

“ON THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA”: THE BELEAGUERED LIFE OF HITLER’S GREATEST WEIGHTLIFTER

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On the eve of a dual encounter in Baltimore and New York between the five best weightlifters of Germany and those of the United States, Bob Hoffman, as editor and America’s weightlifting coach, published an article in the July 1938 issue of *Strength & Health* entitled “Can We Beat the Germans?” While American teams had improved steadily during the 1930s, Germany’s lifters claimed world supremacy by displacing the Egyptians just after the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and decisively winning the 1937 world championships in Paris. With the incorporation of Austrian weightlifters following *Anschluss* in March of 1938, Nazi Germany gained an even greater advantage at the forthcoming Vienna world championships in October. “At the present time the German Empire team has been in a class by itself,” Hoffman estimated. While his lifters could possibly achieve higher cumulative totals than their adversaries in the four lighter classes, he was unsure whether they could win by enough to make up for the “sure superiority” of Germany’s great heavyweight, Josef (Sepp) Manger, whom he regarded as “the greatest lifter in the world’s history in the three [Olympic] lifts.” Coached by Olympic and world champion Rudi Ismayr who was from his hometown of Bamberg, Manger was “boys champion of Germany. A gymnast, tumbler and lifter, fast, and active in spite of his great weight and bulk.” At age 24, he held world records in the press, at 315½ pounds (143 kilos), and the three-lift total. Overcoming Germany’s superiority in just one class, one individual, and one lift would be a formidable challenge for the Americans. Manger’s rise to international fame began when he earned second place at the 1934 European Weightlifting Championships in Genoa, Italy, with a 264-pound (120-kilo) press, a 253-pound (115-kilo) snatch, and a 324½-pound (147½-kilo)

clean and jerk for an 841½-pound (382½-kilo) total. A German report indicated that it was “his first chance to prove his worth in international competition. He proved that he had great possibilities. He appeared almost like a boy among the colossal heavyweights,” the lightest and youngest competitor at 216 pounds (98¾ kilos) and 21 years. At the 1935 European Championships in Paris, Manger made a 275½-pound (125-kilo) press to improve his total to 870½ pounds (395 kilos) with his German teammates claiming three of the four remaining weight classes.

Perhaps the most daunting indication of German superiority was a pre-Olympic calculation that America’s five best lifters trailed their adversaries in cumulative totals (3750½ to 3836) by 85½ pounds (38 kilos). This prediction was borne out by results from the 1936 Olympics in Berlin where German totals, though superseded by the Egyptians, far exceeded those of the United States. While this outcome could be attributed in part to Germany’s traditional passion for fitness, its work ethic, and Hitler’s autarkic rule, “German thoroughness has everything planned,” Hoffman observed. “Results are being had as best proven by Germany’s amazing success in the Olympics. Any other country, including our own, must use a similar program to keep up.” Manger was “lucky to win” with a 902-pound (410-kilo) total, Hoffman insisted, mainly by virtue of his 291½-pound (132-kilo) press. “It was the passing of his rather crude press that put his total beyond the reach of the other lifters present.” Sour grapes aside, it was for Hoffman “the greatest lifting the world had ever seen and the roof nearly fell with cheers when the German Manger was crowned in front of the Führer after he had won the world’s title with the greatest total ever made in weight lifting.” At the 1937 world championships, Manger extended his total to 924½ pounds (420 kilos), via lifts of 297½, 275, and 352. He proved to reporter

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In 1938, Bob Hoffman invited the five best weightlifters in Germany to travel to America and compete in what might be called a weightlifting double header. At the time, the German team was regarded as the best in the world, and in the two exhibition meets, in Baltimore and New York City, Josef Manger proved to be the not-so-secret ingredient to Germany's success. This photo shows the lifters and other men and women enjoying a final meal at the famous German restaurant known as Jaegers Hofbrau in New York City. At the first table in order are Karl Jansen, 148-pound German champion; George Liebch, German and world's champion; Tony Gietl, 181-pound German lifter; Joe Manger, World's and German 181-pound champion; and at the end of the table, John Terpak, Tony Terlazzo, and Steve Stanko. Also in the picture are John Grimek, Gracie Bard, and Rudy Ismayr, Olympic and world's champion. American team managers Dietrich Wortman, Bob Hoffman, and Dan Ferris of the AAU are also present.

Gord Venables, "in spite of his bulk of 240 lbs. that he could snatch and clean as fast as any featherweight." And in the press, he "didn't seem to extend himself. When Manger walks up to the bar his face has only the expression of contempt for the poundage he intends to lift, every movement is deliberate without waste motion." It is hardly surprising with the dual contest fast approaching that Hoffman regarded the Germans, especially with the help of their newly drafted Austrians, as "well-nigh unbeatable."

MANGER WINS FOR GERMANY!

Despite heightening world political tensions in late June of 1938 and high spirits on both teams, hospitality and goodwill prevailed during their two competitions over the next fortnight. The American hosts provided transportation, comfortable living quarters, and training facilities for their German guests at the York Barbell Clubhouse, located at Hoffman's property on Lightner's Hill in North York, often dubbed the Strength and Health Center of the World. "They will have the entire club to their own devices," boasted Hoffman, "with its showers, club room, kitchen, sleeping quarters, and spacious gymnasium. This club set in the

midst of beautiful countryside, gardens, pools, flowers, shrubs, with big porches, will be an ideal place for the German team, and for their visitors." Further perquisites would include a visit to the Gettysburg battlefield and other historic and scenic sites. The Germans would then be transported to their competitions in Baltimore and New York which would also feature hand balancing, tumbling, strength feats, and muscle control exhibitions by Siegmund Klein, John Grimek, and other American strength stars.

Hospitality prevailed throughout the planning and execution of these events. The first contest occurred on Sunday, the 19th, at the Derby Show Arena in Baltimore. As Hoffman expected, his lifters outlifted their German counterparts in the four lighter classes, 3,047½ to 2,986½ pounds (1382 to 1354½ kilos), but Manger surpassed America's best heavyweight, Steve Stanko, 946 to 847 pounds (429 to 384 kilos) to provide the visitors a winning edge of 38 cumulative pounds (17 kilos). "Leave the 'big boy' off and what have you . . . ?" observed Bob Hoffman. A modicum of consolation was possible, however, because of the friendships engendered between the teams. "They are a nice lot of fellows, they lived with us for a week, visited

our homes and we came to know them well. Friendships were created that will endure." Furthermore, Hoffman seemed pleased with the role played by his girlfriend Gracie Bard who "helped a lot in gathering funds for the future competition. But I believe that she unwittingly helped the Germans win. For they were out to her home for dinner several times, and as they lifted more than ever before, it might have been the splendid meals that Gracie prepared. Any way they'll go back to Germany, having a warm spot for America, the lifters and enthusiasts here, for Gracie and for her [baked] beans, and other gastronomic dainties." Despite losing to the Germans, Hoffman took pride in the seeds of international goodwill he had planted, even as war clouds loomed on the horizon.

The spirit of sportsmanship he helped foster carried on to the second team competition on 25 June at the 85th Street Turnverein in Manhattan. This time the Germans won by an even greater margin, owing mainly to the failure of featherweight John Terry to execute any of his clean and jerks, thus enabling his adversary to gain 253 unanswered pounds (115 kilos). Had Terry made his final lift of 264 pounds (120 kilos), the Germans still would have won overall by two pounds. Again, the winning edge was provided by Manger whose superiority, especially in the press, left little doubt about the ultimate outcome of the match. "Manger is such a powerhouse that he could have done more," Hoffman observed. "So, it's evident that Manger will soon score a greater total than the world has ever seen. Over a thousand being quite possible within a year." What especially impressed Hoffman was Manger's overall athleticism. "Turns a back flip as light as a feather," and as national heavyweight wrestling champion, he was expected to win titles in wrestling and weightlifting at the next scheduled Olympics in Helsinki. Hoffman also could not help but admire the personal qualities and friendship of the German visitors and the camaraderie that resulted from their encounters. "To sum up, there were two splendid, hard fought contests. The best of sportsmanship prevailed throughout."

AN ENDURING FRIENDSHIP

While scant information is available about the relationship between German and American weightlifters after the Vienna world championships in 1938 and during World War II, post-war evidence indicates that the friendship engendered by their dual competitions persisted. It stems from a series of letters exchanged

in 1946 between Sepp Manger and John Terpak, neither of whom had been engaged in actual fighting. On 1 February Manger responded "with much enthusiasm and deep gratitude" to a letter from Terpak. It confirmed that weightlifting "is a sport which reconciles nations with each other and that a fine spirit of comradeship has not ceased to exist in spite of six years of terrible war." Despite rumors to the contrary, he was not killed in combat but served in the Wehrmacht from May 1942 to December 1944 as an administrator at home and not at the front. Since September 1939 Sepp was happily married and the proud father of a "strapping son" whom he hoped someday would become a weightlifter.

Conversely, he was not so sanguine about his current situation and prospects of Germany returning to prewar normalcy. Owing to occupation by the American military government in Starnberg (Bavaria), Manger was "without bread" and was dismissed indefinitely from his position on the finance board on grounds that "I belong to the Nazi party, an action based on apparent paper evidence." As justification for the protest he was lodging with American authorities, he explained to Terpak that after Hitler's coup in April 1933 he was stigmatized by the Bamberger daily press as an enemy of the state and as politically unreliable, because I was a Nazi opponent and had publicly voiced my opposition in the inn, the Blue Bell, in Bamberg even after the usurpation of the Nazis, (Refusal to give the Nazi salute). Because of my objection to the national socialistic party I together with my trainer, Fritz Mueller, in Bamberg, Jew Street 9, was expelled from my sport association, the Hercules Athletic Club, in Bamberg in April 1933, a club in which since my eleventh year I had been trained with much labor for the 1936 Olympic games. In addition my expulsion from the Sports Association of Germany was demanded. At the last moment action on my expulsion was stopped by leaders of the sports association Roland Bamberg because then already I was classed as an international star in wrestling and weight lifting and as an athlete of the first rank for the Berlin Olympiad.

With official sanction, he moved to Freising to be trained for the Olympics by 1932 gold medalist Rudi Ismayr. After his 1936 victory, Manger was promoted to be an SA (*Sturmabteilung* or Storm Troopers) squad leader, even though he was not an SA member, and then with no effort on his part, to be chief squad leader. These promotions were purely a recognition of his weightlifting achievements, but he "never per-

formed any service in the SA," he said. His supervisor repeatedly urged him to join the Nazi Party, but Manger continued to refuse until he was confronted with the choice of either joining or giving up the work he was doing to train athletes in foreign countries as a representative of German sportdom. "Thus I became a party member, retroactive to January 5, 1937. I may add that I received no membership book, nor was I obligated to the party by oath. I received merely a so-called party candidate's card." It was imperative that American authorities know that he was never an active Nazi and "never agreed with the ideas of the former Nazi party." He had already enlisted the support of the Third US Army command in Bad Toeltz, and was hoping Terpak, "as my American sport friend," would write a letter confirming that "while living in foreign lands I have always borne myself as a truly democratic sportsman and never as a friend of Nazism, that, on the contrary, I with heart and hand worthily represented my beloved weight-lifting sport . . . just as you know me."

With regard to his weightlifting condition, Manger admitted that he was "not in very good shape." For three years he had not touched a dumbbell, and the desperate food situation in Germany would "not allow me to very quickly attain top form." Still, he was able to press 285, snatch 275, and clean and jerk 340 pounds. Otherwise, German sport was "dead," and it would take many years for German athletes to be able

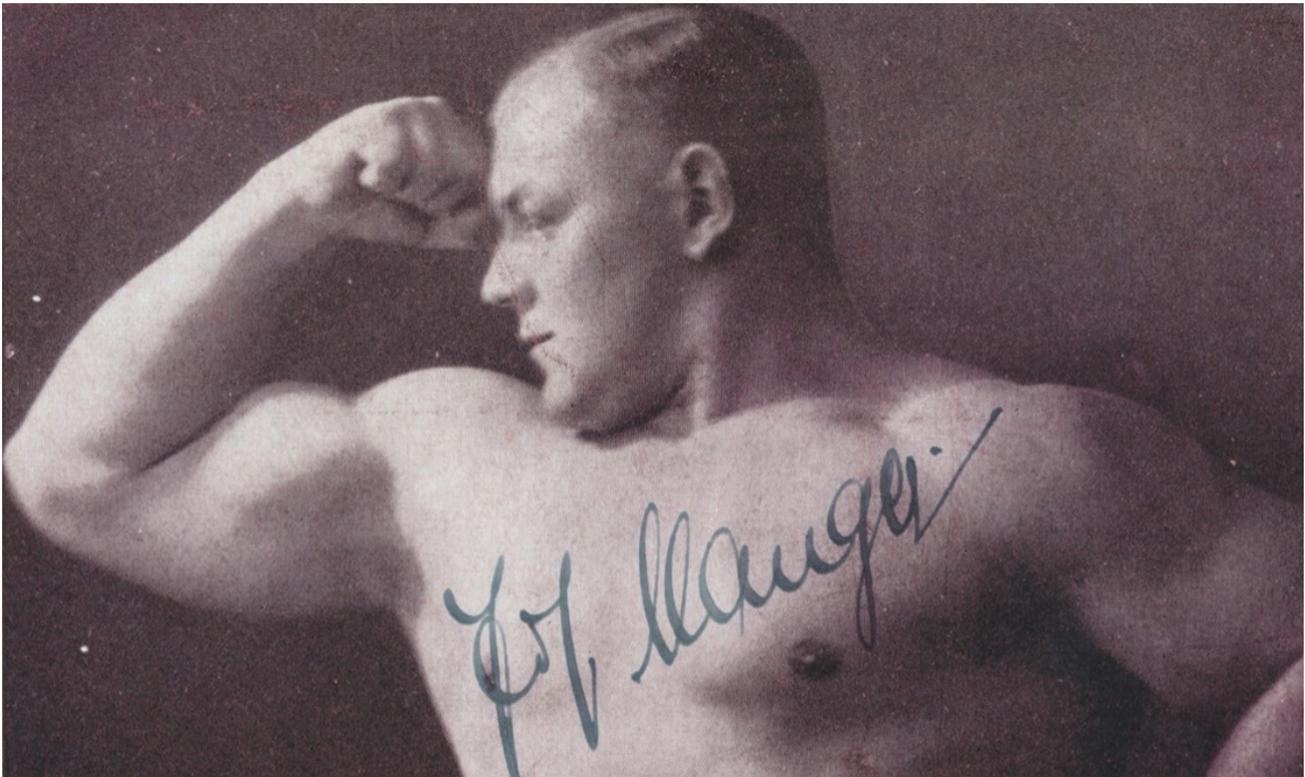


Josef Manger and his teammate Rudi Ismayr, middleweight Olympic champion, had plenty of reasons to smile as they left London on 23 March 1936 to head home to Germany. Both men gave exhibitions at the Holborn Empire Theater while in London, demonstrating once again why they were world champions.

to participate in international games. His trainer and friend, Rudi Ismayr, who was a pilot in the Luftwaffe, ended the war as a buck private and an English prisoner of war. Rudi was "not in shape." Manger believed he might still be able, as a featherweight, to press 200, snatch 210, and clean and jerk 270 pounds (90½, 95, and 122 kilos), but he was an unlikely contender in future international games. Of the other German weightlifters, "all were in bad shape," likewise with the current crop of recruits. Not for eight or ten years would Germany be able to produce weightlifters "fit for world competition," he predicted. American weightlifters, on the other hand, were excelling, as he recently read in a copy of *Life* magazine at Bad Toeltz, which featured pictorial sequences of John Terpak. "I was moved almost to tears. It showed me that you and your friends have not been asleep," but had raised the sport "to the top." Manger believed his friend would "go down in the history of weight-lifting as the American Ismayr."¹ He was no less complimentary about others, including Bob Hoffman and Steve Stanko, his former rival in the 1930s. He regarded America as "the land of weight-lifters" with "the finest man power in the world."²

Terpak responded to Manger's plea by writing letters to American authorities. "Nothing would please me more than to see you reinstated to civilian status," he assured his old friend. "Personally, I have always admired you and respected you for the person you were and as I knew you. To me, you were a true Sportsman . . . a fair and square competitor and a person who used his own better judgment to guide his destiny." Terpak was also pursuing the possibility of shipping parcels of food to Germany through the postal service to relieve Manger's desperate plight. Further to inform him and others of the current state of weightlifting, he was eager to have his fellow Iron Game enthusiasts in America correspond and send articles to their German counterparts. As for his own prospects for the forthcoming national championships in June, Terpak believed he was currently in "the best condition of my lifting career." He had recently pressed 251 pounds (114 kilos), snatched 251 pounds (114 kilos), and clean and jerked 330 pounds (150 kilos) in good form at 162¾-pound (73¾ kilo) bodyweight. At the forthcoming nationals, Terpak was hoping to make 250, 255, and 335 pounds (113, 115½, and 152 kilos).³

Other Americans also expected to do well. They included several other promising middleweights—Stanley Stanczyk, who at age



This 1936 autographed postcard was printed as part of an Olympic Games series in Germany and shows the roughly 240-pound Manger as he appeared at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

22 and weighing 160 pounds (73 kilos) had done 240, 245, and 315 pounds (109, 111½, and 143 kilos); 17-year-old Peter George, weighing 155, who was pressing 220, snatching 240, and clean and jerking 330 pounds (100, 109, and 150 kilos); and Frank Spellman, who at age 24 had recently returned from the war and was pressing 250, snatching 240, and clean and jerking 310 pounds (114, 109, and 140½ kilos). Terpak was over ten years their senior and still quite capable of outlifting them, but he intended to retire immediately after the end of the 1948 Olympics in London.⁴

He admitted, however, that aside from its wealth in middleweights, America had uncertain prospects in the other classes. Its best heavyweight, John Davis, had recently made a 257-pound (116½-kilo) press, a 262-pound (119-kilo) snatch, and a 347-pound (157-kilo) clean and jerk at a bodyweight of 202 pounds (92-kilo), but "he does not possess the same interest as prior to the war so it is not predictable whether he will remain in competition or choose to withdraw." Pre-war featherweight champion Tony Terlazzo, of course, had retired from weightlifting and was constructing a health club in Los Angeles, "specializing primarily in reconditioning exercises for the business and professional men and women. . . . Tony hopes to develop a

lucrative business for himself and I sincerely believe that he will succeed."⁵

Meanwhile, in a strong appeal on 30 April to American commanding officers at Bad Toelz, Terpak confirmed Manger's innocence of any deliberate collaboration with the former Nazi regime. He explained that Sepp was a victim of his success as a champion athlete which was exploited by Hitler's totalitarian government for propaganda purposes. As a result of their interactions at various prewar weightlifting competitions at Berlin in 1936, Paris in 1937, and Vienna, Baltimore, and New York City in 1938, Terpak described Manger as "an amiable person" which made it possible for them to become intimately acquainted. "This fraternization rapidly developed into a friendship" that intensified "because of his admirable character. In athletic competition he exemplified the principles of good sportsmanship." Only recently had Terpak learned of his friend's predicament under the Nazi regime.

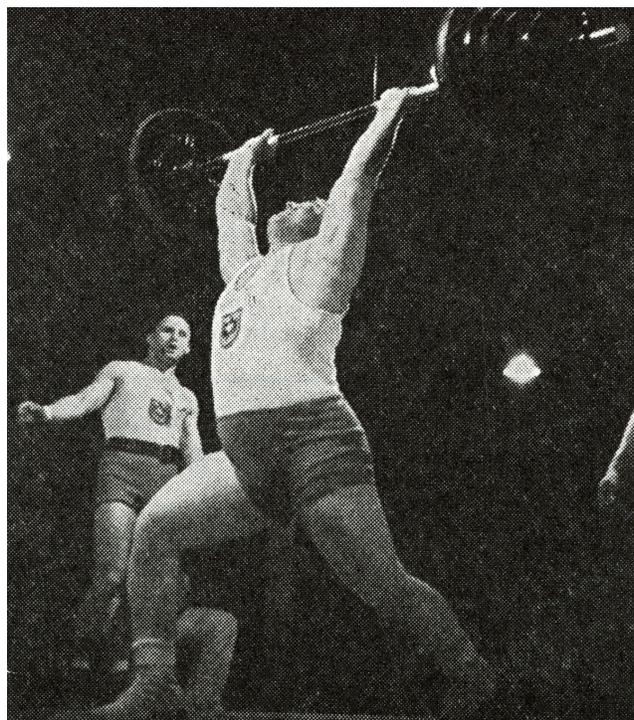
Being a democratic and humane person he was opposed to the Nazi doctrines. Despite his opposition he, like innumerable other persons, was enslaved [sic] to the ruthless government

dominated by Adolph Hitler. The fact that Manger was a distinguished person, being a champion athlete, exposed him to special pressure. Under the threat of persecution he was compelled to become a member of the Nazi party. His affiliation with this organization was a sham in view of the fact that he was not obligated to the party by oath and did not receive a membership book.⁶

Terpak assured his American overseers that Manger was seeking no special favors, only that his case was worthy of re-examination and that he be judged "on his true merits."⁷

ENDURING GOODWILL

On 24 June Manger responded to Terpak's efforts on his behalf "with much joy and gratitude." Although he was personally "rehabilitated" and financially secure, the food situation in Germany remained "terrible," and he hoped Terpak could send him several packages of food stuffs for which he could send him an appropriate reimbursement. Manger also expressed enthusiasm over his friend's latest performances and predicted he would win the middleweight class at the Olympics with a 253-pound (115-kilo) press, 253-pound (115-kilo) snatch, and 335-pound (152-kilo) clean and jerk, despite his advanced age. He reminded Terpak of others who were world and Olympic champions in their forties, including Josef Strassberger of Germany and Carlo Galimberti of Italy. "It is a fact that a weightlifter is strongest between 35 and 45 years." Manger sensed that interest in the sport was reviving in Germany, "but the terrible food situation is keeping the athletes from accomplishing anything worthwhile. Given proper nourishment, the German lifters might quickly play an important part in international competition."⁸ Rudi Ismayr was still being held in a British internment camp near Hamburg, and it seemed unlikely that he would ever return to international form again. Adolf Wagner, was in serious training and able to negotiate a 220-pound (100-kilo) press, a 220-pound (100-kilo) snatch, and a 297-pound (135-kilo) clean and jerk, which is less than he lifted to win a bronze medal at Berlin in 1936, the silver medal at Paris in 1937, or the gold medal at Vienna in 1938 where he made a 810-pound (367½-kilo) total. But, it was comparable to what the American middleweights were currently do-



Josef Manger's form was nearly perfect according to the March 1940 issue of *Strength & Health* magazine who used him as one of their examples on perfect technique in the "Weightlifting News, Shows and Events" section. "The pictures on these pages were not posed," they wrote, "they are actual record breaking attempts by each lifter in real contests." This photo, they went on to explain, "shows World Champion Josef Manger of Germany making a perfect jerk with 363 in Baltimore. Notice that he has thrown the bar directly overhead and made an even split fore-and-aft."

ing. As for his own marks, Manger claimed to be pressing 286½ pounds (130 kilos), snatching 275½ pounds (125 kilos), and clean and jerking 352½ (160 kilos) which, if performed altogether in competition, would be five pounds more than he totaled ten years earlier at the Olympics. "If Germany is permitted to take part in the next Olympics, I have no fears with respect to the defense of [my] Olympic title. Only 33 years of age I cannot yet reckon myself to the old iron. If I had the proper diet, I could today threaten to break many a world's record." For the time being, however, he could only cherish the hope of seeing his American sporting friends again and be able to "discuss the joys and worries connected with weightlifting."⁹

Josef Manger never regained his national title. It was assumed by Theo Aaldering who remained West Germany's post-war champion through much of the 1950s, and there is no evidence that he ever saw his erstwhile American friends again. But he was the first of the big heavyweights—the likes of Paul Anderson, Doug Hepburn, and Vasily Alexeev—who would

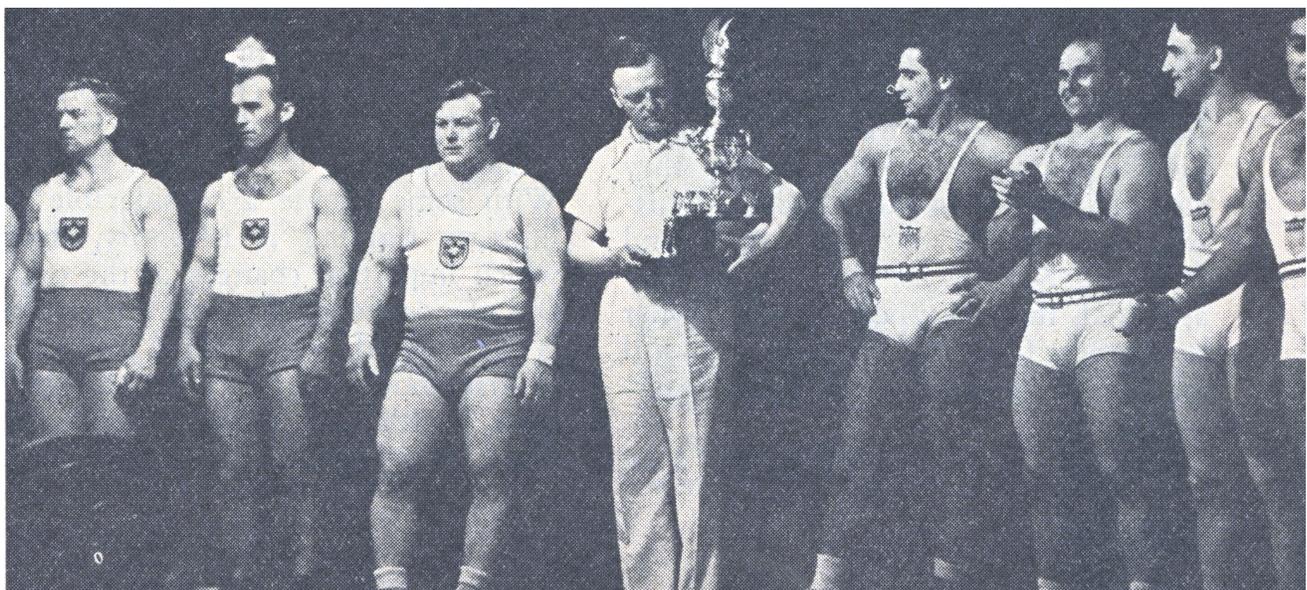
dominate the world stage in later decades. After the restoration of his civilian status, he resumed normal life as a tax collector and salesman in his hometown of Bamberg where a street was named for him. He died without fanfare on 13 March 1991, at age 77.¹⁰

However, Josef Manger's early life was full of drama associated with his becoming a weightlifting champion in the early 1930s, a feat that was complicated by Adolf Hitler's assumption of power and establishment of a totalitarian government. Ostracism from his athletic club and further participation in the sport would normally have resulted from his outspoken anti-Nazi views. But his Olympic and world championships victories as a heavyweight lifter, often associated with the reputation of world's strongest man, made him a valuable propaganda tool. Hence Manger never had to recant his early views. His dilemma was resolved by the regime overlooking his past and making him a Nazi by default, replete with a government position and entitlement to bring glory to the fatherland on the world stage. Manger judiciously avoided the limelight during the war as recollections of his past victories subsided. Afterwards, however, he encountered a second dilemma when American occupying authorities used his presumed Nazi status to deny him restoration to full rights as a German citizen. Seeking relief from this stigma and suffering from his homeland's desperate food shortage, Manger drew on the friendship engendered by his association with Americans in prewar competitions. John Terpak's unqualified endorsement on behalf of

American weightlifters not only provided leverage for Manger to escape the double dilemma posed by his role as a passive Nazi, but an illustration that weightlifting could be employed as an instrument to promote international goodwill.

NOTES

1. "Weight Lifting, 1,500,000 Brawny Americans Expect Their Sport to Boom," *Life*, 29 October 1945, 57-59.
2. Manger to Terpak, 1 February 1946, letter in author's collection.
3. At the subsequent national championships in Philadelphia, Terpak easily won the lightweight title with lifts of 220, 220, and 297, for a 737-pound total which was 27½ pounds more than that of runner-up Bobby Mitchell. "National A.A.U. Senior Weight Lifting Championship and Final U.S.A. Olympic Tryouts," *Strength & Health* 4 (August 1936): 30. Of America's much-vaunted middleweights, only Stanczyk, lifting as a lightweight, won a gold medal at the Paris world championships in 1946, while middleweights Terpak and Spellman took second and third, close behind Khadr El-Touni of Egypt. John Davis, despite Terpak's skepticism, easily won the heavyweight crown. David Webster, *The Iron Game: An Illustrated History of Weight Lifting* (Irvine, Scotland; by the author, 1976), 87.
4. Terpak to Manger, 14 May 1946, letter in author's collection.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Terpak to U.S. Army Commanding Officers, 30 April 1946.
7. *Ibid.*
8. As a heavyweight, Josef Strassberg won a gold medal at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam and the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. He also garnered first place at the 1929 European championships in Vienna and third place in Munich (1930), Luxembourg (1931), and Essen (1933). As a middleweight, Galimberti won a gold medal at the 1924 Paris Olympics and silver medals at Amsterdam (1928) and Los Angeles (1932). Webster, *Iron Game*, 75-76, 85-86.
9. Manger to Terpak, 24 June 1946, letter in the author's collection.
10. For a concise review of Manger's competitive life to 1941 see "Josef Manger (Germany)" at <https://chidlovski.livejournal.com/1039322.html> and "Theo Aaldering" at https://second.wiki/wiki/theo_aaldering.



The Bob Hoffman Trophy was presented to the Germans for their victory in the two special exhibition contests. It is held by Karl Herr, manager of the German team. Josef Manger stands immediately to his right.