

Sebastian's Way:  
A Novel of the Time of  
Charlemagne

By George Steger

**For Professor Lynn Nelson, University of Kansas, whose knowledge and love  
of medieval history inspired this book,  
and  
for Jackson, so that he might know that anyone can write a novel.**

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## Persons of the Story

Adela	Count Gonduin's daughter
Adelaide	Count Leudegar's daughter
Anchesigal	Sergeant at Fortress Fernshanz; friend of Sebastian
Archambald	Soldier at Fernshanz; Sebastian's companion
Arno	The King's Count of the Palace at Worms
Athaulf	Count of the Fortress Adalgray and its lands; Konrad's father
Attalus	Horse Master (Constable) of Adalgray, later Lord of Fernshanz
Bardulf	Fernshanz youth, a free peasant; companion of Drogo
Baumgard	Steward of Fernshanz
Bernard	Frankish veteran soldier; personal aide of Ermengard
Bertha	Peasant woman; Father Louis' wife
Boldering	Leader of a gang of homeless peasants
Boniface	Christian saint and missionary to pagan German tribes
Charlemagne ( <i>Karl der Grosse</i> )	High King, later Emperor, of the Franks
Drogo	Fernshanz youth, a serf; companion of Bardulf

Edelrath	Count and personal vassal of Charlemagne; general of the army and member of the <i>missi dominici</i> (king's inspectors)
Ermengard	Sebastian's mother, sister of Count Athaulf
Father Louis	Priest at Fernshanz; Sebastian's teacher
Father Pippin	Priest at Fernshanz during the rebuilding
Fulrad	Abbot of St. Denis (monastery near Paris); a powerful churchman and Charlemagne's first arch-chaplain
Gersvind	Peasant girl in the village of Fernshanz; deeply attached to Sebastian
Gonduin	Duke and general of the army; Lord of Andernach, and father of Adela
Grennig	Deceased Count of Adalgray; Ermengard's husband and Sebastian's assumed father
Heimdal	Blind hermit; soothsayer and advisor to Attalus and Sebastian
Herlindis	Nun of the convent of Bischoffheim, later Mother Superior; tutor and friend of Adela
Karl the Hammer	Charles Martel, Mayor of the Palace, leader of the Franks under the Merovingian kings, and Charlemagne's grandfather
Karloman	Co-King of the Franks until 771 and Charlemagne's brother
Konrad	Son of Count Athaulf; later Count of Adalgray
Laidred	Learned monk; keeper of Charlemagne's library

Leudegar	Count and lord of Kostheim; one of Charlemagne's generals, and father of Adelaide
Liesel	Bardulf's wife
Liudolf	Soldier at Fernshanz; Sebastian's companion
Liudolf, the Elder	Sergeant at Fernshanz; father of Liudolf
Lothar	Inventive serf of Fernshanz; confidant of Sebastian
Lutz	Shadow-spirited peasant boy; son of Ubrigens, and brother of Gersvind
Marta	Serf and housekeeper in the lord's house at Fernshanz; medicine woman
Milo	Gersvind's son
Pippin III, the Short	King of the Franks until 768; Charlemagne's father
Regwald	One of Charlemagne's personal vassals and a high church official, member of the <i>missi dominici</i> (king's inspectors)
Sebastian	Heir of Count Grennig and Ermengard; later Lord of the Fernshanz Fortress
Simon	World traveler and trader; member of a network of Radhanite Jewish merchants ranging from Francia to the Baghdad Caliphate
Teuthardis	Hunchback leader of a band of forest brigands
Ubrigens	Frankish peasant and carpenter; father of Lutz and Gersvind, one of Sebastian's pilgrimage companions
Varnar	Captain of Charlemagne's personal guard

Welf	Count of the Saxon march (land bordering Saxon territory)
Widukind	Saxon prince and war chief

## The Historical Moment

At the end of the great Roman age, Germanic tribes, held at bay by the power of the legions for four centuries, poured across the old Rhine-Danube frontier barriers and devoured the spoils of Roman Gaul. Celts and Romans gave way to Teutons until, finally, all of Western Europe lay under German hegemony.

Of all the German tribes the Franks proved the most tenacious. By the middle of the eighth century Karl, later called *Carolus Magnus*, or Charlemagne—had ascended to power.

As before, war was what sustained the High King Karl. He remained mighty and glorified as long as he could win victories, extend his realm, and make his wolfish nobles rich. As his power grew, Karl donned the Christian mantle as “Defender of the Faith,” but he fought and ruled largely like his pagan enemies.

However, subtle forces, unlikely men, were at work to change him. It was his genius to recognize them.

## Prologue

### *Treason*

Sebastian wiped the rain out of his eyes as he stood before the king, helmet in hand. He had ridden all through the dark day in a downpour and was wet to the bone. Charlemagne had not asked him to sit, nor had he looked at him since he was admitted to the royal chambers. The king stood at a window watching the heavy thunderbolts crashing down just beyond the palace grounds. His mood reflected the storm. Finally he turned and fixed Sebastian with an angry glare.

“Who has told you that you may refuse to fight for your king? How dare you send me such a message? I am your king. You have a command in my heavy cavalry. If I say you will fight, you will fight.”

“My king....” Sebastian began.

“Do you realize every officer in my army would have you executed immediately for this? Refusing to fight when you are called is high treason! How long do you think you would last if I told them about your message? Should I, your king, make excuses for you? Well? Give me a reason to keep you alive.”

Sebastian dropped his eyes. For a few charged moments he said nothing. Then, drawing a deep breath, he began again. “My liege, I have always loved you since I was a small boy. I would give you the last drop of my blood. But...I do not refuse to fight for you...I refuse to murder.”

“What? What are you saying, you...?”

“Sire, what we did to the Saxons after the Suntel battle was a horror...a terrible mistake. We butchered forty-five hundred unarmed men. We cut their heads off like chickens and let them flop in front of us. And it was all unnecessary.”

“Of course it was necessary, damn you. The swine swore an oath of loyalty to me, as they have done five times before. They have never kept their word. What they did was also treason. I had to set an example—finally, and they deserved to die.”

“Sire, begging your pardon, hear me out. There is another way. You don’t have to annihilate them. You can just divide them. Send them to Francia—deep into Francia. Give them farms—good land. Treat them with respect. Take them into your army. They will make good soldiers and we could use them.

“Right!” the king said with contempt. “And who will keep them from rebelling again and sticking a knife into our backs?”

“Sire, if we divide them there will not be enough of them in any one place to fight us and they will know it. Besides they will be happier. They will realize it is a better life, a better way.”

“And how do you propose to get them to agree to such a radical plan. They will be sure that I plan to lure them deep into Francia and kill them all. In fact, now you mention it, that might not be such a bad idea.”

“Sire, the key is Prince Widukind.”

The king started at the very name. “What? I can’t believe you still propose to treat with that devil’s spawn? He’s the worst of the lot—by far! In fact, it was he who led the Saxons at the Suntel Mountains when they massacred my men. Seven royal counts we lost! Some of the best leaders in the realm! And twenty other nobles were killed in that fiasco. I still don’t know the number of mounted fighters we lost there because of him—hundreds, though, to be sure. And you want me to parley with him. ‘Please, my good prince, do come and sit down with me and let me kiss your ruddy Saxon arsh!’ Are you mad? I’d sooner parley with the devil himself.”

“Sire, if you please, I believe I can get Widukind to come. I have met him several times. I know him better than any other Frank does. I never told you this, but I once saved one of his daughters—a bastard child, to be sure, but his nonetheless. It was during the campaign when we overwhelmed the Saxons at Syburg and took back the Eresburg fortress. You remember how we hounded them and burned their settlements all the way up to the Weser?”

“Ha! Indeed, I do, Sebastian. And that’s precisely what I am talking about. It was that campaign when we first decided to wage all-out war against those bloody tree worshippers. No more of their infernal raids! No more of their pretending to parley after we defeat them! I was ready to wipe them out to the last man—still am, by God. And that was when we began to win, don’t you know. It was the campaign that turned the tide,” the king said, obviously relishing the memory.

“Uh...yes, sire. And that was when I rescued Widukind’s daughter. He later sent me a message of thanks and a fine gold arm ring through a Jewish merchant. You remember the man; his name was Simon and he plied his trade on the Rhine in a boat manned by Danish Vikings.”

“Ah, yes. I know that clever rogue and his dodgy ways. He’s the one who gave you those fantastic paper shields that fly. And he once sold me some powder he said was ground from the horn of a great beast called a rhinoceros; it was supposed to keep me stiff for a week. Didn’t do a thing, the scoundrel. But he was a charming fellow, nonetheless.”

The king seemed to have lost some of his fiery intent to condemn Sebastian. He spoke more kindly. “Damn it all, boy! You know I love you like a son. You’re a marvelous fighter and an extraordinary leader, with the brightest of futures before you—but you are not the king. You cannot defy me.” He paused a moment. “If I

forget your foolish rebellion this one time, will you vow never to try me like this again?"

In answer Sebastian took a deep breath and said nothing. His eyes fell back to the floor.

"Damn you, Sebastian!" the king shouted.

"Sire, about Widukind. I know him. Let me go to him. I am sure he will talk to me, and there's a chance I could persuade him to come and parley with you."

"Pah! I've parleyed with that scurvy vermin before, and little good it did me, by God. I had to put up with his confounded arrogance for an entire hour! Sebastian, he has led every revolt since our first campaign against the Saxons more than 10 years ago. It's Widukind who keeps the Saxons riled up year after year."

"Sire, that's exactly why we must win him over. He's the key. If we can convince Widukind to lay down his spear and move the Westphalians west across the great river into Francia, the fighting will stop."

"Oh, so I'm supposed to reward this murderous pirate with land as well as amnesty, is it?"

"My lord, begging your pardon, it's cheaper than fighting him."

"Sebastian, he'll kill you if I let you go to him. And he'll send me back your head just to taunt me."

"Well, sire, you've said that you feel obliged to kill me yourself. I might as well take my chances with Widukind."

The king paused, chewing the end of his mustache as he often did when he had to make a hard choice. Finally, he took a deep breath, ground his teeth and turned to pronounce his decision. "It's an impossible idea, Sebastian. You couldn't do it for one thing. For another, if it weren't for him, this war would be over. I cannot make peace with Widukind after all the Franks he's killed and all the trouble he's caused me. My generals would never understand."

He gave Sebastian a long look. "Give me your sword," he said. Sebastian's mouth fell open, but the king's eyes were hard and uncompromising. Sebastian unbuckled his belt and handed over the cherished weapon, scabbard and all.

“I had great plans for you, Sebastian,” the king said as he looked down at the beautifully designed, gold-inlaid pommel of the sword. It was an outstanding example of the Frankish genius for making weapons. The king himself had given this long sword to Sebastian after his first fight against the Saxons. He was very proud of it.

“I was going to give you more lands than you ever dreamed of. Devil take it, I would have given you responsibility for half of Saxony after we beat them. You know I cannot do that now. I can’t even have you in my court. You would be liable to preach to me about sparing the bloody Saxons in front of my counselors.” He paused. “Go home, Sebastian. Go home to your little fort at Fernshanz. Dig your fingers in the dirt as you so love to do with your damned peasants. I owe you for your exceptional service in the past, but you’re done here. You’re finished as a commander in my cavalry. Take your men and go home. I won’t bother you; I won’t even ask you to serve again. But from this moment never come to me, and never speak of this to any of my officers. If you do, you will force me to have you executed for high treason. Do you understand?”

“Aye, my lord king,” Sebastian mumbled, his eyes still on the floor.

“Then go. Get out of my sight!”

Sebastian bowed low, backed away from the king, and strode out of the chamber into the pelting rain.