

The Father of Athletics, Theodor Siebert (1866-1961): A Life Amongst Bodybuilding, Life Reform and Esoterica.

[Der Athletenvater, Theodor Siebert (1866-1961): Eine Biographie zwischen Körperkultur, Lebensreform und Esoterik (Gottingen: Norbert Klatt Verlag, 1999) ISBN: 3-928312-08-1]



Bernd Wedemeyer

Translation and Introduction by David Chapman

In November 1950 readers of Ray Van Cleef's column in *Strength & Health* magazine were asked to help out a deserving pioneer of the iron game. They were told that "an opportunity awaits some good Samaritan to relieve the plight of Prof. Theodor Siebert of Germany." This innovative trainer, who had played a decisive role in advancing progressive weight training, had fallen on bad days after World War II and was in dire need of clothing for both himself and his daughter. It had been twelve years since the ill-fated octogenarian had last obtained a pair of shoes, and now the situation was desperate. Siebert would "appreciate any gifts of discarded or unused articles of clothing suitable for either himself or his daughter." Unfortunately, this pathetic appeal went largely unheeded, and a little less than a year later an even more urgent notice appeared in the magazine; this time Van Cleef asked his readers to send food since the Professor was close to starving.

These sad notices constituted the first time many American sportsmen had ever heard of Theodor Siebert, the extraordinary man who had been an important innovator in the field of weight training and physical culture. This man who had founded the first training school for athletics and

physical culture in Germany and who had produced a number of important books on the subject of weight training was still alive and struggling to exist. He was among the first to create a systematized approach to weight training. Regardless of these accomplishments, Siebert was destined to live in misery until he died in April of 1961. The East German government was either unable or unwilling to alleviate his suffering despite many requests and petitions.

It was little wonder that Siebert was unfamiliar to the English-speaking world, since he had done most of his work in an obscure little village far from the world's sporting centers. Perhaps if he had moved away from his provincial backwater, he might have made a bigger impression on the athletic world. Instead, he was content to let the major players in the weight training and wrestling world come to him. Yet there were many who had sought out this enigmatic man in order to learn from his experience and his analytical mind. In his heyday, Siebert had counted such men as George Hackenschmidt, George Lurich, Herman Goerner, and the Saxon brothers among his pupils. But Siebert remained a humble man, and he never enjoyed much luck at cashing in on his method, so when the great athletes no longer chose to make

the journey to Alsleben-an-der-Saale, Siebert had neither the will nor the means to pursue them. In the end, he was reduced to selling books and writing the occasional article for crackpot religio-spiritualist magazines.

Another more significant reason for his obscurity was that Siebert decided to remain an instructor all his life rather than embarking on the other career path that most other muscular men of the time chose: performing on stage as a professional strongman. Theodor Siebert lacked the show business acumen that would have made him known to larger numbers of people; instead, he preferred the unremunerative work of improving the physiques and lifting techniques of others. As noble as it was, this decision kept him out of the public eye and also meant that he was not nearly as famous as other less deserving contemporaries. It did, however, allow him to devise his theories in peace.

Fortunately, Siebert's memory was kept alive by a few scholars and sportsmen, and it was to these that biographer Bernd Wedemeyer turned when he began to write his book. I am proud to say that I played a small part in resurrecting the Professor's memory since I was able to connect the author of this biography, Dr. Bernd Wedemeyer, with one of his most important sources. In 1995 I met an extraordinary man, former weightlifting champion Albert Delaitte of Sprimont, Belgium. In the course of our meeting, I learned that Delaitte had known and corresponded with Theodor Siebert until the great man's death in 1961. Almost alone among all the athletes of the West, Delaitte had continued to show some interest in Siebert and his predicament.

It was clear to the Belgian that Siebert was in dire straits. The Professor had written to Delaitte in 1953 that his pension was only 75 marks per month when 200-300 were necessary to live. If it were not for the food parcels that Delaitte and others sent him, Siebert would surely have died of starvation. Clearly, the appeals that were issuing from Ray Van Cleef

were not the only ones at this time. Finally in desperation, Siebert told his Belgian friend that he had an unpublished manuscript of a book that he had written on the lives and exploits of one hundred famous strongmen (many of whom Siebert had known personally). The book consisted of 140 type-written pages and 60 photographs, and he wanted to sell the manuscript and all future rights to it for 1,500 East German Marks, a ridiculously paltry sum even at that time. Delaitte attempted to broker the work to various publishers all over the world, but no one was interested. After his death, Siebert's daughter wrote to Delaitte saying that she had loaned the book to a student who was writing his thesis, and the work was never returned. There the trail ends. Neither Delaitte nor Wedemeyer was able to track down this priceless document. Like its author, the book was probably stuffed away in some forgotten corner and left to rot.

Fortunately, Albert Delaitte was able to send Siebert a few boxes of food and these helped keep body and soul together. After I met and understood how important Delaitte's link with Siebert was, I was able to connect him with Bernd Wedemeyer whom I knew was writing a book on the Germany pioneer. The rest, as they say, is history.

And what a history . . . The constraints of space have made it impossible to present here little more than a few tantalizing pages from Wedemeyer's excellent book. The author has revealed many hitherto unknown facts about Siebert, his techniques, and his times. As well as the German pioneer's work in muscle building and weightlifting, Wedemeyer has spent an appropriate amount of space exploring the other passion of Siebert's life, his credence in theosophy and the occult. Those who can read German are most heartily encouraged to read the entire book. It will be the standard work on Siebert for many years to come.

—David Chapman