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A jinx in a box?

By Leslie Gornstein, Special to The Times | July 25, 2004

A small wooden cabinet went up for auction on EBay. Inside were two locks of hair, one granite slab, one dried rosebud, one goblet, two wheat pennies, one candlestick and, allegedly, one "dibbuk," a kind of spirit popular in Yiddish folklore.

The seller, a Missouri college student named Iosif Nietzsche, described the container as a "haunted Jewish wine cabinet box" that had plagued several owners with rotten luck and a spate of bizarre paranormal stunts.

"We have definitely seen a tidal wave of 'bad luck,' " the seller wrote on EBay in the first week of February. "Most disturbingly, last Tuesday, my hair began to fall out. I'm in my early 20s and I just got a clean blood test back from the doctor's

Within days, the box's opening bid of \$1 jumped to \$50; that value soon quadrupled. On Feb. 9, the box sold for \$280 to a university museum curator named Jason Haxton.

In the months after, the hype surrounding the wooden box has mushroomed. The Forward, a 107-year-old Jewish newspaper on the East Coast, ran a story about the box's sale and supposed otherworldly powers. Since then, the EBay auction page has logged more than 140,000 hits.

At least five authors, one screenwriter and a documentary crew have sought up-close access, says Haxton, a 46-year-old father of two who also lives in Missouri. Rabbis, Orthodox Jews and Hebrew intellectuals have contacted Haxton, offering to crack the box's mysteries.

Haxton says he's had to unlist his home number, change his e-mail address and erect a website, www.dibbukbox.com, just to field inquiries. He agreed to be interviewed only if he could add this request: Please, please, box fans, leave him alone.

The strange case of the bogey in a box is threatening to become an urban legend as big as any ghostly hitchhiker, fried rat or stolen body part. In Chicago, Bull basketball fans have paused their online arguments over salary caps to post theories on what's in the box. Ditto with newsgroups usually dedicated to Subaru ownership or NASCAR tickets. In Long Island, a group of particularly dedicated ghost hunters has founded a Yahoo chat group dedicated solely to the box.

All the while, dozens of Web surfers have e-mailed Haxton through his website, complaining of strange headaches, nightmares and other plagues.

"One person pleaded with me to get all images of the box off the Internet because they would

provide an electronic portal for the spirit into every computer that visited the site," he says.

Most often, discussions of dybbuks (as it is more commonly spelled) are accompanied by plenty of snorting skepticism -- "I think I'm going to put my haunted Game Cube on EBay," one Texan recently posted -- but the number of those fascinated with the little wooden box continues to climb.

The reason, experts say, is tied to a witch's brew of trends and developments unique to the new millennium: A booming blog culture; a growing interest in Jewish mysticism, particularly cabala; and high-speed Internet connections that allow photos to be downloaded onto countless home computers.

Dybbuks have haunted Yiddish folk tales since the dawn of Judaism's mystical movement in the latter half of the 16th century. "Dybbuk" literally means "an attachment, a cleaving to something"; a dybbuk is thought to be the spirit of a person who, instead of drifting into the next realm, sticks around and enters the bodies of living people.

"It's essentially a kook subject," muses Rabbi Eli Schochet, a professor of rabbinic thought at L.A.'s Academy for Jewish Religion, which trains rabbis and cantors. "But I could never say that it's impossible because, obviously, there's precedent for these things that are recorded in different religious traditions, including my own."

The EBay auction page (still viewable on Haxton's website) claims to document experiences from two previous owners, told in the first person and pasted back to back in the item's description space.

The tale, according to the site, began in fall 2001, when Oregon antiques collector and small-business owner Kevin Mannis discovered the box -- smaller than a case of beer, decorated with two metal plates in the shape of grape clusters -- at a neighborhood estate sale. (Mannis later told *The Times* he bought the box in 2000, but so much bad fortune befell him in that first year that he didn't want to tell potential buyers about it.)

Mannis said the estate sale's host told him that the box had belonged to her 103-year-old grandmother, who had dubbed the cabinet a "dybbuk box" and warned her kids

Heedless of this spooky back story, Mannis bought the box and put it in the basement of his antiques business. A half-hour after the box arrived, the creepiness, as he describes it, began: While Mannis ran a few errands, a mysterious force apparently went berserk in his shop, cursing and smashing light bulbs and scaring a store clerk.

"When I got back to the shop, I went to investigate," Mannis says from his Oregon home. "I remember heading toward the back and walking into what I can only describe as a wall of scent. It smelled like jasmine flowers. You could take one more step and not smell a thing, and take a step

backward and be surrounded by it again."

Later, he says, when he gave the box to his mother as a gift, she suffered a stroke that temporarily left her unable to speak. She penned the tersely scrawled admonishment "hate gift" and Mannis has not discussed the object with her since, he says. The FBI then raided Mannis' shop, he says, hauling out loads of electronic equipment. He got his stuff back but says he never got an explanation for the raid. Add to his list of woes that he lost his shop lease and was a victim of identity theft.

"All of this stuff has an explanation that doesn't necessarily point to this box," Mannis muses. "But when you take everything together, it becomes such a weird coincidence."

The 'curse' changes hands

BY June 2003, Mannis had had enough and posted the box on EBay. The high bidder was Nietzsche, who, for \$140, got the box, contents and -- presumably -- its ectoplasmic squatter. (Repeated attempts to reach Nietzsche have been unsuccessful.)

Nietzsche's alleged experiences, which are also posted on EBay -- included strange odors in his house, a bug infestation, malfunctioning electronic devices and "sort of like large, vertical, dark blurs in my peripheral vision."

Haxton, the college museum director who collects religious paraphernalia, says by phone that he first heard about the box last year through a student employee at his museum -- who is also Nietzsche's roommate.

When Nietzsche posted the box for sale, Haxton went for it. The day after it arrived in his office, Haxton says, "I woke up with my right eye looking like it had been poked." Other afflictions arrived, including fatigue, a metallic taste in his mouth and constant nasal congestion and a cough. Around the house, Haxton says he occasionally smells the signature odors of cat urine and flowers.

Haxton has been aided by Rebecca Edery, an Orthodox Jewish bookkeeper who lives in Brooklyn and whose father studied cabala. It was Edery who helped uncover the purpose of the box. "The two doors on the outside open up just like the Holy Closet," or Aron HaKodesh, a receptacle for Torah scrolls, Edery says. "And I saw round, metal hoops on the inside of the doors that would hold scrolls. This particular size is used when going to comfort the family of the deceased."

Edery says she is convinced the box was sacred and had been intentionally stuffed with some sort of spirit. "This was done deliberately, for a specific purpose." She believes that to put an end to the misfortunes, the box needs a formal Jewish burial involving a 10-man minyan, or prayer group.

For his part, Haxton says he wants to follow the box back to its origins. Then, he says, he might

create a replica and bury the original. "To me this is a historical puzzle," he says. "It came from somewhere. It was made for a reason. What is it and why is it?"

Room for doubt on either side

Researchers and religious scholars say that, sure, the box contains items that could have served as fetishes or tokens to a family, Jewish or otherwise. Pennies and locks of hair fall under the common fetish territory, says Bill Ellis, a fetish researcher and American studies professor at Penn State University.

"It was not uncommon for people to hunt through their change and, when they found the birth date of a child, to put that aside as a life token of the child," Ellis says. "You also have two locks of hair. That is a very common tradition, especially for preserving a keepsake of a dead family member. These things would incorporate a memory or some part of a life spirit."

But the tale also contains a parade of red flags that point to a possible hoax.

For one thing, Schochet points out that most dybbuk tales have the ghost coming back to convey some sort of message, but "there is nothing to explain why this particular box is inhabited."

Elliott Oring, an anthropology professor and folklore specialist at Cal State L.A., also has his doubts. "Go through [the story and] you will see areas that seem to require suspending critical functions. There is too much piling on of incidents

So if there's no proof a dybbuk exists, why is the box so fascinating?

"We embrace such stories because they tap into our own fears and prejudices," says Allan S. Mott, author of "Urban Legends: Strange Stories Behind Modern Myths."

"The dybbuk story taps into our belief that out in the world there is a supernatural evil that will attack anyone regardless of how good they are. They allow people to make some sense of a chaotic world."

The story also benefits from the credibility lent to it by a mainstream site such as EBay, says Jan Harold Brunvand, author of the coming "Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid: The Book of Scary Urban Legends."

But Brunvand sees a difference in the tale. "The length and detail of the story is unlike most urban legends," he says, "as is the supernatural angle and the first-person narrative. So I would not classify it as a 'normal' urban legend."

Perhaps that leaves open a small window of credibility. After all, who doesn't like a good ghost story?

"Of course, we realize we could most probably be dealing here with a very elaborate hoax," notes

the Rev. Jim Willis, an Arizona minister and author of "The Religion Book: Places, Prophets, Saints and Seers." "I have to say that because I do have my academic reputation to uphold." But, he adds, "if you leave it at that, it takes all the fun away."

As his words trail away, a huge picture in his office falls from the wall and crashes to the floor.

"This is weird," Willis says. "Have I just become a part of an urban legend?"

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