

The Way of Niobe

The Way of Niobe

and Other Stories

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The Music Box

After all these years, I feel it is finally time to write down the strange events that befell me during my time as a student in Heidelberg, in the late 1960s. Decades have passed since then, but the memories of those days are still burned deep into my mind. My story starts on a Thursday night in October 1967, when professor Straus came to me with a proposition.

The professor was a strange man, which can be expected from a history professor. He had sleek black hair, undoubtedly kept that way on purpose. His eyes were always at unrest, a trait he had acquired during his years fighting in World War II. Strange as he was, back then I did like him. As a historian he was at the top of his field; he could tell you every single detail about Nazi Germany there was to tell.

“Franz,” he said to me on that October night. “I am going to be upfront with you. I am going on an expedition, and there might be substantial danger involved. I need a good student to accompany me, someone I can trust. Are you interested?”

He did not tell me what the expedition was about, but knowing the professor, it was bound to be something interesting. His warnings of danger were usually only meant to entice me, so I accepted.

We sat down to discuss the details of the project, and it became clear that it was unlike anything I had ever done before. This project involved a music box.

Perhaps you are familiar with an ordinary music box. It is a simple device with a cylinder and a metal pin that is used to play short melodies. The music box that professor Straus had found, however, was no ordinary music box. This was a music box that possessed the ability to store memories.

This means, simply, that if we listened to its music, it showed us the memories of its last owner. Find this hard to believe? I don't blame you, so did I. But it was real, I know that now. The rest of this story will convince you, I am sure.

Only a select number of historians were aware of the existence of this kind of music box. The professor asking me for this project

was more than just an acknowledgement that I was a good student. It was my invitation into this select group. Safe to say, that particular October night was one of the most exciting days of my young life.

Professor Straus told me the music box had been found in an abandoned mansion far in the west of Germany. The mansion had been inhabited during the war by colonel Friedrich Radner, one of the military leaders for Fall Gelb, the Nazi plan to invade the Netherlands. After the successful invasion, Radner had been installed as head administrator for the East of the Netherlands. The colonel had lived in the mansion for years, and he performed his job of prosecuting the resistance and rounding up the local Jews flawlessly.

Sometime during the final stages of the war, however, Radner was suddenly arrested by the Nazis and executed, without any clear reason. After the end of the war, the mansion had been left abandoned. Historians had examined it many times to find a clue indicating what had happened to the

colonel, but they had come back empty handed every time. Now that this music box had been found, there was new hope of clearing up the mystery. Professor Straus hoped it contained memories that would show us what had truly happened.

The music box had been found in a hidden room in the cellar of the mansion, which had been exposed during renovations of the house. The authorities had been informed of this find, and they immediately sent in an expert to investigate the hidden room. This is where professor Straus and I come in, and where our story starts.

We drove to the mansion's estate in an old Volkswagen the university had provided us with. The road was surrounded by dense trees, and statues of gnomes and other strange creatures littered the ground around them, their eyes peering into the world in silence. The cold air rustled the leaves, and I heard a long howl as the wind raced through the hollow statues. The shivers crawled down my spine.

The mansion appeared above us, radiating an atmosphere as thick as the garden surrounding it. Ivy grew on all its walls, like long arms pulling it back into the garden. “A ruin,” professor Straus remarked. “Hopefully this music box contains something worthwhile. I don’t want to come here for nothing.”

The renovators occupying the house greeted us warmly, taking our luggage and showing us around. Before long we were settled in and ready to start our examination. I could not wait to see this hidden room for myself, and to find out what this infamous music box was all about.

The renovators took us to the basement, where they removed a wooden panel from the wall. A room appeared, shrouded in shadows and covered in dust. Our flashlights revealed faded paintings of faces against the walls, and there, in the middle of the room on an old desk, there stood the music box.

It was less remarkable than I thought it would be. Yes, the adornments on it were quite beautiful, forming a golden pattern

woven through with copper. But it did not feel like anything supernatural. It looked like just an ordinary music box.

We asked the renovators to leave the room, and we took on comfortable positions on the floor. Three different patterns of music adorned the music box.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Do they contain the colonel’s memories?”

“Only one way to find out,” the professor said. “Let’s play the tunes. Are you ready?”

In hindsight I know I wasn’t anywhere near ready, and I suspect professor Straus knew this too. But back then, I did not know this, so I said yes.

The professor flipped the switch on the first set of music, and the tones played their slow melody. It deeply entered the minds of me and the professor, carrying along their long lost memories.

Everything I experienced thereafter I remember perfectly. Every single detail of the surroundings I saw, every word that was spoken, even the thoughts of the mind that I now entered; all of these I can recall with

perfect accuracy. I will attempt to describe them as well as my writing abilities allow me.

The first memory

As the sun rose and the last distant howls of the wolves disappeared behind the horizon, Colonel Friedrich Radner stretched the long night's numbness from his limbs. Linda lay beside him, spying him from behind her dark hair. One hand supported her head; the other held their newborn son.

"We should head back," Radner said after a long silence.

"Do we have to?" Linda asked disappointed. "It is such a lovely morning. Let's stay a little longer."

"We can't. There is a razzia tonight in Venlo. I need to prepare all day long."

Linda stroked her son's hair, gazing down at the grass. "The Jews will wait, won't they? They're not going anywhere."

Radner sighed. "Well, I hope they won't. In any case, this is really too important. Come on, let's go."

Linda wrapped her arms around her son.
“All right then.”

They got up, and steadily made their way back to the mansion, along the hidden tracks that weaved their way through the woods. Cobwebs trembled at the falling of dew-drops, and the cold scent of spring was in the air. The winter of 1944 had finally come to an end.

“The wolves were restless tonight,” Linda remarked.

“They always are when the moon is up,” Radner said. “At nights like these they want to hunt. Their cage suffocates them.”

“Then we should set them free.”

Radner laughed. “We can’t.”

“I know,” Linda admitted with a sad voice. “But I wish we could. Wolves need freedom.” In a softer tone she added, “Just like my people.”

Her remark caught Radner off guard. “The Dutch have freedom. We liberated them four years ago.”

“I know.” A frown formed on Linda’s face. “But as national socialists, we should strive

towards more than freedom from our enemies. We should fight our oppressors ourselves. The Dutch national socialists did that before you came. You took away their freedom to fight their own fight. Now they feel weak, as if they have to rely on others to survive.”

“I see your point.” Radner let his thoughts run over the issue a few moments. “But in the end, we are the same people. The Dutch and Germans are of the same Aryan blood. We share one enemy. Jews know no borders, so neither should we.”

“Still, many among the Dutch see the Germans as oppressors.”

Radner sighed. “I know. I think they just need more time. Once we have cleared the vermin from their land, they will see the beauty of the new society we have created. And then, they will thank us.”

“I hope you are right.”

“I’m sure of it.”

A short walk later the mansion appeared before them. It stood serenely among the trees, its roof proudly reaching through the

canopy to breathe in the fresh air. High upon a ladder the window- cleaner rinsed the windows, and the sunlight reflected on the soapy water dripping down the glass. The front door stood wide open, just as Radner liked to see.

The butler came out the door. "Sir," he called. "A package has arrived for you. I left it on the dining table."

"Thank you, Heinrich," said Radner, turning to his wife. "Could you put our son to bed? I'm curious to see this package."

"Of course."

Radner found the package wrapped in a simple box in the kitchen. He undid it of its wrappings, and inside he found a small cylindric box, decorated with markings he had never seen before. A music box, he realized upon further inspection. How curious. "Heinrich," he called out. "Do you know who sent this?"

"It was not mentioned, sir."

How odd. Maybe it was an anonymous gift from the party leadership, to reward him for his loyal service. "Heinrich," he called out