

EDITORIAL

In the Summer 2014 *JSE* issue (Volume 28:2), we published two long reports, by Michael Nahm and myself, on the investigation of physical medium Kai Mügge and the Felix Circle. Those papers were revised versions of papers, ready to be published earlier, but scuttled when evidence of fraud was uncovered in the case. Nahm and I reached different conclusions about Kai's mediumship as a whole. He felt that the majority of Kai's phenomena were probably fraudulent. I was not ready to go that far. In any case, whatever our intuitions might have been about the extent of Kai's cheating, we both agreed that some of his phenomena were still very difficult to explain away—and indeed had not been adequately explained away. I believe it's fair to say that however large or small that residue of legitimacy may be, Nahm and I agree that it at least includes table levitations.

Since that *JSE* issue was published, there have been further developments in the case. Some of these, from an investigation I supervised in October of this year, I hope to present at length in a future issue of the *JSE*. The rest concern some incidents that occurred relatively soon after the appearance of our original reports, and which should be mentioned now without further ado. The item of greatest interest, no doubt, will be the testimony—quoted below—describing how at least one instance of Kai's cheating was uncovered.

In my 2014 paper I noted how I'd confidently concluded that Kai fraudulently used a light-emitting device similar to a magician's trick called the D'Lite Flight (as Nahm had claimed in his paper). That device employs a light-emitting diode at the end of a very thin wire attached usually to the user's thumb, which can make it appear as if points of light are moving around in the vicinity of the magician. Regular Felix Circle investigator Jochen S. (pseudonym) had taken two series of photographs, at Kai's request, from séances in Koblenz. From the start, the reddish lights shown on those photos looked suspicious to Jochen, and as it turned out the photos revealed how the movement of Kai's thumb corresponded to the movement of these lights, just as they would if Kai had been using a device like the D'Lite Flight. Because Jochen was one of Kai's closest associates and a frequent participant in Felix Group sittings, I naturally wanted to see if he could supply more information. In my paper I explained how, when I asked Jochen directly whether Kai had cheated during the Koblenz séance, Jochen struggled to respond, clearly unsure what to say. It was easy to figure out what was behind's Jochen's uncharacteristic struggle to produce a simple

sentence. I inferred that Kai had confessed to Jochen but also had sworn Jochen to secrecy on the matter, thereby—and quite immorally—placing him in an awkward position about what to say to others (including friends, like me) about what happened in Koblenz. Then, when I confronted Kai over Skype video about this, Kai for the first time in our many conversations couldn't look me in the eye (so to speak). I told Kai why, on the basis of my talk with Jochen, I now knew he'd cheated. Now if Kai had felt my inference was unwarranted, he could easily have challenged it; indeed, he should have done so. But instead, he hemmed and hawed, without directly admitting guilt, apologizing repeatedly and mentioning several times how there's a difference between public demonstrations and scientific investigations. While this was not a direct confession, I considered it then (and still do) to be functionally equivalent to one—a clear tacit confession.

During this time, I understood and sympathized with Jochen's own struggle about whether, how, or when to publicly answer questions about this incident. For one thing, although Jochen's role had been initially and primarily that of an investigator, he believed that Kai had become a friend. And although he was deeply disturbed by his discovery that Kai had cheated on at least the occasion in question, he still felt the tug of being asked by a presumed friend to protect something confessed in confidence. He also didn't want to reveal Kai's fraud and thereby risk losing contact with a person whom he still felt produced at least some genuine phenomena worthy of study (especially, the phenomena associated with table séances). In his mind, he had several conflicting *prima facie* obligations, one of which was to science—namely, to study phenomena that promised to reveal important aspects of the working of Nature. After all, Jochen is a scientist himself, and an exceptionally well-informed student of the mediumistic literature. He knows very thoroughly the history of so-called “mixed mediumship,” and he understands (as, e.g., in the case of Eusapia Palladino), how convincing evidence of large-scale PK phenomena can be obtained under good conditions even with mediums who have definitely tried cheating on other occasions. Moreover, he knows that experimental ingenuity, both with good and with “mixed” mediums, is always a matter of imposing conditions in which it's simply unreasonable to maintain that cheating occurred. It's always *possible* that cheating occurred, in any experiment (mediumistic or otherwise), and pointing that out (as if it counted for anything) is both lazy and irrelevant. What matters, as always, is whether the evidence for a clean experiment outweighs the evidence for fraud. Jochen also grasps that the resourceful investigator of mediums has to find that delicate balance between allowing the medium to work within his/her comfort zone and imposing controls that reasonably exclude fraud. Jochen's goal, throughout, has been

to study Kai's phenomena under the most fraud-unfriendly conditions he can arrange. In that respect, he and I have been totally on the same page.

So another reason I understood Jochen's dilemma is because I was in a somewhat similar position myself. Once Jochen told me the whole story, I could have been more outspoken, not just about Kai's cheating, but about the callous way he was willing to sacrifice Jochen's reputation to protect his own.¹ But I too felt that it was premature to abandon study of Kai, and I too didn't feel it was necessary to act at that point. In particular, some of the object movements occurring at a distance from Kai while I was controlling all his limbs I believe continue to challenge the skeptic. Similarly, in my view, some of the results I'd obtained in Austria with Kai had not been explained away satisfactorily (as I discussed in detail in my 2014 report). So I felt it was still worth trying to improve on the quality of documentation secured in the Austrian séances (at least to give it one last shot), and as I noted above my attempt to do so will be reported in due course. (However, spoiler alert: Although we did not improve on our Austrian results, we nevertheless got some interesting phenomena that are difficult to dismiss, and Kai and his wife (and assistant) Julia made no effort to obstruct our work; indeed, they were very cooperative and willing to submit to a variety of test arrangements they found uncongenial.)

But my concern here is not to reach a general conclusion about the extent of Kai's cheating (although that remains very much a live issue). Rather, it's about Jochen and the predicament he faced when Kai asked him to keep silent about his confession. So for the record, and for the sake of Jochen's and Nahm's reputations, it needs to be made clear that soon after Nahm's and my *JSE* papers appeared, Jochen did report what he knew to various investigators, including both me and Michael Nahm. Although he was initially in an understandable quandary about how to handle the situation in which he now found himself, Jochen was neither complicit in the fraud nor determined to keep the matter a secret. He also sent us his sequences of suspicious photos from the Koblenz séances. However, because he didn't want to be cut off from Kai's inner circle and still hoped to observe and investigate Kai's séance phenomena, Jochen did not tell some of Kai's key sponsors and advocates what he knew. I had many conversations about all this with Jochen, and I know he felt that since I had explained convincingly in my paper why I knew Kai had used the D'Lite-type device, the truth was out there (at least for the world at large, if not for Kai's true believers). So although Jochen planned eventually to go on record publicly about what he knew, there was no present urgency to do anything more. The only question for him was a matter of timing: when to finally brace himself for the potential backlash for providing explicit testimony.

But that time has come. Jochen has made it clear to me that he wants to shed the burden he's felt of keeping the details of events pertaining to the Koblenz séances largely under wraps. The pressure has been weighing heavily on him and affecting his health, and understandably he wants to counter the appearance that he might have been a party to Kai's deception. So let's now make clear just what the relevant series of events was, in Jochen's own words:²

The first time I saw the flashing red spirit light phenomenon I felt uncomfortable with it and immediately considered it to be suspicious. This "spirit light" looked very different from those I had witnessed during several previous séances around the table, rather than at cabinet sittings. At Kai's table séances, the shape, brightness, and local appearance of the lights vary considerably, and they also seem to be both elusive and (perhaps most important) outside Kai's radius of action. In comparison to these, the "spirit light" in Koblenz with its red flashing appearance looked like an electrically driven one controlled by Kai within the cabinet. My skeptical concerns were further substantiated after I took a series of photos of Kai and the moving red light.

So I decided to look into Kai's travel bag after a séance in Koblenz. I expected to find a device in case the "spirit light" was mechanically produced. And indeed I found a boxed device with a light-emitting diode at the end of a very thin wire attached to a fake thumb. I was totally shocked and rushed out of Kai's room. The next day I searched the Internet and found a magician's prop, which is commercially available for everyone and which looks very similar to the gimmick I detected. It is called the D'Lite Flight (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZfnjSbbU2g>).

Unfortunately I didn't take a photo of the device in the travel bag. But I confronted Kai with what I had discovered, and he denied ever using such a trick.

Nevertheless, I tried to find out myself whether this gimmick could explain the suspicious-looking flashing red light effect which I saw at the end of the cabinet seance. As I wanted to find out how it could have been naturally done, I looked for the wire, the "thumb," or the LED light during later séances, but I could not detect anything. The red light re-appeared only once or twice again (as far as I remember) in my presence, this time under very poor conditions of observation. Thus I was not able to figure out whether and how Kai might have fraudulently produced it. I also took a closer look at the series of photos I had taken, but I couldn't find anything clearly demonstrating the use of the prop, like the wire, despite the fact that the red light effect still looked very suspicious. I realize in retrospect that it was my mistake that I didn't notice Kai's thumb movements and didn't enhance the photo series. Fortunately, I later sent the series to Michael Nahm, who instantly noticed in the unedited photo series how the movement of the light corresponded to the movement of Kai's thumb.

After Nahm showed me that Kai's thumb was indeed moving on these

photo series in accordance with the movements of the red light, I confronted Kai again, asking him whether he used the D'Lite-type device and insisting that he tell me the truth because of compelling evidence of fraud. This time he admitted he had indeed used the device I found in his travel bag, and he said several times that he'd made a mistake in doing so. He also told me that he'd hidden the device on the shelves behind the cabinet, which he could reach from within its curtains. He apologized to me for having done this, and he asked me not to mention it to anyone.

Since the public hubbub erupted over Kai's alleged cheating, Kai has had many opportunities to do the right thing. What I believe he should have done all along was not to put (and continue to put) Jochen in such a compromising position or publicly accuse Nahm of spreading lies, but to show some backbone, admit he made mistakes, and move on. After all, he confessed to Jochen that he'd made a mistake in Koblenz, and Jochen was willing to forgive him, at least for a time. And why not? There are well-known and understandable reasons why a medium might cheat from time to time. That's not to say those reasons are exculpatory, but it does remind us that mediums (like all of us) are human and have frailties, fears, lapses of judgment, and other weaknesses. Moreover, mediumistic dishonesty can even be forgiven when addressed openly and courageously—and with humility. In sharp contrast to Kai, Eusapia candidly admitted that she'd cheat if given the chance, and investigators simply went with it and tried not to give her the chance! Of course, Eusapia (unlike Kai) didn't adopt the posture of a guru and proclaim herself to be a messenger of great spiritistic truths. Perhaps that's why Kai has not chosen a path to forgiveness or redemption. Despite many opportunities to come clean, he's consistently proclaimed his innocence, thereby continuing to leave Jochen and Nahm hanging in the wind. The time is long overdue for that to stop.

One final matter. I have no desire to hurt Kai, or retaliate against him for the anguish he's caused Jochen. I merely feel a moral obligation to support Jochen here, especially because Kai's dishonesty has led to a serious and unjustified threat to Jochen's professional security. So I hope that Kai will now accept responsibility for his treatment of Jochen (and Nahm as well) and for deceiving others about his use of the D'Lite-type device. We can all move forward if he acknowledges that he made a mistake both when he cheated and when he placed Jochen and Nahm in such an uncomfortable and unfair position.

It would be all too easy to conclude at this point that Kai no longer merits any attention from psi researchers, especially since major questions remain about the extent of Kai's cheating. Nevertheless, Kai is still the only current physical medium willing to be studied under serious test conditions.

And it's worth reiterating that in our 2013 Austrian sessions and especially in the recent séances in Hanau, Kai has been cooperative and willing to conduct table séances under conditions he dislikes, including a few that even some of the least controversial mediums agreed were probably unfavorable to the phenomena. There are still many unknowns about what makes mediums tick and why or when various situations suppress or facilitate the phenomena. (In my forthcoming report, I'll explore how these issues arose in some interesting ways in our latest sessions with Kai.) Based on my own studies of Kai under controlled conditions, I still believe that some of his phenomena are genuine. I also believe that it's simplistic and psychologically naïve to suppose that Kai is nothing but a cheat. So I haven't abandoned all hope of working with Kai again—though it would certainly have to be under more favorable psychological conditions than we had recently, which partially had to do with the very matters discussed in this Editorial. In any case, whether those future sessions occur will probably be up to Kai.

Notes

- ¹ One could equally criticize Kai's behavior toward Nahm, who (on December 18, 2014) informed the members of Robin Foy's forum "Physical Mediumship for You" (PM4U) about Kai's confession, in response to Kai's repeated assertions on his blog and elsewhere that the red "spirit light" was genuine and that Nahm's claims to the contrary were false. Indeed, Kai accused Nahm of maliciously spreading lies, and shortly thereafter Foy uncritically (and, indeed, quite foolishly) banned Nahm from PM4U.
- ² Personal communication, October 22, 2015.

—STEPHEN E. BRAUDE