

A Cigarette Box with a Personal Touch

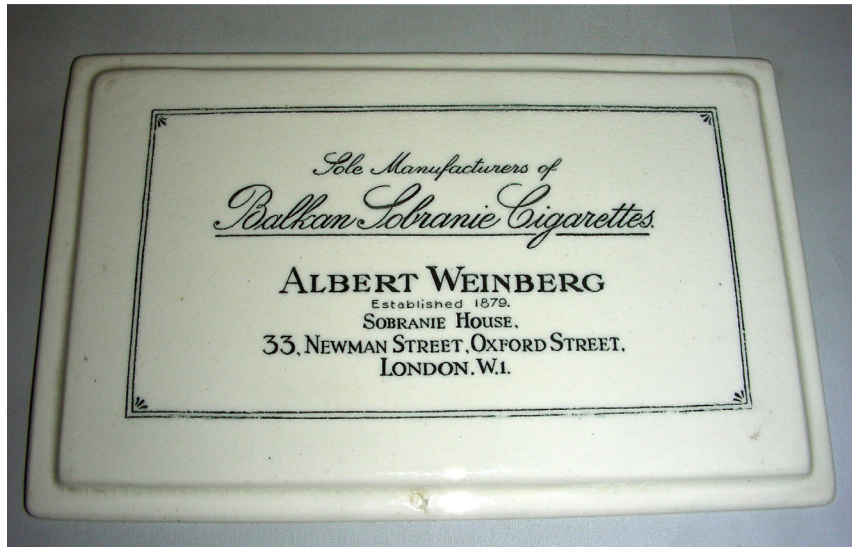
By David Hoexter and Michael Weinberg

When your surname is Brown or Johnson or Roberts, finding it printed on a piece of 19th century English transferware may not come as much of a surprise. But, that is, quite honestly, one of the last places we expected to find someone named “Weinberg.” It would be like finding a 19th century child’s mug with the name “Tiffany” or “LaBron” printed on it. Imagine our surprise when a friend

offered a transfer printed pottery cigarette box from Balkan Sobranie Cigarettes and printed under the lid was the following: Sole Manufacturers of Balkan Sobranie Cigarettes, Albert Weinberg, established 1879, 33 Newman Street, Oxford Street, London, W.1.” What had my father and my grandfather not told me! (And no, I haven’t been able to find ANY connection between Albert Weinberg and my family.)

The Spanish first brought tobacco to Europe from the Americas in the first quarter of the 16th century. Exactly who introduced it to England in the second half of the 16th century is unclear: some say it was Sir Walter Raleigh and others give the honor to Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake and their sailors. At the time, tobacco was called the “sacred herb” because it was thought to be the cure for more than 30 health problems.

It wasn’t until the early 1600s and the settlement of Jamestown that tobacco from the Americas (mostly Virginia) started flowing steadily into England. John Rolfe, husband of Pocahontas, made his fortune exporting the “brown gold” to the UK, and it



Transfer printed label on the underside of the lid of the Balkan Sobranie Cigarette Box. The unexpected name proves that transferware still offers many pleasant surprises.

was the cash crop of early Virginia.

Despite some objections, including a rather harshly worded polemic by King James I in 1604, tobacco use spread and much of that used in Europe at the time came from the Ottoman Empire. Balkan tobacco was milder than Virginia tobacco, making inhaling easier and more pleasant. British troops returning from the Crimean War (1853-1856) brought cigarette use in the UK to a wider scale. And, of course, once entrenched, entrepreneurs found a way to satisfy the demand, especially with the development, in the 1880s, of a cigarette-making machine.

Little biographical information is available about Albert Weinberg. The most extensive piece, by “Olga” (on the website GoArticles.com), reads like it was translated directly from the Russian or the Bulgarian by someone’s laptop (“In 1905, Albert, who went up the hill, took his 16-year old nephew Isaiah Redstouna ...”). The son of an Odessa merchant, Albert left Russia in 1879 and settled in London, where he started manufacturing cigarettes, apparently under the name “Sobranie of London”. Albert believed

that tobacco products would yield large profits, but ran into resistance to the sale of English-manufactured cigarettes (“Olga” is less precise than usual here, and it is not clear what the cause of this ‘resistance’ was; it may have been the result of moral prejudices or maybe snob-appeal, people wanting only the finest imported cigarettes.) To circumvent this resistance, Albert hit on a scheme to make the cigarettes in London, ship them to Holland and then import them back to the UK.

The Balkan Sobranie Cigarettes gained popularity beginning in 1890, and Albert was able to expand his operations out of London to other British cities. Packaging became elaborate – and part of the marketing plan – and Balkan Sobranie Cigarettes were available in everything from simple tins to elaborate ceramic boxes holding 100 cigarettes, similar to the one pictured here. Albert Weinberg died sometime during WWI, but the Balkan Sobranie brand survived until the 1980s.

The box pictured here measures 5 7/8” x 3 3/4” x 2 1/4”; a slightly larger version was also produced. The black transfer on the lid shows two Turkish women, smoking and watching three wagons each loaded with 50,000 Sobranie cigarettes (marked on the backs of the wagons) head for market. Text on the lid claims that the cigarettes are “Made of the Finest Yenidje Tobacco”. Yenidje is located in Thrace (modern Genisea) Greece, a leading producer of high-quality tobacco. The front and back panels of the box show a Balkan scene with a man and a woman, and the sides of the box have “100” superimposed

over the stalk of a tobacco plant. This basic design remained in use for about 100 years, although it appears that most boxes were printed without Albert Weinberg's name.

One has to assume that Weinberg chose to market the package of 100 cigarettes in the transfer printed ceramic box as the 'top of the line'. In fact, "Sobranie" is a Slavic word for an official meeting place of important people, which according to the website www.jti.com, reflects "Weinberg's intention to create a luxury brand in the emerging tobacco market of the late 1800s". If the box lids do not have a transfer printed label, they have a paper label attached to the interior. The three labels we've seen differ somewhat in appearance but each is from "Robert Lewis, Cigar, Cigarette & Tobacco Merchant, St James's Street, London, S.W.1". One label places Lewis at 19, the other two at 20, St. James Street. Robert Lewis (now J. J. Fox) was founded in 1787. According to our Internet source "Olga", Lewis was Albert Weinberg's first customer. It is likely that the owner of the lid/box would return it to a retailer, such as Robert Lewis, for a refill. This practice would somewhat ameliorate the presumably elevated cost of the box and lid.

There are no potter's marks on our Weinberg example, but one of the six other examples we have seen bears the mark "Manufactured by / S. Fielding & Co. Ltd. / Stoke-On-Trent / England". The mark appears on the base of the box. Fielding operated from 1880 -1917. We don't know the precise period of time that this particular box was made, but the primary source of information on transfer-printed advertising containers (Ronald Dale, *Price Guide to Black and White Pot-Lids*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collector's Club, Inc. 1977. Paperback 1987) dates this pattern 1900 - 1910.

The Sobranie Cigarette box is a wonderful example of transfer printed advertising, and as such is included in the TCC Database with separate entries for the base and the lid. The Database also includes examples of another cigarette box base and lid, with the name Navrati Extra.



3 views of the transfer printed Balkan Sobranie Cigarette Box.