

# PROLOGUE

My name is John Schmidt. Thank you for joining me in this exploration. I've shared parts of my story in the past, but I've never before divulged the hidden truths behind it. You may have read, and it is true, that I accomplished a great deal with the help of my trusted friend and life partner, Clara. It is also true, as has been written about us, that we overcame great obstacles to undertake and carry out our multiple missions in Paraguay, South America. And through it all, God led the way and protected us until the very end.

Here's how Edgar Stoesz, former chairman of the American Leprosy Missions, described one of the lasting results of our efforts: "Dr. John and Clara's revolutionary model became the standard for leprosy treatment around the world."

And Dr. Franz Duerksen, the talented plastic surgeon who took over the leadership of our leprosy compound after we left, said this: ". . . their joint passion helped overcome many obstacles and misunderstandings, ultimately leading to extraordinary outcomes in leprosy and social work."

Those are stories I told and encouraged others to tell. After all, we faithfully carried out God's work.

But there is so much more. What has been only hinted at, but never exposed, are my insecurities and my anger and my fear—there, I said it—the *fear* that lay beneath the surface of my stony exterior like smoldering hot ash in the bowels of a volcano.

Even those closest to me rarely saw cracks in my defensive armor. And now I'm going to explore and maybe even disclose them to myself and the world. "Why am I doing this?" you might ask, just as I've been asking myself, over and over. Why now? I wish I knew for sure. Something compels me. If you stay with me, maybe we'll discover the answer together.

It was not our way as a family to open ourselves up vulnerably. Even when I was a young lad on a farm in Kansas, when life was hard, we were taught to shut up and fight our way through it. And I was a good student.

This journey of self-discovery with you will be far more challenging for me than all the hardships I ever endured in Paraguay. I will sweep you away with stories of some of my most harrowing experiences. And I will gradually reveal to you, and to myself, the inner truth lurking behind those stories that has until now remained mostly hidden.

Well, as much of the truth as I can muster, including the parts that are hardest for me to face. I always fought tenaciously to convince others of what I knew to be true. Like “Nazism does not mix with Christianity” and “People with leprosy deserve to be treated with the same dignity as anyone else.” But when it came to my own inner truths, the wounds deep within me, I tried to keep them hidden. Until now.

To be clear, this is not a confession in the traditional sense. That’s the Catholic way, and it is nonsense—confessing sins to another human being to gain healing for the soul. Shouldn’t have sinned in the first place! But there I go again with my bitter judgments. It’s time for me to journey inward and confront my own dark places. Along the way, I hope you will not judge me as harshly as I will surely judge myself.

For those of you who are deeply disappointed that I, someone you believed to be a hero, am a man haunted by demons of fear, anger, and self-loathing, I dedicate this book most especially to you.