

The Case of the Missing Stradivarius: How WilmerHale Played a Role in Returning the Stolen Violin to its Owners

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When renowned violin master and teacher Roman Totenberg passed away in 2012 at the age of 101, he died believing that his treasured Stradivarius violin was stolen following a 1980 performance in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and that it would never be recovered. That all changed today, three years following his passing, as the Stradivarius was finally recovered and returned to the Totenberg family.

In mid-July 2015, one of Totenberg's three daughters, NPR Legal Affairs Correspondent Nina Totenberg, received an unexpected call from FBI agents who claimed they thought they had her father's violin. When the violin thief passed away, a violin from his estate was brought to a rare instrument dealer for valuation. The dealer immediately recognized the violin as the Ames Stradivarius of 1734 and contacted the FBI. The Ames Stradivarius is a rare antique violin crafted by Italian luthier Antonio Stradivari of Cremona. This particular violin was owned by George Ames, who performed with the instrument in the late 1800s. It was later purchased by Roman Totenberg.

While the rightful owner was clear, the steps needed to return the Stradivarius to the Totenberg family required the legal insight of someone well versed in forfeiture law in the Southern District of New York.

"When Nina Totenberg called and explained what had happened, I knew we could help," said Jamie Gorelick, WilmerHale partner and chair of the firm's Regulatory and Government Affairs Department. "I immediately turned to Partner Sharon Cohen Levin, who is by all accounts the most experienced person in the nation on forfeitures, among other talents. Sharon knew exactly what to do and, in short order, cut through each obstacle."

Levin joined WilmerHale in April 2015. Most recently she was Chief of the Money Laundering and Asset Forfeiture Unit in the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York.

"I was thrilled to be able to use my experience working on forfeitures for the government to help reunite Roman Totenberg's Stradivarius with his family," said Levin.

The prompt return of this rare and treasured violin, which meant so much to Roman Totenberg throughout his musical career, was announced today by US Attorney for the Southern District of New

York [Preet Bharara](#), with Levin in attendance. Nina Totenberg [told the story of the violin's reappearance and retrieval on NPR this morning](#) as she and her sisters take possession of the violin.