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**CURIOUS MINNESOTA**

# AN ISOLATIONIST, YES. BUT A NAZI SPY?

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Associated Press via Hennepin County Library

Minnesota Sen. Ernest Lundeen, right, a leading opponent of U.S. involvement in World War II, died in a 1940 air crash.

The catastrophic 1940 plane crash that killed U.S. Sen. Ernest Lundeen silenced one of the country's leading opponents of American intervention in World War II.

But it wouldn't be long before a sinister claim emerged about the longtime Minnesota politico: He was spreading Nazi propaganda.

Lundeen is the unlikely star of the opening episode of "Ultra," a hit MSNBC podcast hosted by Rachel Maddow that was released last fall. It's about efforts in the 1930s by extremist right-wing elements in the United States, aided and abetted by Nazis, to keep the nation out of World War II and perhaps even install a fascist regime in Washington.

Jessica Rappaport, a high school tutor from Hopkins, was riveted by the podcast. She and two other readers recently turned to Curious Minnesota, the Star Tribune's community reporting project, to learn more about Lundeen.

"I've never heard this story, and I pretty much grew up here," she said. "Where was Lundeen from? Was he a spy? What he did — did that have something to do with the plane crash?"

It's a good question, since even the basic facts of the story sound like something out of a screenplay — enough that Steven Spielberg is pursuing a film based on the podcast.

Lundeen was a Minneapolis lawyer who espoused liberal views on domestic issues and stood firmly against American entanglements in foreign wars. He connected with a well-paid Nazi propagandist named

George Sylvester Viereck, who fed the senator pro-German speeches to advance the goals of Adolf Hitler's Berlin. Lundeen's increasingly close ties to a Nazi agent would haunt him in his final days, when it appeared his secret was about to spill out.

Before it became public, however, Lundeen died in a mysterious plane crash in northern Virginia on Aug. 31, 1940 — the deadliest civilian U.S. crash ever at the time. It was never entirely clear what caused the crash: A blinding lightning flash? Sudden wind shear? Disabled pilots?

All 25 on board were killed, including three passengers who worked for the FBI and the Justice Department. We might never know, Washington columnist Drew Pearson wrote, "whether G-men on the plane tangled with Lundeen in flight, or whether it was an act of God and the weather."

#### **A short-lived victory**

Lundeen was born in 1878 on a South Dakota farm to Swedish immigrants. He served in the Spanish-American War before graduating from Carleton College in Northfield. After studying law at the University of Minnesota, where he was the school's champion orator, he began practicing law in Minneapolis in 1906.

It wasn't long before he stepped into the political arena. He was elected as a Republican in 1910 to the state House representing southern Hennepin County. A 1911 legislative manual called him "a

fearless and able young man" with "an excellent record on progressive measures," such as election reforms and labor legislation.

Voters sent Lundeen to Congress in 1916, but he had barely settled into his new job before President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany. Lundeen was one of the 50 in the House who voted no.

The young congressman was castigated as unpatriotic. The Lake Harriet Commercial Club accused him of "a disloyal and seditious spirit" and dropped him as a member. Former President Theodore Roosevelt, speaking in Minneapolis, called Lundeen a "shadow Hun." He was defeated in the 1918 primary.

Temper was still running high the following year, when Lundeen went to Ortonville, Minn., to speak against U.S. membership in the League of Nations. A group of men led by the sheriff hustled him off the platform and took him to the train depot, where they locked him into a refrigerated rail car and sent him out of town.

#### **Resisting 'war fever'**

The incident didn't stop Lundeen from seeking office. He suffered nine straight electoral defeats over 13 years, running for everything from the U.S. House and Senate to governor and even chief justice of the state Supreme Court. He finally returned to Congress, this time as a Farmer-Laborite, in 1932.

Lundeen was getting set to run for re-election in 1936

when the Farmer-Labor Party tapped him to replace Floyd B. Olson, who had suddenly died, as its candidate for the U.S. Senate. He won handily, tallying 62% of the vote against his Republican opponent.

As senator, Lundeen supported workers' rights, fought for unemployment insurance and backed much of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. But as war loomed in Europe, he won fame as an outspoken opponent of U.S. intervention.

In a 1939 NBC radio address, Lundeen said he was resolved "never to vote an American dollar or a drop of American blood into the quarrels of Europe."

"Nowhere in the country was this feeling more pronounced than in the Upper Midwest," said Doug Rossinow, an author and history professor at Metropolitan State University who has taught extensively on 20th century U.S. history. "To them it was a replay of the war fever in 1917."

As Germany flew bombing raids over Great Britain in October 1939, Lundeen suggested it would be a good time for the U.S. to seize the British West Indies in return for unpaid war debts. Most in Congress thought that absurd, but Viereck was impressed.

#### **Helping a Nazi agent**

Viereck, who was born in Germany and became a naturalized American, had been acquainted with Lundeen since 1917. Now, with the German government intent on

keeping the U.S. from joining Great Britain and France, Viereck wanted to rekindle that relationship.

He also knew the senator was hard up for cash — which could be readily supplied by the German embassy in Washington. Lundeen had two children and kept homes in Edina and Wayzata, as well as in Washington, D.C.

"It's telling that Lundeen was the first person Viereck got involved with," said Bradley Hart, a Washington-based historian whose 2018 book, "Hitler's American Friends," provided a lot of material for Maddow's podcast.

Viereck supplied speeches and position papers for insertion in the Congressional Record by about 20 Capitol Hill anti-interventionists, who attacked the Roosevelt administration's plans to ramp up defense spending and establish a peacetime draft.

Then he had the material reprinted and mailed to tens of thousands of Americans using franked, postage-free envelopes supplied by the congressmen. One Lundeen speech was sent to 125,000 households at taxpayer expense.

Lundeen's Senate office became "Viereck's Washington headquarters," according to the 1942 book "Sabotage! The Secret War Against America."

In March 1940, Lundeen delivered a speech beneath the Nazi swastika at a white-tie dinner in New York hosted by the German-American Com-

merce board. With him on the platform were several German officials and Duke Carl Eduard, a special emissary of Hitler's.

"It is our duty to cultivate friendly, cordial relations with the great German Reich and its people," Lundeen said, according to a copy of the speech.

#### **'Gone too far to go back'**

The morning of the plane crash, Lundeen's secretary found the senator sobbing in his office.

"I've gone too far to go back," he said. He continued to cry as she drove him to the airport, according to the podcast.

"By this point, the Viereck story is starting to get out," Hart said. "If you're Lundeen, you know two things: Your relationship with Viereck is pretty deep, and your financial relationship with Viereck is very real. It would have been ruinous to have that exposed."

Among the debris left in the cornfield by the crash was a stained, 106-page speech Lundeen was going to deliver that weekend in Minnesota on German contributions to the United States.

"There is so little foundation for the hysterical cry that Hitler is attacking the world that it would not be worth mentioning were it not for the invidious intrigue behind it," Lundeen planned to say.

And he suggested that Germany was interested only in reclaiming the territory it had lost in World War I. "To this day, Germany has to my knowledge taken no step which was



not directed at, or incidental to, the restoration of pre-1914 Germany and Austria.”

Political leaders, shocked by Lundeen’s death, rushed to pay him tribute. Mourners packed the State Capitol rotunda for his funeral, and he was buried at Fort Snelling National Cemetery with military honors.

“In his stand against conscription and the New Deal foreign policy, he showed himself a very courageous man,” said Minnesota’s senior senator, Henrik Shipstead.

But only a week later, Pearson reported in his nationally syndicated column that Lundeen was being investigated by the Justice Department when he died. The proof was the three Justice employees on the same plane, who were trying to find out “the extent to which Berlin was definitely hooked up” with the isolationist bloc in the Senate, Pearson wrote.

The column created such a furor in Washington that the very next day, Attorney General Robert Jackson publicly denied the Justice Department had been investigating Lundeen. In May 1941, Norma Lundeen went on NBC radio to deny charges made by Pearson and another columnist, Walter Winchell, that her late husband wasn’t a loyal American.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover also denied Lundeen was under investigation, Hart said, “but that’s clearly not true.” Hoover and the Justice Department just wanted it all to go away, he said.

### Details emerge

Lundeen’s affiliations continued to be scrutinized during the 1942 trial of Viereck, who was ultimately convicted of failing to disclose his Nazi ties when registering as a foreign agent.

Testimony revealed that despite her protestations about her husband’s innocence, Norma Lundeen had removed his files on Viereck after the crash. One of Lundeen’s former secretaries testified that he was so concerned about the matter that he searched Viereck’s briefcase and sneaked into the office at night to pore over Lundeen’s files.

If Roosevelt, an interventionist, hadn’t run for an unprecedented third term, the door may have been opened to an alternative perspective on U.S. foreign policy around which Lundeen and other isolationists could have rallied, Hart said.

“These men might have achieved power,” he said. “And if so, U.S. history would have been very different.”

Hart said he wouldn’t call Lundeen a spy. “Typically spies give away classified information, but I don’t think he would have had access to that,” he said. “Certainly he helped a German agent of influence and helped with political intelligence.”

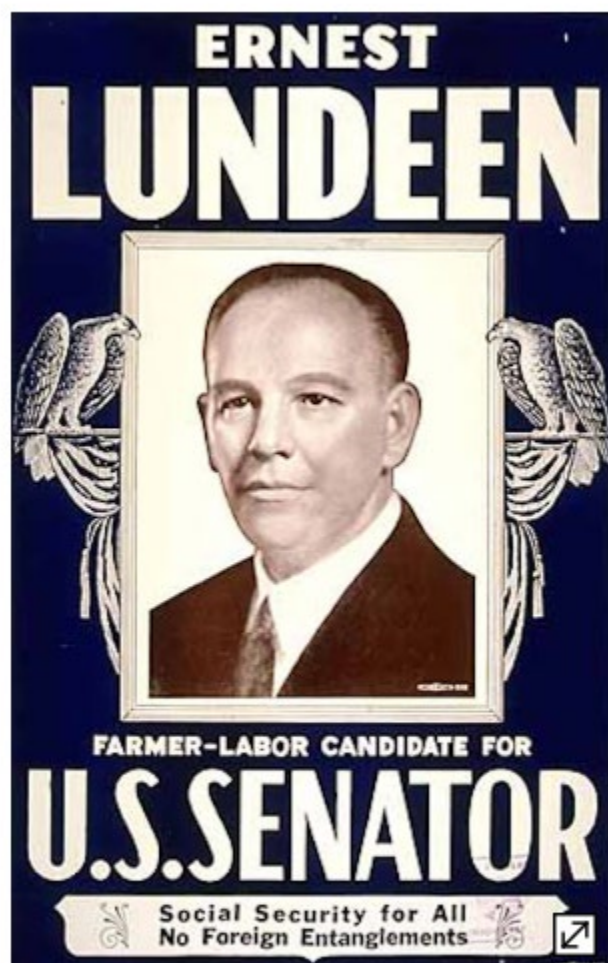
The newfound interest in the story, Hart said, “has been surprising and gratifying. Because it is a story that people need to know about.”

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HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY

Ernest Lundeen during a run for Congress in 1929.



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A campaign poster for Lundeen's 1936 U.S. Senate campaign.



LOVETTSVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

People examine the wreckage of the crash in Lovettsville, Virginia that killed Sen. Ernest Lundeen and 24 others.



FILE PHOTO

George Sylvester Viereck in 1941.





HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY

Sen. Ernest Lundeen's casket in the rotunda of the State Capitol in 1940.





HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY

Norma Lundeen in 1944.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

George Sylvester Viereck was escorted to a police van following his 1942 conviction for not disclosing his Nazi affiliations when registering as a foreign agent.

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PRESS RELEASE

By United States Senator,  
Ernest Lundeen. Banquet  
given by the Board of Trade  
for German-American Commerce, Inc.,  
in honor of the President of the  
German Red Cross, His Royal  
Highness The Duke Karl Eduard of  
Saxe Coburg and Gotha at the  
Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City  
on March 20, 1940 at 7:45 p.m.

It is our duty to cultivate friendship and trade with all nations.

It is our duty to cultivate friendly, cordial relations with the great  
German Reich and its people.

We are disciples of Washington, Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln.

These great spirits and American leaders laid down the principles of  
friendship and trade with all, entangling alliances with none, and  
under their leadership America grew to glory and greatness.

Absolute neutrality in the affairs of Europe is the very first  
principle of friendship and trade with all.

America welcomes a distinguished German citizen who comes here in  
the spirit of fraternity and friendship to help build a better  
understanding between two great nations.



The time is here now when the great flow of trade between Germany and America must flow unhindered into every channel. The records show that our exports to Germany heavily exceed our imports, giving our people a tremendous balance of trade in our favor.

I ask my fellow citizens to remember that the greater German Reich, with its population of 105 million people, is one of the greatest trade areas in all the world. There is every reason that there should be a free and unhindered flow of commerce without any penalties or discriminations on the part of either nation.

In these difficult days of world history we must heed the words of Washington who said, "Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike for another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other."

Absolute neutrality in the quarrels of Europe has proven a powerful stimulant to America's greatness. A policy of interference in Europe and a policy of favoritism ends in tragedy and disaster. This is as clear as crystal and is good American doctrine.



In America every fourth citizen is of German blood. Their mighty names have contributed to the shining events in American history. In culture, in science, in arts, in music, in medicine, in business, on the farm and in the factory we meet true, strong, stalwart Americans of German blood whose highest aim and whose great purpose is the building of a greater and better America.