

Local Author to Speak in Santa Clara

By Carolyn Schuk

"It is March 20, 1940. It is freezing as I stand on the train station platform waiting to leave Vienna. I rub my hands and shuffle my feet. There are many bright lights, many people and many soldiers carrying guns."

So begins Cupertino author Phyllis Mattson's coming of age story "War Orphan in San Francisco." This month, the retired teacher of anthropology and public health will be speaking about her book and her experiences at both Santa Clara University and Santa Clara City Library.

Mattson's recently published memoir tells the story of how in 1940, at 10 years old, she was one of 1,000 Jewish children rescued from Nazi Germany (coming in small groups of ten over 12 years) and sent to the U.S. by the German Jewish Children's Association. The book charts Mattson's sometimes rocky course in America during that decade, moving in and out of a series of foster homes and an orphanage - a consequence of what adults around her called "rebellious behavior."

One thing that becomes clear

quickly is that Mattson is a born writer. At the core of her story are letters: letters she exchanged with her parents, annual "birthday letters" she wrote to herself, and even letters she wrote her parents after their deaths.

"In the first letter I wrote to my father, I asked, 'please be good and save my letters,'" Mattson says. "Writing letters was the beginning of my recording my story."

Mattson's story begins in 1939, when her father was deported from Germany for the crime of being 'stateless.' Initially accepted as a refugee in England, he was deported to Australia as an enemy alien when WWII broke out.

The declaration of war prevented the family from reuniting in England as they had planned. Looking for an escape route and finding no way for both mother and daughter to leave together, Mattson's mother asked a relative in San Francisco if she would take Phyllis alone.

Aunt Laura agreed, providing the girl with the necessary sponsorship. Mattson's mother was subsequently sent to a Nazi forced

labor camp and her letters to her daughter stop in 1942. Woven through Mattson's story is the tale of her life-long effort to discover her mother's fate.

Mattson paints a vivid picture of her life in San Francisco, letting the reader see through her eyes the challenges of growing up as a 'stranger in a strange land.' One of the most moving parts of the story is Mattson's reunion with her father in 1947, where, for the first time in seven years, she has a home she can call her own.

She wrote in her birthday letter on August 9, 1947: "This little apartment is my home. It is a wonderful feeling, I can have anybody over, at anytime, and I can do just what I want to. I hope that this feeling of loving my home will always be with me. It is one of the keys to the big room called happiness."

Although Mattson began writing her book in 2000, she has been telling it for many, many years.

When people ask 'where were you born,'" she says, "if I tell the truth, it will take an hour.

As a social scientist, I read many original documents and understand their value in understanding history,"



Cupertino author Phyllis Mattson

Photo by Jean Rickett.

Mattson explains. "So it only made sense for me to write my own original story."

Phyllis Mattson will be speaking at Santa Clara University's Orradre Library on Nov. 9 from 3:00-5:00 p.m. and at the Santa Clara Central Library Cedar Room on Nov. 19 at 2:00 p.m. For information, visit www.library.ci.santa-clara.ca.us or call (408) 615-2900.

Mattson's talk coincides with a special exhibit at the De Saisset Museum, "Multiply by Six Million: A Personal Perspective on the Holocaust, Portraits of Survivors

from the Legacy Project" by Evvy Eisen. Information about both events can be found at www.scu.edu/library.

"War Orphan in San Francisco" is available at both libraries. Copies signed by the author are available from Stevens Creek Press at www.stevenscreekpress.com. The book is also in stock at Borders, Alef Bet in Los Gatos, Hickbees in San Jose, Linden Tree in Los Altos, amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.

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