

MY DEAR BOY

A WORLD WAR II STORY OF ESCAPE, EXILE AND REVELATION

MARC MIDDLETON

Joanie Schirm had hoped to travel when she retired 10 years ago. But she had no idea that her journey would be one of personal discovery. Along the way she uncovered family secrets, revealed an international network of young people fleeing Nazi persecution and became a respected scholar, teacher and award-winning author.

"It's been an unexpected, uncommon journey that I've adored from the very beginning," Schirm says. "It's changed my life and broadened my perspective about so many issues."

It all began after her parents died within two days of one another. Schirm discovered nearly 400 letters, handwritten in Czech, while sorting through her father's belongings.

Her father had rarely mentioned his life before coming to America. So, overcome with curiosity, Schirm had several of the letters translated. The first translation would change the trajectory of her life—it was a letter to her father from her grandfather, written just days before he and Schirm's grandmother were taken to a Nazi extermination camp. It was dated April 21, 1942:

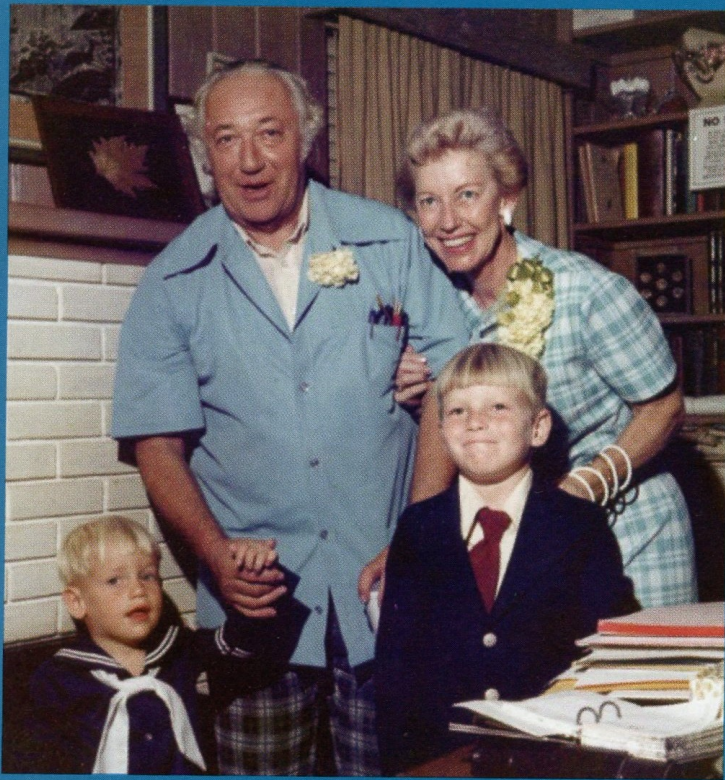
My dear boy. Today we are leaving for a gathering point to follow the fate of those unfortunate people in three-to-

four days who, since last October, have been gradually chased out of their homes, sent to concentration camps and robbed of everything they had. This happened to us as well, and we had to leave the ground floor and its furnishings. Carrying only the necessary clothes, we are setting out on a journey not knowing the day of our return or when and where we can be reunited again. I am not certain I will see you ever again, so I decided to write these lines as my good bye to you.

"I always try to imagine my grandfather sitting there and writing that letter to his son," Schirm shares tearfully. "And then I imagine my father receiving it."

Her father, Dr. Oswald Holzer, wouldn't receive the letter until three years later, in 1945. As he opened it, he knew he was reading his father's final words and, as he read, he learned his father's final wishes:

You have always been a good boy and we are proud of you. I wish for you to find full satisfaction in your profession. 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 for the suffering humanity.'



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"And that was how I met my grandfather, a man I never had the opportunity to meet in person," Schirm says. "I instantly fell in love with him when I read the letter."

Inspired by a single letter, written by a relative she had never met, Schirm had all 400 letters translated. She discovered that they were penned by 78 different writers. When pieced together, they revealed a fascinating, heartbreaking and ultimately inspiring story—with her father as the central character.

Oswald Holzer was a young doctor in the Czech army when the Nazis arrived in 1939 and incorporated his unit. In a daring escape, Holzer returned to Prague to see his parents before making his way China, one of the few countries accepting those of Jewish heritage.

It was there that Holzer met and married Schirm's mother—the daughter of American missionaries. Within months they were on the President Coolidge evacuation ship carrying Americans from Asia as the Japanese became more aggressive in advance of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

From the United States they moved to South America. It was there, while working the oil fields of Ecuador, that Holzer received many of the letters, including the final letter from his father.

The letters offer a first-hand account of a global network of young people fleeing the Nazis and attempting to build a future in all corners of the world.

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Translating the letters wasn't enough for Schirm. She traveled to the places mentioned, met the few writers still living and interviewed descendants of those who had died.

In the end, she uncovered a story that she had to share. "When I started writing it was all new to me," Schirm says. "I had always wanted to write, but I was quickly overwhelmed. A friend of mine said, 'You should just go upstairs one day and strip down and wear the pants. That will give you inspiration.' And that's exactly what I did."

The pants are riding pants that Schirm also discovered among her father's belongings. The letters revealed that he wore them instead of his military uniform to blend in with civilians on the day that he made his escape from the Nazis.

To Schirm, the pants were emblematic of far more than Holzer's bravery and ingenuity. "They represented everything," she says. "They represented the fact that my brother, sister and I exist."

The pants are now part of an important historical collection and an educational platform that Schirm has built and shares with teachers and students in the U.S. and Europe.

"I've spent a lot of time training people to teach the lessons of the Holocaust and the importance of protecting human rights," she says. "What really exists in those letters is the build-up to what happened in Germany in the 1930s; what happens when autocrats gain control."

Schirm has woven those lessons into a dramatic piece of historical fiction appropriately titled, *My Dear Boy, A World War II Story of Escape, Exile, and Revelation*.

"It's important to understand that history, because there are many echoes of it today around the world," Schirm notes. "There are so many attacks on human rights. There are so many people being displaced and leaving everything behind as they search for a safe place to live and raise their families. It's the worst of human history rearing its ugly head."

Before discovering the letters that transformed her life, Schirm had known very little about her father's life before coming to America. "When *Schindler's List* came out in 1993, I asked him if he would see the movie with me," she recalls. "I now realize that was crazy. It was the loudest 'No!' I ever heard from him."

That night, Schirm recalls, her father sat down and typed a list of the 44 relatives whom he knew had been killed, along with where he thought they had died and the year they were taken from their homes.

What Schirm has always known about her father is that he was married and in love with her mother for 60 years. And despite the horrendous murders of dozens of relatives he was never bitter and passed on a spirit of hope and optimism to his children.

She now knows that he was also granting his father's dying wish by becoming a pillar in his community and using skills as a doctor not to make money but to make a difference.

It was his ultimate triumph over one of the most evil forces in history. And it gives Schirm hope for the world today.

"Despair brings darkness into our lives, but hope invigorates us and moves us forward," she says. "I believe that one candle can light up a room and one person can make a difference. What I see today are a lot of re-engaged people and a new generation speaking up and becoming active."

With her new book just released, Schirm has two more books in the works and a second career that's going strong and has her excited for what's next.

"I'm 70, and that was a number that sounded daunting a while back," she admits. "But now I feel great. I've been given a purpose that I never expected. I feel very fortunate. Women of my age look at the world differently than our moms did—and we're lucky for that."

*For more information about Schirm and book, **My Dear Boy, A World War II Story of Escape, Exile, and Revelation**, visit joanieschirm.com.*