

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY'S BUG & STYR RIVER FLOTILLAS IN WORLD WAR I

This exhibit relates to the small naval flotillas employed along the Bug and Styr Rivers in Poland and Ukraine. Much less well known than the Danube and Vistula Flotillas which operated throughout the war, these two units were considerably smaller and were not created until the spring of 1916 after the fighting had moved further to the east. The Bug Flotilla was headquartered at Dorohusk and commanded by Colonel Bresch of the Austrian 4th Army (in whose territory the vessels operated). However, some of the markings depicted naval logos (anchors). The flotilla consisted of two old paddle steamers which were equipped with machine guns and five shallow-draft motorboats that were transferred from the Vistula Flotilla.

The Styr Flotilla was created to operate on this even smaller river further to the east, with headquarters at Rozyszcze. There is very little mention of this unit in the literature, and only two related cachets are known. As the Styr was located much closer to the front lines, when the Russians mounted their mid-1916 advance, the activities of this flotilla came to an end.



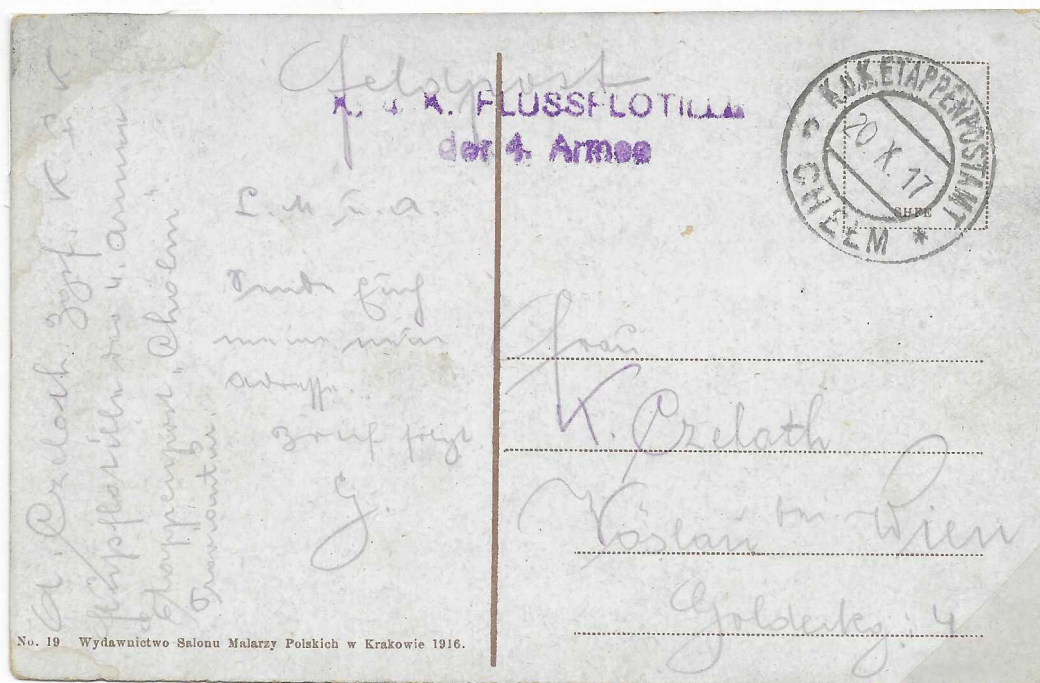
Military card mailed to Vienna in June 1916 through the Austro-Hungarian base fieldpost office at Cholm. Note circular cachet with inscription reading "Imperial & Royal Headquarters of the Bug Flotilla" with anchor in the center of the marking.

Personnel of the flotillas could send cards and letters to Austria-Hungary and Germany free of postage. In fact, the only stamp seen on flotilla mail is on a cover to The Netherlands, requiring postage to a foreign destination. In order to qualify for free franking, an official unit cachet had to be applied to covers. To satisfy this need, a substantial variety of such markings was produced, thus providing the primary basis for the story in this exhibit. The order in which the material is shown starts with the cachets used at the Bug River headquarters, followed by the shipyard and related shore-based facilities. The unit cachets of the Styr Flotilla are shown on the final two pages.

With diligence, mail from the Bug Flotilla can be acquired. However, it is collected by avid philatelists, particularly by specialists in Polish material. As a result, competition for items is keen. Finding material from the Styr Flotilla is even more challenging, and two of the three recorded examples are shown here.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
4th Army Cachet

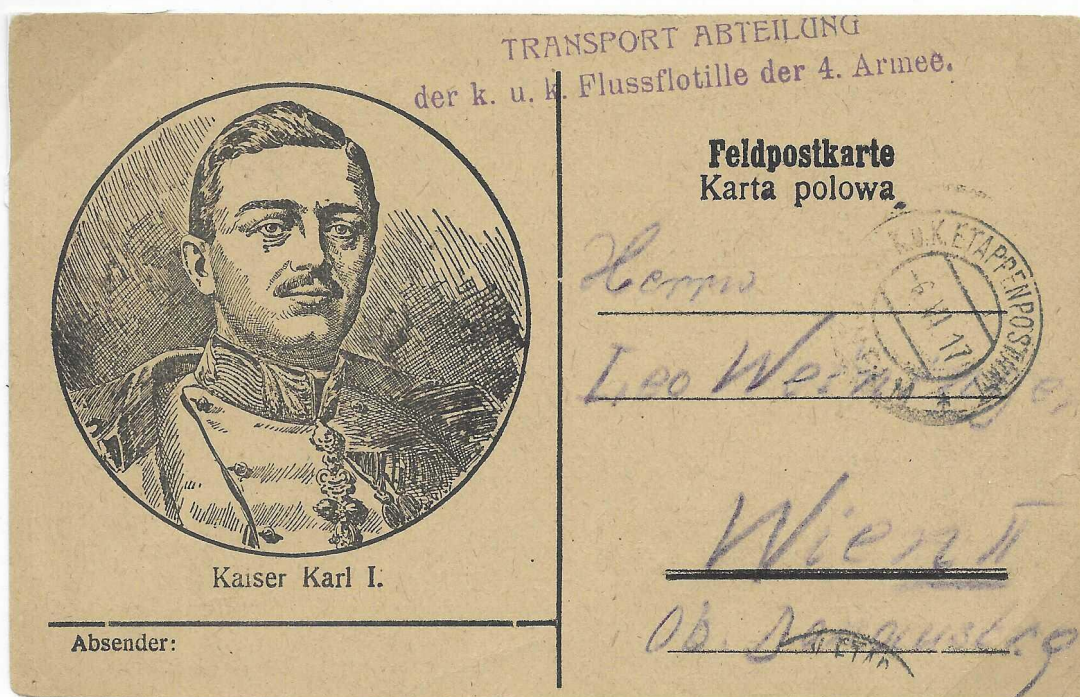
Chelm
20 October 1917



Because of a lack of transportation infrastructure, such as roads and railways, in their area of operations, the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army organized a small river flotilla to move supplies to its men in eastern Poland. Initially, this unit was known as the "River Flotilla of the 4. Armee." Mail endorsed with an appropriate unit cachet was entitled to free postage. This example was sent from the base fieldpost office at Chelm (in eastern Poland today near the Ukrainian border).

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
4th Army Cachet

Chelm
6 June 1917



This fieldpost card shows the cachet of the "Transport Detachment of the I. & R. River Flotilla of the 4th Army." It depicts the new Emperor Karl I (who assumed the throne on following the death of Franz Josef I on 21 November 1916) and was sent from the base fieldpost office in Chelm.

FPO 524
25 April 1918

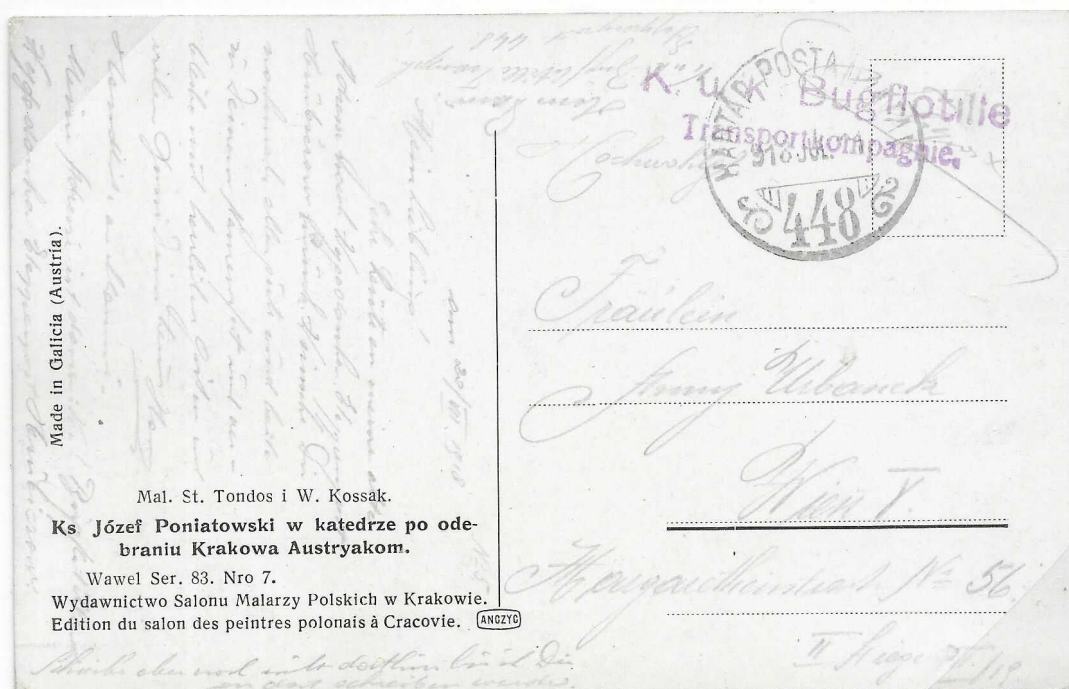
FPO 164
25 December 1917

These fieldpost cards have cachets of the Bug River Flotilla. In the lower example, the wording "Operational Platoon" is added below; it was mailed from Dorohusk, which was the headquarters of the flotilla.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA

Bugflotille Cachet

FPO 448
21 July 1918



Another variation of the "Bug Flotilla" cachet had "Transport Company" on a second line, as shown on this card sent to Vienna. Note that nearly all markings of the Dual Monarchy include "K.u.K." which are the German initials for "Imperial and Royal." This signifies that the Emperor of Austria was also the King of Hungary.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
Bugflotille Cachet

FPO 524
8 August 1918



This fieldpost card has a cachet with "Bug River Flotilla" in larger letters. In addition, it has a separate cachet of the "I. & R. Bridge Building Group of Captain Gayssle." Mailed from Hrubieszow to Vienna.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
Bugflotille Cachet

FPO 357
27 February 1918



This fieldpost card has the "Bug Flotilla" marking as well as a cachet reading "I. & R. Inland Navigation Group Nr. 1," which has not been previously reported in the literature.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
Bugflotille Cachet

FPO 524
7 June 1918



This fieldpost card has an unusual cachet reading "River Shipping Station," not previously reported in the literature. Return address indicates it was written by a telephone operator of the Bug Flotilla in Grodek, with the card being mailed from Hrubieszow.

Bugflotille Cachet Blacked Out by Censor

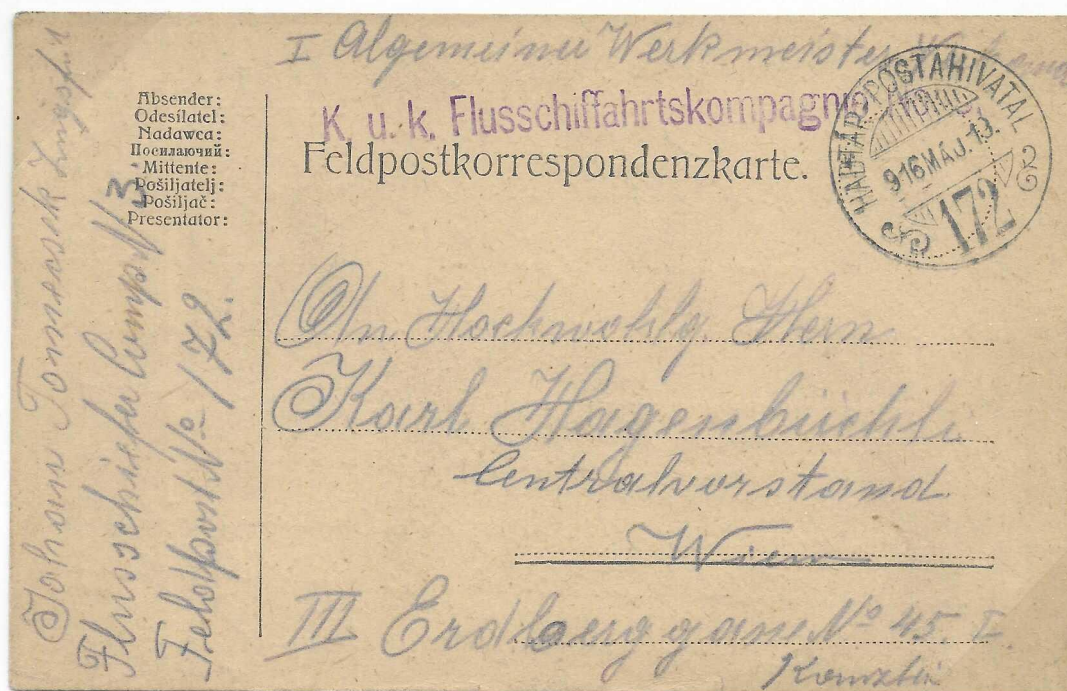
Chelm
22 February 1917



This example is distinguished in several ways. It is the only known cover (as opposed to fieldpost card) from the Flotilla; the only piece of mail addressed to a foreign country (receiving mark of The Hague dated 2 March 1917); the only item requiring a postage stamp and the only one for which the censor crossed out the unit shown in the return address as well as the unit cachet. It is identifiable as Flotilla mail because it was sent by Major Verspyck, who was one of the senior officers.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
River Transportation Company Cachet

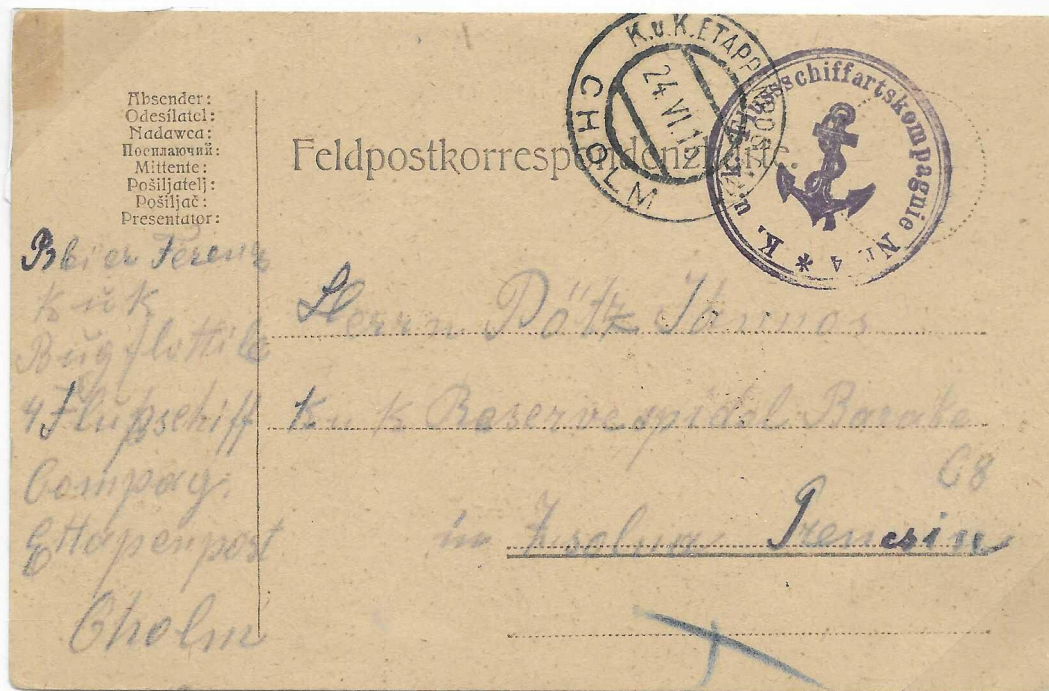
FPO 172
 19 May 1916



Because it was managed by the army, the River Flotilla was divided into various companies. Several of these had numbered cachets, such as the above example of "River Transportation Company No. 3." This card has manuscript endorsement "I Allgemeine Werkmeister Verband (First General Wharf Detachment)."

Chelm
26 December 1916

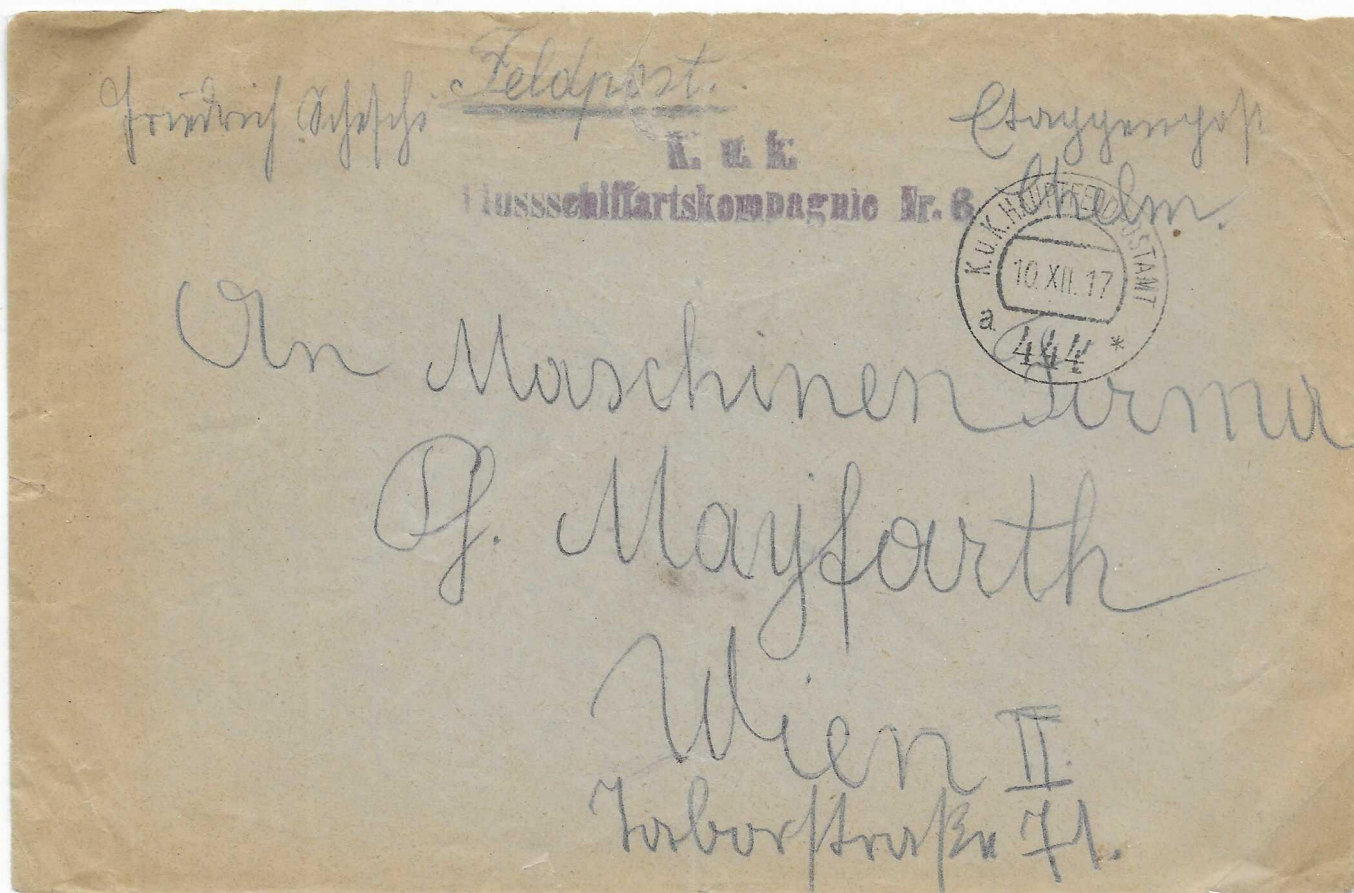
Cholm
24 June 1917



River Transportation Company No. 4 had both straight-line and circular unit cachets, the latter with an anchor in the center. Note that by 1917, the German spelling "Cholm" had replaced the Polish "Chelm" in the postmark.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
River Transportation Company Cachet

FPO 444
10 December 1917



This fieldpost cover with the cachet of River Transportation Company No. 6 was mailed to Vienna through FPO 444 at Chelm.

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
River Transportation Company Cachet

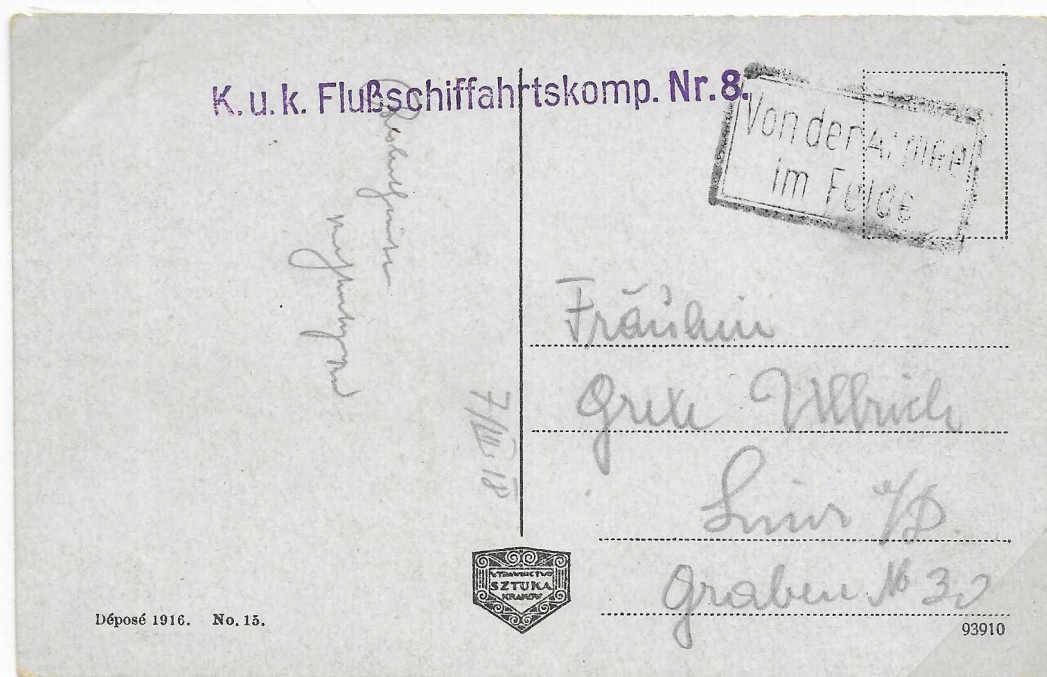
FPO 448
30 June 1918



Fieldpost card with the cachet of River Transportation Company No. 7 mailed to Vienna through FPO 448 at Chelm. Manuscript endorsement "Laborer's Platoon."

BUG RIVER FLOTILLA
River Transportation Company Cachet

7 March 1918

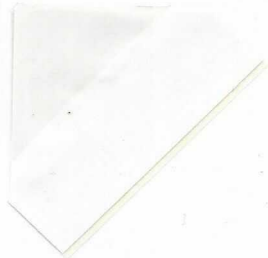


Fieldpost card with cachet of River Transportation Company No. 8 mailed to Linz without postmark. Boxed marking inscribed "From the Army in the Field."

STYR RIVER FLOTILLA
Operations Department Cachet

The Bug River is a tributary of the Vistula, which it joins near Warsaw, and it forms part of the present Polish-Ukrainian border. The Styr is a smaller river about 70 miles further east and entirely in Ukraine today. However, for a few months in 1916, a small flotilla was assembled to move supplies for the Austro-Hungarian army. There are no operating details in the literature, even the names or number of craft involved. There are, however, two unit cachets known -- shown on this and the following page.

Dabrowa
27 August 1916



This fieldpost card has the cachet of the "I. & R. Styr Flotilla Operations Department." This cachet is not recorded in the literature and the above is considered the discovery example. Interestingly, it was mailed after the unit left the Styr due to the Russian advance in the summer of 1916. At the time, the men were assigned to build a bridge at Nivka, near Dabrowa, which accounts for the place of mailing.

STYR RIVER FLOTILLA
Flotilla Shipyard Cachet

FPO 172
10 April 1916



The Styr River Flotilla established its base, which included a shipyard to maintain and repair its craft, at Rožyszcze. This facility must have been small, but it had its own unit cachet. Two examples recorded, of which this is the earliest and 21 May 1916 the latest.