

Judge asked to overturn convictions

by David Reed, Associated Press, December 10, 1996

BEDFORD, Va. - A German diplomat's son sentenced to two life terms for killing his wealthy girlfriend's parents tried to get his convictions overturned by claiming Monday that investigators withheld crucial evidence.

Jens Soering returned to the Bedford County Circuit Court where he was found guilty six years ago to attend the appeal hearing, but he did not testify. Judge William Sweeney postponed his ruling to await additional evidence.

Soering claims that jurors might have found him innocent if they had known that two drifters were stopped a few days after the slayings by a sheriff's deputy and left a knife hidden in his patrol car. The drifters were arrested a few days later and convicted of stabbing to death a homeless man in Roanoke.

Soering, 30, originally confessed to killing Derek and Nancy Haysom in 1985 because they opposed his relationship with Elizabeth Haysom, a fellow honors student at the University of Virginia.

But in his trial, and in an autobiography recently published on the Internet, Soering said he falsely confessed to the murders to save Ms. Haysom from execution. He said he thought his father's diplomatic immunity would shield him.

Soering testified in 1990 that Ms. Haysom, who was convicted of accessory to murder, killed her parents with the help of one or more people unknown to him. She is serving a 90-year prison sentence for her part in the slayings.

In June, the state Supreme court ordered Sweeney to examine claims that prosecutors withheld evidence of another possible murderer.

George Anderson testified Monday that when he was a deputy sheriff in Bedford County, he stopped William Shifflett and Robert Albright because they were walking along a highway outside Bedford in the middle of the night.

Anderson said he later found a knife in the back of his patrol car and told a sergeant involved in the investigation of the Haysom murders.

However, Soering's defense attorney during the trial was never told of the incident.

Assistant Chief Medical Examiner William Massello testified that the knife found in the patrol car was consistent with the type of weapon that was used to slash the throats of the Haysoms.

Dennis Dohnal, a Richmond attorney who has defended numerous murder suspects, testified that the new evidence could have changed the trial's outcome.