

P R E F A C E

A Box of Letters



Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

—GEORGE SANTAYANA

WRITING THIS BOOK was a labor of love, triggered by the discovery of a cardboard box on a closet shelf in the home of my parents. Curious, I cut the twine that bound the carton and rooted through the contents. Inside were hundreds of old envelopes bearing strange imprints—censor stamps, APO numbers, patriotic symbols. Some bore three-cent stamps, others had “Free” inscribed at the upper right-hand corner. I was astonished to learn they were letters written by my father while serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II and posted to his parents back home on the farm in South Dakota.

Somehow, despite many clues in my childhood home—a tapestry from Egypt, ivory carvings from India, embroidered silk cloth from China, cameos from Italy, a mountain goat carved of wood from the Isle of Capri—it had never occurred to me to ask my father about his role in the war and its aftermath.

Like my three sisters and twenty-five cousins, I am a bona fide member of the baby boom generation. During my childhood years in South Dakota I was just another kid on the block, a happy-go-lucky child surrounded by parents, sisters, cousins, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

Since my father and six uncles served in the armed forces of the United States during World War II, you might suppose war stories dominated the conversation at our dinner table during the frequent get-togethers of our extended family. Not so. Once my father and uncles returned to civilian life, they closed the military chapter and focused on earning a living and nurturing a family.

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A cursory exposure to World War II history in a high school class failed to capture my attention. I dutifully read the pedestrian prose and memorized the facts, but important lessons eluded me. Later, I earned a degree at a state university without appreciably adding to my knowledge of the watershed event of the twentieth century. After graduating from college, I traveled throughout Western Europe but perceived little evidence of the destruction wrought by the war.

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, my friend and namesake, Karen, suggested we travel to Eastern Europe. We shared the desire to delve into our Czechoslovakian roots. (Sladek is a brand of “sweet brew” in that country.) As we drove through Poland, Eastern Germany, and the Czech Republic, I was struck by the drab surroundings, the lack of *joie de vivre*, the suppression of the human spirit. Unable to long bear the horrific scene at Auschwitz, we sped away in our rental car. Arriving at Prague, we stumbled upon a three-story boardinghouse in an upscale neighborhood just two blocks from the residence of the president. Vera, the elderly proprietor, warmly welcomed us into her home and showed us to our room.

Each evening, upon hearing the turn of the latchkey, Vera came knocking at our door—under the guise of treating us to tea, pastries, and fruit. Before bidding us good night she would turn and say, “Just one more thing.” That ritual completed, the three of us sprawled out in the guest room and talked the night away. Speaking in a mix of German and broken English, punctuated with much waving of hands, Vera related accounts of life in Prague during the war.

Hanging on the wall midst antiques, artwork, and family photographs was a portrait of a beautiful young woman. “Is that you, Vera?” I asked. “Yes, my da’ling,” she replied. “Once I was blonde like you, but now I’m an ugly old woman, too unpleasant to be seen.” She went on to explain that the picture had been painted by one of her art students shortly before British-trained parachutists of the Czechoslovak resistance descended near Prague to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi Reich Protector at Prague, whom Vera referred to as “Hitler’s right arm.” The Nazis, seeking a female accomplice to the assassination plot, rounded up young blonde women for interrogation. Vera, having proof she had been outside of Prague on a teaching assignment, was spared her life.

Tears welled up in our eyes as we backed out of the driveway and waved good-bye to Vera. Conversations with her had opened my eyes to an aspect of the war seldom conveyed in history textbooks or lectures—how the global conflict known as World War II impinged on the lives of ordinary people. That lesson was soon reinforced by an incident in another town.

My traveling companion was eager to visit her mother’s birthplace. She knew the story of how her German grandparents had been forced to

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AUTHOR KAREN SLADEK POSING WITH VERA, PRAGUE, 1990
VERA'S PORTRAIT HANGS ON THE WALL

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relinquish their home in Czechoslovakia and leave the country with nothing more than a few valuables sewn into their clothing. I was intrigued by the story. Upon arriving at the place, we parked the car and walked down a dirt path obstructed by cats, dogs, goats, and squawking chickens. Heads turned and eyes became transfixed as we strode up to a house and knocked on the door. When an elderly woman appeared, Karen handed her a letter of introduction written by Vera. Assured we had not come to reclaim the property, the woman sent her grown son to town to fetch a translator. He returned with a woman fluent in German and Czech and with two fancy glasses filled with chocolate pudding—a treat for us that I suspected was beyond the family’s means. Tears of healing flowed as we sat in the living room, our thoughts translated among three languages.

When it came time to take our leave, the old woman led us up a steep mountain path. Along the way she picked a large bouquet of wild flowers and handed them to Karen as a token of remembrance. Decades earlier Karen’s mother, then an innocent young woman, had made a similar gesture while departing her family home. Deeply touched, we wept as we drove away. I contemplated the resilience of Karen’s relatives; how her mother had eventually made her way to the United States and given her children the American dream. Before the flowers wilted, we pressed two of the blossoms between the pages of a book.

Upon arriving at a Polish border crossing in the High Tatras, menacing guards barred us from leaving the country. At that moment, my freedom as an American citizen—a gift I had taken for granted—became very precious to me. Eventually, we gained passage into Germany.

Even after my return to the United States, the economic, social, and political fallout of the World War II era remained abstract and impersonal. My awakening came with the discovery of my father’s wartime letters.

My father, after metamorphosing from private to cadet to lieutenant in the Army Air Corps, served as a Cryptographic Security and Intelligence Officer in three theaters of war: China-Burma-India (CBI), European (ETO), and Mediterranean (MTO). As he circled the globe by land, sea, and air, he noted that profound social and political changes were taking place. While stationed in the CBI, he flew “the Hump” from India to China and observed that the Communist forces of Mao Tse-tung were prevailing over the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek. While walking the streets of Shanghai shortly after the Japanese army had evacuated that city, he was struck by the vigor and modern outlook of its people. Billeted near Calcutta, he witnessed riots as Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress agitated for independence from British rule. Continuing westward, he encountered political unrest in Egypt and in Greece. Clearly, the British sphere of influence was shrinking. Cognizant of the dictum “The sun never

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sets on the British Empire,” he sensed the sun *was* about to set on that wide-flung kingdom. Arriving in Europe, he found postwar conditions heart-wrenching and chaotic.

World War II brought about wide-ranging political and social changes in Asia, Europe, and Africa; the war marked the transition from the old world order to the new. The desperate struggle between the Allies and the Axis powers led to quantum advances in technology—radar, jet airplanes, rockets, electronic coding devices, atomic energy—as each side sought an edge in the conflict.

Pulitzer-prize biographer David McCullough warns that we are “losing our past, losing our story.” Memories of events that took place at Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, Midway, North Africa, Anzio, Normandy, Iwo Jima, and Hiroshima are deeply etched in the hearts and minds of “the Greatest Generation.” Their children and grandchildren, however, mainly perceive of the World War II era as portrayed in movies and novels.

An ancient maxim asserts, “History is something that never happened, written by a man who wasn’t there.” My father *was* there, writing letters while serving as a soldier in the World War II army. Upon the death of his parents thirty years after the war, he discovered his mother had saved all of his letters—some four hundred posted from five continents. Written with no thought of posterity, the letters chronicle his observations and adventures from induction to discharge. The letters, while exhibiting the exuberance of youth and old-time values, present “truth” as my father perceived truth.

The letters make no claims of heroics. My father, like the majority of GIs who served in World War II, never fired a shot at the enemy. Fewer than twenty percent of the United States military were combat “trigger pullers.” Wartime perils such as accidents and disease claimed more lives than battlefield wounds. Soldiers and sailors lived or died as chance and circumstance ground out their fate. President Kennedy, a war veteran himself, spoke these apt words:

There is always inequity in life. Some men are killed in a war and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country. . . . It’s very hard in military or personal life to assure complete equality. Life is unfair.

Whether or not veterans have Purple Hearts in their dresser drawers or heroic tales to relate to their grandchildren, they answered the call of duty and deserve our profound thanks for preserving the freedom we enjoy today.

In the course of writing this book, I learned a great deal about the most widespread and destructive conflict in history. I began to understand the genesis of the Cold War, the Korean War, and my country’s involvement in Vietnam—a chain of events that overshadowed World War II. For me, World War II is no longer just a topic in a history book; it has affected me

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emotionally. I admire the American people who made sacrifices on the home front. Most of all, I respect the men and women who served in the armed forces, patriots who risked their lives and postponed personal ambitions while putting down tyranny.

Time colors the past as each succeeding generation becomes further removed from the context of the World War II era. My father's letters, photographs, and documents constitute a primary source apropos to that period. They allow readers to compare and contrast the actual wartime experiences of one American soldier with the mythical constructs espoused by pop-historians and imaginative screenwriters. I am pleased to make this historical treasure trove available to scholars and to the public at large.

Lucky Stars and Gold Bars presents a *living history* of the epochal World War II era. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare postulated the advantage of having the stars in a favorable alignment when undertaking an enterprise of great import. All the stars in the heavens were in the right alignment for my father during those perilous years.