

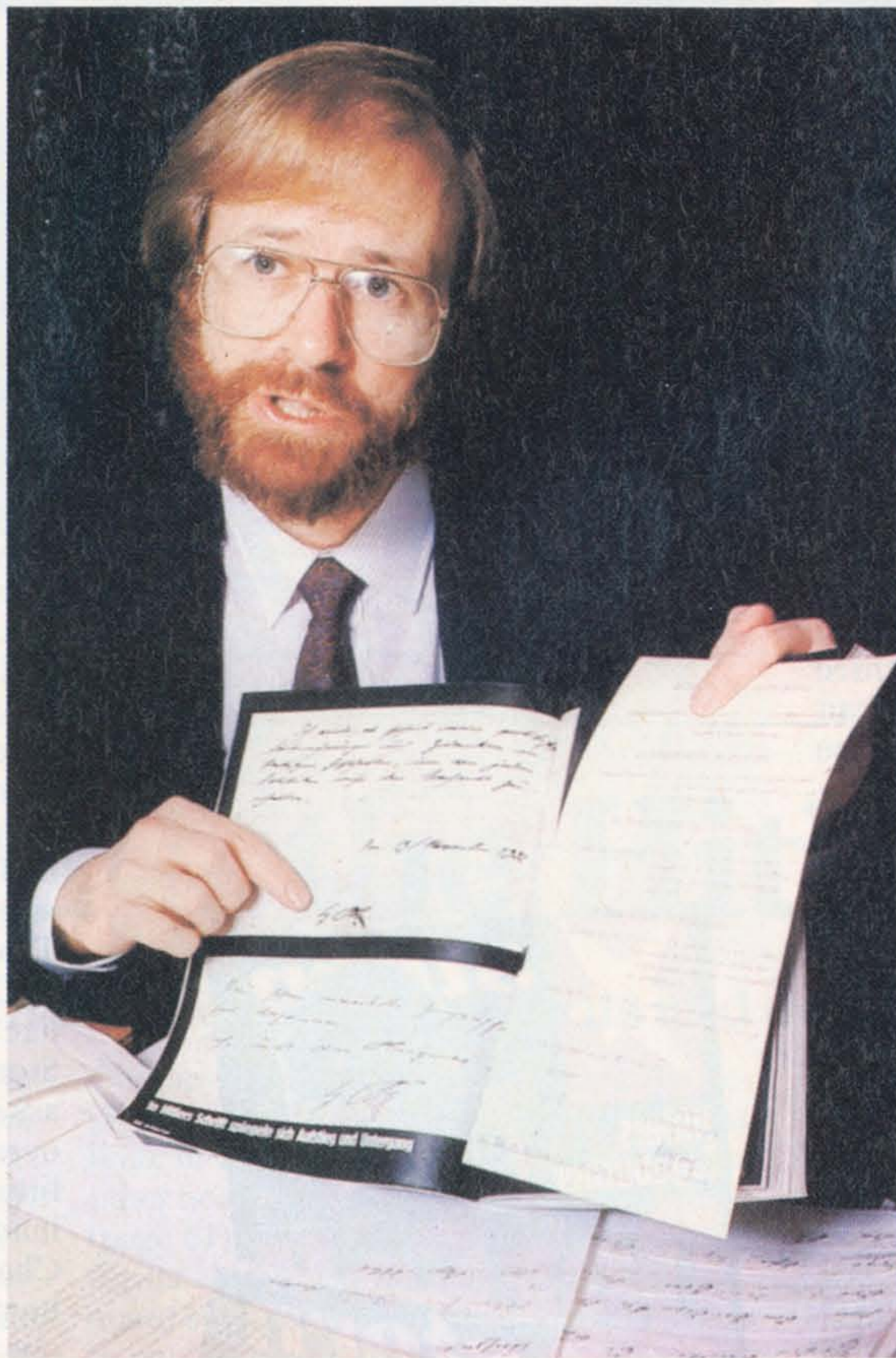
Cracking the Case

An expert spots the forger's mistakes in minutes—and tells how Stern botched the authentication.

Kenneth Rendell, 40, a handwriting expert and dealer in historical papers, has bought and sold hundreds of Adolf Hitler's documents and letters over the years. As a consultant for NEWSWEEK, Rendell was invited to examine two of Stern magazine's Hitler diaries in New York last week: the first installment, supposedly written in 1932 at the beginning of Hitler's rule, and the last, covering the Third Reich's death throes in 1945. Days before Stern admitted the hoax, Rendell came to his own conclusion: both diaries were crude forgeries.

When NEWSWEEK first told me that Stern claimed to have approximately 60 volumes of Hitler's secret diaries, the news staggered me. It was an incredible story one way or another—either one of the biggest finds of the century or the biggest hoax. The probability of forgery was very high. If they were fakes, I assumed that they would be quite sophisticated. Anticipating my imminent departure to examine the documents in Zurich, I organized about 100 examples of authentic Hitler writing, researched scientific tests that might date the material and prepared myself for a sizable challenge. But when I finally laid eyes on the actual diaries last week, I felt like a well-conditioned athlete who wins because the other competitors fail to show up.

Ridiculous Signatures: The initial and final installments of the so-called Hitler diaries were not only forgeries, they were bad forgeries. First I thumbed through the 1945 document. Previously I had seen one of its signatures, an obvious fraud, reproduced in Stern. But it was conceivable that somebody had written that entry for Hitler or that he wrote it while on drugs. Now I saw that every signature in the volume was just as ridiculous. I had no need for further examination. The 1932 diary looked more realistic, but no handwriting expert would have pronounced it genuine. All the same, I could understand how three reputable experts could have authenticated two pages of Stern's documents. For comparison, the experts had relied partly on authentic handwriting from German archives—but more extensively on examples of Hitler's handwriting supplied by Stern. Their conclusion that the diaries and Stern's samples were written by the same person is almost certainly correct. The problem is that that person was not Adolf Hitler. I have concluded that the significant handwriting examples provided by Stern were *also* forgeries. The same forger either created them—or used them as his prototype for the diaries. Thus the experts were in effect asked to judge forgeries against forgeries.



Robert R. McElroy—NEWSWEEK

Rendell: Even the yardsticks might have been bad

mens he could find from West Germany's national archives as his model. For content he would have read all of Hitler's speeches and biographies. My own challenge was clear: to come up with authentic documents that the forger would *not* have. I also searched my files for anomalies in Hitler's style. There were several. For example, he almost always printed the capital letter "A"; yet in a 1932 sample unearthed in Washington, I found an instance in which Hitler wrote a capital "A" in cursive script. I hoped that the forger, with limited samples to copy, had mistakenly adopted the exception as the rule. In that case the forged diary would be sprinkled with cursive "A's." Not only could I detect the forgery, but I could discover which authentic documents the forger had used as his model.

A New Chemical: If the handwriting in the diaries looked genuine, I had some technical tests in reserve. Again I was looking for something that the forger had missed—such as the fact that in 1945 a new chemical was introduced into the adhesive bindings of European notebooks. I would test with ultraviolet light to discover whether fraudulent pages had been added to an otherwise genuine diary. I would study the strings binding the diaries, the wax seals on their covers, the impressions supposedly made by Hitler's seal.

I planned to give particular attention to Stern's peripheral documents, including typewritten notes and the signatures of Hitler's secretary Martin Bormann and his aide Rudolf Hess. Forgers frequently do a very good job imitating their principal section but are careless with other signatures and evidence. (Many first-rate Benjamin Franklin forgeries include a receipt botching the signature of Pennsylvania treasurer David

Rittenhouse.) I also packed test plates for European typewriters of the war years. Old-style typewriters have their unique set of tilted or offset letters—their own fingerprints. In five minutes I could conclude whether a typewritten note signed by Bormann came from the machine he normally used—or at least from a German typewriter of the period.

I had intended to fly to Zurich for NEWSWEEK with my assorted microscopes, cameras and other paraphernalia to pore over the diaries methodically. The idea was to prove whether or not they were authentic—and to make my case so convincingly that neither laymen nor my colleagues could challenge it. But the opportunities for sensible research disappeared as Stern raced into print with its sensation. I was dismayed at the specter of historians arguing over points that were outside the realm of their expertise. The entire

HITLER'S HANDWRITING

Einde

THE FORGER'S VERSION

Eigen

Hitler's 'E's' feature a telltale bottom loop; the forger drew his with a straight bottom line.

Heute

Hier

Normally Hitler used a simple 'H'; the forger always used the stylized 'H' of his signature.

Keine

Kein

Hitler's 'K' was completed in two abrupt strokes; the forger used an elaborate version.

archive had to be examined properly, not from photocopies. Until that happened, the proper procedure was to reserve judgment. Only when Stern's editor in chief, Peter Koch, flew to the United States to appear on various news shows with the 1932 and 1945 installments did I have the opportunity to examine them. With Koch's approval I took my first look at the diaries in the CBS studios in Manhattan as he prepared for an appearance on the morning news. In that first encounter I had only about a half hour with the notebooks, interrupted repeatedly by technicians preparing for the broadcast. But that was all the time I needed.

Even at first glance, everything looked wrong. I have seen Hitler's fine leather desk set—and these leatherette notebooks did not resemble documents he would have left for posterity. I scanned through the 1945 diary. It was written entirely in the same black ink, and the ink looked too modern. None of the writing was blotted, a sloppiness I didn't expect from Hitler. But all of that was circumstantial. The main problem was that the signatures themselves were terrible renditions. Hitler's signature changed often through the years. Basically, it became smaller and more cramped as his health deteriorated and his war fortunes declined. These signatures showed precisely the opposite trend: tight in the early version, open and expansive at the end. The technical mistakes were just as glaring. The crossbar on the "f" of the abbreviated "Adolf" slants from the upper left to the lower right in genuine signatures. In Stern's diaries the crossbar slanted from the lower left to the upper right; on at least one signature, the stroke was executed backwards.

Pencil and Ink: The 1932 book was a better try, written in perhaps four varieties of ink and also in pencil. But it had its own glaring improbabilities. For instance, why would Hitler write for 15 days in a row with a pencil, then go back to using ink and never use pencil again in the remainder of the booklet? Hitler's genuine pencil writing, at least what I have seen of it, consists of a broad, heavy line—almost like a crayon mark—that shows in scribbled notes on memos. In the diaries somebody used a sharp pencil that never dulls—probably a mechanical pencil. That was improbable.

Koch agreed to let me continue my examination at Stern's New York offices in the afternoon. At that point I knew that all entries in the two diaries were forgeries, but I wanted to try to convince Stern. I did not even waste time on the 1945 fiasco. Instead I scanned

the 1932 version with my 80-power microscope, but found no examples of tracing or other glaring technical errors. With the help of my partner Diana Rendell and Stern's staff, I then photocopied the 22 pages of the 1932 diary. We began the tedious process of snipping out all of the capital letters and pasting them on sheets of paper. In all, we assembled separate collections of 21 letters and an additional assortment of numbers. We compared the diary characters with authentic characters we had pasted up earlier—and here we found numerous errors. The bottom line of Hitler's capital "E," for example, almost always curls upward; those in Stern's diaries cut straight across. Hitler's simple "K" was always executed in sharp strokes; those in Stern's diaries were highly stylized. The forger made a common mistake on Hitler's "H." Specifically, the "H" in Stern's diary looks exactly like the "H" in Hitler's signature. In reality, Hitler, like most people, used a much simpler style in text than he did in his signature.

Stern's Dossier: Koch was stunned when he saw my evidence laid out on a conference table. This type of systematic analysis was unimpeachable. His only question was how the three earlier experts could have authenticated two pages. He had the impression that all of the comparison documents provided by his magazine had come from the German Federal Archives. But I showed him that a careful reading of the authentication reports indicated that most examples were from the dossier of Stern and its reporter Gerd Heidemann. One was a certificate promoting a General Kleist to the rank of field marshal; the document was supposedly filled in by Hitler, a bureaucratic task that would seem beneath him. There was also a picture of Hitler, Bormann and Hermann Göring inscribed by Hitler—along with a similarly inscribed picture of the Eiffel Tower. The most important document was a sheet of handwritten military deliberations dated July 4, 1940, and attributed to Hitler. That document is clearly fraudulent.

The uproar over the diaries and how Stern handled them seems destined to grow louder. I can base my own firm conclusions only on the material I have seen. But it is possible that Stern's archive—like its smaller package of authentication documents—might

contain some genuine material supplemented by forgeries of poor quality. Only a thorough examination of the complete body of Stern's material can sort out the truth. As a professional, I can only lament that such an inspection was not made at the very beginning.

Two signatures: The looser fake (right) has a faulty crossbar

