Minnesota Graphic Designer Makes a Chance Discovery that Brings History to Life

By Rachel M. Anderson, Contributing Writer

(WHITE BEAR LAKE, MN) Visiting an antique store is like going on a journey back in time. Most shops are filled with old furniture, paintings, dishes and knickknacks — but sometimes amazing treasures are found.

More than a decade ago, Carolyn Porter visited a now-closed antique store in downtown Stillwater, Minn. "I have an affection for old handwriting, and I had been keeping an eye out for old letters I could use as source material for a new computer font," said Porter, who is a graphic designer. "But until that day, I had not found letters that included enough raw material to work with."

For her font, Porter needed a handwriting sample that had a complete array of both upper and lowercase letters, along with numbers. She found exactly what she had been looking for in a collection of letters written during World War II by a Frenchman named Marcel Heuzé.

"I was drawn not only to Marcel's beautiful, swashed handwriting, but to the papers the letters had been written on. The yellowed pages were covered with faded ink, and blue and red stripes had been painted in the background," said Porter, who bought five of the twenty or so letters for sale. "They cost just over $6 apiece; $30 was all I felt comfortable spending that day."

Over the next several years, Porter worked on the font in her spare time. She finished the font in late 2013, and was honored when P22 Type Foundry, a New York-based distributor that specializes in fonts based on art, history, and design, wanted "Marcel" to be part of their curated collection.

Since its release, P22 Marcel Script has garnered five awards, including the prestigious Certificate for Typographic Excellence from the New York Type Director's Club. However, the creation of the P22 Marcel Script is only part of the story.

A few years before the release of the font, Porter took on another project. Out of curiosity, she had one of Marcel's letters translated. Porter, who does not speak French, was shocked to learn Marcel's letters had been mailed from a labor camp in Berlin. "Marcel desperately missed his wife and three young daughters," she said. She would learn his wife and daughters were waging their own battle for survival in a village in the countryside southwest of Paris.

In the recently released book, *Marcel's Letters: A Font and the Search for One Man's Fate*, Porter shares the story of her search for answers.

Porter says the peek into Marcel's life revealed in that first translated letter left her yearning for answers. "Marcel had this incredible tenacity and hope, which was amazing considering where he was." What began as a curiosity turned into an obsessive search for answers. "I had to know if he survived and made it home to his family," she said.

Marcel's Letters

CAROLYN PORTER
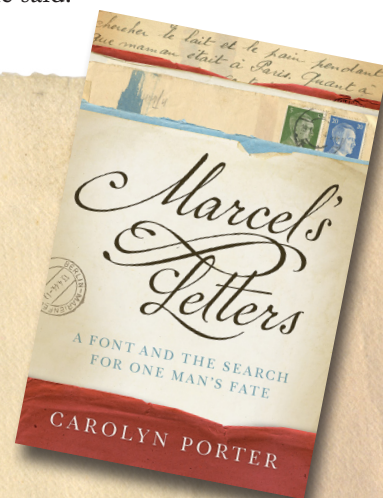
In the book, Porter pieces together answers from archives in Germany, France, and across the U.S. Along the way, she learned about the 600,000 French civilians forced to live and work in Germany during World War II.

"There were millions of jobs in factories, farms, and mines that needed to be done to support the war industry. The Germans needed laborers to replace the German men who had been transferred to the fronts to fight, so they demanded workers from the countries they occupied. At times, Marcel was living in a camp surrounded by razor wire and guarded by S.S. Men worked 70 hours per week and survived on starvation rations. Yet as bad as the French workers had it," Porter acknowledged, "others had it far worse."

In one of the letters, Marcel wrote: "We are about 60 in an old kitchen that is our lodging now. We bed down on straw. Do you picture it? Good thing that it isn't too cold. We don't have any light, that's why my letter is messy." In another he said: "As soon as we leave the table we are hungry again. What we eat doesn't stick to our ribs," and "Death does not count any more."

Marcel's letters were also filled with words of love and optimism. One letter ended with these tender words for his wife: "And for you, my beloved one, I always save my most tender kisses." In other letters, he offers gentle advice to his young daughters.

With the help of a genealogy researcher, Porter learned Marcel's fate, which is revealed in the book. The genealogy researcher also helped Porter track down several of Marcel's relatives in France. Porter obtained permission from Marcel's family to share the contents of these never-before-published letters.

Reviews for *Marcel's Letters: A Font and the Search for One Man's Fate* have been very favorable. The book earned a starred review from *Booklist*, which called it a "captivating memoir." "As impressive as [Porter's] detective work is," *Booklist* wrote, "it is Marcel and his letters — real, honest, heartfelt and brave — that are undoubtedly the star of this marvelous book." And the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* wrote, "It's a pleasure to read Porter's romantic dive into the depths of the lost art of letter writing and contained worlds."

Cathryn J. Prince, author of *American Daredevil: The Extraordinary Life of Richard Halliburton, the World's First Celebrity Travel Writer*, said, "In *Marcel's Letters* Carolyn Porter has plucked a powerful story from the recesses of history." Elizabeth Rynecki, author of *Chasing Portraits*, said, "We pick a font hoping it says something about us: that we are creative, intellectual, or have business know-how. But what happens when a font picks a graphic designer and turns her world upside down and inside out? In *Marcel's Letters*, Carolyn rescues one man's legacy, and ultimately gifts us with her own."

Marcel's Letters: A Font and the Search for One Man's Fate is available in hardcover and eBook format, and is available from Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble, as well as through Apple's iBooks and IndieBound.org. Sales for the first edition were so strong it went into a second printing less than two months after its release.
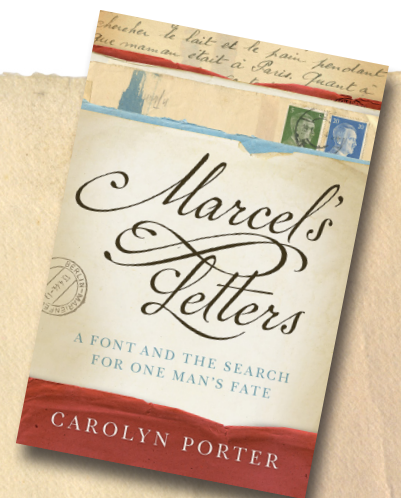
For more information, visit www.Carolyn-Porter.com.

Marcel's Letters

CAROLYN PORTER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn Porter can trace her love of handwriting back to teenage years and a set of calligraphy pens she was given as a birthday gift. She attended the University of Wisconsin-Stout, where she studied typography and majored in Graphic Design.

After college, she worked for the Minneapolis design firm, Eaton & Associates. From there she worked at an advertising agency in Texas, then returned to the Twin Cities and took a position as a graphic designer at The St. Paul (now part of Traveler's Insurance).

In 2001, she started Porterfolio, Inc., a freelance graphic design, art direction, and brand communications company based in White Bear Lake, Minn. Porter designs custom marketing and sales materials for medical and financial companies and an array of non-profit organizations.

In Feb. 2014, P22 Type Foundry, a distributor that specializes in fonts based on art, history and design, released Porter's font, P22 Marcel Script. The font is based on the handwriting of Marcel Heuzé, a Frenchman whose handwritten letters Porter purchased in a Stillwater, Minn., antique shop. Since its release, P22 Marcel Script has garnered five awards, including the prestigious Certificate for Typographic Excellence from the New York Type Director's Club.

In June 2017, New York-based Skyhorse Publishing released Porter's book, *Marcel's Letters: A Font and the Search for One Man's Fate*. The book weaves together the story of the design of the font and Porter's search for the fate of Marcel Heuzé, the man who penned the letters during the depths of World War II.

Carolyn Porter and her husband, Aaron, live in White Bear Lake, Minnesota.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This feature article and the accompanying photography are being offered for your use copyright free and cost free. To arrange an interview of your own with author Carolyn Porter, or request a review copy of Marcel's Letters: A Font and the Search for One Man's Fate, contact Rachel M. Anderson, Publicist, at 952-240-2513 or rachel@rmapublicity.com.

Media assets can be downloaded at www.carolyn-porter.com/media

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Marcel's Letters

CAROLYN PORTER

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