

It was in September 1985 that Rachel Goodkind, daughter of Herbert K. of *Iconography* fame, wrote to me that an acquaintance of hers believed herself to be in possession of Bronislaw Huberman's stolen Stradivari violin, the "Gibson" of 1713. Sensing an adventure I telephoned Rachel across the Atlantic as soon as I thought she might be awake; certainly I would be able to identify it, as Mrs. Rembert Wurlitzer's files, which she had very kindly given to me some years earlier, contained good colour photographs and also a copy of the "Stolen" notice issued by loss adjusters Toplis and Harding shortly after the theft. But what was this exciting story she had stumbled upon?

The story of how Huberman, while playing a recital on his Guarneri del Gesù in New York's Carnegie Hall on 28 February 1936, had his Strad stolen from his double case is well known. Despite a considerable hue and cry at the time — Nathan Milstein, on tour in the USA, was removed from a train the next day and detained for several hours after confessing that his violin case contained a Stradivarius — nothing at all had been heard of the violin for almost fifty years.

Rachel explained that she had been sworn to absolute secrecy, but that her anonymous friend's late husband had told her on his death-bed that his violin was the stolen Stradivarius and that she 'ought to do something about it.' The question was what. She was evidently an honest lady and wanted to do the right thing, but felt that some financial reward should nevertheless come her way and was disinclined to come forward without a pre-arranged agreement in that respect. The first thing however was to be sure that her violin actually was what the dying man had claimed it to be, and by the following January sufficient trust had been established for me to receive polaroid photographs that left very little doubt.

On 28 February 1986, fifty years to the day since the theft, I happened to be in New York for an auction sale and had set up a semi-clandestine meeting with Rachel and our lady friend, but unfortunately the latter was

LOST AND FOUND

The discovery and identification of Bronislaw Huberman's lost "Gibson" Strad is recalled by Charles Beare

unwell and cancelled it. On enquiry, I found that Toplis and Harding had destroyed their old files and were unable to identify the insurance company that had paid Huberman's claim in 1936, and in some frustration I turned to the information department at Lloyds of London. Gradually all the strings then drew together: Lloyds had indeed been the original insurers and had paid out £8,000; our mystery lady's lawyer surfaced and made contact with Lloyd's lawyers in New York, and by May 1986 it had been agreed between Leo Fraser of Mendes and Mount, representing Lloyds, and his opposite number, that in due course I would be asked to make the identification of the violin. That, however, was only the beginning. Another year was to pass before all the preliminary negotiations could be completed, and meanwhile the violin remained out of sight.

Finally the morning of 8 May 1987 found me accompanying Leo Fraser and another Lloyd's lawyer in a limousine bound for Bethel, Connecticut, all of us filled with anticipation and perhaps a little nervous. For the first time I learnt that the lady was called Marcelle Hall, and that she had lived with violinist Julian Altman for twenty years before marrying him shortly before his death in prison. It crossed my mind in the car that this publication's readers might like to have a couple of paragraphs about the rediscovery, but none of us was prepared for what we were to find at Mrs Hall's house, set in rolling Connecticut farmland, let alone for the media publicity that followed.

Instead of just a lady and her lawyer we found that a party had been in progress more or less since the previous evening, and the fifteen or twenty people in the house included an NBC television news crew. Mrs. Hall turned out to be a warm-hearted, emotional, middle-aged lady, thrilled that the great day had finally come, and she had of course invited Rachel Goodkind to be present for the occasion. As I lifted the violin from its case I didn't appreciate that Mrs. Hall and her friends and family were still in doubt about the violin's identity. Very slowly I said 'No ... problem', and it turned out that in the second or two between the two words Mrs. Hall almost died with disappointment. After that there was joy all round.

Out in the better light of the garden, away from the crowd and the popping champagne corks, I had a good look at Huberman's remarkable violin. In 1911, when the young virtuoso purchased it, Alfred Hill of W. E. Hill and Sons wrote 'The red varnish is in a pure state, as applied by the maker.' Now you could barely see it, submerged as it was beneath layer upon layer of dirt and polish. The front was particularly shocking at first glance, with a badly repaired crack visible under all the filth and rosin — Altman could hardly have risked taking the violin to Wurlitzers! The upper treble corner had been scratched completely away, and the lower one was damaged as well. Nevertheless the violin was clearly a masterpiece, and in the pale sunlight its handsome wood and red varnish glowed reassuringly.

Two hours later the respective lawyers had drawn up an agreement, a young girl had played a final piece, revealing a magnificent, warm quality of tone, short speeches had been made in the bright lights of the television crew, and although the champagne was still flowing it was time to return to New York. Among other things it had been agreed that the violin was to be taken to England for J. & A. Beare Ltd. to clean and restore, and then, if ready, to be displayed at the "Capolavori di Antonio Stradivari" Exhibition in Cremona.

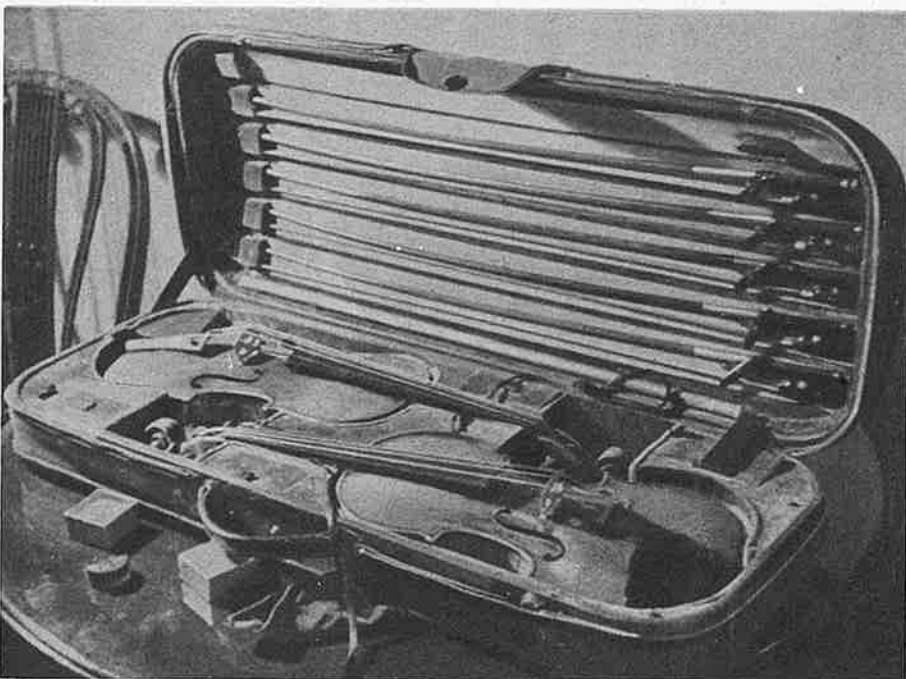
Three months later the "Gibson" of 1713, its restoration more or less finished, duly took its place in Cremona next to Itzhak Perlman's "Soil" of the following year. Among its admirers on the first day was Marcelle Hall, overjoyed at its return to legitimacy. Had her husband really bought the violin from the thief, as he claimed, or could he have taken it himself? 'Well, he said he bought it. Maybe for once in his life he was telling the truth.'



Two owners of the "Gibson" Strad: Julian Altman (left) and Bronislaw Huberman



The "Gibson" Stradivarius (1713) after its recovery early this year



Huberman's double violin case containing the "Gibson" Strad and del Gesù (c.1935)