

Almost a trip around the world

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Almost a round-the-world journey to what is probably the rarest destination of all, from **RĪGA** to **GRAND TURKS ISLAND AMERICA**: The sender of this letter is a surveyor from Lloyd's Register in London, Rīga branch. This institution is renowned worldwide for the classification and certification of ships. He sent the letter in 1915, in the midst of the First World War, to Grand Turks Island, situated in the Caribbean.

As he is unable to take the shorter route to America across the Atlantic because of the war, he explicitly notes "Via Siberia" on the letter, stamps it with 10 kopecks and sends the letter on its long journey from Riga via Petrograd – where the letter receives the Russian censorship stamp – and Moscow, travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway right across the Russian Empire to Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan (Figure 1).

There, the letter is transferred to a ship and (probably) crosses the Pacific via Yokohama to California (Los Angeles or San Francisco). It is transferred again and the journey continues overland across the USA to Miami, Florida. There, it is transferred once more: this time onto a feeder vessel bound for the Turks Islands. The letter has reached its destination. The arrival postmark proves it: TURKS-ISLANDS / A / MY 2015 (Figure 2). By that time, the letter had been in transit for almost two months, from March 21^{Julian} / April 3^{Gregorian} to May 20, 1915.

But the journey is not yet over: the addressee, Professor "Mr. J. O. Grey, Professor", has meanwhile left the main island of the Grand Turks Islands, which bears the same name. The letter follows him to Detroit in Michigan, USA. Unfortunately, there is no arrival postmark from there. It is therefore impossible to determine how long this final leg of the journey back to the American mainland took in 1915.

A generation later, the envelope finally did find its way across the Atlantic. I acquired it in the 1990s at a large exchange event in Bruchsal. It may still have the final leg of its journey back to Rīga ahead of it. Then one could say it has gone "around the world".

Addendum by Thomas Löbbering: "If you have any further information, you're welcome to include it as you see fit," wrote Manfred when he emailed me the envelope and the text block last autumn. I'm happy to do just that.

As well as the postal markings on an envelope, I am always interested in the sender and the addressee(s). In doing so, many an empty envelope with rather limited information regarding postal history often takes on a whole new perspective and significance, as is the case here: The business details printed on the front in English – "E. Buchholz, Ship & Engineer Surveyor to Lloyds Register / Bremerstr. Nr. 9, Riga" – are personalised by the sender on the reverse in handwritten Russian using a modified spelling: "F. E. Buchholtz".

Фёдор Владимирович Бухгольц or *Fjodor Wladimirowitsch Buchholz*, born October 17, 1872 in Warsaw, died April 30, 1924 in Dorpat (Figure 3), was a German-Polish-Russian botanist⁵ From 1903 to 1918, he taught and conducted research, initially as a doctoral student and eventually as a professor of botany and zoology at the Polytechnic in Riga, before holding the same post at the University of Tartu/Dorpat from 1919 to 1924, where, as director, he expanded the local botanical garden. His research focused on the field of mycology, that is the science of fungi, with particular emphasis on how their effects could be harnessed for human medicine. He grew up and lived within a family circle of prominent German-Baltic physicians. Among other things, he was the nephew by marriage of one of the most eminent German (military) surgeons and university lecturers of the 19th century, Ernst von Bergmann (1836–1907).

This is where the addressee, 'Mr J. O. Grey ... Professor W. High ... Grand Turk Island', may also come into play. It seems highly doubtful whether there has ever been a 'West High Street' on the tiny main island of the same name in the Grand Turk Islands (Figure 4)⁶. However, there certainly was one in Detroit, Michigan. Accordingly, someone has re-addressed the envelope from Grand Turk Island to Detroit, Michigan, using American spelling and notation. The sender, F. E. Buchhol(t)z in Riga, has evidently confused Professor Grey's temporary residence on Grand Turk Island with his home address at his permanent place of residence in the USA.

What could Professor J. O. Grey have been doing on the Grand Turk Islands – apart from taking a holiday? And what was his relationship with the sender of the letter? Could it be that the letter was not actually about ship insurance at all, but about botanical matters? We do not know. Unfortunately, the archives of the University of Michigan and similar educational institutions in Detroit from around 1900 provide no further information about him.

However, Mr Google's AI (Artificial Intelligence, Ed.) does provide the following information regarding Professor Gray's probable home address:

„The address **69 W. High St., Detroit, Michigan, ca. 1915** refers to a location in a historical part of Detroit, likely in the Brush Park area. The street known as 'High St.' was later renamed, eventually becoming part of or running parallel to the service drives for the John C. Lodge Freeway". Well.

So there is still quite a bit to do to unravel all the mysteries surrounding this envelope that has "almost" travelled the world. Online research and artificial intelligence are helping with this.

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fedor_Bucholtz

⁶ The Turks and Caicos Islands, formerly a British colony, now a British Overseas Territory. An archipelago in the Caribbean; around 1915, it had a population of a few hundred; at that time, there was only a post office on the main island of the same name, Grand Turk

Image credits:

Images 1 and 2, Manfred Mrotzek collection

Images 3 and 4, Wikipedia

*Figure 1: Krag system machine stamp "РИГА * no reference number * 21 March 1915", Riga Main Post Office December 10, 1912 – March 20, 1919⁷*

Figure 2: Censorship mark 'ДЦ', ДОЭВОЛЕНО ЦЕНЗУРЬ – Approved by the censors; Petrograd, 1st Expedition⁸

Figure 3: Fedor Buchhol(t)z, c. 1910

Figure 4: Grand Turk and Salt Cay Islands (satellite image)

⁷ Cf. von Hofmann, Harry 2014: 1625–1915/18, *The Postal Service in the Territory of the Future Republic of Latvia, Particularly Shaped by Germans, Swedes, Poles and Russians*. Hamburg. p. 199.

⁸ Type 10 according to Speeckaert, Antoine 1990: *Russian Postal Censorship 1914–1918*. 2nd ed. St. Niklaas (Belgium). p. 149.