

User guide to the database of the nominal file cards of the foreigners' files (1830-1890)

Author: Sarah Heynssens

Introduction

Migration leaves traces, not in the least in the archives we conserve. Although Belgium was a country of emigration rather than immigration in the 19th century, many hundreds of thousands of foreigners established residence in the country both temporarily and permanently. Already in 1832, the Belgian state put the Foreigners Police of the Public Security Office (*Sûreté Publique*), an independent directorate under the supervision of the Minister of Justice, in charge of monitoring and controlling these foreign newcomers to the territory. To ensure public order, the Foreigners Police was instructed to identify and track all unwanted foreigners and to expel them from the country. For this purpose it had to rely on the support of both local authorities (municipal administrations and local police services) and judicial and military authorities. The intelligence about foreigners was gathered in a huge administrative endeavour that included tens of thousands of individual files on foreigners. Each file was given an individual Public Safety Number, by means of which each foreigner could be identified for administrative purposes.

The National Archives in Brussels conserve some 154,000 original nominal file cards that were used by the *Sûreté* to provide access to the individual files on foreigners that were opened between 1830 and 1890. This number might seem impressive, but it actually accounts only for a third of the total number of files on foreigners opened in this period (see below). The files that were handed over to the National Archives in 1948 take up some 286 metres of shelves and are ordered chronologically according to opening date. As the alphabetically sorted file cards contain basic individual details such as name, geographical origin, occupation and file number, they provide an essential key to enable further research in these files.

The archives of the Foreigners Police are surely a unique and crucial source for both genealogical research and studies about the migration history and the integration of migrants in Belgium. In October 2015, the State Archives started the project IMMIBEL (www.immibel.arch.be) under supervision of Dr Bart Willems and Filip Strubbe. The acronym IMMIBEL stands for 'immigration to Belgium'. The project is funded by the Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO) within the framework of the research programme BRAIN-be. The goal of the project was to provide a digitally accessible index to the file cards so that the files on foreigners can be searched and accessed more easily. For this purpose, project collaborator Sarah Heynssens developed a special database and supervised the data feeding for two years. The manual below shows you how to use the resultant database.

How to search the database?

For each foreigner a personal file was opened. These files were made accessible by means of a historical nominal file card system. The database is a digital version of the data contained in these file cards. The file cards provide a summary of the information that each file holds about a foreigner. In

order to find all available information about a particular foreigner, you are therefore advised to consult the individual file about the foreigner in the reading room of the State Archives in Brussels, which can be retrieved via the file number.

You can easily search the files cards on foreigners with our search engine 'Search persons' ('Zoeken naar personen'). Unfortunately, there is no English version of this search engine.



Het Rijksarchief in België
Zoeken naar personen

Vul onze enquête in»

Thuispagina Archieven Archiefvormers **Personen** Bibliotheek Thema's

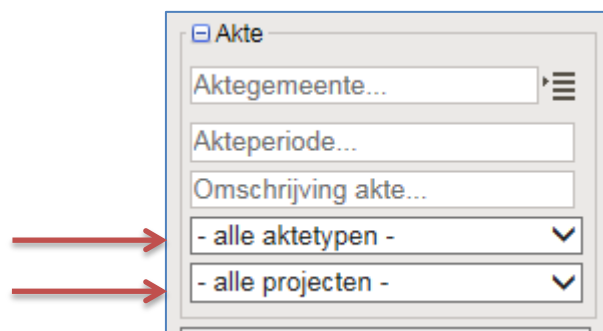
Zoekresultaat Projecten Historiek FAQ

Zoeken naar personen

In de zoekrobot 'zoeken naar personen' vindt u het werk van vele vrijwilligers gedurende de voorbije jaren en decennia. Duizenden bladzijden archiefdocumenten werden op een systematische wijze geanalyseerd. Er werd een korte beschrijving gemaakt van het document (inhoud, datering, geografische omschrijving) en vervolgens werden de namen genoteerd van alle personen die in het document vermeld zijn. Voor zover beschikbaar werden ook andere gegevens van deze personen genoteerd: geboortedatum, geboorteplaats, ...

HANDLEIDING

You can narrow down your search to only include the files on foreigners by choosing 'IMMIBEL' in the sub-menu 'all projects' ('alle projecten') or by choosing the files on foreigners ('Vreemdelingendossiers') in the sub-menu 'all types of records' ('alle aktetypen').



Akte

Aktegemeente...

Akteperiode...

Omschrijving akte...

- alle aktetypen -

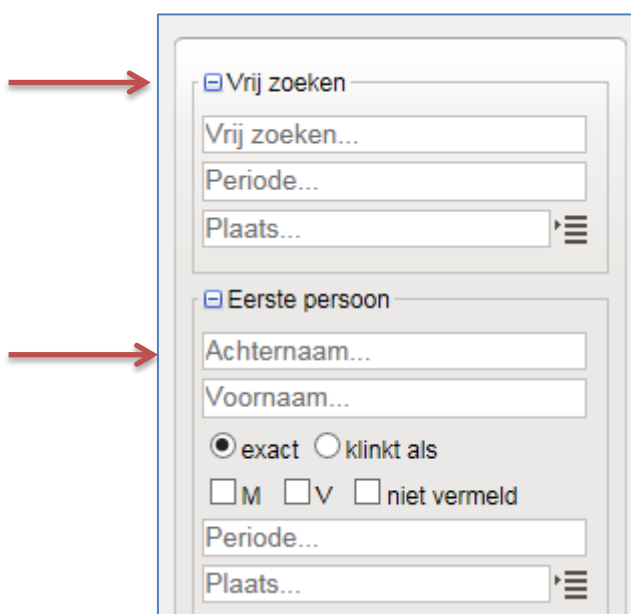
- alle projecten -

You can then enter a search term in the field 'free search' ('Vrij zoeken'). The search engine then finds all occurrences of this term in the database. You can also narrow your search down to a particular period of time or a place. The date entered in the 'period' field ('periode') refers to the moment when the file was opened, that is to say the date on which the foreigner was officially registered with the authorities for the first time. But this date can be different from the date on which the foreigner actually arrived in the country. Indeed, some persons stayed in Belgium for years before being registered by the Foreigners Police. The 'place' field ('plaats') refers to the place of birth of the foreigner.

The file cards were authored **in French** in the 19th century. This is also the language in which they can be searched; please adapt your search terms accordingly. Given the huge quantity of data, you are advised to carry out a very detailed search for best results.

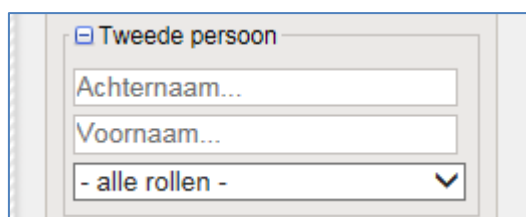
How to find the file of a particular foreigner?

If you are looking for a particular foreigner or group of persons with the same surname, it is best to use the search field '**last name**' ('achternaam'). You can further narrow down your search by entering first name ('voornaam'), occupation ('beroep'), place of birth ('geboorteplaats'), and date of birth ('geboortedatum') if known.



The image shows a search interface with two main sections. The top section is titled 'Vrij zoeken' and contains three input fields: 'Vrij zoeken...', 'Periode...', and 'Plaats...'. The bottom section is titled 'Eerste persoon' and contains four input fields: 'Achternaam...', 'Voornaam...', 'Periode...', and 'Plaats...'. Below the 'Voornaam...' field, there are radio buttons for 'exact' (selected) and 'klinkt als'. Below that, there are checkboxes for 'M', 'V', and 'niet vermeld'. Two red arrows point to the 'Vrij zoeken...' and 'Achternaam...' input fields.

Possible aliases, false identities and titles of nobility can also be found through this search field. If you are not sure whether the person you search was a foreigner himself or herself, or if he or she was married to a foreigner, you can enter your search query in the **free search** ('vrij zoeken') field. Finally, you also have the possibility to search for those file cards that bear on two persons at once. Simply enter the name of the second person in the field '**second person**' ('tweede persoon').



The image shows a search interface section titled 'Tweede persoon'. It contains three input fields: 'Achternaam...', 'Voornaam...', and a dropdown menu with the text '- alle rollen -' and a downward arrow.

If you tick the option '**exact**', the search will bear only on the term you introduced. If you tick '**Similar**' ('klinkt als') you can search variations of the search term. Please note that this *fuzzy search* is language-based and may not always yield the expected result. You may want to try **different spellings** to find what you are looking for. It is also important to mention that the first names of foreigners were often **Frenchified**: If you are looking for Jan or Willem, also try Jean and Guillaume.

Many first names were abbreviated on the file cards. These abbreviations are written in full in the database if it was possible to find out without doubt the full first name based on the abbreviation.

Otherwise the abbreviation was kept. For example, a commonly used abbreviation is 'Ed.d', which may stand for 'Edmond', 'Edouard' or 'Edgard'. If you do not find a particular person directly by entering his or her full name, you may want to look through all persons with the same family name.

In addition to searching for individual persons, you can also search for particular **groups of migrants**:

How to find migrants who came to Belgium during a given period?

The files on foreigners were opened at the moment that the individuals in question were registered with the local or central authorities. This was to occur in principle when they arrived in the country, but quite often the persons were registered only after some time had passed. You can narrow down your search via the '**period**' field ('periode') or you can search by **registration date** to order a file series from a specific period.

The '**period**' option also allows you to find migrants of a particular generation. In general, the birth date of most foreigners was known. In some cases, the file card only provides the year of birth, while month and day are not mentioned. But this information can often be found back in the foreigner's complete file. Some file cards contain several dates of birth, because the Foreigners Police did not know the exact date. In this case, additional information about the date of birth is recorded in the '**remarks**' field ('opmerkingen').

You can search by date (01-01-1800), year (1800) or period (01-01-1800-15-12-1815 or 1800-1815). If you enter a period in the '**free search**' field ('Vrij zoeken'), the search will apply to all date fields. If you enter these search criteria for the first person you must specify whether you are looking for the date of birth or the date on which the file was opened.

The image shows a search interface with two main sections. The top section is titled 'Vrij zoeken' and contains three input fields: 'Vrij zoeken...', 'Periode...', and 'Plaats...'. A red arrow points to the 'Periode...' field. The bottom section is titled 'Eerste persoon' and contains several input fields and options: 'Achternaam...', 'Voornaam...', a radio button for 'exact' (selected) and 'klinkt als', checkboxes for 'M', 'V', and 'niet vermeld', and 'Periode...' and 'Plaats...' fields. A red arrow points to the 'Periode...' field in this section.

How to find the occupation of a migrant?


For slightly over forty percent of migrants, an occupation is mentioned on their file card. You can search for particular job categories via the field '**occupation**' ('beroep'). The occupations are recorded in **French** and distinguish between male and female. So in order to list all day workers, you must enter both male and female day workers in the search options. As the database is a mirror image of the file

cards, quite often only one occupation is recorded. However, the files on foreigners often contain several information sheets mentioning different occupations. For example, a woman who worked as a 'gossip monger' in 1875 could be recorded as 'prostitute' in 1882. Such changes are sometimes recorded on the file card, so that it mentions several professions. In general, the database is a snapshot of the professional situation of the people at the time they were first registered with the authorities.

How to find migrants originating from a given region?

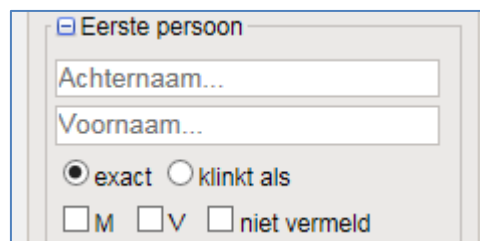
It may be of interest to identify a group of migrants from a particular country or region of origin. The 19th century file cards about migrants in principle contain **no mention** of **nationality**. The **place of birth is known however**. The spelling of the place of birth is usually kept the same as the one mentioned in the file card; that is to say that many places are noted in **French** and that, for instance, places located today in Poland were written down in their former German denomination. Make sure to take this into account when searching and adapt your search query to nineteenth century names of places. For example, the Turkish city of Izmir may be retrieved by its historical name 'Smyrna'.

Attentive users may notice that many foreigners were actually born in Belgium. Indeed, people born in Belgium could still be foreigners if their parents were of foreign origin. Sometimes, even children born in Belgium from Belgian parents were considered as foreigners because they had lived abroad for a long period of time.

For Belgian place names, the search engine 'Search persons' is fitted with a thesaurus of varying spellings and languages. Click on the  icon next to the '**name of municipality**' field ('gemeentenaam'). You can then choose the municipal denomination of your choice. For example, if you chose 'Brussels', the engine searches for records containing the term 'Brussels', but also the French spelling 'Bruxelles'. If you chose to search a joint municipality, the search engine will also yield results pertaining to the individual municipalities composing it. Although this database is updated and extended regularly in order to add alternative spellings and new place names, it currently still does not cover many foreign municipalities. Therefore, the list mainly serves to find people born in Belgium.

How to find men/women?

You can further filter the search results by male/female by selecting the 'M' or 'F' ('V') box. You can find persons whose gender was not recorded by ticking the 'not mentioned' box ('niet vermeld').



How to find out relationships with other persons?

The file cards contain information about the person in question but also references to spouses and sometimes to children. Each person is identified with a relationship in the file cards, for example husband or wife, foreigner or partner. Information about children can be found in the '**remarks**' field ('opmerkingen'), which can be searched via the '**free search**' option ('Vrij zoeken').

Can I search for foreigners based on the city or municipality they travelled to?

It is currently not possible to search for foreigners based on the place where they settled. The database is a digital rendering of the file cards, which do not contain this kind of information. The foreigner's individual file may well contain this information (the files were not digitised but can be consulted in the reading room of the National Archives in Brussels). In addition, an information sheet was created in each municipality in which a foreigner settled. So by aligning the different information sheets, one can trace back a foreigner's trajectory in Belgium.

What does the 'remarks' field contain?

Each file card contains a number of **basic data** about the foreigner: Last name, first name, gender, date of birth, place of birth, occupation, partner (if applicable). Some file cards also have **additional information** recorded in the field 'remarks' ('opmerkingen'). You can search this additional information via the 'free search' option ('Vrij zoeken'). The following types of information can be found in this field:

Additional information about the foreigner

Follow-up code: About 15 percent of the file cards contain so-called follow-up codes. These codes are letter codes referring to administrative actions taken with regard to some foreigners. Some of the most common codes are '**expelled**' and '**extradited**'. These codes indicate that a foreigner was expelled from the country or handed over to a foreign authority respectively. [Follow this link](#) to get a list of the most used follow-up codes with a short explanation.

Once again, be reminded that this is only a snapshot of a given situation in time. The follow-up codes allow you to narrow down your search query to only include those foreigners that were expelled for example. However, the Foreigners Police **did not use** these codes **consistently**, which is why you may not find back *all* expelled foreigners.

Kinship or origin: About 40 percent of the file cards contain **kinship** references. For example: the annotation '*parents français*' for a foreigner born in Brussels. This reference provides a first **indication of nationality**. Prior to 1890, the Foreigners Police did not systematically record the nationality of foreigners. In this context, the use of the term 'nationality' must therefore be taken with a grain of salt. The region of origin is also mentioned regularly, for example, Bavaria, Hanover Westphalia, Saxony, Loire, etc.

Children: In addition to the partner, some file cards also mention **the children** of the foreigner. In some cases there is only a last name; in other cases the place and date of birth of the children are mentioned. So by tracing the places of birth of the children, one can discover the movements of the family.

Additional information about the partner: Usually, only the name of the foreigner's partner is mentioned on the file card. Some cards also contain the place and/or date of birth of the partner, and even divorces and second and third partners.

Date of death: Some file cards also contain the date of decease of the foreigner.

References to other files: Some file cards refer to other files, which allows us to draw a map of parts of a foreigner's social network. These references can be very specific (file number) or vague (i.e. "*see file of father*").

Information about naturalisation applications: Some file cards hold information about naturalisation applications and the date of naturalisation as published in the Belgian Official Journal. Most foreigners opted for an 'ordinary naturalisation', so the cases can be retrieved on the basis of this term in the database. Not all naturalisations were systematically recorded on the file cards – therefore you only get a fragmented view. A naturalisation (application) is usually indicated with the remark: *Article 9 Code Civil* (Article 9 of the Civil Code).

Less frequently recorded information pertains to identity fraud, violations of the law, detention, connections to particular issues and specifications about someone's professional occupation.

In many cases, there are combined remarks about the topics above.

Remarks about the file

This file does not contain information about the person but about the file or the file card.

X43, 43933 and variations: This code refers to a provisional file series opened about persons whose status as foreigner was not clear. If they were declared a foreigner, a definitive file number was allocated. The X43-series is sorted by date, which explains why this reference sometimes appears in relation with a particular date. Files with no definitive number were allocated the number 43933. These files have not been conserved.

This field also contains references to related files, additional information about a possible place of conservation, or other file numbers regarding the same person (file number preceded by a cross, for example "X 231457"), additional information about file number, dates, various numbers and calculations noted on the file card.

What does the file number tell me?

The main use of the **file number** is to find back the **corresponding foreigner's file**. Based on the file number, you can request the full file about the foreigner in question and consult it at the reading room of the National Archives in Brussels. The file number also reveals other information about the foreigner. The data base contains different types of file numbers whose significance is explained below.

Classic file numbers

The classic file numbers begin at number 20,930 approximately. Older files were destroyed in the course of the years. **The higher** the file number, **the more recently** the file was opened. [Via this link](#), you can access a conversion table that relates the file number to the year in which the file was opened. These years can also be searched via the '**period**' search field ('periode'). The first tool you may want to consult is the list of *opening data of individual foreigners' files*.

B-series

A major sub-series is composed of the dossiers with file numbers lower than 23,175. This is an artificially created series with files about persons with **Belgian nationality** or who were not entirely considered as foreigners for different reasons, but about whom a file was nevertheless opened by the Foreigners Police. All files in this series are preceded by the letter 'B', therefore they are called the B-series. This category includes Belgian men married to a foreign woman, children of Belgian parents born abroad, children of foreign parents born in Belgium, etc.

Nomad files

There are also a number of exceptional file numbers, for example those referring to 'nomads'. Their file numbers contain the codes 72C and 106C. These special file numbers do not refer to individual files but to group files recorded in the general series of the Foreigners' Police. Indeed, data about nomad groups of people were bundled. They are fully integrated in the General Series of the Foreigners Police and accessible by means of the following inventory:

[VERVAECK S., *Inventaire des archives du Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique \(Police des Etrangers\). Dossiers généraux \(Régime français-1914\)* \(Algemeen Rijksarchief, Inventaris, I 160\), Brussel, 1968.](#)

Click [on this link](#) to access an overview of nomad files.

Special files

There is another set of special files, namely those identified with the **file number 43933**. This number refers to '**provisional files**' that have unfortunately not been conserved. This sub-series of individual files was opened for persons whose status as foreigner was not clear and in cases it was unclear whether the person was temporarily or permanently residing in Belgium. In case a regular file on a foreigner was opened after some time based on a provisional file, we find traces of the initial provisional file thanks to the file numbers 43933 or X43 mentioned in the field 'remarks about the file'.

Finally, a small number of files on foreigners have a '*special file number*'. This is mentioned in the field 'remarks about the file', so a search query based on a special file number can be carried out. These are files that were recorded elsewhere than in the standard series for various reasons, for example at the cabinet of the Ministry of Justice. This was the case for *high profile* files that were sent to the cabinet of the Minister of Justice for reasons of topicality. Almost none of these files with special numbers have been conserved.

Methodological issues and pragmatic choices in the database creation process

One entry per person

The choice was made to create one entry per person and not per file card. This implies that some file cards were 'undoubled'. If several persons were mentioned together on a single file card, this is indicated in the remarks field of the file. Quite often, persons mentioned on a same file card also had the same foreigners' file. They were usually relatives like brothers and sisters or partners. You can discover these family bonds with a search query based on the file number.

Abbreviations

Many abbreviations were used on the original file cards, which were conserved as such in the digitisation process of this source. Many words and names were abbreviated in the middle and complemented by the last letter in superscript, for example "M.^{ie}" = "Marie". In the course of the cleaning process of these data, the names were written in full where possible. Only those abbreviations that could not be identified unambiguously were kept.

Punctuation marks

The remarks field contains both data already contained in the source file card and information added by the database feeder. A differentiation is made by placing the information from the file cards between quotation marks. The remarks made by the database feeder have no quotation marks. Question marks have always been copied from the file cards. Round brackets '()' indicate that the information was added later. Square brackets '[]' indicate that the information was mentioned between brackets on the file card.