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Judas Gospel Figure Has Tainted Past

*** A dealer credited with 'rescuing' the document allegedly played a major role in the looting of antiquities. She received a suspended sentence.**

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By Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino, Times Staff Writer

In its unveiling of the Gospel of Judas last week, the National Geographic Society credited Swiss antiquities dealer Frieda Nussberger Tchacos with "rescuing" the ancient manuscript, described as one of the most important archeological finds of the last century.

But National Geographic made no mention of a suspended sentence Tchacos received in Italy four years ago for possession of looted antiquities, nor her alleged involvement for years in antiquities trafficking.

"In the past, she was at the center of the looting in Italy," said Paolo Ferri, the Italian state prosecutor who has led an investigation of the illicit trade for 10 years.

National Geographic purchased exclusive publication rights for the Gospel of Judas' contents for \$1 million from a foundation run by Tchacos' Swiss attorney, Mario Jean Roberty. The deal will also give Roberty's foundation and, indirectly, Tchacos a percentage of National Geographic's royalties from two books, a documentary and other proceeds stemming from the Judas Gospel.

Though Tchacos' past has no direct bearing on the legitimacy of the Judas Gospel, the fact that she and her attorney stand to benefit from the financial relationship with National Geographic has raised sharp questions from leaders in the archeological community.

"Nobody should be doing business with these people," said Jane Waldbaum, president of the Archeological Institute of America. "You get down in the mud with these people and you legitimize them.... You encourage not only the trade but the looting that feeds the trade."

Harold Attridge, dean of the Divinity School at Yale University and a noted biblical scholar, said that given the importance of the text, he understood why the renowned scientific and educational nonprofit would publish the document and then return it to a museum in Egypt. But, he added, National Geographic has made "moral compromises" in publishing the Judas Gospel.

"So far as you're an ethical purist, you have to cringe at it all," he said.

Yale chose not to buy the document from Tchacos in 2000 because of legal concerns about its origins, he said.

A top official of National Geographic said Wednesday the organization was told that Tchacos had legal troubles in Italy, but went ahead with the publication of the Gospel of Judas after finding no record of a conviction and doing the best it could to answer other questions, including whether it had left Egypt and entered the U.S. legally.

"We decided that on balance, yes, this is something we should do, and we felt comfortable about doing it," said Terry Garcia, executive vice president for mission programs at National Geographic. "We had an opportunity to add an extra measure of certainty to make sure it was returned to Egypt, that it was authenticated and that the best scholarly minds were involved."

Roberty's promise to transfer the manuscript to the Egyptian museum after it was exhibited in the U.S. made moot many of the questions about its legal status, Garcia said. A law firm could find no record in Italy of

Tchacos' legal problems, he added.

The Judas Gospel is part of an ancient manuscript that dates to about AD 200 and is an account that gives a dramatically different view of the disciple the Bible says betrayed Jesus. It portrays Judas as Jesus' favorite disciple and states that Jesus asked Judas to hand him over to the Romans for crucifixion and liberation from his earthly body.

National Geographic's authentication and translation of the lost gospel, in partnership with the Waitt Institute for Historical Discovery and Roberty's Maecenas Foundation, made headlines across the world.

In a documentary aired Sunday and a related book, "The Lost Gospel," Tchacos is portrayed as a heroic figure who fought to save the deteriorating manuscript. She is quoted as saying she was "guided by providence."

"I think I was chosen by Judas to rehabilitate him," she said in the film. "I think the circumstance of this manuscript coming to me was predestined."

Tchacos bought the gospel and other texts contained in the manuscript in 2000 for about \$300,000 after it had sat moldering for years in a Long Island safe deposit box.

Her initial attempt to sell it to Yale fell through because of concerns about the legal status of the document, said Attridge, the Divinity School dean.

In deciding whether to purchase the Gospel, Attridge said, Yale found itself faced with a dilemma: Should the university buy an object that may have been illegally brought into the United States in order to preserve it? Or should it risk losing the piece for ethical reasons?

"This is kind of like a hostage situation where you have some artifact that is in effect being held for ransom. What do you do? Not do business with them.... Or do you preserve it, and try to save the piece?"

After Yale declined her offer, Tchacos tentatively sold it to a Cleveland-area manuscript dealer, who stuck it in his freezer and sold fragments, Tchacos told The Times in an interview. When he was unable to come up with the promised \$2.5 million, Tchacos recovered most of the manuscript. In 2001 she sold it to Roberty, her attorney, for \$1.5 million and a share of future profits.

A year later, she was arrested by Italian authorities in Cyprus on unrelated charges of trafficking in looted art. In an agreement with the Italian prosecutor, she received a suspended sentence of 18 months and gave a lengthy statement about her knowledge of the antiquities trade.

Tchacos' statement has played an important role in the ongoing criminal trial of Marion True, the J. Paul Getty Museum's former antiquities curator who is accused of trafficking in looted art. Tchacos' willingness to talk has led some dealers to call her the Judas of the antiquities trade.

Records also show that Tchacos sold the Getty fragments of two of the objects Italian authorities are requesting be returned. The Getty returned a third, a drinking cup known as the Onesimos kylix after its Greek painter, to Italy in 1999 after determining it had been looted from Cerveteri, an Etruscan necropolis north of Rome.

True's co-defendant, Robert Hecht Jr., describes Tchacos as an aggressive competitor who "daringly went to Cerveteri and paid cash on the spot." The statement is in Hecht's journal, a key piece of evidence in the Italian investigation.

In a short interview Wednesday, Tchacos said she was never convicted in the Italian case, which she called an "equivocal situation," and she retired from the antiquities trade in recent years because of changing attitudes about its propriety. "I am a dealer who is doing all of the right things," Tchacos said.

She is also being sued in an English court to recover \$3 million from the sale of an Egyptian statue that is part of a bitter financial dispute between a London dealer and the estate of his late partner. Lawyers for the estate allege that the London dealer, now in bankruptcy, failed to tell court overseers about the sale that he ran through Tchacos' Basel, Switzerland-based company, Gallerie Nefer.

Meanwhile, Roberty was negotiating with National Geographic for publication of the Judas Gospel, having agreed to its return with Egyptian authorities. In 2005, after a year of investigation and research by scholars, he and National Geographic signed their agreement.

Roberty defended National Geographic's depiction of Tchacos as a savior of an important archeological relic, saying "perhaps a few expressions may be overdone, but it is correct."

"There is no contradiction between even a very successful ancient art dealer and a protector of cultural heritage," he added.

Roberty has a long history of defending dealers in the antiquities trade, including three other dealers now implicated in the Italian case. "I had the pleasure or the bad luck of being successful 30 years ago in a case that got myself known in this small circle," he said.

Asked about his relationship with many of the antiquities trade's central figures, Roberty said, "If you're specialized in murder cases, you have to deal with murders. It doesn't imply you're one yourself."

Descriptors: DISCOVERIES; ARCHEOLOGY; RELIGION; CHRISTIANITY; BIBLE; TCHACOS, FRIEDA

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PHOTO: SIGNS OF AGE: The 1,700-year-old Gospel of Judas is considered one of the most important archeological finds of the last century. National Geographic paid \$1 million to publish the text.

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