

WAR BOOTY, RESTITUTION, CENSORSHIP AND MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

It appears the American press is more censored than the European. How else explain the lack of American coverage of the "war booty" dispute involving our Secretary of State and the Nebrich family in Austria?

Europeans are following the story closely as it involves the Nazi plundering of Jews, Czech plundering of German refugees, Communist nationalization, and the growing problem of sorting it all out.

The class action suit brought against Czech firms by former German refugees adds a new element to the confusion: Do German victims of postwar Allied crimes also have human rights?

Read about the German suit at:

<http://www.sudeten.de/sites/a52.htm>

Americans are poorly informed about crimes against German refugees.

Under the Yalta agreement between the US, USSR and Britain, fourteen million German civilians were driven from their homes during the winter following the end of World War II.

A quarter of them died in history's bloodiest instance of ethnic cleansing.

Depredations against helpless refugees were particularly bad in Czechoslovakia under the Benes regime.

"Wann ruecken die Albrights die Prager Kriegsbeute heraus?" demands the headline of the Austrian Sudetenpost for April 22, 1999.

Translation: "When Are the Albrights Going to Return their Prague War Booty?"

The story first appeared in the official organ of the Sudeten Association, the principal organization of dispossessed German Czechs.

The editor, Manfred Maurer, predicted "this will make some big waves in the US: the family of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is faced with a restitution suit for millions of dollars in conjunction with the infamous Benes decree of 1945, which has been denounced by the European Union and the US House of Representatives."

Where are the waves? we wonder.

The American press has ignored the story so far.

Maybe it can make some waves on the Internet.

The story of Madeleine's "war booty" began over a hundred years ago when Karl Nebrich, a German industrialist from the province of Hessen, migrated to the Czech part of Old Austria and began manufacturing machine tools.

The new industry transformed the Prague region and Herr Nebrich became a very wealthy man.

By the time of his death he owned three factories, a luxurious villa and a palatial mansion beneath Prague's historic Hradshin Fortress, near the palaces of the President and Archbishop.

An avid collector, he filled his mansion with Renaissance furnishings, persian rugs, silverware and a priceless art collection.

Some paintings in the Nebrich collection dated to the 15th and 16th Centuries.

Included were works by Andrea del Sarto, Herrimet de Bles, Tintoretto and Hendrik van Steenwijk.

The most valuable piece is probably Gerard David's "Triptichon" which is worth around five million marks.

During the 1930s several Jewish friends, forced into exile by the Nazis, left additional masterpieces with the Nebrich family for safe keeping.

Following World War II the Nebrich mansion came into the possession of Josef Koerbl, a German-Czech-Jew who had emigrated to England in 1939.

He was given the mansion by his friend Masaryk, foreign minister in the Benes regime, along with a position in the diplomatic corps.

Herr Koerbl promptly crated up the Nebrich collection and shipped it to the US, where he joined it in 1948.

He de-Germanized his name by dropping the umlaut and adding a syllable at the end.

The once proud Nebrich family, who had looked down on the upstart Hitler, did not fare well during the 1930s and 40s.

The Nazis disliked them because they had Jewish friends and they refused to join the Nazi party.

Father Karl died, leaving his fortune to daughters Hilca, Ruth and Doris.

The Nazis confiscated their villa and other properties but left their mansion undisturbed.

In the winter of 1945/46, under the auspices of Yalta, the Czech government dispossessed all German Czechs.

Bourgeois, workers, peasants, Nazis, former prisoners of the Nazis, Catholics, Socialists, Germans married to Czechs, even Czechs with German names who spoke no German -- all were forced to leave with 40 kilos of personal belongings.

Those too weak to walk were murdered.

At the border, Czech guards confiscated their forty kilos of personal belongings.

Among the refugees were the Nebrich sisters.

Half a century passed and the Nebrich family gave up hope of regaining their fortune.

From time to time they made inquiries and filled out forms, but they lacked money to hire international lawyers or even locate Josef Koerbl.

In 1989 the Communist government of Czechoslovakia collapsed.

In 1992 the new government, in response to an inquiry by Philip Harmer, nephew of Doris Nebrich, informed the family that the Benes government had not confiscated the Nebrich art collection.

They had confiscated the building but not its contents.

"To put it bluntly, the foreign ministry of the Czech Republic says our family property was stolen" says Harmer.

A big break came in 1996 while Doris was watching television coverage of a visit to Prague by US Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright.

Doris' mouth fell open in amazement when Madeleine began chatting about having lived in the magnificent Nebrich mansion on Hradshin Square shortly after the War.

Madeleine Korbel Albright: the daughter of Josef Koerbl, who shipped the Nebrich fortune to America and became rich and influential in the Democratic Party!

Doris immediately contacted Madeleine, who was too busy to be bothered.

All attempts by Doris, her sister Ruth and nephew Philip to recover any part of their belongings were repulsed.

There is no doubt the Koerbl descendants still have the Nebrich paintings since Michael Dobbs, Madeleine's biographer, mentions having seen them in the Albright home.

Michael Jaffe, Madeleine's lawyer, stated in a letter that the Albright family has no intention of giving them up.

The dispute has taken several turns in favor of the Nebrich family in recent months. Last October the US House of Representatives passed a resolution calling on ex-communist nations to return nationalized properties to their rightful owners. Thus, even if there were evidence that the Benes government gave the Nebrich collection to Josef Koerbl, Madeleine would still be defying a Congressional resolution by relying on the argument that it is hers because it was given to her father. In addition, the European Union is now demanding that the government of the Czech Republic return property looted from German refugees. The faltering Czech economy needs the benefits of EU membership. Despite her strong influence within NATO, Madeleine has little influence on the EU. Even Madeleine's own speeches come back to haunt her. At an international conference called by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on December 1, 1998 she urged the assembled delegates to return looted Jewish property. If they return property looted from Jews, it follows that they should also return property looted by Jews. Madeleine's credibility was damaged by her initial denial of her Jewish background, which includes Jewish grandparents killed during the Nazi persecutions. To many people, her denial suggests that she has something to hide. Added to this, the widely publicized critique of her performance as ambassador to the UN by British Ambassador Sir John Weston left her with the sobriquet "Queen of Mean." Lawyer Jaffe, unable to rely on the legitimacy of acts of the Benes regime, must now rely on the controversial "Amnesty Act" which absolves former officials of responsibility for crimes against German refugees. (Maurer can not resist pointing out that German citizens are still paying for crimes committed by the Nazi government even when they themselves were victims of that government.) Harmer is not deterred by the amnesty argument. He points out that since the Czech government did not confiscate the Nebrich collection, there was no official involvement. The door is still open for negotiations, but some agreement must be reached. "This is nothing but an attempt at extortion" says Lawyer Jaffe. Say sisters Doris and Ruth: "We don't expect to get back everything that Herr Koerbl took, but we at least want our paintings back. After all, Austria returned the Rothschild paintings a long time ago." In a separate editorial, Maurer summarizes the moral implications of the dispute as follows:

"Even if Madeleine is not responsible for the actions of her father; and even if Herr Koerbl 'legally' obtained the Nebrich furnishings on basis of the Benes decree, Madeleine still can not entrench herself behind this immoral act.

The American Congress can not pass resolutions urging formerly communistic countries to revoke laws which confiscated private property and the American Secretary of State continue to rely on these same laws as a reason for not returning property worth millions of dollars.

This can not be.

Or can it?

Until there is proof to the contrary the suspicion must remain that restitution for wartime criminal acts will continue to be a one way street, to be enforced only when Germans

have been the culprits."

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