

The Propaganda Front

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An American Turns Traitor

SO Bob Best has turned traitor and decided to join Haw-Haw, Kaltenbach, Ward, Chandler and a few other English and Americans who have sold their native accents and their souls to Dr. Goebbels' short-wave propaganda station in Berlin.

At first there seems to have been some doubt about it in Washington. Best, for the past two decades the Vienna correspondent of an American press association, had gone to Bad Nauheim with the other American journalists caught in Germany when war was declared. Just before their departure for Lisbon, he decided not to return to his native land. According to the State Department, he said he made his decision "in the interest of history."

This interest took him quickly to Berlin. And a United Press dispatch from Washington the other day revealed: "that a person representing himself as Mr. Best had broadcast from Berlin under Nazi auspices." There is no longer any doubt that it was the fabulous Robert H. Best, a native of South Carolina, graduate of the School of Journalism of Columbia University, and known to every American correspondent in Europe and to a vast number of American tourists who met him in Vienna's Cafe Louvre, where he had made his headquarters and where he had spent most of his waking hours for 20 years.

This reporter, who had known him since 1920, heard him broadcast twice from Berlin this week. There was no mistaking the voice, the mannerisms, the slight South Carolina accent. It was Bob Best, and he was shouting Goebbels' pet inanities into the Berlin microphone.

WHY did he do it? Most men turn traitors for money. Best never had much, but he didn't care for money. Nazi money didn't turn his head. Something else did. It showed very plainly in his first two broadcasts. Like Lord Haw-Haw, he became smitten with the bug of anti-Semitism. All else—Hitler's rape of Europe, his blood lust, his suppression of civilization—was forgotten. Hatred of Jews became his one passion. Hitler became his man.

Those who knew Best would no doubt argue that a romantic attachment had something to do with his staying on in Nazi Germany, but such matters are of no concern to this column. There was, however, another reason for his decision to stay.

Best, like a very few other American foreign correspondents, stayed too long in Europe. He arrived in Vienna in 1923 or 1924, traveling on a year's fellowship from the Columbia School of Journalism. He got no further than Vienna and has remained there, mostly glued to the corner table in the Cafe Louvre, ever since. Vienna was far from South Carolina and it was a pleasant town and unless you came home sometimes you began to go European. Best never came home, even for a brief vacation.

Judging from his early broadcasts, he will cut a small figure in Goebbels' propaganda campaign to soften up Americans. He has nothing to say except to repeat the Nazi line about the Jews, and he says that badly. Apparently Goebbels has told him that he has an American audience of several millions and it was a little pitiful in his broadcasts this past week to hear him getting excited about this false prospect. This brief portrait of an American traitor is given merely for the edification of the thousands of Americans who knew him or who have read his dispatches, and also because it seemed to be one of the little tragedies of the psychological part of this war worth noting.