

# A History Lesson

by Joanie Schirm

Dear Valdik,

*Erna forwarded me your letter. I can easily imagine how you feel. I would be really happy if you could get here as soon as possible. Not that the conditions here are much better. There is a huge unemployment problem and strong anti-Semitic feelings. In the newspapers you can read daily ads as: "Will hire Aryan." Signs on some houses read: "Will rent a flat, to Aryans only." I am not afraid of anything, and curiously waiting how it all ends. I don't see a very bright future though."*

A writer known only to me as Vala wrote these lines to my father. The August 1940 letter was postmarked "Camden, Maine," and that author's prediction of a less than bright future was quite accurate. My Czech-born father headed east to China, and Vala had headed west to America. Written 17 months after the Nazis seized my father's Czech homeland and 4 months before America entered World War II, Vala's letter is one of 400 written by 78 different writers that I discovered among my father's belongings after his death in 2000.

The letter's window to history continued:

*Just as you, I considered myself a Czech first. Judaism was an inherited faith, which I was not interested in too much, but I would never deny. After Sudeten struggles, when almost everything would be blamed on Jews, I was deeply insulted. I finally understood the words of Theodor Herzl, who said that his Judaism awakened when he observed the French mob-mentality. As they laughed when Dreyfus' rank, marks, and buttons were ripped off, they didn't laugh that a human has been degraded, but because he was a Jew.*

*When I was pointing out in an argument how willingly Jewish people contributed to the state's security, my long-time friends told me, "It's only to save themselves, not because of the patriotism." I will tell you one thing; I came to a conclusion that the majority of people are narrow-minded, extra selfish, and ruthless. In the good days, they act as wolves with full stomachs towards the minority, they let them be. But alas if they are living in crisis, there are only a handful of respectable, intelligent, and unprejudiced people that make any serious change alone.*

*If someone asks about my nationality, I usually answer, "I am a Jew, born in Bohemia." I would get christened only if someone threatened me that they will cut my head off if I don't obey. I don't mind to be a Jew, but even at my age I would have to blush, if they called me a christened Jew.*

During the five years I spent writing two books about my father's life, I became entranced with what these 78 letter writers were telling me. I already knew my father's story well. In May 1939, he traveled from Prague more than 8,000 miles to China, landing first in Shanghai—a rare refuge for European Jews. Over the next 21 months, he wrote, received and saved a treasure trove of letters authored by friends and relatives reaching him mostly in interior China. In the fall of 1940 in Peking (Beijing), he married the daughter of American missionaries, my mother, Ruth Alice Lequear.

Oswald "Valdik" Holzer, MD, and the love of his life spent a majority of their 60-year marriage in Florida where he hid his letter collection. Born and raised there as a Presbyterian like my mother, I knew of my dad's Jewish past

but not the full story of his World War II experiences—that is, until the discovery and translation of the letters. As I pored over the contents of Vala's letter, peppered with unfamiliar names and frustration over unemployment caused by blatant anti-Semitism, I wondered who she was. How did she know my young father who received her letter all the way in Peking? I wondered what happened to the brave Vala after the war and if there were descendants who would want to read her descriptive letter. I suspected, like me, they would welcome peering through this rare window into the past.

As the eyewitness generation of the Holocaust diminishes, it is clear the significant role the letters can play by personalizing history for generations to come. They can help us recognize the dangers of hate and the consequences of

indifference. So, as I did with many writers of the old brittle letters, I quenched my curiosity about who Vala was through online searches. Sifting through the letters was a challenge, one that needed extensive research and multiple sets of hands to get to the bottom of how everyone writing, or mentioned in the letters, was related to my dad.

The first person eager to help assemble this massive puzzle was my second cousin, retired Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, Tom Fischer Weiss. Tom and I share a great-grandmother, Teresie (nee Vodicka) Orlik, who had four daughters. Two of the sisters became Tom's grandmother Karolina (nee Orlik) Fischer and my grandmother Olga (nee Orlik) Holzer. Both perished in the Holocaust along with many other relatives.

For the "Vala" puzzle piece, Tom provided me with a door-sized Vodicka family tree, a masterpiece he had spent



Valerie Vodicka

many years developing. The chart revealed that one of Teresie's brothers, Isak Vodicka, and his wife, Berta, had two daughters, Ernestine (Erna) and Valerie (Vala). Voila! Vala was a first cousin to my father's mother, Olga. In the Czech custom, my father referred in his letters to Vala and her sister Erna as "aunts."

Through the letter collection and accompanying documents, I realized that Erna's husband, Ernest Mautner, served as a United States visa sponsor, a requirement for my dad when he made his first application to come to America from Prague in 1938. His sister-in-law, Valerie Vodicka, lived in Chicago near the Mautners for a period of time. From Tom's massive tree, I learned that Valerie married a Jacob Pevsner and was last known to be living in Los Angeles. With this information, I googled "Jacob Pevsner Los Angeles" and found Dr. William Jacob Pevsner—a family doctor just like my dad. I called his office and spoke to his receptionist:

*This may be a little out of the blue, but I think I may be related to Dr. Pevsner through a great-aunt Valerie Vodicka who married Jacob Pevsner and lived in Southern California. Aunt Vodicka was from Czechoslovakia and left before the Nazis arrived. Would you please check with the doctor and see if he thinks we could be connected? If so, I will e-mail him an original 1940 letter she wrote in Czech along with the English translation.*

Two hours later Dr. W.J. Pevsner left me a voice mail message:

*Usually people that call my office, if not a patient, are trying to sell me something. But I think it would be too big a coincidence for a Vodicka to marry a Pevsner and it not be the same person...so here's my e-mail address. Please send me what you mentioned to my receptionist and we can talk again soon.*

Soon, Vala's 1940 letter was taking wings again along with an extensive summary of my dad's life, one of his intriguing letters about his life in China, and the progress of my recent writing. Before long, Dr. William "Bill" Jacob Pevsner e-mailed a response.

Hi Joanie:

*I am not sure where to start. And no, no, [that was] not more than I wanted to know...in fact yours is an absolutely fascinating story. Those letters are an incredible treasure to a wonderful account. It just has the ring of a fantastic romantic adventure. I mean imagine being driven from your country to a place as foreign as China for a young Czech man, meeting, and then falling in love with an American missionary who must have seen a man of incredible character. As well as what she must have lived through with him, and what he must have contributed and survived as a physician in war-torn China.*

*Your account has me recalling fleeting memories; trying to piece them all together with the stories that I remember both as a child and younger adult, and as you can imagine with mixed up clarity! It has however resurfaced a strange emotion for family I have not entertained since my father*



*Teresie Vodicka Orlik (1854–1916), grandmother of Oswald Holzer, with four of her children: Ludwig, Karolina, Bertha and Ernestine.*

*died in 1984. The letter you sent reveals the predatory nature of man with the analogy to wolves in a very real way. The persecution even for those not particularly religious must have been dumb-founding. I had patients in my medical practice from Latvia who were "Jews" but said being raised in the Soviet Union, they were atheists! Yet, as well, they were still isolated along pseudo-ethnic lines.*

*Grandma Val as we called her, "Vallie" to my father and his brothers, was the only grandmother I ever knew, so I never considered her anything else. She and Jacob (and yes you are correct I am named for him) as I knew them lived in Hollywood in an apartment. My grandfather was already retired and passed away in 1973. I actually have my grandmother's naturalization papers dated May 17, 1944, (residing at 6949 Paxton Avenue, Chicago, Illinois), as well as her application to change her name to Pevsner when married.... I also have their marriage certificate dated July 1, 1944, in Los Angeles.*

*I am almost the youngest of 12 cousins from four brothers born of course to my grandfather and his first wife, Elizabeth Kanopow, who died of lung cancer just after my father graduated medical school from the University of Illinois in 1943. Between my cousins, I might be able to figure out who Erna's sons are and where they might be. I already sent an email to my cousin David who has a better knowledge as he is one of the older cousins.*

*I will call you again tomorrow, and as well scan some of the papers I have for you to review. I know Grandma Val had a large, I think 12 children (and apparently well off financially), family in Czechoslovakia. I believe the girls were sent away to the U.S. and the boys stayed to fight the Germans. I believe they all perished either fighting or in concentration camps. They had a very good life to that point, and I remember Grandma Val and her hatred toward the Germans for what they did to her family. (Who can*

blame her?) I saw pictures of her brothers, and I remember someone was very good at tennis.

She used to make (and still there's no comparison to) a sponge cake I always looked forward to when we used to visit as children almost every weekend (or so it seemed). It is one of the lasting memories along with the Czech version of "Itsy Bitsy Spider" she would do in my hand. It is a wonderful thing to know of her sister and brother-in-law's sponsorship of your father. So even if we are not necessarily true blood relatives, it is just as if we are in as much as I regard Grandma Val as my only real blood grandmother of my father's family.

Grandma Val was 92 when she died in her sleep at the

Jewish Home for the Aged in Los Angeles.

*I know it is just a small piece of your puzzle, but yours is a very interesting story, and if I can help in anyway, let me know.*

It was not long before Bill introduced me via e-mail to his siblings, his brother, Lee, and sisters, Elizabeth (Beth) and Linda. Lee provided more detail about their adored step-grandmother who they all called "Grandma Val." Like my multi-lingual dad, Val spoke French, English, Czech and German. She often made a lamb mold cake, a Czechoslovak tradition especially loved by Beth, who went on to marry a Czech man herself.

As her step-grandsons shared stories, Val became a real person, well beyond a name on Tom's chart. My suspicion that the freed voices would personalize history for generations to come had been correct. From a letter intended for my father some 70 years earlier, history came alive for us lucky ones able to read her words.

*After her parents' death, Joanie Schirm's discovery of her father's letter cache called her to become a writer. The founding president of Orlando, Florida-based Geotechnical and Environmental Consultants, she retired in 2008 to work full time on her family history. The old letters have led to two books with a 2013 publishing date. Adventurers Against Their Will is a work of historical reconstruction, wartime adventure and a searching exploration of memory and family featuring 7 of the 400 letter writers. My Dear Boy—The Discovery of a Lifetime is the story of her Czech father's escape from the Nazis and his courtship of her mother in China intertwined with Schirm's own story of discovery and revelation.*

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