

Expert rips into handwriting evidence

Analysis 'fatally flawed' in case against city man accused of 1980 Paris bombing

BY CHRIS COBB, OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 5, 2011

A British handwriting expert ripped into French evidence during the Hassan Diab extradition hearing Tuesday, saying its main conclusions are "frankly absurd -- totally misguided and totally incorrect."

Forensic document examiner Robert Radley is the third defence witness to attack handwriting evidence that French authorities say links Diab to a 1980 bombing that killed four passersby and injured more than 40 outside a Paris synagogue.

"I find this whole (handwriting) report unacceptable and not what I would expect from a trained, competent expert," Radley said.

The French want the Lebanonborn Canadian citizen to stand trial for murder and attempted murder, but, in what has evolved as an unusually long and complex extradition case, defence lawyer Donald Bayne is challenging the reliability of key intelligence and handwriting evidence.

Crown prosecutors say the handwriting analysis by French expert Ann Bisotti is the "smoking gun" in the case.

Bisotti compared the writing of a false name on a Paris hotel registration card to Diab's own handwriting on U.S. immigration papers from about 15 years later.

Witness evidence more or less confirms that the man who signed into the hotel using the false name Alexander Panadriyu was also the person who planted the bomb in a motorcycle saddlebag outside the synagogue.

Diab, a former University of Ottawa professor, says he is innocent and the victim of mistaken identity.

Bayne's three experts say Bisotti's work is "fatally flawed" and produced in apparent ignorance of international professional standards.

Although reports from all three are damning, Radley's blistering criticism carries the weight of more than 30 years European and other international experience and familiarity with the European Network of Forensic Handwriting Experts (ENFHEX), with which Bisotti is associated.

Bisotti's methods, he said, contradict ENFHEX standards.

Radley questioned Bisotti's qualifications and professional development, which he said were "sadly

lacking," and described the relatively limited time she had spent on actual analysis as "alarming."

Bisotti's analysis is the third sent by France in the case. Two others were withdrawn following challenges by Bayne.

Radley was especially critical of Bisotti's apparent dismissal of differences in the handwriting specimens as natural variations and of failing to recognize other differences.

"When you have so many differences," he said, "you've got to take into account the possibility of another writer ... all the evidence points in the other direction (away from Diab)."

Radley said Bisotti should have rejected her instructions from prosecuting magistrate Marc Trevidic, who is leading the case against Diab. All three defence experts have said that Trevidic's instructions left no room for Bisotti to simply reject the handwriting evidence he gave to her.

"She should just have said, 'This is not a feasible exercise,'" Radley said. "She is not showing any objectivity.

"In over 30 years dealing with casework and having to produce critiques on literally hundreds of police laboratory reports, I have never had to express criticism in such robust terms."

Ontario Superior Court Justice Robert Maranger will rule -- likely by early March -- whether the French have provided sufficient reliable evidence to justify Diab's extradition.

The hearing continues today.

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