

# In World War II epic, daughter writes dad's 'posthumous memoir'

By HAL BOEDEKER

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Author Joanie Holzer Schirm tells her father's World War II story in "My Dear Boy," using more than 400 letters

Oskar Schindler had a list of Jews he saved during World War II, according to the Oscar-winning film "Schindler's List." Dr. Oswald "Valdik" Holzer had his list of 44 relatives he lost in the war. He created it in 1993 when he told his daughter he could never see director Steven Spielberg's drama.

Holzer's story is recounted in "My Dear Boy," billed as a "posthumous memoir" written by his daughter Joanie Holzer Schirm of College Park.

"I had to reconstruct his life. I have a timeline everywhere he was," says Schirm, 70, a community activist who co-founded the GEC engineering firm. She drew on seven hours of interviews she taped with her father in 1989, journals he had written and more than 400 letters he left (70 by him, the rest from 77 other writers). Her father, who died in 2000, had always intended to write his story, she said.

"I am his ghostwriter, that's the way I see it," Schirm said. "I want his story told like he would tell it."

His story is also recounted in "Displaced Person," a permanent exhibit opening Sunday, April 7, at the Holocaust Center in Maitland. Schirm describes her father as "a refugee through five continents." The exhibit features photos, letters and artifacts.

“This is such an important exhibit that showcases a remarkable story of survival and loss and the struggle to make a new life,” said Pamela Kancher, the center’s executive director. “It’s a deeply personal story for Joanie and her family and yet one that resonates with so many visitors whose own family histories include being displaced, forced to flee into exile.”



Joanie Holzer Schirm shows her book 'My Dear Boy,' what she calls a 'posthumous memoir' of her father, who died in 2000. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel)

Holzer, a physician who was Czech and Jewish, escaped the Nazis in 1939. He traveled to China, which was accepting Jewish refugees. He fell for Ruth Lequear, a teacher missionary from the United States, and proposed to her eight days after they met.

“They had a 60-year love story,” Schirm says of her parents. “They were perfectly matched. They were from different universes.”

The Holzers and their three children settled in Brevard County, where he was a longtime family doctor.

In 2000, Ruth Holzer died. Two days later, her husband passed. “It seemed like he was ready to go,” Schirm said.



Joanie Holzer Schirm tells the love story of her parents, Oswald and Ruth, in 'My Dear Boy.' (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel)

The challenge to write his story took his daughter a decade. She stopped to write another book, “Adventurers against Their Will,” based on seven letter writers in her father’s collection.

Schirm wrote her father’s saga several ways, but publishers wanted it to be his story. (The book is published by Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press.) Schirm channeled her father, synthesized the materials he left and interviewed his younger cousins in Prague. She is meticulous in keeping the record of what she found and updates her timeline when she learns new facts.

“Now more than ever, it is so important for us to not forget the horrors of the Holocaust. Joanie did an incredible job of sharing what her father endured,” said Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, a friend of the author. “She gives us insight into his feelings of despair, loss and at times hope, showing us the emotions that those who were fighting for survival experienced.”

German historian Susanne Urban, in a blurb for the book, writes, “There is enormous educational potential in the story of Dr. Oswald Holzer. We meet a man with values who never lost his empathy toward the ‘other.’ We learn that trauma is often overcome by resilience.”



Joanie Holzer Schirm shows a photo album that belonged to her father.  
(Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel)

Schirm says she thinks about her father’s refusal to see “Schindler’s List” all the time. “I just can’t imagine — 44 relatives were murdered, and he kept it in,” she said.

Her father returned to Prague 10 times before he died and learned the family history from relatives. “He got all of it right, except his parents he thought died at Auschwitz, and they probably didn’t,” Schirm said. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum believes they died in the Sobibor death camp.

After her father’s death, Schirm and her siblings found the 400 letters that her father had hidden away. The book’s title, “My Dear Boy,” comes from a letter



that Schirm found in 2008 in a cabinet that her father had built. The letter helps explain her father's life, but he never showed it to the family.



A postcard to her father is displayed in an album at Joanie Holzer Schirm's home. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel)

In the letter, her grandfather Arnost Holzer wrote to her father shortly before he died in 1942:

“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 to the suffering humanity.”

Schirm says her grandfather gave her father his marching orders. Her father received the letter in 1945.

“All of us can be a benefactor. It's your choice,” she said.

Her father's story, she said, is different from a lot of Holocaust education, which usually deals with the worst of humanity.

“Millions were displaced like my father,” she said. “They all had to go on with their lives. His was: What can I do to make the world a better place? His father outlined that for him, and he did that. That's a choice you make.”

Email Hal at [hboedeker@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:hboedeker@orlandosentinel.com). Follow him on  
Twitter: [@tvguyhal](https://twitter.com/tvguyhal). Instagram: [TVGuyHal](https://www.instagram.com/TVGuyHal)