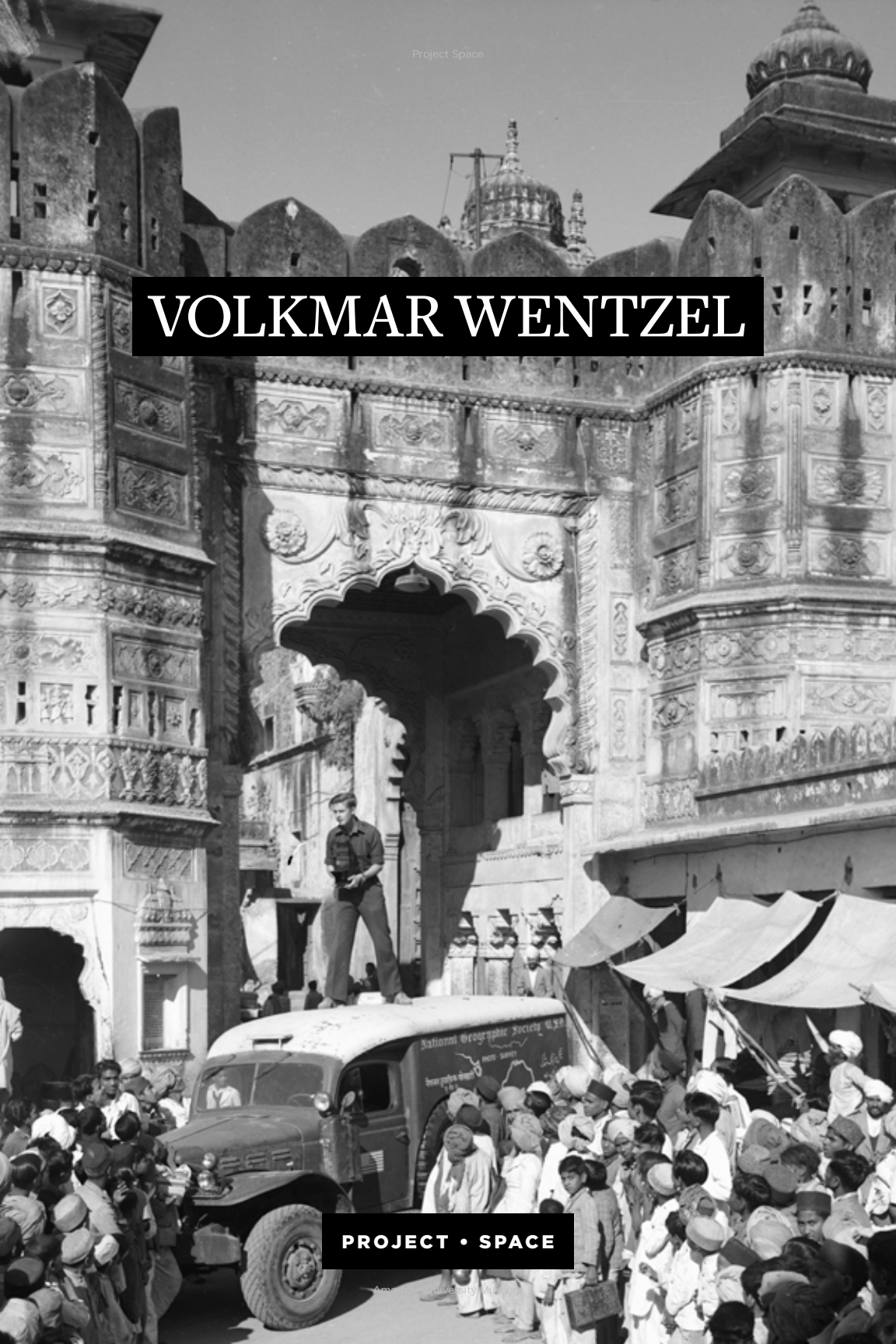


# VOLKMAR WENTZEL



PROJECT • SPACE



Project Space

# Volkmar Wentzel

Leah Bendavid-Val, Curator  
January 25 – May 24, 2020

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PROJECT SPACE

American University Museum



Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1953. A dexterous mechanical hand applies lipstick.

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Washington, DC, 1930s. The columns of the Lincoln Memorial frame the Washington Monument at night.

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East Rainelle, West Virginia, date unknown. Aging wood at Meadow River Lumber Company waiting to be shipped.

# Volkmar Wentzel

By Leah Bendavid-Val, Curator

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Volkmar Kurt Wentzel (1915–2006) was born in Dresden, Germany, in 1915. Unquenchable curiosity, an appetite for adventure, and a gift for friendship showed up early. These traits endeared him to family and friends, colleagues and strangers throughout his life.

In 1928, the Wentzel family immigrated to Binghamton, New York, where Volkmar's father, Fritz, a photo chemist working for the German company Agfa, had accepted a job with the newly merged German-American company Agfa-Ansco. Fritz shared his knowledge of photographic processes and darkroom work with his nine-year-old son. Father and son made a pinhole camera around that time.

Volkmar's mother, Verna, died in 1932. He left home soon afterward, going on a road trip with a friend without finishing high school. Finally arriving in Washington, DC, the boys parted ways. Volkmar decided to stay in the city. He found a room on the top floor of 716 Jackson Place, a short walk from the White House.

In 1933, the Great Depression was approaching and Frank Reeves, a local geologist and new acquaintance of Volkmar's, purchased land in Aurora, West Virginia. Reeves had apparently speculated that there was oil on the site. When it turned out that there was no oil, he built cabins and invited his Washington friends to reside in them. His artist friends included Robert Gates, Arved Kundzin, and Joe Goethe, as well as Wentzel.

The new arrivals reached out to the local Aurora community. Frank Reeves' wife opened a tavern. Artists and local non-artists got to know each other. Volkmar met an older gentleman, an architect, who insisted he complete high school and Volkmar finally gave in and got a degree. He tried to survive on \$2.50 per week, the amount he was getting paid for "tending gardens," but it wasn't enough. He began to photograph farmers' children, flowers, and other local attractions. He built a small darkroom in the woods where



Smoke Hole, West Virginia, 1930s. Saturday afternoon gathering in the Post Office.

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Smoke Hole, West Virginia, 1930s. Saturday afternoon in front of the Post Office.

he developed and printed his photographs. His talent began to reveal itself in photographs of Aurora community life—women quilting, men working, partying on a Saturday night, and the new Washington arrivals slaughtering and preparing pigs to feed the community.

The unique community that evolved in Aurora existed from 1933 until 1937. When the Depression was over, those who had come to escape poverty in Washington returned home. Friendships had deepened and artists back in Washington





Aurora, West Virginia, 1930s. Slaughtering a sow.

5



Asbury, West Virginia, 1939. Weekly weaving class for women (Reverend in back looks on).

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Near Ashland, Kentucky, date unknown. Musical family of Bunyan Oney, from Long Horn Holler.



West Virginia, date unknown. Miners.

continued to stay in close touch with their friends in West Virginia. Volkmar had come to love the entire state. Years later he told his wife Viola the story of returning to Aurora one Christmas: “They had a Christmas goose,” Viola recalls. “They roasted it in Washington, wrapped it up in blankets and drove it to Aurora, and it was still warm, and they had it for Christmas.”

Once back in Washington, Volkmar found a job mixing chemicals for the Underwood and Underwood Portrait Studio on Connecticut Avenue. A new friend, architect Eric Menke introduced him to a book by French photographer, Brassai titled, *Paris de Nuit* (1933). The photographs enchanted Volkmar. He purchased a used Speed Graphic camera and began going out at night to photograph Washington’s monuments and the people he encountered. He printed his pictures on the finest Underwood paper and made postcards. One evening, Eleanor Roosevelt, who was out for a stroll, encountered Volkmar with his camera and stopped to chat. She had already

purchased three of his Washington photographs at the Aurora tavern when on her way to Arthurdale, West Virginia.

When Volkmar felt he had finished his “Washington by Night” series, he put the prints together and walked with them to National Geographic. He was hired immediately. He worked at National Geographic for 48 years.

Being hired as a National Geographic photographer was indeed a high achievement. But photography was not what the thirty-three esteemed gentlemen explorers who met in Washington, DC on a cold, damp January evening in 1888 had in mind when considering the possibility of establishing a society for the “increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge.” They were all science-minded men, endowed with an irrepressible zest for adventure. Their ideas for disseminating yet-to-be acquired knowledge included lectures and meetings and a scholarly journal with a style that educated laymen could respect. Photography was considered lightweight to say the least.

Washington, DC, 1936. From the series, “Washington by Night.”



But Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922), the Society’s exuberant second president, loved photography and so did his reserved 23-year-old son-in-law Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor, the magazine’s first full-time editor. The society’s funds were scant in those days, and Grosvenor took advantage of every opportunity to acquire photographs at little or no cost. He loved to travel, uncomfortable as it was in those days, and he took pictures everywhere he went. He published some of his own pictures in the magazine and looked elsewhere for images. He obtained inexpensive or free pictures from galleries and from serendipitous encounters when he traveled. Back home he appealed for photographic donations at every opportunity, from friends he ran into, clubs he belonged to, and from all branches of the USA government.

His publishing policy was different from his acquisitions policy. He was committed to displaying photography as an objective, potent eyewitness to every kind of human endeavor. In January 1905, the magazine showed readers eleven photographs of the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, taken by two explorers who offered them free of charge. No one had seen such pictures before. A 1906 issue featured 74 “flashlight photographs” of wildlife at night by Congressman George Shiras III.

Publishing such pictures was a bold move at the time. The readership loved it, but board members did not. Two of them resigned. “Wandering off into nature is not geography,” they said, and they were enraged by the idea of reducing their sophisticated journal to a mere “picture book.”

Grosvenor, with Bell’s support, prevailed, and by 1908 photographs appeared on more than half the magazine’s pages. In those days the National Geographic’s publishing policy called for documentation unencumbered by the personality of the photographers. The two seemed separable in those days. The pictures had to be about geography, defined simply as “the world and all that’s in it.” The magazine had to stay away from politics, controversy, and subjectivity. It would be many decades before it would be understood that photography cannot be divorced from the thinking and seeing of the photographer wielding the camera.

Grosvenor was scientifically minded. His focus was on breaking new technical ground. He established an in-house camera department at National Geographic that responded to the technical needs and desires of his photographers in the field. Grosvenor’s support was crucial in the early days,

especially for natural history photography. Cultural topics were less dependent upon equipment. With the passage of time, cameras grew increasingly sophisticated and National Geographic's camera support department was no longer needed, even for coverage of natural history. Eventually it was understood that great photographs, enigmatic photographs, may grow increasingly meaningful over time, either despite or because of the equipment they were made with.

Wentzel's first National Geographic assignment took him back to West Virginia. He had already explored and loved the state, and was comfortable there. He returned to Washington with new photographs of familiar geography, along with landscapes newly seen and pictures of people he had just met. His attachment to West Virginia grew and became lifelong. He and his future wife, Viola Kiesinger, would buy a farm in Aurora, splitting their time between their Washington and West Virginia homes, raising their three children in both places.

10 During World War II, Volkmar enlisted in the Army Air Corps and served as a photo interpretation officer. Returning to National Geographic when the war was over, he received his first international assignment: "Do India." Those two words reflected the Geographic's belief in a global mission to show the world to its readers—and it simultaneously revealed the trust Geographic had in its photographers. Volkmar was given two thousand dollars and told to stay out of politics.

He traveled to Bombay by boat with eighteen suitcases. The first thing he did in Bombay was spend \$600 to purchase a used war ambulance. His idea was to store his suitcases in it, sleep in it, and use it as a photographic lab. When Geographic accountants back home learned of the expenditure they were shocked and let him know it. The two thousand dollars were meant to cover all his expenses for the long months it would take to do the job. He was shaken by the reprimand but was quickly reassured by a telegram from Gilbert Grosvenor, president of the Society, congratulating him on acquiring the ambulance. Volkmar had the ambulance painted with a map of India and the words "National Geographic Photo Survey of India" in English, Urdu, and Hindi. His photographic coverage of India became legendary.

India, it turned out, was just the beginning. Over the next nearly five decades, Volkmar's photographic journeys took him to Angola and



Bombay, India, 1946. Lettering the side of a converted ambulance for an expedition in India.

Mozambique, Timbuktu and Swaziland, and to Nepal and more. He photographed poverty and wealth, peasants and princes, always with sensitivity and unsentimental respect.

I began working at National Geographic in 1985. Wentzel's travels were nearly behind him. National Geographic had always been about breaking new ground, about looking forward, a determination to photograph what had never been seen. I knew who Volkmar was, and I admired his work—loved it in fact. I had the impression his career was almost over.



Angola, 1961. Portrait.

The National Geographic photography archive housed hundreds of thousands of photographs that had been made over a century by hundreds of photographers. The pictures filled up uncountable shelves and boxes at National Geographic. A question gradually filled the air: Why hold onto these? Why look back? The emphasis was—always had been—on the new, on the never-before-seen. It was National Geographic’s trademark. But the growing archive began to seem both untenable and uninteresting to the current officers at National Geographic. In the 1960s, a decision was made to begin tossing old pictures to make room for the new.

To say Volkmar was appalled when he got wind of this is an understatement. It turns out a few others were appalled as well. Volkmar could not change policy, at least not right away, but he inspired several employees, including the one charged with doing the tossing. She and Volkmar made a plan: she would telephone him immediately when photographs had to be thrown in the trash. He would rush over, take them from the trash, and bring them home. He saved negatives and Autochromes. The valuable images would eventually go back into the Geographic collection when the policy changed. His wife Viola recalls that in the end he rescued about 3,000 negatives along with a few Autochromes and Finlay plates.

My job at National Geographic was to produce books showcasing photography that told stories behind the creation of the most stunning imagery. I collaborated with individual photographers to create books of their current work.

From the day I arrived, I loved those old Geographic pictures in the Archive. I had the opportunity to create three books to celebrate them—*National Geographic: The Photographs*, 1991; *Odysseys and Photographs: Four National Geographic Field Men*, 2008; and *National Geographic Image Collection*, 2009. I met Volkmar and learned from him while working on these projects.

Over the years, Volkmar’s photography was exhibited widely, including at the Royal Photographic Society in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

Volkmar Kurt Wentzel died on May 10th, 2006 in Washington, DC.





Madras, India, 1948. Volkmar Wentzel prepares to photograph a local resident.

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India, near Bombay, 1948. Performance.



India, 1948. Raking salt in evaporation pond.

15



India, date unknown.



India, date unknown. Volkmar documents a crew filming local citizens.

16



India, 1948.



Jammu, Kashmir Province, India, 1940s. Silkworm cocoons tumble out of a basket.

18



Nepal, 1950. Porters transport a vehicle across a stream.



Ladakh, India, 1946. Religious ceremony.



Ladakh, India, 1950s. Novice red lamas dressed as demons strike threatening poses.



Louie Glass Company furnace, Weston, West Virginia, 1940. Glass objects were blown, partially aided by molds.

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West Virginia, near Aurora, 1940. Quilting Party.





*Hog Slaughter II*, Gerald Parks' Farm, Eglon, WV, c. 1938-39. Courtesy of the Aurora Area Historical Society.







Kings Point, New York, 1955. Cadets learn to use weather balloons, radio set, and sextant.

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Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, 1956. Record of architecture in National Historical Park in need of renovation.

Previous page: Hickman, Kentucky, 1940. Small general store run by an African American family.

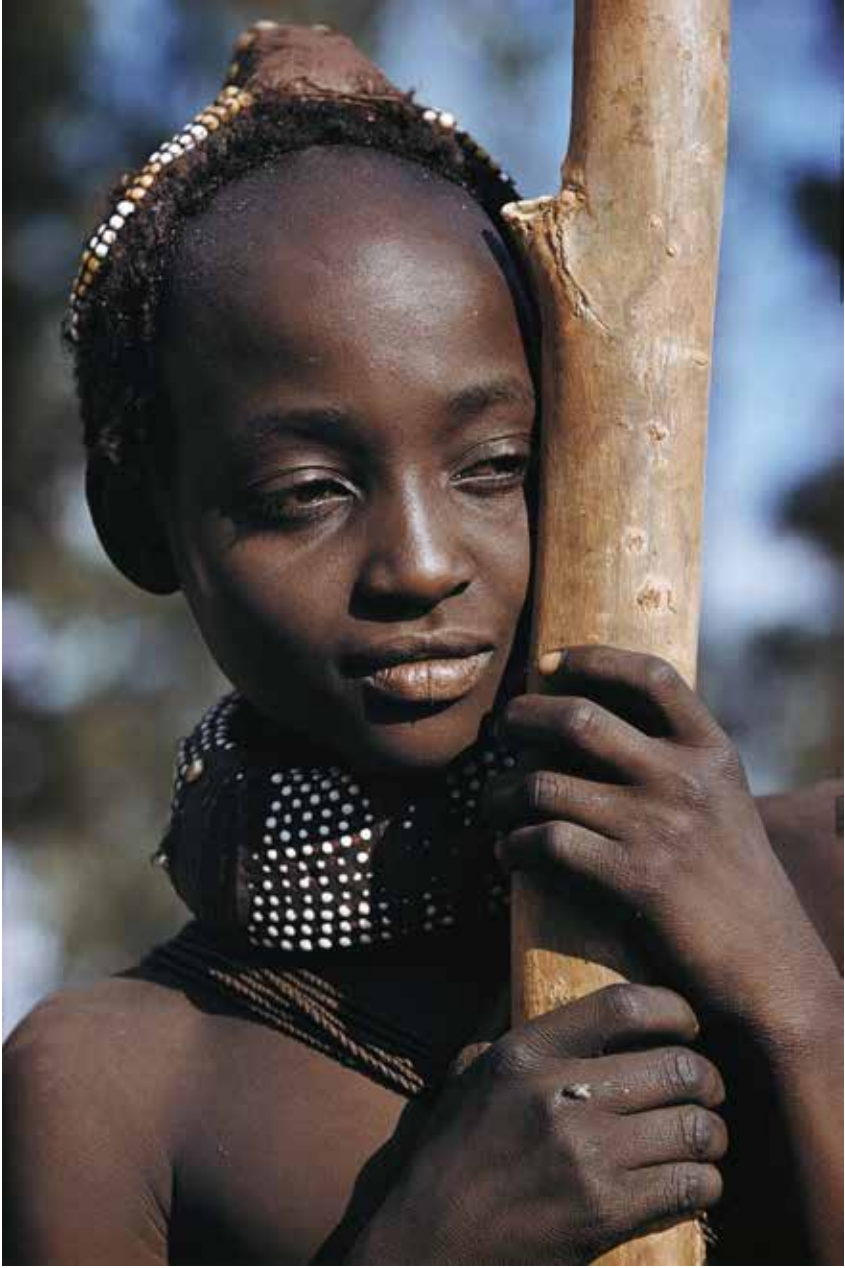


Lambaréné, Gabon, 1952. Albert Schweitzer at his desk with kittens.



Colorado, 1950s. Soldiers and airmen preparing for winter cold, smoking pot.





Angola, date unknown. Portrait of a Mwilla girl.





Benguela, Angola, 1961. City sidewalk.



Angola, near Humpata, 1960. The coils of beads indicate these women are married.

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Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1958.

Opposite: Above New Mexico, 1960. A man leaps from balloon gondola at an altitude of 102,800 feet.







Nevada, 1950s. Atomic bomb test reported in the Los Angeles Times.



New York, 1953. Radioactive research.

Opposite: Nevada, 1950s. Atomic blast (rocket markers at left).



Vienna, Austria, 1958. River Danube flows past scaffolded buildings damaged in World War II.



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The Mary Goldman Cottage, Youghiogheny Forest, WV, 1935-1936. Courtesy of Viola Wentzel.



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**LEAH BENDAVID-VAL** is an author, curator, and historian of photography. As Director of Photography Publishing for National Geographic Books, she developed books for popular audiences and for historians and photographers. As a Senior Scholar at the Kennan Institute, Bendavid-Val focused on Russian photography. Her book *Song Without Words* looks at photographs by Sophia Tolstoy; *Siberia and the American West* examines surprising similarities among photographers from dramatically different backgrounds. Books published under Bendavid-Val's direction have been included on the *New York Times* Bestseller List and have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

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*I am grateful to Viola Wentzel for opening her home and sharing so much about Volkmar's life and work; Thanks also to Laura Frye, President of the Aurora Area Historical Society, for her in-depth history of Aurora, and for the loan of Volkmar's dramatic Pigs scene for this exhibition. My special appreciation to National Geographic, especially to Julia Andrews and Meredith Wilcox, for supporting my research on Volkmar's career for this American University Museum exhibition.*

Leah Bendavid-Val,  
Curator

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Front cover: Bundi, Rajasthan, India, 1946. People of Bundi flock to see photographer Volkmar Wentzel.

Inside front cover: Washington, DC, 1940s. Military parade.

Opposite: Volkmar Wentzel's studio.  
Photograph by Leah Bendavid-Val.

Images courtesy of National Geographic unless otherwise noted.



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