RETURN OF A TREASURE

A new movie depicts how Randy Schoenberg ’88 retrieved a Nazi-looted icon
Return of a Treasure

Randy Schoenberg ’88 helped a friend recover a famous painting that had been looted by the Nazis. Now Schoenberg’s story is told onscreen.

By Zachary Pincus-Roth ’02

THE FIRST TIME he was in Berlin, E. Randol Schoenberg ’88 was a junior at Princeton, spending six months studying math and German. It was 1987, two years before the wall dividing East from West would fall. The Brandenburg Gate was impenetrable, surrounded by guards.

In February of this year, he was back, marveling at the changes. As a student, he had lived in a tiny room in an apartment building; now he was staying at the fancy Hotel Adlon Kempinski, with a view of the open Gate. When Schoenberg had lived in Berlin as a college junior, the city had not yet truly grappled with its history; now, it had both a Jewish Museum and a Holocaust memorial.

Schoenberg had returned to the city for the premiere of the film Woman in Gold, the story of a woman’s quest to regain artistic treasures seized by the Nazis—a battle in which Schoenberg played a central role. In the evening, he would put on his tux and walk down the red carpet. But before that, he took a gloomier path, wandering through the Holocaust memorial, a rolling field of rectangular gray monoliths that...
E. Randol Schoenberg ’88 at home in Los Angeles. The large framed picture is a portrait of him with the painting he helped retrieve.
looks like a graveyard. For Schoenberg, there was a deeply personal connection: Members of his own family had perished. Woman in Gold recounts how Maria Altmann’s family fled Vienna after the Nazis marched into the city in 1938, leaving behind valuable paintings by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt. After the war, the Austrian government kept the paintings and displayed them in a museum for six decades. Schoenberg was Altmann’s attorney, and in 2006 he shocked the art and legal worlds by winning back five Klimts for her and her fellow heirs. One of these, the 1907 Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I, portraying Altmann’s aunt, would sell for a reported $135 million — at the time, the highest price ever paid for a painting. The other four — three landscapes and another portrait of Adele — would sell for a total of $192.7 million.

The sales made Schoenberg a very rich man, and made the case worth the professional risk. He had given up his steady job at a law firm in part to work on this case, though the only promise of payment was the 40 percent of the paintings’ value at sale he’d get if he were to win.

But Schoenberg also wanted the case to convey a personal message. His great-grandfather died in the death camp at Treblinka. His grandfather, the composer Arnold Schoenberg, had to flee Berlin. Even if Randol had lost the case — as most people expected — it would have been worth it. He wanted to show what had happened to his family, to Altmann’s family, and to all the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe.

“You feel like you’re representing the whole community of people who were kicked out and that are now being welcomed back,” he says of his trip to Berlin. “It’s not always that the people who have been vanquished get to return.”

SCHOENBERG SPEAKS to PAW in his living room in Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife and three children. He wears his Class of 1988 25th-reunion sweatshirt. Books on Klimt and binders of memorabilia from the Altmann case fill a shelf nearby.

His family has lived in Los Angeles since the Nazis rose to power. The city was a favored destination for European Jewish artists and writers in need of a new home; Schoenberg has described it as Austria in exile. (Among the newcomers was famed writer-director Billy Wilder, an Austrian Jew who fled to Hollywood from Berlin.) Many of these Angelenos knew the Vienna of Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Gustav Mahler.

In that Vienna, enlightened, wealthy Jews like the Bloch-Bauers supported radical artists such as Klimt and his protégé, Egon Schiele. Schoenberg’s grandfather Arnold, a founder of musical Modernism, was a central figure in that world, and his work would influence musicians for generations. His grandfather on his mother’s side was a Viennese composer as well: Eric Zeisl, who scored films such as The Postman Always Rings Twice and Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man. Both grandfathers ended up in Los Angeles. Writing in 1944, Arnold described the situation faced by the city’s émigré composers: “They all had to abandon their homes, their positions, their countries, their friends, their business, their fortunes. They all had to go abroad, try to start life anew, and generally at a much lower level of living, of influence, of esteem.”

The two grandfathers had died by the time Randol Schoenberg, known as Randy, was born in 1966. His father, Ronald — note the three-generation anagram — was a judge, and his mother a German professor at Pomona College. Family history fascinated him. Before sixth grade, he created a family tree that grew to be 12 feet long, going back to his great-great-great-grandmother. Schoenberg never outgrew that passion: Today, he spends his spare time as a volunteer curator at geni.com, a Wikipedia for family trees. Users plot out generations of ancestors using documents and a computerized algorithm that connects disparate branches together. “History and math together — that’s what I like about it,” he says.

Indeed, at Princeton, Schoenberg majored in math, with a certificate in European cultural studies. He helped lead a Holocaust remembrance event. He was news editor of the Nassau Weekly. He researched correspondence between grandfather Arnold and Albert Einstein that was in Mudd Library and at the Arnold Schoenberg archive in Los Angeles, which he would later help move to Vienna. Then he followed his father into law, earning a degree at the University of Southern California. Law would turn out to be the perfect blend of his various passions: logic and history, arguments and documents, culture and family ties.

As a young lawyer, he helped represent multinational companies and Hollywood celebrities like Michael Jackson and Kim Basinger; by 1998, he was working at the firm Fried Frank doing securities and antitrust litigation. That’s when he got a call from Altmann, who was then 82 and running a clothing boutique in Beverly Hills. Schoenberg might have seemed like an unusual choice to handle a case involving looted art; he wasn’t exactly an expert in art law. But Altmann had been a friend of his grandparents, and she knew he’d understand her plight.

Schoenberg had seen the famous Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I in Vienna’s Belvedere Palace museum during a childhood family trip. The gold-leaf portrait is iconic — Austria’s Mona Lisa. Schoenberg’s mother pointed to the painting and said it showed the aunt of his grandmother’s friend Maria.

As a child, Maria had been close to her aunt Adele and her uncle Ferdinand, a Jewish industrialist and art patron who commissioned the painting. Klimt painted Adele’s portrait twice; it’s rumored that they had an affair. Klimt died in 1918; Adele in 1925, from meningitis. She was 43, leaving a will requesting that her husband give the paintings to Austria after his death.

When the Nazis annexed Austria in March 1938, Ferdinand fled, without the paintings, and ended up in Zurich. He died in 1945, and his will left his estate to the three children of his brother, including Maria Altmann, who had managed to sneak her husband out of Dachau and head to America.

After the war, Altmann’s family tried to get its paintings back, but Austrian authorities claimed Adele’s will had

**Austrian officials refused to budge on the family’s Klimt paintings:** They could give back some art, but not this art.
granted them to Austria. Decades later, a Vienna journalist named Hubertus Czernin uncovered the paintings’ paper trail, writing about it for Vienna’s Der Standard newspaper in 1998. Czernin’s reporting led to Austria’s 1998 Art Restitution Law, which opened museum archives and helped many families get back their Nazi-looted art.

That’s when Altmann believed she might be able to recover the paintings. Reviewing documents supplied by Czernin, Schoenberg realized that the key to a legal case would be to show that it was Ferdinand’s will, not Adele’s, that mattered, since the paintings were his. Besides, Schoenberg believed deep down that if Adele had known what would become of Austria’s Jews, she would have changed her mind.

Austrian officials refused to budge on the family’s Klimt paintings: They could give back some art, but not this art. Schoenberg wanted to sue the country, but didn’t know if he could. Then one day, at a Brentano’s bookstore in Century City, Calif., he found his opening: a guidebook for the Belvedere museum with the gold Adele painting on the cover. According to the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act of 1976, a country can be sued if the case involves property taken in violation of international law and owned by an agency of a foreign state engaged in U.S. commercial activity. Brentano’s surely counted, Schoenberg figured.

In 2000, just before his second child was born, Schoenberg quit his law firm. His superiors didn’t mind him dabbling in Altmann’s case, but they didn’t want him pursuing a huge lawsuit. Plus, he wanted to be his own boss. He discussed it with his wife, Pam. “I said, ‘Listen, there’s not going to be a better time — the kids are going to be older, they’re going to be in school, our expenses are only going to increase,’” he recalls. “‘If I’m going to do this, I’ve got to do it now.’ To her credit, she said OK.”

His dad bought him some furniture, and he stuck it in a one-room office with a phone and a fax machine. In his first year, he made about $20,000. But business picked up. A lawyer acquaintance asked him to partner together in a small firm.

Anne-Marie O’Connor, a Los Angeles Times reporter who covered the case, was impressed to see Schoenberg drafting thankless motions and making his own photocopies. “He had an air of humility in those days, and a lot of people didn’t see him coming,” she says. “There was no reason to think that he would go anywhere with this, although he had a deep sense of mission and sense of destiny.”

The case worked its way up to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled in his favor. Then the Supreme Court decided to hear it.

Schoenberg was up against not only Austria’s attorneys at mega-firm Proskauer Rose, but also the U.S. State Department, which contended that suits against foreign countries could infringe on foreign policy. He did not have high hopes. He had to argue that Congress intended the 1976 law to apply retroactively, and that the case wouldn’t open a can of worms, with people suing other countries left and right. “I went into it almost with a gallows humor,” he recalls. It didn’t help that the day before his argument to the court, his wife went into pre-term labor with their third child. (Their son was born a couple of months later.)

At the hearing, just seconds into Schoenberg’s argument, Justice David Souter interrupted with a question. Schoenberg answered, “I’m not sure that I understand the question.” He felt like a figure skater who had fallen on the first jump.

“It ended up being the best way to start, because it was an icebreaker,” Schoenberg recalls. “All of [the justices] smiled as if to say, ‘Oh, you know, we didn’t understand, either.’” At the end, he floated out of the building.

Three and a half months later, he got the news: He had won, 6–3.

The case wasn’t over. The Supreme Court victory just meant Schoenberg could sue Austria — now, he needed to argue the case. Instead, he chose arbitration in Austria. Altmann was growing older, and he feared that a court case would take years. His client was worried; Schoenberg admitted it was risky to trust the country they were fighting. But he pressed on, speaking in English and German as he made his case to three Austrian arbitrators. One night after a poker game in early 2006, he checked his BlackBerry before going to bed — and again he’d won, this time unanimously.

A few weeks later he flew to Vienna to examine the paintings, the scion of an Austrian cultural giant coming to take away the country’s most prized cultural possessions. The city had hung posters of the gold Klimt with the words “Ciao Adele” — Schoenberg now has one in his house. As he waited outside the Belvedere, an elderly couple walked by and recognized the lawyer from his photo in the press. “Schoenberg!” the man
“I wanted a film that people were going to see. I kept saying to Maria, ‘You know, we’re going to lose [the case], probably. But think how many people are going to know your story.’”

snorted to himself, then glowered and marched away.

Some Americans weren’t happy, either. While art collector Ronald Lauder bought the gold Adele portrait, hanging it for public view in his Neue Galerie in New York City, where it remains today, anonymous bidders bought the other paintings at auction, and the works disappeared. Altmann and her four fellow heirs were criticized for falling prey to the temptations of the art market.

“How sad — if unsurprising — to hear that the heirs of Ferdinand and Adele Bloch-Bauer are indeed cashing in,” wrote Michael Kimmelman in The New York Times. “Wouldn’t it have been remarkable (I’m just dreaming here) if the heirs had decided instead to donate one or more of the paintings to a public institution?”

But James Steward, director of the Princeton University Art Museum, argues that the public benefited in other ways. “The impact was through its visibility, these objects of tremendous star power,” he says. “It’s refocused on the phenomenon of the Nazi looting.”

That attention continues. In 1998, 44 countries, including Austria and the United States, signed the Washington Conference Principles, an agreement to identify looted artworks and establish a registry, seek out pre-war owners and heirs, and find a “just and fair solution” to ownership issues. After that, Princeton’s museum, for instance, went through its archives and found 153 items (in a collection of 92,500) that it could not verify were not looted by the Nazis, and entered the information into a central U.S. database. (The museum hasn’t had to repatriate any of them.)

Princeton hired someone to wade through its collection full time for two years, but not every museum can afford to do that. Plus, other countries aren’t always cooperative. “The Austrians have been notoriously reluctant to pursue the question of...

A Small Victory in Pursuit of Looted Art

Fritz Grunbaum, an ancestor of Timothy Reif ’80 *85, was a renowned cabaret performer, songwriter, and director in pre-World War II Vienna. Grunbaum, the first cousin of Reif’s paternal grandfather, moved in artistic circles, ultimately collecting dozens of works by leading artists, including the late Austrian painter Egon Schiele. Almost eight decades later, the fate of those artworks — and who should own them — is in dispute.

When the Nazis invaded Austria in 1938, Reif says, Grunbaum — who was known for criticizing the Third Reich — tried to flee, but he was quickly recognized. He was arrested and sent to Buchenwald and then to the Dachau concentration camp, where he died in 1941. Grunbaum’s wife died the following year, also in a concentration camp, and the collection vanished.

Some works surfaced in the mid-1950s, when they were sold by a dealer in Switzerland, purportedly after a niece of Grunbaum’s smuggled them out. Reif and other family members, however, have fiercely disputed this version of events in court.

Reif, who is now general counsel in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, became involved beginning in the 1990s, when his mother and aunt contested the ownership of Dead City III, a Schiele painting that was being shown temporarily in New York City. Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau seized it, kicking off a legal tug-of-war that eventually would span the Atlantic. It since has been sent back to Austria.

The family has contested the provenance of other works as well. But a lack of international legal standards and incomplete or contradictory document trails and witness memories have made the task difficult.

No artwork has yet been returned to Reif’s family; most works believed to have belonged to Grunbaum either have vanished or are scattered around the world. Still, the Reif family recently won a modest victory. Last fall, a Schiele watercolor, Town on the Blue River, was sold by Christie’s under an acknowledgment that Grunbaum was a previous owner, and a share of the proceeds was reserved for his heirs.

“It was very, very important to me and the other heirs, even though it’s only one piece of the collection,” Reif says.

Family members want to see the proceeds of future sales go toward a foundation that encourages young artists and freedom of expression — two things Grunbaum cherished, Reif says: “I believe someday we will be able to achieve that, and have some restoration of this man’s dignity and a reminder of the extraordinary courage he possessed.” ◆ By Louis Jacobson ’92
objects that made their way into Austrian national collections,” Steward says.

It remains difficult to know what happened to specific works. The Nazis stole some of them outright. And forced sales, in which owners sold the works for below market value, perhaps to protect them from the Nazis or because the Nazis stripped the owners of their livelihoods, might be considered morally equivalent. “This issue is going to be with us in a larger sense for a long time,” Steward says.

In Woman in Gold, the new film about the case, Ryan Reynolds plays Schoenberg; Helen Mirren plays Altmann. London playwright Alexi Kaye Campbell wrote the script, hoping to conjure up not only the courtroom battle but also the explosion of creativity in Vienna in the early part of the 20th century. The Nazis wiped that world away. “The knee-jerk reaction [is] it’s about a painting, it’s about money,” Campbell says of the story. “It was challenging for me to say, no, it’s about what that painting signifies and about the world that brought it about.”

Campbell met with Schoenberg in Los Angeles and later showed him an early draft. Schoenberg bristled at some inaccuracies added to create drama, such as a conflict between him and his wife over pursuing the case, and imagined conversations between him and Altmann. “There were times when he said, ’I’d never say something like that to Maria; I’d never be so rude,’ ” Campbell recalls, “but I said, ‘Unfortunately, in the film, you will be.’ ”

Now, Schoenberg is nonchalant about the inaccuracies. In Berlin, watching himself cry on screen — in a pivotal but fictionalized scene — Schoenberg couldn’t help but break down.

Though critics’ early reviews were largely negative, audience members, posting online, have been full of praise. At the Berlin festival, the audience gave the film a huge ovation. Schoenberg fiercely defends the film.

“I wanted a film that people were going to see,” he says.

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Schoenberg’s work on Holocaust property cases isn’t over. He helped negotiate a $6.5 million settlement involving a looted Picasso, a $3 million settlement for a Canaletto, and the return of an $8 million building in Vienna.

He is consulting on a case involving Pasadena’s Norton Simon Museum and two disputed works, Adam and Eve, painted in 1526 by Lucas Cranach the Elder. There’s even another Klimt, Portrait of Amalie Zuckerkandl, which Schoenberg is trying to retrieve for Altmann’s estate. She died in 2011.

Just before his arbitration victory, Schoenberg became president of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. When the Klimt paintings were sold, he used some of his 40 percent to help finance a new building for the museum, the oldest Holocaust collection in the country.

The 2010 building is a shallow gray slab with greenery spread across its roof, like a camouflaged bunker within Pan Pacific Park. Schoenberg wanted it to be free and accessible, with all the latest electronic gizmos. On a tour he gives for PAW, he darts through packs of schoolchildren corralled by docents. He brags that the museum’s audio guide beat the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Reagan Library to win an award.

Early in the permanent exhibit there’s a long black table that’s a touch screen of digital pre-war photos. It’s supposed to feel communal, like a Sabbath table. Further into the museum, there’s a small screen for each of 18 concentration camps. The tour groups become more fragmented, and the space gets darker, more cramped — mimicking the death-camp experience.

Schoenberg came up with the idea for the table and the Tree of Testimony, a sculpture of 70 screens simultaneously showing survivor testimony. Visitors can listen in on any screen via headphones. He also decided to display Los Angeles Times pages showing Holocaust news. In the late 1930s, it’s on the front page. Later reports appear inside the newspaper, including one with the headline “Half of Jews in Europe Dead.”

At the end of the permanent exhibit, Schoenberg points out a collection of music scores. Here is the manuscript of the first major musical commemoration of the Holocaust, which happens to have been written by Schoenberg’s grandfather Zeisl. And here is the most famous one, A Survivor from Warsaw — written by grandfather Arnold Schoenberg.

The Klimt case is the same for the grandson. It is, as much as any courtroom battle can be, a work of remembrance.

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