

Q and A with Joanie Holzer Schirm, author of MY DEAR BOY

Could you talk a bit about your decision to write in your father's voice, as opposed to framing the entire book around your personal journey to uncover his past and experience?

Over the decade I wrote MY DEAR BOY, I experimented using different voices to share my father's story. Whereas my earlier book was a history, MY DEAR BOY is more subjective. I sought the voice that would allow the reader to glean the universal dimension of his story. As I poured over his own carbon-copied letters, I learned of my father's intent to write a book about his experiences. After listening to hours of his recorded voice and attaching myself to his power of speech, I realized I could take on his persona and write in my father's voice. Through his eyes, as his ghostwriter, I've shared his against-all-odds story of adventure, pain, and accomplishment.



You mention a few people who played a part in this journey, but who were some of the most significant and/or unexpected figures who helped you in that decade of research and travel?

The first person I met was Michlean Amir, a reference archivist at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. She was born in France to Czech Jewish refugee parents. A friendship bond instantly solidified, and throughout the next decade, Michlean played a significant role, connecting me with international experts. Her early introduction to award-winning Czech filmmaker Lukas Pribyl was in hopes that he would recommend a skilled translator to unearth the mysteries of the Holzer letter collection. Serendipitously the voices from the old letters drew him into the potboiler as he uncovered primary sources for rarely memorialized events. From Czech to English, Lukas translated the majority of the four hundred letters, adding historical footnotes and meaning as he interpreted the conversation. During four research trips to the Czech lands, Lukas played vital roles as host, translator, and friend. Some six years before the manuscript was complete, combining my father's vintage film and bits of his recorded voice, Lukas lovingly produced the MY DEAR BOY book trailer.

How did you prevent yourself from coloring the writing with your own feelings and opinions during the more difficult parts of the narrative?

I knew it must be Dad's story, not mine. I wanted it to be as factual as I could make it with evidence to back that up. Much of the detail he shared with me on tape, or I discovered it in the letters. But where gaps existed, more specifics were needed. Like a

massive puzzle with pieces that suddenly fit when I found interconnecting missing links, my emotions would swing from euphoria to a storm cloud hanging over 'our' heads. For the narrative where Dad says his last goodbye to his parents, there was a letter and a journal entry that let me know how he felt when it occurred, and of course, he had no idea he'd never see them again. When he received the last letter from his father, I had to imagine the scene. In a twist of fate, that letter was the first letter I had translated, allowing me to meet my grandfather at the beginning of my writing journey.

You mention the eerie link between Reinhard Heydrich, the Butcher of Prague, and your family. Were there other, similarly surprising findings as you worked on the book?

I've become a believer that help sometimes arrives from the great unknown. Central to my father's experiences in China in 1940 was the time he served as a physician at a remote American Brethren hospital in Ping Ting, Shanxi Province. In 2011, I reached out to the Brethren Historical Library and Archives in Elgin, Illinois. Much to my surprise, not only did they send me a vintage 1940 film showing Dr. Daryl Parker, who my father worked for, but also images of the house in which my father lived. Most remarkable, in the "Star of Cathay"

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Brethren newsletter of summer 1940, there's the welcome to my father under "Meet Dr. Holzer." It notes: "because of the widespread anti-Semitic [sic] feelings in parts of Europe, Dr. Holzer came to the Orient with several others of his race and religious faith hoping to find an outlet for his professional ability." The newsletter used photographs my father took at the hospital, pictures I already had in his personal photo albums. One of those albums displayed the business cards of several foreigners that attended my parent's wedding in Beijing, October 1940. By Googling their names (Americans, British, Germans, French), I discovered many well-known scientists (discoverers of the Peking Man), foreign diplomats, professors, philosophers, and art dealers.

How different was the man on the page to the man you knew? Other than the obvious circumstantial ones, were there significant differences?

The man I knew growing up is much like the younger version on the page. Outwardly, holding a positive outlook on life with humor intact, his personality and character traits match the man in the letters. Always curious about other cultures, wanderlust defined him as he traveled to



every continent except Antarctica. He never met a stranger and charmed them all with his endless story-telling. While growing up, I thought my father emerged unscathed from one of the most fraught periods in World history. Now that I reflect more in-depth, I recognize personality traits that correspond to his losses. He was overly protective and held an obsession for each of his children to become well-educated. "It's the one thing that someone can't take from you."

He flashed a quick temper if his children didn't do things according to his standards. After I studied his Czech and Jewish family history, I realized his background not only colored his intellect, religious philosophy, music, art, and humor but also influenced choices made during life and death circumstances. His love for all things Bohemian never waned.

In addition to gaining a deeper knowledge of who Valdík was, what changed for you after going through this process?

In a small Florida town, I was born into a life of ease and privilege and raised in my mother's Christian faith. I had no personal experience of prejudice and little awareness of what my father had endured. During the past decade, as I've researched the lead-up to World War II and subsequent atrocities, I've witnessed the alarming erosion of protections for

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human rights and dignity. The global migrant crises made up of desperate people like my displaced father has exploded while echoes of the 1930's slip from the mouths of dangerous new autocratic leaders. It's clear it's not limited to anti-Semitism but a fear of the 'other' which incites violence. As I've now walked within the Holocaust's multi-layered shadow that accompanied my father's life and now mine, from a place of knowledge, I feel an obligation like never before to speak the truth against hatred and persecution. As my grandfather, Arnošt

wished, as a benefactor for suffering humanity, I have the extraordinary opportunity to bear witness for those who came before us and forge ahead against backward pressure.

Could you give us an idea of what your research process was? Was it linear and organized, or more scattered? How many translators did you work with?

Beyond film, hundreds of photographs and slides, clothing, artwork, maps, tape-recorded interviews, books, and miscellaneous ephemera, the Holzer Collection consists of 534—often

multi-paged—paper items, such as letters and official documents. I've shown the collection to many professional archivists and curators; Henry Mayer, former chief archivist for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, called it “one of the most complete personal collections of WWII correspondence seen in years.” My research started out scattered and then moved to organization, recording data on handwritten notecards, journals, charts, maps, and timelines. Soon, from stuffed file cabinets grew a massive computer data- base where critical specifics were logged in for each of the letters and documents. Kathy (nee Pinkas) Bowman, my Czech-American assistant, managed the database, which then allowed for sharing data with experts and archives. Most of the letters and documents are in the Czech language; a few in English; others in French, German, and Chinese. A total of fourteen translators—eleven of Czech heritage—transformed the words to English. The vast majority of translation, with cultural history footnotes, was done by Lukas Pribyl and



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Mirek Katzl. The Czech language and its plethora of idioms and slang, coupled with cases of “Old Czech” and an old form of German-language handwriting known as ‘Kurrent,’ increased the difficulty. The letters revealed some 300 names. Over many months, I was able to identify most relationships with my father via genealogy sites, archives, and interviews. My research spanned the gambit - from identifying who all the letter writers were to examining the cultures and/or histories of Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Jews, China, America, South America, World War I and II, and the Holocaust.

A lot of the book is about concealing the truth in order to spare the people we love. Were there things that you left out of the book for the same reason?

No. To ensure the reader gains the most from my father’s compelling account, I included his most excruciating truths that he’d hidden from my brother, sister and me. Not wanting to bring us children fear and sorrow, his silence also allowed him to avoid a revisit of his own pain and guilt. By not hiding his most painful revelations, I inherited his heartache as I believe was meant to be.



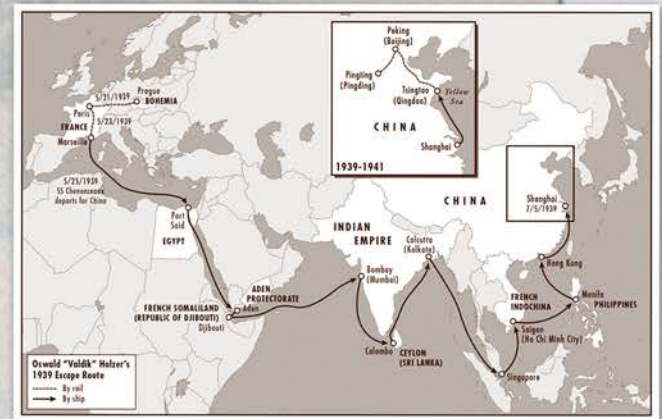
Heute die kleine Welt

Sharing it this way, the complete story is revealed through the words of his own correspondence and my later research to determine who lived and who died. I have no doubt he carried heavy guilt during the remainder of his life about his failure to save lives. From my findings, I believe he did all he could have done under the circumstances, with the knowledge he held at the time. It was clear his real experience offers modern relevance for creating empathy for the everyday frantic life and death decisions of forcibly displaced persons, migrants, and refugees.

What do you think your father would make of current immigration detention centers in the U.S?

My father would be appalled by the actions of his adopted country. The erosion of government accountability that characterized the Third Reich echoes the insufficiently conceived prison-like facilities to prevent foreigners from entering the country. The centers, unresponsive to protecting asylum seekers, create terrible trauma, especially for children when separated from their parents. These actions are contrary to fundamental American principles which my father proudly exemplified by hosting at our home a Cuban refugee family in the 1960s.

I also know from conversations with both my parents what they thought of the relocation and internment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent. With no evidence of these citizens' disloyalty, my parents thought it was a disturbing example of racist persecution by the fact that citizens who traced their ancestry to America's other WWII enemies, Germany or Italy, weren't incarcerated. Recalling the media fanning the flames of fear in America, my father said it reminded him of why public opinion turned negative in 1930s Czechoslovakia as Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi oppression flooded their border.



What made you want to release this book when you did?

With the modern world awash with accounts of persecution, displacement and earsplitting voices growing louder from authoritarian regimes, this is a perfect time for the hope-filled story of MY DEAR BOY. 2019 marks the eightieth anniversary of milestone events that changed my father's life forever. In late March 1939, he made his great escape from his German Wehrmacht-controlled Czechoslovak Army unit, returning to his parents' apartment in Prague. With Nazi-required exit papers in hand on May 21, 1939, Dad said his final goodbye to his parents at Prague's Woodrow Wilson Train Station. May 25, he sailed on the SS Chenonceaux from France to China, arriving in Shanghai as a stateless person on July 5. Unknown to him, Dad was beginning his permanent exile from his native country. Seven years later, after suffering the loss of forty-four relatives in the Holocaust, he starts to recreate a meaningful life in America. What better time than now, eighty years hence, for MY DEAR BOY to remind: What you do matters. What you do can teach respect.



My Dear Boy is the story of your father's escape from persecution as a Jew during World War II, but you do not share his religion, being raised in your mother's Christian faith. Did you gain a greater appreciation for the Jewish culture as you wrote the book? Did you feel you were approaching the story as an outsider?

With feet in two heritage camps, curiosity about faith and tradition propels me. Not only did I want to learn about my father's Jewish cultural past but also how my Christian mother first and foremost was comfortable to teach and to offer a "Christian way of life" rather than to proselytize. Initially, more onlooker than outsider, as I waded through brutal Holocaust history, I developed a much broader view of what took place. My writing mission moved from dissecting my parents' situation to working to universalize what happened to millions and make it felt. Through unadorned delivery of their story emerged an emotional chronicle that offers a retort to the Nazi's crazed dehumanization of humanity. Background true stories reinforce the Nazi-fixation to destroy the Jews and others they deemed inferior. The reader is reminded that victims are more than statistics and empathy is neither place nor time limited. With feet firmly planted in Holocaust education, exhibitions around the world share my father's story, and I participate in teacher training institutes and in Orlando as a capital campaign co-chair for the new Holocaust Museum for Hope & Humanity.



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Joanie Holzer Schirm was the founding president of Geotechnical and Environmental Consultants, Inc., which she directed for seventeen years. She is now a full-time writer, speaker, and curator of the Holzer Collection, her father's World War II legacy. Schirm's first book, *ADVENTURERS AGAINST THEIR WILL*, won the Global Ebook Award for best biography in 2013.

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By Joanie Holzer Schirm

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For more information please visit: joanieschirm.com

Inquiries: Anna Weir aweir@unl.edu

Jeremy Wang-Iverson jeremy@vestopr.com

