

# Orange

## APPEAL

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# What 'Never Again' Means to Me

by Joanie Holzer Schirm

The idea for the museum, a memorial to the Holocaust that would ensure its lessons would be taught in perpetuity, first began in 1978 through President Jimmy Carter's establishment of the President's Commission on the Holocaust. In the final report of the commission in 1979, President Carter's words "never again" lodged their place in history:

"Out of our memory... of the Holocaust we must forge an unshakeable oath with all civilized people that *never again* will the world stand silent, never again will the world... fail to act in time to prevent this terrible crime of genocide... we must harness the outrage of our own memories to stamp out oppression wherever it exists. We must understand that human rights and human dignity are indivisible."

Fifteen years after the Commission's work began, the \$168 million museum was lauded as one of America's finest accomplishments, as 200,000 private donations had been received, with land donated by the federal government to bring the project to reality. The Museum opened not only as a memorial but also as a national institution for the documentation, study and analysis of Holocaust history.

Since it opened, over 30 million people have toured the museum. According to the USHMM, this number includes 34 percent school-aged children, 90 percent non-Jews and 36 percent international visitors. Beyond the now 2 million annual visitors, the Museum's public programs have extended resources to dozens of communities across



*As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, commemorates its 20th anniversary this April, Joanie Holzer Schirm shares why these words are so important to her.*

the United States. They have produced vast amounts of content for people trying to understand what happened within humanity to produce such a horrific atrocity. I am one of those people. This April, as America's Holocaust Memorial Museum commemorates 20 years of existence, President Carter's words remain deeply personal.

In May 1939, a young Jewish army doctor, Oswald "Valdik" Holzer, escaped to China from his homeland, the Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. His parents, and most of his relatives, chose to stay behind. In the interior of China, in a war-torn area where Chinese Nationalists and Communists battled the Japanese, Valdik spent eight months working as a doctor before arriving in Peking (Beijing) in the fall of 1940. Soon, he fell madly in love with a beautiful teacher, Ruth Alice Lequear, born in China of American Missionaries. Marrying only five weeks later, they lived a 60-year love affair, settling in 1952 in Melbourne Beach on the east coast of Florida. These were my parents.

At 64, I now fully understand what my father lost after he said goodbye to his parents at a Prague railway station. Because of that horrific massacre, I grew up without the opportunity to know my grandparents, Arnost and Olga Holzer. Now, as a grandmother myself, I think about that loss. I also never met 42 other Czech relatives. In 1942, they were taken from Prague to concentration camps where, like my grandparents, each of them perished.

Other than a few sympathetic words, my father rarely spoke of his parents and the tragedy that claimed their lives. In fact, I didn't know of the 42 other relatives who were murdered until *Schindler's List* premiered in 1993 — the same year the USHMM opened. It was then that my father, who refused to see the movie, typed out a list of their names and where he thought they died.

Before the USHMM opened, the details about what happened during the Holocaust had been slow to reach the public. Like my father, most families who had lost loved ones

only had hearsay information. He knew little about his family's fate. After he handed me the list, he did not want to talk any more about it. Even my young mind understood how difficult it would be for anyone to say: "I had 44 relatives murdered."

Because of the USHMM's role as our national institution of Holocaust documentation and study, I now know the truth of what happened to my father's family and friends. But first, I must tell you what prompted my request for help.

In 2000, my beloved parents died within two days of each other. I thought then my chances of knowing any more information about his lost loved ones died with my father. But among my father's possessions was a treasure trove of hidden letters: 400 by 78 Czech writers who corresponded with my dad during the war as he traveled through five continents.

When I retired in 2008, I had the letters translated. At last I had the opportunity to 'meet' my grandparents. I got to know their kind nature, their humor, and the great love they had for their son. Through the letters, I was not only able to fall in love with my grandparents, but I also got to know my young, displaced father, and many of his friends and cousins. Finding the letters was a great gift. I planned on writing two books based on their contents, but the answers they provided were joined by many more questions. I needed to know about the people of the letters: Who were they? What was happening around them and why? What happened to them after the war?

To help answer my many questions, I began working with representatives of the USHMM in 2008. Over five years, I've received research help along with moral support at every step of the way. First, I learned from USHMM representatives that my grandparents may have perished in Sobibor in 1942. As I learned the morbid details, I mourned their loss as if they'd just been

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taken from me as well. But even in this deep sadness, I wanted to know more — for myself, my children, grandchildren, and generations to follow.

In 2009, my husband and I visited Sobibor, a shameful place in eastern Poland where more than a quarter of a million innocent lives were lost. We were accompanied by a USHMM-recommended expert who provided additional value and insight to the already meaningful experience.

I've had experts review my books to ensure historical accuracy, most recommended by the USHMM as resources. Working at the library archives or on their website, I found pertinent documents. I've shared these with relatives and descendants of the letter writers so they too can learn more about their family past.

The voices of the letters personalize history. They provide meaningful connection to the Holocaust and the humanity of the victims and survivors. The letters speak to anti-semitism not just in Europe, but America as well. They describe what it is like to lose your homeland, become an immigrant, and be forced to rebuild a life with tremendous

personal loss and guilt, either earned or unearned. The USHMM helped me understand the backdrop to all that was happening to my father, his friends and family, so my books can pair history with personal context.

The first letter I had translated was my grandfather Arnost's last letter to his only child. Within the letter my grandfather makes a last wish for my father to use his "profession of curing not just to garner wealth but to help the suffering humanity." I observed my father live out his father's wish as he served as a compassionate and generous doctor, providing thousands of pro bono hours helping people in need. I had no idea he was fulfilling his father's last wish until recently.

Written three days before he was taken to his death, Arnost's poignant message represents what the USHMM attempts to achieve in their "never again" mission. Arnost's instruction gives us a blueprint for taking personal responsibility to ensure a more humane world. A world not filled with hate but with compassion for other human beings.

I now understand fully the significance of all that my father lost — homeland, family and friends. I have no doubt about the Holocaust's role in this loss. And it could happen again at any moment, to anyone, anywhere in our world if humanity repeatedly looks the other way. The voices of the letter writers resonate with the "never again" cry for help that we must never put aside. Sadly, as time has gone by, some people have become doubters that it ever happened.

In a December 1945 letter, written just after the war ended, a close friend of my father who was a witness to the horror at Terezin concentration camp prophetically warned about future doubters of the atrocities.

"If we watch the Nuremberg Trial from the view point of the German Lebensraum inhabitants, we have reason to be pessimistic

about the future. Most people lack the gift of imagination, and what they themselves don't go through seems nothing but propaganda to them."

I could not have accomplished my research without the assistance and resources of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I know I'm one of millions they have assisted over the past 20 years. I intend to donate the letter collection to this fine institution of learning and action. I want to ensure "never again" is embraced by the generations ahead who will need to take action when hate and prejudice, once again, raise their ugly heads. It is clear, regardless of heritage, that we all need to be a part of the USHMM's mission of learning the lessons from the Holocaust.

For me, the USHMM's work honors the memories of my 44 relatives who perished. They honor my father, Dr. Oswald A. Holzer, who passed away without ever knowing how precious the legacy of his collection would become. In the capable hands of the USHMM, the freed voices from the letters will be available to the world to understand why we should continue united in the responsible action required to achieve "never again."

*Joanie Schirm is a writer, photographer, community activist and retired award-winning businesswoman. While president of Geotechnical and Environmental Consultants, she became internationally known for her volunteer leadership role of Orlando's hosting of FIFA's World Cup USA 1994. After raising two children, Kelly and Derick, she lives in Orlando with her husband, Roger Neiswender. Look for Joanie's companion books, Adventurers Against Their Will due for publication in April 2013 and My Dear Boy: The Discovery of a Lifetime in Fall 2013. joanieschirm.com*