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In Monsieur's Net - by Andreas Ulrich

With the discovery of a great amount of jewellery in an old house, one of Germany's most spectacular crimes may be about to be solved – a thriller, involving millions, and the jeweller named Düe.

In theory the man is poor as a church mouse, however he has not been left wanting: The magnificent house on Sylt where René Düe lives belongs to his sister, the Mercedes SL he drives is borrowed. The former exclusive Hanover jeweller now lives in seclusion on the island playground of Germany's rich and famous, dependent on the kindness of friends for his luxuries, because, for legal reasons, Düe (54) is not officially allowed to own anything.

In a still unsolved robbery at his jeweller's business in Hanover in 1981, jewels, gold and watches worth more than 13 million Deutschmarks went missing, most of them did not even belong to him. And the owners would be very glad to have their precious loss restored.

Because Düe himself opened the door to the robbers while the safe was standing open and because he later handed over some of the pieces reported as stolen to private agent Werner Mauss (60), the insurance company is still refusing to pay out any compensation. Both the agent and the insurance company believe that it was Düe himself who set up the robbery.

Now, 19 years later, the case may be about to be solved – eleven packages containing 10.8 kilos of the stolen goods were turned up by chance last week, they had been hidden in the former business premises of the Düe family.

It's a turn of events that throws one of the most spectacular criminal cases of modern times in Germany back into the spotlight. Old wounds are being re-opened. It's a story of ambitious police officers and illegal investigation methods. And, in the end, it led to the constitutional state itself being put to the test by a committee of enquiry of the parliament of Lower Saxony. Some of those involved are still suffering the consequences.

The story begins on the 31st of October 1981: A postman who came to deliver registered mail found Düe unconscious on the floor of his prestige jewellery shop. He was bleeding from a head wound and had vomited. Upstairs, gagged and very frightened, cowered Düe's mother. The safe was open, its contents gone. The value of the missing jewellery amounted to 13,665,962 Deutschmarks.

Via newspaper advertisements and postcards, Düe had advised his customers of an exhibition of exquisite pieces that was to have taken place that very day. However,

before the opening, just after 9 o'clock, two elegantly dressed men carrying pilot's attaché cases rang the doorbell; they were of southern European appearance according to witnesses. Düe opened the door because, he said, he was expecting a business associate.

The two men knocked Düe brutally to the ground. As a result, the jeweller spent the next two weeks in hospital. The haul consisted mainly of consigned goods, although there was also some private jewellery, worth about half a million Deutschmarks. Because of the exhibition Düe had raised his cover with the Mannheimer Insurance Company. The switched-off security camera and the open safe were due to exhibition preparations, Düe maintains.

However, from the start, neither investigators nor insurance company were particularly inclined to believe his story. Düe, who had already been the victim of a robbery once before, soon became the chief object of suspicion. In the belief that the jeweller himself had set up the raid, the insurance company refused to pay. They would wait to see what the investigation would turn up. Düe came under tremendous pressure and the police had no leads to the robbers.

Then Werner Mauss entered the fray. At that time Mauss was no more than a phantom, the most secret of Germany's secret agents and employed as a civil agent by the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA). Hardly anyone was allowed to know what he looked like. The Hanover police had turned to the BKA for help explains Mauss.

Germany's most successful agent, who, according to himself was responsible for the arrest of 2000 criminals, had begun his infiltration of criminal and terrorist groups in the 1960's. Insiders at the time respectfully referred to him as "Institution M". In 1976, in Greece, working for the BKA, he tracked down and apprehended Rolf Pohle, who was then being sought for terrorist offences. Prior to this he had been instrumental in the recovery of most of the stolen Cologne Cathedral treasure and the arrest of the perpetrators. He was in possession of various identification papers in different names and made police officers happy by taking them along on official trips halfway around the world. The insurance industry took over the expenses, though Mauss maintains that he was never paid any commission. "I have never been a double-dealer. That would have caused problems for me in my collaborations with the police."

Mauss took on the tricky case. "I had asked for a few days to think things over and had the files sent to me. I was intrigued by the case", he says. But the net that the detective began to spin would later entangle him too. The Düe case ended in disaster for Mauss because he was transformed by it from a phantom into an identifiable figure – he was unmasked and had his reputation damaged by rumours of his dubious methods.

His tricks were publicly criticised by the commission of enquiry on the Düe case before the parliament of Lower Saxony. The investigating authorities were accused of letting Mauss lead them, instead of the other way round. Money from the Mannheimer Insurance Company ended up in the private bank account of the investigator and was used to finance official trips. By the end, there was even a

photograph of him in circulation. The Mauss legend was tarnished; his undercover role had become more difficult.

Years later, when Mauss himself spent several months in a Colombian jail, his enemies rejoiced at what they saw as him finally getting his just desserts. The accusation against him was that he had, without the government's knowledge, paid Colombian guerrilleros to secure the release of hostages. However, a Colombian court acquitted Mauss of all charges in May of 1998.

Back then in Hanover, however, Mauss could still set unconcernedly about his business. With the help of intermediaries skilfully manoeuvred into proximity with Düe, Mauss was able to introduce himself to the jeweller as "Claude", the representative of a rich man who was looking to invest some money. Düe was told he was exactly the man that Claude's client was looking for to open up a jewellery shop on his behalf in a well-to-do area of Hamburg. No more small potatoes, this was the real thing.

Most of the meetings took place abroad. Mauss, alias "Claude", used a number of tricks during their various meetings to try to get incriminating evidence against the jeweller. One investigator recalls that the agent bugged cars and hotel rooms, while German judges authorised the monitoring of the telephones of Düe's friends and family. The jeweller, however, said nothing that would have proven his guilt.

Around the summer of 1982, "Claude" chartered a chic motor yacht to take Düe and some of his trusted associates around the Mediterranean. The yacht was, of course, bugged and was followed secretly and at a distance by a second vessel carrying French and German police. Unfortunately for them, the sound quality was so bad that hardly a word could be understood.

Shortly thereafter, in August 1982, after months of investigations and "confidence-building measures" the trap was nevertheless sprung. Düe sent a suitcase to his supposed partner "Claude" at the Hotel Columbus in Bremen. Inside, hidden between hand towels, were 15 pieces of valuable jewellery. Every single item had previously been reported as stolen, and, according to Mauss, Düe proposed taking it to a fence in New York. The police were then to be tipped-off, the jewellery seized and a New York supplier incriminated. Düe's reputation would thus be rehabilitated, the robbery story made believable and the insurance company obliged to pay up.

The case seemed clear; a judge issued a warrant for Düe's arrest. On the 4th of January 1984, the district court in Hanover sentenced him to seven years imprisonment for simulating the commission of an offence, attempted fraud and embezzlement.

It all looked like another Mauss success, the bugging did not occasion any pangs of conscience: "That had all been agreed on with the public prosecutor's office." Without the "logistic support" of the authorities he could not have carried out such an operation.

Düe memories are very different. Mauss was pushy from the start, urging that the insurance thing be settled quickly so that they could concentrate on the new

business. It had been the detective's idea to place the jewellery with the fence. He had even pressed to have some pieces made up from photos and passed on to the fence. In the end, however, it was Düe himself who discovered the allegedly stolen goods, "by chance", or so he claims, in his workshop where they were supposedly awaiting repair.

Even today he refuses to mention Mauss by name. He refers to him as "Monsieur". "I would be left with a disgusting taste in my mouth otherwise" Düe says. After the first trial, the jeweller spent 870 days in custody. However, on the 13th of March 1989, the Hanover lawyer Elmar Brehm achieved a sensational second verdict at a new hearing before the Brunswick district court. Düe was acquitted. The court declared that the allegedly stolen jewellery that Mauss had received from Düe was irrelevant as evidence because Mauss had obtained the stolen goods by illegal methods.

Brehm today believes that: "at the time, we helped gain a victory for the constitutional state." Brehm fought on Düe's behalf for political reasons. Was it then, after all, a case of fighting against the police state and investigators who were too free in their methods? Brehm still believes in what he did. Only now Brehm has a problem, just like all the others who argued for Düe and condemned Mauss. In legal terms Düe is as innocent as anyone can be. For the alleged injustice done to him he even received 2.5 million Deutschmarks from the state of Lower Saxony. But the fact that the missing jewellery has turned up in a former Düe house does not look good. Mauss will be "unjustly rehabilitated and the real problems identified at the time be forgotten", fears Brehm – he could very well be right.

It could well be that Mauss, the alleged villain of the piece, was on the right track after all. Let's remind ourselves of the details. Workers found the carefully packed jewellery hidden in the ceiling of a small jeweller's shop between the "Kalauer" bar and the teashop "Teestübchen" close to the Ballhof in Hanover. Jeweller Horst Ackermann who ran the business until recently had taken it over in 1985 from his former boss, Friedrich Düe, René Düe's father, who died in 1990. Now the idyllic ivy-grown house is being renovated by its new owners. Walls are being torn down and re-plastered, floors restored.

After making the find, the young jeweller Ackermann asked Hildesheim lawyer Martin Fett for help. It was clear to them that the jewellery must be from the Düe case, and they feared the effect this would have on their business.

The eleven parcels were carefully wrapped in brown parcel tape. Fett opened one of these and counted 163 rings with price labels and marked "Jeweller Düe". The lawyer took the parcels to the nearest police station. The young police officer at the station at first had no idea what the find could be, but an older colleague remembered. The jewellery is now in the possession of the state criminal investigation department.

The jeweller has very little to fear in terms of prosecution. Düe has been, as Thomas Klinge of the public prosecutor's office in Hanover knows, legally acquitted of all charges against him. He may not even be referred to as a suspect. "We are not investigating Herr Düe, we are seeking the unknown perpetrators of robbery", says Klinge.

That is the only avenue left open to allow further investigation of the case. So witnesses are interviewed and the recovered jewellery examined for fingerprints.

Specialists from the state criminal investigation department, armed with rubber gloves and tweezers, have very carefully removed the adhesive tape from the dispatch boxes in which the jewellery was found.

The hope being that they might find some hair or particles of skin adhering to the tape which would make it possible to carry out a DNA analysis and obtain a genetic fingerprint. Should it turn out that robbery cannot be proven, the public prosecutor's office will just have to announce that no new leads have been found.

Though there is, in fact, another lead to be followed, to Turkey, to Istanbul. It was there in 1992 that the then 34-year-old Aydin Y. was sentenced to 17 years imprisonment for murder. The Turk had brutally murdered his friend Nevzat A. whom he had known for a number of years when both lived in Hanover. He had strangled his victim in a hotel room and then sewn up his mouth with coarse linen thread, a favoured method of punishment with the Mafia for those who talk too much.

At the beginning of the trial Aydin Y. testified that René Düe had contracted him to murder his companion in order to silence him. According to the daily newspaper "Hürriyet", the jeweller had hired the pair to carry out the robbery on his shop. Düe had failed to pay up however, and the murdered man had wanted to blow the whistle. A sum of 225,000 Deutschmarks was reputedly paid for the murder.

Aydin Cosar, lawyer for the murdered man's family, explained that the German authorities were unwilling to follow up on the lead and there was insufficient evidence for a conviction in Istanbul. Besides, during the course of his trial, the murderer retracted the part of his evidence that incriminated Düe.

Jeweller Düe, soon to be Dué, who plans to open a new jewellery gallery in exclusive Keiltum on the island of Sylt with the help of wealthy friends, sticks to his version of events, all just a nasty web of slander spun by "Monsieur". "I only heard about the discovery of the jewellery on Friday; it made me very happy to know that the case can finally be cleared up and my innocence proved", he says.

However it did not take long for the old suspicions to arise, his old fears to return, he complains. Are the methods of "Monsieur" once again behind the find? A new intrigue? Or, a terrible suspicion – might it even have been his old father who was behind the robbery?

But, then again, that really is an unbelievable suspicion.

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