

## HARRY SÖDERMAN. A GREAT PAN-EUROPEAN CRIMINALIST, 1902–1956

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**ABSTRACT:** The importance of the contribution of Harry Söderman to forensic science can be understood through anecdotes, notes and contributions by his peers, especially through the eyes of his master and friend E. Locard. His visions of science as a process useful in determining truth (identity, cause, circumstances) as much as possible for the judiciary is definitely modern. It needs polyvalence, observation capabilities and intelligence to transform data into meaningful information. In this Söderman demonstrated that he was of the foremost mind in the development of forensic science in Europe and the USA. Documents and archives give a telling although fragmentary picture of his contributions.

**KEY WORDS:** Harry Söderman; Sweden; History of forensic sciences.

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### INTRODUCTION

Harry Söderman is a name that I first heard when I was a student of forensic science in Lausanne some 25 years after his death. It did not come up attached to a specific field like Bertillon (anthropometry), Galton (dactyloscopy), Goddard (firearms), Osborn (Questioned documents), but more like the name of his master Edmond Locard, a generalist, a criminalist in its pure dimension looking at evidence not only as a means of proving in court, but also as lead-giving in the investigation. This is also probably why he became known in circles where forensic scientists are rarely known: in police circles. This, in my mind, is an indication that he had a clear, modern and forward looking vision of the role of forensic science; a vision that many forensic scientists still lack today ensconced in their specialist's views of "their" science for the law, rather than science in its broadest sense as a process useful in determining truth (identity, cause, circumstances) as much as possible for the judiciary. This needs polyvalence, observation capabilities, intelligence, to transform data into meaningful information. Curiosity and

the development of a multilingual culture helped make Harry Söderman one of the foremost mind in forensic science.

Not knowing him directly, it is by researching through archives that I started to understand the importance of his contribution and to regret his early disappearance. Forensic scientists of today should be aware of a rich contribution whose validity is still evident some 50 years later!

My contribution here is minimal, but shows through anecdotes, notes, contributions by his peers (which do not appear in most published material I have seen in English) how highly regarded Harry Söderman was and how innovative he could be, facing pragmatic problems.

#### RELATION TO LOCARD

It is obvious, throughout his writing, that Harry Söderman had an admiration for Edmond Locard, his thesis director, mentor, colleague, friend. This relation and admiration can be felt while reading the first 190 pages of the book *Policeman's Lot* [9]. What is less obvious and less well known is that this admiration was reciprocal, arose from the time Harry Söderman was a student of Locard in Lyon, and remained after the dreadful tragedy that split Europeans in WWII. There are two "preface" written by Locard in 1928 and in 1956 that never appear in English editions or versions, but that are telling witnesses of this close relationship. It is perhaps better to start with the preface written in 1956, when Locard learns of the death of his friend. I freely translate the whole preface which I will try to relate to other documents later in this presentation.

"At the very moment I was going to write this preface, I learn with such a deep sorrow, the death of my dear friend Harry Söderman, who disappeared, still very young, when he was going to be able to take, finally, such a well deserved rest.

What a magnificent life he has had, or better, what a story! Harry Söderman, traveller without rest, has not only gone round the vast world, but has explored all the fields of knowledge. I feel honoured to have had him as a student, the most brilliant of all my students. But this great criminalist has learnt many other things than the art of detecting and confounding criminals. Chemist, graphologist, prodigiously polyglot, enriched by an immense reading, he had accumulated in his unique brain what would have been the richness of twenty elite's intelligences.

Moreover he was a producer/a doer. He had the art of drawing from what he knew for the better good of his friends and others. During the many years he spent near me what I have got to do due to his initiatives! I should say his darings. It is him who, literally, made me create the *Revue Internationale de Criminalistique*. Beside me, he has pushed to create the International Acad-

emy that Van ledden Hülsebosch, Popp, Türkel and Bischoff could perhaps not have managed to organise, nor to maintain without him. And how to forget that, when I was backing from the terrifying enterprise of composing the seven volumes of the *Traité de Criminalistique*, it is him who decided a careless editor, my friend Joannès Desvignes, to risk the dangerous adventure “PM addition!”

Since then, Harry Söderman has played a historical role where his courage without capitulation joined his spirit of initiative. But at the heat of the action, he never ceased to be a very great criminalist. Secretary of the International Commission of Criminal Police, he insured the liaison between countries. Locally, he has founded for the Scandinavian countries this journal where so many pertinent articles have appeared, among which the bests carried his signature. With this, always wandering. His letters would enrich a stamp collection: and I was not more surprised to see on his letters the stamp of Tanager rather than that from New York or Stockholm.

Harry Söderman has had the wisest idea when he started to write his memories, as if he had been foreseeing that his days, so full, were counted. I am glad to vouch here that nothing that came out from his pen should be neglected by men who wish to know what can the alloy of such an intelligence combined to such a magnificent energy<sup>1</sup>. [10].

The second preface appears at the beginning of Harry Soderman’s thesis and is telling, if not an early admiration of the master for the pupil, at least the clear vision that the pupil was destined for a great future. I leave in the beginning of the preface which demonstrates a facet of Locard’s vision of science used in the judicial process.

“I don’t know a more tragic image than that which represents Themis with her eyes covered. I understand well that the ancestors of classical Mediterranean, Greeks and Latins, have wanted to mean by that that Justice did not want to know the purpur of kings, nor the splendour of naked Phrynea. But how not to worry that this bandage, after having saved her from the prestiges that she would risk by imposing her the contemplation of the “greatness of the flesh”, as would say Bossuet, would stop her distinguish the narrow road that would take her to the truth. And since, furthermore, she would

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<sup>1</sup> Au moment où j’allais écrire cette préface, j’apprends, avec quelle peine profonde, la mort de mon cher ami Harry Soderman, disparu, bien jeune encore, alors qu’il allait pouvoir prendre, enfin, un repos si rudement gagné.

Quelle vie magnifique il avait mené, ou plutôt quel roman !

Harry Soderman, voyageur sans repos n’a pas seulement parcouru la vaste Terre, il a exploré tous les domaines de la connaissance. Je m’honore de l’avoir eu comme élève, le plus brillant de tous mes élèves. Mais ce grand criminaliste avait appris bien d’autres choses que l’art de détecter les malfaiteurs et de les confondre. Chimiste, graphologue, prodigieusement polyglotte, enrichi d’une immense lecture, il avait accumulé dans son cerveau unique ce qui eut fait la richesse de vingt intelligences d’élite.

risk to be deafened in temples where so many people make with their larynx formidable concerts, human Justice, that was already lame according to mythological traditions, would be the real figure of a cripple.

Really, she is a dame that there is no charm to frequent. It is better to forget that one was given a leathering than ask her for any compensation or vengeance. This goddess without eyes and hearing, and limping, would certainly add more blows of her own. But if you are accused of having stolen the tower of Notre-Dame, and had not been able to flee prudently in due time, as was the counsel of this wisest amenable person, that Panurge was, one has to think to put ones affairs in order with her. When one has a pure heart, one would like her to see that, and that she took away for one moment her bandage in order to see that well.

So has been created the recent myth of a Justice seeing clearly. What do I say, some daring people have dreamt to substitute an acute vision from eyes armed with magnifying glass and microscope to a legendary blindness. One would like a learned Themis who, after having gone through the faculties where one speaks, she had spent some time in those where we learn to observe. So the civil or criminal inquiry has become scientific. And the expert has collaborated with the judge, after helping the policeman.

This co-operation has not always been received as enthusiastically as it was offered. One of the most distinguished magistrate who presided the de-

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Surtout il fut un réalisateur. Il avait l'art de tirer parti de ce qu'il savait pour le plus grand bien de ses amis et des autres. Pendant les années qu'il a passées près de moi, que n'ai-je pas dû à ses initiatives! Je devrais dire à ses audaces. C'est lui qui m'a, littéralement, obligé à fonder la Revue Internationale de Criminalistique. A côté de moi, il a poussé à la création de l'Académie Internationale que Van Ledden Hulsebosch, Popp, Turkel et Bischoff ne seraient peut-être pas parvenus à organiser, ni surtout à maintenir sans lui. Et comment oublier que, lorsque je reculais devant la terrifiante entreprise de composer les sept volumes du Traité de criminalistique, c'est lui qui décida un imprudent éditeur, mon ami Joannes Desvignes, à risquer la dangereuse aventure! Depuis, Harry Soderman a joué un rôle historique où un courage sans capitulation se joignait à l'esprit d'initiative. Mais, au plus fort de l'action, il n'a pas cessé d'être un très grand criminaliste. Secrétaire de la Commission Internationale de Police Criminelle, il a assuré la liaison entre les Etats. Localement, il a fondé pour les pays scandinaves cette Revue où tant d'articles pertinents ont paru, dont les meilleurs portent sa signature. Avec cela, toujours errant. Ses lettres enrichiraient une collection de timbre-poste: et je ne m'étonnais pas plus de voir sur ses lettres le timbre de Tanger que celui de New-York ou de Stockholm.

Harry Soderman a eu la plus sage des idées quand il a entrepris, comme s'il prévoyait que ses jours, si plains, étaient comptés, de rédiger ses souvenirs. Je suis heureux de témoigner ici que rien de ce qui est sorti de sa plume ne saurait être négligé des hommes désireux de connaître ce que peut produire l'alliage d'une telle intelligence avec une aussi magnifique énergie.

Docteur Edmond Locard  
Directeur honoraire  
du Laboratoire de Police Technique  
de Lyon

bates with a praiseworthy effort in a difficult case, summarised experts' testimonies in these very careful terms: "when science goes one step forward, truth goes back two steps".

Despite this pyrrhonian pessimism, techniques are created that not all magistrate turn up their nose to, nor all amenable persons. And even magistrates, such as Hans Gross and Robert Heindl, have collaborated to these developments. It is true that they are not from our country. And little by little, criminalistics has shown what could be expected from the study of marks, prints, stains, dust, written documents. Among all these problems, that of the identification of firearms is one where the results are the clearest and the most conclusive.

Harry Söderman has arrived from Scandinavia to study criminalistics in a French laboratory. I have followed step by step this clear intelligence, helped by a tenacity without shortcomings and the very firm love of work. I believe in the success of only those who join the merit of the character to those of the mind. Harry Söderman is one of them. It is not indifferent that a young man who is dedicated to an intellectual life has started to cross the deserts of Central Asia and to hunt the tiger in the Mekong. Nothing mediocre to expect from him. It is very sweet to me to be the godfather of Harry Söderman at the beginnings of a life which I pretend will be prolific, and to present to the public this first scientific work of a man for whom my esteem equals my affection.

This work is first a state of the art. One can find a clear and complete summary of what has been done on short firearms with the criminalistics point of view. It is also to a large extent, the presentation of original and very sound techniques. So this monograph is the most commendable work that exist today on a very important and difficult question. I can recommend it to technicians in conscience"<sup>2</sup> [5].

#### HARRY SÖDERMAN, THE PARADIGM OF A EUROPEAN

Student in Sweden, then Germany, his knowledge of languages extended to French (as evidenced by his thesis) and English (his activities with

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<sup>2</sup> Je ne sais pas d'image plus tragique que celle qui représente Thémis les yeux bandés. J'entends bien que les ancêtres de la Méditerranée classique, grecque et latins ont voulu signifier par là que la Justice ne voulait connaître ni la pourpre des rois, ni la splendeur de Phryné dévêtue. Mais comment ne pas craindre que ce bandeau, après l'avoir sauvée des prestiges que risqueraient de lui imposer la contemplation des "grandeurs de chair", ainsi que parle Bossuet, ne l'empêche de distinguer l'étroit chemin qui la conduirait à la vérité. Et comme, de surcroît, elle risque fort d'être sourde en des temples où tant de gens font avec leur larynx des concerts redoutables, la Justice des hommes, que déjà les traditions mythologiques nous donnent pour boîteuse, fait vraiment figure de stropiat.

O'Connell in New York), a true polyglot he was able to communicate and publish proficiently in all these languages [4, 5, 7, 11], this led him to become one of the most sought after scientist and consultant in matters of forensic science and criminal investigation and one of the most active forensic scientist on the international scene. Made a member of the newly created International Academy of Criminalistics (seat Vienna) in Lausanne (1929) at the early age of 27 (wrongly called International Academy of Criminals Science from Vienna by Larson ) he became a leading European figure with editorial

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Au vrai, c'est une dame qu'il n'y a nul agrément à fréquenter. Mieux vaut oublier qu'on a reçu les écrivains que de lui en demander compensation ou vengeance. Cette déesse sans yeux et sans ouïe, et qui claudique, vous en ajouterai plutôt quelques coups de son cru. Mais si l'on vous accuse d'avoir empoché la tour de Notre-Dame, et que vous n'ayiez su prendre à temps une fuite prudente, ainsi que le conseillait ce plus sage des justiciables, qui fut Panurge, il faut bien songer à lui rendre des comptes. Et si l'on a le cœur pur, on aimerait qu'elle le vît, et que pour le bien voir, elle ôtât un instant son bandeau.

Ainsi s'est créé le mythe récent d'une justice qui y verrait clair. Que dis-je, certains audacieux ont rêvé de substituer à une cécité légendaire la vision aiguë d'yeux armés de la loupe ou du microscope. On voudrait une Thémis savante qui, après avoir passé par les Facultés où l'on parle, eût fait un stage dans celles où l'on apprend à regarder. Ainsi l'enquête civile ou criminelle est devenue scientifique. Et l'expert a collaboré avec le juge, après avoir été l'aide du policier.

Ce concours n'a pas toujours été accueilli avec le même zèle qu'il était offert. Un magistrat des plus distingués, et qui présidait avec un effort louable les débats d'une affaire difficile, résuma les dépositions des experts en ces termes pleins de prudence: "Quand la science avance d'un pas, la vérité recule de deux".

Malgré ce pessimisme pyrrhonien, des techniques se créent dont tous les juges ne font pas fi, ni tous les justiciables. Et des magistrats même, tels Hans Gross et Robert Heindl, y ont collaboré. Il est vrai qu'ils ne sont pas de chez nous. Et peu à peu, la criminalistique a montré ce que l'on pouvait attendre de l'étude des empreintes, des traces, des taches, des poussières, des documents écrits. Parmi tous ces problèmes, celui de l'identification des armes est un de ceux où les résultats sont les plus nets et les plus concluants.

Harry Södermann est arrivé de Scandinavie pour étudier la criminalistique dans un laboratoire français. J'ai suivi pas à pas cette intelligence claire, servie par une ténacité sans défaillance et l'amour très ferme du travail. Je crois au succès de ceux-là seuls qui joignent aux mérites de l'esprit ceux du caractère. Harry Söderman est un de ceux-là. Il n'est pas indifférent qu'un jeune homme qui se consacre à une carrière intellectuelle ait commencé par traverser les déserts de l'Asie Centrale et chasser le tigre dans le Mékong. Rien de médiocre à attendre de lui. Il m'est très doux d'être le parrain de Harry Söderman aux débuts d'une vie dont j'affirme qu'elle sera féconde, et de présenter au public le premier ouvrage scientifique d'un homme pour qui mon estime égale mon affection.

Ce travail est d'abord une mise au point. On y trouvera le résumé clair et complet de ce qui a été fait, du point de vue criminalistique, sur les armes à feu courtes. C'est aussi, pour une part très large, l'exposé de techniques originales et très sûres. Ainsi cette monographie est l'ouvrage le plus recommandable qui existe aujourd'hui sur une question très importante et difficile. Je puis en conscience la recommander aux techniciens.

Edmond Locard  
Directeur du Laboratoire de Police technique  
de Lyon

responsibilities besides Locard in the official organ of the Academy *La Revue Internationale de Criminalistique* (1929–1939).

The name of Söderman appears as a contributor to the second general assembly of the Academy in Vienna in 1930, and the typewritten summary ap-



Fig. 1. Founders of the Academy: Prof Marc A. Bischoff, prof Siegfried Türkel, C. J. van Ledden Hülsebosch, Prof G. Popp and Dr Edmond Locard, in Lausanne, 1929.



Fig. 2. The last meeting of the Academy took place again in Lausanne in 1938. Söderman appears in the official photograph.



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6. Dr. Harry SÖDERMAN. Stockholm.

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Des diverses méthodes applicables à l'identification des projectiles, des douilles et des poudres.

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Le Dr. Harry Söderman préconise, dans tous les cas de meurtres commis à l'aide d'armes à feu, et tout spécialement lorsque le coupable est inconnu ou en fuite, de déterminer de manière aussi précise que possible le système, la marque et les caractéristiques de l'arme employée. Cette détermination, mieux ce "signallement" de l'arme, ~~doit~~ doit non seulement comprendre le système, la marque et le calibre, mais aussi le nombre des rayures, leur largeur, la largeur des chocs, la marque de l'extracteur, celle du butoir, et toutes les autres marques, traces ou défauts caractéristiques. Il préconise également d'obliger les fabricants d'armes à employer un signe distinctif devant s'imprimer au moment du coup de feu sur le culot de la douille. Ce procédé, si on parvenait à l'introduire d'une manière généralisée, serait certainement de nature à rendre la détermination du système et de la marque presque instantanée.

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Fig. 3. Minutes of the Academy meeting taken by Bischoff, Vienna 1930.



Fig. 4. The Executive Committee of the ICPC with Ducloux, Harry Söderman, Nepote, Howe, Müller and Louwage in 1947 (above) and in Bern (General Assembly) in 1949 (with Müller and Louwage).





Fig. 5. A well respected figure, he appears in all major police ventures like the creation of the BKA in Germany and keeps a leading role in international police circles until his untimely death.



Fig. 6. General Assembly of Interpol, Rome 1954 with Pope Pius XII.

pears on page 14 of the notes made by Bischoff. It appears just after a contribution by Heess (Stuttgart) (well known in the field of firearms identification with Mezger and Hasslacher) and before a contribution by Prof. Popp (Frankfort a/M). His paper concerned methods applied to the identification of projectiles, cartridge cases and powders. He made the proposal that manufacturers of firearms develop specific signs that would be identifying marks on fired cartridge cases, and that the system should be compulsory and gen-

eralised! It is ironical that in 2001 this was (still?) debated at the UNO in New York in order to be able to trace firearms and their origin!

The last meeting of the Academy took place again in Lausanne in 1938 and Söderman appears in the official photograph (Figure 2).

In the meantime he had founded, with others, the *Nordisk Kriminalteknis Tidskrift* in 1931 [6] and become a professor of criminalistics at the University of Stockholm that same year, also publishing in *Archiv für Kriminologie* (founded by H. Gross) [6]. A prolific author he also travelled extensively and helped set up or reorganise police laboratories and organisations in many countries (see Larson [1] besides his own. Connections with the International Criminal Police Commission before WWII, were revived in 1946 when he became Reporter General to the ICPC with President Louwage, Secretary General Ducloux and two other Reporter General Howe and Müller.

I have collected a few photographs and must thank Roger Sauvain, Swiss rep at Interpol for some pictures from archives where Harry Söderman even appears with the pope on the occasion of an Interpol General Assembly in Rome.

He was still active with the ICPC and had a working meeting with the Directorate of the ICPC still one week before his untimely death.

#### HARRY SÖDERMAN, THE DOER AND CRAFTSMAN

Locard mentions that Harry Söderman was capable of developing, from his ideas and those of others, tools and methods useful in criminalistics.

One such tool was the hastoscope, based on Goddard's ideas (comparison process in firearms identification, used in the Sacco and Vanzetti's case by Goddard and Waite).

It is an improved comparison microscope with a special sample holder designed to hold bullets horizontally and to turn them around their axis to observe and compare rifling marks. The origin of the name itself is mysterious but my hypothesis is that it came from a contraction of Ha(rry)S(öderman)-toscope with the pun that it helps get results much quicker than before (as in haste).

This became the basis of the development of comparison microscopy in the identification of firearms used in criminal activities [2].

Another such development, was the creation of a dust collector connected to an Electrolux vacuum cleaner [6] called thereafter the "Söderman-Heuberger filter", its use was adopted by Locard in its extensive writings about dust.

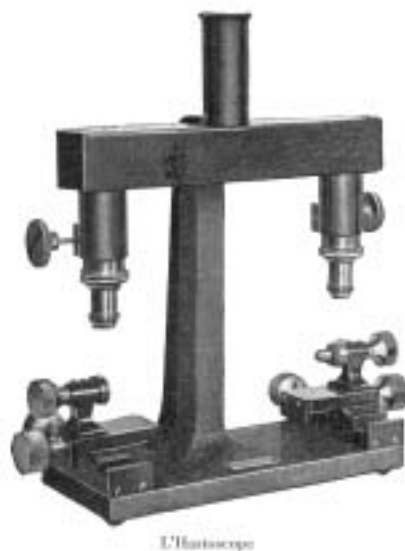
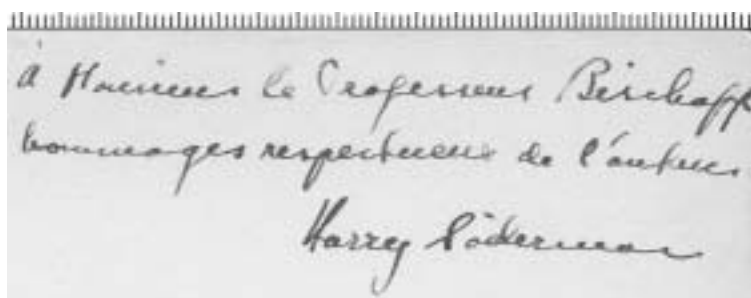


Fig. 7. Hastoscope.

#### HARRY SÖDERMAN, MISSIONS DURING THE WAR

There is one specific indication that Harry Söderman had a mission from the Swedish government in 1942, when he was sent to Switzerland. There he spent (February 1942) a week with the chief of Intelligence in the Swiss army, Colonel Werner Müller (who was to become one of the members of the directorate of the ICPC too), before travelling to Geneva and France where he met, for the last time, his friend and master Locard [9, 10]. Inquiries in the Swiss National Archives about this specific mission are under way, and I hope to be able to uncover this at our meeting in May in Linköping.



à Monsieur le Professeur Birschopp  
bonjour respectueux de l'autre  
Harry Söderman

Fig. 8. 1928.

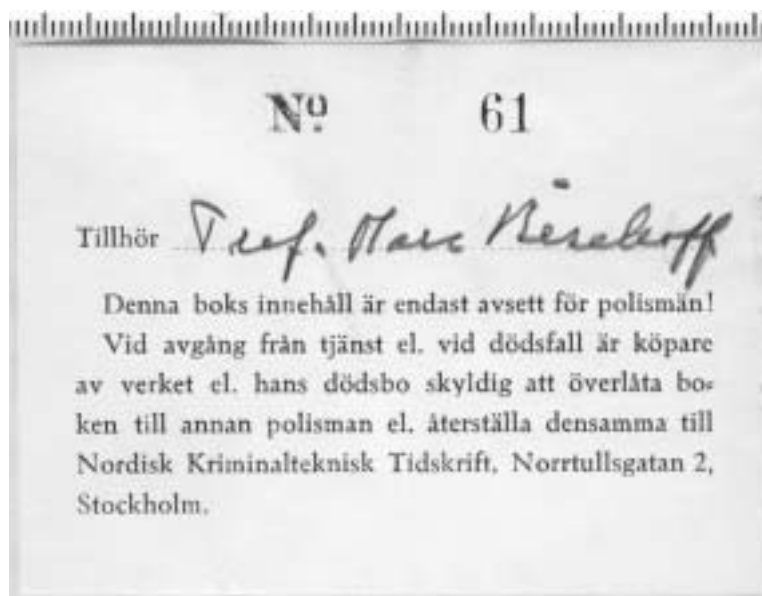


Fig. 9. 1938.

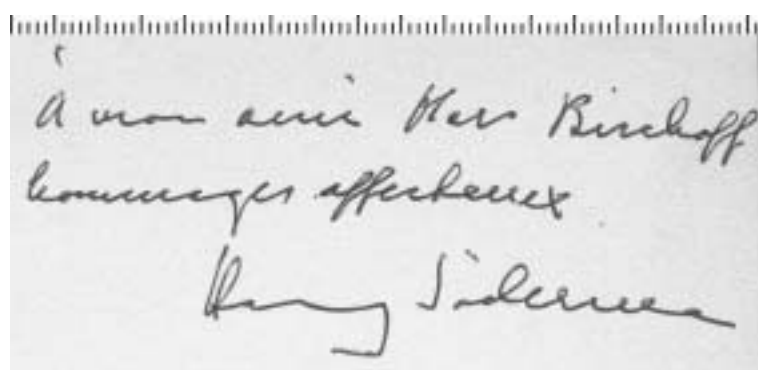


Fig. 10. 1954.

#### HARRY SÖDERMAN, REGULAR CONTACTS WITH BISCHOFF IN LAUSANNE

Unfortunately, personal correspondence of Bischoff does not exist anymore at the IPSC. Bischoff himself cleared his archives when retiring in 1963, but I could find a few tokens showing contacts with Bischoff starting in 1928 and lasting until Harry Söderman death in 1956 as evidence by autographed books.

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