In the camp, former Tallinn businessman and expert Villem Eichenthal also published a five-language "Baltia" catalogue with almost a hundred pages.¹⁹ This was a great service to the Balts, as the German Michel catalogue was not published and did not contain correct prices.

The "Baltia" society continued its monthly meetings until 1950, when it was dissolved due to the emigration of displaced persons. The society had almost 300 members, and people from other occupation zones also took part in the exchange days."²⁰

In 1949, August Pensa emigrated with his family to the United States, where he first settled in Patchogue, New York, and then in Paterson, New Jersey.

After settling in and finding work, Pensa began organising a philatelic society together with other stamp collectors whom he knew from Baltia and who had settled near New York. The Eesti Filatelistide Selts (EFS, Estonian Philatelic Society) was founded on August 12, 1950.

The society met regularly at the Estonian House in New York, which was acquired in 1947 by several Estonian organizations and associations under the umbrella organization New York Eesti Haridusselts (Estonian Educational Society in New York) at 243 East 34th Street in Manhattan – which remains an active centre of Estonian life to this day²¹.

¹⁸ Compare, for example, Klieber, Walter & Fueß, Hartmut: The DP camp for interned Balts in Hanau and its post office. In: BALTIKUM No. 17. Page 63 ff.

¹⁹ It was actually 200 pages (Ed.)

²⁰ Available online at URL: <https://dea.digar.ee/cgi-bin/dea?a=d&d=meiekodu19751008.1.6>, text excerpts translated by the author of this article. See also the website of the magazine 'meie kodu' at URL: <https://eesti.org.au/category/meie-kodu-articles/>

²¹ Available online at URL: <https://www.estonianhouseny.org/eng/home>

*"Swap days were held there regularly on one Sunday a month, during which lectures on philatelic topics were given, articles were published in magazines, members were introduced at meetings with small exhibitions, and the collection of special editions and letters was explained. Where possible, circulars and stamp auctions were organised. Unfortunately, not much could be achieved in the area of circulars, as members had very few duplicates for sale and those who did had complained that they lacked the time to stick the stamps into albums."*²²

From 1953 onwards, August Pensa was chairman of the EFS and remained in this position for 13 years. His son Allan later became chairman of the Long Island Estonian Society.²³

In 1955, August began publishing the magazine Eesti Filatelist (The Estonian Philatelist), which he edited for ten years. The last issue he oversaw, No. 10, was already 100 pages long.

In 1965, August Pensa had to step down as editor of Eesti Filatelist for health reasons. From issue 11 onwards, it was published by EFÜR (Eesti Filatelistide Ühing Rootsis = Estonian Collectors' Association in Sweden) in accordance with an agreement between the New York Philatelists' Association and the Swedish Philatelists' Association.²⁴

August Pensa took part in many international philatelic exhibitions, the most important of which was the 1964 World's Fair in New York, where he received an honorary award for his Estonian exhibition collection. He wrote:²⁵

„In 1964, a world exhibition featuring stamp displays was held in New York. Thanks to good relations, a Lithuanian was granted permission to exhibit Baltic stamp collections for ten days. Adolph Lell, August Veri and A.E. Pensa exhibited their collections on behalf of the Estonians. Thousands of people came to see them, and each exhibitor received a beautiful mantel clock with a silver plate as a prize."

He was very keen to promote Estonia through international philately. As an Esperanto speaker, he corresponded with philatelists from many countries. From the beginning of the weekly newspaper Vaba Eesti Sõna²⁶ ('Free Estonian Word'), he was a freelance contributor and also wrote for other Estonian newspapers.

After retiring, he sold his house for health reasons and moved with his wife Hilda to live with his son Allan in East Meadow, New York.

His grandson Eric Pensa, who fondly remembers the time his grandfather lived in his family home in East Meadow, wrote to me about it:

²² Pensa, August E. 1950: 'Eesti Filatelistide Seltsi' tegevus ja eesmärgid (Activities and objectives of the Estonian Philatelic Society), in: Eesti Filatelist No. 1. New York.

²³ <https://de.scribd.com/doc/267237708/Eesti-Filatelist-nr-2-New-York-1956-pdf>

²⁴ However, Pensa continued to work as an author, for example with an article on the Rakvere overprints of 1918, available online at URL: <https://www.filateelia.ee/efur/articles/rakvere.html>.

²⁵ In 'Meie kodu', see above

²⁶ <https://www.vabaeestisona.com/>

"The most important time of day for him was when the post arrived. Walking was difficult for him, but he often went downstairs to see if the post had arrived. He loved his old typewriter and often wrote letters to his stamp collector friends. When wipe-out came onto the market, he was thrilled.

Sometimes I was scolded for tearing open envelopes – especially when the stamp was damaged in the process. Instead, I was taught to look at the stamp first and then carefully cut open the envelope.

Apparently, during the war, people used steam to take apart used envelopes. Then they turned them inside out and glued them back together so they could be reused. My mother told me that he kept up this habit for many years after the war, as he was always very thrifty due to his childhood poverty."

As an active Estonian philatelist, August E. Pensa rendered outstanding services to Estonian philately on both sides of the Atlantic. He died on February 15, 1979, in Long Island, NY, USA. In 1996, the remains of August and Hilda Pensa were transferred to the cemetery of St. Paul's Church in Tartu. They had wished that their ashes be brought there if Estonia ever regained its freedom.

Fig. 1: Parochial certificate (certificate of baptism and confirmation, usually issued when moving to another parish for the local pastor) from St. Peter's Church in Tartu, issued in 1912

Fig. 2: August Eduard Pensa in the rank of captain with his mother Liidia (probably late 1920s)

Figs. 3 and 3a (next page): Registered letter from Lübeck-Vorwerk (DP camp in the Neue Artilleriekaserne = New Artillery Barracks), posted in Lübeck 1b on May 9, 1946. The letter is underfranked by 38 Reichspfennig, as this postage rate applied to local registered letters until February 28, 1946; from March 1, 1946, the rate for long-distance registered letters was 24+60 = 84 Rpf. The back of the letter shows the language designation 'Estonian' (which was mandatory for DPs), the British camp censorship sealing strip overprinted with the Augsburg arrival stamp dated May 12, 1946, and the registration number 210. It is not clear why the insufficient postage was not objected to.

Fig. 4: The Augsburg camp postmarks of February 5, 1948

Fig. 5: Exhibition stamps Altenstadt/Schongau, issued on June 5, 1946

Fig. 6: Allan (left) and August Pensa (right) in Augsburg in the late 1940s.

Fig. 7: Long-distance letter from Schongau-Altenstadt to Augsburg dated May 24, 1946, with promotional postmark for the first Baltic Philatelists' Day, postage 24 Reichspfennig

Fig. 8: At the following annual meeting of 'Baltia' in 1947, camp postmarks from other camps were also used for internal camp mail. Here a stamp produced in Detmold and issued with an overprint for a scout meeting in Augsburg on a camp post receipt from August Pensa to J(uozas) Liubinskas, who also lived in the Augsburg-Hochfeld DP camp, 'for E(duard) Krasauskas' (who lived in Munich).

Figs. 9 and 9a: Another document from the first annual meeting of the philatelic society 'Baltia'. Sender: The recipient of the letter in Fig. 7, the Lithuanian artist Eduard Krasauskas, who lived in Munich and was the designer or co-designer of the camp postmarks shown above in Fig. 5.

Fig. 10: The five-language BALTIA stamp catalogue with valuations in Swiss francs²⁷

²⁷ See also references on the Internet at URL: <https://arge-baltikum.de/Kat-40-de.shtml>

Fig. 11: Letter dated June 27, 1964, to August E. Pensa in Paterson. Content of the advertising logo: 'Estonian Sports Year in the USA 1964.'

Figs. 12 and 12a: Document commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Estonian national flag, 'Eesti Lipp', which was first flown on June 4, 1884, in Otepää in the colours blue (like the sky), black (like the farmers' boots) and white (like the snow). The sender and producer of the print was the Estonian Philatelic Society in New York. The recipient was Georg Kuik, an Estonian pharmacist working in Munich, who was also a founding member of the Estonian Working Group, one of the predecessor associations of the Baltic Working Group.

Fig. 13: The board of the Eesti Filatelistide Selts Ühingriigis (Estonian Philatelic Society in the USA). August Pensa, chairman = standing, second from right

Figs. 14 and 15: Logos of the magazine 'Eesti Filatelist' published in New York from 1955 onwards: No. 1/1955 with an advertisement for the second stamp exhibition in New York on October 9, 1955, the date of publication of No. 1. No. 2/1956 shows the outline of the Estonian state.

Fig. 16: This is how most readers probably know the magazine 'Eesti Filatelist': in the format in which it was published by EFÜR until 2009.

Fig. 17: The 1964 World's Fair in New York (source: Wikimedia)

Fig. 18: Letter from Bradford, England, from the Estonian Stamp Club in England²⁸ to August E. Pensa in East Meadow, September 3, 1969. Text of the secondary postmark: Estonian State / 50 / Estonian House Bradford / E.M.R.I.

Fig. 19: Christmas 1968 or 1969 in East Meadow. August E. Pensa (3rd from left) next to his wife Hilda (2nd from left), on the right his son Allan (2nd from right) with his wife Juta (3rd from right) and their two children Linda (right) and Eric (left). Image credit: Eric Pensa

Fig. 20: Commemorative document marking the 20th anniversary of the Estonian Society in New York, with an image of the Estonian House and a special postmark for the anniversary exhibition on October 11, 1970.

²⁸ E.M.R.I. = Eesti Margiring Inglismaal = Estonian Stamp Club ('Stamp Ring') in England. I would like to thank Reet Järvik from the Estonian House in Bradford, who remembered the meaning of this name, as she was a member there as a young girl in the 1960s/1970s.

Website of the Estonian House in Bradford: <https://www.facebook.com/EestiKodu/>