

**“The Monuments Men”  
The Treasure in the Neuschwanstein Castle**

8 February 2014

by Marcus Raffler  
Translated by Micahel Pfurr and Mary Ashcraft

*The Nazis hoarded cultural artifacts from all over Europe, and a special unit from the U.S. tracked down the hidden stash – including the treasure trove in Neuschwanstein Castle. A Hollywood film tells the story, but the locals know more.*

Germany lies in rubble and the end of the World War II is imminent. In the midst of cluster bombs, sharpshooters, and fanatical SS men, an American unit attempts to save stolen art works from the Nazis before their destruction. It is a race against time. A race which the 350 or so U.S. architects, art historians and museum directors eventually win – in reality and on the silver screen. In the thriller “The Monuments Men” producer and leading actor George Clooney has created an action-packed memorial to the unconventional treasure hunters from the States.

**The key role of Neuschwanstein Castle**

A key role in the film, which celebrates its German premiere tomorrow as part of the Berlin film awards, is played by an historical icon in Bavaria: Neuschwanstein Castle. Another fabricated story from Hollywood? Nothing of the sort. What is largely forgotten today is that the Nazis actually converted King Ludwig II's castle into a strictly guarded treasure vault during the Second World War. Goods worth millions according to today's values were stored at the foot of the Ammergau Alps.

He did not personally see that, says Magnus Peresson, 65, grinning. “They say that back then, the castle was filled up to the roof with works of art.” That may have been a little exaggerated, says the head of the Historical Society of Füssen. However, the fact is that since 1941 valuable cultural goods were stored in almost every floor of this fairy tale castle. “The servants' quarters and foyers were used, as well as the King's apartment, where especially valuable pieces were stored,” Julius Desing recalls. The 85-year old was the caretaker of the Neuschwanstein castle until the beginning of the 1990s, and he knows many details and stories from his fellow workers there.

**1300 paintings hidden in the castle**

Experts estimate that the number of valuable paintings stacked in specially crafted shelves in the large rooms of the castle numbered at least 1300. That is not counting other works of art like sculptures and pottery, furniture and tapestries, jewels and manuscripts. Pieces from the Louvre [sic] like the Ghent Altarpiece, one of the most valuable works of art from Belgium, were also hidden in the “dream castle” of Ludwig II.

The stolen treasures were transported in a large number of heavy crates. The steps were furnished with ramps and treated with soft soap, so that the treasures could be unloaded unharmed from the access road into the inner courtyard, according to Magnus Peresson. In addition, large pulleys were also part of the process.

Dr. Sabine Heym, with the Bavarian Administration of State-Owned Palaces, divides the depots in the castle into two categories: objects which were taken from national museums starting in 1941 in order to protect them from bombings – for example, from the national collection of paintings or from the king's Munich Residenz. And the stolen art that Hitler's chief ideologist Alfred Rosenberg ordered systematically transported out of the occupied areas by his deployment staff (the ERR, "Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg"). Rosenberg was to erect a giant "Führermuseum" in the Austrian city of Linz, which would contain the most valuable of the European artworks under one roof – an absurd undertaking, to which Hitler held fast until shortly before the end of the war.

### **National Socialists acquire five million works**

"In France alone, almost 4,200 crates with over 22,000 objects were removed by the ERR in the time between April 1941 and July 1944," notes Heym. Most came directly to Neuschwanstein, including the famous Rothschild collection with its exquisite jewels and paintings. In total, the Nazis acquired approximately five millions works of art in the whole of Europe – the biggest art heist in history.

Castles, fortresses, cloisters and churches had already served as shelters for art works during war times in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the Second World War, such hiding places were used to a far greater extent. "The highly explosive bombs which were utilized, for example in Munich, mandated that large amounts of art should be protected," according to the spokesman of the national castle administration, Dr. Thomas Rainer. Herrenchiemsee Castle, the Veste Coburg, the Buxheim charterhouse near Memmingen and the Befreiungshalle in Kelheim were loaded with works of art of all kinds.

But why did Neuschwanstein play such a central role? The castle offered many free rooms and the railway line from Munich to Füssen, Rainer explains. "And of course, the belief that this mountainous region would not be bombed played a role in this decision." The crown jewels of the Wittelsbach family, which were taken out of the of the Munich palace treasure chamber, were not enough for the ERR. "The treasury of the Bavarian throne was walled up in the former meat locker within the cellar. That was the most secure room," the former keeper of the castle Desing reports. "The remnants of mortar found on these pieces today testify to the Nazis' makeshift treasury. Rosenbergs deployment staff completely sealed off the castle," Desing adds. "The massive gate at the entrance of the castle was one example of the extent to which it was secured. After all, an unbelievable amount of wealth was stored in the castle."

### **“That was no fun”**

“Yes, that was an enormous amount of wealth,” Johann Scheidberger agrees. The 86-year old former mayor of Schwangau saw pictures, sculptures and many other valuable pieces with his own eyes. As a carpenter’s apprentice, he was regularly called to the castle with his mentor whenever woodworking was required. “We constructed shelves and crates, but also the slides in the courtyard for the large pieces of rubble. And we were responsible for protecting the castle from fire.” Therefore, it was imperative to equip the ceilings or entrances to the throne hall and the singers’ hall with fire proofing. “Asbestos and glass wool was used as insulation. That was no fun,” he remembers. Rosenberg’s staff in the castle consisted of only 8 to 10 civilians, says Schneidberger – all “normal, unremarkable people” who lived at the time in the Bethania House, a former rest home. Looking at a large stone sarcophagus, the master carpenter is said to have joked with a mason: “Hopefully, Hitler will end up in there soon...” In those days, that was an extremely dangerous remark that thankfully went unnoticed.

“Of course, we suspected that some of the art works did not find their way there by honest means,” says Schneidberger today. “But that was a time in which we were not allowed to do a lot of thinking.” No thinking, no speaking. “Not everyone had to know, what we were doing there,” his mentor drummed into him. That way of thinking has stuck with Schneidberger and a half dozen of his fellow workers all these years.

### **Stolen art on a large scale in the “castle”**

During the war years there were only rumors in the town below the castle. From time to time the Schwangau citizens whispered to one another that mysterious things were going on up in the castle. Motorized convoys repeatedly transported large crates from the Füssen train station to the castle door, or they drove in the other direction. And there was always talk of treasures, gigantic treasures.

Until April 28<sup>th</sup> 1945 – the day, on which the American troops occupied Neuschwanstein. For a long time the Allies had learned from reliable sources that stolen art was stored in the castle on a large scale. The ERR had left the castle shortly before, fleeing in the direction of Lechtal. The art works stayed behind.

The show pieces from the treasure chamber of the Munich Residenz were taken away at the last minute: Tino Walz, an employee of the National Castle Administration, feared the destruction of the unique artifacts, because explosive charges were said to be installed in the castle. In accordance with Hitler’s “Nero Order,” it would be preferable that Neuschwanstein be blown up rather than leave the treasure trove to the enemy. Walz packed seven crates full of precious items in and on his Opel Blitz truck. He drove the valuable cargo, including the king’s crown from 1806, to Lake Tegernsee – and hid everything in a farmer’s potato cellar.

A short time later the first GIs advanced from Lechbruck. Numerous tanks got in position along the street to St. Coloman, which the Americans believed would be under

fire from the castle. Yet the assault never happened: the "Occupation," which consisted of elderly castle guides, opened the castle gates without resistance. The "Monuments Men," under the leadership of Lt. James Rorimer, accessed the treasure chamber and could not believe their eyes at the amount of art there. Photos taken that day went around the world - laughing soldiers who held the valuable oil paintings and the legendary Rothschild jewels up to the cameras.

### **The return process lasted until 1949**

It was six weeks until all of the stored pieces were documented and delivered to the central receiving location of the Allies, the so-called "Collecting Point" in Munich. "The return process lasted until 1949," says Dr. Sabine Heym from the Bavarian Administration of State-Owned Palaces. And even then, not all of the stolen objects were reassigned. Unsolved cases were turned over to a trust administration, and later to national public authorities in Berlin.

And peace did not return to Schwangau until after the end of the war. After the departure of the "Monuments Men," American soldiers and private treasure hunters continued to search the area around the castle. They were looking for the missing gold treasure of the Reichsbank. The bullion, which was worth around 150 million German Marks, had supposedly been brought from Berlin to Schwangau in April 1945 by twelve SS-men in armored vehicles. Shortly thereafter, a convoy is said to have left the castle. Destination - unknown.

A smokescreen, as many believe? Was the treasure hidden out of fear from the approaching enemy? Buried at the foot of the mountains, sunken in the nearby Alatsee? During the attempt to find the bullion, a buried air raid shelter near the former marine flight school was uncovered. Nothing was found there. In the ensuing years, there have been unsuccessful attempts to find the bullion. Year after year, new faces and new technology show up. Even today, the tale of the gold treasure drifts like fog around the castle walls.