

Looted instruments on the Swiss market?

Abstract

Switzerland was deeply involved in art looting and also participated in the trade of stolen instruments. As I will show, this is more than a hypothesis. Anyone who addresses the role of Swiss dealers and luthiers in the 40s and 50s comes up against difficulties and resistance. We are told that important databases seem to be lost, archives inaccessible, records not kept during the time in question. Yet footprints are to be found, and in certain cases the paths of individual instruments can be traced. These reveal how closely connected the main players of the worldwide trade of valuable instruments were. It soon becomes apparent how quickly the instruments changed hands. The closed borders were selectively porous.

Instruments sold during and after the war are still on the market today. Back then as it still is now, professional expertise is a necessity for the sale of valuable instruments. Reconstructing the owners' history is common practice, but only for the most high-end instruments. Yet this research into origin ought to be standard procedure. String instruments and their paths through time and society are a part of our cultural heritage. In light of historical experience, we are today capable of establishing better and fairer rules for the transfer of instruments.

Findings from Swiss archives

Many of the fine instruments traded in Switzerland during and after the war passed through two music dealers. Eugen Tenucci's violin department at Musikhaus Hug in Zurich, and Henry Werro in Berne. They were internationally renowned. Yet both Werro and Tenucci deceived their customers in their desire for profit. Certain transactions were exposed by colleagues and customers in the 50's, leading to prosecutions and lawsuits in Switzerland. This Geigenkrieg (means Violin War), caught the world's attention. The surviving documents provide us with a look into the business practices of the time.

The violin satellite

Let's imagine that a satellite has been hovering above Europe for 500 years. Its purpose is to recognise newly-made string instruments, to follow their paths and to collect the data relating to these movements. This means we can visualise their journeys.

Shortly after the year 1500, we can see on the map of northern Italy a few dots appearing, first in just a few places, and then in an increasing number of locations. We can zoom in and fast forward time so we can see that small towns such as Cremona and Brescia spew dots like volcanos. These then move away and gather in towns, in royal courts and their chapels, but also in cloisters. As early as 1550, certain dots move towards Paris, then soon to Madrid and northwards over the Alps. As we watch, the decades and centuries pass by, we can soon recognise a pattern in the movements of the most prized instruments. They wander in the early 19th century towards France, then to England, to the USA and now towards Asia. The violins are like a loose group of nomads that follow money, power and cultural dominance. In the same way the violins originally left Italy, they also left the host countries.

In search of valuable, forgotten instruments, dealers and collectors clubbed together. Certain names

are still known to us today: Luigi Tarisio and Alfred Berr, whose “Geigengeschichten” (Violin Stories) provide valuable insights.

The demand for Italian instruments, the classic masterpieces, far exceeded supply. So even damaged instruments were collected. Some workshops became specialised in taking apart old instruments, adding new parts and then ascribing them to popular masters.

But let us turn our attention to the people who owned and played these instruments. A good example may be the German Jewish people in southwest Germany.

Operation Wagner-Bürckel

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On the night of October 21st, the Jewish community was given a couple of hours to pack their bags, before being driven from their homes and transported away. These people were permitted to take only fifty kg of luggage and 100 Reichsmark in cash. In Operation Wagner-Bürckel, as it became known, 6,500 Baden and Palatine Jewish people were deported to Gurs and later to Auschwitz. A further 22,000 Jewish people were deported from occupied Alsace.

What happened to the abandoned homes, the possessions of those 6,500 people? The Nazi authorities didn't just organise their transport. As early as November 1940, the auctioning of the so-called “abandoned Jewish property” began.



Screenshot from “Bruchsal ist judenfrei”
(Bruchsal clean of jews)
source: youtube



This police photograph from Lörrach shows the public full of interest. It is also documented that violins were auctioned.

The questions arise: who had a professional interest in stringed instruments in the region at that time? Who were the collectors and dealers? Who might have had privileged access to such viewings?

In Strasbourg at that time was the workshop of luthier Pierre Vogelweith. He had a contract with Special Task Force M of the Nazi looting organisation, ERR (Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg), for whom he was also active in Paris. Furthermore, Vogelweith was a personal friend of Robert Wagner, the co-organiser of the Wagner-Bürckel deportations.

Also in Strasbourg lived Albert Uhl. He was the director of the violin department of the local music shop, Wolf, founded in the 19th century by the long-established Jewish Wolf family. During the war, Albert Uhl sold a number of instruments to Swiss luthiers. He recorded this in his notebooks, which have survived and tell us that he travelled routinely to Switzerland, visiting luthiers in Basle, Berne and Lausanne. A particular friend of his was Henry Werro, with whom he did regular business. So now let us follow Uhl and his instruments to Henry Werro in Berne.

Henry Werro's shop in Berne

Werro's shop in Berne was one of the most significant Swiss locations for the trade of valuable violins during and after the war.

Henry was born in London in 1896 as son of luthier Jean Werro. He was eloquent, charming with his clients, extremely well-connected worldwide, and a bold entrepreneur. Even during the war, he amassed a fortune from the trade of important instruments. Around fifty Guadagninis had passed through his hands and a number of Stradivaris and Guarneris.



source Hans Boltshauser: Die Geigenbauer der Schweiz, Degersheim, 1969

Werro regularly removed the labels from old instruments in order to replace them with labels bearing the names of other masters. Sometimes it meant the labels were better correctly assigned but more often they were not.

His business methods made some suspicious. Werro's employee, Willi Mächler, observed many criminal dealings in the course of his ten year employment. In 1950 he quit and finally shared his knowledge with his brother, Karl Mächler. Karl was also a successful violin maker and dealer in Zurich, who often did business with Werro. So he confided his suspicions to the Swiss Association of Luthiers, but his voice went unheard, as the president at the time was none other than Henry Werro.

With the agreement of the possessor of a recently bought Stradivari in the Werro shop, Karl Mächler took out its label and showed it in London to the most important expert, Hill in London. Hill declared it as a composite instrument. At the luthier association congress in Berne on 1st October 51, Karl Mächler presented this story. It must have been a memorable event. The existing conflicts within the association escalated. It fuelled the increasing doubt about the authenticity and condition of all instruments sold by Werro. Unsettled owners contacted him, so he bought back the instruments or made generous offers in exchange. However, it was too late to regain confidence. Cheated customers wouldn't keep quiet, which roused the attention of the authorities. Werro was arrested, and a long court case ensued.

The Violin War

Willy Mächler's statement provided evidence for the prosecution. Karl Mächler also discreetly supplied further material for the investigation. Henry Werro was taken into custody. A central role in preparing the prosecution was played by the Italian-Swiss Chamber of Commerce headed by Giovanni Iviglia. Their main focus was to save the reputation of the Italian art of violin making.



(Top left Karl Mächler, bottom left Giovanni Iviglia, right Max Frei-Sulzer from Kriminalpolizei Zurich)

Iviglia's Advisory Centre for Old Italian String Instruments became a busy point for the many unsettled owners. On opening the instruments, the assembled experts hit on many inconsistencies like obviously faked labels, and under UV-lamps disguised manipulations finally became visible. Hardly an instrument passed the scrutiny of the committee. However, among them there was no experienced violin-maker, so the Chamber of Commerce made some mistakes concerning a few quality instruments.

The violin-war spread further; Eugen Tenucci, the old head of the violin-making department of Musikhaus Hug, was taken into custody in Zurich. He was found guilty of several instances of fraud. The Berne Court soon realized that their experts' report was still of limited use, so the legal proceedings were delayed and only concluded after seven years in 1958. Werro received a one year suspended sentence for repeated fraud and continued forgery. Since then the exchange of labels has been openly punishable in Switzerland.

Thanks to the preserved extensive case files, we have gained valuable insights into these business practices of the war and post-war period.

Exchange of labels

A central element of the fraud were the labels. For the amateur, they only name the maker of the instrument. However they can still be easily exchanged. Even long before the war, this fraud was taking place. Once the instrument was open, it was easy to peel off the paper that had been secured with bone glue. If you are skilled you could even manage this through the F hole.



Picture: Confiscated label, still enclosed in the court records

However, violin-makers and dealers still also possessed original, old labels. For example, Eugen Tenucci had two boxes, marked „F“ for fake and „R“ for real. The „R“-labels were with handmade paper with visible ridges and embossed letters, the dates written with a quill. The „F“-labels were printed on thin paper with a high wood content. An employee described in a witness statement how Tenucci demanded the original label of the instrument he was then working on. Later this label would have been put into another instrument; at Hug's. This process was called „re-christening“. Apart from original labels and simple re-prints there were also valuable, sophisticated ones which were only available to a small circle of dealers. In the 1920s a printing shop offered such labels specifically to violin-makers.

Around 1946 Werro bought a number of these dangerous no more produced labels from Oskar Erich Heinel in Markneukirchen. Heinel was aware of the value as well as the possibilities for fraud. In return he received coupons for fat and other desired goods as people were going hungry after the lost war. Imagine in the following story: Half an our for the violinmaker to replace a label, how much time for the open questions of the possessor?

A written statement by Henry Werro describes how fast this could be done:

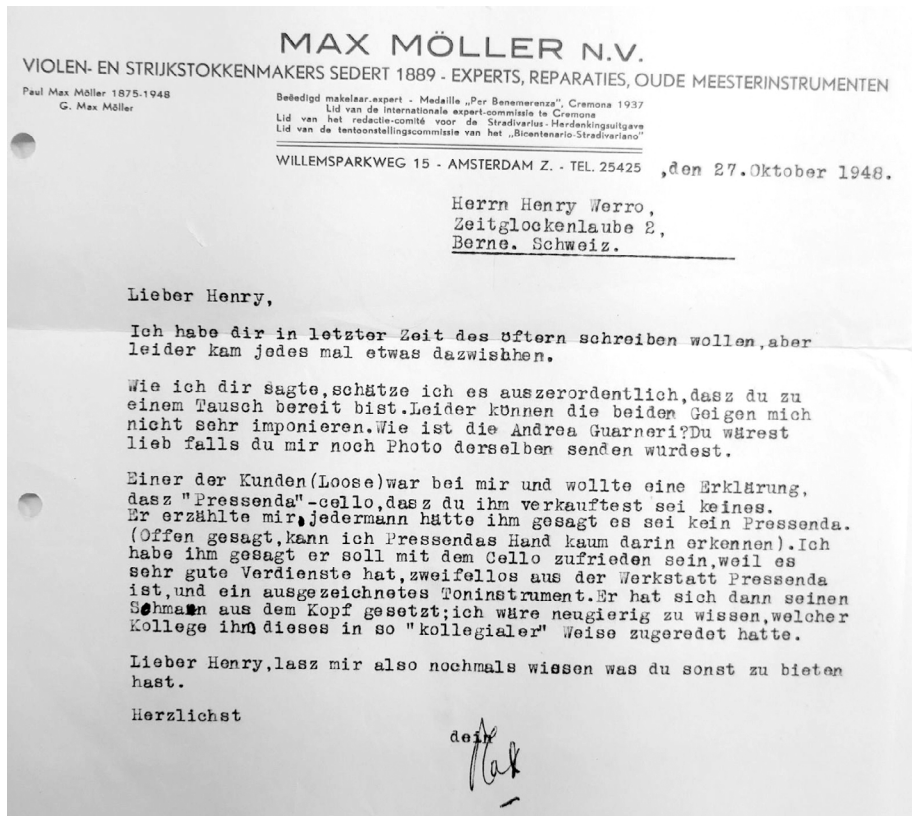
„The opening of a violin takes only minutes. The removal of a label takes half an hour maximum, including the regluing of a new label.“

What was really the point of this label exchange? The market demanded Italian instruments from the classical period, but the supply could not meet the demand. So instruments from a different provenance were regularly „Italianised“, and the work of lesser known violin makers from elsewhere was ascribed to higher renowned masters.

At that time you could buy large print sheets of facsimile labels, but experts could tell that neither paper nor printing technique were genuine.

Covering-up for each other and staying in business

In 1945, a cello bought as a Pacherel by Dr. Uhl was sold by Werro as an alleged Pressenda to the Bernese cellist Rolf Looser. Looser was uncertain and showed the cello to Max Möller in Amsterdam



„One of the customers (Loose) came to me to get a statement that the „Pressenda“ cello you sold him was by a different maker. Everybody had told him it wasn't a Pressenda. I've told him he should be happy with the cello, it was a good instrument and doubtlessly out of Pressenda's workshop with an excellent sound quality. He then let go of this bee in his bonnet; I was curious to know which "colleague" had made him question the instrument.“

in 1948. Part of the letter written afterward from Möller to Werro is as follows:

The letter also indicates that they had other business dealings and connections together apart from this client, and gives an insight into the communication of part of the network.

But Looser still wasn't convinced and took the cello again to Paris - and again he didn't receive an honest answer. Werro heard of this and wanted to learn to whom Looser had shown the cello. He wrote to his colleague Français like a friend. So Français asked among his Parisian confrères and soon reported back that the Pressenda had been shown to Chardon but he had refused to write a certification for a cello not sold by him.

The secret network of dealers not only commanded advanced knowledge but also used it to exploit their customers.

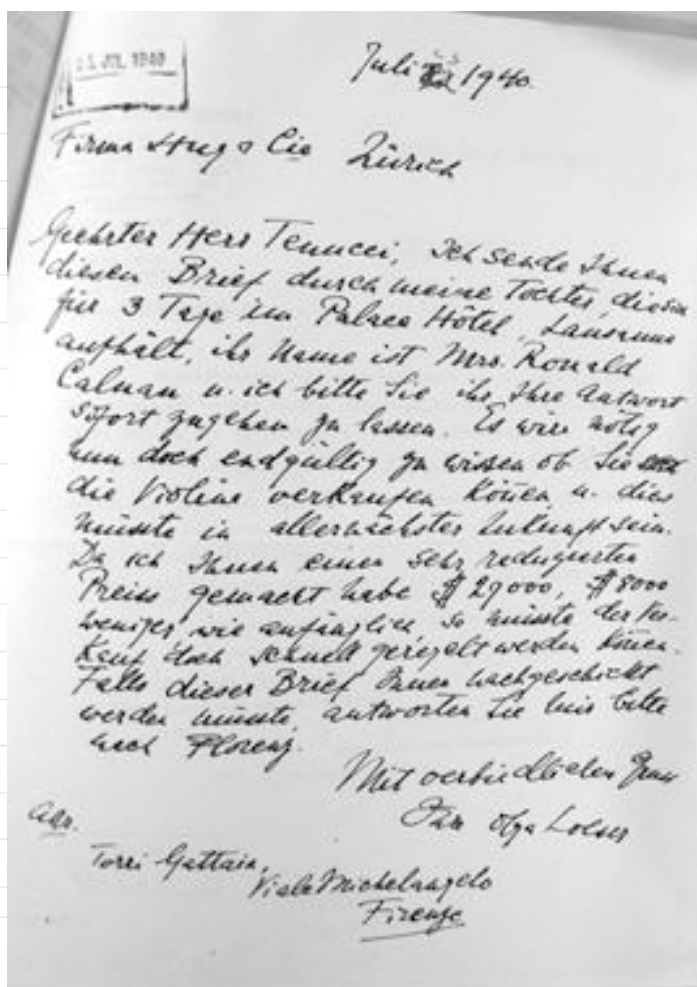
The Greffuhle – provenance with a gap

One of only eleven decorated violins by Antonio Stradivari now forms part of the Smithsonian Collection in Washington DC: the Greffuhle. Its history is well documented, and on the website of Tarisio, one gets the impression that the instrument was in the possession of the Zurich music dealer Hug between 1923 and 1962.

In 1954, the Greffuhle was confiscated, opened, and investigated by the Hug company in the context

Provenance

in 1840	Dr. Camidge
...	...
in 1870	Reverend John Blow
...	...
from 1878	John Adam
in 1880	Sold by David Laurie
in 1882	Gand & Bernardel, Freres
1882 - 1910	Vicomte de Greffuhle
in 1910	Sold by Caressa & Francais
in 1910	Sold by Hamma & Co.
1913 - 1923	Valenti Walther
1923 - 1962	Hug & Co.
1962 - 1976	Carl E. Tannewitz
in 1977	Sold by Jacques Francais
in 1977	Sold by Sotheby's
1977 - 1997	Dr Herbert R. Axelrod
from 1997	Smithsonian Institution Museum



of the Geigenkrieg (Violin War). The company did inform the district magistrates in Zurich about the history of the instrument. In these communications, we can read about one further owner not listed by Tarisio.

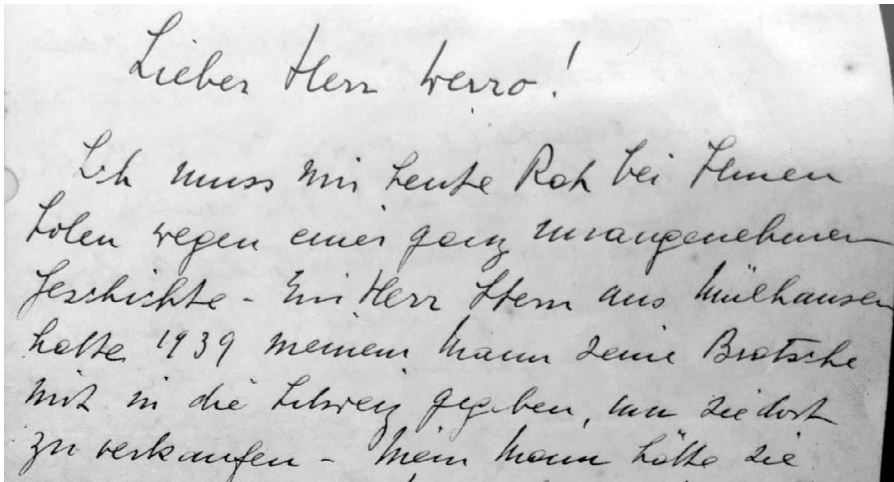
The Greffuhle was bought in 1926 by the notable Jewish art historian and patron, Charles Loeser, who unexpectedly died two years later. His wife, Olga Loeser, was a well-known pianist, who also performed with the London-based Léner String Quartet. The first violinist of the quartet, Jenő Léner, played this celebrated Stradivari on loan.

In 1939 or 1940, the violin was deposited with the Hug company in Zurich. Olga Loeser was still living in her villa in Florence at the time. When the internment of Jewish people also began in Italy in July 1940, Olga Loeser was forced to emigrate to the USA with her daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter. In her plight, she offered the Stradivari to Eugen Tenucci at a greatly reduced price.

In spite of Olga Loeser's urgent pleas to conclude the deal, it was only after her death five years later that the sale was completed. In February 1945, shortly before the end of the war, the Hug company transferred \$26,854 to the estate executor in New York. The sellers assumed that the instrument had been purchased by the Hug museum. Was the situation with the purchase with all the delays and reduction in price uncomfortable for the Hug company later on? Why were the long-time owners of this instrument concealed? In any case, there is no mention of Charles or Olga Loeser in the Greffuhle brochure later published by the Hug company. This information now public, is a positive gain for our history.

The last case is also uncomfortable:

... an uncomfortable matter ...



Alfred Uhl died in 1945 or 1946. In the letters found in the Werro case file between the newly widowed Mrs. Uhl and Henry Werro, the settlement of mutual claims between the two violin dealers are discussed. Unpaid instruments belonging to Uhl were in Werro's possession, but Uhl had also obtained instruments from Werro. From the Ladenburg Guarneri del Gesu that was transferred from Hamma to Werro in 1942, and then via Hamma once again to the Dr.-Joseph-Goebbels-Stiftung, we already know that Werro exported instruments to Germany during the war. The exchange of letters tells us that there was a close friendship between the Uhl and Hamma families. Given that Uhl could cross the border so easily, he may well have been a link during war time for the close trading relations between Hamma and Werro. In the period directly after the war, no more exchange was possible.

There were, however, Jewish survivors who returned and made demands.

On 20th March 1946, Mrs. Uhl wrote to Henry Werro asking for, I quote, "advice on an uncomfortable matter. A certain Mr. Stern from Mühlhausen gave my husband his viola to sell in Switzerland..."

Mrs. Uhl then made enquiries to the likely Swiss luthiers, but received no real information. She recompensated Mr. Stern with a modest sum.

Mr. Stern's viola remains lost to this day. Musicians, collectors and dealers should consider that their old instrument may have had a previous owner, whose right to participate in cultural life, whose right to ownership, even the right to live was denied.

Provenance research by all concerned institutions, luthiers and owners should really be standard practice now. If all remaining receipts and references were to be dug out of the drawers, account books opened, and the information collected, completely new perspectives would open up on our cultural history, and the playing of fine instruments whose life stories were no longer hidden.