

Ancestors in the Internet

November 6, 2019

By Stefan Israel

You never know what you'll find where. When you're doing genealogy, you might look at the county courthouse, or a genealogy website, or a shoe box in the attic.



And you might just browse the general internet for your ancestors. You never know what you'll find. Or when.

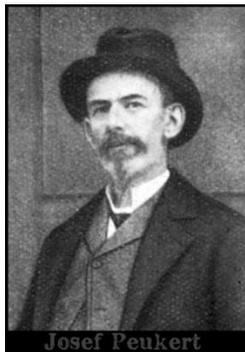
My mother had googled her grandfather time before, but a few years ago, when she tried it again, a new webpage came up.

I should give you context first- Alois Harschnek was the wild rebel of the family. He left his little village around 1890, hit big city Berlin, and by 1893 was in the United States, en route to German Africa. He never did get to Africa.



Berlin's where he picked up radical ideas. Among others, he became a firebrand atheist, and told his wife, if she ever- ever! took the kids to church, it was over! He even would stick his head into the local church (in Chicago by that point) to make sure no son of his was in there. But Grampa wasn't in the Catholic church. Sundays, on his way to the Turnverein (essentially a German-language YMCA), he would just happen to wind up in the downtown Orchestra Hall for Sunday services near the Turnverein. His dad did not think to look there.

Verbotene Früchte schmecken am besten. Forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest.



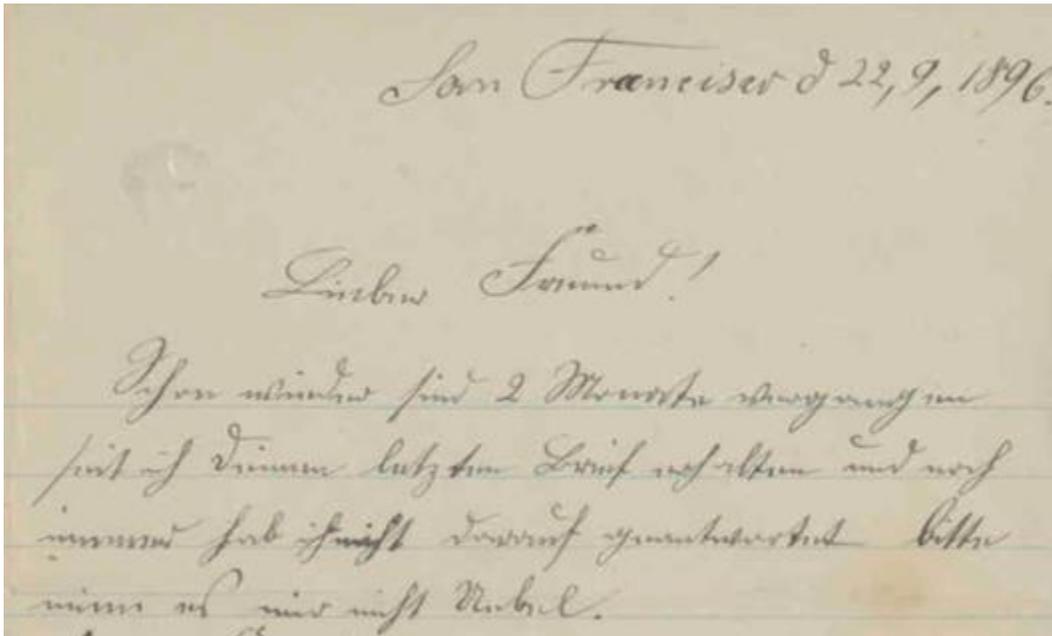
In any event, Grampa sensed that his father was very left-leaning, and he figured, not that Alois would ever talk about it, that his dad was a socialist or something,

Or something. My mother's google search brought up Alois Harschnek in the recently digitalized archives of Josef Peukert. But who was Josef Peukert?

It turns out that Peukert was one of the top Austro-Hungarian and American anarchist leaders. And Great-granddad was addressing him as a dear friend,

plunging straight into strategizing for the anarchist cause. Rounding up subscribers to the anarchist newspaper the Kämpfer ('the Fighter (for Justice)). Getting a rousing anarchist speaker 'to wake the sleeping American workers'. Organizing in San Francisco.

We hadn't even known he had lived in San Francisco for a time.



So... he was an anarchist organizer. I do not know how you organize anarchists.

He also left an elusive hint in that letter. He makes a passing reference to the Bestmann affair. Peukert was a leading proponent of Propaganda der Tat, of the Deed, in essence, bomb-throwing. And three months prior to the letter, their colleague Bestmann had left his apartment in Chicago for Texas for a time, leaving behind his trunk full of books as surety. When his landlady eventually opened the trunk, it turned out to be packed solid with dynamite, 'enough to level the city block.'

So was Alois a bomb thrower or not? His letter does not tell, nor did he ever directly speak of politics to his son. Maybe something new will come into the light some day, some other place.

Every family has something remarkable, somewhere in their tree. Always keep your mind open to unexpected sources about your family.

Newspaper articles from a hundred years ago, from the 1800's are increasingly finding their way online- mostly by expensive subscription, but many libraries let you use their computers and subscription for free.

General internet searches may turn up an ancestor listed in their third grade class in 1823, or in a Swedish military roster from 1712. Every few months, more is coming online.

Distant relatives may have an extensive family tree for their side of the family. Perhaps they have old family stories. A distant cousin, gave my father the family Bible from over 200 years ago, since we still bore the original family name, and the entries solved a major genealogy impasse. Some generosity you'll never fully repay.

So even if you have no older family records, no family tales, never lose sight of the chance that someone somewhere has what you have lost. And might share it with you.

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P.S. some of you may find it fun reading his letter, in translation:

\*Asterisks in the translation indicate footnotes.

**Red font** indicates words that were hard to read and may be misread.

### **LETTER FROM ALOIS HARSCHNEK TO JOSEF PEUKERT**

[envelop front]

Mr.

J. Peukert

579 Thomas Str. [Street]

Chicago Ill.

[postmarked] San Frans[isco] SEP23 9AM [18]96

[envelop back]

**S**.b. A. H. 39 Minna Str. [5 or S?]

San Francisco Cal. [A.H. = Alois Harschnek]

[PAGE 1]

San Francisco the 22, 9, 1896. \*1

Dear friend! \*2

It's been two months again since I received your last letter and I still haven't responded, please don't be cross with me.

I did receive Der Kämpfer, numbers [issues?] 4 -6 <\*3>, I am writing/wrote a few lines and ordered the same ones for comrades with the note that the money for everyone is following next week (if the others want to get the first number/issue, we [will] send it on; I had not yet rustled up subscribers at that time. We haven't heard anything more since then and have come to the conclusion that Reitzel's <\*4> prophecy sadly really has come true, which we really regret, since the history of freedom in recent times revolts me. <\*5>

We are still poor comrades in touch with one another and would like to found a group, since up to now there isn't one here [in San Francisco],

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other than what Gorri <\*6> has created among the Italians [Italians in San Fran? or the U.S.?]; they are (and I think they are completely right to be so) pretty reserved, you can't communicate with them much or not at all. They do though seem to be pretty strong. It is a disgrace that the Germans are such sleepyheads and are so far behind.

By the way, the field doesn't appear to be so bad [for agitprop]; you find a pretty radical element among the Germans, all that's missing is for someone to really let them have it and chew them out for once, someone who can give a proper speech, someone like that could erect a lasting monument, money for travel extra, needs to be risked at least once. We want to at least get just that underway and see if we can shake the sleepyheads awake. Maybe we could manage to get a well-known speaker, maybe Turner. <\*7>

What's the real scoop on the Bestmann Affaire? <\*8> which one readings about in the papers now.

As to your letter, I want to also pass along to you that Sessler <\*9> did arrive here Dec'br 93 by ship. If you know him well, it's not necessary to describe him more precisely.

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His sister, a Frau Schwarz in New York committed suicide on 2 February of this year, maybe you read something about that. She was very rich, and had, even before, always supported Gustel. He's said to have inherited from her, as he says, \$10,000. He then turned around and invested a hefty chunk of credit [hard to read two words] received a hundred dollars once and a couple of times 50 dollars sent to him, but that was always gone in one or two days.

I don't otherwise have anything else new to write beyond what you folks read in the newspapers in Chicago already.

I hope and wish that you are healthy and in good cheer, and I remain your friend who greets you warmly,

Alois Harschnek

39 Minna St. <\*10>

## NOTES

\*1 interestingly, Alois is in San Francisco when he wrote this, which we had not even known- was he on a long work assignment, or was he living in SF in 1896?

\*2 Alois uses the word *Freund*, which is a much stronger word than the American 'friend', and addresses him with du, not *Sie*, i.e. he was on a close first-name basis. Germans like these two do not extend the du to just anyone.

\*3 *Der Kämpfer* ('The Fighter') was a German-language anarchist newspaper based in St. Louis that is listed as only lasting four (weekly?) printings (before being shut down); it was the successor of the Chicago/St. Louis paper der Anarchist. Alois has numbers 4 -6 ... were there six issues? Did they call the first issue #4? They could have, to look more established, or maybe they considered the last issues of the *Anarchist* to be the first of the *Kämpfer*? And Alois wrote 'a few lines'- he may have contributed some very short item in one of the issues.

\*4 Robert Reitzel 1849-1898 German-American anarchist, came to the U.S. in 1870. He translated English classics into German, advocated for free speech, and tried to get the men sentenced to death for Haymarket Riot freed (including planning to bust them out).

\*5 *die Geschichte der Freiheit* is an ambiguous phrase. It is probably literal: 'the history of freedom', but history could just as easily mean 'story', and to cloud the issue more, *Freiheit* was also a German-language anarchist newspaper published in London by Peukert's rival Johann Most.

\*6 Gorri is presumably Pietro Gori, a leading Italian anarchist of the time, who would naturally be in contact with Italian-American anarchists; he got himself arrested in Italy for his protest of how the Haymarket Square Riot defendants were treated.

. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro\\_Gori](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro_Gori)).

The anarchists were persecuted, suppressed and infiltrated, leading them to be cautious about talking with outsiders. Peukert himself was not careful enough and may have talked to a police informant, leading to the arrest and execution of another anarchist.

\*7 Turner is likely John Turner who was a leading British anarchist, and publisher of the anarchist newspaper *Freedom*, and was traveling and lecturing in the U.S. in 1896, but was arrested just weeks after Alois wrote his letter. Turner did get out on bail, and resumed lecturing for a little while before the court ordered him deported.

. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Turner\\_\(anarchist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Turner_(anarchist)))

It is conceivable that Alois organized one of those last talks.

\*8 A huge anarchist bomb cache had just been found in Chicago, enough to level a city block- why Alois thought Peukert would put in writing whether Bestmann was guilty or not, we do not know. Here is a newspaper article:

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024350/1896-09-21/ed-1/?sp=4&st=text&r=0.101,0,1.202,1.305,0>

[Lingg was a Chicago anarchist and known bomb-maker; he was one of six sentenced to death as the bomb-maker for the deadly Haymarket Square Riot. Several got pardons, one embraced martyrdom; an anarchist smuggled a blasting cap in to Lingg's cell in a cigar, and Lingg used it to commit suicide by detonating it in his mouth. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis\\_Lingg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Lingg))

\*9 We have not been able to identify Sessler nor Frau Schwarz. We could assume that Gustel is a Gustav or August or Augustus, and perhaps Sessler's first name. The date is odd- Alois is writing in September 1896, so [18]93 would mean that Peukert was nearly three years out of date on Sessler. Perhaps Alois wants to know if Sessler is a trustworthy anarchist or if he should be circumspect with him.

\*10 Minna Street, San Francisco is in the South of Market neighborhood, which was a 'working class ghetto' according to Jack London in 1909.

**Source of the letter:** Catalogue of the [International Institute of Social History \(IISH\)](#) Josef Peukert Papers

<https://search.socialhistory.org/Record/ARCH01054/ArchiveContentList>

#27 Harschnek, Alois (San Francisco, Cal.). 1896. 1 letter

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