

The Hare with Amber Eyes

Audio Script

Final as recorded transcript

Nov 11, 2021

1. BLOOMBERG GALLERY (Netsuke Table) 257 words, 1min 59 sec

There are 264 netsuke in this collection. It is a very big collection of very small objects.

I pick one up and turn it round in my fingers, weigh it in the palm of my hand. If it is wood, chestnut or elm, it is even lighter than the ivory. You see the patina more easily on these wooden ones: there is a faint shine on the spine of the brindled wolf and on the tumbling acrobats locked in their embrace. The ivory ones come in shades of cream, every colour, in fact, but white. A few have inlaid eyes of amber or horn. Some of the older ones are slightly worn away: the haunch of the faun resting on leaves has lost its markings. There is a slight split, an almost imperceptible fault line on the cicada.

Who dropped it? Where and when?

Most of them are signed -- that moment of ownership when it was finished and let go. There is a wooden netsuke of a seated man holding a gourd between his feet. He's bending over it, both hands on a knife that is half into the gourd.

It is hard work, his arms and shoulder and neck show the effort: every muscle concentrates on the blade. There is another of a cooper working on a half-finished barrel with an adze. He sits leaning into it, framed by it, brows puckered with concentration. It is an ivory carving about what it is like to carve into wood. Both are about finishing something on the subject of the half-finished.

Look, they say, I got there first and he's hardly started.

2. HURST GALLERY (Video) 409 words, 2min 55sec

I want to know what the relationship has been between this wooden object that I am rolling between my fingers - hard and tricky and Japanese - and where it has been. I want to be able to reach to the handle of the door and turn it and feel it open. I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it has been in, and what they felt about it and thought about it - if they thought about it at all. I want to know what it has witnessed.

I know the bones of this journey from Iggie. I know that these netsuke were bought in Paris in the 1870s by a cousin of my great-grandfather called Charles Ephrussi. And I know that he gave them as a wedding-present to my great-grandfather Viktor von Ephrussi in Vienna at the turn of the century. And I know the story of Anna, my great-grandmother's maid, very well. And I know that they came with Iggie to Tokyo, of course, and were part of his life there with Jiro.

Paris, Vienna, Tokyo, London.

As my grandmother and my great-uncle Iggie have died, I must also ask for my father's help to get started. He is eighty and kindness itself and will look out for family things for me, he says, for background information. There isn't much, he warns me. He comes down to my studio with a small cache of photographs, forty-odd. He also brings two thin blue files of letters to which he has added yellow Post-it notes, mostly legible, a family tree annotated by my grandmother sometime in the 1970s, the membership book for the Vienna Club in 1935 and, in a supermarket carrier bag, a pile of Thomas Mann novels with inscriptions. We lay them out on the long table in my office up the stairs, above the room where I fire my pots in the kilns. You are now the keeper of the family archive, he tells me, and I look at the piles and I am not sure how funny I should find this.

I put a netsuke in my pocket and I set out.

PART 1: PARIS 1871-1899

3. ARRIVAL 142 words, 1 min 15 sec

One sunny April day I set out to find Charles. Rue de Monceau is a long Parisian street bisected by the grand boulevard Malesherbes that charges off towards the boulevard Pereire. It is a hill of golden stone houses, a series of hotels playing discreetly on neoclassical themes, each one a minor Florentine palace with heavily rusticated ground floors and an array of heads, caryatids and cartouches. Number 81 rue de Monceau, the Hôtel Ephrussi, where my netsuke start their journey, is near the top of the hill. I pass the headquarters of Christian Lacroix and then, next door, there it is. It is now, rather crushingly, an office for medical insurance.

This is the world in which my netsuke first settled. On this street I feel this play between discretion and opulence, a sort of breathing-in and breathing-out of invisibility and visibility.

4. IWAN PHOTO (Entry staircase) 184 words, 1min 24sec



A delivery man carries boxes of Speedy-Go Pizza into the medical insurers. The door into the entrance hall is open. I walk into the hall, its staircase curling up like a coil of smoke through the whole house, black cast iron and gold filigree stretching up to a lantern at the top. And there is a marble urn in a deep niche, and checquerboard marble tiles. Executives are coming down the stairs, heels hard on the marble, and I retreat in embarrassment.

The Hôtel Ephrussi was a family house, but it was also the Parisian headquarters of a family in its ascendancy. It had its counterpart in Vienna, the vast Palais Ephrussi on the Ringstrasse. Both the Parisian and Viennese buildings share a sense of drama, of a public face to the world. They were both built in 1871 in new and fashionable areas: the rue de Monceau and the Ringstrasse were so of-the-minute that they were unfinished, untidly, loud and dusty building sites. They were still spaces that were inventing themselves, competitive with the older parts of town with their narrower streets, they were spikily arriviste.

5. PARIS WUNDERKAMMER 468 words, 3 min 26sec



Charles has his new apartment in the family house, gilded and clean, and empty. He has languages, he has money and he has time. So now he sets of wandering. Like a well-brought-up young man, Charles goes south.

He has a year away from his family, a gap year, a Grand Tour through the canon of Renaissance art. This journey turns Charles into a collector. Or perhaps, I think, it allows him to collect, to turn looking into having and having into knowing.



The Musée Graphique is a vast maroon three-volume elephant folio in the library at the Victoria and Albert Museum. I order it up, and there is much jocularly when it is brought into the Reading Room on a hospital trolley.

It contains engravings of all the major collections of Renaissance art in Europe, principally those of Sir Richard Wallace, assorted Rothschilds – and the twenty-three-year-old Charles. This folio is vanity publishing on a colossal scale, produced by collectors to impress other collectors.

And one page makes me laugh out loud: Charles's huge Renaissance bed, a *lit de parade* hung with broderies. A high canopy with putti embowered in intricate patterns, grotesque heads, heraldic emblems, fruit and flowers. It is a sort of ducal bed – almost a princeling's bed. It is a bed from which to rule a city state, give audiences, to write sonnets in, certainly to make love in.

What kind of young man would buy a bed like this?

It is not yet time for the netsuke to enter the story. Charles in his twenties is always elsewhere, in transit to somewhere, sending regards and apologies for missing family gatherings, from London, Venice, Munich. He is starting to write a book on Dürer, the artist he fell for in the collections of Vienna, and he needs to find every drawing, every scribble in every archive, in order to do him justice.

At the age of thirty, Charles is no longer the rushing young man. We see him here with his mistress and his new role as the recently appointed editor of the *Gazette des beaux arts*, and we find that he has grown into himself. He is a collector now not only of netsuke, but also of pictures.

Later, as he approached his mid-forties, he developed a new taste for Empire paintings and furniture. And I began to realize that this was more than just a way of creating an ensemble in which to live. It was also a claim on an essential Frenchness, on belonging somewhere properly. And perhaps also a way of putting more space

between those first, jostingly complex rooms and this, his authoritative life as an arbiter of taste. Empire is not *le gout Rothschild*, it's not Jewish. It's French.

6. PARIS NETSUKE TABLE 311 words 2min 25sec

Netsuke cannot knock around your salon or your study unprotected. They get lost or dropped, dusty, or chipped. They need a place to rest, preferably in company with other bibelots. This is why vitrines come to matter. And in this journey towards the netsuke, I become more and more intrigued by vitrines, glass display cases.

The vitrines exist so that you can see objects, but not touch them: they frame things, suspend them, tantalise through distance.

But the vitrine - as opposed to the museum's case - is for opening. And that opening glass door, that moment of looking, then choosing, then reaching in and then picking up is a moment of seduction, an encounter between a hand and an object that is electric.

I want to find how these nonchalant Parisians, Charles and his lover, handled Japanese things. What was it like to have something so alien in your hands for the first time, to pick up a box or a cup - or a netsuke - in a material that you had never encountered before and shift it around, finding its weight and balance, running a fingertip along the raised decoration of a stork in flight through clouds?

There might be a literature of touch somewhere, I think; someone must have recorded in a diary or a letter the fugitive moment of what they felt when they picked one up. There must be a trace of their hands somewhere.

These netsuke add something very particular to Charles's way of living, I think. They are the first thing that have any connection to everyday life, even an exotic everyday life. They are wonderful and highly sensual, of course, but they are not princely like his Medici bed or his Marie Antoinette lacquers. They are for touching.

Above all, they make you laugh in many different ways. They are witty and ribald and they are slyly comic.

7. PARIS SALON HANG 363 words, 2min 24sec

In three years Charles created one of the great early collections of the Impressionists.

He bought paintings and pastels by Morisot, Cassat, Degas, Manet, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Renoir: All the walls of these rooms must have been filled with these pictures, they must have been hung above each other three deep. Forget the Degas pastel glowing solitary on a gallery wall at the Metropolitan, five feet from another picture on either side, nothing above or below. In this room, this pastel must have shaded the Donatello, knocked against a score of other glowing pictures, rubbed up against the vitrine of netsuke.



Charles bought a picture of some asparagus from Manet, one of his extraordinary small still lifes. It was a bundle of twenty stalks bound in straw. And Manet wanted 800 francs for it, a substantial sum, and Charles, thrilled, sent 1,000. A week later Charles received a small canvas signed with a simple M in return. It was a single asparagus stalk laid across a table with an accompanying note: 'This seems to have slipped from the bundle.'



Charles had bought two paintings by Gustave Moreau.

He wrote to Moreau that his work had 'the tonalities of an ideal dream.

And Renoir was absolutely furious. 'Ah that Gustave Moreau. It was clever of him to take in the Jews, to have thought of painting with gold colours. Even Ephrussi fell for it, who I really thought had some sense!'

I imagine Renoir entering the marble hall and coming up those winding stairs past Ignace's apartment to Charles's rooms on the second floor, and being let in and finding Moreau's *Jason* in front of him: standing naked on the slaughtered dragon, holding up his broken spear and the golden fleece.

It is 'Jew Art', Renoir writes, galled to find his patron, the editor of the *Gazette Des Beaux Art*, with this *goût Rothschild* stuff on the walls, jewelled and mythic, and contaminatingly close to his own paintings.

PART 2: Vienna 1899 - 1938

8. VIENNA ARRIVAL 218 words, 1 min 42 sec

On the cusp of the new century, Charles's first cousin in Vienna was to be married. Charles had known Viktor von Ephrussi since boyhood, when the whole family had lived together, all the generations under one roof, the evenings spent in planning their move to Paris. Viktor was the bored little boy, his youngest cousin, for whom Charles drew caricatures of the servants. The clan was close and they had seen each other at parties in Paris and Vienna, on holiday in Vichy and St Moritz, at Fanny's summer gatherings at the Chalet Ephrussi. And they shared Odessa - the city they were both born in, the starting place that is not mentioned.

The three brothers in Paris all send wedding-presents to Viktor and his young bride, the Baroness Emmy Schey von Koromla. The couple will start their new life in the enormous Palais Ephrussi on the Ringstrasse.

Jules and Fanny Ephrussi send them a beautiful Louis XV desk of marquetry with tapering legs ending in small gilt hooves.

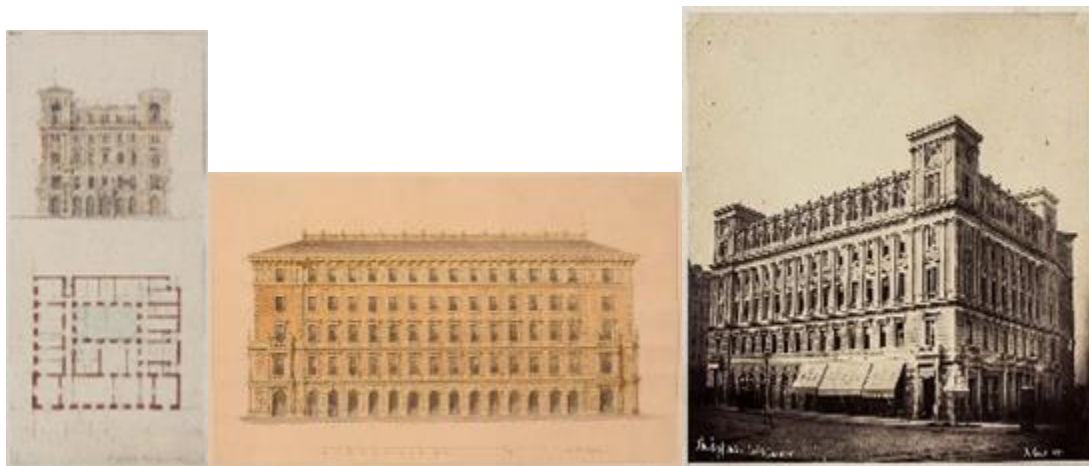
Ignace Ephrussi sends them an Old Master painting, Dutch, of two ships in a gale. Perhaps a coded joke about marriage from a serial avoider of commitment.

And Charles Ephrussi sends them something special, a spectacular something from Paris: a black vitrine with green velvet shelves, and a mirrored back that reflects 264 netsuke.

9. VIENNA WUNDERKAMMER LEFT (Palais) 281 words, 2 min 28 sec

When the netsuke arrive at the Palais Ephrussi, the house was almost thirty years old. The building is a piece of theatre, a show-stopping performance by the man who commissioned it, Vitkor's father, my great-great-grandfather Ignace von Ephrussi.

What this rich Jewish banker wanted was a building to dramatise the ascendancy of his family, a house to sit alongside all these great institutions on the Ringstrasse.



This new home for the netsuke is absurdly big. The Palais Ephrussi has Corinthian pilasters and Doric columns, and urns and architraves, and four small towers at the corners, and even rows of caryatids holding up the roof.

For rooms covered in gold, it is very, very dark. The walls are divided into panels, each one delineated by ribbons of gilding. All the ceilings are divided into more networks of lozenges and ovals and triangular panels by heavy gilded mouldings, raised

and coffered into intricate scrolls of neoclassical froth. These panels are painted by Christian Griepenkerl, the acclaimed decorator of the ceilings of the auditorium of the newly built Opera. It is all absurd.

The vitrine needs to go somewhere.

The great glass case of beautiful things has a particular difficulty for Viktor, as it comes from Paris, and he doesn't want it sitting and reminding him of an elsewhere, another life. The thing is that Viktor and Emmy are not quite sure about Charles's gift. They are wonderful, these little carvings, funny and intricate, and it is obvious that his favorite cousin Charles has also been exceedingly generous. But the malachite-and-gilt clock and the pair of globes from cousins in Berlin, and the Madonna, can be placed straight away - salon, library, dining-room - and this great vitrine cannot. It is too odd. It's too complicated, and it is also rather large.

10. VIENNA WUNDERKAMMER CENTER 408 words, 2 min 63 sec

Emmy has put the vitrine in her dressing-room, with its mirrored back and all 264 netsuke from cousin Charles. This is where my brindled wolf has ended up.

This makes so much sense, and yet it makes no sense at all. Who comes into a dressing-room? It is hardly a social space, and certainly not a salon. If the boxwood turtles and the persimmon and the cracked little ivory of the girl in her bath are kept here on their green velvet shelves, this means that they do not have to be explained at Emmy's at-homes. They do not have to be mentioned at all by Viktor.

Could it be embarrassment that brings the vitrine here?

Or was the decision to take the netsuke away from the public gaze intentional, away from all that pomposity; putting them into the one room that was completely Emmy's own because she was intrigued by them?

This is her room. She spent a great deal of time in it. She changed three times a day - sometimes more.



There is a picture of Emmy in a Viennese street. It is winter 1906 and she is talking to an archduke. They are smiling as she hands him some primroses. She is wearing a pin-striped costume: an Aline skirt with a deep panel at the hem cut across the grain and a matching close-cut Zouave jacket. It is a *walking costume*. To dress for that walk down Herrengasse would have taken an hour and a half: pantalettes, chemise in fine batiste or crêpe de Chine, a corset to nip in the waist, stockings, garters, button boots, a skirt with hooks up the plaquette, then either a blouse or a chemisette - so no bulk on her arms - with a high-stand collar and lace jabot, then the jacket done up with a false front, then her small purse - a reticule - hanging on a chain, jewellery, fur hat with striped taffeta bow to echo the costume, white gloves, flowers. And no scent; Emmy does not wear scent.

11. VIENNA WUNDERKAMMER RIGHT 444 words, 2 min 53 sec

The household and the family make their sacrifices during the First World War. The manservants in the Palais have disappeared, apart from the Butler Josef, who is too old to be called up. A small bevy of maids is kept on and a cook and Anna. Anna has now been with the family for fifteen years and seems to anticipate everyone's needs and has an ability to calm tempers.

Emmy's and Viktor's oldest daughter Elisabeth is almost sixteen. She is now allowed to get her books bound in half-morocco with marbled covers when Viktor gets his books bound for the library. This is a kind of rite of passage, a way of marking that her reading has significance. Her sister Gisela is eleven and starts drawing lessons in the morning-room. She is very good. Their brother Iggie is nine and is not allowed in. He knows the uniforms of imperial regiments and sketches the colours of their tunics in his little leather notebooks tied up with purple silk.

It was a particularly cold winter in Vienna in 1918 and the white porcelain stove in the corner of the salon was the only fire that could be kept going all day and night.

When I try to imagine life in the family in the weeks after Austria's defeat in the First World War, I see the paper blowing along the streets. Vienna had always been so tidy. Now there were posters and placards, leaflets and demonstrations.



Emmy, with her new baby, struggled in these first weeks and both she and Rudolf became weaker and weaker. There was talk about getting Emmy and Rudolf out of the city and away to their country house in Kövecses, even of taking Gisela and Iggie away too, but there was no petrol for the car and the trains were in chaos. So they stayed in the Palais in the marginally quieter rooms with their backs to the Ringstrasse.

At the start of the war the house had felt very exposed, a private house surrounded by public spaces. Now, the peace seemed more frightening than the war: it was not clear who was fighting who, and it was not clear whether or not there was going to be a revolution.

Anti-Semitism gained even more ground in Vienna during those years. You could hear the echo of the demonstrations, of course, with their rants against the 'plague of Eastern Jews', but Iggie remembered that they used to laugh at those, as they laughed at the mass displays of youth groups in their proud uniforms and of Austrians in peasant costumes of dirndl and lederhosen. There were lots and lots of these parades.

12. VIENNA NETSUKE TABLE 407 words, 2 min 48 sec

The children in the dressing-room choose their favourite carving and play with it on the pale-yellow carpet. Gisela loved the Japanese dancer, holding her fan against the brocade gown, caught in mid-step. Iggie loved the wolf, a tight dark tangle of limbs, faint markings all along its flanks, gleaming eyes and a snarl. And he loved the bundle of kindling tied up with rope, and the beggar who has fallen asleep over his begging bowl so that all you see is the top of his bald head.

Elisabeth, contrary, loved the masks with their abstracted memory of faces.

You could arrange these carvings, ivory and wood, all the fourteen rats in one long row, the three tigers, the beggars over there, the children, the masks, the shells, the fruits.

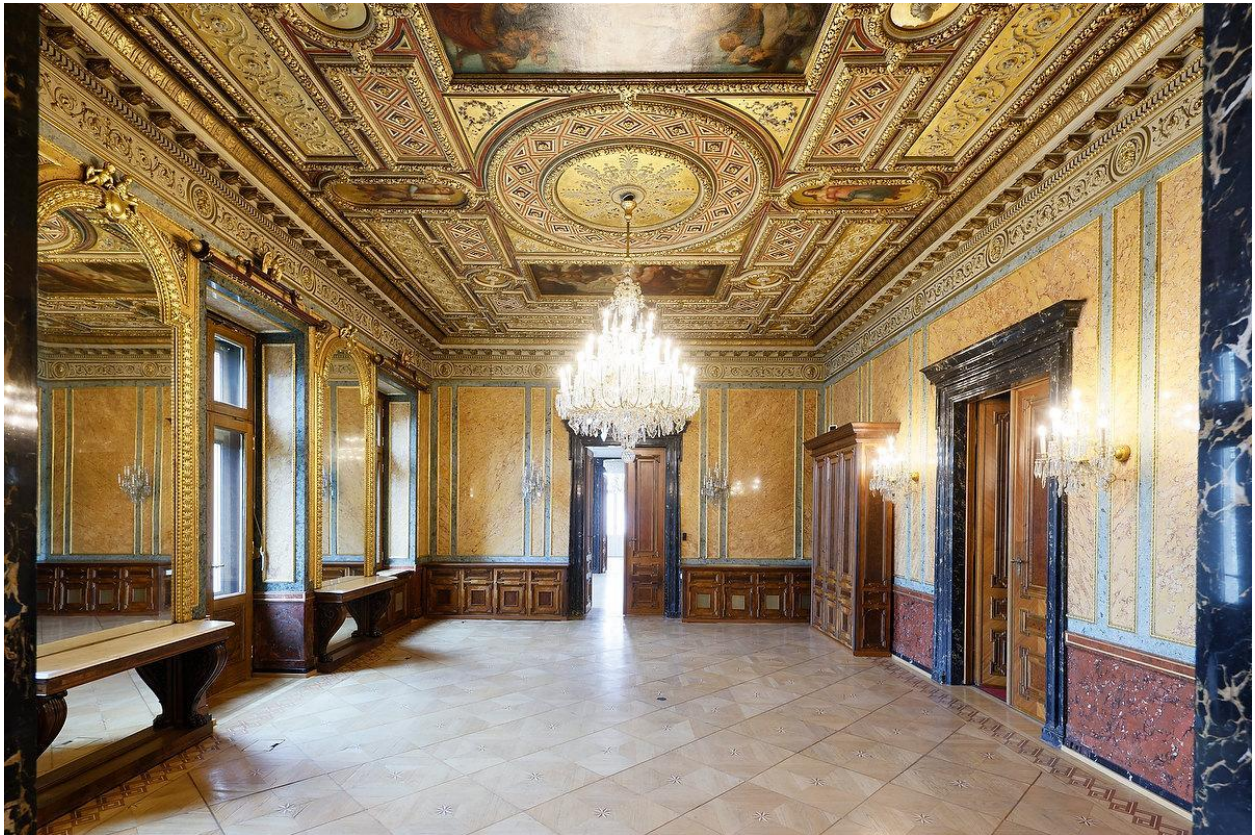
You could arrange them by colour, all the way from the dark brown medlar to the gleaming ivory deer. Or by size. The smallest is the single rat with black inlaid eyes chewing his tail, little bigger than the magenta stamp issued to celebrate the sixtieth year of the Emperor's reign.

Or you muddled them up, so that your sister can't find the girl in her brocade robes. Or you could stockade the dog and her puppies with all the tigers, and she would have to get out - and she did.

The netsuke could not feel safer than they are here. Careless domestics do not last long in Emmy's *Palais*: she snaps at the girl who spills the cream jug on the tray. And a broken Meißer Harlequin in the salon means dismissal. In her dressing-room one of the other servants dusts the furniture, but only Emmy's maid Anna is allowed to open the vitrine for the children, before she lays out her mistress's clothes for the evening.

The netsuke are no longer part of salon life, they are no longer part of a game of sharpened wit. No one is going to comment on the quality of their carving, of the pallor of their patina. They have lost any connection to Japan, lost their *Japonisme*, are suspended from critique. They have become true toys, true bibelots: they are not so small when picked up by a child. Here, in this dressing-room, they are part of the intimacy of Emmy's life. This is the space where she undresses with the help of Anna, and dresses for the next engagement with Viktor, a friend, a lover. It has its own kind of threshold.

13.IWAN VIENNA PHOTOGRAPH 250 words, 1min 45sec



Everything in this place, I realize, is very shiny. There is nothing to grip onto with these marbled surfaces. Its lack of tactility makes me panic: I run my hands along the walls and they feel slightly clammy. I thought I'd worked through my feelings about Belle-Époque architecture in Paris, craning my neck to see the Baudrys on the ceilings of the Opéra. But here it is all so much closer, so much more personal. This is aggressively golden, aggressively lacking in purchase.

What was Ignace trying to do? Smother his critics?

In the ballroom, with its three great windows looking across the square to the Votivkirche, Ignace suddenly lets something slip. Here, on the ceiling -- where in other

Ringstrasse Palais you might find something Elysian -- there is a series of paintings of stories from the biblical Book of Esther:

Esther crowned as Queen of Persia, kneeling in front of the Chief Priest in his rabbinical robes, being blessed, with her servants kneeling behind her. And then there is the destruction of the sons of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, by Jewish soldiers.

It is beautifully done. It is a long-lasting, covert way of staking a claim for who you are. This ballroom is the only place in a Jewish household -- however grand, and however rich you might be -- that your Gentile neighbours would ever see socially. This is the only Jewish painting on the whole of the Ringstrasse of Vienna.

14. VIENNA SALON HANG 252 words 1min 57sec

In 1914, before the war, Viktor had a fortune of twenty-five million crowns, several buildings scattered around Vienna, the Palais Ephrussi, the art collection of '100 old paintings' and an annual income of several hundred thousand crowns. Now even the two floors of the Palais that he rented out for 50,000 crowns did not bring in any more income. And his decision to leave his money in Austria had proved catastrophic. This newly-minted patriotic Austrian citizen had invested massively in war bonds late into 1917. And they were worthless, too.

Things now had to be preserved, sometimes even cherished, where before they had been just a background, a gilt-and-varnish blur to a busy social life. The uncounted and the unmeasured started at last to be counted very accurately.

There was a huge falling away; things were so much better and fuller before. Perhaps this was when there were the very first intimations of nostalgia. I begin to think that keeping things and losing them are not polar opposites. You keep this silver snuff-box, a token for standing as a second in a duel, a lifetime ago. You keep the bracelet given by a lover. Viktor and Emmy kept everything - all these possessions, all these

drawers full of things, these walls full of pictures - but they lost their sense of a future, a future of manifold possibilities. This is how they were diminished.

Vienna is sticky with nostalgia. It has breached the heavy oak doors of their house.

PART 3

15. ANSCHLUSS 392 words 2 min 15 sec

There are fists on the door, someone leaning on the bell, and there are eight or ten, a knot of them in some kind of uniform - some with swastika armbands, some familiar. Some are still boys. It is one o'clock in the morning and no one is asleep, everyone is dressed. Viktor and Emmy and Rudolf are pushed into the library.

This first night they swarm through the apartment. There are shouts from across the courtyard, as a couple of them have found the salon with its French ensembles of furniture and porcelain. There is laughter from someone as Emmy's closet is ransacked. Someone bangs out a tune on the piano keys. Some men are in the study pulling out drawers, roughing up the desks, pushing the folios off the stand in the corner. This convulsive disordering, messing up, sweeping off is barely looting; it is a stretching of muscles, a cracking of the knuckles, a loosening up. The people in the corridors are checking, looking, exploring, working out what is here.

The last door they reach is Emmy's dressing-room in the corner, the room with the vitrine containing the netsuke, and they sweep everything off the desk she uses as a dressing-table: the small mirror and the porcelain and the silver boxes and the flowers sent up from the meadows in Kövecses that Anna arranges in the vases, and they drag the desk out into the corridor.

They push Emmy and Viktor and Rudolf against the wall, and three of them heave the desk and send it crashing over the handrail. This desk - the wedding-present from Fanny and Jules Ephrussi, from Paris - takes a long time to fall. The sounds ricochet off the glass roof. The broken drawers scatter letters across the courtyard.

On 23rd April a boycott of Jewish shops is announced. That same day the Gestapo arrive at the Palais Ephrussi. They have orders to search the apartment.

16. ATTACHE CASE VITRINE 356 words, 2 min 22 sec

Emmy's maid, Anna, was told that she could no longer work for Jews, and that she was to work for her country. She was to make herself useful and help sort out the belongings of the previous occupiers, pack them into wooden crates. They had lots to do, and she should start by packing up the silver in the silver-room.

All around her people were busy taking the apartment to pieces. It was the day Viktor and Rudolf were arrested and taken away, and Emmy was barred from the apartment and sent to the rooms on the other side of the courtyard.

They were taking the clocks that Anna had wound, the books from the library, the lovely porcelain figures of the clowns in the salon. Everything. She had looked to see what she could save for Emmy and the children.

'I couldn't carry anything precious away for you. So I would slip three or four of the little figures from the Baroness's dressing-room, the little toys you played with when you were children - you remember - and I put them into the pocket of my apron whenever I was passing, and I took them to my room. I hid them in the mattress of my bed. It took me two weeks to get them all out of that big glass case. You remember how many there were!

'And they didn't notice. They were so busy. They were busy with all the grand things - the Baron's paintings, that gold service from the safe, and the cabinets from the drawing-room, and the statues and all the Baron's old books that he loved so much. They didn't notice the little figures.

'So I just took them. And I put them in my mattress and I slept on them. And now you are back, I have something to return to you.'

She gave the netsuke to Elisabeth in 1945, and Elisabeth put the persimmon and the ivory stag and the rats and the rat-catcher and the masks that she had loved when she was six, and all the rest of this world, into a leather attaché case to take back to England. They can expand to fill a huge vitrine in a Paris salon or a dressing-room in Vienna, but they can also fit into next to nothing.

17. FAMILY DIASPORA 244 words, 1 min 46 sec

It was a family that could not put itself back together. Elisabeth provided a kind of centre in Tunbridge Wells, writing and relating news, sending on photographs of nieces and nephews. Gisela was in Mexico. She had lean times and worked as a cleaner to support the family. Rudolf was demobbed and living in Virginia. And fashion had 'given up' on Iggie - as he put it. He could not face working on gowns again: the thread from Vienna to Paris to New York had been broken by his battle experiences in 1944 in France.

He was now working for Bunge, an international grain exporter, an unintentional return to the patriarch's roots in Odessa.

In October 1947 Iggie visited England between postings. He had been offered placements, none of which appealed. He traveled to Tunbridge Wells to see Elisabeth and Henk and his nephews, and to visit his father's grave for the first time. Then he planned to make a decision about his future.

It was after supper. The boys had done their homework and were in bed. Elisabeth opened the attaché case and showed him the netsuke.

They take a few out and put them on the kitchen table of the suburban house.

We didn't say anything, Iggie told me. We had last looked at them together in our mother's dressing-room, thirty years before, sitting on the yellow carpet.

It's Japan, he said. I'll take them back.

18. TOKYO 159 words, 1 min 53 sec



I'm looking at the clutch of small, round-cornered Kodachrome prints of Iggie's first house in Tokyo.

It is a house with panache. There is none of the clutter of his childhood in the Palais: it is a dramatic interior of golden screens and scrolls, paintings and Chinese pots created as a new home for the netsuke.

For right in the centre of this house, in the centre of Iggie's life, are the netsuke. Iggie designed a glass case for them. It has a patterned paper on the walls behind it, a pale-blue pattern of chrysanthemums. Not only are the 264 netsuke back in Japan, but they are back on show in a salon. They are placed by Iggie on three long glass shelves. And there are hidden lights so that at dusk the vitrine glows with all the gradations of creme, bone and ivory. At night they can light the whole room.

The netsuke share their imagery with the Japanese scrolls and gilded screens across the room. They have something to talk with in this room, unlike Charles's Moreaus and Renoirs, or Emmy's silver and glass scent bottles on her dressing-table in Vienna. They have always been objects to be picked up and handled - now they become part of another world of handled objects.

At Iggy's parties, with glasses of whiskey and plates of edamame, crunchy green-bean pods, scattered on the tables, the cases were opened. Netsuke were picked up again, exclaimed over again, handed round and enjoyed.

19. Picture of Edmund's father Viktor de Waal, 2 min 15 sec

Just because you have it does not mean you have to pass it on. Losing things can sometimes gain you a space in which to live. I don't miss Vienna, Elisabeth would say, with a lightness in her voice. It was claustrophobic. It was very dark.

She was over ninety when she mentioned that she had received rabbinical instruction as a child: 'I asked my father for permission. He was surprised.' She told me. She was matter-of-fact, as if I'd already known.

When she died two years later my father, the clergyman in the Church of England, the Dean of Canterbury, born in Amsterdam with a childhood everywhere in Europe, stood in his Benedictine-black, rabbinical-black cassock and recited the Kaddish for his mother in the parish church near her nursing home.

The problem is that I am in the wrong century to burn things. I am in the wrong generation to let it go. I think of a library carefully sorted into boxes. I think of all those careful burnings by others, the systematic erasing of stories, the separations between people and their possessions, and then of people from their families and families from their neighbourhoods. And then from their country.

I think of someone checking a list to make sure that these people were still alive and resident in Vienna, before stamping 'Sara' or 'Israel' in red over the record of their birth. I think, of course, of all the listings of families in the manifests, for deportations.

If others can be so careful over things that are so important, then I must be careful over these objects and their stories. I must get it right, go back and check it again, walk it again.

You take an object from your pocket and put it down in front of you and you start. You begin to tell a story.

20.LONDON VITRINE 191 words, 1min 30sec

After the funeral Jiro asks me to help sort out Iggie's clothes.

And when this job is done, over a glass of wine, Jiro takes out his brush and ink and writes a document and seals it. It says, he tells me, that once he has gone I should look after the netsuke.

So I'm next.

The collection's latest resting-place is in London. The Victoria and Albert Museum is getting rid of some of its old vitrines to make way for new displays. I buy one. With great effort, we haul in this decommissioned vitrine. It takes four of us and a lot of swearing. It is seven feet high and is made of bronze with glass shelves.

This latest vitrine I think will be a good resting place for the netsuke. It is next to the piano, and unlocked so that the children can open the door if they wish to.

I put some of the netsuke out on display - the wolf, the medlar, the hare with amber eyes, a dozen more - and when I next look they have been moved around. A rat, curled up asleep, has been pushed to the front. I open the glass door and pick it up. I slip it into my pocket, put the dog on the lead and leave for work. I have pots to make.

The netsuke begin again.