

The Mystery of

Georg Nissen and the Missing Notebooks

PART I

(This article appears in part from my book, *Echoes of a Distant Crime; Resolving the Mozart Cold Case File*)

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In 1809, Mozart's widow, Constanze, married again, this time to Georg Nikolaus von Nissen, a councillor of state in the Danish government; from 1793, he worked in Vienna as a *chargé d'affaires*. Nissen had transferred in 1793 from Regensburg to Vienna, meeting Constanze four years later, possibly when he rented a room in her third-floor apartment at 535 Judenässel or at one of Constanze's Sunday concerts, featuring music by Mozart and Haydn, which attracted diplomats, musicians, and aristocrats.

A 1798 directory confirms this address for Nissen, and Constanze posted a letter from there to the Leipzig music house Breitkopf & Härtel in September of that year. The attraction the highly educated Nissen felt for Constanze speaks well of her intelligence and character.

Mozart biographer Otto Jahn characterizes Constanze's second husband as "a tiresome but an upright and honorable man" who "acted well towards Constanze and her children from the time of their marriage. . . ." ¹ But Nissen's 1809 portrait, painted by the German artist, Ferdinand Jagemann, the same year the Danish king made Nissen a Knight of the Dännebrog Order, reveals a man with fiery eyes and a passionate nature. An amateur musician and poet, Nissen, like Mozart, enjoyed billiards.

Nissen admired Mozart greatly, and it must have been a lucky star that led him to the composer's widow. Referring to Nissen, Constanze Mozart wrote in a 22 January 1826 letter to her older son, Karl, just two months before her husband's death: "Yes, such a defender of Mozart, as Nissen is, can scarcely be found." ² Were it not for Georg Nissen, in fact, the world might have had fewer works by the celebrated composer. Nissen discovered hundreds of Mozart's musical compositions in a closet in Constanze's apartment. Categorizing them with the help of acquaintance Abbé Maximilian Stadler, he prepared 15 parcels of the music for sale in 1800 to Offenbach am Main music publisher Johann André for 2,550 *gulden*.

The most consuming project of Nissen's life was compiling a huge biography of Mozart, an undertaking that became almost too much, even for Nissen. Constanze wrote to Karl: "If you have anything written by Mozart, or have anything others have written about him, be sure to send it to us, for your [step]father is always looking for such material. Day and nights he sits buried under piles of books and journals—stacks so high I can hardly see him." ³ *Biographie W.A. Mozarts*, more than 900 pages, appeared in April 1829, three years after Nissen died, and was sold on subscription to many of the European nobility, among others.

Two of his friends had helped finish it as death overtook him; Anton Jähndl, choirmaster of the Noble Ladies' Convent on Salzberg's Nonngasse, who was especially knowledgeable about Mozart's church music, and Dr. Johann Heinrich Feuerstein, who would ultimately complete it, although Constanze would be displeased with the final product. ⁴ However, although Georg Nissen is best known for his lengthy work on Mozart, he tried to accomplish something

no one had ever done, and that few people know about today. He attempted to expose the murder of Wolfgang Amadé Mozart.

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Nissen was especially interested in news about Mozart's death. In a 31 December 1825 letter to his friend Franz Sales Kandler, a composer and music publisher, he discussed Johann Adolph von Schaden's play, *Mozarts Tod: Ein Original Trauerspiel*, or *Mozart's Death: An Original Funeral Drama*. Von Schaden's play deals with Mozart's poisoning from an "Unknown" who plans to revenge himself "with sharp dagger and poison!"⁵ Nissen asked Kandler why he thought the censors had forbidden the play's publication "if it is other than true." Nissen wrote: "As censor of taste, I would certainly have condemned it . . . and I will take great delight to know that there is even more to criticize about it."⁶ He requested a copy of the play from his friend.

Then, on 12 March 1826, just 12 days before his death at age 65, Nissen wrote to Kandler in Vienna details about various music pieces and his personal concerns regarding his Mozart biography. Suddenly, toward the end of the letter, his tone changed to one of privacy: "I ask you expressly, absolutely to allow no person to learn of my plans and of the existence of our letter-exchange of *this* situation. Perhaps you have anticipated my request, which should completely warrant the attainment of my wish."⁷

While discussing his biography with Kandler on one level, Nissen also alludes to a plan that his friend will understand. Nissen might have suspected the Viennese Freemasons were involved; he corresponded briefly with Illuminati founder Adam Weishaupt in 1811, obviously casting about covertly for information on the Order.⁸

Another letter Nissen wrote shortly before he died holds many clues that support this contention, but in all the years following Nissen's death, scholars have failed to notice them, or they have mistakenly ascribed the clues to something concerning Mozart's *Requiem*.

This error has occurred possibly for two reasons. First, scholars have associated Nissen's second-to-last letter (now missing), written to his stepson Franz Xaver Wolfgang (Mozart's younger son) detailing plans to expose the crime, with Nissen's final letter of 16 March 1826 to Offenbach music publisher Johann André (also missing) about his active attempts to prove Mozart the true author of the *Requiem*.⁹ And second, Nissen's garbled letter to Wolfgang rambles, prompting scholars to discount it as the meanderings of a sick man's mind.

The fact that Nissen *did not* include Constanze in his scheme speaks volumes about the perilous undertaking that Nissen certainly anticipated. Or, as Nissen states in his letter, he didn't want to bring back dark memories to Constanze, that she had experienced with Mozart's death. But that excuse seems frail; more likely, Nissen believed that Constanze would stop their gambit from taking place, and kept it between himself and his stepson, whom he could trust.

Nissen's final letter to Wolfgang would be useless to translate because no rational meaning can be garnered from it—*unless* one considers the letter in light of his attempt to expose Mozart's murder. Nissen must have come across something in his extensive search to secure documents relating to Mozart's life. As a Danish councillor, he moved in high circles within the Viennese Court.

Interestingly, he asked two government officials, the king of Denmark (the highest authority in Denmark), and Copenhagen's magistrate (a municipal official), to witness the letter to Wolfgang, which went unpublished until 1942, when an article by Erich Valentin appeared in

the *Mozart-Jahrbuch*. Valentin notes that the letter's "content alludes to something mysterious to his stepson Wolfgang a few weeks before his death."

Nissen wrote two letters to stepson Wolfgang in Podkamien, Poland, on 5 March 1826; the shorter one is of crucial importance, because it contains two details that are of interest. First, Nissen tells Wolfgang that he met Constanze in the winter of 1797, which nails the time frist of their association:

For a few months after I had the good fortune (at the end of 1797) to get to know Mozart's widow, my wife, I, by virtue of my gender, was better able to do so than others and honored with her blind confidence, conducted all of her so-called business with the most perfect independence, wrote all the letters, took all the steps. She rarely saw the letters I wrote, other than to sign them.¹⁰

The second part of the letter is of pivotal importance, because Nissen is planning a move that will have far-reaching, reverberating consequences. He is laying down written evidence that he, and he alone, will be responsible for his actions in an upcoming undertaking that he and his stepson, Wolfgang planned, in duo collaboration. His second, longer missive, lays out the stratagem.

In his own hand, Nissen wrote in German what he considered his solemn testament:¹¹

Testament
Salzburg, March 5, 1826

Dear Wolf,
You will be inclined to put this present letter with your very most important papers in your care and to secure it with the utmost safety known to man.

Alone, I beg you explicitly to do this and I would order you to do this, if I could order my stepson to do so since he has become a man. I do that which depends on me: I will insure to you and to me the arrival of this letter to you by taking out a postal receipt [certified mail]. Everyone finds or tells me out of politeness that I look good: even the doctor says so. But I am in my 66th year, and every day as a rule I have a feeling in my head which I have to take as a symptom of the danger of a stroke, which can occur at any day or in the future.

For the immediate future, at the same moment that I have the pleasure of having it occur to me [to make] the following solemn explanation from which I request of you in the aforesaid circumstance; to make it your duty as you wish in all public use, also in print, and in as many different places as it is possible, to make use of it in these ways as soon as this has the slightest value to you, as soon as you have the slightest inclination to do this.

Nothing in the world should hold you back under one of these two stipulations. But so long as I live, you will undertake nothing concerning it. Only as long as I live, it will be up to me to choose the time when the public announcement is to take place, and to bring it about myself.

The matter, however, is: my complete and singular participation in the affair; you are permitted now by any opportunity, verbally and in private letters to speak about it; it is well known for a long time anyway to most of our friends in the Vienna surroundings. But you will not mention one syllable about my solemn declaration as long as I live, and nobody should get it unsealed except you.

I don't need to tell you what could possibly move you or me to make such an announcement: you will certainly judge it completely. I would like it very much if, after my death, when the

announcement would happen, that this entire letter, which will remain a secret while I live, would be read and printed.

For the authenticity of my document, you will probably have to procure witnesses, best of all, the highest government authorities.

I would spare you from this trouble today and lay witnesses by, if I were not in such a hurry to do that which cannot happen without me, and what would not happen if, in the time that I'm soliciting witnesses, I should meet with death.

Since I will deposit this announcement in several places, also sealed, with one highly eminent authority, but provided with an appropriate inscription that it not be opened inadvertently after my death, then it will probably provide evidence as well, so that everyone will come here (and in a short time) bring everything to complete justice.

After my death, but only in the moment that you make use of it, instruct your mother; it is not proper that she would suddenly read it in print. But as long as I live, above all, your mother must know not a word of any of this. Whatever she will remember about my death, and also from something very distant [Mozart's], will distress her so much, as it equally makes me unhappy, to a certain extent, to actively think about the separation from her.

Thus I implore you in your next letter only to tell me that you have received my letter from the 5th of March; not a word of the contents, you shall find out where I have otherwise deposited it.

You, my friend, have the power with the affirmation that what I have entrusted to you in this letter, to be considered as a codicil of my will; have I told you that this will is in the hands of my cousin Cäcilia, née Dyrhoff, or her husband the businessman, Jens Schoustrup in Copenhagen?

The Copenhagen Magistrate has a copy in his archive, which you can receive signed as correct if the original should get lost upon my death:/ S and his wife are old:/ By the way, I have the essential excerpt, and signed for certain by witnesses, among my belongings here in two composition books which I have always recommended to your mother, which I believe are also deposited somewhere, and after my death, they will be sent to your mother, and after both our deaths, made available to you and your brother. This Will is from 9 March 1815. On the 13th of the same month S: my King, His Majesty, has confirmed it.

Your Nissen
or the way I sometimes sign Nihsen¹²

(Nissen signed this testament as a codicil to his original will, which was completed and signed on 15 May 1815).

There could be only one reason why Georg Nissen asked the king of Denmark, Frederick VI, the highest government official in his homeland, to witness his letter to stepson Wolfgang, his solemn testament. If one person had killed Mozart—Antonio Salieri, for example, or another single person—Nissen would not have needed his sovereign's protection when exposing Mozart's murder. Depending on the circumstances, the state judicial system would have prosecuted the case, bringing it to a conclusion, although the system might have enabled a cover-up for such a well-positioned person by looking the other way. And besides, Salieri had been dead for a year already.

However, if Nissen were planning to expose Mozart's murder by a powerful group of people, his letter to Wolfgang makes abundant sense. In case he died before he could procure all

of the necessary witnesses, he needed Wolfgang's cooperation. After all, he wrote, "it is well known for a long time anyway to most of our friends in the Vienna surroundings."

That he admonished his stepson "not to mention one syllable . . . as long as I live" is particularly unsettling. Even more chilling, Nissen reminded Wolfgang, "I don't need to tell you what could possibly move you or me to make such an announcement: certainly you can judge it completely."

The letter's guarded tone reflects the seriousness of the matter, and Nissen's concern for the potential consequences. Nissen realized that if he were to expose the crime properly, even posthumously, he would have to protect the three Mozart family members, Constanze and her two sons, from the shadow group's possible retribution. That Nissen also sent a copy of this letter to his cousin Cäcilia and her husband, Jens Schoustrup, his closest friends, bears out this conclusion. Since July 1820, when Nissen, resigned from the Danish government, and he and Constanze left Copenhagen, he bestowed on Schoustrup his power of attorney.¹³

Nissen sent the letter to his stepson and waited anxiously in Salzburg for an answer. As if by some mysterious hand, however, the plan came to nothing. Before Wolfgang's 19 March reply could reach Nissen, he died of paralysis of the lungs, possibly from heart disease, on 24 March 1826 in the apartment he shared with Constanze in the Café Tomaselli building at 9 Alter Markt. When Wolfgang learned of his beloved stepfather's death, he, in deep grief, wrote his mother:

Lemberg, 12 April 1826

My dearly cherished Mother!

It is probably in vain if I would try to describe to you the pain which overcame me, when I received the letter yesterday from Herr Metzger. Just yesterday I was waiting for the answer from my unforgettable father to my last letter from 19 March, and instead of this I experience the irreplaceable loss that concerns us both. You, my dear, good Mother, know only too well what he was to all of us, and especially to me. My best, my only friend, from childhood on, my father and benefactor! Now I am not able to get my thoughts in order, and even less, to express comfort to you, as I need this too, so very much. . . . If you want to come to me, expect from my love as your child that I will do everything for you that will contribute to your contentment. Or do you wish rather, that I come to you at an agreed time in order to arrange your affairs; if so, write me immediately: with one word, whatever you think of doing, count on your son.¹⁴

Wolfgang was extremely close to Nissen, who, since 1797, had been a loving stepfather to both Mozart boys. That Wolfgang never honored his cherished stepfather's beseeching last request seems especially salient. What could have stopped him? Perhaps the final letter with specific places where Nissen had deposited the notebooks with the "essential excerpt" never reached him.

It is not widely known that Wolfgang, like his father, joined the Freemasons. The 1820 membership roll of *Hall of Constancy*, the third largest Lodge in Warsaw, Poland, lists Franz Xaver Wolfgang Mozart as "No. 257 Apprentice," with the additional designation "traveler."¹⁵ But unlike his famous parent, he was a less than zealous Brother, attending Lodge meetings only sporadically.

Perhaps he was really exploiting his Lodge relationships to further a personal quest for the truth about Mozart. Possibly he visited the Masonic Lodges in Vienna, seeking former *Crowned Hope* members. Perhaps he went to the old Lodge room at 3 Schwertgasse where his father once sat, where, in 1790, an artist recorded for posterity that revealing scene, in an oil painting.¹⁶ Imagine for a moment that Wolfgang saw the Lodge painting that eventually came

into the possession of the Tinti family—and contacted Georg Nissen. Whatever motivated Nissen to investigate Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s death, one cannot discount totally that his stepson might have discovered something in Vienna.

Apparently short lived, Wolfgang’s experience with Freemasonry prompted author Joachim Hurwitz’s comment that “Our account can therefore only lead to the conclusion that, while [son Mozart’s] reception into the masonic brotherhood might have become of great value for his inner life if more favorable circumstances had prevailed, Freemasonry actually must have become a fading experience for him rather soon.”¹⁷

Nissen certainly realized the dangers of exposing the murder should it have been perpetrated by a powerful group with deep connections to the Court. Someone might have discovered Nissen’s plan and made perfectly clear to Wolfgang the seriousness of such an undertaking.

The person most likely to have interfered was Constanze. Perhaps she intercepted Wolfgang’s response to Nissen’s solemn testament. By late March, Nissen was seriously ill, even bedridden, and no doubt, Constanze was opening all correspondence that came to their apartment.

Nissen’s goal was exemplary: he wished to expose an unthinkable crime. Maybe his wife had the last word, not wanting to incite the terror that remained her constant shadow. And perhaps she feared for her son’s life; even Nissen had warned Wolfgang of the consequences of speaking out prematurely.

Did Constanze open her son’s response to Nissen’s final request, as her husband languished in his last hours? If she did read Wolfgang’s letter to his stepfather, undoubtedly she was horrified to learn that the secret she had carefully concealed for 36 years had been unearthed. Somehow, she would have to convince Wolfgang of the foolhardiness of trifling with the powerful group.

Constanze knew who they were, and would have been unimpressed with the protection Nissen felt the king of Denmark could afford the family. For no one knew better than she, the lengths to which the shadow group would resort to carry out and conceal their activities; this may have been the catalyst that prevented her from unclocking details about Mozart’s death, and his burial site.

When Wolfgang failed to come forward with instructions that action be taken on the letter’s contents, the magistrate sent the letter to the Danish Chancellery, the government law offices, where it remained for years.¹⁸ Today, the Mozarteum holds Nissen’s original letter to Wolfgang—with the same stamp that appears under Nissen’s portrait on the title page of *Biographie W. A. Mozarts*.

Nissen’s letter of 5 March 1826 to Abbé Maximilian Stadler in Vienna, with whom Nissen had been communicating secretly concerning Mozart’s *Requiem*, has gone missing. But Nissen’s final 16 March 1826 letter to André included important information concerning the public announcement that he hoped to make. At the end of the letter, Nissen vaguely counselled André to get in touch with some person central to the plot who “is a considerate man who has obtained information in top levels since 1791; make his acquaintance as early as it can be done.”¹⁹

Possibly Nissen was referring to Abbé Maximilian Stadler, who came to Vienna in 1796, and was there earlier, at the time of Mozart’s death. Obviously Nissen knew that Stadler had information about Nissen’s “private matter” that André would find of interest. Nissen advised André to make the acquaintance of Stadler for a reason; he was lining up witnesses. The first part

of his letter to André, a supplement, is missing.¹⁹ Perhaps it contained information that he was planning to include in the public announcement that would appear after his death.

Nissen died eight days after writing that letter. Any reply to him from André has also disappeared. But Nissen's plot was not dead in the water; his stepson, Karl, would play a pivotal role.

¹ Jahn, *Life of Mozart*, Trans. Pauline D. Townsend, Vol. III, London: Novello, Ewer and Co., 1882, 394; Nissen's father's financial situation was precarious, so he was unable to provide the intelligent boy with the education he needed. Consequently, at age 12, young Nissen was sent to be educated in Mögeltönder, near the North Sea, where he was brought up by an uncle, the local dean who had several children of his own. In 1775, Nissen worked as a clerk in Copenhagen's Treasury Office, with assistance from another uncle who held the title of chief for the postmaster-general there. In 1779, Nissen graduated from the University of Copenhagen, was promoted to head clerk, and went on to apply to the Danish Foreign Service, which afforded him a more interesting job involving travel. Ten years later, an opening became available when the secretary of the Legation in Regensburg, Germany, died, and Nissen assumed his position in 1791. (The salary was the equivalent of only about \$300.00 U.S.) In early 1793, he was transferred to the Legation in Vienna, where his official title was secretary of the Legation and he received double the salary of his former post. Here, Nissen found a rich social life incorporating his main interests— theater and music. See Viggo Sjøqvist, *Twice Perfectly Happy: Constanze Mozart's Two Marriages*, 1991.

² Gärtner, *Die Geschäfte der Constanze Mozart: Mozart's Requiem*, Frankfurt: Verlag Ullstein, 228.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Feuerstein used much of what is now known as Nissen's collection of biographical materials, the *Kollektaneen*, preserved at the Mozarteum. These materials include manuscripts from persons providing Nissen with information on Mozart, printed works, and copies of many documents, among other materials he used or collected. According to author Ruth Halliwell, Nissen's work, completed by Feuerstein, "was cobbled together in a haphazard fashion from the raw material, and the results were disastrous in terms of quality. Repetitions were rife, sources were frequently not given, and anecdotal material was reproduced without comment even when contradicted by primary evidence also given in the book. Nissen probably would have been horrified if he had known that his name would forever be linked with the work." See Ruth Halliwell, *The Mozart Family: Four Lives in a Social Context*, 623–24; Feuerstein absconded to Italy with the money collected from the sale by subscription of Nissen's biography. Agnes Selby estimates that he received, by 1830, around 3,020 *gulden* that should have been paid to Constanze.

⁵ Schaden, *Mozarts Tod: Ein Original Trauerspiel*; I obtained a copy on microfilm from the *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek* in Munich.

⁶ Schaal, Richard, "Unveröffentlichte Briefe von Georg Nikolaus Nissen," *MJ*, 1965–1966, 202; For the entire article, see pages 195–203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸ Duda, Gunther, *Den Göttern gegeben: Ein Bauopfer Tod*, Pähl/Oberbayern, Deutschland: Verlag Hohe Warte, 388.

⁹ Deutsch and Bauer, *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, Band IV 1787-1857, No. 1411 and 1412, 481.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, N. 1410, 480.

¹¹ I translated the letter with the help of native German-speaker Ursula Schubert.

¹² Valentin, "Das Testament der Constanze Mozart-Nissen," *NJM*, 1942, 165–67.

¹³ Selby, Agnes, *Constanze, Mozart's Beloved*, Sydney: Turon and Armstrong, 1999, 167.

¹⁴ Hummel, Walter, *W.A. Mozarts Söhne, MISM*, Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1956, 148–49. Deutsch and Bauer fail to list this letter in *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*.

¹⁵ Hurwitz, Joachim, "Franz Xaver Wolfgang Mozart: Freemason," *MISM* 36, July 1988, Heft 1/4, 102.

¹⁶ The oil painting has confounded scholars for decades since it was discovered in 1926, donated by Baron Rudolf von Tinti to the *Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien* [Vienna's Historical Museum]. (Tinti was a descendant of the Tinti Brothers, Barons Anton and Bartholomäus von Tinti, who had formerly owned it.) They were both Freemasons of the *Concord Lodge* in Vienna, and musicians, as well, friends of Mozart. Scholars believe that Ignaz Unterberger was the painter, but *Crowned Hope* would not allow a Freemason who was not a member of their Lodge to be entrusted with sacred Lodge business. Instead, on the 1790 *Crowned Hope* Lodge roster, we find the name of Joseph Kraftmayer – Mahler – painter. This can be seen on page 253 in H. C. Robbins Landon's book, *Mozart: The golden Years*. Kraftmayer is No. 7 on the *Serving Brothers* list, who has been specially initiated into the First Degree,

Entered Apprentice, to create the painting. On the Lodge roster in 1791, his name no longer appears. (See my book, *Echoes of a Distant Crime: Resolving the Mozart Cold Case File*, pp. 122-124 for the 1791 *Crowned Hope* roster.)

¹⁷ Hurwitz, "Franz Xaver Wolfgang Mozart: Freemason," 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁹ Deutsch und Bauer, *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, Band IV 1787-1857, No. 1413, 482.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 1412, 481.