“A Spy Story” (transcript): a reading performance by Rayyane Tabet

Growing up, I ate lunch with my maternal grandparents every other Sunday.
They lived in a large, cold apartment and showed their affection in a restrained manner; so I spent most of my time sitting in a chair trying to behave. From there, I could see the photograph of a solemn-looking man hanging on the wall, and the spine of a bright yellow book among brown and black ones piled on a shelf.

Years later, I went back to that apartment to help my parents move its contents into storage. When taking down the photograph, I noticed that is was signed on the back by Baron Max von Oppenheim.

When I opened the yellow book, I found an envelope inside. The back was stamped with: Max Freiherr von Oppenheim. Berlin-Charlottenburg. Savignyplatz 6. The envelope was addressed to: Monsieur Faik Borcoche. Beyrouth/Syrie.

Inside the envelope was the postcard of what looked like the sculpture of a bird and a business card that read, in French: The Baron Max Oppenheim. Minister of Germany. Wishing you a good and happy new year. Kind regards. Berlin, December 20th, 1932.
I was confused: How did memorabilia belonging to a member of the German nobility come to find itself in the dining room of a relatively quiet Lebanese family?
My mother’s answer was simple and direct: “It is all a spy story.”

And this is how the story goes:

Early one morning, a Bedouin tribe went to bury their elder on a hill. While digging his grave they came upon a large stone sculpture of an animal with a human head. Taken aback and scared, they covered it up and went looking for another burial site.

That year, their land suffered from an unprecedented drought. It was invaded by a swarm of locusts and there was a cholera outbreak. The tribe attributed these misfortunes to evil spirits hidden in the stone that had been released when the statue was unearthed, and they started to think of ways to rid themselves of the curse that had befallen them.

When Max von Oppenheim arrived to the village of Tell Halaf, in the summer of 1899, the tribesmen told him the story of gods, demons, and monsters hiding underground, hoping that the curiosity of this foreigner would lead him to dig up the statue so that the curse would be carried away from them.

Max only intended to stay in Tell Halaf for one night. At the time, he was a 39-year-old German diplomat living in Cairo on his way to Baghdad to establish a route for the railroad that would connect Baghdad to Berlin.

The story fired his imagination; so, armed with a shovel, he went to the site of the buried gods. By the end of the day, he had discovered a few more sculptures. That night an urgent letter arrived at his campground ordering him to return to Berlin immediately.

Surprised, he reburied the statues and promised to come back as soon as he could.

It would take him twelve years to obtain the necessary authorization from the Ottoman Empire and return to look for his buried treasure. That was when Max found the remains of an entire city hidden under the plains of Tell Halaf.

His greatest discovery was a palace whose façade included a five-meter-high portico depicting gods standing on animals, and a burial ground with the figure of a seated woman. World War I broke out before Max could share his finds with the Ottomans, and he was forced to evacuate, leaving everything behind.

In 1927, at the age of 67, Max returned to Tell Halaf for the third time. By then the Ottoman Empire had been partitioned, and the village was now in Syria under the governance of the French Mandate.

Max brought along Igor von Jakimow, a Russian sculptor who specialized in plaster works, to make full-scale replicas of several of the ruins, so that each governing body, in addition to taking their share, would receive a replica of what they did not own.

In addition to the sculptor there was an architect who made drawings of the ruins and a photographer who documented the entire process. They collected specimens of animals and plants, recorded Bedouin songs and stories, and even kept a logbook of weather patterns in Tell Halaf.

Following the division of the finds, the material that remained in Syria was transported to Aleppo and formed the major endowment of the National Museum of Aleppo, founded in 1931.

On his return to Berlin, Max tried to find a home for his share of the find. He approached the second Pergamon Museum, which was under construction at the time, but was unsuccessful. Undeterred, he decided to establish his own museum, a private institution known as the Tell Halaf Museum, housed in a former factory in Charlottenburg.

The Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin quickly became an important tourist attraction, since it did not differentiate the archeological finds from rugs and costumes, and did not follow the usual rules of conservation and chronology. Among the many visitors were British archaeologist Max Mallowan and his wife, the crime novelist Agatha Christie, who recalls, in her memoirs, being shown around by von Oppenheim for a grueling five-hour visit, during which he stopped his enthusiastic commentary to say lovingly: “Ah, my beautiful Venus!” as he looked up to the statue of a seated woman.

On November 22, 1943, the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin was hit by a phosphorus bomb. With temperatures exceeding 1,000 degrees Celsius, all the artifacts were destroyed except for objects made from basalt, a volcanic rock that can withstand heat. When firefighters came to dowse the flames, the sudden temperature change between the cold water and the hot stone shattered the artifacts.

Despite logistical difficulties, the director of the Museum of the Ancient Near East in Berlin managed to get the shattered fragments crated up on behalf of von Oppenheim. In August 1944, nine truckloads full of rubble were brought to the cellars of the Pergamon Museum to await an uncertain fate.

Max von Oppenheim died at the age of 86. He is buried in Landshut under a basalt replica of the bottom half of the seated goddess he so admired.

After the war, the Pergamon Museum was in East Berlin, while the burnt-out Tell Halaf Museum was in West Berlin, so nothing could be done with fragments housed in a museum in the East but owned by a family living in the West. It was only after reunification in 1990 that an agreement allowed restorers to handle the fragments.

The reconstruction project began in August 2001. Some 27,000 basalt fragments were laid out on 200 wooden pallets. By 2011, 25,000 fragments had been reassembled into thirty sculptures and architectural elements. Fractures remained visible, with no attempt made to disguise them, and molten glass from the roof of the destroyed Tell Halaf Museum was left on the surface.

The 2,000 remaining fragments that could not be identified or matched with anything are kept in several crates and cabinets in the storage rooms of the Pergamon Museum, which is undergoing a major renovation due to be completed in 2035.

When that day comes, the restored façade of the Ruler's Palace of Tell Halaf will serve as the entrance to the Ancient Near East collection.

Meanwhile, the conservators at the National Museum of Aleppo are piling up sandbags around the plaster replica of that same façade while they wait for a lull in the war in Syria.

Just then, I interrupted my mother and asked: "I thought this was a spy story; so, where are all the spies?"

"Well," she said, "this is where it gets a little complicated. When I was child, my grandfather, your great-grandfather, used to tell me how, back in 1929, the governing authorities of the French Mandate stationed in Lebanon sent him to be Max von Oppenheim's secretary and to gather information on the archeological dig he was carrying out in Tell Halaf."

At the time, the Germans needed to make detailed maps of North Africa and the Levant for a possible military attack there. Since these areas were under British and French rule, mapmaking had to be done secretly; so, intelligence officers disguised as ethnographers or archaeologists were sent on sham survey missions there.

The French were suspecting that von Oppenheim was one of these intelligence officers, because they knew that for the past thirty years he had been going back to the same location on the border between Syria and Turkey, and they were afraid that he was radicalizing the Bedouin tribes and preparing an undercover coup against the colonial powers.

It seems that my great-grandfather's job was basically to spy on a suspected spy. He wrote a report of everything Max did and sent it back to Beirut for the French to analyze. Alongside this material he sent photographs to my great-grandmother, keeping her informed of his movements.

This one was her favorite:

> Dear Victoria,
>
> I kiss you; I kiss Joseph, Albert and Marie and wish you all good health.
>
> This is a photograph of the snake I caught hidden under a Bedouin's tent. After showing it around, I killed it.
>
> The next day a photographer took this portrait of me holding it.
>
> I am standing and my tent is behind to my right. All is well here except the unbearable scorching heat. Send me your news and send my regards to all the neighbors.
>
> My best wishes and a thousand kisses to the kids.
>
> Yours
>
> Faek
>
> Tell Halaf, June 1929

The French were unable to find anything on Max; so when his expedition ended in the fall of 1929, my great-grandfather's mission was curtailed and he went back to his day job as a government employee who translated documents from Arabic to French.

When my great-grandfather died in 1981, he had nothing of value to leave behind except a goat-hair rug that had been given to him by the Bedouins of Tell Halaf. It was his wish that the twenty-meter long rug should be divided equally among his five children with the request that they, in turn, divide it among their children, and so on and so forth until the rug eventually disappears.

His youngest daughter did not marry, so her piece, which is 1/5th of the original rug, remained intact.

His second son, my grandfather, had two children: my mother and my uncle.

My uncle's piece is 1/2 of 1/5th of the original rug.

My mother has two children: my sister and me.

My piece is 1/2 of 1/2 of 1/5th of the original rug.

My sister has two daughters: Yasmina and Nour. Each of their pieces is 1/2 of 1/2 of 1/2 of 1/5th of the original rug.

As of today, the rug has been divided in twenty-three pieces across five generations.

During Max's initial excavation in 1911, he discovered all along the temple's back wall a sequence of 194 stone slabs. The slabs had been carved in low relief. They alternated between black basalt and red-painted limestone to form a narrative frieze of imagery including animals, plants, deities, and scenes from daily life.

Prior to their dispersal, the reliefs were meant to be drawn, photographed, measured, and replicated in plaster. But due to the sudden outbreak of World War I, this work was left unfinished and Max shipped a portion of the materials he had found to Alexandria.

In 1914, a British naval ship seized the cargo of a German cruiser that had set sail from Alexandria bound to Berlin. On board were fifteen of the Tell Halaf reliefs, alongside more than 100 boxes holding some 700 objects. Because the cargo was considered as enemy property, the British government took ownership of the artifacts and offered them for sale. In 1920, the entire consignment, including the fifteen reliefs, entered the collection of the British Museum in London.

In 1927 Max returned to Tell Halaf to continue his excavation. While taking an inventory of the ruins he had left behind, he noticed that fifty-five of the reliefs had disappeared.

In 1929, at the end of his expedition and following the division of finds with the French, thirty-five of the reliefs were transported to Aleppo to be put on display in the National Museum of Aleppo.

In 1930, while taking the artifacts out of their crates to set up the inaugural exhibition of the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin, Max realized that six of the reliefs had gone missing en route from Alexandria to Berlin.

Shortly after opening the museum, Max traveled to New York to try selling eight of the Tell Halaf reliefs. He arrived after the stock market crash and failed to find a buyer, so he placed the reliefs in the storage facility of a local art dealer and returned to Berlin.

On March 11,1942, President Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing the Office of the Alien Property Custodian, whose mandate was the seizure of material that belonged to U.S. enemies on U.S. soil. Under the terms of this order, the eight reliefs that Max had left in the care of the local art dealer were removed from storage and put up for auction. The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York each acquired four of them.

In 1943, when the director of Berlin's Museum of the Ancient Near East came to assess the damage caused to the Tell Halaf Museum by the bombing; he noted that twelve of the reliefs had been destroyed beyond repair.

In 1974, the National Museums in Aleppo and Damascus donated 140 objects for the founding of the Deir ez-Zor Museum, an institution devoted to the history and archeology of northeast Syria. One of the objects from Aleppo was a relief from Tell Halaf.

At some point in the 1930s, Max wanted to thank the French authorities for their cooperation in his excavations in Syria. He donated three reliefs to the Louvre Museum in Paris. In 2016, the museum acquired a fourth relief from the great-grandson of a French soldier who had served during World War I. The soldier had been stationed near Tell Halaf, and claimed to have bought the relief from a Bedouin tribesman.

As of today, from the 194 reliefs excavated in Tell Halaf; 59 are in Berlin, 4 are in Paris, 15 are in London, 4 are in New York, 4 are in Baltimore, 34 are in Aleppo, 1 is in Deir ez-Zor, 6 are missing, 12 were destroyed, and 55 have disappeared.

In 2006, a joint German-Syrian team of excavators went back to Tell Halaf to continue the work Max had left behind seventy-seven years earlier. They went back again five more times until their expedition was cut short in 2011 with the start of the uprisings.

Today, Tell Halaf sits on the border between Syria and Turkey in an area that is under Kurdish governance.

Not long before Max died, he sent a letter to the director of Berlin's Museum of the Ancient Near East telling him that in the future, if ever there will be someone in charge of putting together the destroyed artifacts, then KOPF HOCH! MUT HOCH! UND HUMOR HOCH! Which can be translated as CHIN UP! GOOD LUCK! AND KEEP SMILING!

End of "A Spy Story" (transcript): a reading performance by Rayyane Tabet