

JONATHAN KEATES

## Fiddler on the Run

Lev's Violin: An Italian Adventure  
By Helena Attlee

(Particular Books 215pp £20)

Cremona is one of northern Italy's less interesting cities. It has a dull aircraft hangar of a Romanesque cathedral and its enormous civic art gallery is noteworthy only for the sheer volume of undistinguished crusts stacked on the endless walls. The place, however, had its moment, 'one far fierce hour and sweet', when, during the mid-16th century, the violin maker Andrea Amati established a workshop in the town, initiating an enterprise that, over the next two hundred years, made the name Cremona forever synonymous with some of the loveliest sounds produced by human brilliance and virtuosity.

Amati's extended family nurtured a succession of gifted apprentices, among them Andrea Guarneri, who set up on his own in an area of the city known as Isola, which, by the 1650s, twanged, scraped and thrummed with artificers of stringed instruments. One of these was Antonio Stradivari, most famous of them all, whose fiddles are nowadays purchased as investments to diversify the portfolios of hedge fund managers, banks and charitable foundations. By no special irony, it was Stradivari's buccaneering business techniques that forced his rivals to shift elsewhere – to Venice, Brescia, Bergamo or Turin – and killed off the industry in Cremona for good, as it then seemed.

Amid this world of people doing clever things with spruce wood, sheep gut, resin and horsehair, Helena Attlee's 'Italian Adventure' begins. She has proved already, in her superb *The Land Where Lemons Grow*, the strength of her empathy with the moods and pulses of Italian culture, moving across the peninsula's different landscapes in the guise of an explorer rather than simply another educated tourist. In *Lev's Violin* she does this again, enunciating the book's basic theme when discussing the career of the virtuoso violinist Maddalena Lombardini, who graduated from Venice's Ospedale dei Mendicanti in 1767: 'When I thought

about this, it struck me that although people make things, things are very often the making of people.'

So Attlee scrambles up Dolomite mountainsides in search of traces of the *boschieri*, the woodcutters who felled the tall conifers that were later floated down Alpine streams, at length to reach Chioggia, on the Venetian lagoon, where the *lignaroli*, local timber merchants, took them by barge to the Po delta and upriver to Cremona. She learns how to make varnish from limonite, lycopodium, candelilla and carnauba in the city's Scuola Internazionale di Liuteria, which has brought violin-making back home, and she scoots off to the Russian city of Rostov, through whose Armenian quarter she follows the musical spoor of the band in which the book's titular figure, Lev, once played his fiddle.

The man himself inhabits the book as a sort of phantom – numinous, playful, elusive – whom the errant author only pins down after any number of chicanes and false turnings. We meet him first – or a fleeting notion of him at least – when Attlee attends a performance by a Klezmer band in a small town somewhere in Wales. One of the players introduces his instrument as

'Lev's violin'. With 'a voice powerful enough to open pores and unbuckle joints', the violin seemed possessed of 'a shocking intimacy that left us all stupid with longing for emotions larger, wilder, sadder and more joyful than any we had ever known'.

This voice and its origins begin to obsess her, and so the book takes wing. Had the violin migrated from eastern Europe during the Second World War, when countless of what experts refer to as 'Old Italians' were snatched from Jews and Roma gypsies dispatched to the camps? From a morass of possibilities, the real Lev finally emerges, a Russian musician now living in Glasgow, who smuggled the fiddle out of Rostov when Glasnost enabled him and his wife to leave the USSR for the USA. From his experiences another thread spools off, so that the book resembles one of those *Arabian Nights*-type tales where the encompassing narrative cocoons multiple stories running in parallel with each other.

It's at this moment that readers are likely to start asking what *Lev's Violin*, so obviously not just an Italian adventure, is actually about. Attlee's writing has borne us forward with such seductive fluency, such a captivating sense of incident and place, that we mightn't until now have paused to consider her object in putting its elements together. To a significant extent the work is a self-portrait of a restless, enthusiastic and insatiably curious woman for whom the pursuit is often more important than the beast in view. It is also a study of cultural interdependence, demonstrating the ways in which our civilisation relies for its achievements on erasing frontiers, boundaries and chimerical fantasies of nationhood.

An answer to the overarching question of a provenance for the wandering violin provides a toothsome twist in a book that pleases the more for so neatly resisting classification. Is it a travel book simply by virtue of all the geographical zigzags? Does it belong under 'History' because of the author's rewarding forays into Cremona's past or 'Musicology' on account of her absorption with collecting violins as well as making them? Or is this just an expertly contrived arabesque on that enduring sentiment 'it's the journey, not the arrival, that matters'. Read it and decide.

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