The Schuler Files: Life Under a Cloud

By Michael Kernan

Sometimes he would go to the D.C. Library and spend the day there, so the children wouldn't know he was out of work.

"To me, libraries are still places of despair," said his wife. "He'd wait around all day so he could come home at the same time I did. I would cry in my office."

For over 30 years, the career of Frank A. Schuler was blighted by what he believes to be a blackballing campaign. He cites chapter and verse to back his accusations against the State Department and now has a book out on the subject, co-authored by writer Robin Moore.

The story is hardly unique, especially in Washington. People's lives

Heirs

have been shattered by things written into their personnel files years before, deserved or not.

Also familiar to Washington is the story of the lifelong struggle for exoneration, the problems of living and perhaps even raising a family under a cloud. This is one such story.

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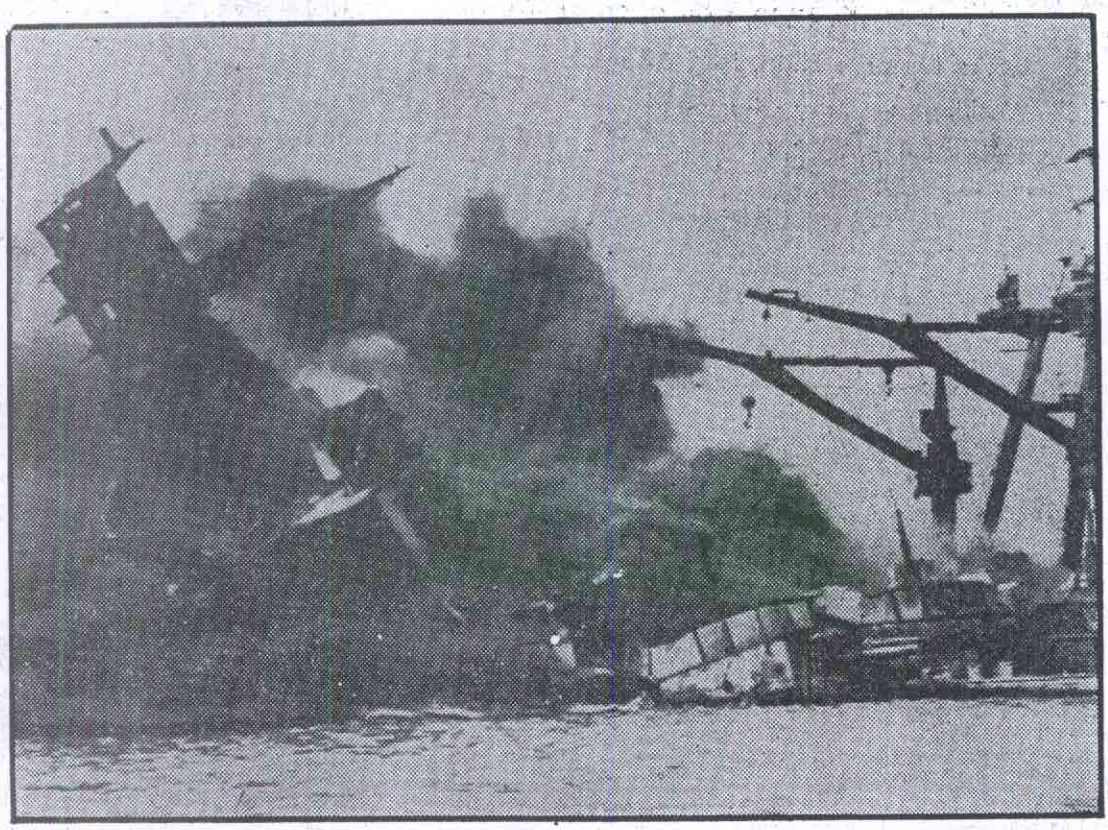
Frank A. Schuler, left; right, the sinking of the U.S.S. Arizona at Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941.

Photo at left by Joe Heiberger—The Washington Post; at right, by United Press International



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Schuler Files: Life Under a Cloud

HEIRS, From B1

Briefly, Schuler's case: A Foreign Service professional since 1930, fluent in Japanese, he was stationed in Tokyo in 1941. He and five other Far East specialists warned in a memo—three months before Pearl Harbor—that war was imminent and that Japan's peace negotiations were merely a stall for time.

The memo was discredited because it conflicted with the views of Ambassador Joseph C. Grew and other top diplomats who accepted Japanese reassurances at face value.

For the rest of the war, Schuler was shunted to places like Antigua, Lisbon and Ontario, where, he felt, his sorely needed Japanese expertise was of no use to his country. (Just 10 days after he reached Antigua, the whistles blew and the staff gathered to hear the announcement that we were at war. Schuler kept his mouth shut.)

Finally, in 1944, still feeling he wasn't being used to best advantage, he cabled his resignation. Unhappy with the reply, which said in part "Keep your shirt on," he took off in a rage and stormed home to Michigan.

There he learned that the resignation had not been accepted, that he was considered to have left his post. He was dismissed for insubordination.

Drummed out of the elite Foreign Service, then an exclusive corps of 800, he had a series of temporary jobs with the State Department at large, his salary dropping from $15,000 to $8,000. Then in 1953 his name popped up at Sen. Joseph McCarthy's Communists-in-government hearing: He had been recommended as a Japanese language expert by none other then Owen Lattimore, a favorite McCarthy target. Nothing came of it, but it was enough to end his connection with State.

From then on it was a series of temporary consultantships. Every time an enthusiastic employer acted to get him permanent status because of his competent work, someone would go to the old personnel file and find the damning record. "Meddlesome" was one word that appeared there. Veteran State Department personnel staffers confirm that not only were an employee's files open to other government agencies, but also any interested employer could get an informal reading on a prospect simply by asking what kind of person he was—contentious, easy to get along with, and so forth.

"It came on very slowly," said Olive Schuler, a legal secretary who was off and on for years the sole support of the four children. "We didn't realize they were blocking him this much, we didn't think it was that serious. It's probably what saved us from giving up long ago."

After no one knows how many jobs averaging a few months, the Schulers turned a corner in 1970. One night Frank was berating himself, as he often did. What had he done to deserve all this? It was becoming a theme song. "This is what destroys me," he said. Suddenly Olive lashed out:

"Look, Frank. You've got to face this thing, I'm sick and tired of having you say 'What have I done?' I think it's something *they've* done. I think the reason they don't want you around is that they're afraid you'll find out something *they* did."

A terrific fight developed. She left the house next morning without saying goodbye or making breakfast. "I had to make him angry," she said. "I had to make him want to fight. To investigate the case and write it down. Later he phoned me at the office and said, 'Darling, guess where I am—at the Library of Congress.' He'd already found some evidence."

Last year, with the aid of his youngest son Peter, 27, a recent graduate of William and Mary law school who is devoting full time to the cause, Schuler made a telling discovery: In the archives at Suitland, Md., the nearly 100 volumes of State Department records covering 1936-40 and the loose material for 1941 had been chopped up so badly that when one held a book by the binding, bits of paper rained out like confetti. The Schulers were so excited they had a picture taken of the sight. They also found evidence that other papers had been rewritten and revised.

One result of all this has been the paperback book, "The Pearl Harbor Cover-up," which accuses Ambassador Grew and others of refusing to listen to repeated warnings from many sources about the approaching war. It also charges that records were destroyed or changed in an attempt to avoid blame in our lack of preparedness at Pearl Harbor.

Though the Schulers are not especially happy with the rewritten book, on sale in Washington now, they agree that its evidence may revive interest in the events of '41.

This evidence plus the 1974 Freedom of Information Act has given Schuler new hope. Now 68, he is primarily interested in restoring his Foreign Service pension, as well as his good name. He gets Social Security and recently won back his Civil Service pension which, however, doesn't cover dependents.

Still, nothing can erase what Olive Schuler calls the years of loneliness.

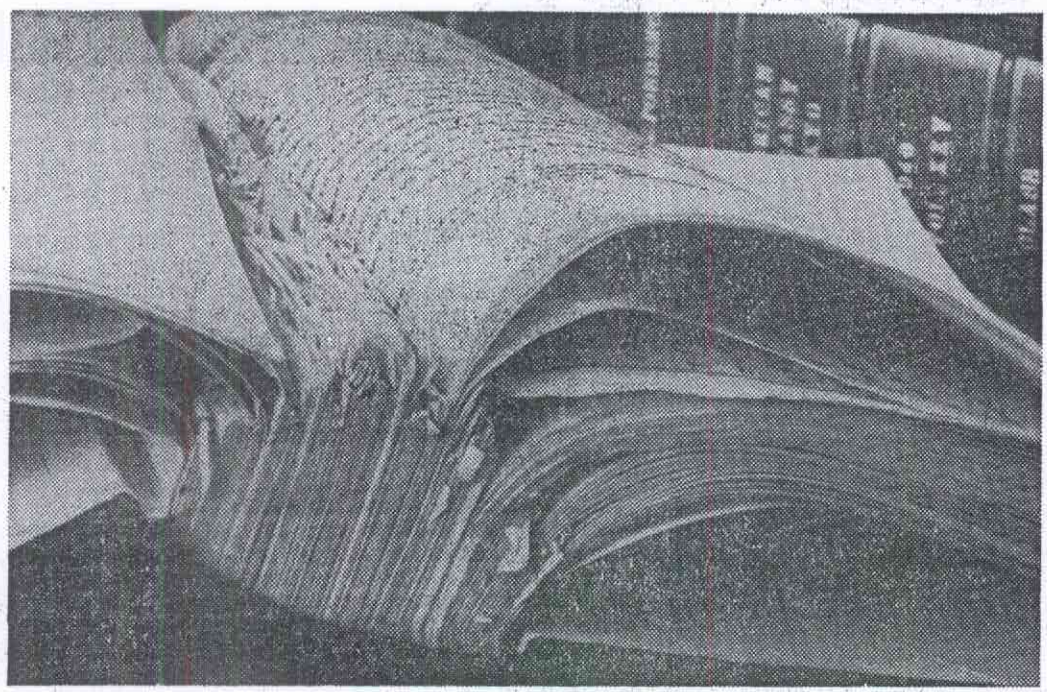
"He would pick me up at work, and he'd be so angry. He wasn't really angry at me, but I was the only one he could let go with. I was always able to get jobs as a legal secretary. Often I worked a seven-day week. Neither of us has had a vacation since '51. What usually happened was that I'd build up vacation time and take the extra money instead, when you could do that."

Raised in a modest Berlin, N.H., home, she has always taken pains with what she calls the esthetics of life: keeping everyone's clothes clean, mended and pressed, keeping the house in order, keeping up appearances.

"I guess I inherited from my mother an endurance, a pride in doing my best. I made all my clothes for years. I was born a happy person, always sang and played the piano, but I've had to forego things like that. We still have our original furniture: I've refinished and reupholstered it time and again. I'm thankful we had our health, and our hope, knowing we were right. But there were times when I wanted to just lie down and die."

One strength has been their solid 36-year marriage. They met when she was in the Far East Division secretarial pool in 1940. During dictation one day, he said he had two tickets to the National Theater and would she like to go. She said yes. As she left, she heard him phoning the theater for tickets. Six months later they were married.

It was lucky, she added, that the children were bright enough to get along on scholarships. The oldest son Frank, 34, is a plastic surgeon, chief surgeon at a Norfolk, Va., hospital. Paul, the second son, died while a



Partially shredded files of State Department correspondence with the American Embassy in Tokyo, covering the period just before Pearl Harbor.

Fred J. Maroon photo

medical student shortly after winning a scholarship. Janet, 24, is divorced and lives with her small daughter at her parents' Crystal City apartment.

When the children were growing up, the Schulers tried to keep knowledge of the depressing situation from them. Filling out forms for school, a child would ask what to put down for "father's occupation." The answer was always, "Consultant." Invariablly, the kid would pipe up smartly, "Consultant of what?" And would be told, "International relations."

"We knew," said Peter Schuler. "We knew something was wrong and we reacted our different ways. By the time my mother felt she could go to work I was 10, the older two boys were in school and I could take care of Janet, who was born in 1953. It was hideous to watch a guy sit home, waiting for a phone call. There was always some expectation, some hope. He hated himself at times, I think. He was very proud."

Peter remembers leaving Europe in 1953 after the McCarthy episode, "when we knew some massive gate had just shut on us," and they were returning to their hometown, Muskegon, Mich.

At first Schuler couldn't find work even in Muskegon, though the family had been prominent there for four generations and there were many relatives in town, including his brother, a prosperous businessman.

He tried to resuscitate his father's machine pattern factory but had to close that down and eventually wound up as an elementary school teacher. (Unlike some diplomatic exiles, he had no family money, no academic escape hatch.)

The family lived in a flimsy beach cottage with inadequate heat, later rented a house in town. Schuler rose in the school system, found himelf in line to become a principal, but "at this point something finally hit" and he left to take a post with the Federal Civil Defense Administration in Battle Creek, commuting the 100 miles home on weekends.

The operation moved to Washington; Schuler didn't get the call. He took another job, public relations for a railroad, but lost that because, he believes, of the presumed McCarthy taint. For a period he did telephone soliciting.

At last returning to Washington in a temporary job with HEW, Schuler camped in an attic here while his wife took the two youngest children, then 9 and 6, to her family home in New Hampshire. She was recuperating from a slipped disc. Five months later she rejoined him, and eventually they were able to move to a better home in the District.

Schuler recalled:

"We tried to put the older boys through college on scholarships and loans. Peter was going to Georgetown Prep, which in those days wasn't expensive at all, but even that became too much, so they let him stay on for nothing because he was such a good student.

"We tried to protect the children from all the McCarthy stuff. We were so frightened. We didn't want it to spread to them. We were always a closely knit family, a happy family. We tried to live as normal a life as

It is hard for him to talk about those years, about the sense of being a pariah, when people literally crossed the street to avoid him or greeted him in restaurants with acid little comments. He doesn't like to speak of the friends who dropped him even from their Christmas card lists and who perhaps still see him as a renegade from the Foreign Service clique.

He and Peter, with the help of attorney Bernard Fensterwald, plan to file a suit in Federal District Court for the retirement benefits. They also watch the progress of the book which, though extensively rewritten from Schuler's straight documentary account, dramatizes the story.

"My friend John Peurifoy once told me the only way I was going to beat them was to outlive the bastards," Schuler said. "Maybe he was right. Anyway, you keep going. You put a good face on it. You keep your shoes shined."