The Democratic Embrace of Hermann the German

You've probably never heard of Hermann the German and likely never stopped to greet him in New Ulm, Minnesota. Then again, you could have driven through town and not seen him at all. You've got to go south and up into the wooded hills.

But once you're there, he's a can't-miss. Hermann the German stands 32-feet tall— you heard that right. What's more, his statue stands 102 feet above town—way up there. Hermann the German ain't no "small wonder"—he's huge.

He has a real name— it's Arminius of Cheruscan, enough of a mouthful to prompt Martin Luther himself to bestow a nickname, so ever since the Reformation he's been Hermann Deutsch or Hermann the German.

Hermann burnishes a huge sword and faces east towards the Romans, I guess. He's a freedom fighter who thwarted not one, not two, but three Roman garrisons with a few ragtag rebs to gain German liberation from Roman tyranny more than two thousand years ago. You heard that right— 2000 years.

Hermann's heroics happened in the year we might call 9. Not 1009 or 309, but 9. His great-great-grandchildren wouldn't have believed a huge continent called North America existed. The guy goes way back.

That huge statue came to mind when a news story broke about the Pieper twins, a couple of World War II radio operators, just 19 years old and from Nebraska, who were killed when their ship hit a mine in the English Channel, thirteen days after D-Day in 1944. One of the twins, Louie, was buried in the military cemetery just off Normandy beach, but Henry's remains were never found.

Not, at least, until a history project by a high school kid named Vanessa Taylor prompted government officials to speculate about the remains of six American sailors whose remains were retrieved from the LST-523, the ship on which both twins served.
A French salvage team found the wreck in 1961 and located the remains of six seaman, one of them in the radio room, where Henry Pieper served.

Had to be Henry. Had to be.

So today, thanks to a Nebraska high school girl, the Pieper twins' remains lay side by side at Normandy, where they and so many others were killed.

So, what do the Pieper twins have to do with Hermann the German? Stay with me. Louis and Henry Pieper were themselves the children of German immigrants, on their way across the English Channel in support of an Allied Army sworn to destroy guess who?--Germany, the Third Reich and their mustachioed maniac fuhrer.

You can't help wonder what it must have been like for millions of Americans of German heritage to send their children off to a war against the Huns, two of them in fact. Two world wars. Hundreds of thousands did it, lots of Mas and Pas from right here in our world.

If you think there's something weird about New Ulm, Minnesota, erecting a huge to a German tribal hero dead by the year 50, a man who never even heard of the US of A, so do I. But then, there's something weird about democracy. Very weird.

You may have heard this one. After the first constitutional congress, a Mrs. Powell button-holed Ben Franklin. "Well, Doctor," she said, "what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin's answer bears repeating, "A republic," he said, "if you can keep it."

A republic can make even Hermann the German an American hero, strange as that may seem. Only a democracy can make a foreigner one of us. That, too, is no small wonder.