

Sleuth's Corner

Whatever Happened to Margaret of Austria's 'Shroud relic' Bequest?

Some two years ago BSTS member Hugh Duncan, who lives in France, very kindly volunteered to undertake any historical researches on the Shroud that might be useful in his area. One suggestion that he took up was that he might try to locate a portion of the Shroud that is said to have been given to the church of Brou, in Bourg-en-Bresse.

Margaret of Austria, who as a young woman was cruelly widowed on the death of her much-loved Philibert II of Savoy, is best known in Shroud circles for her commissioning of the very fine silver casket in which the Shroud was so very nearly destroyed in 1532. But on 20 February 1508, over a year before the Shroud was installed in this casket, Margaret drew up her will. In this she gave the specifications for her tomb in the church of Brou at Bourg-en-Bresse, and how this should be placed in relation to that of Philibert. In this same document she also bequeathed to the church of Brou, amongst other relics, a snippet of the Shroud.

The key question raised is whether this might have been one of the two portions of the Shroud that were already missing at either end of the side-strip before further snippets were taken in 1973 and 1988. Hugh Duncan accordingly wrote to the church at Brou and on 28 January 1999 received a most informative response from the Musée de Brou's archivist, Michele Duflot. She provided the relevant quotation from the will, which reads: 'I give to my church St. Nicholas all the holy relics that I have now and will have on the day of my death, the piece of the Holy Cross, the Holy Shroud, bones of saints that I have and will have on my death, and which could decorate the church.'

But as Michèle Duflot further revealed, promising as the will might sound, when an inventory of Margaret's possessions was made in 1523 (a transcript of this was published by Michelant of Brussels in 1870), no mention was made of any piece of the Shroud. On February 21, 1531, following Margaret's death, Margaret's executors wrote to Brou alerting them to be ready to install her body in the tomb she had prepared, and also asking for assurance that 'you will hand over the relics, devotional paintings and carpets of the said lady'. Yet four years later, when the Brou authorities wrote to Margaret's executors asking them to reclaim their goods, there was reference to church ornaments and to work in progress, but no mention of relics. Whereupon the trail of any missing portion of the Shroud goes cold.

Michèle Duflot kindly provided a quantity of documentation on movements of the Shroud during this same period, and this is being absorbed into a master chronology of the Shroud still under construction.

Did Dr. Max Frei authenticate the Hitler Diaries?

Joe Nickell of CSICOP, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, has long, and sometimes none too fair-mindedly, promulgated the Shroud's fraudulence. In particular he targeted Dr. Max Frei after Frei's death. He intimated that Frei was at best incompetent and at worst a charlatan, citing amongst his evidence that Frei had helped authenticate the notorious Hitler diaries, by way of authority quoting only his own local Kentucky newspaper. Despite knowing Max Frei personally to the end of his life, I had no knowledge of his involvement in the diaries

fiasco, Max's professional expertise, to my understanding, having always been in the down-to-earth field of botany, never in the more esoteric one of handwriting. My guess was that if there was any truth in the allegation, the likelihood was that Frei had acted merely in a notarising capacity over the diaries, which was in fact the way that he had first become involved in the Shroud.

Recently, in the November/December 1999 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, (pp. 22-23), Joe Nickell repeated his allegation that Max Frei 'once pronounced the forged "Hitler Diaries" genuine'. He did so as part of a critique of the Danin-Whanger *Flora of the Shroud of Turin* booklet reviewed in the last issue of this Newsletter. This prompted me to try to find Nickell's source, a book by Charles Hamilton, *The Hitler Diaries* published by the University of Kentucky Press in 1999, looking a likely authority. In the event it was Joe Marino, who had first alerted me to the *Skeptical Inquirer* article, who tracked down a copy of this book. The pertinent section occurs on pp. 92 and 94. Joe Marino's transcription of this is as follows:

After Hilton [a handwriting specialist] finished his report (cited in a previous chapter), the same documents were turned over to Max Frei-Sulzer, a document expert in Zurich, the former head of forensic services for the Zurich police department. He also received a dossier compiled by Heidemann to show how the Fuehrer's handwriting had changed between 1906 and 1945 and a guide to the gothic script. Frei-Sulzer worked on the project for two months, and his analysis of the two forged Hitler documents ran to seventeen pages. Robert Harris described the results:

"The script of Adolf Hitler," wrote Frei-Sulzer, "is highly individualistic and offers a good basis for the examination of questionable handwriting." He singled out fourteen special characteristics, analysed the i's, the h's and the t's, the gaps between the letters and the pressure that had been applied to the pen. He made large photographic blow-ups of individual passages, and at the end of it all his conclusion on the Hess communiqué and the Horthy telegram was unequivocal: "there can be no doubt that both these documents were written by Adolf Hitler."

[The quote is from "the Stern Report" in Harris, *Selling Hitler*, New York, Robert Harris, 1986]

We do, then, have to recognize that Max Frei, arguably rather unwisely, did participate in the authentication of the notorious diaries. Far less justifiable, however, is Nickell's allegation, in the same *Skeptical Inquirer* article, that virtually the only pollens on the Frei sticky tapes were on their 'lead' edge, and came from the gloves which Frei had to wear while working with the STURP team in 1978. Quite aside from the fact that Frei worked without gloves when he obtained his first samples in 1973, all those who have had the privilege of actually studying the tapes under the microscope, including myself, can attest that the pollens are to be seen on the main part of the tapes, and in plenty.