1 november 2001 **The Curse of the Sevso Silver**

A treasure trove of Roman-era silver, perhaps worth $200 million as a complete collection, came to light in the late 1970s - most likely discovered by a Hungarian laborer. He had little sense of the value of his find. In the years that followed, efforts to sell the silver have led to a web of plots and counterplots, the close attention of police officials in several European capitals, and, quite possibly, three murders
Peter Landesman November 2001 Issue [of The Atlantic]

He lies like an eyewitness. - RUSSIAN PROVERB

i.

The village of Polgardi is a dusty roadside settlement northeast of Lake Balaton, a resort area in western Hungary popular with German tourists. Two thousand years ago Balaton was popular with Romans, a kind of Jersey Shore for the generals who ruled Pannonia, the immense Roman province that encompassed parts of today's Croatia, Bosnia, and Yugoslavia, along with parts of Hungary, Romania, and Albania. The region was a hub of the Roman Empire, the site of countless wars, and crisscrossed by trade routes. In the fourth and fifth centuries Goths and Vandals swept down from the north, and the Romans bolted, leaving behind the lavish wreckage of their occupation. Ever since, the Balaton area has been a rich hunting ground for archaeologists and treasure seekers. Workers at a stone quarry outside Polgardi often found coins and other artifacts, and in the years following World War II a lively trade developed between locals and the Hungarian and Soviet soldiers stationed nearby. Some of the loot was semi-valuable, but most was essentially ancient junk: bent coins, ceramic fragments.

According to the Hungarian government and police officials, on a warm day in 1978 Jozsef Sumegh, twenty-two years old, was doing a routine excavation at the Polgardi quarry when his shovel hit metal. He unearthed something the likes of which no one in the modern world had ever seen: a copper cauldron, about three feet in diameter and one foot deep, containing cunningly crafted silver plates, ewers, an amphora, and a basin of the Roman era. The treasure is known to have included at least fourteen pieces and may have included as many as thirty. The cauldron was encrusted with grime, and blackened by a cooking fire that had gone out more than 1,600 years before. The silver was barnacled by centuries of detritus, and Sumegh could not possibly have known exactly what he had found, though he must have sensed that it was extraordinary. It would turn out to be one of the most beautiful and valuable treasures ever to have survived from the ancient world.

A few months later Sumegh quit his job without explanation and moved to Budapest. He lived in a hostel. He took menial jobs. He came home every other week, and he told his family next to nothing about his life. But relatives noticed that he had taken to wearing Levi's jeans and American shirts, extravagant, expensive, and bold fashion for Communist Hungary. The only place to buy clothes like that was the flea market near the Budapest airport, a mangy fiefdom of tents and stalls ruled by Gypsies and black marketeers, where the right contacts could get one anything from belt buckles to diamonds to automatic weapons. In those days any Hungarian who wanted to unload something unusual and potentially troublesome went to the flea market.

After a few months, in early 1979, Sumegh left Budapest to fulfill his national-service requirement. He was assigned to the army barracks in Papa, a half hour's drive from Polgardi. But before he left for the army, evidence suggests, he buried the cauldron and its contents - minus at least three pieces of the silver, which he may have sold - in the dirt floor of a wine cellar adjacent to the quarry.

How many people Sumegh told about his find is unclear. Zoltan Fodelmesi, the principal of the local school, an avid coin collector who often traded with Sumegh, says he remembers once being asked to Sumegh's house. The house was divided into two rooms. The entire family - Sumegh, his two young brothers, and their parents - slept in one of them. Sumegh's find was locked away in the other. Only he and his mother had access.

Fodelmesi, now in his seventies, is stooped, his cheeks and chest sunken. He wears an expression of perpetual worry. He says that he knew from the beginning that knowledge of the treasure was dangerous; today, more than twenty years after Sumegh showed it to him, he says he is still afraid for his life. Fodelmesi advised Sumegh to take the find to the national museum in Budapest. Most countries offer a reward for the surrender of found antiquities, but Hungary's citizens are required to turn everything they find over to the state museums, and they may only receive a small fee in return. Sumegh had no incentive to do anything but sell - which is what he told

Fodelmesi he was going to do. "And not cheap," he said. He'd had his eye on a plot of land in the village, and he wanted to buy it and build a house on it.

No one knows for sure exactly how the treasure began to find its way to market. The most likely scenario, based on interviews and circumstantial evidence, is that someone at the Budapest flea market - who also had no idea what he was dealing with - took a few pieces off Sumegh's hands. Somehow three pieces of the silver wound up in Vienna, a center of the antiquities trade, in the possession of two antiquities dealers, Halim Korban and his partner Anton Tkalec. Korban is a Lebanese who sold icons and minor antiquities out of a shop in the Vienna Hilton. Tkalec (pronounced Ka-litz) is a Yugoslav Serb who had developed a business selling mostly Greek and Roman coins in Zurich. His personal and political connections are believed to have run all the way to the top of the Yugoslav government. Some of those who know Tkalec say that after Sumegh passed through the flea market, Tkalec got three pieces of the silver. The first thing Tkalec would have done, they speculate, is to find out just what he had. He wasn't an antiquities expert - he was a coin guy. Korban was the one with contacts in the antiquities world.

In November of 1980 one piece of the silver was sold to a dealer consortium called the Art Consultancy. On November 24 Korban flew to London with a package. In the package was a piece of the treasure, a silver ewer or pitcher. Korban took the ewer to a web of antiquities dealers at the center of which was Peter Wilson, then sixty-seven and recently retired as the chairman of Sotheby's. Wilson was the art market's pre-eminent power broker. He had the piece taken to the British Museum for evaluation. The dealers had thought the piece was Islamic - nice but not special. After a little cleaning the museum realized that it had something Roman - and spectacular - on its hands.

Most of the pieces in Sumegh's treasure are decorated with images: exotic beasts, Achilles and Ulysses, Castor and Pollux, Atalanta. The handles of the amphora are solid silver panthers. A wine pitcher one and a half feet tall shows the revels of Bacchus in gilt. A pear-shaped pitcher of the same size has ten sides divided into 120 hexagonal panels, each with gilded figures of hunters and wild animals. What Tkalec and Korban at least suspected - and later confirmed - was that the treasure included several enormous plates, up to two and a half feet across, several inches thick, and weighing up to eighteen pounds apiece. The centerpiece is a plate engraved and inlaid with a skill that experts say is unequaled in all of surviving Roman-era silversmithing. The plate has a Latin inscription: "Let these, O Sevso, be vessels fit to serve your descendants worthily." Experts believe that Sevso was a Roman general. The antiquities curator at the Hungarian national museum, in Budapest, told me that the only ancient workshop capable of craftsmanship like this was in Thessaloniki, in Greece. Had the entire hoard been sold together, it might have pulled as much as $200 million. Any museum in the world would consider the treasure to be its most important Roman-era possession, and any country would be eager to claim it as national patrimony.

Around the time that one piece was shown to the British Museum, Jozsef Sumegh returned to Polgardi, in Hungary. He was to be discharged from the army in a few weeks, and the army had allowed him a short leave. Before he reached home, he stopped in at a local bar. Two strangers in civilian clothes walked in and asked for him by name. The three started talking, and were seen leaving the bar together. The bartender remembers Sumegh as being drunk. The men crossed the road and then a series of fields, heading toward the wine cellar where Sumegh had stashed the treasure.

Sumegh never made it home. Two days later two Polgardi quarry workers, whose job it was to clear inhabited areas before blasting, spotted the wine cellar. Snow covered the ground, and as they approached they saw three sets of footprints leading to the cellar door but only two leading away. One of the workers remembers that two sets of footprints had been made by distinctive Soviet military boots. The workers stepped inside and found Sumegh hanging by his neck from the rafters; but Sumegh's knees were touching the floor, and limestone dust from the quarry marked his clothes, as though he had lain on the ground. Medical reports revealed that he had not died from asphyxiation. Beneath his feet, in the dirt floor, the police found a circular patch roughly three feet in diameter. It looked like a hole that had been filled in. If the Sevso treasure had indeed been hidden in this place, it was now gone.

Over the next two months two more people were found dead close by. One, a co-worker and close friend of Sumegh's, had been fed poisoned cheese. Another of Sumegh's friends was found hung by the neck in a forest. Though the police could not officially link the incidents, the deaths seem an unlikely coincidence.

ii.

The itinerary of most antiquities from their source - tomb, temple, quarry - to the shelves of museums or private collectors is murky and often purposely concealed.

Western museums are filled with objects harvested from Third World nations, often in violation of cultural-patrimony laws and export regulations. Coveted objects pass along a sort of food chain that begins with peasants and grave robbers trying to eke out a living; these people unload their discoveries on local agents and middlemen, who sell to dealers and smugglers operating on an international level. Most governments claim that anything found on - or under - their soil is national property, so black-market dealers must quickly cut an object's ties to its country of origin, or muck up its story to the point where a reconstruction of events is impossible. Few questions are asked, deals get forgotten, export licenses are forged, customs officials are bribed to look the other way. Once stolen antiquities have passed through enough hands and acquired enough bills of sale, their origins effectively laundered into oblivion, they will appear legitimate enough to be bought in happy ignorance and clear conscience at the highest levels - by private collectors, auction houses, and museums.

Melted down, silver is worth a little more than four dollars an ounce. But carved, inlaid, and engraved, and identified with a particular year, it becomes the direct reflection, often the literal record, of human history, our movement through time. And time casts a magic spell over what were once simply the last known artifacts to leave an artisan's studio. They are worth whatever a person is willing to pay for heritage - his or someone else's. Of course, this also speaks to our quest for the authentic and the sacred. A nation's claim on antiquities is an attempt at national immortalization. And so antiquity's betrayal - its faking, its looting, its destruction - is seen as more than a petty crime; it is an act of national violation. A soberer view, shared by some museum personnel and antiquities collectors, holds that immensely valuable and historically important artifacts like the Elgin Marbles and the Sevso silver treasure cannot be claimed by any one country, because they are human resources, buried by the vicissitudes of time. A Picasso, by this logic, does not automatically belong to Spain, or a Hopper to America, or a Michelangelo to Italy. The argument is a smuggler's call to arms.

Today art crime is a multibillion-dollar-a-year business, eclipsed in illegal commerce only by drug smuggling and weapons dealing. More and more often, stolen and smuggled art is moved along the same routes, and by the same people, as drugs. The FBI and U.S. Customs are gravely concerned about growing links between the antiquities trade and organized crime. Two years ago a huge collection of Greco-Roman antiquities worth more than $2 million, snatched from a museum in Corinth, was discovered hidden in fish crates in Miami. It was packed in the same manner as a $24 million shipment of Mafia-controlled cocaine discovered not long before. One reason art crime is becoming more popular is that the penalties are far less severe than they are for drugs. Getting caught with a Roman bust might result in a few years' imprisonment for larceny. But get caught with 100 kilos of heroin and the sentence is approximately twenty years to life. Only 10 percent of stolen art is ever recovered, which means that once sucked into the art underworld, valuable artifacts are almost never returned to their owners.

iii.

My connection with the story of the Sevso silver treasure began in late November of 1999, in the course of a phone call from a Dutchman named Michel van Rijn. I had met Van Rijn the previous March, in London. We were introduced by Charles Hill, formerly the detective chief inspector of Scotland Yard's Art and Antiques Squad. I had been writing about art crime, and Hill thought it might be illuminating for me to meet Van Rijn, whom he described as a true impresario and "art-world operator; a sometime smuggler, dealer, and thief; and a fount of information - but not knowledge or wisdom - on art history and art crime." Van Rijn was also a Scotland Yard informant. In other words, he played all sides.

Van Rijn met the two of us for lunch. He is a broad man in his late forties, handsome through his bloat, with a shock of dark hair and a stripe of a moustache. His face was tinctured orange by an out-of-the-can tan, and he wore a pink shirt under a plaid suit and a Hermès tie with an Egyptian motif. Below his Savile Row cuff jangled four pastel-colored bracelets. His agate eyes darted with the watchfulness of a man long on the run.

Over lunch Van Rijn talked about all the things he had bought and sold: toys, paintings, music boxes, steam calliopes, Old Master paintings and drawings. He owned a warehouse outside Amsterdam, he said, where he kept much of his trove. I asked him, half in jest, if he was related to Rembrandt van Rijn. He nodded, and added that on his mother's side he was descended from the painter Peter Paul Rubens. I didn't know whether these claims were true, or whether he believed them to be. But then I realized that whether he did or not didn't matter. One thing about Michel van Rijn

was to become abundantly clear: to him, an insistence on truth is annoying and boring. It makes human communication cumbersome and self-defeating.
He was not simply a con man - though he did have many of the qualities that con artists have: a yearning for solitude, a love of freedom, a hatred for authority, and enormous powers of fantasy. He signed letters and notes with a cartoon drawing of a man with a devilish grin smoking a long cigarette. But Van Rijn also possessed a wealth of knowledge about the art underworld, from the smuggling of icons out of Russia to the corruption of major auction houses to various sting operations aimed at recovering stolen art.

Lunch was polite and introductory. Eight months later Van Rijn called me in New York and said we had something crucial to talk about. But we couldn't talk by phone. I had to come to Tenerife, a Spanish protectorate off the coast of Morocco. He told me to pack for a few weeks. Then he asked me if I'd heard of the Sevso silver treasure.
By then the sordid, labyrinthine story of the Sevso silver had already begun to attract a certain amount of public attention. In February of 1990 Sotheby's announced the upcoming sale of a treasure that consisted of fourteen pieces of silver, which their brochure said had been discovered "in what was once the province of Phoenicia in the Eastern Roman Empire" - what is now Lebanon. Sotheby's believed that the silver could sell for upwards of $150 million. On February 9 the London Independent had published several articles about Sotheby's auction, reporting that although the provenance was unknown, the treasure was thought to have been found in either Lebanon or Eastern Europe. The morning they ran, one of their two authors, a journalist named David Keys, received a phone call from a man who gave the story a new twist, which the Independent revealed a month later. That article said that the Sevso silver had most likely been found in the early 1970s by elite Yugoslav troops on military territory near the town of Pula, on the Istrian Peninsula of Croatia. The tip confused rather than clarified matters - and that may have been the intention. In the antiquities world smugglers and sellers attempt to cover their tracks either with total silence or with confusing details and alternatives. Keys's source obviously had an interest in kinking the chain that led back to the treasure's origins. (Keys would not reveal his source.)
Sotheby's lavish brochure described the treasure as the "most important Late Antique silver ever to be offered publicly for sale." The seller was a British aristocrat - Spencer Douglas David Compton, Marquess of Northampton, who was then listed as the ninety-fourth richest man in England. The Art Consultancy had brought in Northampton as their primary investor. What the brochure did not say was that Northampton had bought part of the treasure several years before, that he had been trying to unload it ever since, and that whoever had sold it to him had gone to extraordinary lengths to plant evidence of a discovery in Lebanon.
Northampton told the police in 1990, soon after they had begun to investigate the Sevso silver, that he doesn't have much business sense and didn't doubt what he was being told about its origins. Halim Korban and Anton Tkalec had taken whatever pieces of the treasure they had - acquired by means that remain a mystery - and begun to enact a classic bazaar stratagem. They doled out the silver one or two pieces at a time, first to the Art Consultancy, then to Northampton. Weeks or months later another morsel, and then another, would appear. Knowing that a partial treasure is worth nowhere near what a whole one is, Northampton kept buying. Eventually he spent somewhere around $16 million, and got fourteen pieces - the complete treasure, or so he thought. He never intended to keep the treasure, considering it purely an investment. He'd been promised by his advisers that he would at least triple his money by reselling. He had met Korban and Tkalec a few times. At one point he asked about the origins of the silver and was told that it had been found in the Tyre and Sidon regions of Lebanon. He had no reason to think otherwise.

"The first of the silver sold with no documentation at all, not even a receipt," Richard Ellis, then a detective sergeant at Scotland Yard, says. "Peter Mimpriss [Northampton's lawyer] insisted some invoices be provided. Korban provided these invoices. They needed a story to show where it came from. They couldn't say it came from Hungary, because the Hungarians would say they wanted the treasure back." There were also a few bodies lying around, possibly connected with the Sevso silver. "So Hungary was out of the question. The next obvious place was across the border [in Yugoslavia], where Tkalec himself came from. Then Korban, being Lebanese, and having influential family members - both his sisters were believed to be married to generals in the Christian militia - obtained Lebanese export licenses." A London-based antiquities dealer who once worked with Tkalec told me that at first Tkalec had merely been vague about the silver's origins. Later Tkalec told him that he'd bought the silver from Gypsies in the Macedonian town of Strumica. Shortly after the fake

Lebanese export licenses had been obtained, the dealer said to Tkalec, "But you told me it came from Macedonia." To which Tkalec replied, "Well, now it comes from Lebanon."

Northampton and his advisers soon ran into problems. Their prime target for resale had always been the wealthiest museum in the world, the J. Paul Getty Museum, in Los Angeles, and at first the museum was eager. "It was a phenomenal thing," says Marion True, the Getty's curator of antiquities. "Extremely interesting iconography on a fabulous scale. It would have been on a par with other great treasures. It was of tremendous importance." But the Getty's associate curator of antiquities at the time, Arthur Houghton III, noticed inconsistencies in the forged Lebanese licenses. He had lived in the Middle East for years, and was fluent in Arabic; he saw immediately that the same name had been signed in different handwriting. The Getty wanted the treasure's pedigree to be documented well enough to show that the museum had practiced due diligence. The real origin of the treasure mattered less than credible documentation that it had passed through good hands and was therefore a legitimate target for acquisition. According to the Yard, Peter Mimpriss tried to rectify the forgery problem by arranging for new Lebanese documents. His agent in Beirut, Ramiz Rizk, sent Mimpriss a telex implying that Lebanon's director of the department of museums could be induced to provide documents that would look authentic. "He is a very honest and careful man and has indicated that in no way he will accept any present. But I am persisting and have not made my offer yet and I am guided by my motto 'If he has a mouth he will eat.'" Later that day Mimpriss replied, by telex, "We look forward to hearing the result of your meeting with the Managing Director... We hope he is still hungry."

Houghton suspected foul play and urged the Getty to pull out of the deal, and eventually it did. The museum might have gone for the treasure had the sellers been more careful in their ruse. (A spokesman for Peter Mimpriss, James Broomfield, says, "We would not regard it as either productive or appropriate to re-enter discussions about that.")

Faced with the collapse of a story line for the silver's provenance, and thus with the loss of his investment, Northampton called Tkalec, wanting to know where the silver had come from. Tkalec's "reaction was to say that I was mad to want to know where it had come from," Northampton said in a statement to the British police in 1990. "He continued that if I knew, it would create much more trouble... I have spoken to Tkalec on the telephone on other occasions recently when he has contacted me. On one such occasion... he told me that it was important that I destroy the... copper basin," which Northampton had bought with the silver. The cauldron was crucial to Hungary's claim on the silver. According to the police and to archaeological experts, soil samples from the cauldron, which Northampton had released for testing, and microorganisms from the silver matched those from the Polgardi region.

Before the auction was announced, Sotheby's notified the twenty-nine countries whose territory had once made up the Roman Empire of the impending sale of the Sevso treasure. This was a matter of due diligence, more or less expected by the art world. Sotheby's received three indignant replies: from Yugoslavia, on behalf of Croatia, whose officials had been electrified by the scant information in a March Independent article; from Lebanon, probably owing to the bogus claim about the treasure's origins; and from Hungary, which insisted that the treasure had been found in its soil, that the man who unearthed it had been murdered, and that the silver was a critical piece of its cultural patrimony.

The three countries sued Northampton for the treasure's return, in the state supreme court in New York City - where Sotheby's was displaying the silver. The silver was immediately locked away in a New York vault. The Hungarians seem to have had the strongest case. The word "Pelso," inscribed on the most magnificent of the Sevso plates, was the known Roman name for Lake Balaton, and below it was an engraved image of water. Scientific data - soil samples swabbed from the silver itself - placed the treasure's burial site in an area with a geological makeup identical to western Hungary's. And sitting in a museum in Budapest was a silver tripod decorated with many of the same exquisite carvings and depictions of the hunt, which had been found in Polgardi in 1873. The antiquities curator at the Hungarian national museum told me that archaeologists who examined both the tripod and the Sevso treasure concluded that it was all most likely made by the same hand. Then there was the story of Jozsef Sumegh. His death, originally recorded as a suicide by military investigators, is now believed to be a murder. His surviving friends and family members had recently been interviewed. A strong circumstantial case had surfaced that Sumegh had been murdered over the silver.

But in court all three countries were badly outmaneuvered by Northampton's lawyers. Citing evidentiary rules, the judge in the case, Beatrice Shainswit, refused to allow

the tripod or the allegations regarding Jozsef Sumegh's death to be submitted as evidence. Still, even though the Hungarians couldn't wrest the silver from Northampton, uncertainty about the treasure's origins made it difficult to sell, and Northampton was stuck with his fourteen pieces of silver. (He sued his lawyers and, according to the Birmingham Post, was awarded almost $40 million in an out-of-court settlement.)

The loss in court did not deter the Hungarian government, which believed that there were at least thirty pieces to the treasure - that a second half, presumably as valuable as Northampton's cache, was somewhere out there up for grabs. What the Hungarians now wanted to know was who had the missing silver and where it was. Short of expertise and resources, but determined, Hungary appealed for help from Scotland Yard's famous Art and Antiques Squad.

In May of 1990 Dick Ellis's partner, Detective Sergeant Tony Russell, flew to Indianapolis to interview an antiquities collector named Peg Goldberg. The Art and Antiques Squad had heard that Goldberg knew something about the Sevso treasure. Goldberg had recently bought four valuable early-Christian mosaics for about $1 million, not knowing that they had been looted from a Cypriot church. Forced to surrender the mosaics, during and after her ordeal she learned more about the underground antiquities trade than she cared to know. It was Michel van Rijn who had engineered the sale of the mosaics, and it was Van Rijn who had later blown the whistle and led the police to the goods.

Goldberg told Russell that she thought she had been shown one of the huge plates - and not one from Northampton's trove. This seemed to confirm that there was more to the treasure than Northampton's pieces. Goldberg asked Russell if he would like to talk to someone who knew more about the treasure than she did. He said yes. Russell says she put him in touch with Van Rijn.

In the early 1990s Van Rijn was in the United States, secretly collaborating with the FBI and the DEA, he says. He had landed in St. Louis. According to a front-page story in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in 1992, in short order Van Rijn moved into a rented mansion, persuaded a local businessman to pay $650,000 for a "Rembrandt" and an "El Greco," and tried to fob off a painting of the Madonna as a Leonardo on a curator at a St. Louis museum. Another source said that Van Rijn had borrowed $500,000 from a wealthy candy distributor and that he owed other money all over town. The article said that by the time bill collectors and repo men converged at the mansion, Van Rijn was gone.

But he soon turned up in Indianapolis, apparently eager to talk to Russell. And Russell was eager to talk to him. But for some reason Van Rijn didn't give Russell any useful information on this occasion. The years went by, and then, in 1998, he told the Yard that he knew who had the missing silver, where it was, and how it could be rescued. "We heard about the usual Michel trail of devastation," Ellis told me later. "On the one hand having some people over, on the other putting a few things right. He'd been having his fun with the art-business world and the FBI."

Ellis called Eva Hajdu-Bankuti, the commissioner of the Sevso treasure in the Hungarian Ministry of Culture, and came back to Van Rijn with an offer. "He agreed to help us flesh this out for a reward," Ellis recalled. The Hungarians, according to Van Rijn, agreed to pay him $1.7 million if he got back their treasure.

iv.

In early December of 1999 Van Rijn called me in New York. A few days later I was waiting for him in the lobby of the leafy colonial Hotel Mencey, in Tenerife. He arrived accompanied by a tall, very beautiful young woman who looked to be in her thirties. He carried a briefcase and wore an expression of brooding concentration. Everyone who worked in the hotel seemed to know him, and he nodded to various figures standing around the lobby. His handshake was perfunctory. He told me he had some business to attend to and asked me to wait. He and the young woman sat on a couch across from me and began to look through a book of Picasso reproductions. Van Rijn turned the pages, stopping at certain images, gesturing as if he was drawing in the air. The woman leaned forward, elbows on her knees, nodding. At one point Van Rijn rose and crossed to me and asked if I had a copy of an article I had written for The New York Times Magazine about a British forger and a con man who had conspired to sell fake Giacomettis and Chagalls through the world's top auction houses. What had made the scam surprising was the shocking mediocrity of the pictures and the almost willful self-delusion of the buyers. I did have a copy, because Van Rijn had asked me to bring it. He and the woman looked it over, pointing at the pictures of the fakes. They laughed and shook their heads in amazement. Then the woman kissed Van Rijn good-bye and left.

Van Rijn came over to sit with me. He asked if I knew who David Stein was. Stein, a former art dealer from France who is believed to live now in Monaco, was once one of the world's most notorious forgers, specializing in Picasso, Chagall, Matisse, and others. He had done jail time. But, Van Rijn said, Stein wasn't as good as everyone thought. The young woman who had just left was the master talent, the source of Stein's genius. She had done most of his best work. Van Rijn wanted to encourage her. He wanted her to paint him some Picassos. I never knew whether the woman was a real faker or Van Rijn had presented her to me just for show.

We moved to the hotel's sparsely populated patio, where a young man in a waistcoat was singing pop songs, accompanying himself on a synthesizer. When Van Rijn entered, the singer nodded at him and segued into the theme song from The Godfather. Van Rijn's eyes moistened. "He's playing that for me," he said, sitting down with a sigh. When the song was over, Van Rijn was the only one who clapped.

Van Rijn told me that he now lived in Tenerife, in self-exile with his wife and two of his children, in a villa with a view of the sea. He had abandoned his London townhouse six months before, he said, because he'd been receiving death threats. From whom he wouldn't say, but he alluded to Iranian smugglers he had exposed as having sold looted antiquities to the Miho Museum, in Japan. In the early nineties, he said, he had moved back to London from New York after the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston, was robbed of three Rembrandts and a Vermeer. Van Rijn leaned forward. He said he had been an early suspect in the robbery, and had skipped town just ahead of the FBI. He hadn't arranged the heist, he said, but he knew who had, and where the paintings might be. He said something suggestive about art's sometimes being stolen as leverage to get out of another kind of jam - getting caught smuggling drugs, for instance. If he exposed the Gardner conspiracy, he said, he'd almost certainly be killed. Then he sat back. He said that when all this was over, by which he meant the Sevso affair, he would have to move yet again. He mentioned Bali. He mentioned various Caribbean destinations. "We've lived in eight countries," he said wearily. He made an elaborate ceremony of lighting his cigarette, squinted through the smoke, and sighed. "So," he said breezily. "Sevso."

He complained that in the past few years The Company (which is what he sometimes called Scotland Yard) hadn't gotten anywhere, that it had bungled the operation. I asked him what operation he was talking about, and he waved me off - he'd fill me in on everything later. "Everything - slowly, slowly," he said, gently reproaching me. It was to be the subtext of every conversation Van Rijn and I would have in the future: he had the information, he had the control. Language that passed between Van Rijn and someone else was rarely a conversation. It was usually a skirmish. One was always too eager, always underinformed. He would lead one to the light, but one had to wait. He said it was about manners, but really it was about power.

Eventually Van Rijn told me that the Hungarians were getting impatient. They had gone around the Yard and approached him directly. They had asked him to open negotiations with Anton Tkalec, to pay Tkalec outright for the rest of the treasure. They hoped to win back Northampton's portion in court and put the entire collection on display in the national museum. Van Rijn was trying to build a case that connected Tkalec not only to the silver but also to the murders. Although Tkalec was an initial suspect in the murders, neither the Hungarians nor Scotland Yard has been able to prove his involvement, and Tkalec denies that he was even in Hungary at the time. "Tkalec is willing to play ball as long as he gets immunity for the murders," Van Rijn said. "He's holding sixteen pieces. I'm going to succeed where Scotland Yard failed."

"Look," he later said, "in the art business you don't have friends and don't expect to make friends. You are fighting a war where no prisoners are taken. I am no saint, but I have some dignity left, and that's the part I want to live with the rest of my life... Some people get hurt. You can't do it endlessly [the rip-offs]. You have a conscience. You have to live with it. My conscience is to fuck Tkalec, nail the guy. But what do we do? We're going to make him rich, bring him one and a half million pounds and immunity."

Van Rijn's stream-of-consciousness sounded like a recitation, as though he'd said it before - and many times. I already knew that he liked to talk to journalists and often invited them to hear his stories and to witness the unfolding of events. Sevso, he later assured me, was going to be his last hurrah. He had been seized with a different sort of ambition. Van Rijn had been writing. In 1993 he published a ghost-written memoir, Hot Art, Cold Cash, that details his many schemes, duplicities, and amorous adventures. The book opens with a fifteen-year-old Van Rijn in Amsterdam selling sheepskin coats he'd bought in Istanbul, then quickly moves to him smuggling Byzantine icons out of Russia, then to fencing looted antiquities, and then to forging them. He'd lived and operated in Amsterdam, Paris, London, Palm Beach, Beirut. He was imprisoned in Spain. The book is fun and light, full of bravado, and some portions of it might even be true, though no one - perhaps not even Van Rijn -

can be certain which. In 1999 he published a novel in his native Holland, The Mecca Manuscript, an art-world thriller populated with busty female spies and dastardly villains. He had even begun to write a soap opera about the Sevso mystery, with him as the protagonist. "I'm ending my career," he said. "Mind you, never say never. But I want to be a full-time writer. And I want to go out of this business with a bang."

Van Rijn leaned back, rooted in his pants pocket, and brought out a large coin. It looked old. He began to play with it. "It's worth a million dollars," he told me. Then he lowered his voice an octave and gestured grandly with his cigarette. "I was involved from the start [of the Sevso affair] with Korban, who I know from Beirut - a nice guy, but afraid of his own shadow. He was used by Tkalec, and was not strong enough to stand up to him. He doesn't have the weapons to defend himself. He made a lot of money selling the treasure piece by piece. But Tkalec can never share, he can never give. He's dangerous. He was a small-time crook and coin dealer who clawed his way up. He has this grocery mentality. He's not the kind of dealer who adds to the market. He skims the market; he always takes. When I dealt with him, I disliked him. I wanted to put him in his place there and then. Tkalec is the guy I would love to bring down at the end of my career. For me, this is my For Whom the Bell Tolls. The game is over."

It now seemed obvious that what Van Rijn craved, and wanted from me, was his very own Boswell, a chronicler of his last "bang." But the safer move for him seemed to be to walk away. There was his family to worry about, and the next, dreaded decampment. I suggested this to Van Rijn. His eyes took on a faraway look. Again he leaned in. "Kavla," he said, and then sat back. His entire life, he said, had been based on the pursuit of a sensation he learned of while apprenticing as a fur trader in the bazaars of Turkey: kavla, the moment in sex just before climax, a state of pleasurable frenzy when everything is still possible and disappointment has not yet occurred. In the marketplace kavla is the moment just before a deal is sealed. It is a moment to be savored, Van Rijn said, if not extended for as long as possible.

Later, in London, I was to hear a story that suggested another, less prosaic reason Van Rijn had it in for Tkalec. In Amsterdam a few years before, Van Rijn's life had been seriously, and verifiably, in danger over an art scam with some Yugoslavs that went sour. Van Rijn laid low for a while, and during his absence rumors circulated that he had been killed. Around that time, when a minor dealer accused Tkalec of cheating him, Tkalec reportedly warned, "Be careful, or you'll end up like the Dutchman" - meaning Van Rijn. Van Rijn confirmed the story, and admitted that when he heard what Tkalec had said, he vowed to exact revenge one day. It was, he said, a point of honor.

But Van Rijn may have had yet another, more psychologically probable reason for wanting to bring down Tkalec: professional envy. In the early nineties Korban was interrogated by Scotland Yard about the Sevso treasure, and was asked about his relationship with Van Rijn. Korban replied, "I have nothing against him, but I knew I would never make business with him, deal with him directly, because he ..." Korban trailed off. Then he said, "He was really, at the start, when I met him, in 1972,... a very nice chap, very honest, very correct. But later on he started to have difficulties." Korban was asked if he had ever offered Van Rijn the silver. "No," he replied, "but he came to me trying to pick up on me, if I have something. I told him, 'Look, sorry, you are not a client. If you were a client maybe we could speak.' That's all, but he was possibly jealous. He knew that I was selling the silver."

Van Rijn also had a history of inviting journalists into his world and luring them away from their objectivity. Exposing or entrapping a con man, after all, sometimes means also becoming one - entering into a circular conspiracy of seduction, deception, and self-deception in which one makes a show of being convinced, and then thinks one is convinced, until, finally, one is convinced. In the world of antiquities the origins of everything are shrouded in lies and silence. But everything is also on offer: trust, friendship, and especially information. Early on Van Rijn asked for a commitment from me to cut him in on any film option arising from my story about the Sevso silver. It was inevitable that, always hyperconscious of himself as a man playing an actor playing Michel van Rijn, he would contemplate how Hollywood might portray him. It was also inevitable that mere access was going to cost me an entrance fee. I agreed to a deal.

v.

When I asked people to talk about Anton Tkalec, I got the feeling I was putting a gun to their heads. No one knows Tkalec. Even the ones who do don't. Coin and antiquities dealers in the United States and Europe shrug, smirk, or wag their heads when his name comes up. On the phone dealers were too polite to hang up, but all I got was

sighs and silence.
Few details about Tkalec are known. Now around fifty, Tkalec is a heavy-drinking, chain-smoking recluse who "likes to live in his own world with his cronies around him," according to a former associate of his, who has known him for twenty-seven years and would speak only anonymously. He was born in Belgrade. In the late 1960s he moved with his wife to Vienna, where he studied mechanical drawing and took a job as a draftsman in an architectural firm. Either he went to Vienna to escape military service or he decided not to return for duty once he was there; in any case, he couldn't return to Belgrade without being arrested. According to Belgrade newspapers, he divorced, married an Austrian belly dancer, became an Austrian citizen, and at some point - no one knows when - began seriously to traffic in ancient coins. His sometime business partner and closest friend at the time, Victor Ristovic, was, according to sources in Belgrade, a crony and business associate of a man named Zeljko Raznatovic, who later became known as Arkan, a Serb paramilitary leader accused of war atrocities. (Street urchins, Ristovic and Raznatovic, according to common lore, defected to Italy at fifteen to learn the criminal trade. Raznatovic's trajectory is infamous: seduced by the glitter of hard-core smuggling, born again as a corrupt Serb "patriot" and then as an indicted war criminal, he was shot to death in the lobby of the Intercontinental Hotel in Belgrade in January, 2000.) Through his connections Tkalec is said to have had his strongest rivals in Belgrade harassed, raided, temporarily jailed, and ruined. In 1975 or 1976 he met Halim Korban. By then the Serbian Numismatic Society was reportedly tipping Tkalec off whenever anything valuable - coins, antiquities - appeared anywhere in Yugoslavia. When appropriate, he teamed up with Korban to sell the goods. Tkalec placed scouts throughout Serbia and Macedonia. He advanced Numismatic Society members money to buy anything of value on his behalf.
On April 29, 1990, nearly three months after Sotheby's announced the upcoming sale of Northampton's portion of the Sevso treasure, Tkalec and Ristovic were arrested while trying to enter Yugoslavia. The Serbian police interrogated Tkalec about the treasure for twenty-four hours and then released him. They held Ristovic for two more days. Neither was charged with anything. But stories began appearing in the Belgrade newspapers, quoting Ristovic as their main source and saying that the silver had been found on the Serbian-Macedonian border by Gypsies, who had then sold it to Tkalec for a song. Tkalec was working for the Serbian secret police, the papers said, perhaps as an informant, perhaps as penance for his draft-dodging. In his home town he was now larger than life, a rags-to-riches merchant who was dangerous and powerful. Very few people knew what he looked like.
By the early 1990s Tkalec was, by all accounts, hugely wealthy, at least in part because of his share of the Sevso proceeds. (Korban is thought to have made around $10 million.) He was the No. 1 coin dealer in the world. "He could buy up the entire coin trade with one of his bank accounts alone," the former associate of Tkalec's told me. "Everything will always fall in his direction. He is extremely clever. He's cultured. He has this amazing passion for coins. He understands the most ruthless levels as well as the finer points. Tkalec goes forward like a ratchet wheel, never slips backward. He is capable of working at an almost superhuman rate. He'll spend nights and nights awake cleaning coins."

vi.
The morning after we met in Tenerife, Van Rijn came up to my room at the Mencey and dropped his briefcase on the bed. He began to refer again to Scotland Yard's bungling of the Sevso operation. By then I knew enough to wait for clarity. He opened his briefcase. Inside were two dozen cassette tapes and a tape recorder. The cassettes were labeled in Van Rijn's hurried scrawl: "Double-cross," "No backing of Yard," "$1,000,000 to me as bait for Tkalec." Van Rijn has secretly recorded nearly every phone conversation he has had - with police officers, criminals, journalists. He has taped all the antagonists and protagonists of his life's daily dramas, because at any hour an ally might become an enemy, and might need reminding of the potentially damaging content of certain conversations. "They're not [Linda] Tripp tapes," he insisted. "I record them out of the preservation of life." He plugged in the recorder and began to tell me his side of a strange story.
Three months before, in September of 1999, still in search of his last bang, Van Rijn had informed his handlers at Scotland Yard that Tkalec and the missing portion of the Sevso hoard could now be had. Van Rijn's idea was a classic buy-and-bust operation: lure Tkalec into exposing the silver with a trick purchase and then seize the loot - and Tkalec. The plan required a decoy customer of supreme plausibility; that is, someone wealthy enough to contemplate spending a few tens of millions of dollars. Also, to calm Tkalec's legendary paranoia, it had to be someone who wouldn't run to the police if things went sour. Someone, in other words, who may well have had things

to hide. Van Rijn had the perfect candidate.
In late September, Van Rijn met with Yard detectives at the British embassy in Madrid. He had with him an old friend, a man he and the detectives had been referring to in telephone conversations as "our friend in Spain." The friend was Felice Cultrera, an amateur art-and-antiquities collector; the owner of casinos in Paris, Belgrade, and Prague; someone who was allegedly linked to the Sicilian drugrunning Santapaola Mafia; and a money man for the weapons merchant Adnan Kashoggi. A man, in other words, with resources, but also with ambitions and plans of his own. Described as lithe, well-tailored, and elegantly spoken, Cultrera liked to point out that in addition to his other activities he wrote poetry. His credentials as a prospective buyer for the silver were impeccable: he lived in a mansion in Marbella, on Spain's Costa del Sol, and he collected coins. Moreover, he had already, in effect, seeded the operation. Van Rijn had spent almost $25,000 on coins that Cultrera had taken to Zurich, knowing he'd eventually be directed to Tkalec. When Cultrera met Tkalec, he suggested that they might have some other business to do. Cultrera told the detectives that he could introduce Tkalec to Adnan Kashoggi at his casino in Paris, so that Tkalec could see he wasn't dealing with an idiot. He would invite Tkalec to his home in Marbella, to see his expensive antiques. The strategy, in the language of the sting, was "slowly, slowly." Make Tkalec feel comfortable over time; get him to lower his guard.
Van Rijn said that Cultrera agreed to play because "he is twenty-five years my friend." But as compensation for completing the sting, Cultrera wanted something from Scotland Yard. He had not actually been charged with anything in his native Italy, but the Italian constitution permits the police to jail someone indefinitely merely on suspicion of a crime. He wanted the British to facilitate a conversation between his attorneys and the Italian Carabinieri, so that he could travel to Sicily without being tossed in prison. He wanted, eventually, to die in Sicily. He wanted to see his grandchildren. Cultrera was the ideal decoy.
Next Van Rijn told me something extraordinary: during the Madrid meeting, he claimed, the Yard contingent, led by Detective Chief Superintendent Andy Sellers, suggested that Van Rijn engineer the kidnapping of Anton Tkalec and then shake him down for the silver. "Whatever was discussed in the meetings in the British embassy in Madrid, I didn't believe my eyes what they brought to the table," Van Rijn said, his eyebrows arched, his expression full of disbelief. "Tkalec was to be taken to the casino of 'my friend in Spain.' At some point Cultrera would have taken him aside and made him an offer he couldn't say no to. We would have pressed the silver out of him physically."
Van Rijn saw my expression. "You don't believe me?" He slipped a cassette into the recorder. The tape was already cued to an October 24 conversation between him and Detective Sergeant Kevin Naidoo, of Scotland Yard. On the tape Van Rijn can be heard saying "We are going to set things in progress. What if the situation arises to take [Tkalec] to another place, the casino of my friend. Would that be an option?" Naidoo replies, "Of course it would. We have to be flexible with how [Cultrera] plays the situation. If that is the appropriate thing to do, then that's what we do." Although Van Rijn was trying to convince me that the kidnapping was the Yard's idea, just the opposite was true. Sellers told me that the idea had been proposed at the Madrid meeting, but not by the Yard. "We laughed," Sellers said. "It was so preposterous."
Cultrera arranged a second meeting with Tkalec in Zurich for October 28. Sellers and the other detectives arrived two days earlier as an advance party. Unbeknown to them, however, according to Van Rijn, he and Cultrera had been contemplating something far grander than a sting or a kidnapping culminating in an arrest. It would be a plot twist that would allow Van Rijn to end a long career as scam artist, informant, and renegade with a flourish. Van Rijn says that Cultrera took him to Seville and introduced him to a master silversmith - a magician of a craftsman who could do anything with metal, even copy something as intricate as the Sevso silver. Outside the silversmith's studio, Van Rijn says, he asked Cultrera, "'You didn't bring me here for nothing, did you?' Felice said, 'What do you think? This guy is the most capable forger I've ever met in my life, and I've seen many.'"
Then Van Rijn told me that Tkalec - whom he had condemned just the day before as his mortal enemy - was to have been folded into the plan, and that after the treasure had been attained, they would have substituted some of the fake for some of the real and held on to the authentic pieces, worth tens of millions of dollars. They would then have either sold them to a private dealer or kept them as trophies, or as leverage. "I loved the idea [of the forgery], of course," Van Rijn told me, standing by the window of my hotel room, which overlooked the pool and the outdoor café. The sound of splashing and pop music wafted in. "It was a great scam." Later, on the phone, he told me, "When you take the police out of their environment, they don't have anything to grab on to. You stay in charge. That's when the music starts playing. You go

slowly, slowly toward your target. The deal, in the end, if you do it or you don't do it, it doesn't matter." In other words, all kavla, all the time.
Van Rijn returned to my hotel the next day, brandishing another cassette tape. He told me excitedly that the Hungarians wanted to make a deal. He'd just had a conversation with Eva Hajdu-Bankuti. Van Rijn and I sat on the bed. The other compromising cassette tapes were spread behind us. Van Rijn's face took on a radiance. He was in his element. The tape recorder was spinning.
"Scotland Yard didn't want to inform the Hungarians that they were going to Switzerland, because they don't trust the Hungarians," I heard Van Rijn telling Hajdu-Bankuti. "What if you give me immunity to negotiate the sixteen pieces which are out there? I will cut a deal with Tkalec, in which he receives immunity, and we can then buy the pieces for a reasonable amount, because he cannot sell them to anybody."
"So this is not a trick?" Hajdu-Bankuti replied.
"No," Van Rijn said.
"I feel the Interior Minister himself also would like to solve the problem... We can make a deal with you."
"We have to keep it very quiet," Van Rijn said, "because the Yard is not going to be over the moon, if you know what I mean."
Later, when talking about the risks, Hajdu-Bankuti said, "Nobody wants you to die because of this."
Van Rijn grew excited that his plan was beginning to take shape. He asked Hadju-Bankuti if the statute of limitations for the murder would be up soon, making the offer of immunity to Tkalec meaningless. She said there was still one more year "for the murder."
"I hate to see this guy walk free. He is such a piece of shit."
"I know. But all of us would like to somehow solve the problem, would like to finish it."

vii.
Van Rijn and I flew into Budapest on the cold and misty night of December 13. Eva Hajdu-Bankuti met us at the airport. She is a small woman, and surprisingly droll. She drove us to the Budapest Hilton Hotel, which sits, fortresslike, high above the Danube. We were met in the lobby by Lieutenant-Colonel Bela Vukan, of the Hungarian national police, and three other men, who stood silently by and didn't bother to say anything about who or what they were. The Hungarians wore drab clothes and serious expressions, and looked tired. Van Rijn's eyes were alight, and in his flashy clothing and gaudy tan he walked through the doors of the hotel lobby looking poised and important. That is how the Hungarians treated him, leaning forward, hanging on his every word.
The group huddled in a corner over coffee, and I waited to one side. By then, it turned out, the Hungarians had decided that their other options for getting the silver back had been used up. They were also loath to pay Tkalec for anything that they believed was rightly theirs. As he later recounted to me, Van Rijn listened and then told them that they wouldn't have to. He already had another plan. Not only would he and Cultrera retrieve the silver by kidnapping Tkalec and forcing it out of him, but, as a bonus, he would deliver Halim Korban, who could easily be persuaded to testify against Tkalec - or at least to make a statement connecting him directly to the murders. Van Rijn said that $410,000 would do the job of persuading Korban; he would spend the money in Korban's shop in Beirut, perhaps on a chandelier. The Hungarians, Van Rijn said, immediately authorized the bribe. (The Hungarians later disputed that there had been any discussion of either a bribe or a kidnapping at the Budapest meeting.)
That night, according to Van Rijn, they plotted out an operation that could potentially have crossed the bounds of international law: the retrieval of Tkalec's half of the treasure by force. The job was to be contracted out to Felice Cultrera, who would be free to do whatever was necessary to secure the treasure. The Hungarians were not to be told the method. They supposedly agreed to Van Rijn's fee of $1.25 million, which he was to split with Cultrera, and which included Korban's bribe. Only the date of the operation had yet to be arranged.
I began to wonder about who I had become in this story. Van Rijn's actions had begun to seem more and more like performance, and I the audience. If a kidnapping was in the works, then I possessed knowledge of a future crime. But knowledge was responsibility, and from this point on I would be less an observer than a participant. I had to leave Budapest, and I told Van Rijn that I was going in the morning.
The next morning I found a note under my door. I also found a small sable paintbrush. Van Rijn had told me that his father was a painter, and that since his father's death

he had carried around one of his brushes. He was bequeathing it to me, along with his confidence. "Don't forget that I am still here," he wrote me. "Please don't forget that nobody will be straight with you. I gave you all I could give you to bring this story to a good end. Double agendas, deceit, reputations on the line. Don't believe anything people want you to believe. This is a world of betrayal. I was the best. It was enough." He'd signed off with a cartoon of a moustachioed man wearing a devil's goatee - his usual signature.

Driving along the Danube in a taxi on the way to the Budapest airport, I couldn't stop myself from wondering if Van Rijn carried a briefcase full of small sable paintbrushes as brand-new, and clean, as mine was - if he'd given out two dozen of them over the years.

viii.

Vesna Girardi led the Croatian committee on Sevso, which was assembled after the appearance of the Independent articles. I met with Girardi in her apartment in the town of Pula last May. She fired off an impenetrable commentary listing the reasons the treasure belongs to Croatia. Her list was a short one. "Well, why not have this in Croatia?" was her ultimate point. She told me that the government had taken the Independent articles as gospel. I asked her if she realized that the reporter had been unable to confirm any part of the tip he had been given. She said she didn't know that, but she didn't seem at all dissuaded.

Besides, an eyewitness had appeared, she said. He had surfaced shortly after the Independent articles ran. He was a seventy-two-year-old former secret policeman named Anton Cvek. Cvek claims that on May 15, 1961, he was ordered by army officers to report to a high-security military base near Barbariga. When he arrived, he was told that during a routine excavation on Brioni Island, just offshore, soldiers had uncovered Roman ruins and a stone sarcophagus. The sarcophagus contained a hoard of spectacular silver, which, he says, was the Sevso treasure. Brioni was the summer residence of Marshal Tito, and strictly off limits, so the silver had been carried to the mainland and stored in a small house not far from Brioni. Cvek said that he was accompanied by a technician named Vlado Klikic, who filmed the silver and took some photographs, and that Klikic died shortly afterward and the film and photographs vanished.

Barbariga is a Croatian seaside village just north of Pula. As in Hungary, Roman ruins are scattered throughout the countryside. In the heart of Pula stands the astonishing sight of a Roman stadium nearly as big as the Roman Coliseum, and in much better condition. Barbariga's rocky coast was once a kind of Roman high-end subdivision, with villa after villa overlooking the Adriatic. Some of the Romans who fled the barbarians in Pannonia settled here, with nowhere else to go but back to Rome itself, across the water. This is just one reason the Croatians are convinced that the Sevso silver belongs to them. Maybe the silver started its journey in Polgardi, Hungary, they argue, but it ended up in Barbariga.

Girardi cited other "evidence": Anton Tkalec often visited Pula, because he had friends there, and in the late 1970s Halim Korban had been to Brioni Island as a moderator at an OPEC meeting being held there. Then Girardi volunteered that Cvek was a weird and unreliable witness. "He repeats the same phrases, sentences, even with the same glimmer in the eye" - as though his tale had been rehearsed. She looked off into the middle distance. "It does sound like a fiction," she suddenly said.

We drove to Barbariga. Modest, modern holiday houses peeked through stands of scrubby trees. No one, not even the Sevso committee, had been permitted to examine the supposed discovery site on the island. Still, Girardi described exactly where the silver had been found, and when I asked her how she knew, she told me that that was what she'd been told. We went to the house where the silver was said to have been stored. It was more a tool shed than a house. We peered in through the chalky windows and saw nothing. An aged man emerged from the house next door, which stood twenty-five feet away, ambled up, and introduced himself as Vilko Kapetanovic. He said he'd lived next to the house since the late 1950s. I asked him if he'd ever seen any silver treasure, and he shook his head. He never saw or heard soldiers or photographers or a secret policeman named Anton Cvek. I asked him if anyone could have come and gone without his knowing, and he smiled and shook his head emphatically. No.

Anton Cvek is now in his early eighties. He is short, stocky, and round-faced. He spends his days drinking and playing cards at a restaurant in Pula on the shore of the Adriatic. I took him to lunch and talked to him for about four hours. His story was polished. It had linearity. Sevso had made him a kind of national hero, and he had been in all the newspapers and on TV. He talked lucidly about why he was the one asked to take the report on the silver. "If you want to keep this thing a secret, call a secret policeman," he said through an interpreter, a Croatian journalist named

Branimir Pofuk. I then began to repeat questions, circling back to points he had made earlier. The more he talked, the more specific his answers became. He told me that on June 1, 1961, he had examined the treasure, taken photos, and filed a report. On June 6 a yacht belonging to Misha Broz, Tito's son, had transported the silver to the Croatian coastal city of Split. On June 7 the silver had been flown from Split to a town called Motovun, on the Istrian Peninsula. On June 8 Tkalec, who was close to Broz, had flown the silver to London. "This sounds like a fairy tale," Cvek admitted. "Who could make this up?" Cvek then volunteered that he'd known Tkalec personally, from the 1950s, and that they'd gone to school together - but there is a difference of three decades in their ages. And Motovun, I knew, was a tiny medieval village that sits astride a hill. The only things that land and take off from Motovun are birds. And then, unsolicited, Cvek told me that Tkalec had flown the silver to London on Northampton's plane, and that Northampton himself was the pilot. Pofuk and I exchanged looks. Cvek sat wearing an expression of self-importance. Did he realize, I asked, that in 1961 Northampton had been fifteen years old? I didn't wait for a reply. I turned to Pofuk and said, "I'll get the check."

Until the conclusion of the New York trial, Croatian government officials had been committed to claiming the treasure. Whoever or whatever lay behind Anton Cvek's story, it certainly reflected a fledgling nation's hunger for a national identity. I heard rumors that in 1992 Northampton had offered to give Croatia either $85 million or one or two pieces of the treasure, gratis, if the Croatians would walk away from their claim. Officials in Zagreb wouldn't talk about that. The story itself might have been planted to bolster Croatia's credibility, and so undermine Hungary's. Dick Ellis told me that Scotland Yard detectives watched a video of Cvek testifying about how big the Sevso plates were, in which he held up his hands about a foot and a half apart. The detectives, Ellis told me, broke out in laughter.

ix.

Back in London, I went to see Andy Sellers, the head of the Sevso operation, at his small, dingy office at New Scotland Yard. Sellers, in his late forties, is young for his rank. He is tall and plainspoken, with a military bearing, a street cop more comfortable with armed robbers than with anyone or anything relating to art. He was obviously the last man on earth with whom Van Rijn could do business. At the mere mention of Van Rijn's name Sellers's jaw tightened, his hands clenched his chair, and he shook his head slowly, as if talking himself out of saying something he would regret.

Sellers told me that from the beginning of the Sevso operation he had disliked Van Rijn. He thought him "a manipulative dilettante." Sellers was aware of Van Rijn's reputation - that he'd informed for Scotland Yard for years, and for the French police, the Carabinieri, and the FBI, all the while cutting his own side deals, ratting on the operations of rivals, and then filling the voids he had created. But Van Rijn was the Yard's sole source of information on Sevso, and Felice Cultrera was its only possible approach to Tkalec. "But we risk-assessed it," Sellers told me, "and the other side of it was the Hungarians' expectation, and the sheer value of this commodity." There was also the pathos of the story of Jozsef Sumegh to consider, and the purity of the Hungarians' passion.

Then he told me what had happened in Zurich.

On October 27 Van Rijn and Cultrera met Sellers and two other Yard detectives in Zurich. They collectively decided that Cultrera would meet Tkalec at noon and take him out to a restaurant. They allowed two hours for the lunch, after which they'd reconvene and debrief. But given what he knew about Van Rijn, Sellers had pre-arranged for a Swiss surveillance team to secretly shadow Cultrera.

Three o'clock came and went, and Sellers had heard nothing from Cultrera. Then the Swiss called and reported that Cultrera had gone to Tkalec's office at noon, stayed for only twenty minutes, and then returned to his hotel, and he hadn't left since. Sellers immediately called Van Rijn and said that he wanted to meet right away. When the group was all together, Cultrera told Sellers that everything had gone according to plan, that he'd been with Tkalec for forty-five minutes, and that Tkalec had talked openly about the Sevso silver and was ready to deal. Cultrera also said that Tkalec wanted to give him a photograph of the silver so that there would be no doubt what they were talking about. He would return to Tkalec's office the next morning to pick it up.

The next day Swiss surveillance picked up Cultrera's trail outside his hotel. But instead of meeting Tkalec at his office to get the photograph, as he'd told Sellers he'd do, Cultrera drove straight to the airport hotel where he was to meet the British detectives before his flight home. Cultrera told Sellers that he'd met with Tkalec at his office, as planned. He then handed the detective the photograph that Tkalec had supposedly given him. "When we had a look at this photograph," Sellers

said, "we saw it's a laser copy. It looks like a photograph of part of Northampton's [portion of the treasure]. So we now know that FC is giving us bullshit. We're already smelling a rat. FC says he's in a hurry, I've got things to do. FC flew off happy."

Later that day Sellers shared a cab to the airport with Van Rijn. Van Rijn chattered excitedly about the progress they'd made, and how the sting was going better than expected. Sellers listened patiently and then turned and confronted him, telling him bitterly that he'd had surveillance on Cultrera the entire time, and that he knew the Yard was being set up. Sellers was seething. Van Rijn seemed devastated. "If it was an act, it was a good act, of total devastation and surprise," Sellers told me. "The rest of the trip to the airport he's silent and quiet. When we get to the airport, he pulls me to one side and says, Look, about a month ago FC suggested that we try to have you over, and we have a copy of the silver made, and we'll do the switch, and you'll seize the copies, and the Mafia will make copies of the real commodity, and you'll be left looking like a bunch of prats." Van Rijn said he'd tried to convince Cultrera that they had to stick with the Yard's plan, and thought he'd won him over, but obviously Cultrera was having him over as well. According to Sellers, Van Rijn then said, "Look, we'll work together and we will shaft FC. If you let me get back into him, and say all right, let's fucking shaft the police, I'll find out exactly what the plan is, because if the silver's going to be copied, Tkalec's going to have to give it up, and if we know where it's going, and I think I know the silversmith in Seville who'll do the copying, if I know it's there, you can arrange for the Spanish police to seize it, and job done."

Two months later Van Rijn's lawyer sent Scotland Yard a fax terminating his cooperation in all ongoing operations, including Sevso. The reason Van Rijn gave me was that the Yard had put his life - and his family's lives - in danger by reneging on a promise to protect him. He also says that the Yard left him vulnerable to criminal prosecution in France by exposing him as a participating informant in a case involving smuggled bronze statues. The police later told me that although they had installed alarms in Van Rijn's London townhouse, and had offered him a place in the witness-protection program, he continued to send faxes all over the world announcing that he knew of various plots to buy and sell stolen art and antiquities. "I was going to offer him a change of identity, but I knew that it would be a waste of time," Dick Ellis says. "Within six months Van Rijn would resurface as himself, in his striped shirts and plaid blazers and flowery ascot."

A more likely explanation of Van Rijn's withdrawal of cooperation is that his vanity couldn't recover from the humiliation of having been outwitted in Zurich by the likes of Andy Sellers.

x.

For two weeks after the meeting at the Budapest Hilton, Hajdu-Bankuti phoned Van Rijn repeatedly to see how he and Cultrera were progressing, but he didn't return her calls. Instead, just before Christmas, he called Anton Tkalec. They had two conversations. In the first, Van Rijn says, Tkalec offered him a partnership in the silver, so that they could double cross the Hungarians. (I asked to hear that tape, but Van Rijn told me that his recorder had, in this one case, malfunctioned.) In the second conversation, which I did hear, Tkalec's hostility toward Van Rijn was manifest. Tkalec said he had spoken to his lawyer and wasn't interested in talking about the Sevso silver anymore. He and Van Rijn had nothing more to talk about. Then he wished him a Happy New Year and hung up. Van Rijn had eliminated any chance that Tkalec could be surprised by anything at all. He had sabotaged the entire operation.

Meanwhile, I asked Hajdu-Bankuti why her government did not merely buy back the silver.

"It doesn't sound good in the international market to buy back something that went out illegally," she replied. "And the connection with the murder - there were three deaths around it."

I finally called Cultrera himself. He was astonished that this was anyone else's topic of conversation. "This is reality. This isn't a movie, you know," he told me darkly. The day before I called, Van Rijn had told him that Scotland Yard was publicly talking about his participation in the failed sting. Actually, the Yard wasn't - but Van Rijn was.

"How can they talk about something as delicate as that?" Cultrera said. "I risk my life, and they are like that. They are stupid... They come to me to help for the situation. I am for justice." In what had become for me a litany of denials, Cultrera told me that he never suggested kidnapping Tkalec or had any intention of forging any of the treasure.

When Dick Ellis learned what Van Rijn had been up to with the Hungarians, he was appalled. The whole point, after all, had been to seize the silver in Tkalec's

possession, go after Northampton's in the courts, reunite the hoard, and put it on display in the national museum in Budapest, for all of Hungary - and the world - to see. "If they have recovered the silver in the back of a car after paying for it, and Tkalec is covered with black eyes or worse, you're not going to be able to evidence the silver, or maybe link it to the other hoard," Ellis told me. "The Hungarians have to be able to produce evidence and present it to a court and a judge to prove that Northampton's silver rightfully belongs to them."

After I met with Sellers, I sat in a pub around the corner from New Scotland Yard with a detective friend, a man with a keen street intuition and without an agenda. Police officers can get close to the animal angles that lie beneath - and sometimes undercut - intellectual reason. They often come around to the idea that the solutions to most mysteries are simple, if not mundane. The more convoluted the case, the more probable this is. This detective planted his flag in plainness. We drank, ruminating on Van Rijn ("There are those who wouldn't mind seeing him at the bottom of a river," the detective said, only half joking), on Tkalec ("nasty piece of work"), and on the Sevso treasure. At some point he fell silent, pointed at me with his finger, and squinted. "Have you ever considered the possibility," he said reflectively, "that there is no more silver? That what Northampton has is basically the whole lot, except the one piece we know about that Tkalec has? And that all this - the sting, everything - has been for nothing?"

I thought about what Van Rijn - or anyone else, for that matter - actually knew to be true about the remainder of the treasure. I knew of at least one more extraordinary plate, with an engraved Chi-Rho in the center. Tkalec himself had disclosed its existence by having its image published on the cover of an auction catalogue. I'd heard strong rumors and descriptions of another plate, called the Constantine Plate. But who had actually laid eyes on Tkalec's treasure? Who had held it? The answer, as far as I knew, was no one. Except, of course, the enigmatic Tkalec himself. And then it struck me that maybe the reason Van Rijn hadn't followed through with the sting or the kidnapping plot was that he couldn't, because despite the time and the money invested, there was no more treasure - and he had known it all along.

"Just a thought," the detective said.

xi.

I eventually made contact with Tkalec myself. He spoke to me by phone from Zurich, and from his country house in Thessaloniki, on a number of occasions, and we developed a strange, dueling rapport, in which he would alternately try to intimidate me with dark threats and talk to me openly about his love of antiquities, and of history itself.

He told me that he didn't have the silver - that Northampton's half is all there ever was. "You tell me what you're missing, and I'll tell you what I have," he said, laughing. (An impossible task, it seems, because the only people to have seen the remaining silver, if there is any, are either dead or in the mute chain of dealers.) But one London dealer, who asked to remain anonymous, told me he had seen the inveterate British antiquities collector George Ortiz looking the silver over in Zurich. And Dick Ellis says that Ortiz once bragged to him that he had a piece of the Sevso hoard.

On a number of occasions I asked Tkalec if he could identify what country the silver came from. One time he said that he had no idea, that he was only a part of the treasure's chain of dealers. Another time he said, "Yes, I can, but I don't want to. Who has to know, knows this." As for Hungary: "They are communists looking for their heritage in places where they never had it." About the possible existence of plots to kidnap and entrap him, Tkalec sounded curious and amused. I asked him if he knew Felice Cultrera. He said he didn't. I said Cultrera was allegedly linked to the Santapaolo Mafia. Tkalec said, "The oldish guy who came to me? He was Mickey Mouse." As for Scotland Yard, he said, "They're like Dr. Watson and the other guy... Sherlock Holmes, that's it, that's it. They have this complex and they want to prove it to the world. It's in their blood. They are a bunch of assholes, excuse me... Van Rijn is a creep... He's trying to make some money. He was a kind of playboy. He's not my world. All over the world he was involved in all kinds of funny stories. I'm a hard worker. I work eighteen hours a day. This man never worked more than one hour a week." Tkalec confirmed that he had spoken to Van Rijn just before Christmas, but not about double crossing the Hungarians.

"If you tell me you'll give me ten million dollars," Tkalec told me, "I'll tell you the full story of Sevso. For ten million dollars I will sell my grandmother. I do not want to make my future on the skeletons of other people... I will never lie. I may not tell the truth, but I will never lie."

An old friend of Tkalec's had told me that Tkalec is half Jewish. Tkalec asked about my background. I am Jewish - half Hungarian, half Russian. When I told him this, it

seemed to give him pause. He seemed to mull it over. After a moment his voice lowered, and he told me to be very Jewish - that Jews don't hurt other Jews. It was half threat, half advice. Then he hung up.

In May of 2000 I flew to Zurich to try to meet him. Bank Leu's coin auction, the numismatic world's biggest and most important annual event, was taking place at a hotel downtown. I knew that Tkalec would be there, and he was. He didn't know what I looked like, but I knew him from photographs. Tables were arranged in a huge square around the perimeter of the hotel's main ballroom, with an auctioneer at the head. I sat against the wall across from Tkalec, watching him. Ancient coins came and went for tens of thousands of dollars. Many of them were from his collection. I didn't want to embarrass him by approaching him in front of his colleagues. During a break I went downstairs to the lobby and called him on his cell phone. At first he was amused that I was calling. We hadn't spoken for some months. Then I told him where I was. He became supremely unhappy. He growled that he would never meet me. We argued. After the auction I waited outside his office, along the fashionable Limmatquai, to catch him in private. He called me on my cell phone. He told me that he knew I was there waiting for him, and that he'd never come, and I'd never find him, and we'd never speak again.

xii.

In the town of Szabadbattyan, Hungary, about a mile and a half from the spot where Jozsef Sumegh is thought to have found the copper cauldron, lie the recently discovered ruins of an enormous two-story Roman villa. The remains of four Roman soldiers were found crushed beneath a collapsed floor. There were also signs of burning. Archaeologists trying to piece together the last moments of the villa's occupants believe that they escaped ahead of a barbarian attack, and that the soldiers stayed behind to defend the homestead. At some point the silver treasure could have been stashed in a hiding place in what is now the Polgardi quarry.

A short drive away, on the southern shores of Lake Balaton, lives Jozsef Sumegh's brother, Ishtevan, in a house behind a restaurant he owns. He is twenty-nine, a big, cheerful man who turns somber and quiet when Sevso is brought up. The story he tells is harrowing. He says that at one point Jozsef sent him and their other brother, Attilla, for sandpaper, and that they used it to clean off one of the pieces of silver. He is convinced that the military was involved in his brother's death. Both Russian and Hungarian officers visited Jozsef after he found the treasure. "During the 1980s," Ishtevan told me through an interpreter, "there was no way whatsoever for a simple person to take anything across the border." He also remembers that a peasant family in Polgardi was interested not in the silver pieces but in the copper cauldron, to make the local brew. Jozsef showed it to them, but it was too oxidized for use.

In 1980, Ishtevan said, Jozsef and their mother had a screaming match, which he remembers clearly. His mother complained that Jozsef wanted to sell the treasure too cheap, piece by piece, rather than holding out to sell the whole thing for a huge sum. Not long afterward Jozsef was dead, and the treasure was gone. Ten years later, when Ishtevan was seventeen, he and Attilla were jailed for stealing a car. They happened to be paroled just as Northampton was gearing up to sell the treasure through Sotheby's. Ishtevan told me that his mother met him and his brother outside the prison and said that they had to defect immediately, that their lives were in danger because of what they knew about the treasure. She had arranged to have them smuggled out. If they had been caught, the penalties would have been heavy. At the Hungarian border she told them, "I will never see you again, but when I die I am going to leave a good-bye letter that will tell everything I know about the treasure." Ishtevan and Attilla left for Spain. Two weeks later their mother was found dead on the lawn in front of their house. The official cause of death was an accidental fall and blow to the head, but her husband told Ishtevan that this was inaccurate - she had just collapsed and died. A family friend says she posted a letter two weeks before she died, but nothing is known about this letter, if indeed it was written.

Just before I left, Ishtevan asked me how much the treasure was worth. I wrote in my notebook, "$200 million." Ishtevan stared at the figure with indifference. Then he took the pen out of my hand and wrote underneath, "2 life."

Michel van Rijn remains in Tenerife. Occasionally, he says, he goes underground, and when he does, he calls from cell phones, and e-mails through the accounts of friends. But he now appears less romantic knight than nervous refugee. Of course he has people to answer to now, people with resources: the British government, the Hungarians, his old friend Felice Cultrera, whom he has exposed as a police informant. If Cultrera does have links to the Santapaola family hierarchy in Sicily, this may not sit well with them. Van Rijn told me that Cultrera has been hunting for him. Try as he might,

Van Rijn cannot account for himself. He wears the mantle of professional rogue proudly, testifying against himself with relish, not confessing so much as taking credit for his ruses and crimes.
The Sevso silver is out of the world's reach. Northampton's stash, I have been led to believe, sits in wooden boxes in a vault on one of the Channel Islands; Tkalec's is most likely in a bank in Zurich. Scotland Yard will not comment on whether or not Tkalec holds any of the treasure.

xiii.
One night last June, I was waiting in a dingy hotel room in Belgrade for a phone call from Anton Tkalec's friend and former partner, Victor Ristovic. Earlier in the day Ristovic had said he would call to arrange a meeting to discuss Tkalec and the Sevso treasure. At 9:00 P.M. the phone rang. But it wasn't Ristovic. The man on the line wouldn't say who he was. His voice was deep and gravelly - and familiar, though I couldn't place it. During random pauses I could hear him draw on a cigarette. He introduced himself simply as a guy who knew Anton Tkalec, and said he was prepared to vouch absolutely for Tkalec's honor and integrity. Tkalec, he said, would never get involved in anything illegal. He staked his life on it.
He said that he'd been informed that an American journalist was in town asking questions about the Sevso silver. He didn't know my name. Then he said, "Do you know who is this? This is Anton Tkalec." When I told him who I was, he paused, sucked in his breath, and said, "Fuck you. You're in my home town. Do you think if I wanted something to happen to you, you'd be okay for three minutes? Fuck you." Then he hung up. I turned to Branimir Pofuk, who was serving again as my interpreter. Pofuk was sitting on the bed, transfixed. I said to him, "Start packing. We're leaving. Tonight."
Five minutes later Tkalec called me back, and we spoke for two hours. He was bitter and frustrated. I wanted to persuade him to tell me the truth, and he wanted to convince me that he was innocent. "I am involved with Sevso from the beginning," he said, "but I'm one of the chain. It came from me. But I assure you, on the lives of my children and the holy grave of my father, I had the treasure for twenty-two hours. I am a person of honor, not a garbage man. I was inside, and couldn't step out. It was too late for me." I wanted to know who had sold it to him. He paused. He seemed to consider the question. Finally he said, apologetically, "I can't reveal the person."
Later he said, "If you are looking for the holes where the Sevso treasure came from, you will never find them. You will never find the truth in Yugoslavia. You will never find any truth in that country, about anything." Tkalec broke into throaty, rueful laughter. Then he instantly sobered. I could hear him breathing on the other end of the line. "I will be a barrier between you and the truth, a dam. It's the end of the story. If you keep coming after me, I'm going to fuck your soul." Then he was gone.

Zie http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/11/the-curse-of-the-sevso-silver/302331/