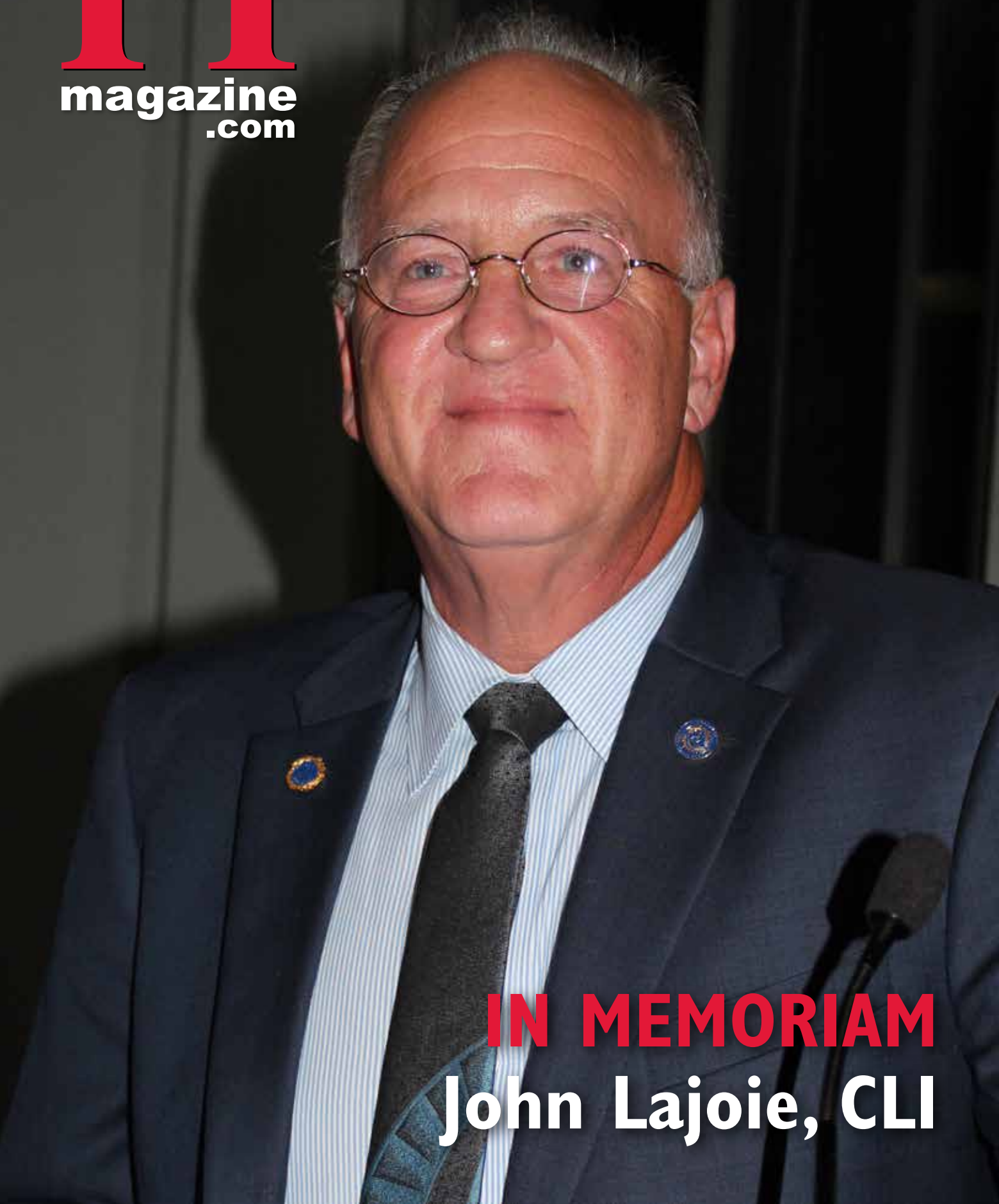


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IN MEMORIAM
John Lajoie, CLI

A Case of Pillow Talk

BY DANIEL J. DEMERS

Hans Schmidt shaved, bathed, put on a black suit and walked to the death chamber. He refused his last meal but did drink a cup of coffee. Minutes before his electrocution at Sing Sing, he addressed the seventeen witnesses: “Gentlemen, I ask forgiveness for those I have offended and scandalized.” He also apologized to his mother.

Schmidt, a Catholic priest, was electrocuted on February 18, 1916 after being convicted for the 1913 murder of Anna Aumuller, 22, a pretty German immigrant.

The thirty-three-year-old priest had been romantically involved with the girl. Two weeks prior to her murder, Anna was employed as a maid at St. Boniface’s Catholic Church in New York. She was fired in August when her pregnancy became known. For his part, Father Schmidt was transferred to Harlem’s St. Joseph Catholic Church.

The press reported that the murder occurred in a flat rented by Schmidt under the pseudonym “A. Van Dyke” and “to which he brought the girl, introducing her as his wife.” Mark Gado, who has written the definitive account of the events in his book *Killer Priest*, revealed that Schmidt had married Anna—performing the ceremony himself.

Schmidt confessed to killing Anna in her sleep “by drawing a knife across her throat with such force and unerring skill that her eyes



Father Hans Schmidt

never opened.” Placing her body in the bathtub, he cut her into nine pieces with a saw—wrapping each in blood-stained sheets, towels and pillow cases—then overwrapping each in tarpaper. He told detectives he made “seven [trolley] trips [to the Hudson River] dropping one or two of the bundles on each trip until he disposed of all.” The floating bundles precipitated the investigation.

He cleaned the crime scene and burned the bloody mattress in a vacant lot. Schmidt was born in Aschaffenburg, Bavaria. After ordination in 1906, he served in three different parishes in Germany. He immigrated to the US in 1909.

Schmidt rented the apartment claiming: “She thought we were married. She was happy. I adored her. She was innocent of all thought of wrong.”

In the days before fingerprint and DNA technologies, Schmidt made one big mistake. He placed the dismembered upper torso of Anna’s body in a descriptive fancy pillowcase. Police detectives tracked the pillowcase to George Sachs Furniture store. Only two had been sold—one with furniture delivered to Schmidt’s flat. Inspector Charles Faurot of the NYPD, upon entering the apartment, found “the floor blood-stained and strewn with fragments of wrapping paper and pieces of cloth-covered wire” identical to those found securing the packages containing the dismembered body. Faurot also found a letter addressed to Anna c/o St. Boniface Church with her photograph, which led him to the church. He was told Anna “had been discharged because of her ‘unsatisfactory mode of living.’”



Anna Armuller

Further, Faurot was told Schmidt had been “unduly attentive to the girl and that he had been transferred.” Schmidt was arrested.

The day after his arrest, police arrested Dr. Arthur Muret, a dentist, for counterfeiting. A fully equipped counterfeiting plant with \$20 plates was found at his house. Faurot was led to Muret’s by letters found among “the effects of Schmidt after his arrest.” According to the *New York Times*, Schmidt was becoming “a criminal of amazing versatility.” Schmidt’s pastor acknowledged that the priest had been frequently absent but these “had been accounted for on the ground of eccentricity. No one ever suspected his criminal bent.” Muret was ultimately convicted of counterfeiting and imprisoned.

The case took another bizarre twist the following day when police discovered a second flat rented by Schmidt. Evidence found there included a photograph of Schmidt wearing a fake beard along with wigs, false whiskers and other “disguises.” The police also discovered a suitcase which contained “embroidery, crochet needles and a small embroidered undershirt, pathetic evidence of Anna Aumuller’s thought of the baby to which she expected soon to give birth,” reported the *Times*.

Later that night police located yet another Schmidt apartment. There they found over two hundred collection envelopes stolen by Schmidt from parishioners. Additionally, a wallet belonging to a visiting clergyman who had been robbed was found along with evidence that Schmidt had taken \$400 from the Easter Sunday collection.



Father Hans Schmidt Mug Shot, NYPD

Schmidt told the press he believed in euthanasia, claiming it was “right to take the lives of the crippled and of persons undergoing mental or physical suffering.” “Mercy killings,” alleged Schmidt, “were acts of God’s will” because it ended pain and suffering. Police disclosed they found blank death certificates at the second apartment.

The author Mark Gado reveals Schmidt told police he intended to take out life insurance on “cripples, infirm and [the] elderly,” poison them and then “forge their death certificates.” Newspapers also disclosed he had induced elderly women parishioners to entrust him with their savings. Schmidt claimed his thefts and counterfeiting were designed to “solve the social question by creating money [to be shared with] the poor.”

Prosecutors countered asserting the money “made it possible for him to pose as a wealthy nobleman among the frequenters of Broadway cafes.” They also declared their belief Schmidt “planned to become a wholesale executioner and cover up the deaths of his victims by forging the names of reputable physicians to death certificates.”

Schmidt’s mother told authorities that some of his youthful pranks had disgraced her. After seminary studies in Mainz, he was sent to Munich for advanced theological schooling. While there, “his love affairs with women of questionable character became a public scandal and led to his disgrace.” Later he disappeared from his hometown when he “was involved in a forgery,” reported the *Times*. German police revealed he had sold forged certificates and diplomas to students in Munich.

Schmidt was indicted in October, 1913 for Anna’s murder. The proceedings were sensationalized by the world’s press.

Schmidt told investigators that God “had told him to sacrifice Anna as Abraham was ordered to sacrifice Isaac.” In February, 1914 he was found guilty of first-degree murder and given the death penalty.

Eleven days after his conviction, in an effort to beat the death penalty, Schmidt recanted his story and presented a new confession. He claimed Anna actually died after a botched abortion. The state appellate court dismissed his appeal, ruling “A criminal may not experiment with one defense and then, when it fails him, invoke the aid of the law which he flouted, to experiment with another defense, held in reserve for that emergency.”

Schmidt asserted he was being “put to death for lying and not for murder.” He claimed police failed their duty by not investigating his claim “that a criminal operation caused the girl’s death”—his “death” would be “a miscarriage of justice.” One newspaper reported it was a pitiful scene seeing Schmidt kneeling and praying with the chaplain, Father John Cashin, “a clear-eyed and muscular man who has led a score of men to the chair, and the other a bleared, blanched convict who was once to a dying man what the prison chaplain was to him.”

The last bit of irony was Sing Sing Warden George Kirchwey’s refusal to witness the execution. Kirchwey, a lawyer and a former Dean of Columbia Law School, like the Catholic Church, opposed the death penalty.

George Schmidt was the first and only Catholic priest ever executed in America. **PI**

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