

## FOREVER AMBER

*A room built for a king and treasured by an empress haunts two countries.*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

On September 17, 1941, the German Army took the town of Pushkin, in the Pulkovo hills south of Leningrad, and immediately proceeded to occupy the Catherine Palace. Originally a gift from Peter the Great to his wife, the palace had been expanded into a Russian version of Versailles—an enormous wedding cake of a castle, with pavilions, follies, and royal baths—and, later still, it had been converted by the Soviets into a state museum. Its collection, assembled by the Romanovs, comprised some thirty thousand paintings, sculptures, silver place settings, and French porcelains, but by the time the Nazis arrived the palace was practically empty. During the Germans' advance, the women of Pushkin, working in three shifts, day and night, had packed up the museum's holdings and carted them off for safe-keeping. They had managed to remove just about everything of value except the chamber known in Russian as Yantar' naya Komnata, in German as *Das Bernsteinzimmer*, and in English as the **Amber Room**.

Amber, in mythology, is the tears shed for Phaëthon after his fall; in scientific terms, it is a partially cross-linked polymer. From an artisan's perspective, it possesses several appealing properties. It can be polished to a high gloss, or cut into thin, translucent sheets, or carved with fine designs. It is soft (not much harder than a fingernail) and light (roughly the density of water). Since Neolithic times, amber has been used to make jewelry and amulets; starting sometime in the sixteenth century, workshops in northern Europe began to invent new uses for it, such as pipes, chess pieces, and inlaid boxes. The Amber Room represents, by several orders of magnitude, the largest such work ever attempted. Three of its walls were covered in panels reaching to a height of thirteen feet, and each panel was covered with a seamless mosaic of amber

tiles. Many of these tiles were ornately worked into the shape of flowers and weapons and Biblical figures; others were pieced together to form crests and royal insignias; and still others were underlaid with foil and embossed with tiny, elaborate scenes of sailing ships and country life.

Why the women of Pushkin left the Amber Room behind is not known for certain; they probably just didn't have the time to box it up, or the means to transport it, or perhaps the two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old panels seemed to them too fragile to move. The Nazis, for their part, immediately recognized the importance of their find: within hours, the panels had been taken down and were on their way to Germany, from which they never returned.

Of the tens of thousands of art works to disappear during the Second World War, the Amber Room ranks as the most significant, and the most avidly pursued. It has been hunted on both sides of what was the Iron Curtain, from the Baltic Coast to the Thuringian hills, in caves, jails, churches, salt mines, tunnels, bunkers, ice cellars, and shipwrecks. Before the Stasi, as the East German secret police was known, was disbanded, it systematically investigated some hundred and fifty possible hiding places, at one point spending more than a million dollars to excavate a clay pit south of Leipzig. (In the process, the Stasi compiled a dossier on the Amber Room that ran to a hundred and eighty thousand pages.) Although many have dabbled in the search—the Belgian mystery writer Georges Simenon, for example, was a member of an international Amber Room club, founded by a Russian baron living in exile in Liechtenstein—for some it has turned into a life-consuming, even life-depriving, obsession. One of the most dogged of all Amber Room hunters was a West German fruit farmer named Georg Stein.

Starting in the mid-nineteen-sixties, Stein pursued the room for more than two decades, deciding—incorrectly—that it had been buried in a mine shaft near Göttingen. His search left his family destitute, and one day he was found naked and dead in a Bavarian forest, his stomach sliced open with a scalpel.

Conservative estimates put the value of the room at a hundred and fifty million dollars. It is clear, however, that this price, which is, in any case, hypothetical, is only a small part of the equation. The Amber Room is desirable because it is beautiful and rare and unlikely. Even when it was new it was exquisitely fragile, and now it is lost.

On a cold, gray morning this past January, I set out for the Catherine Palace to visit what is known as the amber workshop. The goal of the workshop is to replace the missing Amber Room with an exact replica. Depending on how you look at it, this ambition perfectly parallels the effort to find the original or else completely contradicts it.

The director of the project is a forty-seven-year-old **stone carver** named Boris Igdalov. I met Igdalov in his office, which lies at the back of the workshop, at the end of a warren of oddly shaped rooms strewn with drawings, diagrams, and little plaster models, all coated in a film of fine, yellowish dust. Every few minutes, Igdalov's phone would ring, and he would utter a few words of reassurance—"Everything will be ready very soon"—and hang up. Igdalov oversees a staff of seventy-five, mostly amber carvers, but also carpenters, architects, accountants, and even lawyers. "This workshop can be considered in a way unique," he told me. "You probably cannot find another like it in the whole world."



*Carvers at the Catherine Palace, near St. Petersburg, reconstructing panels of the lost Amber Room. Photograph by Jens Röttsch.*

Like the old room, the new one is being made out of amber extracted from the loam in Yantar'nyi Poselok, or Amber Village, near the Russian city of Kaliningrad. This amber, the fossilized resin of a now extinct tree, was deposited some thirty million years ago in a layer of sediment known as the Blue Earth which stretches under the Baltic Sea. The knowledge of how to work Baltic amber was once widespread, but by the time the Russian Republic's Council of Ministers decided to rebuild the Amber Room, in 1979, this knowledge had largely been lost, and it took nearly ten years, mainly through trial and error, to recover the most basic techniques. Some two hundred and thirty experiments, for example, were performed just on glues.

Igdalov himself joined the workshop in 1984. "We are living in a very special country, and always we were missing something," he told me. "In eighteen years, every day we were missing something." Before he was promoted to director, Igdalov worked on a series of four mosaics made of onyx, lapis lazuli, and other semiprecious stones. Each of the mosaics represents a different sense; in one, a group of peasants picnic in the midst of ruins; in a second, figures gaze through a telescope. In 1997, the original of one of these mosaics—showing a woman sniffing a rose—suddenly surfaced on the black market in Bremen. It was the first piece of the room ever to be recovered. By then, however, Igdalov had almost completed the replica—a labor of nearly five years.

Igdalov made it clear that the timing of my visit was inopportune. This spring, the new room is finally supposed to be unveiled, and when I arrived the carvers were, in their own painstaking way, racing to finish so that the ribbon-cutting could take place during the festivities planned

for the three-hundredth anniversary of St. Petersburg, in May. It was with a marked lack of enthusiasm that Igdalov invited me to observe them. In one part of the workshop, I found two men working on a huge wooden frame that was covered with pieces of amber fitted together jigsaw-puzzle fashion. In another part, I came across a half-dozen carvers sitting hunched over microscopes. Each carver had a set of tools of the sort found in dentists' offices—thin pliers, chisels with very fine points, and tiny drills hanging from cords attached to the walls. American rock blared from the radio.

The Amber Room is being reconstructed from a series of photographs taken in the late nineteen-thirties for a planned restoration that never occurred. For the last three and a half years, the work has been sponsored by a German company, the energy giant Ruhrgas. (Ruhrgas's interest in the project reflects a German obsession with everything having to do with the room, as well as the fact that Russia is the company's primary supplier of natural gas.) One of the carvers—the only one who spoke English—told me that he was making a set of cufflinks engraved with the initials of a Ruhrgas executive. As far as I could tell, everyone else was working on pieces of a single large amber medallion. A man in the center of the room was carving the two-inch-high torso of a Roman soldier, and had reached the point of incising the tunic. He let me look through his microscope—much of the carving is so delicate that it can be done only under magnification—and I could see that the tiny grooves were filled with bits of dust. Another man was carving a set of cannons, a third some bayonets, and a fourth what looked like a bunch of grapes. A plaster model showed that,

when all the pieces were put together, the torso would be in the middle, surrounded by the bristling cannons and bayonets; eventually, I was told, the medallion would decorate the amber frame that I had passed on my way in. Every thirty seconds or so, one of the carvers would lift up the piece he was working on and blow the dust off with a practiced *whoosh*. Then he would put it back under the microscope, resting it on a little velvet cushion. As it happened, this was the fifty-ninth anniversary of the end of the siege of Leningrad, and preparations for some kind of toast seemed to be under way. People kept passing through with supplies, including a tall stack of plastic shot glasses.

Before I left the workshop, I asked Igdalov for his thoughts on the original Amber Room. He spoke for a while about how delicate the room had been, and how difficult to keep up, and about how, over the course of two centuries, many of the amber tiles had fallen off, while others had developed a sugarlike coating. Nevertheless, he told me, he personally knew several people who were still searching for it. This is something they do, he said, "to make life not seem so sad." He sighed. "They are looking for it everywhere, probably on the moon."

The Amber Room was first conceived of in the spring of 1701 by Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg, who had just had himself crowned Frederick I, King of Prussia. (The coronation ceremony was, in the words of one historian, "so overlaid with tawdry and offensive splendor, that it is always described . . . with unqualified contempt.") On his way back from Königsberg, as Kaliningrad was then known, to Berlin, a journey of some three hundred

miles, the new monarch—at least, so the story goes—found himself at loose ends.

The plan Frederick dreamed up in his royal coach seems to have been for an intimate chamber for his own private enjoyment. To work on his Bernstein-Cabinett, he hired craftsmen from all over the Baltic. For ten years they labored, and still they were not quite finished when, in 1711, the room was set up in Berlin's City Palace. Frederick reportedly used it to host ticktacktoe and piquet games for his friends. In 1713, he died.

His son, Frederick William, inherited the project, but, like the rest of the royal family, the new King appears to have had little regard for the late King's ideas. (Frederick I's second wife, Sophia-Charlotte of Hanover, who liked to debate the court philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, once told a courtier, "That idiot Leibniz, who wants to teach me about the infinitesimally small! Has he therefore forgotten that I am the wife of Frederick I? How can he imagine that I am unacquainted with my own husband?") Frederick William's preoccupation, to the exclusion of virtually everything else, was Prussia's military, and his one weakness was for very tall soldiers, known as *lange Kerls*. In 1716, Peter I of Russia—later, Peter the Great—was travelling through Berlin and expressed admiration for the Cabinet. Frederick William immediately offered it to him as a gift. The following year, Peter returned the favor by sending to Prussia fifty-five of his tallest guardsmen.

The Amber Room was shipped to St. Petersburg in boxes and installed some three decades later when Peter's daughter, Elizabeth I, ascended the throne. It was she who had the room mounted in, and expanded for, the Catherine Palace. The task of redesigning the room fell to her court architect, Bartolommeo Francesco Rastrelli, who is also responsible for most of the palace's other famous interiors, including the Green Pilaster Room and the Golden Enfilade, and who seems to have applied himself to the task with characteristically rococo zeal.

To start with, Rastrelli put up all of the panels from the original Cabinet. These consisted of ten so-called pedestal panels, decorated with Frederick I's initials and Prussian eagles, and twelve much taller panels, decorated with amber frames and carvings. Between these panels, he

mounted twenty-four mirrors of Venetian glass, each topped with a gilded statue of a bare-breasted nymph. Above each nymph, he placed a putto in a languid pose, and behind the putti he installed a series of trompe-l'oeil paintings done to look like amber mosaics. The four mosaics of semiprecious stones, which were done to look like paintings, were the final, sumptuous touch. By the time the work was completed, the intimate Cabinet had been thoroughly transformed. A Frenchman who visited it wrote, "This isn't a cramped boudoir, or a small chamber, but a room of considerable proportions. . . . The eye, unaccustomed to seeing amber in such profusion, is mesmerized and blinded by the wealth and warmth of the tones." Elizabeth's successor, Catherine II—later, Catherine the Great—liked to play cards in the Amber Room, and legend has it that she always won.

On October 30, 1941, twenty-seven crates containing the panels, the mirrors, and the gilded pilasters arrived by truck in Königsberg, where, in a manner of speaking, the Amber Room had originated. The crates were unloaded at the enormous medieval fortress that housed the city's art museum, and the room, or as much of it as would fit, was reassembled in a fourth-floor gallery in the castle's south wing. The opening, in March, 1942, was attended by local Nazi officials and noted in the local press. A pamphlet printed by the museum for visitors' edification explained that, because of the siege of Leningrad, German soldiers had "saved the old Amber Room of Frederick I from the line of fire and brought it to Königsberg for safety."

When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, they stole just about every work of art they could get their hands on, including icons from the churches. Still, the Amber Room's provenance placed it in an entirely different category. Built for a Prussian king in Prussian workshops, it was an ideal symbol of the glorious past that the Nazis were trying to create for themselves. Hitler, it is said, intended the

room for the monumental Führermuseum that he was planning to build in Linz, and its disposition until then became a matter of contention between, among others, Hermann Göring, the commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe, and Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Third Reich's Foreign Minister.

Once in Königsberg, the Amber Room was entrusted to the care of the museum's director, Alfred Rohde, an art historian who had trained in Paris and Munich. Rohde specialized in amber and was widely regarded as a leading expert on the subject. (Some of his monographs, including "Amber, a German Material: Its Artistic Uses from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century," are still considered authoritative.) Although Rohde was not himself a Nazi Party member, he appears to have enjoyed good relations with the area's regional commander, Erich Koch, and, weeks before the Germans had even reached Pushkin, he urged Koch to try to lay hold of the room. After the war, Rohde's secretary reported that the museum director used to arrive at work at five o'clock in the morning. He would make the rounds of all the galleries in the castle, stopping last in Gallery 37, where the Amber Room was on display. "Often, he sat in the middle of the room and just gazed at the amber walls," she said.

The Amber Room was exhibited in the Königsberg castle for twenty months, during which time the German advance was halted. By late 1943, the Nazis' position had weakened to such an extent that Rohde began to worry about the room's safety. He had it disassembled and boxed once again. On the night of August 26, 1944, British planes dropped four hundred and sixty tons of bombs on Königsberg; three nights later, they returned to drop another four hundred and ninety-two tons. The raids laid waste much of the city, including the castle. But, in a letter dated the following month, Rohde assured a colleague in Berlin that, with the exception of six of the pedestal panels, the Amber Room had survived the bombings intact.

That winter, the Germans' eastern defenses collapsed. When it became clear that Königsberg would soon be occupied, Rohde's two children were evacuated. He and his wife presumably could have gone, too, but they chose to stay be-



hind. They lived through the capture of the city by the Soviets, in April of 1945, and during the next few months Rohde was interrogated several times by Soviet officials. He was evasive, and at one point was discovered burning a pile of papers. By the end of December, both of the Rohdes were dead. Officially, their deaths were attributed to typhus; however, rumors began to circulate that they had been poisoned. Suspicious, the Soviets went to look for Rohde's body, which they could not find, and also for the doctor who had signed his death certificate, whom they could not locate.

The twenty-seven crates in which the Amber Room had arrived in Königsberg had together weighed several tons. Moving them had required a team of men and a small convoy of trucks. Yet there is no record of how the room left the city, if, indeed, it ever did. From Königsberg, theories about the room's fate branch out in all directions. Some point west, toward central Germany—according to one particularly far-fetched account, the room was buried in Berlin's Botanical Gardens—some north to the Baltic Sea, others south to Poland, and a few even east, toward Lithuania.

With Rohde's death, the most obvious source of information became his friend Erich Koch. Like Rohde, Koch was an art lover. He was also, by his own admission, "a brutal dog." A formal railway clerk, Koch had joined the Nazi Party early—his membership card was No. 90—and, in 1933, was appointed by Hitler as governor of East Prussia. Later, his jurisdiction was expanded to include large swaths of Poland, and, in 1942, Koch became Reichskommissar of the Ukraine.

In Koch's view, which was not universally endorsed by the Nazi command, but was, importantly, shared by Hitler, the Ukrainians were primitive beings—half monkeys—who had to be "handled with the whip, like the Negroes." (Koch once declared, "If I find a Ukrainian who is worthy of sitting at the same table with me, I must have him shot.") Under Koch's command, all schools above the fourth grade were closed, the city of Kiev was reduced to a state of near-starvation, and more than a million Ukrainians were sent to work—and often to perish—as slave laborers. When the Soviets finally drove the Germans out of the Ukraine, Koch

retreated to Königsberg; after the Germans surrendered East Prussia, he fled westward once again, this time in his private airplane.

In 1949, British agents finally tracked Koch down in a small town near Hamburg, where he had been working, under an assumed name, as a farmhand. The British turned Koch over to the Poles for prosecution, and in 1959 he was convicted by a district court in Warsaw. The original sentence was death, but it was commuted to life in prison. At the time, it was widely believed that the reason the Poles had decided to spare Koch was to find out what he knew about the Amber Room.

In prison, Koch did indeed begin to talk. Early on, he let it be known that the crates containing the room had been loaded onto a ship called the Wilhelm Gustloff, which had been sunk not far from Königsberg by Soviet torpedoes. (Of the estimated ten thousand people on board, most of them German civilians being evacuated from the city, more than nine thousand had drowned.) Koch's story sent at least a half-dozen diving teams to the bottom of the Baltic to search the Gustloff's wreckage.

Subsequently, Koch asserted that the Amber Room had been loaded onto a different ship, the Emden, and also, contradictorily, that it had, by his own orders, been trucked to Ponarth, a Königsberg suburb. On another occasion, he was reported to have told a Polish newspaper, "In the place my art collection can be found, you'll also find the Amber Room." During the war, Koch had been a particularly avid looter; records found in the Ukraine show that among the many art works that he appropriated for the Nazis were three thousand and seventy-seven oil paintings, seven hundred and sixty-six watercolors, and three hundred pieces of faïence. According to German records, part of what Koch considered his own art collection reached Weimar in January, 1945, and was then shipped out again—where, no one knows. (The works have never been found.) Only later was it revealed that Koch's remarks had been mistranslated from Polish into German, and that what he had really said was "If anyone can tell me where my collection went, then I'll know where the Amber Room is." But by that point an "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" rush to Weimar had already ensued.

At the time of his sentencing, Koch was supposed to have been gravely ill, yet somehow he managed to live for another twenty-seven years. In 1986, shortly before he did die, at the age of ninety, he made an offer to reveal the room's *real* hiding place in return for his freedom. By then, the Polish authorities, understandably, had had enough.

Today, practically everyone who could have had direct knowledge of the Amber Room in the final months of the war is dead; still, a lively traffic continues in rumors, secondhand stories, and purported deathbed confessions. In 1994, a sketch made by a former prisoner and the notes of a U.S. Army officer led to reports that the room had been buried at Buchenwald. In 1998, the German radio station Norddeutschen Rundfunk, following a tip from an eighty-year-old resident of Preila, Lithuania, sponsored an expedition to search a shallow lagoon there. In 2000, two teams, one from Germany and the other from the Czech Republic, excavated a defunct silver mine spanning the border; both teams were acting on information allegedly provided by former S.S. men. Such is the fascination with the room, particularly in Germany, that there is almost no clue too trivial to be pursued. A journalist I know who worked for the weekly *Der Spiegel* was once sent to hunt for the room in a Russian riverbed on the basis of information provided by the former boyfriend of his cleaning woman.

Perhaps the world's authority on the search for the Amber Room is an amateur historian named Heinz Schön. Schön, who is seventy-six, is a slight man with white hair, a gray mustache, and a fastidious manner. "I'm not a treasure hunter" was one of the first things he told me when I went to visit him a few months ago at his home in Bad Salzungen, not far from Hanover.

Schön became interested in the Amber Room in connection with the Gustloff sinking, of which he is a survivor. (A civilian on the ship's staff, he saved himself by clinging to a raft.) "The search for the Amber Room is for me a sort of criminal case," he said. "One suspects something is somewhere, and, when one can't find it, exactly like in a crime story there's only rest when one has found it, and not simply closed the book and said the case

remains unsolved." In his spare time, he began collecting documents and newspaper clippings, and conducting his own investigation. Whatever he found, he assembled in bright-yellow binders. He is now up to binder No. 95.

Over the years, Schön has come to believe that the key to locating the Amber Room lies in understanding the psyche of Alfred Rohde. "Amber was for Rohde the most important thing in life," Schön told me. "The Amber Room was, naturally, the crown, the only treasure in the world that had meaning for him." Rohde's decision to stay in Königsberg after his children were evacuated proves, according to Schön, that the room never left the city. Schön also stresses the fact that, as an art historian, Rohde had a professional interest in the city's ancient fortifications. The Königsberg castle, which was begun in 1255, sat atop a network of vaulted cellars that extended at least three stories deep and covered an area the size of two football fields.

After the war, the Soviets decided to erase almost all traces of Königsberg, and to build an entirely new city, named after the revolutionary hero Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin. They bulldozed the castle ruins and erected a twenty-two-story, poured-concrete office tower on top of them. The tower, which was supposed to serve as government offices, was deemed structurally unsound shortly before it was completed. "The Monster," as Kaliningrad residents call it, has never been occupied. Schön maintains that the building's architectural problems are a result of ignorance: the Soviets never knew the full extent of the castle's underground vaults, which explains why they never found the Amber Room. He advocates tearing the building down so that a thorough search of the site can be made. "Naturally, there are people who say, 'That Schön is crazy,'" he told me.

Since the early nineties, when visas to the former Soviet Union became easier to obtain, Schön has been to visit Kaliningrad several times. (The city, which is seven hundred and fifty miles west of Moscow, is now considered part of Russia, although it is separated from the rest of the country by Lithuania.) He has also been to St. Petersburg, and toward the end of my visit he pulled out one of his

yellow binders, filled with pictures he had taken at the amber workshop. Schön spoke enthusiastically about the reconstruction; however, he was quick to point out its limitations. He was reluctant even to refer to the new Amber Room as a copy, since, as he put it, a copy can be made only from an original, which in this case is exactly what's missing. "When people see the new Amber Room, they will say, 'Man, that's an amazing thing. And the original?' The question will always arise: Where is the original?"

The Catherine Palace is laid out in a straight line, with a façade, designed by Rastrelli, that stretches on for nearly a fifth of a mile. The Amber Room is in the northern part of the palace, and to get to it you must first put on a pair of booties and climb a set of stairs covered with crimson carpeting. Then you turn down a hall of identical golden doorways that seem to go on and on, like a trick done with mirrors.

In preparation for its grand reopening, the Amber Room has been closed to visitors since September. The first time I got in to see it was a day when the palace was shut, and nearly deserted. It was said of the original Amber Room that it seemed to glow from within; standing in the new room, in the quiet, I had the same strange sensation.

One of the paradoxes of the Amber Room is that its fabled amber color is not actually the color of amber. In its natural state, most Baltic amber is a dull, unappealing shade of tan. (An expert I spoke to likened its hue to that of milky tea.)

Frederick's craftsmen improved on nature by using techniques that had been developed over hundreds of years. Either they heated the amber to make it translucent or they dyed it any one of more than a dozen shades, from a lemony yellow to a deep red. To reproduce the room's warm glow, the amber workshop first had to recover—or, perhaps more accurately, reinvent—these lost arts. (Its technique of amber dyeing is now considered a Russian trade secret, and all I was able to learn about the process was that it involved organic chemicals.)

The next challenge was in some ways even trickier. In all, eighty-six photographs

were taken of the Amber Room in the nineteen-thirties, in preparation for the restoration that never took place. These images are remarkably detailed—enlarged many times, they have been made to yield the irregular shape of each individual tile—but they are in black-and-white.

To get around this problem, the amber workshop turned to a bag of tiles that had fallen off the panels before the war and, mostly by chance, been preserved. Each of these tiles was photographed in black-and-white, and the results were used to construct a reverse color scale for interpreting the original photographs. What were described to me as "heated discussions" over the color scale lasted more than nine years, and, in expert circles, the question of whether it has been applied properly is still being debated. Alexander Shedrinsky, a chemist from St. Petersburg who now lives in New York and teaches at Long Island University, told me that, in his opinion, many of the tiles had been dyed too red: "It is disturbing for every person of a certain level of aesthetic understanding." Alexander Zhuravlev, the project's former director, said, "It is a pity that the coloring of the panels in the Amber Room was conducted unsystematically."

Given the hundreds of people who have worked on the new room, a certain amount of rivalry and ill will was perhaps inevitable. (Zhuravlev, who left the project eight years ago to start his own workshop, told me that the greatest obstacle to its success had been "the relentless ambition of certain individuals, as well as the occasional ignorance and incompetence of some others.") On a larger scale, the project reflects the progress in German-Russian relations and, at the same time, lingering bitterness and resentments. More than once, I was told that the new room had shown Russian craftsmen to be not just as good as, but superior to, their German counterparts. "I even think our version improves on the original," one of the workshop's foremen, Alexander Krylov, said. In a gesture whose aggressiveness was hard to overlook, there was talk of unveiling the new room on May 9th, the very day that the Russians celebrate their victory over the Germans in the Second World War.

Ivan Sautov runs the Catherine Palace and negotiated the deal by which Ruhrgas became the exclusive sponsor of the reconstruction project. When I went



to see him, he gave me a long, upbeat lecture on German-Russian friendship, which began with the fact that Catherine the Great had been born a Prussian princess and concluded with a story about how his eighty-three-year-old mother, after surviving the siege of Leningrad, used to invite German P.O.W.s over to the house for dinner. Then he related to me his personal theory of the Amber Room. Sautov proposed—without, as far as I could tell, any supporting evidence—that when Rohde had the original Amber Room packed up, he divided it into two sections. The first consisted of those parts of the room that had been crafted in Prussia and the second of those parts that had been added later, in Russia. The first section, he told me, was still hidden somewhere, but Rohde had allowed the second section to be destroyed.

At the time of my visit, in late January, the new Amber Room was nearly complete. The half-naked nymphs and the putti and the trompe-l'oeil paintings were in place, as were all but two of the twenty-two panels. I stood in the middle of the room for a while, and then moved up for a closer look.

If the Amber Room is in some ways less than a great work of art, it is also more than one. From its conception, it was an idea carried too far, an idle pleasure pursued to the point of mania, and even now, three hundred years later, its attraction is almost indistinguishable from its excessiveness. The panels are full of surprises—roses, garlands, castles, cannons—that reveal themselves only gradually. Everywhere, there are diminutive heads, some in profile, some staring back at you. I noticed a tiny windmill with blades turning in a perpetual breeze, and a group of amber knights resting by a tiny amber stream. When I got close enough, I could see their little amber faces, sporting little amber beards. On one of the panels, I happened to recognize a date, “Año 1709,” spelled out using only the amber’s natural veins. The cumulative effect was at once exhilarating and slightly frightening. I couldn’t help thinking of the many people who had searched so long—and so fruitlessly—for the room. Most of them had never had an opportunity to enter it or even, as I had, its replica. It was to them purely a romantic fiction, an impossible notion of splendor that once existed and might still be found again. ♦

# Amber Room fate reopened

Russian vet says  
art treasure likely  
destroyed in fire

Associated Press

MOSCOW—A Russian veteran said Wednesday he saw fragments of the legendary Amber Room in the closing days of World War II, suggesting one of the world's greatest missing art treasures burned at a German castle after it was seized by the victorious Red Army.

Russian officials denied the allegations, saying the fate of the jewel-encrusted masterpiece carved in amber remains a mystery after Nazi troops looted it from a Russian imperial palace.

The assertions by Leonid Arinshtein, a literature expert with the non-governmental Russian Culture Foundation, echo a recently published book that claims the fabled chamber vanished in a fire after the German city of Königsburg fell to the Soviets.

In an interview, Arinshtein recalled seeing fragments of amber decoration in the Königsburg Castle but said he only realized it was part of the treasure years later.

"I probably was one of the last people who saw the Amber Room," said Arinshtein, 79, who was a Red Army lieutenant in charge of a rifle platoon when he knocked on the castle door in April 1945. "But I was a 19-year old boy, and I didn't understand what I saw."

Arinshtein described how he entered Königsburg Castle, accompanied by his sergeant, as battles raged on the streets. He said he noticed fragments of a wall panel and a mirror frame in amber on the walls of the Knight's Hall and



ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AP

Leonid Arinshtein, a Russian war veteran, recalls during an interview Wednesday in Moscow seeing what could be fragments of the legendary Amber Room in the closing days of World War II.

asked the castle's custodian about them. The man nervously told him the rest of the amber paneling was kept in cases in the basement and offered to show Arinshtein around, but the young Russian declined.

When Arinshtein tried to tour the castle a couple of days later, he couldn't reach it: The entire city was engulfed in flames and black smoke filled the skies.

Only years later, when he saw articles about the Amber Room hidden in Königsburg, did he make the connection between the fragments he saw and the missing treasure, Arinshtein said.

The elaborately carved chamber, made of nearly 1,000 pounds of amber, was a 1716 Prussian gift to St. Petersburg's founder, Czar Peter the Great. Looted by the Nazis in 1941 from a former imperial palace, the Amber Room epitomized Russia's losses in the

war and inspired a series of treasure hunts. An \$8 million reconstruction of the chamber was unveiled in St. Petersburg a year ago.

British investigative journalists Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark claim in their new book, "The Amber Room," that the fire that destroyed the treasure was sparked by careless Red Army troops who looted Königsburg.

It says Soviet authorities knew the Amber Room vanished at the hands of its soldiers, but continued to claim it was missing as a convenient symbol of Nazi destruction of Russia's cultural treasures.

Russian officials hotly deny the book's allegations.

Avenir Ovseyanov, an official in charge of the search for missing art, said while some fragments burned in the castle, its core had likely been taken away by the Nazis.