

LIFELONG ATHLETE 'A TOM BRADY, ONLY OLDER'

82-year-old leaves aging in his wake



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR



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ABOVE: Dr. John Howell, 82, negotiates a slalom course on Lake Anna behind Al Luck's boat. Howell still competes in slalom events and has won regional championships several times. **TOP:** Howell gets geared up before hitting the water.

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Dr. John Howell doesn't just break the stereotypes about aging, he completely blows them out of the water while on skis—or on the tennis court with a nasty backhand or on the dance floor with a few Cuban steps.

Howell, a dentist who continued to practice until he was in his late 70s, remains an internationally ranked water skier in his 80s.

Even during the winter, he skis over a slalom course on Lake Anna where the water stays a warm 70-some degrees after being heated to produce steam for the nuclear plant and then released.

He also plays tennis several times a week, snow skis at Massanutten, takes cruises, goes to the Kennedy Center and takes his wife out dancing—she's 29 years younger—when COVID-19 conditions make it safe to do so.

His level of activity inspires both seniors and juniors.

"When I found out his age, I was dumbfounded," said Steve

Flanagan, who's part of the tennis group Howell plays with and is almost 20 years younger. "He runs like a deer. I can't get over how impressive his stamina is, his ability, his speed. He's a genetic freak of nature. He's a Tom Brady, only older."

Born a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Howell is 82 and always has been a "super jock," as he calls himself. The son of a career military man and West Point graduate, Howell went to four high schools as his father got different assignments—and

SEE HOWELL, A16



Lori and John Howell, shown at a wedding last fall, enjoy dancing, cruises and the theater.

HOWELL

► FROM A1

he played practically every sport known to man during high school and college.

He kept a similar pace in the decades that followed.

Howell already had finished undergraduate work at the University of Virginia and dental school at what was then the Medical College of Virginia when he volunteered to serve in the Vietnam War in 1966.

He had done a little water skiing before then, but when he got assigned to a camp along the shores of Cam Ranh Bay, Howell told the officer ordering supplies what he needed for his dental facility. He also casually mentioned that it was “too bad we don’t have a ski boat.”

Within a week, Howell had his dental equipment—and a 16-foot fiberglass boat.

“To make it interesting, they had jellyfish the size of trash-can lids with tentacles going out so many feet,” Howell said. “You could fall out there and it looked like someone beat you with a willow. It didn’t take me long to learn to get up, I’ll tell you that.”

Howell would apply that same kind of tenacity to other sports and endeavors in the years that followed.

“The man has kept in shape and obviously he’s got super eyesight and quick reactions to be able to move, both through a slalom course while water skiing and during tennis, where he loves to come up and play the net,” said Mike Puig, who organizes the tennis group. “But he’s been active his whole life, that’s the thing. He never stopped, he never became a couch potato.”

‘NOTHING BORING ABOUT HIM’

Howell was a dentist in Woodbridge for 51 years and for some of that period, he divided his time between homes in Arlington and lakefront property west of Spotsylvania Courthouse. In the mid-1970s, he and fellow water skier Joe Cornett were so desperate to find a place where they could practice—without interference from jet skis, fishing boats and joy riders—he chartered a plane to search for possible private lakes.

He found Jennings Pond off Robert E. Lee Drive,



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Al Luck pilots his boat through a slalom course as his friend Dr. John Howell, 82, skis on Lake Anna.

and he and Cornett found partners to develop the 269 acres around it. The two men also removed stumps and layers of mud, drained the lake, cleared the bed and built a new dam and spillway—all to make the lake ski worthy. In a late 1970s story in *The Free Lance-Star*, Howell called it “one of the finest ski sites on the East Coast.”

The partners later built a second body of water—Bear Lake—that’s fed by natural springs. Those involved got to pick their lots based on when they joined the partnership and Howell’s first dibs entitled him to a home that abuts both lakes.

The four children he had with his late first wife got to enjoy obstacle courses he set up at the Jennings Pond property, where they could swim, kayak, shoot BB guns and bows and arrows and rope-swing into the lake.

The water has also been a source of enjoyment for him and his second wife, Lori. She was a dance instructor, and she taught him how to improve his footwork—which he says helped immensely on the tennis court—and he taught her how to water ski.

Like his fellow tennis players, she never would have guessed how old he was when they first met. Even when she realized the difference, she wasn’t concerned because he



Some of John Howell’s water skiing awards and medals fill the top of a pool table in his home.

didn’t look or act his age.

In fact, when Flanagan once asked what drew her to him, she said it was because she’d seen him with his shirt off and he was ripped. He has a headful of hair, few wrinkles and no age spots.

“He’s just a fun, amazing, exiting man,” she said. “There’s nothing boring about him, and I can tell you that I’m not neglected in any way by being married to an 82-year-old.”

‘IT’S ALL ORIGINAL’

Not only does Howell keep moving—with a schedule that often includes daily sports matches—but he also does everything with a pedal-to-the-metal attitude. A photographer following him to Lake Anna had trouble keeping up with him on winding back roads. Once there, Howell wasted little time before climbing into the boat and heading for the slalom course.

His wife said he works at staying active and healthy. When he wants a snack, he picks an apple or orange while she says she’d probably reach for popcorn.

He doesn’t avoid red meat, but he doesn’t over-indulge, either. He weighs himself daily to make sure he stays on track and his weight has hovered around 163 pounds for decades.

Howell also has taken supplements for 30 to 40 years and often suggests them for friends and fellow players having pain or joint problems. He favors a tablet that combines glucosamine, chondroitin and methyl sulfonylmethane, or MSM, “to get rid of all those shoulder aches and knee pains and stuff like that,” Howell said. “It’s a preemptive strike so I don’t have problems.”

He also takes an antioxidant and another supplement to keep his prostate in check. He takes medicine for high blood pres-

sure and gout, especially after he played a tennis match while suffering a painful bout in both feet.

“Still, I went out and played. It was not of the happier times of my life, but my partner and I did quite well,” he said. “Certain things in life you don’t forget, and I’ll never forget that.”

Howell admits he has a high threshold for pain and that may be one reason age hasn’t been able to catch up with him—either that or he simply moves too fast for it. He avoids pain relievers because they’re bad for the kidneys, even though there were plenty of times when he probably needed relief.

He’s broken ribs, dislocated shoulders, knocked himself out, had concussions and suffered the normal twists and bends. Most injuries came on the water.

“You’re going 45 to 50 mph and all of a sudden you crash,” he said, “it’s like having somebody dismember your body.”

Even so, he’s proud he hasn’t done any major damage.

“If you look at my knees, they are perfect. No scars, no torn cartilage, no torn ACLs, no replacements, nothing,” he said. “It’s all original, like an antique car.”

And one that plans to keep running, full throttle.

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‘THIS REALLY IS A GREAT AMERICAN STORY’

WWII love letter finds its way back to family

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

A World War II soldier's letter to his sweetheart—perhaps his last correspondence, as he was killed in action less than a month later—has found its way to the serviceman's family, almost 77 years after it was written.

It's not clear where the love note was for all those years after Pfc. Glenn Campbell sent it to Viola Grosso, who was attending what was then called Mary Washington College, on March 8, 1945.

All that's known is last year, the Air Mail envelope unceremoniously tumbled out of a mattress stuffed inside a Virginia Beach storage unit. A relative of the couple who found it contacted The Free Lance-Star after Christmas to seek help finding descendants of the writer or recipient.

“Having written enough of these during the Vietnam War, you kind of feel the emotion,” said Harry Morley, a veteran who lives in Washington state and was visiting the East Coast when he learned about the letter from long ago.

Members of Morley's family have served in the military since Pearl Harbor, so he was keenly sensitive to its value. What he didn't expect was the overwhelming response from others just as determined as he was for it to end up in the right hands.

“I feel humbled [to be] part of the process that took his letter back through time to his family,” Morley said. “It deeply touched me and my military family.”

As a result of connections created by the story, the letter traveled from Virginia Beach to a Fredericksburg organization that specializes in retrieving remains of American service members killed overseas. Then it went to Texas after the soldier's family was tracked down.

In between, genealogists from near and far—including one in Massachusetts—helped research the sweethearts and build family trees online, complete with yearbook photos and marriage and death certificates.

The letter never ended up in the Netherlands, but the soldier's story extends to there as well. Three generations of the same family have taken care of Campbell's grave since 1946—but that's a separate story.

Despite the twists and turns it took

SEE LETTER, A16



PROVIDED PHOTOS

David Sims says a 1945 letter to a Fredericksburg college student is the only correspondence he has from his uncle, WWII soldier Glenn Campbell.

WAR-TORN FAMILIES SHARE CONNECTION, CARE PACKAGES AND ‘UNDYING GRATITUDE’

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Two things about the life and death of Pfc. Glenn Campbell have amazed his nephew, David Sims of Austin, Texas.

That a letter Campbell wrote in 1945 would seemingly “fall out of the sky” and land in Sims' lap 77 years later has been almost as incredible as three generations of the same family caring for his uncle's grave since 1946.

Growing up, Sims said his mother and grandmother didn't talk much about the loss of Campbell, probably because it was too painful for them. Sims tried to find out more as he got older, but never knew until this century that his uncle's grave had been “adopted” by a family in the Netherlands.

In the early 2000s, his mother, Dortha, got a call out of the blue. A man in the Netherlands was seeking information about relatives of a soldier buried in the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten.

Thinking it was a scam, she passed the info along to Sims, who decided to reach out to Robin Huijnen. Sims learned the Dutchman is the third generation of his family to voluntarily put flowers and flags on



Robin Huijnen is the caretaker of Glenn Campbell's grave in the Netherlands. He's the third generation of his family to do so.

Campbell's grave since the year after the war ended.

Sims asked his mother about it and was even more shocked when she pulled out a box of letters written in the late 40s between the Campbells and Huijnen's.

Marie Huijnen, Robin's grandmother, formally adopted the grave. A letter from the Civilian Committee Margraten to the Campbell family in July 1946 explained the

SEE FAMILIES, A16



Campbell, 21, served in a glider squadron and was involved in the last major airborne effort of WWII.

LETTER

▶ FROM A1

to get the letter to David Sims, Campbell's nephew, Sims is certain it was heaven-sent. He believes there was divine direction, every step of the way, from the time it fell out of the mattress.

"Definitely, I think it could have been easily whisked away and thrown in the trash," said Sims, a retired engineer who lives in Austin, Texas. "Like my wife says, it's like Glenn is reaching out to us from the grave."

'GREAT AMERICAN STORY'

Glenn H. Campbell and Viola Grosso attended high school together in Norfolk, then she went to college in Fredericksburg and he went off to war.

In his three-page letter addressed to "Dearest Via," the 21-year-old Campbell doesn't say much about his military activities because that was prohibited in wartime correspondence. He was with the 17th Airborne Division and 680th Glider Field Artillery Battalion—a unit whose gliders were towed into action by transport planes, then dropped behind enemy lines under what then-Gen. Dwight Eisenhower described as "withering crossfire" from Germans on the ground.

Because Campbell couldn't mention that, he instead described the many Hollywood stars who had entertained the troops and how lonesome he felt when he heard Bing Crosby crooning on the radio. "I sure wish you were here with me," he wrote to Viola. "That would make everything strictly OK."

The letter is one of millions of such pieces of mail penned from foxholes on the frontlines to loved ones back home, said Justin LeHew, a retired Marine sergeant major who heads the nonprofit History Flight in Fredericksburg. It focuses on bringing home the remains of U.S. military members missing in action from World War II to Vietnam—and has located 130 servicemen since 2003.

LeHew saw the story in the Dec. 28 Free Lance-Star and brought it to his office, thinking he'd get around to researching it when he had time. But as he walked past display cases of uniforms with names and service insignias still at-



FILE / MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

In Fredericksburg, retired Marine Justin LeHew helped locate the family of a soldier who penned a recently found WWII letter. He calls the note's path 'a great American story.'

tached—some of which he bought from Corky's Military and Police store in downtown Fredericksburg—he thought about families who just didn't care about pieces from their relatives' past.

"I'm a firm believer that every generation is one drug addict removed from selling off everybody's stuff," LeHew said.

Reading about the reverence the Morley family had for the letter inspired LeHew to act.

Tracking down families of long-lost service members "is the business that I'm in," he said, so he got to work, accessing records and names far beyond Google searches and online genealogy sites. Within days, he spoke with Morley, who was still visiting his relatives in Virginia Beach, and Sims, Campbell's nephew in Texas.

Sims was so eager to get his hands on the letter that he offered to drive to Virginia.

"When David was talking to me on the phone, he was in tears," LeHew said, grateful that a younger generation cared about mementoes from one who came before him. "This really is a great American story."

'DOESN'T SEEM REAL'

In the hill country of Texas, northwest of Austin, Sims was amazed that of all the letters that might fall out of a mattress, his uncle's had.

"It's the only thing we really have from him in terms



PROVIDED

Before joining the military, Glenn Campbell was an Eagle Scout in Norfolk.

of correspondence," he said. "The whole thing still doesn't seem real."

His middle name is Campbell and his late mother Dortha was the younger sister of Pfc. Glenn Campbell. Before Glenn was a soldier, he was an Eagle Scout and an all-around great kid who was adored by his family, said Sims, who's 61.

As a child, Sims didn't have an appreciation for what his uncle did—or the impact the young man's loss had on his family. That's changed over the years as he's tried to find out everything he could, even though there weren't many conversations about the fallen soldier when Sims was younger.

"I understand why my mom and grandmother didn't talk about it," Sims said. "It

was probably too painful for them."

By March 1945, the war in Europe was winding down and the Campbell family might have had a blue star hanging in their front window, announcing they had a loved one in service. They probably checked the daily news reports, hoping they'd soon see a notice about when their handsome young man might be heading home.

Instead they got a Western Union telegram notifying them that he'd been killed in action. "Just think about how horrible it would be to get that," Sims said. "Your worst fears."

Equally hard to imagine, Sims said, was what his uncle did in the war as part of a glider squadron. About two weeks after Campbell wrote Grosso, his unit participated in Operation Varsity, the last major airborne effort of the war—and the largest one to be conducted in one day and one place.

The battalion received the Distinguished Unit Citation by Eisenhower for "extraordinary heroism, efficiency and achievement in action against the enemy" during the assault crossing the Rhine River near Wesel, Germany, on March 24. The gliders were dropped into the heaviest concentration of antiaircraft fire "yet experienced in an airborne operation," the citation states.

Despite being shot at by everything the Germans could throw at them, the

Americans fought their way through. They destroyed enemy equipment and captured 150 prisoners, according to the citation.

Glenn Campbell survived that onslaught. During a counterattack by the Germans 10 days later, his jeep hit a land mine and he was killed, Sims said.

'WHAT A TREASURE'

Sims hadn't heard the name Viola Grosso before the letter surfaced. According to research shared by genealogists, she earned her bachelor's in home economics at MWC, moved back to Norfolk and taught for six years. In 1950, she married a dentist, Dr. William Stokes, and the two raised three children and built a thriving dental practice, according to her obituary.

They couple was married for 52 years until his death in 2003. She died in April 2020 and her obituary chronicled her lifelong passions, in addition to her family: gardening, reading, pets and researching healthy lifestyles. "She could always advise you as to which vitamin supplements you needed," the obituary stated.

Milbrey Bartholow, a former Fredericksburg resident and member of a military family, was intrigued by the letter from Glenn Campbell to Viola Grosso.

"It sounded like a sweet World War II love story—boy goes off to war, girl stays home and waits, only connecting via letters," she said, then wondered if Viola's things might have been put into a Virginia Beach storage locker after her death. "It is amazing that she kept that letter all these years."

Many others appreciated the military connection. Debbie Baerga, who retired after 21 years in the Marine Corps, said she has a special place in her heart for veterans and their experiences.

"We are a special breed, regardless of branch of service," the Fredericksburg woman said. "We are brothers and sisters in arms."

But she was particularly captivated by the connection to the Greatest Generation and thrilled to learn the letter had landed in family hands.

"I hope they recognize what a treasure they have," she said.

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FAMILIES

▶ FROM A1

arrangement.

"There are absolutely no expenses," it stated about the grave, which would be maintained by the cemetery but regularly decorated by the volunteers. "We want to show you our undying gratitude."

Marie Huijnen exchanged letters with Glenn Campbell's mother, who was so grateful her son wasn't being forgotten that she sent the Huijnens various items they couldn't find overseas.

Sims thought the care packages sent in those days were just random items, but there was an effort called the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe, or CARE, that arranged the packages. Americans were encouraged to spend \$10—which equates to about \$143 today—and select from a variety of CARE packages.

The standard box included 7 pounds of flour, 3 pounds of meat, 2 pounds of shortening, sugar, whole milk powder, chocolate, fruit, egg powder and soap. There were others filled with sewing materials, nursery items or baby food.



In 1946, the Huijnen family adopted the grave of American soldier Glenn Campbell, who had been buried in one location then reinterred at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten.



In 2014, David Sims and mother Dortha visit Campbell's grave. The soldier, who was killed in action in 1945, was Dortha's brother. At right, the pair gathers at the cemetery with the Huijnens.

"At that time in Europe, it was just terrible," Sims said. "You couldn't get anything.

In some ways, those years after the war were as hard as during the war."

Sims' mother and grandmother wrote to the Huijnens for a while, then the correspon-

dence—like the letter between Campbell and Viola Grosso—seemed to fall off the map. For

about 50 years, there was no contact until Robin Huijnen talked to David Sims.

But even in the decades when the families didn't communicate, a Huijnen dutifully visited Campbell's gravesite on holidays. The dedication amazed Sims, who later visited the Netherlands with his mother before her death in 2014 and met the caretakers of his uncle's grave.

"It's just hard to describe, the appreciation from the Dutch people and the French as well, everyone who was in occupied territory. It is incredible," Sims said. "We can't even begin to know what it was like for them during the occupation."

Justin LeHew, a retired Marine who operates History Flight, a nonprofit that locates remains of service-members overseas and brings them home, has noted the same kind of dedication and gratitude in online genealogy sites.

"Most of these people have open arms and they love the American soldier or Marine or whoever for what they did for them in the 1940s," he said.

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PROVIDED PHOTOS

His case challenged the power of Putin

BY CATHY DYSON

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Of all the places to find an insider on Russian politics, particularly one who knows what makes President Vladimir Putin tick, who would have thought to look in the woods of Spotsylvania County?

For there, in a \$1.6 million home with lakefront views and bookcases stacked 10 shelves high—as well as walls decorated with photos of people and places from around the world—lives Franz J. Sedelmayer. Born and educated in Germany, he also graduated from the University of Utah, served in the German Army Airborne, then joined the family business, selling defense products.

But perhaps the greatest schooling the 58-year-old received came in the 1990s, during the seven years he did

SEE RUSSIA, A16



Franz Sedelmayer's son, Daniel, (far right) and his fraternity brothers in Austria have helped with Ukrainian relief efforts.

RUSSIA

FROM A1

business with the Russian Federation. Convinced that counterterrorism was a growing—and lucrative—field and that Russia was more open to business, thanks to the policies of then-President Mikhail Gorbachev, Sedelmayer made a bid to teach special operations tactics to Russian police forces.

And he was successful, thanks in part to relationships built and friends made, including Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, a former KGB officer who was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg at the time.

“He used to be a guy like us, right up our avenue, he was a reliable person to deal with in my days in St. Petersburg,” Sedelmayer said in a 2021 video. “He was one of the guys who was a handshake guy. We agreed on something with him and it would be done.”

But Sedelmayer would see with his own eyes—and through the devastation to his own business bank account—how Putin changed as he rose to power. How that absolute power morphed into corruption as the man nicknamed “Volodya” was willing to do whatever it took to retain his chokehold.

It didn’t happen all at once, but slowly and steadily, as Putin chipped away at the foundations of a free society, Sedelmayer said. He created a Russia that not only has bombed the military and civilian targets of its neighbor, Ukraine, but also punished its own citizens who protest the action. Anyone who even mentions war and peace can be arrested, said Sedelmayer, who keeps in touch with associates in both countries and throughout Europe.

“Where Putin is today was unthinkable 20 years ago,” he said.

Last year, Sedelmayer predicted that Putin—who in previous campaigns seized land from the country of Georgia and the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine while the world watched—would continue to “flex his muscles” whenever he needed to drum up support at home.

“We can expect a lot more violence to come in the next years,” Sedelmayer said in 2021.

‘KILLING EVERYTHING’

Sedelmayer was more than an observer of Russian-style tactics, which he said at times made him feel like he was caught in an episode of “The Sopranos,” an HBO series about a New Jersey crime family. He was a victim of their way of doing business—or at least the authorities tried to make him one. After he’d built a successful business, SGC International, Sedelmayer equipped and trained police forces, including the KGB’s first SWAT team based on Western principles.

“In those days, all [Russian] law enforcement were military people,” Sedelmayer said during an interview at his home. “You see they haven’t changed their tactics, they’re bombing everything in [Ukraine], they’re killing everything on the



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Franz Sedelmayer used insight learned in his case against Russia to become an international consultant.



In 1991, Sedelmayer (right) set up a compound on Stone Island in Russia to train and equip police.



His team traveled throughout Russia by plane after discovering how many doors cash opened to them.

ground. That’s their understanding of a surgical strike.”

Likewise, police would kill everyone—including hostages in such situations—and consider the operation successful, he said.

“Our mission became to introduce them to Western-style modern law enforcement. So any piece of equipment we sold came with training, including how to put on handcuffs because most Russian cops didn’t even have handcuffs in those days,” he said. “They were tying them up with wires or rope, it was like the Middle Ages. They had cars that wouldn’t run, crime labs that didn’t work, it was just a complete disaster.”

As his company progressed, the local police force wanted a piece of the financial pie and tried to take over his business. Sedelmayer appealed to Putin because the two had spent “scores of hours” together when the German first did business in Russia, Sedelmayer wrote in a 2019 opinion piece for The New York Times.

“He sat in my headquarters on Stone Island as we conversed, in the almost-perfect German he likes to speak, over beer and Bavarian food. My trust in those early days was based on the fact that he acted rationally and appeared to be sincere in his interest in St. Petersburg,” Sedelmayer wrote. “Putin signed the registration papers for my security company and personally registered them. He advised and counseled me. He helped me expand my business.”

But when his business was threatened, Putin turned a blind eye. Even though Sedelmayer had

signed a 25-year lease on his military training compound, then-President Boris Yeltsin seized it for use as a state retreat.

Putin let it happen, Sedelmayer said, because by then, he had taken a Kremlin post and was on his rise to power.

‘ADETERMINATION’

The German businessman wasn’t about to sit by and do nothing. Sedelmayer sued the Russian Federation, which others had tried but hadn’t succeeded because the country always claimed sovereign immunity.

Sedelmayer not only won his case but he also received a settlement of more than \$7 million from Russia—almost three times the amount for which he had originally sued.

He became “the only man to collect money from Vladimir Putin,” according to the subtitle of the book “Welcome to Putingrad.” He and John Weisman, a regular on the New York Times bestseller list, wrote it in 2017 after Sedelmayer got his last payment from Russia.

It’s both a compelling narrative—humorous at times and borderline terrifying at others—as well as look at the mindset and “collective memory” of a people whose leaders historically have ruled with a hammer. It’s also a story that’s particularly relevant these days, said Paul Miller, who lives in the same lakefront neighborhood as Sedelmayer.

“Franz is a talker, outgoing, it’s what he does, as he brings people together by connecting them and has a determination to get things done,” Miller said. “Franz is a good friend and great neighbor.”

Miller said Sedelmayer

shares a trait with the late Colin Powell, Army officer and former secretary of state. “He believes in looking into things for himself” and is careful with experts, who as Powell said, sometimes have more data than judgment.

‘SUPERMAN LOST’

He took his case to a Stockholm arbitration court, but it was hardly one-and-done. Part of Russia’s successful campaign to avoid payouts included wearing down its opponents.

Sedelmayer faced 143 different court cases in three countries. It took him 2½ years to win a judgment but another 12 years for it to be enforced—and for him to collect his money.

In the “cigar room” of the expansive home he shares with his Russian-born wife Vlada, Sedelmayer laughed easily—and often—when recounting his experiences. Most times, there was barely the trace of an accent, but when asked why he was successful when others failed, it wasn’t clear if he said he was hungry or ornery enough.

He actually said hungry, but both adjectives might apply.

Sedelmayer “pushed full-court press against a system headed by someone who thinks himself Superman,” said Jack Gosnell, U.S. consul general in St. Petersburg from 1991–94, on the book jacket. “Superman lost.”

Sedelmayer represented himself at times and had two attorneys at others—and ended up paying about \$2 million in legal fees. They sometimes sought measures that hadn’t been tried before to get Russia to pay up. One example involved Lufthansa, Ger-

many’s largest airline.

Every time Lufthansa planes flew into Russian territories, they had to pay Russia fees for using their airspace. Sedelmayer convinced the courts to make him a garnishee of those fees, to be a third party to whom the money would be paid as part of his claim.

Russia didn’t like that and told Lufthansa that if it was going to pay Sedelmayer, then stay out of Russia.

“That whole thing creates a political problem for everyone, which I love because eventually somebody has to pay me because I’m not going anywhere,” Sedelmayer said.

He got such a good education about beating the state-held system, Sedelmayer became a consultant who helps others in the same situation. And he’s been paid to share his story in prestigious settings from Harvard University Law School to gatherings of London litigators.

‘TO WORLD WAR III’

While many of the photos in his home show him laughing, Sedelmayer turns serious when he talks about Ukraine. He’s glad to see the United States and its allies standing up to impose sanctions against Russia after it invaded Ukraine.

“We should have done it literally 10 or 12 or 15 years ago and we didn’t and now the only choice we have is war or no war,” he said. “Think about it.”

He believes his homeland of Germany and his adoptive home of America—he’s here on a five-year investor’s visa—and other NATO countries must give Ukraine the tools they need to survive. Not troops, but armament. Otherwise, there

THE BOOK

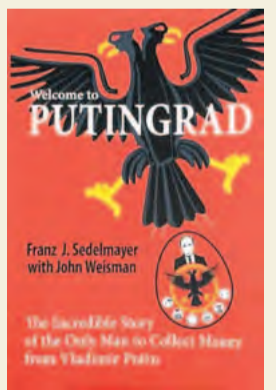
“Welcome to Putingrad” is available on Amazon and as an audio book on audible.com. It describes the historic settlement German businessman Franz J. Sedelmayer received from Russia—after the country seized his business—as well as Sedelmayer’s insight into Russian practices and President Vladimir Putin.

DON’T LAUGH: Putin takes himself seriously and can’t stand someone making fun of him, Sedelmayer said. He’s convinced that if “Saturday Night Live” were broadcast from Moscow and actor Alec Baldwin parodied Putin as he did President Donald Trump, “Baldwin’s corpse would be found one night in his hotel room,” Sedelmayer wrote.

THE BOSS: The writer observed a system similar to the Mafia, that whoever is boss can do no wrong and is almost as infallible as the pope. Every kickback, every perk goes up the chain to the boss who can get away with just about anything, Sedelmayer said, provided he doesn’t offend a higher ranking boss. In Russia, it’s known as the “nachalnik” syndrome. Sedelmayer called it “chutzpah on steroids.”

ÜBER-NACHALNIK: In 2005, Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, was visiting Putin with other American businessmen. Putin saw Kraft’s \$25,000 diamond-encrusted Super Bowl ring and asked to try it on. Putin did so, commented that he could kill somebody with it and put it in his pocket. When Kraft reached out his hand to get the ring back, Putin walked out of the room with KGB agents, according to the New York Post. In Russian society, Sedelmayer said, he hadn’t done anything wrong because he’s the boss, the “nachalnik.”

TRANSLATE THIS: Sedelmayer met his Russian born wife, Vlada, when a colleague hired her as a translator. They’ve been married 29 years and have two children in college. She speaks German, Russian, English, French and Spanish. “She’s the real talent in this family,” her husband said. “I’m just a co-pilot.”



will be no end to Putin’s destruction.

Sedelmayer learned to play hard ball and believes nations who want to preserve democracy better do the same thing.

“They should give the Russians a hard time,” Sedelmayer said. “You have to beat them in the field, you have to help the Ukrainians. It’s not going to lead us to World War III. If we don’t do that, that’s what will lead us to World War III.”

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