

Gunter Nitsch Oral History

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Interviewed by Kenneth Clarke

Transcribed by Rachel Berlinski

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CLARKE: My name's Ken Clarke. I am the President and CEO of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, and I am here today with Gunter Nitsch, who is a member of—

NITSCH: Nitsch.

CLARKE: Neech?

NITSCH: Nitsch.

CLARKE: Nitsch?

NITSCH: Nitsch, like Mitch with an "N".

CLARKE: Nitsch, not Neech.

NITSCH: No.

CLARKE: Okay, let me start over. My name is Ken Clarke. I'm President and CEO of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, and I am here with Gunter Nitsch, who is a member of the Museum and Library, but probably, more importantly, he has a very interesting story to tell about his life, I want to thank you so much for being here today and being willing to share your story. I don't think a lot of Americans have the perspective that you have. And I think there's a great opportunity for you to inform people about the story of your life. And there's probably some tales in here and some morals in the story that I hope that we can get into so that we can enlighten people. So thank you very much for being here again, and I just want to start off with a very basic question. Where were you born?

NITSCH: I was born in Königsberg, East Prussia in Germany -- Nazi Germany -- in 1937.

CLARKE: So 1937 is a very important year in Germany. Lots is going on. Hitler's in power. The war has not really begun in the eyes of Americans and a lot of other people.

NITSCH: That started two years later.

CLARKE: Yeah, but the war machine was up and running when you were born.

NITSCH: Well, I didn't know it was --

CLARKE: Things were happening, so this is a very important year from a historical perspective looking back. So tell me a little bit about your very earliest memories in Germany.

NITSCH: My parents had a pastry shop in Königsberg, and I was born in 1937 as I mentioned before. The war started in '39. Only four weeks later, my father got drafted. My mother and I moved to her parents' -- to a little village called Langdorf that was about forty miles away from Königsberg. That's where I grew up. And the earliest memory I had was, two soldiers came to my -- to our farm and talked to my grandmother and to my mother, and they started to cry, and I heard that Uncle Walter, the brother of my mother, had crashed in an airplane. He was a pilot, and they drew the curtains and didn't give me any food for three, four days. I spent my whole time with my grandfather in the barn, and he gave me three meals. Much later as a teenager when I was fifteen, I found out this was in September 1941, so at that time I was three years and ten months old. That's my earliest memory of my childhood. My grandfather was the only male among my relatives who was not a member of the Party. He was a very religious man. And all the religion I have is from him and from my grandmother. I had a good time on the farm. We were far away from any city. There was no lack of food. We had everything because -- my grandfather produced it on the farm. And all of a sudden the adults got very nervous in 1944 because you could see a red light on the horizon. And I was told -- this was in August of 1944 -- that Königsberg had been bombed by a thousand bombers. And then in school they started to talk funny -- I was in second grade for a couple of months. And then all of a sudden there was talk in the winter about partisans coming toward the farm. School was closed in November of 1944, and there was constantly talking about an escape with our horse and wagon to a harbor called Pillau to get a boat to Germany. But the Party said, "No, you cannot leave." But then in --

CLARKE: Before you go to the "Then in", let me ask you a question about -- your grandfather was not a member of the Nazi Party.

NITSCH: No.

CLARKE: And you mentioned the religion that you have is because of him and your grandmother. And from my understanding your grandfather was very influential on you as a person. He raised you—

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: -- very directly for a period of time that was very important to you.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: Can you tell me a little bit more about him?

NITSCH: My grandfather read a church paper and the Bible. I never saw any other book. And many times after work he would sit with me on a bench near the big tile oven, and he would tell me stories of Moses and Jesus and Jonah and the whale and all of that. And he told me many stories of him as a boy in southern East Prussia. He had been skating, and he just liked the outdoor life, and he was totally upset about the regime. But he was also -- was very, very worried about escape, which we were not permitted to do.

CLARKE: Was he involved at all with WWI, or—

NITSCH: He fought for the Kaiser in France, yes.

CLARKE: He did.

NITSCH: He hated wars. He said, "We don't need a war. It's against our religion." Of course, he was a strict Lutheran, and we shouldn't have any wars. He was a pacifist I would say.

CLARKE: So his experience during WWI very much influenced him on this?

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And how much do you think that this influenced you?

NITSCH: Well, quite a bit because I found out the hard way that he was correct. And my grandmother, she never read any books. She only read the Bible, just like my grandfather. And when she was singing or humming, it was always hymns from church. - I never learned how to read music, so if I go to church today in Chicago, I can only sing along if I remember the melodies from her, 'cause I cannot read music. Sounds strange, but that's the way it is.

CLARKE: What was her influence on you?

NITSCH: Well, maybe we should come to that later. She was very rough. Once we were under Russian occupation, she gave me a hard time, and I gave her a hard time.

CLARKE: Okay, let's talk about that later.

NITSCH: -- Yes

CLARKE: Okay, sorry. I wanted to definitely get into your grandfather a little bit, because he seems to be a very large figure in your life.

NITSCH: Yes, he was.

CLARKE: So you are -- it's November 1944, and schools are closed, and you're talking about an escape, but you have been told by the Nazi Party you cannot escape. You have to stay where you are.

NITSCH: Right. We had two French prisoners of war. And then one day in late January my grandfather said, "That's it. We're going to build a car, a wagon that will enable us to flee." And they helped him. Then my aunt, who had five kids, joined us. And they came, and we left at the end of January and tried to go to this harbor called Pillau. I think today it's called Baltiysk. It took us six weeks to go a distance of sixty miles or a hundred kilometers. Why? 'Cause the German army was in retreat, and it was winter. It was snow and ice. And most of the time we were chased off the road, so we had to go to forests, and we didn't have any maps. We got lost. And there were refugees. And the military was brutal. They just didn't let us go. And then finally we made it to Pillau. And we found out in the harbor that two large ships had been torpedoed by the Russians. One was the Gustloff and one was the Steuben. Nine thousand refugees died when the boat was torpedoed by the Russians. And hearing this, my grandparents and my mother, my aunt -- her sister -- lost all appetite for taking a boat. So we went thirty kilometers north to a town called Palmnicken, and nearby there was a little village called Biskobnicken, and that's where we got a room and stayed with this farm family and waited for the end of the war. The end of the war came on April the 15th 1945.

CLARKE: Let me ask you a question. You said you had French prisoners of war.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: What does that mean?

NITSCH: All the men in the village were gone, so the farmers were always supplied with prisoners of war. They were Russians, Poles, Belgians, and we had at the end French. They were not supposed to eat with us in the kitchen. But my grandfather said, "This is nonsense." We ate all together. And the French prisoners, one left the day before we left, and the other one joined us for about a week, and then he found some French prisoners on -- and he left with them. This is also rather unknown fact of history. Hundreds, maybe thousands of French and Belgian prisoners of war were caught by the Russians, and the Russians just locked them up or shot them because they didn't believe -- they thought they had been maybe fought in the SS, in the French SS division. So it was -- it's a rather messy story.

CLARKE: How did you as a family make sure that your prisoners of war stayed put?

NITSCH: There was no way of leaving. First of all they had some shirt that says KG, it means Kriegsgefangener, "Prisoner of war." No one left. There was too much military -- no. It was not possible to flee. Maybe some tried, but I don't know about that.

CLARKE: So they were there to help on the farm?

NITSCH: Yeah. They worked.

CLARKE: Interesting. During that period of time up to the wars end, you mentioned that school was in session for a couple months during your second grade year, and you mentioned the strange things going on. What do you remember being taught about what was going on?

NITSCH: We were taught that the Germans would win the war, and we should be careful not to pick up toys 'cause the toys would be thrown around by the American and British and Russian planes, and if we touched the toys we would explode. It was all very, very strange. And they always talked about victory. On April the 20th was Hitler's birthday 1944. And we celebrated his birthday in school. We sang songs. The teacher told us a story, what a great guy he was, that he came from a humble background and he was now the savior of Germany. And we were given hot chocolate, which was unusual. And on the way home, I had a conversation with my pal. His name was Horst. He was also six years old. And he said, "I don't understand why he said the Fuhrer was our savior. My opa always -- my grandfather -- always says the Lord Jesus Christ is our savior." So we had an argument about it. So I asked my mother and

she said, "No, Opa is correct. The teacher was wrong." That's what I remember of April the 20th 1944.

CLARKE: What were the teachings about the Nazi Party?

NITSCH: They didn't teach too much about it. We were very little. But on many days when the weather was nice we were all given a big apron with a big bag on the front, boys and girls. I didn't want to wear an apron. And we had to go to a lawn and pick certain plants, like chamomile and others [clears throat] that would help to make medicine for the soldiers and help them to become well again. We also had to collect at home bones and iron and paper, and we all had to bring it to school. This was all to help with the war effort. Sounds crazy, but that's the way it was.

CLARKE: You mentioned the day that you—

NITSCH: -- And then at home we had to -- my grandmother had to dry the plants in the attic, and when they were dry they were put in a bag and then given to the school, and they were sent to some pharmaceutical company.

CLARKE: So everybody was doing this?

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: You mentioned the three days you didn't get food.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And the curtains were drawn. You were -- that's your first memory of your mother's brother dying.

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: What do you think was going on there in hindsight? Why did you have to stay in the barn? Why was there no --

NITSCH: They were crying. They were totally dissolved that my mother's brother had died. He was a young guy. Twenty-three, twenty-four. I'm not sure about the age now. But he had died. And there had been so many other people -- soldiers who had died. Now it was our family. And my mother and my grandmother were totally—they went out of their mind. And after three, four days the curtains got up, and they took care of me again. I don't remember the date, but later I found out the date. I was not four

years old. That's my first memory as a child. It's kind of bizarre, but that's the way it was.

CLARKE: So your parents are both members of the Nazi Party.?

NITSCH: My father was a member of the Party, and my mother was a member of the Association of German Maidens, a young women Nazi organization, yes.

CLARKE: And they had been members of the Party before the war began?

NITSCH: My father, yes. Absolutely, yeah.

CLARKE: So when he got drafted he probably had some ideas of what was going on. Is that speculation?

NITSCH: Oh, yes. Absolutely, yes.

CLARKE: So you moved to your grandparents' farm. Your mom was with you during that whole time?

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: What do you remember about her during that period of time?

NITSCH: My mother worked very, very hard. She helped my grandparents. Okay, we had two prisoners of war, but there was a lot of work. In peacetime you had to have two, three people who knew their stuff. Now this was all gone, and they had to work very, very hard. She was also of course concerned about my father. He was in the first half year in Germany in some barracks again training. And then he was working -- oh, they found out that he was a pastry chef, and they made him a cook, so he cooked food in military hospitals first in Berlin, later in Paris, then in Vienna, then in Berlin again for almost six years. So he never fought. At the end of the war when he was near Berlin, he was running away from the Russians. He made sure that he was -- become a prisoner of war by the British. He succeeded. They caught him in 1945. They checked him. Was he a big Nazi? No, he was a small fry. And only two weeks later they gave him a job as a cook in the military canteen. Half a year later he was chief of the officers' kitchen in the British army in Munsterlager. That's a big place in Germany where they train troops. Kind of crazy. He had access to alcohol, cigarette, and chocolate. He had lived like a king while we were starving in East Prussia.

CLARKE: So you talked about this journey from the farm over to where you could maybe catch a boat, and then you end up north, you said, and living with another farm family.

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: So let's pick back up there—

NITSCH: But, but -- but this journey, that was pretty, pretty rough because first of all we were chased away from the road all the time. And one day again there were many, many wagons in front of us, and all of a sudden a motorcycle came with an SS officer, and he said, "From here on everybody down there -- it was a steep hill. And my grandfather had the guts to tell him, "If you send us down there we might die because our wagon will not be able to do this." So he put the gun on my grandfather's chest, and he said, "Civilian swine like you have no business being here. If you don't move I'm gonna shoot you." At that moment I hated him. If I had been able, I would have killed that man. I was only seven years old. But I never forget that. And we had to go down there. So it took us, again I repeat, six weeks to go sixty miles. Then in the harbor we made it to the farm family. And they were very nice to us and other refugees. They gave us food. My mother and my grandmother helped in their kitchen. And there were a couple of soldiers that were supposed to protect us, but it was all nonsense. You could hear the artillery. And then on April the 15th -- no, on April the 14th we heard on the radio they're gonna come. And my mother packed a small suitcase with some photos and some money and some jewels, and they said probably come tomorrow. And the next morning I woke up, and my mother went to the window. She was talking, heard noise, and the Russians -- the Ivans are here." Ivan. "The Ivans are here." And then minutes later, Russian soldiers stormed into our apartment -- oh, no, pardon me, into our room. It was not much bigger than this. And they wanted uhri -- that means uhr. It means watch. So my mother gave her watch. My grandfather gave him a pocket watch. And they left. Then another older -- Russian soldiers -- female soldiers came, and they took all the blouses and skirts and dresses from my mother from her closet, and another young Russian came, and he also wanted watches. And he found a bottle in a suitcase, and he drank it. And my mother said, "Nein." No. And then he was mad, because it was perfume. So he was mad. And then they chased us down. Oh, no, he wanted to grab my mother, and she just grabbed my little brother who was at the time one and a half, and went to the courtyard. And we left in haste. My brother, my mother, my grandparents, and I. And we walked all day, found a abandoned wagon. We got some shelter, then Russian soldiers came again, and they wanted my mother. [Sighs] Oh, it gets difficult.

CLARKE: Before we go into that difficult territory -- and we should address it—

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: -- when you're in that small room, what do you remember about the soldiers? The men and the women, like how they were dressed or how they appeared? Or --

NITSCH: The soldiers that was a group of soldiers from the navy, from the air force, from the army. There were about twenty-five. And they had a kitchen on wheels, and they invited me to have their soup, 'cause I wanted to be a soldier also. I was not a peacenik at that time because all of a sudden I was impressed by the soldiers. And one day I went to the pig barn, and I saw soldiers crawling on the floor in the dirtiest straw, and picking up little ampoules -- glass filled with medicine. And I was told, or we were told, that the Russians had been there before and had taken all the medical supplies and tried to destroy it and throw it into their barn. So I helped them. They had to work on their knees, but I just squatted, and they acted as if I was a soldier. And they gave me the soup, and I was very proud to get free soup.

CLARKE: [Chuckling] That's the --

NITSCH: It was kind of silly, yeah. And then one day -- one day they just left. They said, "Well, we have to help the people on the coast," because we were four kilometers away from the coast. And then they left, and then two days, three days later the Russians were there.

CLARKE: What do you remember about the Russian soldiers?

NITSCH: Oh, they had brown uniforms. They always had this short rifle with a large magazine. It looked like a fish can, so I called it -- they had a fish can rifle. And they always screamed loud. Many were drunk. And I mean, I had grown up on a farm, and they wanted women, so I knew what they wanted. Well, on the second night we had made it to Palmnicken; that's now Yantarny. Palmnicken was -- still is the place in the world where ninety-five percent of all amber is being found. And we found a house there with many refugees inside. We rested. And all of a sudden I was woken up by loud screaming. And about ten Russian soldiers came and wanted women. They broke through the second floor, and then one guy came and grabbed my mother. And then we heard a lot of screaming all night long. They came back in the morning. My mother was all disheveled, and they all had cried. And the Russian soldiers left. I knew

what had happened, 'cause I was a farm boy. And I suggested we all go to the Baltic Sea and drown ourselves. My mother said, "No, not yet." And then we walked around for quite a few hours and found another empty house where we then cleaned up and lived there for a couple of weeks. Once we had cleaned it up, Russians confiscated the house, and we were given another house. And we cleaned up again. And I always remembered we had to move once. But once I went back in 1998. I was looking for our house. I didn't find the house. And then I remembered all of a sudden we were kicked out every four, six weeks. Once we cleaned up we were kicked out again.

CLARKE: So you just moved from house to house to house—

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: -- by the occupying Russians?

NITSCH: Yeah. They needed to for their troops.

CLARKE: So your experience with the Russians, which is horrible on so many levels -- it was just wave after wave after wave of different groups of Russians who you would encounter?

NITSCH: Well, yeah. Yeah, right.

CLARKE: And so every group you encountered would be after the same things, and would be --

NITSCH: Well, after about eight weeks there was a sign on the kommandantur, or the commanding post of the Russian army, "No more raping", but it still was going on. My mother always had to watch out. At night she was told by the other German women to put some jam in her face and a lot of flour, and she looked like an old woman who had a bad disease. And when they came -- she would scream the word, "Typhus", in English typhus, and typhus is the same word in Russian, and they would leave. That helped here. But later my mother told my wife decades later, because she didn't want to talk to me about rape, that she was raped many times in those days. [Clears throat] But the worst in Palmnicken, once we had been occupied, was the story of the SS massacre. We were caught in April, and the end of May I think, there was another message on the kommandantur. And all the Germans were told that all German men had to come the next morning to the kommandantur or to the commanding post, no exceptions. But men meant some boys who were fifteen, fourteen, or men over sixty-five, 'cause all others were gone. And

they showed up, [Pause] and my grandfather then got a job, and he came home and cried. And I wanted to know why, and I was not told. Next day he came back again and cried. He just didn't eat -- first of all we didn't have much food. My mother had to clean houses of officers. And we didn't have much food, and he didn't eat the food. So he just went into the backyard. We didn't have electricity, no running water. And he read the Bible, cried, went to bed. And after the third day, I wanted to know why. Tell me. Then I was told to leave with my little brother outside, and I ducked under the window. And I heard, they were talking about something terrible that the German soldiers had done, shot thousands of people. [Pause] And then I insisted I wanted to know. And they told me. The SS had shot more than four thousand Jewish women on January the 31st on the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea was frozen. They chased them on the ice and shot them. They were Polish and Hungarian Jewish women. And then they were buried at the beach. And my grandfather and other men had to un-dig those corpses without tools. No shovel, just with their bare hands. So whenever he came home he smelled bad. He didn't have any appetite. He was totally destroyed physically and mentally. I couldn't believe that this had been done by Germans. The Germans always thought there would be revenge. But when it was all over there was no revenge by the Russians. And all these corpses were brought to newly-established Jewish cemeteries. And in the summer my mother no longer had to clean apartments. She was told with another German woman to go to one of these Jewish cemeteries that was six kilometers away in a town called Germau. My grandfather was astonished that no one else was there to help, just those two women. This was in a lonely place. So then my mother asked me whether I wanted to come along. Again, I was seven and a half. And I said, "Sure, I'll come along." This was a long way. So we walked, and we came to the cemetery. There were a lot of little graves with a big fence. The big fence had -- it was all rather primitive, made of wood with red stars on the graves. Red stars, not -- stars with five crowns, not six. And my mother and this woman had to get out the weeds, plant flowers, and so on. And I helped for six weeks. After a while I got used to it. It was a long way. We would always pass some trucks that were burned out. I didn't know whether they were Russian or German. I couldn't see any signs. There was -- we also passed a place that smelled very bad, and my mother said, "It's a rotting horse." I never forget that smell. So even years later when I -- I went to the Rocky Mountains with my wife, I could smell carrion. I was reminded of this time, you know. I mean, if a deer in the Rocky Mountains dies, no one buries it, and it smells bad. I remember this. I never forget that. But after six weeks, then my mother was told she would get another job, and she did. We had no water. There was some factory where some water was coming out, and we had to get it with a pail that was half a kilometer away. We -- our food

consisted of some bread that my mother was given by the Russians for whom she worked. We collected berries and mushrooms. My grandmother found potato peels in the Russian garbage containers. So it was pretty, pretty bad. [Sighs]

CLARKE: Let me ask you about your grandfather. So the massacre that he was assigned to dig up, basically.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: The impact on him had to be pretty heavy-duty on that.

NITSCH: Yeah, he was—

CLARKE: Why -- why was he so shocked the Germans had done this?

NITSCH: Well, he had not known, and he just couldn't believe that this had happened. He got another job. He got a job then as a watchman in some factory where they made amber jewelry. He got some food, but he never recovered.

CLARKE: Why did he think that Germans were incapable of doing this? What was his -- I'm trying to get into where he was as a German who fought during WWI who then sees his country do this.

NITSCH: Maybe he had heard rumors, but he never believed that. But he just could not digest this, and once we moved in April of 1946, he just died.

CLARKE: Was it part of his faith, do you think?

NITSCH: I would say so, yes. Yes.

CLARKE: Well, the reason I'm asking—

NITSCH: He—

CLARKE: The reason I'm asking you this is you told me that at another time. You told me that his faith -- he could not believe that Christian Germans would ever do something like that. So I'm trying to get you to go there.

NITSCH: Yeah. He questioned how could God permit this? The ironic thing was that the amber industry had been established by a man by the name of Mr. Becker. And Mr. Becker was Jewish. And he had made money with amber building a factory. And he had built the Lutheran church in

Palmnicken. My grandfather knew this. And he just couldn't believe it. He said, "What does this man think if he's in heaven and looks what Christians did to his people?" He couldn't believe it. Again, in '46 he died, not because of old age. He died of grief I would say. Undernourishment also. He was a tough man, but that just --

CLARKE: So those three days are so that he was assigned to -- or was it more than three days?

NITSCH: No, no, that was four weeks.

CLARKE: Four weeks. Okay.

NITSCH: Four weeks, no, no, no.

CLARKE: Okay, tell me a little bit about that so that we get it right for the —

NITSCH: He lost a lot of weight. First of all, he didn't eat. We didn't have much food, but he refused to eat. And when he came home he didn't -- he never talked to me again during those four weeks. He cried a lot. He talked to his wife and to my mother, but I spend my time outside playing. There was a playground with, with some -- my goodness. My mind -- searchlights. Military searchlights, and some tanks and some trucks. They were all rusty. That's where I played with other German kids.

CLARKE: What did you kids talk about when you were playing? You had to have been talking about stuff.

NITSCH: Our main concern was food. Where to get food. Strawberries, blueberries, mushrooms, wood. We always had to look for wood. There was no electricity, no heat. We needed wood in the summer and the winter, and after a while there is no wood left. The old furniture in the whole house is all gone. So my main concern was to fill my belly and, a little later, to keep away from my grandmother.

CLARKE: Okay, lets' talk about that.

NITSCH: In the spring of 1946, the Russian commander announced that all Germans who were not natives of Palmnicken or today Yantarny would be moved to another kolkhoz that was a hundred kilometers away, a town called Goldbach. And we were told this in the morning. At lunch there were trucks, and we were loaded in trucks -- three trucks -- and we left on the trucks. And during that ride on the trucks my mother and my grandmother were told that we were part of a bargain. The Russian commander of the troops in Goldbach needed workers, so we were the

workers. And the commander in Palmnicken, Yantarny, needed vodka. So he got vodka, and we were the bargain for vodka. So we came to this village. Again we were given an abandoned house. We cleaned it up. And a couple of days later -- oh, my grandfather was already a little -- [Pause] -- he cried most of the time. One morning I woke up -- I was woken up, and my grandfather had died. And to me that was the end of the world. To me he had been my father, our support, the guy who fixed everything, who got wood, who got food, who got water, and he was gone. That was all too much. And he was buried. There was no pastor. We sang some hymns and prayed the Lord's Prayer. And that was it. And I thought now life would come to an end. But it did go on. My mother and -- oh, in the meantime my mother's sister had come to us. And they had five kids. And we were two. And my oldest cousin who was at the time thirteen had to work at the kolkhoz; that means the state-run farm. Twelve hours a day. My aunt, my mother's sister, had to work on the farm and my mother. So they were gone for twelve hours. In the winter they had Sundays off, but in summer, fall, seven days a week. And the pay was three hundred grams of bread. That's about eleven ounces, if I'm not mistaken. Now that was one loaf of bread for eleven people. So we had to look for berries, mushrooms, all kind of plants. Nettle. We had to pick nettle. It was cooked like spinach. Sometimes my mother got salt. But all the Germans who work at the kolkhoz, they tried to steal food. However, whoever was caught was sent to Siberia. It was rough. But it was not just the Germans who got punished. The Russian civilians -- because in the meantime they had brought a lot of Russian civilians to replace us in the long term as workers. And the Russian civilians from all parts of the Soviet Union had been promised a house or an apartment, which they got, a good job, which they didn't get. They got a job like my mother. They only got the double portion of bread. They got six hundred grams of bread. The Germans got only three hundred. And they were promised a cow. None of them got a cow ever. It was rough. Now with my mother, my aunt, and my oldest cousin gone, my grandmother had to cope with six kids. We were all hungry, and there was nothing. So she was very, very rough. And when I remember her today, she was always -- when I came home, she was always towering over me with a wet washrag ready to hit me. And I didn't like her. And she really pressed us to work harder. My cousin, a girl one year older -- her name was Gerda -- and I, we spent most of the time finding wood. Finding it, sawing it, and chopping it. And she could hear in the courtyard -- we were on the second floor. Did we work or not? If not, she would yell, "GO TO WORK you lazy bums! Go to work." So I really didn't like my grandmother at that time. She never called me by my first name. She always called me lazy, lazy boy. Again I don't know the English translations. Basically lazy and no good. So I don't have fond memories of her during those three years. Once we were in

West Germany it was okay. But she had no choice. And I was a bad kid. I did stupid things. First of all, all boys my age had a slingshot, and we shot sparrows, made little fire, plucked the feathers, and roasted them and ate them. I never brought anything home. When I went begging to the food store -- there was a Russian food store -- I got bread; most of the time I ate it myself. Maybe that's the reason I survived. I was the -- so I was not a good kid. And I also was a bad boy because there was a bakery in the yard where our house was. A Russian bakery. Never got any bread. And there was a truck going up a hill. And once on a hill he would stop and then move on. And I had to go to my friend, so I sat on the sideboard and on top. The truck kept going. And I got scared. And then after one kilometer I jumped off, and I turned over, and had my foot was split like six centimeters long. I was bleeding like a pig. And I thought I was gonna die. But then all of a sudden -- we were already in the fields, and then all of a sudden the truck stopped, the Russian soldier -- truck driver -- came back, picked me up, put me in the truck, and brought me back to the bakery. You cannot imagine all the flak I got from my grandmother. She called me no good and stupid and the worst kid in the world and I'm a devil. And it took a long time to heal that. I also -- there are berries that grow on trees, elderberries. And the elderberry branch, if you cut off a piece and you make it hollow, it's like a little hollow pipe. And I shot ripe elderberries at other people, and they got very spotty dresses, and then they complain to my mother, and I got another beating from my grand -- so I was not a good kid at all.

CLARKE: What do you think was going on with you during all that time? Was it just—

NITSCH: Well, the worst was no school. There was no school for the German children. Then finally I think in 1947 they said, "We're gonna have a German school." And indeed they -- oh, wait a minute. There was also a church that had been emptied of all furniture, but there were a few benches left and a few sculptures of wood. The twelve apostles. And when my cousin and I were looking for wood, we went into the church. Grandma had told us, "Don't bring me any branches of live trees. They don't burn. They're wet. Bring real wood." So we sawed a bench from the church apart and brought it home. Now she accepted it. She didn't ask where it was from. She must have known, but she didn't say anything. But the next few nights I thought the devil would send me to hell or kill me and send me to hell. I was very superstitious. I had a bad conscience for many, many weeks. One day then there was nothing left in the church. There was also -- a little glass was left. And my friend and I shot out the rest. There was a building on the hill where the church was. And we shot also. It was fun. We'd shoot out the last glass. And this building

was then renovated. That became the German school. And the first day of school there were about thirty kids. We were told every day you would come to school, we would get three hundred grams of bread. That was the same portion as adults got for a whole day of work. And indeed we got the bread. We got also textbooks, all printed in Moscow. One in German, one in arithmetic, one in political science -- you would call propaganda about the Soviet Union -- and one in Russian. But the German teacher spoke German and Russian, but we got a Russian teacher who didn't speak any German. And he taught us Russian. But the whole thing ended after four and a half months. It was too expensive. They closed again, so it was the only time we got bread and I had some school.

CLARKE: So you stopped going to school in '44—

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: And you went and you got -- the next time you went was in '47 for four months?

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: Wow.

NITSCH: The school was a joke. The Russian teacher didn't speak any German, and the German teacher spoke not really good Russian. And we repeated like parrots what he said. I never learned the sentence structure. All we heard was all the time from the Russians was Russian curses. And they have a lot of imagination.

CLARKE: Describe to me your town where you're living. You're talking about the c Churches—

NITSCH: Goldbach.

CLARKE: The churches, you know, the condition of the town if you will. The church has been completely gutted of all the wood. The windows are shot out. What is this town like?

NITSCH: It was not a town. It was a village called Goldbach. Had probably five hundred inhabitants. And one big farm had been turned into the kolkhoz. That's where the workers had to show up every morning at five or six in the morning. And no one had a watch, but they had a plow hanging in the

air, and someone hit it with a hammer, and then they would go and go to work.

CLARKE: What did it look like, this town? I mean, this post-war town? 'Cause by the time 1947 is happening in the United States, you know—

NITSCH: There were typical houses covered in straw. Made of brick, not of wood. No one had plumbing, no running water. We got the water from a pump in the courtyard. There was a little store that sold food, but they sold only bread, dried fish, pickled tomatoes, pickled cucumbers, pickle -- and the Pravda, the Russian paper. But no detergent, no soap. So we all had lice. My mother, my grandmother washed her laundry from a recipe she probably got from my great grandmother. She would take the ashes from the stove, put it into a big container with water, and when it had sunk down after many hours she would take the water from the top, and that was the water with which she washed the laundry. Whatever had been white got all gray, and it was hopeless. And she had to do a lot of laundry because we were eleven people. So my -- my grandfather had died, and then one of my cousins died of tuberculosis. Dorchen. And it was rough. Then the worst were the winters. People were starving. Not only the Germans. Also the Russians. And there were earth mounds in front of the farm filled with potatoes, covered with earth straw and then earth. And that's where my mother and cousin Ilse went stealing. And the Russians went stealing too. Again, if they had been caught that would have been the end -- it would have meant Siberia. Going back to the spring of '46 now, one of our Russian neighbors had a -- [Pause] -- had a little yard. And there was a father, mother, and three little kids. And the father had been a veteran in the Russian army. He was in his late thirties I would say. He had a chest full of medals, but only one leg. He walked with two crutches, wooden crutches. Very primitive. And one day my grandmother checked the carrots in their yard, and he thought she was stealing. She was not. And he came over, hit here with the crutch three times. She collapsed. And then she went back to the house and cried for hours. And the Russian soldiers -- no, Russian neighbors had to get him away 'cause he wanted to still beat her. Only days later, a Russian officer who spoke German and a nurse came to our house. And the nurse checked my grandmother, and they asked a lot of questions. They asked questions to my cousin. And the officer said, "Nothing is broke. According to the nurse you will live. It's okay. You're gonna be fine." We thought that would be the end. Only days later an American jeep came with Russian officers. They arrested the Russian man, the veteran with one leg. He was sent to Siberia. We never saw him again.

CLARKE: For beating your grandmother.

NITSCH: Yes. And my mother asked her superior in the kolkhoz, "Yes, he beat my mother, but was this necessary?" And he said, "The war is over. This is a crime. We treat all criminals alike." That was it. The man who had owned the farm where the kolkhoz was, was caught stealing ten kilos or twenty-two pounds of rye. He was sent to Siberia for ten years. He came back in 1957 to West Germany. That was Russian justice. Again, it was not Russian justice. It was Soviet justice. It was a system. My grandmother always -- she never talked bad about the Russians. She always talked about the communists and the Russians in the soviet system.

[Pause]

CLARKE: So what happened after you -- did you ever end up going to school again after '47? I mean, 'cause by '47 you're how old?

NITSCH: In '47 in December I became ten.

CLARKE: So you haven't gone to school since you were six or seven years old.

NITSCH: Right.

CLARKE: You're ten years old and you—

NITSCH: I couldn't read or write really. I could read, but very slowly. It was pretty bad.

CLARKE: Well, you've come a long way, 'cause you wrote a whole book about this topic. So somewhere in there something happened. So, how—what --

NITSCH: Well, in 1948 -- there had been rumors for three years. They have enough Russians. They're gonna send us to Germany but it never happened. Then finally in September 1948 there was another rumor we're gonna be sent to Germany. We didn't believe it. And then my cousin, my aunt, and mother went to the kolkhoz to work at five or six, and they came back at nine o'clock. I said, "What's going on?" "We're going home, I mean going to Germany." "What do you mean?" "We have to pack. We can take whatever we can carry. There will be a truck at twelve o'clock." And the truck came at twelve o'clock, and they loaded us in the truck, brought us to Königsberg, Kaliningrad, and then we were put into a freight train, about twenty, thirty people into one wagon, and it took us two weeks to get to Berlin. Normally it takes six, eight hours by train, so many times we thought we would be sent back. But maybe I should tell you about some of our Russian neighbors.

CLARKE: Yeah, I want to know about that, and I also want to know about, briefly if you will, did you ever have the chance to go back to the family farm? Or was that just gone?

NITSCH: No.

CLARKE: That was never given—

NITSCH: First of all, the Russians had taken that part of East Prussia, but half a year later they left. And this became Poland. This became part of Poland. So I went back in '98, but I never went back, no -- first of all, during that time from '45 to '48 we had no photos, no identification, no papers. Absolutely nothing. No money. No newspaper, no radio, to be— [chuckles]—we didn't know that West Germany -- no, that Germany had been divided into Russian zone and a British and the French and the British -- American one. We had no idea. There were rumors there was a Russian zone, but we didn't believe it. And we had no -- the people in West Germany did not know whether we were alive or dead. In '47, I think, we got a postcard from my father through the Red Cross. But we couldn't write anything, only to say we are alive. No, no, it's different. Sorry. My mother had to fill out a card, a postcard, to the Red Cross. Where we are, and this was sent to Germany. And then we got some message.

CLARKE: So the whole time your father's doing what he's doing, and you described that earlier. He becomes a cook for the British. And you're—

NITSCH: And a womanizer.

CLARKE: And a womanizer. And you're starving in —

NITSCH: Yeah, but we had no idea.

CLARKE: You had no idea where he was. He had no idea where you were.

NITSCH: No, we only knew that he was alive, but—

CLARKE: That was it.

NITSCH: And he knew that we were alive, but that was it. We were like living on the moon. And I've been asked, "Why didn't you just escape?" No one escaped. There was Russian military all over the place. Even if the

Russians had tried to move, they would have been caught and brought back to this village, 'cause that's what the authorities wanted.

CLARKE: So back to the family farm question -- I'm just curious -- did your grandpa and grandma own that farm? Was that their farm?

NITSCH: Yes. Yes.

CLARKE: So when the war happened and they moved out and you went over to the coast -- that was it.

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: You gave up the farm.

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: So somebody else owns that farm now.

NITSCH: It's owned by a Polish family. I visited them in 1998. But let's go back a moment to my cousin when she died. Dorchen. She died of tuberculosis. And an old man made a coffin of old wood, and we told the Russian neighbors. And they came and started to cry. Before they left they prayed, but we didn't understand that. And before they left -- before they left they put a loaf of bread and tomatoes and cucumbers on the corpse, and they put a twenty rubble note in her nightshirt. And then other neighbors came, and they did the same. And I didn't understand it. So my grandmother said, "They must believe once you're dead you need food in heaven." And once they left, we kids -- not the grownups -- but my cousins and I, we ate the bread and tomatoes and everything. And the money was used then to buy more bread. This is all a little confusing.

CLARKE: No it's not, actually. It's not confusing. It's—

NITSCH: Maybe I should tell you—

CLARKE: You're doing a good job of describing something that I don't think anybody had a great deal of knowledge except for somebody who was there. Your description of -- that you were on the moon is probably the most apt description for anybody to really think about what you were experiencing during that time. I mean, for Americans, the war's over. The baby boom is happening, the economy's booming, all that kind of thing is going on. And you, the son of Nazis, is living in Russian-occupied territory. You don't know where your father is, your mother and your family is

trying to deal with this, you're losing people, people are sick, you're malnourished, you're not going to school, and Russians are moving in to occupy that territory. And the only reason that you get to leave is that they have enough people. They have enough Russians now—

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: The area's occupied. So what becomes East Germany is Russian-occupied land, by Russians.

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: And the legacy of that is very fascinating as well historically as well.

NITSCH: Well, it didn't become a part of East Germany. It became a part of Russia. East Prussia became part of Russia and part of Poland.

CLARKE: Yes, that's what I meant, sorry.

NITSCH: But let me tell you about the best meal I got in those years. We were still in Palmnicken, Yantarny. It was the winter of 1945. Yeah. No, '46 already. We were starving, it was unbelievable, and I went begging many times. And I went to a Russian house and knocked. And I had -- my grandfather was working in the amber factory. He had gotten some defective little pieces. And I always got for a little cigarette holder, I got a loaf of bread. But this guy looked at me, and he was a big man. He -- long pants, he was shaven, hairy chest, and he gave me one slice of bread. I said, "Njet." No. So he took the cigarette holder, threw it on the floor, and kicked me in the pants. I flew out the door. I was in the snow. I thought I was gonna die. I hurt like hell. And I remembered somehow that people fall asleep in the snow and die. So I crawled and then finally got up and went home. It was a horrible, horrible event. Only weeks later I went again begging. I knocked at the house, and an officer opened the door. I knew he was drunk, but he smiled. He was friendly. I had nothing, nothing to change. No amber, nothing. So he said, "Come on. Sit in. Sit down." And I smelled fried potatoes and fried bacon. I got all hungry. I hadn't had that for years. He said, "Sit." I sat down, and he walked around with some container and collected food. Sausage pieces, bean soup, cucumbers, fried eggs, everything. He put down the container. I said, "My goodness. This is a chamber pot." "Nah." So I started eating. I ate very fast. And all of a sudden I discovered a yellow ring inside. I said, "Is this from you-know-what?" "Nah, it's fat." So I finally -- I couldn't eat any more. I said, "Kharasho." So he took the pot, filled it up, and I said, "Can I take it home?" He said, "No." He went into another room, got a huge towel,

folded it, put the pot inside -- no, no, took the pot, and slammed it upside down so all the food would go into the towel. Then he made two knots in the four corners, and gave me the towel. Then he gave me a whole loaf of bread. That was the best meal I had in three and a half years. When I came home, my grandmother gave everything -- everybody a little bit, and then she cooked soup for three days from the rest of the food. That was by far the best. I never forget.

CLARKE: Why do you think he did that?

NITSCH: I don't know. Maybe he had a boy -- a son like me. My grandfather was still alive at that time, and he prayed. Thank him. Now I'm crying.

CLARKE: Yeah.

[Pause]

CLARKE: The Russians who occupied your part of the world at that time, how did they -- how do you think they felt about you? The Germans -- not you in particular, but the Germans?

NITSCH: I really don't know because we couldn't talk to them, and they didn't talk to us. But the few Russians among the military people who spoke German were Jewish [i.e., they spoke Yiddish], and they talked to my mother, and they talked to my aunt, and they regretted what had happened on both sides. And they were the tolerant ones. Sounds strange, but that's the way it was.

CLARKE: Do you remember having any ideas of what had actually happened at that point, or would that -- would your knowledge about what happened during the war come much later?

NITSCH: In Russia? No, no, I had no idea. No. No, no. That now brings me to my second book. No, no. Once I was in West Germany I started history three times. Stone Age and always stopped at the end of WWI. 1918 that was it. That was it. However there was a program on German TV in 1961, the Third Reich in twelve hours, segment, on TV. That was the first time I heard a lot. I had read some articles about trials against SS men who had worked in concentration camps. This was going on in the 50s and 60s, but this -- in the late 50s. But this was an eye-opener. In school and then of course we saw the program, how the Nazis got to power and how they then armed the German people, how the war started and what they did.

CLARKE: It was much later?

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: So you—

NITSCH: That's not in this book.

CLARKE: So you move into West Germany.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And tell me about that.

NITSCH: Well they didn't bring us with the cattle train. They brought us to East Berlin. And we were sent to a camp which had been a concentration camp, mind you, in WWII. And we were given food and showers. That was the first shower or the first bath I had in three and a half years. And I was scrubbing and scrubbing, and I was somehow convinced that the dirt had grown into my knees. But it felt good. It was the first time I got my own towel in three and a half years, because we all shared one towel. And in that German school under the Russians they had taught us about communism, about Karl Marx and Engels and Lenin and Stalin and all of those guys. And the Russians were the most intelligent people, the smartest people, the cleverest people. They worked hardest -- harder than anybody else; they were stronger than anybody else. And they had eleven time zones, and they would rule the world under communism. So in Berlin, someone gave a speech, an East German guy. Tells us the same stuff, and my mother, my cousin, my grandmother, my aunt -- they were all disgusted. And I felt disgusted, too, because I heard this. So we just turned it off. A week later we were all sent to a village near Berlin, and we were given a room by some woman in a small town near Berlin. And that's when I started to have school. First of all I was taller than everybody else, and I had an East Prussian accent, which doesn't come across well in Berlin. And I thought all the kids were smart, and I thought I was stupid. I had a rough time, and then one day my mother said, "In a few days we'll pack our stuff," -- this was on my birthday, December the 3rd 1948 -- "We're gonna go to West Germany, illegally." We packed our suitcase, we traveled all night by train, we somehow made it to the border, and we approached. We were in a forest, and all of a sudden we heard Russian. "Shtoi Takoi." It means stop. And there were two Russians soldiers with those "Shtoi"-- fish can machine guns. And they wanted us to go back. "Davai, davai," showing into the east. My mother went to her knees, started to cry -- she spoke some Russian by now -- and she told them her husband or my father is in the west, you should let us go. So

finally they spit out and said, "Davai, davai." So we went to the west. I hope I don't cry now.

CLARKE: So they let you—

NITSCH: Two guys—

CLARKE: -- they let you go.

NITSCH: Yes. Two uniformed guys showed up. It was a uniform I had never seen before. Sorry. [Chokes up]. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

CLARKE: Don't worry about it, please. Let's make sure we have a tissue over here or something.

NITSCH: Anyhow, they were British soldiers. They grabbed my mother's suitcase, carried it. [Fumbling with microphone]

CLARKE: We can take a moment if you need it, don't worry.

NITSCH: And brought us to the German police. And they brought us to a rail station. We got a room in some mission, and then the next day we went to the town where my father lived.

CLARKE: The things you must have been thinking and going through as you're sitting on the edge of the border in the woods with these two Russian soldiers, I mean -- after everything you had gone through up to that moment, must have been—

NITSCH: "Davai, davai." Go, go. In any case, my -- an uncle in Berlin, in East Berlin, had given my mother the address of my father and the place where he worked. He worked in the pastry shop 'cause the British army had wanted to take him to a military outfit in Aden, in the Middle East. And he said, "No, I'm not coming. I'm staying here." So he left that job, and he got a very good job in a pastry shop in a town called Uelzen. Now mind you the way we were dressed. I wore a grimy coat and knickerbockers made of a -- the potato bag.

CLARKE: Burlap.

NITSCH: Burlap, oh burlap. A burlap suit. And I wore boots with high heels made of wood. So I was taller than normal, and we were all dressed in rags. And that's the way we went to this pastry shop. And my mother asked for my father. And the woman said, "He is not here." My mother said, "We are

his family." She said, "You're his wife?" My mother said, "Yes." She said, "Come back tomorrow." My mother knew something was wrong. So we walked over to his apartment with our bundles. All we had was in the rail station, but we looked like ragamuffins. And we saw the sign Willi Nitsch. We rang the bell. Nothing. So the door was open; we walked up. All of a sudden we heard noise. Suddenly I see my father towering over us dressed in a very nice suit. He looked very elegant. He said, "What are you doing here?" And my mother said, "That's it." He said, "My god, you have turned all white." And she hugged him, but he didn't hug her back. I was so angry. I felt as angry as I had been when my grandfather had been threatened by the SS officer. What a nasty guy. Then she said, "Would you show us your apartment?" And he said, "No, that's not possible." And then he walked us to a refugee camp. He said, "You have to stay in the refugee camp for a while." And then we walked over to the camp. He got us a quarters, and during that time he acted as if he didn't belong to us. But I didn't tell you this -- my mother had a bad finger. There was some thorn, 'cause she had worked on the farm in East Germany in the village, and it was swollen, and so he brought her to a hospital, and he left my brother and me alone in that camp. Then in the evening he came back, and he said, "Mother has to stay in the hospital. She needed an operation. She's probably gonna lose her right index finger." And then he left us. The next morning he came back and talked to us. And then a woman who worked there said, "So you're the father? These boys have been alone." He said, "Yes." She said, "You have to take them. We cannot keep them here." "My wife is in the hospital." Out of the question, can't do that. I'll have a solution tomorrow. And the next morning he came back with his sister, my aunt, and then she took us in for three months in some totally different town. And then we lived with my relatives for three months, and then my father took us to another camp, a refugee camp, in a town called Bodenteich, where everybody was from East Prussia, from Silesia [and Pomerania], and two weeks later he left us for the next two years. So I don't like my father. Sorry. Then he took us back, and then he raised hell and beat us almost every day for about a year and a half. He was a terrible man. My mother said, "Weeds like us don't perish." I never forgave him for that.

CLARKE: So after everything you get through, you basically find your freedom, so to speak. And you find your father, and he treats you like strangers. And then worse than that, he beat you.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And was he out of your life after that, or was he—

NITSCH: No, I had to stay with him until I was more or less twenty-six.

CLARKE: Was he—

NITSCH: -- No, no, no, that's not true. I left when I was twenty-three, then I was on my own and made money.

CLARKE: And he stayed with your mom?

NITSCH: He stayed. But my mother claimed that was the best time of their life when they had the -- they had another store then, after '59 or so. They had another store. But he was not a nice man. He had -- I had been in the German army. I was twenty-one, and I loved jazz. I loved America. And he was -- got mad every time I went to a jazz concert in Cologne. I saw people like Count Basie and Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Mahalia Jackson, Harry James, Jack Teagarden. And I had gone on a Monday. On Friday I got dressed -- I was twenty-one. I was bigger than he was. He said, "Where are you going? You're dressed up again." I said, "I'm going to a jazz concert." He said, "You're not going." I said, "Oh, yes I will." I said, "My girlfriend is waiting downstairs, and her friend has a car, and we're going." He said, "Not going." So he steps back and hits me in the chest with his fist. I flew down in this position, as long as I am. I got right up, very, very slowly -- said, "If you ever hit me again, I'll hit you back." And then we didn't talk for six weeks, at all. I talked to my mother, and he talked to my mother, and so on. Then I spent four weeks, I think, in England. But I always wrote, "Dear Parents." So after that he acted as if nothing happened, and from then on it was okay. But he was not a nice man.

CLARKE: Hm.

NITSCH: And he was a womanizer, and I thought I would be a womanizer, too. And I was, and thank God I met my Mary.

CLARKE: So you, you settle into Germany or West Germany. You start going to school again.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: Your dad takes off for two years, comes back. You have somewhat of a family life.

NITSCH: Right.

CLARKE: You're going to school.

NITSCH: Correct.

CLARKE: Other than your memories of your father and your mother, what are your memories of the world and your place in it at that time, leading up to you joining the army?

NITSCH: Most boys were totally upset that they were drafted into the army, because they wanted to stay with their parents and in their hometown and maybe their girlfriend. And I was so, so happy to get away from my father for a year. Had a good time in the army. And I met some people who spoke English, and I listened to more jazz. We saw American movies, and then we had maneuvers with British troops and American troops. It was a place called the Baumholder in southern Germany. They had French troops and American troops and us. That's the first time I ate in an American military canteen. French fries, hamburger, ketchup. I heard Count Basie again. I had heard him before. I learned English. I had never learned it before. I was the one who told the jokes English and German. I got a lot of free beer. I said, "I have to go to America." Five years later, I came.

CLARKE: Why do you think your father was so opposed to you going and listening to jazz?

NITSCH: He called it Scheissneiger Musik -- shitty Negro music, he called it. He liked marches from the military. Maybe operetta. Not opera. My father never read any books. My mother read a lot of books, but my father was a strange man.

CLARKE: Did your parents ever talk about the Nazi Party after the war, or was that just gone?

NITSCH: No, no, no. We had huge discussions when we saw this twelve-hour program on TV. Oh my goodness, we had long discussion. And my mother admitted that she had admired Hitler, that she had seen him three times live in Königsberg. And my father had been also a storm trooper and fought the communists. And he told us how he helped to break up communist meetings. And the communists came to the Nazi meetings, and he beat them up. He was bragging about it. I found it disgusting. So did my brother. But when the German reporter asked former German officers to talk about Major Lieutenant -- Lieutenant Colonel, "Did you know about the massacre of the Jewish?" He said, "No idea, whatsoever." My father got so angry, he got up, he said -- he jumped up from the seat.

He said, "This guy is lying!" He said, "This is bullshit. Every German soldier who fought in Poland and Russia knew what was going on. This is scrap. How can you talk that way?" No, no, that he admitted. He knew. He didn't participate. He had no -- I don't think he would. My father always bragged when he was a kid that the best, most capable MDs, surgeons, in Königsberg were mostly Jewish -- he told me this several times. He had high respect for the professors and so on, and he talked about the elite in Königsberg. But this in this TV program really got him mad when he said, "No, they're lying," he said.

CLARKE: Was there any wistfulness on his part of the -- what could have been with the Nazi empire, the Third Reich, or was it more sober than that?

NITSCH: My father and most of my relatives in East Prussia knew -- I mean they were all for the war in the beginning. But once they attacked Russia, they knew that was the beginning of the end. They all had studied some history. They knew about Napoleon and the vastness of the Russian empire. They knew. They were all against that. And that's when it all went downhill from the very beginning.

CLARKE: So you joined the -- how are you doing by the way? Do you want to take a break? Or are you --

NITSCH: No, no, no I'm fine.

CLARKE: Okay.

NITSCH: This is all a little mixed up. Maybe I should talk about when I was in the camp where my father abandoned us in Bodenteich in the refugee camp. My mother found a job on a farm, and my brother had tuberculosis, so he was gone for almost two years in a sanatorium. So I was alone with her, and she was gone all day and worked all kinds of jobs. And I had a big string around my neck and a key, and I was on my own. School was unimportant. The camp had been established in the former ammunition company, ammunition dump, ammunition factory. So my friends and I, we found a lot of ammunition powder. We found black powder, filled it -- put it on the ground, lit it, put a can on top. The can would fly up. We exploded bottles. We found some black noodle -- we called them black noodles. This was an ingredient for a smoke bomb. So a little piece, you would put on fire, blow it out, and it would smoke like hell. And we exploded bottles with this, smoked out the apartment of a neighbor, and they had to come out and we tipped the barrel of water on their vegetable garden. I was a bad kid again. I was -- had no supervision. Was no good at all. And winter came -- oh, my mother would have gotten, or

we would have gotten financial support from the German government if my mother had been on her own, if she had been divorced.

CLARKE: [Sighs] Oh.

NITSCH: But my father was gallivanting around in Cologne with another woman, and we were alone. So in the fall she lost a job, and okay, we had enough bread and potatoes, margarine, but it was rough. And then one day the mailman came and said, "I have a parcel for you from America." My mother said, "It's out of the question. We don't know anybody in America." She said, "Why don't you bring the parcel?" He said, "You've got to be kidding. It's much heavy. You have to pick it up. Bring a cart." One of my -- well, my father's younger sister had married a -- we were all Lutherans, but they were Mennonites. And their son had been given a scholarship to study theology in America in Gordon College, Indiana. And he had talked about East Prussian refugees. He also had talked in a Mennonite church in Belleville, Pennsylvania. And that was the reason for the care parcel. So we went to the post office, got this parcel. It was about two feet long, wide, and long. It was very, very heavy. We carried it home on our cart, brought it home, opened it -- was very difficult. Had to get pliers, because there was metal around it. And inside were coffee powder, rice, raisins, bacon, cheese, fruit salad. We couldn't believe it. It was unbelievable. It was as if somebody would give you today three thousand dollars. And then we found a letter inside that was written in an old fashioned German that was a German that was probably spoken in northern Switzerland and southern Germany, 1700. And these Pennsylvania Dutch people who sent the parcel, that's the way they wrote, mixed with English. So my mother could read the letter, and it was very, very religious. So my mother wrote a long letter. She cried, I ate the fruit salad, and I said to myself, "If there's a heaven and there are angels, that's what they eat: fruit salad." I had never -- the best in the world. And then we got another fifteen parcels in the next two years. And then my father took us back, and then my mother wrote a letter. We don't need any more parcels. It's enough. Thank you very much. It was fantastic. So when I went to America, my mother said, "You have to visit those people." And I said, "Yes, I will." Well, I never did. And they sent the parcels in 1949-1950. Finally in 1975 we had -- my wife and I had visited my mother, and I thought, I'll see to it. And we visited them. It was a husband, a wife, and they had seven kids. Several of them were already married. And they were peaceniks in the truest sense of the word. The father had worked drying swamps in Georgia for four years. He didn't want to go through the American army. The two sons, instead of going to Vietnam, they worked in mental institutions for two years. The two daughters had worked in Indian reservations in Arizona to take care of

abandoned babies by Native Americans. And the grandson, years later, worked in New Orleans to build housing for African Americans after Katrina. And these people treated us like family. And they sent many parcels to many people, but that was the first time that someone came to visit them. And then meantime, the couple has died, but their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, they are our best friends. They live all over the country -- in Pennsylvania, New York, California, Kansas, Manitoba -- somewhere else. And when they come to Chicago, they visit us.

CLARKE: All out of those acts of kindness—

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: -- from basically strangers sending you these care packages—

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: That got you through --

NITSCH: And about one and a half years ago, I met somebody in Chicago, and she contact -- she read my book, *Weeds Like Us*, and she gave it to somebody from the CARE organization. And we met that man, we had a long talk. He lives in Chicago. And he invited me and my wife to a CARE presentation in Washington. There were four hundred people from all over the world working from the CARE organization. And they had invited receivers of care parcels like me, and donors of care parcels. There was one couple. They were in their nineties. It was a family from the Midwest somewhere, and they had sent care parcels to someone -- family in Berlin. And the care parcel went to Berlin, and they had a daughter. And years later the American son of the donors was sent by the American army to Berlin, and he met the girl there. And they got married. And they were in Washington. And I think he was in the nineties, and she was in the late eighties. All care parcel.

CLARKE: [Chuckles] Wow.

NITSCH: And I had to write -- they asked me to write a letter about my childhood in East Prussia to a Syrian refugee guy -- a kid who was eight years old. And I did and helped pack the parcel with chocolate and raisins and nuts. And I made an airplane. And then later in Washington they showed me writing the letter and talking and they showed how the little boy and his family in Jordan received that care parcel and how they liked the airplane.

CLARKE: Let's go back to -- you've joined the German army.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: and—

NITSCH: Draftee. I was not a volunteer.

CLARKE: Yes, you were drafted.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: So talk a little bit about being drafted. You actually did this already. You talked about doing maneuvers with the British and the Americans and all that stuff. So when did you get it in your mind to come to America?

NITSCH: When I got the care parcels. I also saw a movie in that refugee camp. Oh, there was a refugee camp for people from Eastern Europe -- from Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Russia. And they were all waiting to be sent to America, Canada, Australia. And they showed American movies. And as I explain in the book, some kid from Lithuania -- no, Estonia—got me into the camp, and I got some agreement, and I always could see movies, free of charge. But they were in English. I didn't understand. But I learned a little -- saw a lot of American fancy life. And one day I saw a movie of an old Russian guy going to America. He didn't speak English at all. He was old, decrepit, but he got a job as a snow shoveler. He got paid by the hour. And for lunch -- I think it was maybe in Chicago, or maybe Minneapolis -- for lunch he ordered toast, scrambled eggs, and two franks. And he paid with a few coins. He didn't eat the toast. That really had me upset. He only ate the eggs and the sausage. I said, "My God, he is living luxury." We were still in the camp. We were eating lunch of butter and bread. If he can afford, as a snow shoveler, to have such a fancy meal, I want to go to America. [Sniffles] But then jazz and the movies really convinced me. That did it.

CLARKE: So when did you start making your plans? That moment? [Laughing]

NITSCH: No, no, no, no, no. I went to the American consulate in nineteen [Pause] sixty-two. I knew I needed a green card because I had met an American young guy in a -- apartment complex in southern Germany where I worked. And I met his friends. There was a guy from Japan, from India, and the German guy. And him -- and we always met for supper once on the weekend and spoke English. So I improved my English vastly. And then I had already a green card, and his parents became my sponsor. That's the reason I came. But when I went to the Frankfurt [US] Consulate, that was a little scary. I said, "I'd like to have a green card." I said, "Is there any problem?" She said, "No. On the contrary. We want a lot of Germans." I said, "That's strange." Well, she said, "The German quota is not used anymore. They only came right after the War, but they don't come any more. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but it is almost impossible for an African man with a PhD in mathematics to come to America. It's easier for a milkmaid from Denmark." I found that strange. So I got in -- out for racism already at that time. But I got my green card, and I had a sponsor, and I came to America.

CLARKE: So it's because the quota wasn't being used and there was room.

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: For a refugee to come to America from Germany, basically.

NITSCH: Well—

CLARKE: Or Eastern Europe or wherever it was.

NITSCH: Anyone could have come from Germany. They wanted to fill the German quota. But it was in America where I got a chance to go to college. I took a high school course in New York, in English, at night. Most of my fellow students were minority, so people from South America. Some were from Eastern Europe. And the teacher said at the end of the course, "I don't want to see you ever again in this class." I said, "I beg your pardon?" He said, "You don't belong here. You should go to college." I knew universities, but I said, "College?" He said, "It's like university. You should go to college." He said, "Where do you live?" I said, "Madison Avenue, 67th." He said, "Go to Hunter College." So I went to Hunter College. I said, "I'd like to take some courses, matriculate." "Do you have a high school degree?" I said, "I don't." "Where did you go to school?" "I went to a commercial school." "What did you study there?" I said, "German, English, advertising, accounting, French, geography." "French! See this man." And they sent me to the head of the French department. I didn't know. And he asked me in French, "What is your name? Where are you from? How old are you? What do you want to study?" I told him, in French, and he said, "You can take courses." That's the reason I got in college. Three years later I got a freebie. My grades were good enough, I didn't have to pay tuition anymore. In Germany, you get sorted when you're ten. High school or more, elementary school, and then you learn a trade like plumber or butcher or whatever.

[Pause]

CLARKE: You've had some experiences in the States as a -- you have a German accent.

NITSCH: I do.

CLARKE: And you have a very German name, you know, when you look at it.

NITSCH: Gunter, yes.

CLARKE: And so you've had some experiences here in the states that you've told me about before, people making assumptions on who you are based on where you come from. And I'd like to hear about some of that.

NITSCH: That was a little upsetting in the beginning. When I came in '64 I had blond hair, wavy hair, but my temples were already graying or whitish. And many people asked me, "Where did you serve in the German army?" I said, "I'm sorry. I was seven when it was over." "Where did your father serve?" I said, "Well, he worked in military hospitals, and he was in Berlin and Paris and Poland." "Did he work in a concentration camp?" I said, "No, he didn't." That was a bit upsetting. Yeah, that's about it.

CLARKE: Are you willing to tell your story of your experience of, I think you were in, Louisiana?

NITSCH: Sure. Later, much later, I got a job with the German American Chamber of Commerce in New York, and my job was to help German companies in marketing and to have American companies in marketing in Germany to create contacts. But I had a lot of contact with state development agencies from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut,

Massachusetts, but also from southern states. And many of these people who were far away said to me, "Should you ever come to our state, come and visit me." And I said, "Well, if I come it would be on a vacation, and I would dress casually." So one day I called up the state development agency in Louisiana, in Baton Rouge. And I went there, told them who I was. I was dressed casually. And the minute I walked into his office, he said, "Oh, my goodness. You really look like a German. You could have been in the SS." I said, "I beg your pardon." He said, "No, really. That's what we've been looking for." I said, "What does this mean?" [He said]: "We have a representative in Brussels, and young man. He looks a little bit like you. His father, he was in the SS. Great guy. By the way, I want you to know I have a first class copy of *Mein Kampf* in German and in English, though I cannot read German." I said, "This is -- sounds all strange to me. *Mein Kampf* was like the Red Bible for Mao Zedong." Then he was a little taken aback. But then he told me whenever he visited the father of the representative in Bavaria, he would come to the bar, and they would raise their hands and scream, "Sieg Heil!" I said, "To me, that sounds like a fairy tale." And, well, he kind of understood me. He was very friendly when we left. But of course, I never sent him any German investors. And when I told my wife outside, who has a Jewish background, she was more than stunned. But there were other incidents like that, all over the place.

CLARKE: People making assumptions of who you were and what you might think as a result of where you're from, not having any idea of anything.

NITSCH: And another time we went to a banker in -- wait a minute, yes. Sorry. In Jackson, Mississippi -- a bank in Mississippi. We met the man in his office. He was rather short. And I guess I made him feel uncomfortable 'cause I'm a little tall. And he took us to a restaurant in the highest building of Jackson at that time. At our place, there was a cigar with a band with his name. We got a menu. And I wanted to order, but he said, "No, I do the ordering." So I told him what I wanted, Mary told him what she wanted, and then he ordered. And we talked about all kind of things. And I said, "Look, if I were to live here -- let's say I would come here with a German company -- we have driven around this town. There's a lot of fancy country clubs. Would I be accepted as a foreigner?" And he said, "Oh, anytime. They would welcome you with open arms. When it comes to a nigger or a hebe, that's a different story." I was shocked. I didn't even know what a hebe was. My wife told me then, later.

CLARKE: You've shared a lot about your life and -- and getting through the wartime period, and getting through the, basically the refugee period, if you will.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And the reuniting with your father and the supreme disappointment that must have been.

NITSCH: I was to him, and he was to me.

CLARKE: Yeah, yeah. And the, you know, the experiences that led you to want to come to America, and all of that kind of thing. I'm kind of curious to know, when you actually got to America, what did you find?

NITSCH: Well, I was overwhelmed with the high buildings in Manhattan. About the cars. Most cars at that time in Germany had space for four people. Most cars here at that time

had space for six people. Then the tremendous amount of food in the supermarkets. I had seen supermarkets. I actually even worked for a couple of weeks in a supermarket in Germany. But the dimensions. My first stay was four weeks in California. I had never seen anything like it. The cars, the way people dressed -- wild and modern, and it was all overwhelming. I loved the music. It was all fantastic.

CLARKE: [Chuckles] In thinking about that experience of coming here and, you know, becoming American basically --

NITSCH: Yeah.

CLARKE: How have you reflected on this experience of yours? I mean, there are others as you mentioned, there are other refugees even right now who need help, who need a care package, who need somebody like those people in Pennsylvania who helped you. How have you reflected on all this after all this time? I mean, you're a kid. You're swept up by a world war. You're the kid of the losing side, if you will. And yet, things have been oh-so different for you in many ways that, you know, I'm just kind of wondering what your reflections on all of that are.

NITSCH: Well, I've been retired for a long time. I read a lot. I read a lot of books. I read a lot on the Internet. I'm always astonished, appalled, when I look at the amounts that the large countries in this world spend on defense. Defense for what? -- For thirteen billion dollars. The defense budget of the United States is bigger than the fifteen next countries. I said if there were a fraction of the money for refugee camps in the Middle East that could help a lot. But now we're in politics, and some people don't like that. I'm really a pacifist. I mean, I'm a member of the Pritzker Military Library, but I'm against all wars.

CLARKE: What do you think that an increased budget for taking care of refugees would do for the world? I mean, you are one. You received -- I mean, is there at any time where it could have been different for you if a different opportunity had come up? Had you not gotten help? I mean, survival seems to be important.

NITSCH: If it hadn't been for -- let's start from the very beginning. If it hadn't been for some good Russians, I would have starved to death. There was a superior of my mother at the kolkhoz who caught my mother stealing syrup. If he had reported her, she would have been sent to Siberia. If she had been sent to Siberia, I and my brother and my family, we would have starved to death, 'cause she was the manager of our family. There was -- the guy who caught her was, by the way, Jewish. Mr. Shatin. He's in the book. That was his name. There was another Russian woman. She didn't speak German but a number of times she gave my mother potatoes. Loud -- my mother understood a little Russian -- saying in very loud Russian, "Ah, here's some more rotten potatoes. Take them home." There was nothing wrong with them. If it hadn't been for people like that, I wouldn't be here. Very simple.

CLARKE: And the Germans and the Russians, they were bitter enemies.

NITSCH: Yes. And there were some people in West Germany. For example, when my father took us back for the first three years, we lived in a room, five-by-six meters. There was a sink, a bed, and a small stove, and a couch. I slept on a cot every night which got shoved under the couch, and I slept in the cot. For three years. There was an outhouse

that was thirty yards away from the house. And the Catholic family above us, natives, from Cologne, they allowed us to use their bathtub every Saturday, and they allowed me to do my homework for school in their apartment. It was people like that. There were always people who helped. When I came to this country, I found out about an organization called English in Action. I went to a meeting, I talked to a woman, and she thought she couldn't help me. My English was good enough. And then I talked to an old man -- elderly gentleman, I should say -- and he said, "I'm a widower. Why don't you come to my apartment for supper?" And I went a week later, and we talked. He made me read from *Time Magazine*, he corrected my pronunciation, and then I had to tell him the story in English. And then we had supper. He had an African American cook. And he was not a good eater, but I ate like a horse. So she was very happy that I ate all the food. That's when I learned about Southern cooking. And he was also Jewish, but secular Jewish. His father had owned a clothing store before WWI. He made some kind of apprenticeship and traveled all over the country, and then his father said, "It's time for you to get some education." He didn't go to college. So he spent a year in Paris, learned French. He spent a year in Germany, learned German. And came back. And he was my mentor for, what, a year. And then he died.

CLARKE: Let's go back to what you said --

NITSCH: He reminded me of my grandfather.

CLARKE: Hmm?

NITSCH: He reminded me of my grandfather.

CLARKE: Oh, he did. He was -- that's pretty cool actually. So that's pretty neat.

NITSCH: So I met a lot of good people.

CLARKE: That's pretty neat. Let's go back to -- actually I just kind of screwed up the end of that story, and I want you to tell it a little bit for this recording.

NITSCH: Okay.

CLARKE: Because I jumped in there about something else. But I have to figure --

NITSCH: I have to blow my nose.

CLARKE: Please do. But I have to get a portion of you saying, without me talking over you, "He reminded me of my grandfather." So, just if you don't mind restating that he was your—he was my mentor for a year and then he died and he reminded me of my -- if you could say that story again so I don't mess it up.

NITSCH: Can we interrupt for a second?

CLARKE: Yeah.

NITSCH: I'm embarrassed. I forgot the man's name.

CLARKE: Is it in here?

NITSCH: No.

CLARKE: Oh. That's okay.

NITSCH: I have to call my wife, no?

CLARKE: Oh, if you want to, sure. Yeah.

[2:08:40]

NITSCH: That is embarrassing. [Movement] That's terrible. [Pause] That's a senior moment. I'm so embarrassed.

CLARKE: At least you have an excuse.

NITSCH: [Dialing phone]

[Phone Ringing]

Mrs. Nitsch: [Over phone] Hello.

NITSCH: Hi, it's me.

Mrs. NITSCH: Yeah, I was wondering where you've been.

NITSCH: I'm embarrassed. What was the name of the Jewish man who helped me with my English in New York, from English in Action?

Mrs. NITSCH: Oh, I have no recollection. I don't know.

NITSCH: You don't know?

Mrs. NITSCH: I don't know.

NITSCH: It's in *Singular Education*.

Mrs. NITSCH: You need this information now?

NITSCH: Well, maybe you can look it up?

Mrs. NITSCH: Okay. Where are you now?

NITSCH: In the Pritzker Military Library.

Mrs. NITSCH: Oh. Okay. Should I call you right back?

NITSCH: Sure. [Hangs up phone] She'll call back.

CLARKE: Okay. Well, we can go into another thing, and we can redo that section.

NITSCH: Okay.

CLARKE: 'Cause that's -- I think that's an important part here, especially with that connection to your grandfather. It is interesting how people in our lives can be surrogate family members. I've had some, and it's a powerful thing. And then they die. And I don't mean to be flippant, but I've had that happen to me.

NITSCH: Well, he hasn't died for me. He will always be with me.

CLARKE: Yeah, yeah. I had a WWII vet who kind of took me under his wing here in Chicago when I was doing some different work, and just a great fellow. I actually got to give him a tour of here after I got this job. And two months later he died. And he was very much like that to me as far as, like, me being able to call him and ask him about business questions, and how do you do the best thing, and that kind of stuff. So, yeah, very powerful -- you know, it's like you -- It's something. He will always be with me. And he was not a family member. He was some guy I'd never known before that moment. And that's pretty powerful. Let me ask you -- you mentioned that you're a pacifist.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: Your grandfather saw war.

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And he was a pacifist.

NITSCH: Right.

CLARKE: You saw -- you didn't serve in wartime --

NITSCH: No.

CLARKE: -- but you did serve in the military --

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And you saw the effects of war while it was going on--

NITSCH: I was not strong enough to be a conscientious objector, 'cause I wanted to get away from my father.

CLARKE: Right, right.

NITSCH: I did not make enough money to be on my own.

CLARKE: Right, so, but you've had --

[Phone rings]

CLARKE: There she goes.

NITSCH: Hello.

Mrs. NITSCH: [Over phone] Mark Silverberg.

NITSCH: Thank you very much. See you later. See you later. Bye-bye. Love you.
[Hangs up phone]

CLARKE: Okay, well I want to get into the pacifism and all that stuff—

NITSCH: Mark --

CLARKE: -- Let's get that story—

NITSCH: -- Mark Silverberg. Silverberg.

CLARKE: Mark Silverberg. Okay, well then tell me that story about Mark Silverberg again so that we can get it, the whole story, properly.

[2:12:49]

NITSCH: When I arrived in New York I was looking for possibilities to improve my English, and about two weeks after I'd been here, I found out about an organization called English in Action, that would go and meet people and talk to them in English for an hour. I met two -- I went to this registration -- and I met a middle-aged woman. And she talked to me for about ten minutes, and she said, "Your English is good enough. I think you don't have to come here." But I didn't believe her. I talked to other people. And I met an elderly gentleman by the name of Mark Silverberg. He told me he was a widower, and we talked for the rest of the time. And he said, "I am alone. I have a housekeeper who cooks my food. Why don't you come and have dinner with me on Wednesday?" So next Wednesday I went to her, or went to him, and we talked. I had to tell him about my childhood and so on. We met again a week later, and from then on he made me read magazine articles from *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek*. He corrected my pronunciation. And he also made me retell the story after I've read it. And then we had dinner. His cook was an African American lady from the South. That's when I learned how to appreciate Southern cooking. She whispered to me that he was a terrible eater, and she loved it that I ate her food. And in those days I ate like a -- I had just ate too much. I love eating, and she appreciated that. And we had many, many discussions with Mark Silverberg, who also taught me about politics. He didn't like Goldwater. And then he told me about his own life. His father had a clothing store in Manhattan, but they were also selling to other stores. So as a young man, he had to travel all over the state of New York. A lot of time was spent on fixing tires because you got a flat very easily in those days. And then one day the father said, "You have to get some education." So he got him a job in Paris for a year in a clothing store. He learned French, and I think one and a half years in Germany. And then he came back and worked again in the United States. Had been married. He had a couple of kids. And he was well off. And we talked about everything. And since he had white hair and the laughing folds around his eyes, reminded me of my grandfather. Very much. And when he died, I was pretty shaken up. I went to the funeral. Sorry, I went to the funeral, and I talked through the whole time with the lady cook, 'cause everybody ignored us. And that was the end. But I haven't forgotten Mark Silverberg. [Sniffles] Sorry.

Clarke: Thank you. [Pause] You've seen a lot of war. First hand.

NITSCH: Yup.

CLARKE: You've seen the after effect of war—

NITSCH: Yup.

CLARKE: -- very much first hand. Your grandfather served in the German army during WWI.

NITSCH: Yup.

CLARKE: Saw war. Your father saw war. You are a pacifist, as you have mentioned. And you more than anybody possibly can say that war should be our absolute last thing anybody ever thinks of doing. But where did this come from? When did you start thinking about your position on warfare and fighting and -- because you are a member of the Museum and Library?

NITSCH: Yes.

CLARKE: And you know, like I know, that conflict seems to be inherent in human nature. It seems like something that we do a lot of. And the study of it is very important. So I'm kind of curious to where -- when and where you started formulating your ideas about pacifism. Because it's a powerful perspective, and it needs to be understood. And in my opinion, it's very much a part of military history. Pacifism is a part of that conversation that needs to be discussed.

NITSCH: I would say it started very early. From the minute I set foot on West German soil, I was still scared of the Russians, because this camp in Bodenteich was only five kilometers away from the East German border, and many times, I was afraid the Russians would come again. And then when I was a young man I always read about the American army and the British army, and how the Germans, how they watched that the Russians wouldn't come. And I heard a lot about the Fulda Gap. I also read statistics that the Russians had so many tanks and so much artillery they would walk through Germany in hours, maybe to the Atlantic coast. And I was so scared until I came to America. Now there was one great moment with my father, and that was very important to me. I was dating a young woman in '61, I think it was. And -- no, a friend from school invited me to a party. I went to a party to a different town and met his sister. We liked each other, and we celebrated until six in the morning. Then the girls made breakfast. There were about thirty people. The parents were not home. And they turned on the TV. And on TV we saw a show, the *Werner Hofer Show*. Werner Hofer was a rather famous German journalist who always invited an American, a French, British, and Russian reporter -- also other European countries -- and discussed politics. And on that day they were all dressed in black. And we found out that the East Germans were building a wall around Berlin. And the reporters mentioned, "This might be the beginning of World War Three." And I remember we were all shaken up, I more than most, because most of the other people were natives who hadn't gone through what I had gone through. I knew the Russians. And when I came home my parents were very upset. I talked to my mother, my father. We had lunch. And after lunch my father said, "I want you to come to my baking kitchen. He closed the door, and he said -- I will never forget -- "If they decide

that we have another war, I'm gonna give you one thousand marks. I want to leave instantly and go to southern Spain, or maybe to Morocco, Algeria. And if you write, write a postcard. Don't give your address. I don't want you to be cannon fodder for World War Three." I never told my mother. That was a great moment. [Tearing up] So I'm a pacifist. I'm sorry.

CLARKE: You think that --

NITSCH: And when I see young soldiers or young men or young women in Chicago with one leg or one arm, I know they were not -- probably not in an accident. It makes my heart bleed.

CLARKE: You study military history.

NITSCH: Yes. In a way, yes.

CLARKE: Why?

NITSCH: Um -- [Pause]

CLARKE: Let me ask a different question. Why should we study military history, from your perspective?

NITSCH: To learn how to avoid it. One of the greatest books I ever read was the life history of General Zhukov. That was one of the leaders of the Russian army that succeeded in crushing Germany. And reading his story made me realize the whole thing is so unnecessary that we have wars. So unnecessary. And he talked about the Russian troops and how they suffered and their families and -- also I have the feeling that many times when Russian former soldiers, Russian men were nice and they gave me some food or helped me lift a piece of wood, I think they were fathers who had lost their son, their little son. I've given book readings in Germany, and German ladies my age told me that the Russian soldiers were always nicer to little boys than to little girls.

[Pause]

CLARKE: Why don't you take this book and tell me a little bit about -- tell me a little bit about it?

NITSCH: This is me at the age of three. To be honest, I don't remember when this picture was taken. It shows me in the Luftwaffe hat of my father and his boots. If you watch exactly, you can see my little tummy because I was wearing a little shirt with suspenders to hold up my knitted stockings, which I hated. I hated them. And I was very proud when I got my first long pants, but by that time I was thirteen years old. But in East Prussia, I wore most of the time pants made of -- forgot the word again.

CLARKE: Burlap.

NITSCH: Burlap. Pants made of burlap -- knickerbockers made of burlap.

CLARKE: So --

NITSCH: We --

CLARKE: Why did you decide to write this book?

NITSCH: Oh, that's easy. My wife was born in New York into a well-to-do family. Her father was a lawyer; her mother was a teacher. And when we had children, we tried to bring him to a kindergarten in Manhattan. We lived in Manhattan. And we were told public kindergartens aren't any good, so we inquired about private kindergartens, and my wife phoned a kindergarten called the Rudolf Steiner School, and they wanted at that time -- this was in 1987 -- 15,000 dollars for one kid. So my wife decided we'd move to Scarsdale. We moved to Scarsdale. It's a fancy suburb of New York. We bought a house, and my boys started in school. And when we met the teachers, I got very, very jealous. The teachers were loving, smart, good-looking, pretty, and most important, they loved our sons. And I was very, very jealous because I never had teachers like that. Most of my teachers after the war were men who had been in the army, they had a problem with drinking or bad temper, they were upset, and at that time, they were allowed to hit us. So I wanted to write a book and prove to my sons that life for me was different. For example, if they would go to a birthday party in Scarsdale, they took along a little coloring book, and they came back with a car that was two feet long. And in my opinion, they were all spoiled. So I wanted to prove to them that my life was different. I also got very upset when my sons didn't finish their food. That told me about my life, so that's the reason I wrote the book: to show them that mine was different. And also I wanted to show to Americans, the American public, what was it like when the war was over. 'Cause many Americans know war only from television or from movies. And many believe once a peace treaty is signed, the war is over. It's not over because the infrastructure has been destroyed. There is no food, no water, no medical care, no hygiene. And all that's left is grandmothers and mothers who have to worry about the children, and the men are all gone. That's when it starts. That's when -- there are two major reasons why I wrote this book.

CLARKE: When you were jealous of your sons, you knew what was going on with you, though, right? I mean, you understood why you were jealous? That's --

NITSCH: Yeah, I was envious. I said, "Why didn't I have a childhood like this?" For example, we have teachers -- we have pictures at home where a teacher kneels down -- a pretty young woman -- and she has her arm around our son Michael. No teacher ever touched me like that. No touch. No teacher ever. All were smacking.

[Chuckling]

CLARKE: Aye, yai, yai. Well, I'm glad you decided to write this book. And I'm glad you decided to come in here to talk to me today about all this stuff today. It's not easy stuff to talk about. It was probably very difficult for you to write the book.

NITSCH: Oh, I got some advice. First of all, I sent a questionnaire to my mother, my aunt, and my cousin Ilse. And they answered. Then I interviewed my mother in person. And Ilse had to interview on the telephone because she became a nurse after the war -- after when Germany, and she married a Turkish doctor, and she's been living in Turkey for -- since 1955. I got help from them. But my wife also helped me to think through it and make it logical. And my sons read it. And for example, I had been rather critical. When I was a little boy we lived on the farm of my grandfather in 1944. In the fall, the

refugees from the eastern part of East Prussia came to us. I said to myself, "What do they want there? What do they want here?" They took my room. I had to sleep with my mother. I wanted my own room. And also they smelled bad, and they had diarrhea, and I said, "I don't want them here." I had this describe[d], and then my son said, "Are you out of your mind? You're a refugee! You criticize them? No, no. You cannot say that." And so I cut this out. So my sons also helped.

CLARKE: Oh, so that part is not in the book.

NITSCH: No.

CLARKE: Oh, wow, that's quite an interesting—

NITSCH: [Chuckles]

CLARKE: That is an interesting part of your story, though.

NITSCH: Well --

CLARKE: Well, that's probably what most people would think if they encountered dirty, smelly, sick people who had nothing, who needed help.

NITSCH: Well, I let go what I thought. There's another story that was cut out -- oh, I took a writing workshop in Scarsdale with a lady there. There were other people who wrote a book. And whoever wrote had to read, let's see, five pages, and then it was criticized by the others. And one passage was taken out because it was when we were in Goldbach, under the Russians. It was winter, and the Russian woman who gave several times potatoes to my mother, although they were not rotten, invited my mother to come to the sauna. And my mother was asking, "Are there also men?" And she said, "No." So she said, "Why don't you also come along?" So we went to a sauna. It was a big room. It was very hot, very steamy, and there were about thirty women, all in their twenties. My mother was at that time, I think, thirty-eight. I'd never seen so many naked women. And something happened to me, and I was very embarrassed. And they kept staring at me. I ran out to the snow. It didn't help. And the women in that course, they loved that story, but they said, "You've got to cut this out. This is not kosher." I'm sorry.

[Chuckles]

CLARKE: Aye, yai, yai. Wow.

NITSCH: So it takes a lot of time to write a book.

CLARKE: Oh, absolutely—

NITSCH: It took me six years to write this book.

CLARKE: This is published in German, right?

NITSCH: It is published in German, yes.

CLARKE: But it's a self-publication in America, so for the time being, right?

NITSCH: Yes, it is. Can be bought --

CLARKE: So if somebody were to publish it from a publishing house or something, you wouldn't be opposed to that?

NITSCH: No. No, not at all. It can be bought with Amazon. Hardcover, paperback. For young people, e-book. And I translated the book at the suggestion of an American historian. I translated into German, and I tried to get a German publisher, and I didn't have any luck. But then I wrote a letter to a German writer. His name is Arno Surminski. And he's also from East Prussian, three years older than I am. He wrote thirty books. He makes a living with this. And he helped me to get it published. His story was also strange. He was born in 1934. The Russians caught him, and three weeks later his mother and his father got arrested, and he never saw them again. He lived there for half a year, together with other boys, on abandoned farms. Then he was sent with a transport to East Germany, and then to West Germany, and he was adopted by an East Prussian family. And then he became a writer.

CLARKE: And he helped you get it published, in German?

NITSCH: Yup.

CLARKE: Yeah.

NITSCH: He wrote the foreword, and that's the reason it got published. And in 2014 when he became eighty, he invited me and my wife to a party on the Elbe River on a ship. They had one hundred and thirty people from seven different countries: America, Russia, France, Poland, Namibia, England. And we celebrated for six hours and had a good time. We're still in contact with him.

CLARKE: That's great. Well, we are -- been talking for about three hours-ish. Something like that.

NITSCH: Oh, my god.

CLARKE: Yeah.

NITSCH: I didn't realize.

CLARKE: Well, it's good. This is what I hoped that you would be willing to do with me. But do you have any closing thoughts or something that you would like to kind of close with? Something we missed, a story or if there's a -- if there's a moral of the story, so to speak? [Laughs]

NITSCH: There was one other story that was worthwhile. When my mother and my brother and I fled East Germany, we had to go to a town, Magdeburg. This is still in East Germany. And we had to spend all night sitting on a bench in the railroad station of Magdeburg. When we got to the railroad station, we were told we could wait in the waiting room. It was huge. And when we got close to the room, we could see inside. It was loud music, and there were many, many Russian soldiers dancing with German young women. And my mother was so upset -- she was so taken aback, I felt sorry for

her. She started to cry. So we could not go in there, even when it was empty later, so we spent all night in the railroad station. That was all the -- upsetting to me. And the next day, we walked over the border. Final thoughts. I enjoyed writing the book. I am glad my sons read it, helped with it. I think it helped them in their lives. They probably think -- still believe that I'm a strange person. They know that I would not throw away food no matter what. And when they were young and in middle school, I was the cook, although I had a fulltime job. My wife was a lawyer. I was the cook, cooked at night. And once a week I would collect all the leftovers, add some tomato juice and some beans, and called it Wundersuppe. And then one day they said, "Forget Wundersuppe. We'll never touch it again. You're just too stingy." And they almost had a laughing fit at the same time when they saw me, one day, darnning socks. "Why do you do that?" I said, "My grandmother taught me." And they think this is odd. I said it was helpful in the German Army. They also think I am very frugal because whatever they didn't want to wear as teenagers, I'm still wearing. Jackets, pants. It fits. We're the same -- they're a little taller than I am, but it fits. And I hope that the book will be read by the American public to learn that wars are terrible, not necessary, and the aftermath is always a disaster. And we have seen this, unfortunately, too many, many times. If one asked the average American how many wars have America been involved since WWII, many people might say it was Vietnam, some others -- four or five maybe. No, it's twenty-five. And that's just, just too many. The best would be if all armies in the world would help only if there is an earthquake or a flood or a forest fire. That would be ideal. But I'm probably dreaming. It will probably not happen in my lifetime.

CLARKE: I want to thank you, Gunter {Neech}, for -- I should say, Gunter Nitsch -- I'm just too used to Nietzsche. I want to thank you, Gunter Nitsch, for sitting with me and talking over these past couple of hours about your life and your experiences and the lessons and for writing your book, *Weeds Like Us*. Thank you very much for doing this. And we will -- we will take this whole thing that we've just recorded and get this transcript, like I said, and then get this over to you. And then we will piece together a podcast of this. And hopefully, that will help more people borrow your book from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. We do lend it out. And then basically help get your story out there further. 'Cause I think it's an important story. You're the son of Nazis, and that's not something that is -- I mean, when—

NITSCH: Doesn't come across well.

CLARKE: Well, if I say it that way, but then you tell the story that you just told, it's -- it's like they don't fit together. And I think that we need to keep in mind that in warfare, there's always two or more belligerent sides. And there's going to likely to be a winner and loser, but even like with WWI history, there were no winners because of the way it led into WWII, and then it's -- there's powerful message in this, and that is my point.

NITSCH: As I mentioned before, I have written -- no, I've read many, many books. Russian books, French books, German books, British books. And most books, the own nation are the good guys, and the other are the enemy. In my book, there are good Russians and good Germans, but there are also bad Russians. And bad Germans, and one of the worst was my father. That's the way it is.

CLARKE: Yeah.

NITSCH: And as my mother said, "Weeds like us don't perish." If I'm lucky, I'll be eighty at the end of this year.

(2:41:48)

CLARKE: [Laughing] Well congratulations on that. That is very good. Well, this has been a great interview. We've got a lot of work to do now on this. And it's gonna take a little while, but bear with us, and we can turn this long conversation into something that—

NITSCH: Are we still on?

CLARKE: Well, we're still on, but we're not gonna use this part of the—

NITSCH: I thought you had read the book, and you would plaster me with questions.

CLARKE: I did plaster you with questions.

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NITSCH: I thought you had read the book, and you would plaster me with questions.

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