

# **Boonin Family Collection of Immigration Letters**

**ARC MS 51**

**Finding aid prepared by Louise Strauss.**

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Last updated on August 08, 2017.

University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies

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## Table of Contents

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Summary Information.....	3
Biography/History.....	3
Administrative Information.....	6
Related Materials .....	6
Controlled Access Headings.....	6
Bibliography.....	7
Collection Inventory.....	8
Letters.....	8
Miscellaneous.....	11
Photographs.....	12
Books and Binders.....	13

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	University of Pennsylvania: Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies
<b>Title</b>	Boonin Family Collection of Immigration Letters
<b>Call number</b>	ARC MS 51
<b>Date [bulk]</b>	1907-1919
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1884-1991
<b>Extent</b>	4 linear feet (6 manuscript boxes, 1 large box and three large binders)
<b>Language</b>	English

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## Biography/History

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The Boonin Family Collection of Immigration Letters comprises a variety of materials related to the Boonin family and the correspondence between family members, mainly in Philadelphia and Russia, from 1884-1991. The material represents an archival history of how the Boonin/Bunin family left Russia, beginning in 1903, and eventually immigrated to the United States in 1911.

The material was donated to the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania by Harry D. Boonin, who collected the material. Mr. Boonin, a retired lawyer, was the founding president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia and its newsletter editor for four years. He has written three books: "The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia," "Keshet Israel Synagogue," on Lombard Street in Philadelphia, and "Never Tell A Boy Not To Fight," a collective biography of four local Jewish boxers from 1893-1928.

The majority of the collection consists of handwritten letters in English, Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian. Most of the letters were translated and typed in English by Edna Boonin and Harry D. Boonin and these are also part of the collection. The majority were written between 1910-1916, although the earliest is from

1884 and most were addressed to Mendell and Abraham or just Mendell.

Harry D. Boonin's grandparents, Matle and Noson Boonin, lived in Slutsk, Russia where they grew vegetables and raised animals. They had eight children: Mendell, Abraham, Laibel (Leon), Sarah, Schmeril (Sam), Lipe, Bailke (Jean), and Yankel (Jacob). The loans that their father, Noson, had to repay and the hard work involved in farming eventually killed him, in 1909. His wife died a year later, in 1910, leaving six children ages 5-21 in Slutsk and two other sons, Mendell, who had immigrated to Philadelphia in 1903 at age 17, and Abraham, who had immigrated in 1905 at age 15. At the time of their father's death, Mendell was a student at Ohio State University and Abraham (Abe) was a pharmacy student in Philadelphia. After his father's death, Mendell, the eldest, dropped out of college in order to earn money to send to his family in Russia. His brother also sent money.

Abraham met a man named Isadore J. Cooper, a seller of ship tickets, in Philadelphia. A lot of discussions were held in Philadelphia and in Slutsk about what to do with the six children, whether they should remain in Russia or immigrate to the United States and how they should travel the great distance. Laibel, the eldest of the children living in Slutsk, became eligible for the military draft in 1909 and when his name was called he was, instead, sent to a government hospital to be treated for an eye disease. This, along with the many others travails, was discussed in a number of the letters which crossed the Atlantic between Philadelphia and Slutsk among various family members. There were a number of visits to Kletz to attempt a cure of Laibel's trachoma and letters describe attempts to cure Bailke's leg problem (which may have been due to polio), and what the family should do if she, or any other child, was denied entrance into the United States, or other countries on their intermediary stops, and which route would be the easiest for the family.

While the family initially planned to leave from Libau, they needed a gubernskii passport, but at first they were denied as Mendell, the eldest, had not repaid a loan he had taken from the Russian government. Finally, the family received the tickets which were purchased by Abraham from Isadore Cooper in Philadelphia. When they received the tickets, they also learned that a 300 ruble fine had to be paid by Laibel before he would receive his exit passport. This fine was levied on the family of a person who evaded the Russian military draft -- Mendell had emigrated to evade the draft. This was a lot of money and there were many discussions about what to do since the family did not think this was fair. Luckily, the family could pay the fine as they had sold the family house for 1200 rubles and had also sold the animals. In addition, the children decided to send their ship tickets back to Abraham in April 1911 and have him secure tickets via Liverpool instead. While this took extra time, the family was able to obtain the new tickets. The story of the family up to this point was "told" via the letters exchanged between family members in the United States and Slutsk.

The next part of the story only became available twenty-nine years later when Laibel wrote his memoir. In this writing, Laibel related how the family left Slutsk in August 1911 and traveled to Hamburg with their Uncle Alter. Initially Laibel had thought to travel separately from his family (in an attempt to avoid paying the 300 ruble fine). But, after a cousin, Elias, ran away in an attempt to flee Russia--and was caught during a chase by his mother--Laibel persuaded his cousin to allow him to use Elias's passport to (illegally) cross the border into Germany. The six children and their uncle took a six hour bus ride and then a train to cross into Germany. Once there, the family was detained for 24 hours in quarantine, at the end of which Uncle Alter returned to Russia and it became Laibel's responsibility to get his siblings to Philadelphia. The family then traveled by train to Hamburg where they waited for four days before boarding a ferry to cross the English Channel to Grimsby, England.

Once in England they traveled to Liverpool where they again encountered delays and difficulties. First, they faced a longshoreman's strike. The American Line had housing for them in Liverpool where they needed to stay until the *S.S. Dominion* would sail for Philadelphia. The Boonins had trouble finding out when the ship would actually sail. The shipping line tried to convince them to sail to New York, in which case they could leave earlier, but the family feared ramifications if they changed plans. When they had their final medical exam before departure, three of the children were rejected for eye problems (despite

having passed exams in Germany and on arrival in England). Luckily, while waiting for the ship to arrive, Laibel had visited a Jewish grocer regularly to supplement the food which the American Line had been providing. The grocer referred Laibel to an eye doctor who gave the children an eye wash to cure their eye problems and gave them advice about how to get aboard ship despite the fact that some of their tickets had not been marked with the company doctor's stamp. He told them they would have to have another exam as they boarded the ship anyway. The doctor's advice worked and the Boonins boarded the ship on August 31, 1911.

Laibel's memoir, as told by Harry Boonin, continues with life aboard the *S.S. Dominion* and the crossing of the Atlantic. The most difficult part of the crossing was getting enough food of a nutritious sort. Passengers had to move quickly and eat fast to get what they wanted and this was difficult for the Boonin children. Aboard the ship, Sarah proved her resourcefulness. When her brother Leon unsuccessfully tried to buy fruit and baked goods from some of the vendors who tied up to the ship when it arrived at Cobh, Sarah took the money from her brother, dove into the crowd of passengers and vendors and returned with an apron full of fruits and cakes.

Life aboard the ship was fascinating and an education for the children. For Laibel, it was particularly so and he was entranced by the view of a star-lit sky on summer evenings on the Atlantic Ocean. Equally, he found it unbelievable to be unaccompanied by a chaperon on the deck, meeting boys and girls his own age. They met a fellow Russian, Abe Resnick, whom the children nicknamed "Soldat." He helped the Boonin family get food aboard the ship and looked after them. As they neared Philadelphia, Resnick grew quiet and concerned and finally admitted he did not have the required twenty-five dollars (equal to 50 rubles) which were part of the admission/immigration requirements for adults. Laibel loaned it to him, hoping, but not knowing for sure whether he'd ever get the money back.

The ship arrived in Philadelphia and the children waited for their turn with the immigration inspectors. Meanwhile, they saw, but could not communicate with, their brothers Mendell and Abraham and Uncle Goldberg through a glass partition. At the end of the day, with the children still aboard, the ship raised anchor and left the port for the night. The next day, they again entered the port and the children waited for their turn. The children had been coached on their answers to the examination questions. Five year-old Jack, though, changed his age (adding a year) making his siblings fear, for a few minutes, that he might be rejected and denied admission. However, the family did pass and they were admitted to the United States. They went, with their uncle, to his home in South Philadelphia. Laibel enthusiastically explored the house and was fascinated by the gas stove, the electric meters in the basement, and quickly learning about touching exposed copper wires, receiving a tremendous electric shock that knocked him unconscious. Several weeks later, Abe Resnick unexpectedly arrived at their house and returned the \$25.

By the time the Boonin children landed in Philadelphia, Abe had graduated from pharmacy school, saved his money, and bought a pharmacy on Snyder Avenue, below 8th Street. Abe intended to have his siblings live above the store and have the store provide a living for them. The home was to be run by 14 year-old Sarah and it would be her job to cook, sew, shop, care for the children and get them off to school, just as she had done in Slutsk. Laibel arrived in the United States at age 22, pleased that he could give his *younger* brother, Abe, the proceeds from the sale of the house in Slutsk and the cash left over from the trip.

The family letters continue telling the story of the Boonins first years in America and in Philadelphia. They make fascinating reading for anyone interested in the immigrant experience and the early years of assimilation and acculturation, as the children experience the joys of playgrounds, learning about baseball, American politics and strikes, attending school, and the hard work required in starting and maintaining a business, including a pharmacy and newspaper routes. Along the way, there are marriages and deaths in the Boonin family. It is hard to imagine a 22 year-old being given the immense responsibility of taking five siblings ages 5-14 and traveling across Russia, through Germany to Great Britain, across the Atlantic to Philadelphia, getting them through immigration inspections several times, seeing to their health and welfare throughout the journey, and seeing them safely into the hands of an

older brother and an uncle in the United States. How relieved Laibel must have been when he handed the family and money over to his brothers in America.

Several things may be somewhat confusing to the reader. First, the children's names changed during the period the letters were written. In Slutsk, the children were: Laibel, Sarah, Schmeril, Lipe, Bailke and Yankel. In America, they became Leon, Sam, Leo, Jean, and Jacob/Jack. Only Sarah and Abraham (Abe) kept the same names. Mendell, at some point, changed the spelling of his name, going from Mendel to Mendell, to distinguish himself from a cousin with the same name.

Despite the fact that most of the letters were addressed to Mendell or Mendell and Leon, the letters give a fairly complete idea of what occurred in the family from 1909-1915. The absence of letters from Mendell to Abe, in particular, does leave a gap and makes one wonder what Mendell thought, and to some extent, how he fared in America. Many letters from his brother, Abe, leave one believing that he may have changed jobs frequently, especially from 1910-1912, when he had to leave engineering school to help support his mother and siblings in Slutsk and then help finance his siblings journey to Philadelphia.

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## Administrative Information

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University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies  
Finding aid prepared by Louise Strauss.

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## Related Materials

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### Related Archival Materials note

Other Boonin Collections can be found at:

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Mr. Boonin co-authored *The Davidows: the experiences of an immigrant family* with David J. Goldberg, 1995)

Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Boonin family Papers about Mendel Boonin who immigrated in 1911)

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## Controlled Access Headings

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FORM/GENRE(S)

- Letters (correspondence)
- Photographs

## GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- Philadelphia (Pa.)--History--Sources.

## SUBJECT(S)

- Emigration and immigration--Soviet Union

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## Bibliography

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1. "Coming to America Through Hamburg and Liverpool" by Harry D. Boonin. *Avotaynu* Volume XXII, Number 4 Winter 2006, pp. 15-22.
2. "Coming to America through Hamburg and Liverpool Part II: Crossing the Atlantic" by Harry D. Boonin. *Avotaynu Online* April 1, 2008.
3. "Coming to America Through Hamburg and Liverpool: Part III: Arrival and Inspection Reaching the Promised Land," by Harry D. Boonin. *Avotaynu*, Volume XXIX, Number 4, Winter 2013, pp. 5-8.

## Collection Inventory

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### LETTERS.

#### Scope and Contents note

This series is comprised of letters of several different varieties. The largest group is letters between members of the Boonin family. There are also letters to Mendell and Abraham from friends that they made once they had settled in the United States--either from school or work. Also included are official documents and letters from government departments (e.g. re: military service) and potential employers. The family letters, between Abraham and Mendell and their parents and siblings in Slutsk, Russia, are dated 1909-June 1912. After June 1912, family letters are mainly between siblings in the United States, although there is some correspondence with family in Russia and the Soviet Union. Other letters in the collection are related to Mendell's employment.

	Box	Folder
Postal Card (1884) and letter (1910).	1	1
1907.	1	2
1908: typed.	1	3
1908: untyped.	1	4
1908: letters enclosed with October 5, 1908 letter.	1	5
1908: letters enclosed with December 6, 1908 letter.	1	6
1909: typed (Part I), 1909 January-July.	1	7
1909: typed (Part II), 1909 August-December.	1	8
1909: untyped.	1	9



1910: typed (Part I), 1910 January-May.	1	10
1910: typed (Part II), 1910 June-September.	1	11
1910: typed (Part III), 1910 October-December.	1	12
1910: untyped.	1	13
1911: typed (Part I), 1911 January-March.	2	1
1911: typed (Part II), 1911 April-December.	2	2
1911: April 18.	2	3
1911: untyped.	2	4
1912: typed.	2	5
1912: untyped.	2	6
1913: typed.	2	7
1913: untyped.	2	8
1914: typed (Part I), 1914 January-July.	3	1
1914: typed (Part II), 1914 August-December.	3	2
1914: untyped.	3	3
1915: typed (Part I), 1915 January-June.	3	4
1915: typed (Part II), 1915 July-December.	3	5
1915: untyped.	3	6
1916: typed (Part I), 1916 January-June.	3	7

1916: typed (Part II), 1916 July-December.	4	1
1916: untyped.	4	2
1917-1940: typed.	4	3
1917: untyped.	4	4
1918.	4	5
1918: Miscellaneous correspondence.	4	6
1919.	4	7
1922.	4	8
1930.	4	9
1967.	4	10
1968.	4	11
1969.	4	12
1970.	4	13
1978.	4	14
1980.	4	15
1981.	4	16
1982.	4	17
1983.	4	18
1984.	4	19

1985.	4	20
1986.	4	21
1988.	4	22
1989.	4	23
1991: ** RESTRICTED ACCESS**.	4	24

**MISCELLANEOUS.**

**Scope and Contents note**

The series of miscellaneous materials, which comprises perhaps 1/10 of the collection, includes a variety of materials including copies of a family tree and ancestry charts, immigration papers and a passenger list from the *S.S. Noordland*, Hyman Cantor's memoir, English papers written by Michael Mendell Boonin (sometimes spelled "Boonien") and other papers. Also included are photocopies of material Harry Boonin used in his research.

	Box	Folder
Family tree of the Bunin-Boonin Family, 2000 June 10.	5	1
"Slutsk: Pinkas of the Cheverah Kadisha" and other items of interest by the Historical Society of Slutsk, 1999.	5	2
Facsimile of the Passenger List of the <i>S. S. Noordland</i> , 1905.	5	3
M. M. Boonien's English Papers.	5	4
Letters with illegible dates.	5	5
1908-1982.	5	6

Undated.	5	7
Undated and/or untranslated or untyped.	5	8
Miscellaneous research, 1993.	5	9
Bunin/Boonin family tree, 2000 June 10.	5	10
"Hyman Cantor: His Thoughts" and other writings.	5	11
Return (visit) to Slutsk.	5	12

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## **PHOTOGRAPHS.**

### **Scope and Contents note**

The photograph series includes black and white and sepia photographs as well as some negatives. One photograph, dated 1941, includes the eight Boonin children who immigrated to the United States in 1903-1911.

	Box	Folder
Miriam & Noson Boonin.	6	1
The Boonins, 1941.	6	2
Miscellaneous.	6	3
Miscellaneous.	6	4
Miscellaneous (1916).	6	5
Miscellaneous (1916).	6	6

Miscellaneous.	6	7
Miscellaneous.	6	8
Miscellaneous.	6	9
Miscellaneous.	6	10
Miscellaneous.	6	11
Miscellaneous.	6	12
Miscellaneous.	6	13
Miscellaneous.	6	14
Miscellaneous, 1919.	6	15
Miscellaneous.	6	16
Miscellaneous.	6	17
Miscellaneous (1917).	6	18
Miscellaneous (1917).	6	19
Miscellaneous.	6	20
Miscellaneous.	6	21
Miscellaneous.	6	22

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**BOOKS AND BINDERS.**

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## Scope and Contents note

This series is composed of seven books and seven large binders. One binder contains translated, typed copies of the handwritten letters (found in Boxes 1-4) between members of the Boonin family and with friends. A great number of these were transcribed from Yiddish and were sent to Mendell or Mendell and Abraham by family members. Four binders contain correspondence, dated 1977-1982, 1983-1987, 1988-1991, and 1992-1996, between Harry D. Boonin and his sources, including family members, as he worked to uncover his family history. Boonin consulted resources around the United States and abroad, including organizations and governmental agencies in Canada, Germany, Russia, and Israel. A sixth binder contains a collection of twenty-five stories, including "Our Trip and the Experiences in Coming to America" by Laibel Boonin, with an introduction by Jean Boonin. Also included are comments by Leo and Sarah Boonin, written in 1945. The stories, which were originally told to the Boonin children by their parents, are full of humor and give a picture of what rural farm life might have been like in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The seventh binder contains research material, encyclopedia articles, and other reference materials which Harry Boonin used as he researched the people, places, and time in which his family lived.

## BOOKS.

Schneerson, Rabbi J. I. Lubavitcher Rabbi's Memoirs Volume One, English rendition by Dr. N. Mindel (New York: Kehot Publication Society, 1956) Eighth Printing, 1980 by Otzar Hachassidum.

Schneerson, Rabbi J. I. Lubavitcher Rabbi's Memoirs, Volume Two, English rendition by Dr. N. Mindel (New York: Kehot Publication Society, 1960) Fourth Edition, 1974 by Otzar Hachassidum.

Berkowitz, Yitzhak Dov Kinder yorn (Childhood). (Tel Aviv: Beth Shalom-Aleichem I. L. Peretz Publishing House, 1970).

Berkowitz, Yitzhak Dov Pirke yaldut. bayit aba (Hebrew). (Tel Aviv: Am Oved. 1965).

Gritskevich, A.P. Drevnii gorod na Sluchi. Minsk: "Polymia", 1985.

Lisitzky, Ephraim R. In the Grip of Cross-currents. (New York: Block Publishing Company, 1959). Translated from the Hebrew by Moshe Kohn and Jacob Sloan and revised by the author.

Mal'tsev, A.N. Rossiia i Belosrussiia v seredine XVII veka. Moskva: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1974.

**BINDERS.**

The Boonin Family Letters from 1908 to 1917.

Family Stories.

Research material.

Genealogy Correspondence from 1977 to 1982.

Genealogy Correspondence 1983 to 1987.

Genealogy Correspondence 1988 to 1991.

Genealogy Correspondence 1992 to 1996.