

HERMITAGE LOST / VERLORENES ERBE

Content

October 2005: Nowak, a grumpy, moderately successful Vienna-based lawyer, is asked to have an old master confiscated: The painting, a Rembrandt, was acquired under dubious circumstances by Congo's former dictator family and shall soon be shown in Vienna. An arts expert, instantly voicing concerns regarding the canvas's authenticity certificate issued by the world famous Hermitage Museum, is found dead in St Petersburg the next day. – By coincidence also staying there, Nowak's assistant, a former arts student, witnesses a raid on her professor's apartment: Obviously, someone is hunting for documents related to the frail man's past activities at the Hermitage. They flee to a remote dacha, whereupon Nowak, concluding that recent events may be connected, decides to join them.

During a long night at the dacha and a subsequent meeting with a gallerist in Tallinn, Nowak learns about looted art by Nazis and the Red Army, but also about art theft from the Hermitage during and after the Perestroika. The Rembrandt – is it actually an original? - had apparently been stolen, then traded for industrial assets, only to end up with a dictator family: Business interests appear neatly and tightly connected with sophisticated schemes of hiding and transferring assets as well as money laundering.

Things escalate, as Nowak's assistant gets arrested. – It appears that for years, a hand-full oligarchs as well as leading officials in the Kremlin have been involved in a systematic multi-million-dollar scheme of forging and looting of art: This must now be covered up.

Nowak launches a furious fight for his assistant's release, but he has to be careful: A life isn't worth much in Russia, even less so in the midst of a scandal of epic dimensions. In addition, those involved in arts- and business-related crimes can count on loyal support from wealthy collectors, well-connected diplomats, corrupt honorary consuls, as well as ruthless lawyers, not least in Austria and Switzerland. – Nowak realizes, though, that agendas and interests of those involved are not always the same: Especially, as an oligarch pursues a major corporate acquisition in Austria. This seems to be Nowak's big, but also only chance.

Setting and context of *Hermitage Lost* were carefully researched: The story, based on facts, could easily have played out that way.

Also in his second novel the author processed own experience in the region as well as such gathered in the world of international business and finance.

The Author

For more than three decades Christian Schopper has been engaged in global banking and finance, foremost in emerging markets. Besides, he is member of visiting faculties for banking, finance and capital markets at several universities in Russia and the European Union. – After *Congo Limited*, *Hermitage Lost* is his second novel.

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Categories

- Crime Fiction
- Business Crime
- Arts-Related Crime

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"Believing in art is like going to church."
Wolfgang Beltracchi

Background

My affinity to the arts is due to having spent a fair amount of time in working with artists, collectors, gallery owners in Europe and Russia. Besides, I ran workshops on arts-related topics, such as about those markets' unique (or: archaic?) mechanisms: Remarkably, the – vastly unregulated - arts markets still offer all sorts of possibilities long since impossible elsewhere, for example big-scale money laundering. Hence, it may not come as a surprise that entire collections of Picassos, Monets or Warhols have been traded for industrial assets somewhere far off in international waters.

The idea to write *Hermitage Lost* came several years ago during a visit of an important, well-known private collection: Today, it is no more secret, how the founder behind it, a lawyer and trustee, made his fortune. Also, several of his illustrious clients have meanwhile been disclosed: Foremost individuals who once sought advice in delicate financial matters. – Imagine the day, I speculated, when the democratically elected successor of one of the collector's clients (a former dictator, perhaps?) laid claim on parts of the collection. - Reason? Damage caused by assisting in shifting and concealing looted assets.

Serious research for *Hermitage Lost* began about two years ago: It was in Moscow, where I met this very charming lady, fluent in German and English, already well in her 90s (she passed away only recently). For decades, she had run the world-renowned Pushkin Museum in Moscow. But there was one aspect which was even more fascinating: In the closing stages of WWII, Stalin had made her responsible for sorting and storing art works looted by the Red Army. To this day, most of these treasures are kept in secret vaults all over the country, related archives still off-limits. Candidly, thousands of works held there had previously been aryanized – hic: looted - by the Nazis, only to be looted by the Red Army some years later.

Despite I hate to say this, but Russia's history is littered with tragedies. One of them concerns the country's vast cultural heritage: Around the year 2005, a decades-long systematic theft from Russian museums was acknowledged and made public. Recent estimates suggest that across the country approximately two million items have gone missing from collections since the times of Perestroika. Naturally, one of the prime targets was the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. - Playing around with words, the story's title *Hermitage Lost*

emerged, referring to a vanished part of Russia's cultural heritage.

The arts world is rich of characters but also anecdotes, not least due to its markets' discretion, secrecy, lack of transparency. Some of them have found their way into the story of *Hermitage Lost*: For instance, art forger Jan van Meegeren, who actually tricked Göring with a fake Vermeer. When caught after WWII - in relations to a different case, though -, no one believed him when confessing that he himself was the gifted forger: In earnest, he was asked to prove it. – Or, according to a prominent gallerist, not too long ago President Putin was given a painting by a Russian neo-romantic, later this turned out to be a forgery: A guest at his home recognized it as a work he had seen under another name at a western European auction, offered there for almost nothing. – Besides: With the neo-romantic period still very popular in Russia, numerous cases have surfaced whereby cheap Austrian or German Biedermeier-period works were upgraded and traded for a substantial margin after having been "russified" – by adding figures in traditional, local costume or putting typical onion domes on top of church towers.

Russia has been an essential part of my professional, but also private life. Therefore, *Hermitage Lost* is not least a reflection of what I have seen and experienced over the years: Next to meetings with awkward oligarchs (some are nice and charming, though), wild taxi rides, lengthy journeys on local trains (elektrichkas), or the life on remote dachas in the middle of Siberia. The country is full of surprises, also hurdles, certainly for first-time visitors, starting with seemingly simple challenges, such as the purchase of a ticket at a railways station. Leave alone more tricky ones, such as getting the sequence of toasts right after a dozen shots of vodka.

As large parts of *Hermitage Lost* are set in Russia, the story naturally refers to the entanglement between the Kremlin, senior officials in the administration, the church and many an oligarch. Also, references are made to the inconsistencies, often absurdities observed in relations to investigations or persecutions of (by times: faked, fabricated?) crimes. It is no secret that parts of police, the administration and courts are corrupt and prone to interventions to accommodate business, clan or political interests. - On the other hand, though, *Hermitage Lost* is also about the enormous warmth, friendliness and hospitality of Russia's ordinary people, as well as the dooms suffered and fortunes made during and in the aftermath of the Perestroika.

Some of *Hermitage Lost*'s characters are already known from Congo Limited. Also the story's

structure and intentions behind writing it are broadly similar: Bloodshed restricted to a minimum, instead, focus is on the entanglements between the arts markets, business and – by times – politics. Whereby the Rembrandt (never seen, till the end hidden in some art storage facility in some free-trade zone, probably in Geneva) serves as a symbol for art looted, stolen, traded, faked, but also as a study object to look behind motives why art is actually acquired and held and why some people are so absolutely obsessed about it. - And, as it turns out, upcoming elections in the DR Congo could very well have to do with systematic thefts from the Hermitage Museum or art forgery.

Also the case of *Hermitage Lost* may never be entirely resolved. However, the newspaper clippings at the very end of the story help to close some of the gaps. Not least they are a reflection on the cynicism of our times.