

SMS Emden: How a German Royal letter ended up in Malta during WWI

by
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Introduction

We have a letter at hand written by William Prince of Hohenzollern (*Wilhelm Fürst von Hohenzollern*), General of the Infantry during the war addressed to his youngest son Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern who was a Prisoner of War in Malta at the time of writing. It is dated 3rd February 1915 and sent from Sigmaringen in the German federal state of Württemberg which formed the seat of the House of Hohenzollern. It is addressed to the Prisoner of War Information Bureau at London where it received the single circle 'P.C. / POST FREE / PRISONERS OF WAR' cachet and in pencil it was indicated that he resided in Malta. We will next tell the story of Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern being second torpedo officer on the light cruiser *SMS Emden* and his stay in Malta. An important primary source of information used for this write up is a book published by him in 1925 titled 'Emden: Meine Erlebnisse auf S.M. Schiff 'Emden'.

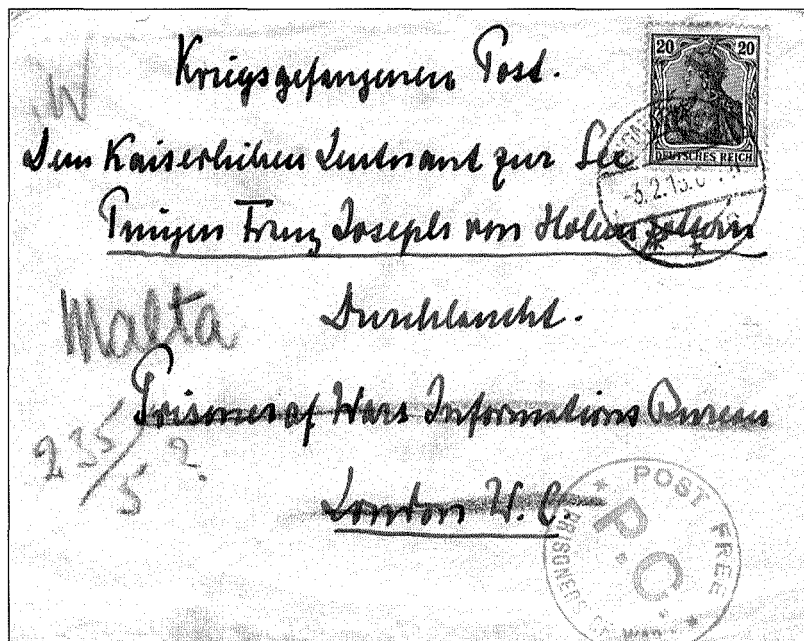


Fig. 1a. Front of a cover sent 3 February 1915 Sigmaringen addressed to Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern.

The Hohenzollern family and Sigmaringen

The House of Hohenzollern is a noble family and royal dynasty of electors, kings and emperors of Prussia, Germany and Romania. It originated in the area around the town of Hechingen in Swabia during the 11th century. They took their name from their ancestral home, the Burg Hohenzollern castle near Hechingen. The family uses the motto *nihil sine deo* (English: nothing without God). The family split into two branches, the Catholic Swabian branch and the Protestant Franconian branch, known also as the Kirschner line. The Franconian-Kirschner branch eventually after the unification of Germany and the creation of the German Empire in 1871 formed the German Royal Family. The Swabian branch which we follow here ruled Hohenzollern (Hohenzollernsche Lande in full) which was a de facto province of the Kingdom of Prussia. It was created in 1850 by joining the principalities of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen and Hohenzollern-Hechingen after both formerly independently ruling Catholic princely lines of the House of Hohenzollern had handed over their sovereignty to Prussia, ruled by the Protestant branch of the Hohenzollern. It used the same coat of arms as the main coat of arms of the ruling house.



Fig. 1b. Backside of a cover sent 3 February 1915 Sigmaringen by William Prince of Hohenzollern.

The sender of the letter was William Prince of Hohenzollern (* 7 March 1864, at Schloss Benrath near Düsseldorf – † 22 October 1927 at Sigmaringen) who was the eldest son of Leopold Prince of Hohenzollern and Infanta Antónia of the Royal Family of Portugal. Between 1880 and 1886, William was heir presumptive to the Romanian throne, which rights he renounced on 20 December 1886. On 27 June 1889, William married Princess Maria Teresa of Bourbon-Two Sicilies. William and Maria Teresa had three children: a daughter named Augusta Victoria of Hohenzollern (* 19 August 1890 – † 29 August 1966), and a twin born on 30 August 1891 (1) Frederick Victor Prince of Hohenzollern († 6 February 1965), and (2) Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern in 1933 († 3 April 1964). The latter son was the addressee of our letter.



Photo 1. Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern in naval uniform. Courtesy Anthony Camilleri.

The *SMS Emden* in the Far East and the Battle of the Cocos Islands

During World War I Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern served in Germany's Kaiserliche Marine (Imperial Navy) as the second torpedo officer on the light cruiser *SMS Emden*. The *SMS Emden* was launched at Danzig on 26 May 1908 and was commissioned into the Kaiserliche Marine on 10 July 1909. She was named after the German city of Emden, which sponsored the warship. On 1 April 1910, the *SMS Emden* officially entered the fleet and was assigned to the East Asian Station at Tsingtao in Germany's Chinese Kiautschou colony. In May 1913, *SMS Emden* received her last commanding officer, Korvettenkapitän Karl von Müller. The chivalry of Captain von Müller during his command would earn him the respect of both friends and foes.

SMS Emden left Tsingtao on 31 July

1914 and was at sea when news of the beginning of World War I was received on 2 August. Soon after it became an independent raider in the Indian Ocean capturing mainly British ships. Several warships from the British Australian and Far East squadrons, as well as a few French, Japanese and Russian cruisers, were dispatched to hunt down the *SMS Emden*. Finally the Australian light cruiser *HMAS Sydney* which was larger and faster than the *SMS Emden* engaged her at the Cocos Islands, and forced the *SMS Emden* to beach on North Keeling Island to avoid sinking on 9 November 1914. German losses were 131 dead and 65 wounded. Some 6 officers, 5 warrant officers, 39 petty officers, and 67 men remained unharmed. Captain von Müller and the rest of his crew were made Prisoners of War (PoW). The officers were, however, allowed to retain their swords as a mark of honour. Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern finely remarks that none of them had any swords along.

The captured German sailors were taken aboard the *HMAS Sydney* on 11 November and next proceeded to Colombo, Ceylon. On 15 November Colombo was reached, where all the wounded were landed and placed in hospital before being transferred to Australia, and all the other survivors of the *SMS Emden*'s crew were transferred to three Australian and New Zealand troop ships, to be taken to Malta. These vessels forming part of the first ANZAC convoy to Egypt were *HMAT A3 Orvieto*, *HMAT A5 Omrah* and the *HMNZT Ruapehu*, the latter was at that time transporting the Otago Battalion of the main body of the NZ Expeditionary Force. Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern together with other officers such as Captain von Müller, Lieutenant Fikentscher, medical doctor Luther, two deck officers and 30 sailors were boarded on the steamer *HMAT A3 Orvieto*. Some of the PoW's were offloaded at Suez, with the remainder transferring at Port Said on to *HMS Hampshire* for the trip to Malta. They finally arrived at Malta on 6 December 1914.

The *SMS Emden* crew and their internment in Malta

Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern describes in detail camp life. He was interned in Verdala Barracks in the old fortifications of the Three Cities. Verdala was meant for officers and was some 200 m long by 40 m wide, apart from one part at the west side which was some 70 m wide. Around this court the rooms were found. According to him there were also civilian internees housed here such as traders, and personnel of large firms and hotels in Egypt and Malta. In addition crews of German and Austrian steamers as well as nationals of German allies. Some 650 internees were kept over here. South of Verdala was the main camp confined, St. Clement's Camp holding some 850 internees who were mainly lodged in tents. Polverista was another camp with barracks where initially very few persons were interned and if so mainly women. Fort San Salvatore was where some 150 lower ranking members of the *SMS Emden* were interned. Initially there was no contact allowed between the respective camps, much later limited contact was permitted. A specific barrack of Cottenera hospital was dedicated for the internees where Red Cross staff took care of them.

According to Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern there were great delays noted in delivery of mails and money transfers. Also unfavourable exchange rates took place when the Swiss Delegation in London on behalf of the Red Cross during Christmas 1917 organised a transfer for him of 2000 Mark and he received £60 instead of £81. The censors also destroyed or withheld letters, without informing the sender. He mentions that just after arriving at Malta he sent a message home and had hoped for a speedy reply. However, he complains that he received his first letter only after three and a half months blaming the British censors who expected him to include secret messages. I have the suspicion that the cover illustrated here concerns this first letter he received. A similar bitter complaint by him concerned

a letter he sent to his sister the Queen of Portugal. He states what kind of sensitive news he could send from Malta, as he was not allowed to leave the Verdala Barracks during the first two years of his internment.

Social unrest at the end of World War I led to the German Revolution of 1918, and this political change would lead to the collapse of the German ability to continue fighting. With the formation of the Weimar Republic the Hohenzollerns were forced to abdicate, thus bringing an end to the modern German monarchy. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 set the final terms for the dismantling of the German Empire. Franz Josef Prince of Hohenzollern left Malta in the night of 12 November 1919, and travelled over Syracuse, Messina, Naples, Rome, Milan, Zurich, Konstanz, Sigmaringen where he arrived in the morning of 18 November. The *SMS Emden* had an extraordinary record capturing British ships, and as a result all those who served on her, including Franz Josef, were given the right to add the ship's name to the end of their surnames which he finally decided to do in 1933. The princely House of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen never relinquished their claims to the princely throne of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen or the royal throne of Romania. Because the last reigning king of the Romanians, Michael I, has no male issue, upon his death the claim will devolve to the head of the House of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen.

Source

1. Franz Josef, Prinz von Hohenzollern (1925). Emden: Meine Erlebnisse auf S.M Schiff 'Emden'. Verlag Richard Eckstein, Leipzig (reprinted as 'Emden: The Last Cruise of the Chivalrous Raider, 1914', Brighton: Lyon, 1989, ISBN 0904256456).

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