

The Troubled Life of Jakob Stainer

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PART IV

Resuming the thread of our story as it concerns the troubles of the master: the Royal Diploma conferred upon Stainer by the Emperor Leopold in 1669 was a verbose document the wording of which began as follows:

"We, Leopold, elected Roman Emperor by the Grace of God, do recognize and proclaim officially that We are pleased to nominate Jakob Stainer Our honorable servant, the same title which had been bestowed upon him by Our predecessor, the Archduke Ferdinand Karl, Count of Tyrol . . ." The concluding words were: ". . . We also confirm Stainer's rights to be honored and to be given the same protection of the law, privileges and exemptions as are accorded Our other servants of similar ranks."

It can be imagined that, gladdened in heart by this expression of Royal favor in January of 1669, it must have come as a terrible shock to the master when, on March 26 of the same year, he received a summons to appear in court at Thaur to face his old persecutor, Salomon Hübmer, who, as related, had reopened his case charging Stainer with the unpaid claim for board and lodging during his stay at his house at Kirchdorf in 1648. Whether neglect or lack of funds were the reason, Stainer had not paid the 9 florins balance due to Hübmer (rightly or wrongly, we know not) of his original demand for 24 florins. Little wonder, then, that Hübmer's action in again asking for the full sum brought dismay to the violin maker.

However, and fortunately for the troubled debtor (as it turned out) Hübmer overstepped the bounds of discretion; his avarice prompted him to present additional claims for legal expenses, interest, etc., to the court at Thaur. The evidence of his usurious actions prejudiced his case and Stainer's petition for justice and lenience combined with the obvious fact that the wily Hübmer was attempting to victimize the defendant in no uncertain manner, caused the case to be dismissed with the advice that the plaintiff should appoint some one at Hall to be his collector.

The temporary relief afforded poor Stainer in his financial troubles had hardly been effected when tribulations of another character brought further worries to harry the unhappy man.

From the archives of the time we learn that meetings of religious character were being held in various localities in the Tyrol, meetings which were unsanctioned by the established church and viewed with suspicion by the authorities. The Lutheran faith was being extolled and attendants at the gatherings were being urged to embrace its tenets. To combat this and other movements then viewed as heretical, the Government established a university at Innsbruck as it was there that foreign traders were distributing sectarian works, in the city and at country fairs. A close watch was kept on all those who evinced interest in literature of the type mentioned, and as Stainer was evidently among those who attended meetings and purchased pamphlets, he was marked and fell under suspicion of being a heretic.

Some of the staunchest upholders of the Catholic religion in those days were the Jesuits of Innsbruck and Hall- they exerted every effort to bring all persons suspected of heresy to trial. When suspicion pointed to Stainer, he and a certain Jakob Meringer of Hall were indicted and imprisoned by Johann Vischer, the district attorney of Hall. Two Government orders, dated April 26 and May 2, 1669, were issued stating the rulings by which the court was bound to abide in such cases.

Meringer petitioned the government to be pardoned on the grounds that he had always been a good Catholic and for that reason the crime of heresy should not be charged against him and, furthermore, that his imprisonment wrought a great hardship on his family. He was thereupon released.

Stainer, however, although he recanted and disavowed heretical leanings, was held about five months during which time he was subjected to repeated examinations. In the pardon which finally brought about his release it was instructed that he was not to be molested further in any manner which would affect his dignity or status of honorable servant and violin-maker to the Imperial Court. Notwithstanding this seeming connection with his petition to the Emperor beseeching appointment at the Court, the unfortunate man was to discover that the Imperial favors which he had enjoyed were at an end, as we shall see.

Upon his release from confinement he was to learn that during his incarceration Hübmer had appealed his case to the court at his home town of Kirchdorf. There, an edict was pronounced enjoining the city of Hall to extradite Stainer unless it was able to make him pay the amount of 24 florins; failing this, the city of Linz (a larger community under whose jurisdiction Kirchdorf fell) would arrest, at the forthcoming Linz fair, the next best citizen of Hall and hold him responsible for Hall's failure to meet the demand ! No records apprise us of

the final outcome of the affair, but the case affords an insight to the strange and peculiar laws of those days. Whether Stainer refused, or was unable to pay, his situation was desperate and, we can imagine, his state of mind deeply affected.

Beset with troubles, it is to be marveled that Stainer could still have applied himself to his calling and to have produced the beautiful creations which we have as evidence in this day that even in those dark hours he could still turn mind and hand to works of unrivaled perfection.

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Taking up, at this point, the review of earlier recorders AS they concern the master's instruments:

Our previous chapter ended with an excerpt from the writings of George Simon Lohlein indicating his high regard for the violins of Jakob Stainer.

Lohlein, it appears, was not alone in his preference as it remained a generally accepted opinion that the merits of the makers named remained as given until well on towards the close of the eighteenth century.

Hill's quotation from Hawkins' *History of Music*, published in 1776, presents, as the concluding remarks concerning violins: "The violins of Cremona are exceeded only by those of Stainer, a German, whose instruments are remarkable for a full and piercing tone." Further, and as indicating French opinion, they quote from a work published in Paris in 1785, the *Encyclopedie Methodique*, which includes chapters treating of the construction, etc., of various types of musical instruments, after detailed reference to the process of making violins:—"The violins of the greatest reputation are those of Jacob Stainer. . . . This celebrated artist, who worked upwards of 70 years [Stainer worked about 40 years] aided by a number of workmen whom he had trained [Stainer's condition was, in general, such that he could not afford the employment of any help] finished every violin with his own hands and made a prodigious number [authentic examples are extremely rare] as he lived to the advanced age of nearly 100 years [his death occurred when he was 62]. The violins of Cremona are also renowned: there are two kinds— those made by the Amatis and those which were the work of Stradivari. Those who excelled among the Amatis were, firstly, Andrea Amati, the master of Stainer (*sic*) . . . secondly, the brothers Antonius and Hieronymus, contemporaries of Stainer Girolamo Amati was well up in years when Stainer was born] . . . thirdly, Nicolo Amati, who made excellent violins, but of varying merit, and not all possessing equal goodness of tone. Among the skilled makers of more recent date we find Antonio Stradivari, who, like Stainer, was long-lived [Stradivari's life was longer than that of Stainer by 31 years].... The Amatis made their violins of high build, Stradivari on the contrary nearly flat, yet these opposite methods have both furnished instruments of an equally perfect description . . ."

The last sentence is significant for, if it could be accepted literally it would tend to disprove the theory that a violin has to be flat in order to be sonorous and not tubby, or that it has to be arched to be melodious.

Hill points out that the Amati Stainer influence governed the work of the early Italian schools of Rome, Venice, Florence, Genoa, Mantua and Naples as well as that of the makers of England, France, Holland and Germany, an influence which "took years to eradicate" before a return to the "teachings upheld and emphasized by Stradivari." Speaking of England especially, Hill states that the Stainer influence was felt soon after 1700 and that with few exceptions all contemporary makers soon became completely "Stainerized." The change of opinion came after the turn of the century, when most of the notable violinists acquired Stradivari instruments and played them in public. Although not immediately, nor in some cases without misgivings, the adoption of the Stradivarian principles and form followed and Hill records that as the middle of the century was reached and passed such makers as Richard Duke, Lockey Hill and John Betts provided labels to indicate their copies of Stradivari instruments, the last named using labels as late as about 1785 on which was printed that he made "in the neatest manner violins after the patterns of Antonio Stradivari, Hieronymus Amati, Jacobus Stainer, and Tyrols." This indicates that the Stainer pattern by then no longer held supremacy.

The writings of Charles Burney, one of the most famous of the early English musical historians, have often been quoted: Hill's Stradivari work makes reference to several remarks he included in his comments on Francesco Veracini, celebrated Italian violinist known as "Il Fiorentino," who visited England for the first time in 1714, returning in after years, when Dr. Burney heard him in 1745. Burney stated that Veracini used two Stainer violins which he christened "St. Peter" and "St. Paul," which were later lost in shipwreck. On the occasion of a visit to Rome, Burney became acquainted with Signor Mazzanti, a distinguished musician and recorded: "He plays pretty well on the violin, and is in possession of the most beautiful and perfect Stainer I ever saw."

(To be continued)

The viola illustrated here may be well regarded as one of the most outstanding works of Jacobus Stainer. It

is built on generous proportions, the body measuring 16-11/16 inches the width across upper bouts 7-15/16 and across the lower 9 Es inches. It bears the original manuscript label dated 1670, or about the time the master was at the zenith of his powers. The original varnish remains in plentiful state and is of a lovely golden red color. The instrument came to English possession from a noble family of Hungaria; about 1885 it was acquired by the late Baron Knoop, a collector of fine discrimination who in his time owned many fine instruments. It later passed to Hill & Sons and from them was purchased by Nathan E. Posner in 1924. The May 1925 edition of *The Strad* carried an article regarding the viola written by the late Towry Piper, accompanied by fine plates. In 1926, through the intermediary of John Friedrich & Bro., E. N. Doring sold the viola to Alexander J. Stuart, who was at that time a resident of Detroit. The instrument has since then changed hands and is in private possession at the time of this writing.

A fine set of plates illustrates a beautiful violin of 1669 in the August 1934 edition of *The Strad*; the article which accompanies them is excellent and includes a reference to the master's labels: "there are some printed labels in existence which are to be found in genuine Stainer instruments. At one time it was considered that these labels were inserted in instruments made by his contemporaries or his workmen but experts have since accepted as genuine some instruments thus labeled."

The Wurlitzer Collection contained such examples as the ex-Waddel Collection violin of 1653; the ex-Partello Collection violin of 1675; the ex-G. H. Kemp violin of 1668, the last named being shown in plates in the large catalogue published in 1931.

Emil Herrmann's brochure of 192627 contains portraits of: the ex-Siegert violin of 1659, an example with a carved head of a lion; and another violin, of 1665 which, for a short time, was owned by Raymond Pitcairn.