

America's First Hero of World War II

by Peter Duffy, author & journalist

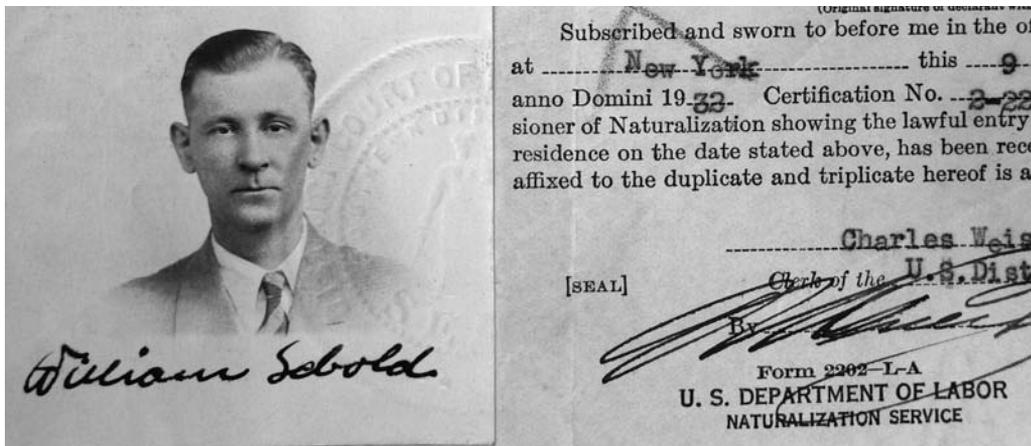
On Feb. 8, 1940, William G. Sebold arrived in New York harbor aboard the S.S. Washington. He was a 40-year-old German-American who, during a visit to his mother in his birthplace of Mulheim in the Ruhr Valley, had been coerced into returning to the United States as a messenger and paymaster for Nazi Germany's network of spies in the largest city in the nation. He had \$1,000 in American cash taped to his body and several microfilmed documents of instructions hidden in the gears of his watch. Instead of working for the Fascist Fatherland of his birth, Sebold agreed to become the FBI's first double agent, enlisting on behalf of his adopted country.

Over the course of the next 16 months, he was at the center of a spy investigation that resulted in the arrest and conviction of 33 enemy agents, still the largest espionage bust in American history. He ensnared agents embedded within the two contractors assigned by the United States military to perfect the science of delivering aerial bombs on target, the Sperry Gyroscope Co. of Brooklyn, and Carl L. Norden, Inc., of lower Manhattan. One of them, Hermann Lang, was responsible for stealing America's most precious pre-war secret, the Norden Bombsight, delivering its blueprints into the hands of the German military three years earlier, in 1937, at a time when a dysfunctional American counterintelligence system was doing next to nothing to halt foreign espionage.

In a soon-to-be published book, I will detail how a spy movement grew out of a German-American community

of true-believing Nazis headquartered in the thriving Little Berlin of Yorkville on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, the capital of German America. The spies were able to place themselves within the most sensitive sectors of the military's research and development, sending valuable data to a rapidly rearming German war machine through the vehicle of transatlantic couriers working on luxury ocean liners as waiters, hairdressers and cooks. The FBI, which was then forbidden from opening a specific counterespionage investigation in the absence of a request from the Army, Navy or State Department, stumbled upon a portion of the ring in 1938 but was so inexperienced in the ways of Nazi intrigue that two valuable operatives were able to escape back to the Reich. The ensuing publicity sparked a national debate about the importance of protecting the nation against spy infiltration, which led President Franklin Roosevelt to formally declare J. Edgar Hoover as America's spymaster with responsibility for overseeing all investigations, our first modern director of central intelligence.

When William Sebold landed at the West Side piers, he was ostensibly on a mission to set up a radio link to more efficiently deliver secrets to the Reich. Instead, he began working with the FBI, which built a sophisticated investigation around him that included the construction of a short-wave radio station on Long Island in order to better learn the mind of his Hamburg spymasters and the opening of a "research" office at 42nd Street and Broadway that allowed special Agents hidden behind a two-way mirror to film meetings conducted between Sebold and his in-country associates.



“We are meeting with considerable success in the case I am working on and it may turn out to be a wonderful thing for the country,” wrote Jim Ellsworth, the Agent who was assigned to be Sebold’s “body man.” Ellsworth was a Mormon who had learned German during his mission abroad.

With the Bureau’s guidance, Sebold put away a colorful cast of spies, including a South African adventurer with an exotic accent and a monocle named “Colonel” Fritz Duquesne and a Jewish femme fatale, Lilly Stein, who had escaped Nazi Vienna by agreeing to help Hitler by seducing U.S. government officials of prominence into whispering secrets into her ear. The guilty verdicts were read on Dec. 12, 1941, the day after Adolf Hitler formally declared war against America, which meant that the enemy would not be privy to our most hallowed military secrets during the darkest days of the war.

At the center of it was Sebold, a mysterious figure whose face was never shown in newspaper stories or

newsreel footage and who sought anonymity in a chicken farm outside of San Francisco after the case.

“He was very depressed about this whole thing,” Helen Buchner, his 97-year-old sister-in-law, told me in her thick German accent. “He was torn between two things — he thought he did bad things for the German people and good things for the American people. He was not a happy man.”

He suffered from depression during his final years. When he died on Feb. 16, 1970, no obituary appeared in any newspaper. Yet he must be recognized for what he is: America’s first hero of World War II.

Peter Duffy is an author and journalist in New York. His previous books include The Bielski Brothers and The Killing of Major Denis Mahon: A Mystery of Old Ireland, both published by HarperCollins. His book on the Sebold case will be published by Scribner in 2014.



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