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## Extraordinary biography honors all who struggle in exile



LIZ

**MEADOR**

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Ideas for topics for this

column come from many sources, and I especially appreciate family and friends who suggest books to review. For last week's article about "Ruthless River," I am indebted to my sister Marie and brother-in-law John who read and discussed the memoir in one of two book clubs to which they belong.

The suggestion for this week's extraordinary book comes from my friend Dr. John McRae who attended school with Joanie Holzer Schirm, author of "My Dear Boy: A World War II Story of Escape, Exile, and Revelation" (2019). McRae has become an unofficial promoter of the book as he would like to see it studied in schools.

The "boy" in the title is contained in the salutation of a letter from Schirm's paternal

grandfather to his son, Oswald Holzer, nicknamed Valdik.

This letter occurs at the book's close when the fate of Valdik's parents is to become two of the thousands of Jews removed from their homes and taken to concentration camps and certain death.

Schirm discovered 400 letters her father had kept in two Chinese red lacquered boxes as she and her siblings sorted through their parents' belongings at the Florida beach condo where they had resided before their deaths.

Her father died in 2000, but Joanie Schirm and her siblings, Tom and Pat, had no idea of the journey their parents had

undergone to find a home in America. The tragic tone of this final letter from his parents haunted Valdik, who never thought he had done enough to remove his parents from the Nazis' program of deliberate extermination of Jews.

Schirm's goal to publish a book about her father took years of planning, but she had sold her Orlando engineering consulting firm, and she was inspired by her grandfather's words to his son Valdik:

"I wish for you to find full satisfaction in your profession [as a physician]. I also wish that your profession of curing doesn't just become a source of wealth for you but that you yourself become a benefactor to suffering humanity."

### **ESCAPE**

The book's subtitle reveals its approximate organization into three major portions, beginning with the chapter

entitled "My Flight." Told in her father's words from the letters, Valdik relates that he crossed five continents to find a place where he felt accepted though he was a refugee running from the German army which would have murdered him. Twenty-seven when his journey begins, Valdik starts his story with his birth in 1911 to Arnoš and Olga Holzer in a small town, Benešov, 25 miles southeast of Prague. His parents and grandparents were prosperous merchants who gave Valdik a comfortable childhood and education at Charles University where Valdik became a doctor of medicine. Jews had lived in the area since 1570, and by 1893 numbered 800. Valdik's family practiced no religion, however, in a country where Catholics and Lutherans prevailed. In 1914, Valdik was 3 years old when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. Valdik's father joined the Austro-Hungarian army which he served for four years during which he was incarcerated in a Russian prisoner of war camp in Siberia. Life continued after World War I, but Valdik became more aware of the prejudices against Jews as he grew older: "I never thought of myself as Jewish. I felt being Jewish ... meant belonging to a religious community and going to services, which my family rarely did. Like others in Bohemia [now the Czech Republic] who mixed Jewish and Czech Protestant traditions and culture, we celebrated Christmas and Easter in a non-religious way that today we might describe as commercial." The family revered

books, art, music, science, technology, and history instead. Books fed Valdik's interest in medicine to the extent that the family moved to Prague so that Valdik could graduate from Charles University. Prague had a Jewish population of about 35,000, and Valdik began to worry as Adolf Hitler and his anti-Semitic Nazis won seats in the Reichstag in the 1932 election. Valdik admitted that he was naïve to believe that "a government of law" could quell Hitler's power. By 1935, the Nazis had adopted the Nuremberg Race Laws which stripped Jewish Germans of citizenship and imprisoned those who intermarried.

#### **EXILE IN CHINA**

After graduation, Valdik served two years in the Czech army, but as he watched Hitler's advance, he knew he needed to leave his homeland to find a place where he could establish himself as a doctor and send for his parents. Eliminating Palestine and the United States, Valdik learned that China was a possibility for his resettlement. In May 1939, his family bade him farewell, and he embarked on the long journey, chronicling his time in Shanghai with his ever-present camera and in letters. Valdik accepted several jobs in medicine, but they were part-time or they shut down. Finally, he heard about the need for a chief physician at the American Mission Hospital in Pingting Hsien in North China. Hampered by lack of the Chinese language, Valdik accepted the mission's offer to send him to Peking for three months to study Chinese language and culture. In his letters Valdik

recounted the struggle he had as a doctor to impose modern science on patients who relied on superstition. He urged patients to open the windows to allow fresh air, but the Chinese believed that their “home ghost” would escape.

#### **MEETING RUTH**

Valdik’s story continued in Peking where he met Ruth Lequear, the daughter of American missionaries from the German Reformed Church China Mission. Ruth had been born in Hunan province, so her Chinese was excellent. Immediately the couple found parallels in their backgrounds and common interests that led them to love and marriage. They eventually realized they must leave China as turmoil continued. After much red tape in securing visas, they sailed for San Francisco then Los Angeles where they stayed with Ruth’s relatives until they could find work. Schirm calls her book “narrative nonfiction biography,” and it is all those genres and more. She creates a tribute to her father and all people who have endured exile and exclusion.

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