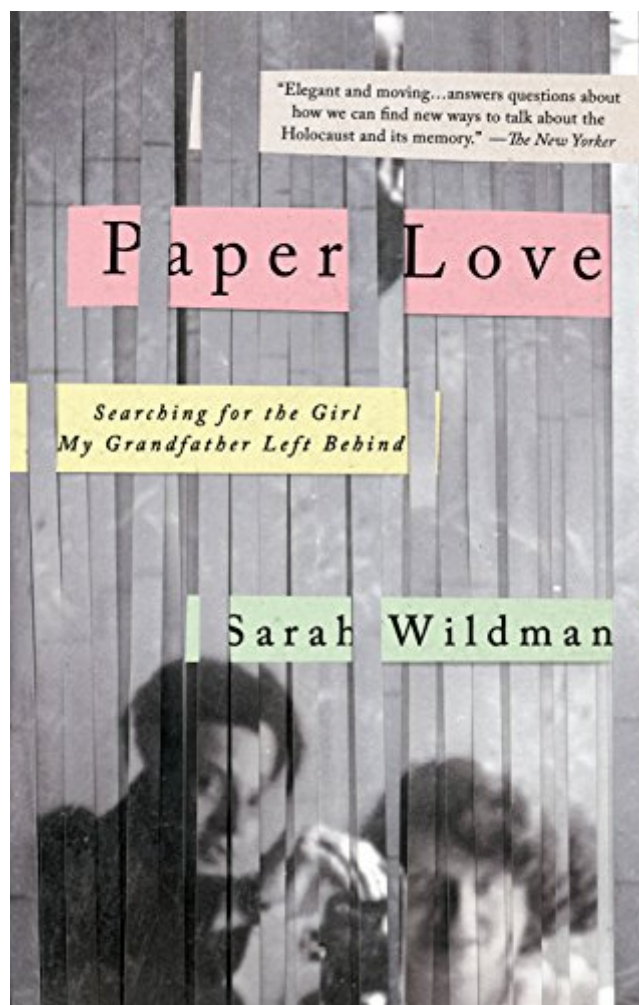


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Paper Love: Searching For The Girl My Grandfather Left Behind



Synopsis

One woman's journey to find the lost love her grandfather left behind when he fled pre-World War II Europe, and an exploration into family identity, myth, and memory. Years after her grandfather's death, journalist Sarah Wildman stumbled upon a cache of his letters in a file labeled "Correspondence: Patients A-G." What she found inside weren't dry medical histories; instead what was written opened a path into the destroyed world that was her family's prewar Vienna. One woman's letters stood out: those from Valy "Valerie Scheffel." Her grandfather's lover who had remained behind when he fled Europe six months after the Nazis annexed Austria. Valy's name wasn't unknown to her "Wildman had once asked her grandmother about a dark-haired young woman whose images she found in an old photo album. "She was your grandfather's true love," her grandmother said at the time, and refused any other questions. But now, with the help of the letters, Wildman started to piece together Valy's story. They revealed a woman desperate to escape and clinging to the memory of a love that defined her years of freedom. Obsessed with Valy's story, Wildman began a quest that lasted years and spanned continents. She discovered, to her shock, an entire world of other people searching for the same woman. On the course of discovering Valy's ultimate fate, she was forced to reexamine the story of her grandfather's triumphant escape and how this history fit within her own life and in the process, she rescues a life seemingly lost to history.

Book Information

File Size: 14083 KB

Print Length: 387 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 1594633975

Publisher: Riverhead Books; Reprint edition (October 30, 2014)

Publication Date: October 30, 2014

Sold by: Penguin Group (USA) LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00INIXNVY

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #157,679 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #163
inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Jewish #214 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle
eBooks > History > World > Jewish > Holocaust #217 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks >
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Customer Reviews

Author Sarah Wildman is the granddaughter of Dr Karl Wildman, a Jewish Viennese newly-minted doctor who fled Austria after the Anschluss in 1938. He, his parents, his sister, brother-in-law, and nephew were the lucky ones who "got out". They were able to settle in the United States and within a couple of years of hard work they all prospered. Dr Wildman was able to establish a medical practice in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He joined the US Army and later married an American-born woman and they established a family together. But Dr Wildman left many people he loved "behind"; those who were not as fortunate as the Wildman family, those who didn't "get out" in time. One of the loved ones Karl Wildman left behind was his girlfriend, a fellow medical student at the University of Vienna, Valerie "Valy" Sheftel. After Karl's death, his widow told the family that she had thrown away a lot of her husband's personal items. The name "Valy" had come up in family conversation and Dorothy Wildman simply said that Valy had been her husband's first love. Sarah, their granddaughter, was intrigued by what and who her grandfather had left behind. Definitely his love for his native city of Vienna, but also his first girlfriend. I alluded in my review's title to the "Second Generation". Those are the grandchildren of survivors who are now making their voices heard as they explore their own family histories. MY generation - the survivors' children - is the "First Generation"; our children are the "Second". My generation lived WITH the survivors and our relationships with our parents are different than the following generations who saw their grandparents only in their later years.

Ideally, journalism uncovers what has been overlooked previously and rejuvenates stories that already have been told hundreds of times. While news often takes the form of who/what/when, some journalists are able to make plain facts personally relevant to the average passerby. This is the feat Sarah Wildman has undertaken in PAPER LOVE. PAPER LOVE is Wildman's attempt to reimagine her grandfather's famed escape from Austria and the ensuing events during World War II from the perspective of the girl he left behind. When Wildman uncovers love letters to her grandfather after his death, she vows to find out what happened to the letters' author: Valy. Besides being the object of his affection, Valy is a newly minted Jewish doctor who runs from Nazi

encroachment first to the Czech Republic with her mother and then to Berlin. Wildman makes it her task to follow Valya's footsteps and to see if she can uncover what happened once the letters stop. At first glance, the subject matter is both an advantage and a disadvantage. While there appears to be a never-ending fascination with the events of World War II and the individuals who took part in it, there is also a feeling of weariness. Dishearteningly, humans have an awesome capability to become inured to tragedies, and horrifying stories become a source of exhaustion rather than interest. The strongest argument for Wildman's work, therefore, becomes the individuality of the story she tells. It's not the story of someone who affected hundreds of people or who changed history. It's the story of an individual whose distinguishing qualities were character-based, and therein lies its strength.

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