

Hunts welcome report that clears family of Nazi art links

By MIKE DWANE

MEMBERS of the Hunt family have spoken for the first time on the report that clears John and Gertrude Hunt of allegations they had links with "notorious dealers in art looted by the Nazis."

The allegations, which were outlined four years ago in an open letter to President McAleese from the international liaison director of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, Dr Shimon Samuels, led to accusations that, not only had the Hunts traded in looted art, but that they were engaged in espionage and were members of fascist political organisations.

This outraged John Hunt Jr, who told the Limerick Leader shortly before his death in 2004 that his German mother was "deeply anti-fascist", and the allegations would be proven to be groundless.

Now, his sister, Trudy, and widow, Patricia, have released a statement welcoming Lynn Nicholas' report which "fully vindicates the good name" of John and Gertrude Hunt. "Anyone who knew my parents would realise that the allegations made against them could not be true."

Dr Nicholas, who was engaged to examine the work of the Royal Irish Academy's Hunt Museum Evaluation Group, also examined the Wiesenthal Centre's supposed smoking gun—a wartime file on the Hunts in the Irish military intelligence archive. The RIA was lambasted by the Wiesenthal Centre for not including this file in its investigation, despite the fact that the centre never revealed it



Trudy Hunt with her late brother, John: a report into the Hunt Collection has cleared their parents of having links with Nazi art dealers

was depending on this file in making its allegations.

But Dr Nicholas found nothing linking the Hunts to anything suspicious in this file. Dr Samuels had also called on the personal files of John and Gertrude Hunt to be scrutinised, and the family has told the Limerick Leader that Dr Nicholas was given access to these documents in the course of her inquiries.

"We have co-operated fully from the start with the Hunt Museum Evaluation Group, and to that end we agreed to meet with Dr Nicholas and give her access to the family papers," they state.

While finding no evidence of anything untoward, Dr Nicholas does recommend continued research into the provenance of artefacts in the Hunt Collection, something the family agree should be done.

"Dr Nicholas suggests, continued research into the provenance of objects in the collection. This is an ongoing task for any museum," the Hunts state.

"We have always stated that the collection was

given in good faith, and that should anything untoward be found to have been inadvertently included, then international best practice would be followed and justice done."

The provenance of objets d'arts notwithstanding, it was the campaign to portray the Hunts as Nazi sympathisers or spies that most outraged the family and their supporters. Dr Samuels had written that when the couple moved to Ireland from Britain in 1939, they did so "one step ahead of MI5."

But Trudy and Patricia Hunt say nothing could be further from the truth.

"My parents moved to Ireland because of the local resentment towards my mother, as a German national, not 'one step ahead of MI5' as alleged. My mother was interviewed by the security services, as were most Germans resident in England at that time, but was not found to pose any security risk. My parents were able to travel freely to and from England after the war, which would not have been the case if they had been involved in any

illegal activity."

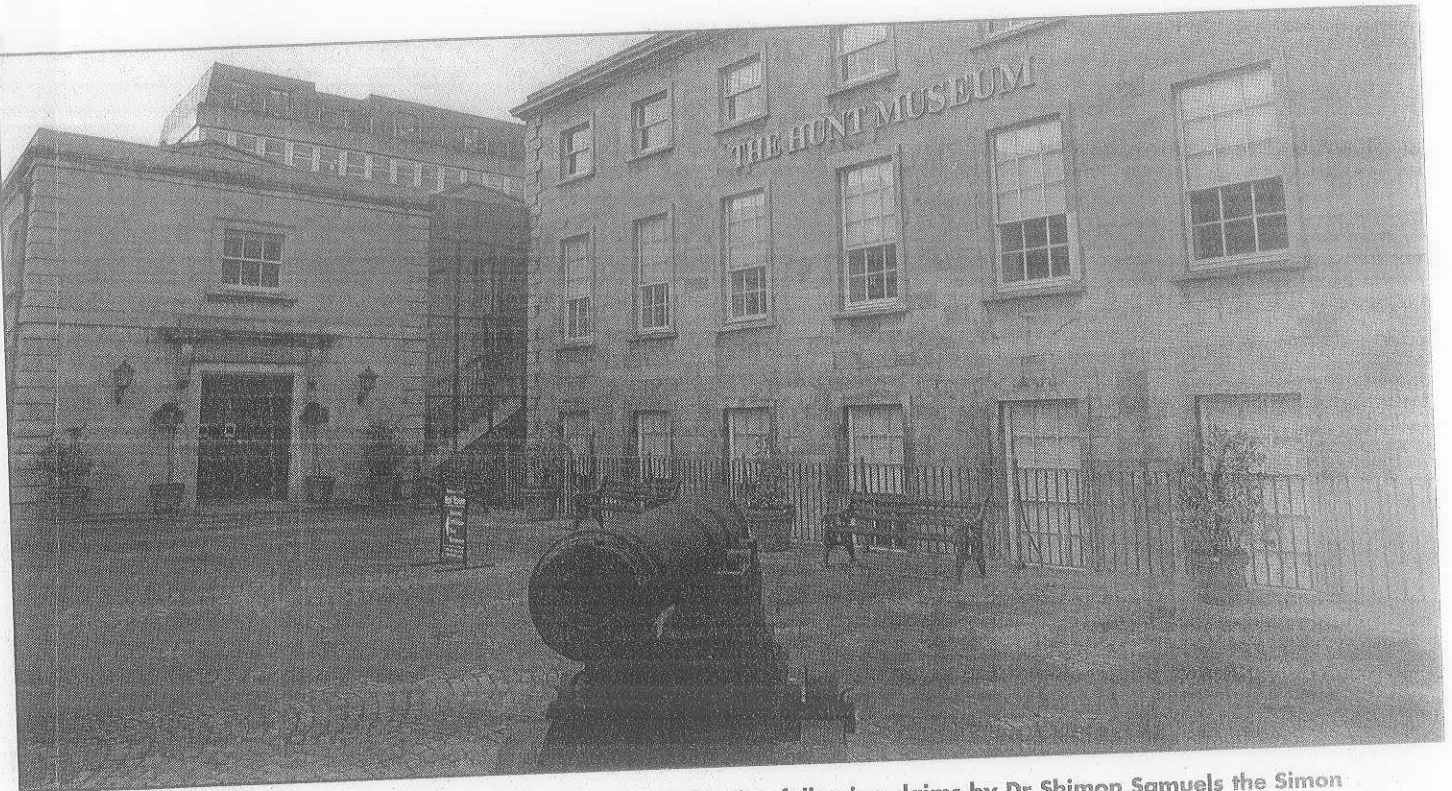
"As John stated in an article in the Limerick Leader on February 14, 2004, my mother was deeply anti-fascist. She had moved from Germany to England to escape the developing political situation there. She had experienced the hardship of the First World War, in which her father was killed, and later lost her two step-brothers in the Second World War."

Much play was also made by the accusers of a post-war visit to Germany by the Hunts. But Gertrude, who was deeply concerned for her mother who remained in Nazi Germany during the war, and her husband had gone "to see her mother, not to buy art, as was alleged," the family state.

"John and I and all of the family," said Trudy Hunt, "were deeply distressed by the allegations made against our parents. The attack on their reputation was of a very personal nature and completely unsubstantiated. Sadly, John did not live to see the report published, but he knew from the outset that the truth would win out."

"I feel that the Dr Nicholas report has completely vindicated my parents and clearly shows that they were not Nazis, spies or dealers in looted art, as was alleged. We sincerely thank all those who have stood by us through these difficult times."

When the allegations arose, both John Jr and Trudy Hunt stepped aside from the board of the Hunt Museum. Asked if she was interested in reassuming the position, Ms Hunt said: "I would welcome the opportunity to be a member of the board once again, but have not been contacted in this regard."



The Hunt Museum: its collection was the subject of an investigation following claims by Dr Shimon Samuels the Simon Wiesenthal Centre that part of it came from art looted during the Nazi era in Germany

J'accuse! Now Samuels is in the dock

THE man who accused the founders of Limerick's Hunt Museum of links to "notorious dealers" in looted Nazi art, has in turn been accused by one of the world's leading experts in the field of making mistaken statements and unverified claims, writes Mike Dwane.

American academic Dr Lynn Nicholas variously describes the claims and conduct of Dr Shimon Samuels, of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Paris, the Jewish human rights organisation, as "offensive" and "confrontational and personally abusive", while his withholding of information regarding John and Gertrude Hunt in Irish military intelligence files is compared to "challenging the Irish authorities in a sort of blackmail game" which was "unprofessional in the extreme."

Irish security forces monitored Gertrude Hunt, as they did all German nationals in the war years, but having examined the relatively insubstantial 30-page file, Dr Nicholas concludes that "presently available information and research provides no proof whatsoever that the Hunts were involved in any kind of espionage or they were traffickers in looted art."

And in a hard-hitting conclusion to her report on the work of the group that examined Dr Samuels' claims, Dr

Nicholas refers to the "moral obligation" professed by art historian and archaeologist Erin Gibbons in notifying the Wiesenthal Centre of her concerns about the Hunts, who she had been researching. Some of these concerns had been aired in a review of a guide to the Hunt Museum in the Irish Arts Review in 2003. In subsequent interviews, Ms Gibbons claimed to have established links between the Hunts and Karl Haberstock, who sold over 100 artworks to Hitler, and Walter Hofer, Goering's art agent. How strong this link was, however, she would have to establish through further research, Ms Gibbons conceded.

It was Ms Gibbons husband, Eamon Kelly, keeper of Irish antiquities at the National Museum, who caused a sensation last year as the Royal Irish Academy published its final report into Dr Samuels' allegations. Mr Kelly demanded to know why the military intelligence file was never examined. It was decided that the RIA would then appoint an international expert to do this.

Dr Nicholas notes that the keeping of such files was commonplace for foreign nationals, particularly for Germans. Security forces did advise that Gertrude Hunt should not work at the flying boat station in Foynes, but she was later engaged to

"advise on the decor of the terminal in any case."

Dr Nicholas concludes that, critical to the allegations was the inclusion in this file of three letters to the Hunts between April 1944 and November 1946 from the Swiss art dealer Alexander Von Frey.

According to Dr Nicholas, post-war Allies' records show Von Frey in contact with other dealers who traded with the Nazis and "was involved in at least one Nazi exchange".

Dr Samuels had claimed that the correspondence between Von Frey and the Hunts proved they were in contact with two dealers, Arthur Goldschmidt and Emil Buhle, who were in turn associated with Hofer and Haberstock.

While von Frey refers to specific pre-war transactions between Goldschmidt and Hunt, the objects are not identified.

"The fact that dealers once new each other and dealt with each other is, therefore, not sufficient basis for assuming that they shared political ideas or participated in looting. Von Frey certainly did trade with the Nazis, but that fact alone does not prove that the Hunts did," Dr Nicholas writes.

And the claim the file refers to Buhle is simply a mistake, Dr Nicholas states.

"The name used, four times in one letter, is Buhl, not Buhle, and the

individual described, certainly bears no resemblance to the extremely rich collector and armaments manufacturer Emil Buhle."

The military intelligence file, in fact, refers to Buhl eight times in total. Moreover, Dr Nicholas says it is clear from the correspondence that it was through Von Frey that Gertrude Hunt kept in touch with and sent food and coffee to her mother, who remained in Nazi Germany during the war.

After accusing Dr Samuels of "at times misstating" what was in the file, Dr Nicholas concludes her report as follows: "There has been much talk about moral obligations during this inquiry. It is, of course, important to recover and return items unlawfully taken during World War II, but it is equally obligatory, in the pursuit of justice, to protect people and institutions from unproven allegations."

Dr Samuels, who told the Limerick Leader in 2004 that he would go public with his information once the inquiry had concluded, and added he would name specific objects, has twice been too busy to do interviews this week.

However, he told RTE radio last week that he was "happy to know that nothing has come back in terms of trafficked art".

When asked if he would

be apologising to the Hunt family for making unsubstantiated allegations of the gravest nature, Dr Samuels said he should be given an apology for Dr Nicholas' "defamatory" criticisms of his conduct.

Bizzarely, Dr Samuels claims the Wiesenthal Centre was "sidelined" during the entire investigative process.

This is despite Dr Nicholas outlining that she got no response to four written requests for documentation.

Her report also recounts that the evaluation group chairman, Sean Cromien, and Dr Michael Ryan of the Royal Irish Academy received no assistance from Dr Samuels when they requested information on the allegations.

"She wrote to me," Dr Samuels said of Dr Nicholas, "without explaining to me what she was doing or who she was."

This latter claim has led to raised eyebrows in Limerick, as Dr Nicholas has long been regarded as the world's leading expert in Nazi looted art. Her 1995 book, *The Rape of Europa*, has recently been adapted for a feature documentary, while two years ago, the author was awarded a National Jewish Book Award for *Cruel World*. She has also been an advisor to the National Jewish Museum in Washington DC, and given expert testimony to Congress.

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