

What connects a life-saving Bible, a crucifix in a bottle and a postcard from Hitler ?

Web portal Europeana has collected and shared these extraordinary personal stories of World War 1 from across Europe.

The Hague, 2 May 2012

Untold and extraordinary real-life stories from World War 1 have come to light and will be shared online as a result of family history roadshows run by the digital innovation project Europeana. They include a life-saving Bible, the first-hand testimony of a centenarian, and a postcard from a 27-year-old soldier named Adolf Hitler, which suggests that the future dictator had problems with his teeth and his spelling.

In preparation for the 100th anniversary of the conflict, WW1 roadshows have been held in Germany, England, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Denmark. People are invited to bring along WW1 memorabilia to be seen by experts and digitised. The Europeana 1914-1918 website also shows people how to upload their own digital scans. The idea for the roadshows came from the success of the University of Oxford's Great War Archive in 2008, funded by leading UK educational technology innovator, JISC.

Two thousand people of all ages from across Europe have attended the roadshows to share family stories. Roadshow participants have been joined by online contributors and 45,000 photos of objects, scanned letters and diaries have been uploaded onto the website to date. Most of these are previously unpublished and have never been seen or studied outside the families.

Jill Cousins, Executive Director of Europeana said: "The project's success highlights the huge interest that Europeans have in their shared history. People pass their stories down their families, and in Europeana have found the means to preserve them for future generations, and make them universally accessible. Europeana brings a new approach to cultural history, linking people's own stories to the official histories of the war that we're collecting from the national libraries and archives."

Markus Geiler contributed pictures of his grandfather's life-saving Bible, with the lump of shrapnel embedded in it from the grenade that killed his comrades while they slept. He said: "I am here to show how a family story can actually become part of the collective memory of Europe. I hope that there will be many, many such stories, and the European idea will develop even further when people deal together with the past and tell each other their stories."

In Preston, UK, John Stafford's first hand account of the Battle of the Somme was brought along by his daughter Joan. The typed manuscript documents Stafford's experiences and illustrates how he coped with post traumatic stress disorder, decades before the condition was recognised. Stafford lay horribly injured for two days until Allied troops found him and carried him across 'Death Valley' to medical help. Joan said: "I think the war must have haunted him a lot, especially when you read his account. My mother used to encourage him to write down his experiences and this seemed to have a calming influence."

The participation of Irishmen in WW1 was politically sensitive and as a result many of their stories have never been told. That was one reason why the Dublin roadshow was the best attended in Europe so far. More than 600 people turned up, some queuing for hours, to share their memorabilia and stories. They include a marvellous wartime love story, told by Joseph

Heapes' daughter-in-law, Máire, of how Joseph found the love of his life, Mary, while a prisoner of war in Germany.

Slovenian centenarian Slavko Zupan is one participant able to share his direct memories of the war. His enthusiasm for the project was such that he visited the roadshow in Nova Gorica, Slovenia, twice. To illustrate his childhood recollections Slavko brought along a bottle containing a richly decorated wooden crucifix. It was made by a Russian prisoner of war in Slovenia. Existing on meagre rations, prisoners crafted such objects to barter for food or cigarettes. The crucifix has been in Slavko's family since 1916.

The Munich roadshow revealed what at first sight appears to be just one of many postcards sent by soldiers in the field. The postcard, 'Greetings from Nuremberg', describes the sender's recent trip to the dentist and his desire to go back to the front line. That soldier was Adolf Hitler, writing to his comrade Karl Lanzhammer in December 1916.

Director of Oxford University Computing Services, Dr Stuart Lee, one of the digital experts attending the roadshow, recalls the moment when he was first handed Hitler's postcard: "I felt a shudder run through me. I found it hard to believe that at a local event to record ordinary people's stories, I was seeing a previously unknown document in Hitler's own hand. Europeana's project is remarkable in that it can bring in the most meaningful story in a person's whole existence - the Bible that saved a life, for example - as well as the mundane and misspelt jottings of the future dictator."

Oxford University has provided professional expertise to Europeana 1914-18, leading the training for the family roadshows, and providing expert support in digitising and cataloguing.

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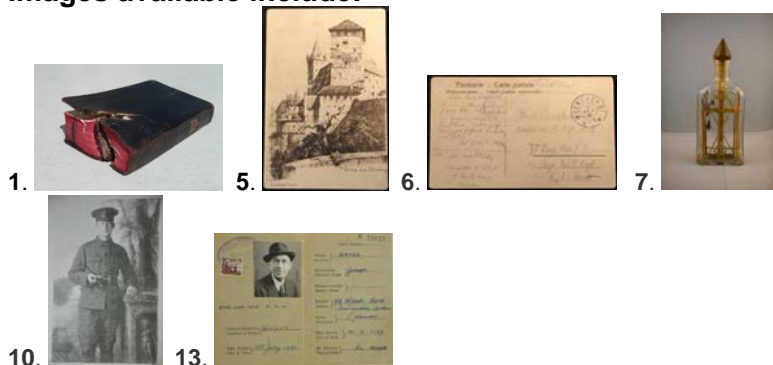
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See below for full stories of the items mentioned in the release and links to images

Click [here](#) to link to press images

Images available include:



1. Kurt Geiler's life-saving bible
2. Markus Geiler with his grandfather's bible
3. Kurt Geiler in uniform
4. Postcard from Adolf Hitler to Karl Lanzhammer, Dec 1916 (both sides)
5. Postcard from Adolf Hitler to Karl Lanzhammer, Dec 1916 (front view)
6. Postcard from Adolf Hitler to Karl Lanzhammer, Dec 1916 (back view)
7. Crucifix in a bottle, made by WW1 Russian prisoner of war
8. Centenarian Slavko Zupan with the cataloguers at the Nova Gorica roadshow, Slovenia

9. Centenarian Slavko Zupan talking with Matej Arčon, the mayor of Nova Gorica, at the Slovenian roadshow
10. John Stafford, 5th Liverpool Regiment
11. John Stafford, extract of personal account of the Battle of the Somme
12. John Stafford, full account of the Battle of the Somme (pdf)
13. Passport of Joseph Heapes, Royal Irish Rifles, in later life

Selected stories from Europeana 1914-1918

My father's Bible saved his life

Click [here](#) to see Kurt Geiler's Bible on Europeana

Devout Christian Kurt Geiler never went anywhere without his Bible – and that faith paid off in 1917 when the precious leather-bound book saved his life.

In the never-ending trench warfare in North-East France, the German infantryman was sleeping as usual with his Bible underneath his head. Without warning, a direct hit destroyed his dug-out almost completely, wounding and killing many of his comrades.

Geiler was not harmed and managed to get out of the rubble. It was only later when he retrieved his Bible he discovered to his astonishment that the holy book had saved him.

His son, Professor Gottfried Geiler, from Leipzig, said: "A 4cm large piece of shrapnel tore the Bible under his head. It broke through, but not completely, so my father was unharmed and still alive.

"It's true to say that the Bible, which has been kept ever since as a precious memento in the family, really was his salvation."

Geiler's grandson Markus Geiler said it had also been treated as a 'family anti-war memorial'.

"I can remember my father leading me to his bookcase, opening it and taking out the Bible which was wrapped in thick paper," he recalled. He said: 'Look, this is what saved your grandfather's life.' It was always something very special when this book was unpacked."

Witness to the War: testimony from Slavko Zupan, 100 years old

Click [here](#) to see Slavko Zupan's WW1 crucifix in a bottle and similar objects on Europeana

The centenarian Slavko Zupan contributed an unusual piece of memorabilia, a crucifixion scene in a bottle, created by a Russian prisoner of war in Slovenia.

Many Russian prisoners, brought from the Galician front, were used by the Austro-Hungarians to build roads, narrow-gauge railway lines, barracks, military storage and battlefield positions.

They lived in terrible conditions and many died because of infections, exhaustion, severe malnutrition and workplace accidents.

The prisoner who produced this bottle is thought to be one of the luckier ones who helped on farms and in homes in the Vipava Valley. These prisoners often created pieces of art, rings and bracelets of copper and iron which they could sell to Austro-Hungarian soldiers for a piece of bread or a cigarette.

Slavko Zupan said his relative, Rozina Pahor, a restaurant owner in Prvačina, bought it from a Russian prisoner of war in 1916. The prisoner had carried the bottle from Russia and later inserted wooden carvings of a skull, cross and other symbolic figures.

Zupan, who lived in Ljubljana during WW1, said he could remember watching trains full of prisoners of war being brought in from the Front. The bottle, which is very similar to a ship in a bottle, is kept in his family home today.

Bad teeth and poor spelling: a postcard from Adolf Hitler, 1916

Click [here](#) and [here](#) to view Adolf Hitler's postcard to Karl Lanzhammer on Europeana

Transcription:

Feldpost

Post mark: München 31, 19. Dez. 16, V 8-9 a

Letter mark: K.B. 2. Inf. Rgt., Ers. Btl., 4. Ers. Komp.

Recipient:

Karl Lanzhammer

Radfahrer b. Rgt. Stab

VI Bayr. Res. I. Division

16 Bayr. Res. I. Rgt.

Rgt. Stab

Text:

Lieber Lanzhammer

Bin nun in München beim

Ersatz Btl. Stehe zur Zeit

in zahnärztlicher Be-

handlung. Melde mich

übrigens soffort freiwillig

ins Feld.

Hrzl. Grüße A. Hitler

Translation:

Dear Lanzhammer,

I am now in Munich at the

Ersatz Btl. Currently I am under dental treatment.

By the way I will report voluntarily for the field immediately.

Kind regards A. Hitler

Sender:

Abs. Gefr. Adolf Hitler

I. Ersatz Btl. II. I. Rgt.

IV Ersatzkomp.

München

Front of card: Gruss aus Nürnberg / Greetings from Nuremberg

Provenance

The father of the owner of the postcard was for many years Landrat (District Administrator) of Dingolfing in Bavaria and an avid stamp collector. On his 65th Birthday, the head of the District Savings Bank presented him with this memorable philatelic collector's item. It is a field postcard written by Corporal Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) to his regimental comrade Karl Lanzhammer (1896-1918) on 19/12/1916 from Munich.

Karl Lanzhammer was a friend of Hitler's from their time together on the Western Front, and a known correspondent of his. At this time he was a cyclist at regimental headquarters of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment. In 1917 he went to flight school in Schleissheim, and died at a test flight accident on 15 March 1918 in Feldmoching. Lanzhammer was born in Dingolfing and was also buried there.

The postcard is likely to have come from his estate, among items given away by his parents. It came into the possession of the manager of the town's Savings Bank, who later gave it away as a birthday present to the Landrat.

Hitler was wounded by shrapnel in October 1916 and was in the hospital at Beelitz near Berlin. In December 1916, when he wrote this postcard, he had just been discharged from hospital and was then stationed with the reserve battalion in Munich. He tells Lanzhammer, that he is now with the reserve battalion, is undergoing dental treatment and would as soon as possible voluntarily report back to the field. In fact, he went back in March 1917 at the request of his 16th Reserve infantry regiment as a news runner. In the brief text, Hitler reveals some spelling difficulties by writing the German word for immediately, 'sofort' with double f – 'soffort'.

Authentication

The postcard was authenticated by signature expert Ian Sayer, who advises the UK's Imperial War Museum, and by Thomas Weber, a German-born expert on WW1 who teaches at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and is the author of *Hitler's First War*. Additional research was provided by Frank Drauschke, founder of the Berlin-based historical research company, Facts and Files.

Love found as a Prisoner of War

Click [here](#) to learn about Joseph Heape and other soldiers' stories on Europeana

Having been gassed, shot and held as a German Prisoner of War, the last thing Irish soldier Joseph Heapes expected to find was love.

Born in 1887, Heapes had already served in India and Burma with the Royal Irish Rifles between 1906 and 1913. But when war broke out in 1914, he was recalled by the army and sent to the continent where he was injured, captured and held at the Limburg Camp.

It was while he was there, sending letters to his sister Theresa - a housemaid in Killiney, Dublin - that Heapes' fortunes changed. Theresa encouraged her co-workers to write to the men in the POW camp to keep their spirits up - and one of the women to answer the call was Mary Fearon, a cook from Dundalk.

She wrote to Heapes and the couple quickly became pen pals. Many letters and photos followed until Heapes finally returned home to Ireland in 1919.

Heapes' daughter-in-law Máire Uí Éafa - who contributed official letters, a passport and medals to the Dublin roadshow - said Mary obviously liked what she saw because the couple were married in 1921 and went on to have one son and two daughters.

Soldier left for dead at the Somme documents horrors to save his sanity.

Click [here](#) to find out more of John Stafford's story on Europeana

A British soldier who was left for dead after being shot through both legs on the Somme had his life saved by Allied troops who took shelter in the same trench. John Stafford was just 20 yards from the Germans when he was wounded during the symbolic battle of 1916, which resulted in 420,000 British casualties, including nearly 60,000 on the first day alone.

His daughter, Joan, told the WW1 roadshow at Preston, that had it not been for Allied soldiers finding her father two days after he was shot, he would have died.

"Although at the time he was unconscious, they managed to get him back across 'Death Valley' as they called it, where he was actually seen by medics," she said. "He was covered with a sheet, having had a label tied to him on which a doctor had written 'maggots'.

"Thankfully medical staff were able to save his most badly injured leg. However, it did end up 3.5 inches shorter than his other one and he had to wear a surgical boot for the rest of his life.

"Although he couldn't return to the frontline after his injuries, he was employed by the Army in a civilian capacity at their records' office in Fullwood Barracks, Preston."

But the war took its toll on John, said Joan, who brought in her typed copy of her father's recollection of the conflict.

"Dad was a very nice man, a gentle man – a wonderful man," she said. "But looking back I think the war must have haunted him a lot, especially when you read his account. My mother used to encourage him to write down his experiences and this seemed to have a calming influence. I also remember him always asking us children to read him fairy tales."

During WW2, the Army needed Fullwood Barracks for soldiers, causing all civilian personnel to be moved to other record offices. For John this meant working in London through the Blitz, before being moved to Leicester and Edinburgh.

"During my early teens I saw very little of my father," recalled Joan. "But later he was awarded the MBE for his services – which made us all very proud."

Notes for Editors

Europeana <http://www.europeana.eu/portal/> is Europe's digital library, archive and museum. It gives people access to over 20 million books, paintings, films, recordings, photographs and archival records from over 2,000 partner organisations, through an interface in 29 languages.

Europeana has set up a project with Oxford University Computing Services called Europeana 1914-1918 to collect people's digitised photographs, letters, diaries, photographs, film, recordings and objects such as trench art and souvenirs. In the run up to 2014 and the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War One, members of the public brought objects and their stories along to roadshows to be professionally digitised and added to the online archive, along with their corresponding descriptions. All material collected by the project is channelled into Europeana.

The project website also shows people how to contribute their own digitised images and stories directly: www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/contributor

Many local libraries and museums do the work of organising and running the roadshows, and to date 15 have taken place in Germany, England, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Denmark. In the run-up to the WW1 centenary Europeana is working with partners in Belgium, Italy, France, Switzerland, Romania, Poland and Austria so that thousands more people will have the opportunity to share their stories.

These family stories complement the national narratives being digitised by national and state libraries for the centenary as part of [Europeana Collections 1914-1918](#).

Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS)

Oxford University began the WW1 family history initiative when it asked people across Britain to bring letters, photographs and keepsakes from the war to be digitised in 2006. This pilot project was funded by JISC, the UK educational technology innovator. Its success encouraged Europeana to approach OUCS to form a partnership to roll out the scheme across Europe.

OUCS provides training, equipment, digitisation and cataloguing expertise during the roadshow events across Europe.

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