

Transcription of Dr. Wally Schmeichel's Story
May 22, 2009
Kalamazoo College

I will be retiring at the end of this quarter after 35 years in the school, came here in 1974 when you were not even a gleam in your parents' eye, I have taught by some cautious estimate about 6,000 K College students, I am astonished by that, and some of you who have taken my exams can sort of figure how many short responses I have graded.

I am deeply grateful that you are here, and I am utterly delighted that you have chosen to do so. Some of you have heard my story before, others of you have not, it is dramatic, it is unusual, and it is only relatively late in life that two things happened: that I believed that my experience was not very, that my experience was in fact quite usual, that not everybody gets shot at or has guns pointed at them or sees spilled intestines over a white snow, or see blood and death and violence and these sorts of things, I thought that belongs to the way one lives.

The second thing is that it was, it took some time for me to be able to speak about all of that, there was a certain reticence about it, first of all I come out of a religious tradition of which you do not make yourself easily the focus, of your own speech you speak about something else or someone else, and to do that about yourself seemed as I mentioned in a different context this morning to one of you, my classes, seemed hubris. Still here is my story:

If you draw a straight line from Berlin the capitol of Germany to Warsaw the capitol of Poland, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the line toward Poland is where I was born. To the best of my knowledge our ancestors emigrated from Germany to Poland in the 17th century, probably earlier than that. And they did so along millions and millions of other people who lived, who lived in Eastern Europe or lived in the Soviet Union and existed on a bi-religious, bi-cultural, bi- or tri-lingual level for many, many centuries and for the most part existed peacefully and harmoniously and had entered these countries at the invitation of the host country. But 1939 happened, and that is when World War II broke out. And the first instance of my awareness of that was when as a 4 or 5 year old I observed and noticed planes flying overhead in our farm, and they were flying very low, and they were flying in formation. In fact it was possible for us children to run out into our farm and to wave to the pilots and they waved back. Planes were of that nature at that point. When they however returned and flew east they flew much higher and the tone of the engine was much relieved from the way to they no longer were carrying. This in my mind prompted a question: what are these things?

We lived in a very isolated, very idyllic kind of farm, where life was simple. We had no running water, we had no engines, we had no telephone, we had no, well yes we did have a radio, we did have a radio. Power was muscular, either animal or human power, and we functioned in a very prosperous kind of a way, as farmers, and lived there and lived very, very ideally and very, and very comfortably. And thereby planes like this were unusual. And then I discovered something else: the adults were reticent to talk to us children about what was going on beyond our immediate circumstance. If you want your children to get bothered or if you want them to become curious that is what you do. I tried to inquire, and I received deflections. And finally I asked our hired hand what was going on and he said well, a war is being fought. And I said what

is war? I still see, so many years later, his puzzled face. Well, war is when people shoot at each other. And that was too painful an answer because I had seen my father shoot at animals. A rabbit or a, or a, or a fox, or a pheasant, and I had seen animals killed. When you live on a traditional farm you are not squeamish about these sorts of things. Life and death are part of the reality of existence. Now, however, human beings were shooting at other human beings. And that was too vivid for me. And I immediately translated that into an amazingly real scenario that bothered me no end. And then I learned that four of my uncles were now in the war. A war from which they would not return. All four perished. And then I noticed that, as was customary in our family the prayers, the grace before meals were getting longer. And they didn't have all that much to do with the immediacy of food, all sorts of things. They covered peculiar topics. And children note prayers that are too long. Finally I pressed my, our hired hand again. Remember I was about 5 at the most, as best as I can recall, and finally he said well the Russians and Germans are fighting. They're mad at each other, I have no idea why but that is what is happening.

I don't know why this made an impact on me, but I became concerned about the larger world I did not know nor did I see. And I became bothered. Extremely bothered by what I did not know. We had a dog, and in the way of dogs he picked up that I was troubled and he followed me around. I would walk around the larger countryside which was very safe even for a child of my age and he went and walked with me. Finally I found myself behind our barn, and looked up the, the escalating fields and the terrain behind which the, the horizon disappeared. And in the manner in which I had seen the adults do things, and prompted by our church life, I knelt and prayed for the peace of the world.

What stuns me today is that I was not concerned with myself or our family. I was concerned with what was taking place that I did not know. I had an intuitive sense, on the basis of adult behavior, that somehow the world was unhinged, and that things were taking place that were extremely chaotic. And then raw elements reached our attention. My aunt had gotten hurt, and she had gotten hurt for an attempt at a humane gesture. My grandmother's farm was immediately adjacent to Chelmno. Some of you remember what Chelmno was, or remember my talking about it. Chelmno was the first concentration camp, where, where over two brutal years probably over a quarter of a million, most of them Jews perished in a most brutal fashion. Before it was a concentration camp I played there. Enjoying the abandoned landscape, the large wall that separated that, that estate from my grandmother's, remembering how our hired hand had caught an abandoned doe because it had been separated from its mother and brought it home, and we as children and cousins were delighted by all of that.

Now, terrible things were going on there. On a day where for some reason the trucks that were bringing these unfortunate people to their, to their destruction were bunched up, my aunt walked out with a pitcher of water and some bread in order to nourish them. It is then that she was gut-butted by a Nazi guard, and threatened to, with, with having to join those who were, who were about to perish.

When news of this hit our family, I remember a pause settling over all of us. We were all gathered in our large kitchen, and trying to make sense of what was taking place.

“Was geschieht mit den Juden?” asked my grandmother, “What is happening with the Jews?” We all knew, but this was war time, marshal law prevailed, and we lived in an extremely censored world. The only news we obtained came through the radio, and the radio was state controlled. All that we knew about the world was what we were given to understand by a dictatorial authority. I walked into my father’s, my parents’ bedroom, where my father was seated on the bed, leaning over, next to him the radio standing on the nightstand, and he was listening to an intense voice, and for awhile I listened too. And finally I asked who is speaking? See that’s the rice [sic] counselor. That’s Adolf Hitler. Soon thereafter, my father was drafted. One of the last to do so, because he was a farmer, and he was the husband, the head of a family of, of small, young children, of whom I at the age, this was forty, forty-five, at the age of six or seven was the oldest, my youngest sister just a few months old. And I remember the utter agony with which my parents parted, because they did not know whether they would ever see each other again. And then it was my mother, a hired hand, a brand new farm that still exists, and four young children in a world in chaos.

Some of our relatives and members of our church obtained information through short-wave radio emanating from Sweden. They understood enough Swedish to know that the knowledge we were being given about things was radically incomplete. And they knew that the Russian forces were advancing, and that the German war effort in the East was failing. We, as German nationals in Poland and elsewhere, now were the enemy. We knew ourselves to be in danger and rather unsettling news reached us about how Germans were faring elsewhere. But what to do?

To this day, we are not clear whether it was an official mandate or it was a decision that, that my, that my mother and relatives made on their own simply to leave. With the help of a hired hand on my father, on my grandmother’s, the, my father’s, on my father’s side, with the help of this hired hand a rudimentary roof was built over, over a farm wagon, and we took whatever we believed we could carry and which whatever we could accommodate overnight, we butchered a pig in order to have food along the way and then we turned all of our farm animals loose, opened doors, and opened food supply, this was in January. And on the cold January night, cold January morning rather, we left a farm that had just been built eight years earlier, brand new and that will survive for the next 300 years. It was that well-built. Two miles out of town we joined hundreds of wagons like ours, who sought whatever political safety might be found in a westerly world. The roads were icy, it was women, children, and old men, farm animals, way too heavily laden farm wagons trying to out-run the Russian military force. The first day we covered two miles. For some reason, and it must have been a, a warm spot for, for horses we took two young colts along which we tied to the back of our wagon, and somehow they tore themselves loose, and somehow these stupid animals ran into the lake. It took us 2-3 hours of coaxing and cajoling and persuading them in three languages whether, in order to come to the safety of, of the wagon. Finally the cold accomplished what our words did not and they came out. And I remember we took towels and blankets and dried them off, and remember this is January, I remember with one hand drying them off with the other hand punching them in the gut for their stupidity.

The progress was slow. At least our horses were newly shod and therefore they had purchase on the, on the icy road. Many did not. And quickly we saw, saw the dereliction of responsibility here. Our [inaudible] stopped, and slowly we moved, we moved forward only to see a wagon sit in the middle of the road, whose front left axle had broken. On the front seat sat a young woman

flanked by two young girls, tears streaking down her face, hopeful, pleading, that someone might help to fix a wagon thus severely disabled. But who could do so? It requires remarkable skill and requires sophisticated equipment to do that, and no one was able to do that. With the heaviest of hearts, we turned around her, and left her to whatever hope might still exist in a miserable circumstance. At night, we joined others in an abandoned farm, a beautiful house as I remember meticulously equipped and furnished. And we claimed a small spot, prepared some food, and then we slept overnight sharing the circumstance with people we had never met and whom we would never see again. After the evening meal under the pretense of having to go to the outhouse, I went, and with the logic of my years knelt before each of the axles of our wagon and prayed for their strength so that we would not experience what this woman had experienced.

And so it went. We would go slowly, miserably, the noises of war were catching up with us. Planes were now flying overhead and they were not German planes. Canons were heard, machine gun fire was heard, and we knew we were right in the middle of the war. And then suddenly the Russian army caught up with us. We stopped. And enemies looked at each other the way enemies have done so throughout history. But the remarkable thing is, that the Russian soldiers smiled, they waved, they were friendly, they were hospitable. And we didn't know how to react. Generally, our interaction with the Russian soldiers was humane. There were some exceptions, but they were understandable given the circumstance. But we lost our horses. They were more able, they were stronger, better fed than the Russians' were, and so they traded. But theirs had never pulled a wagon, and those of you who come from farms know how difficult that is. And it took all the skill of our hired hand to make them do what they never in their lives had, had done. But it was now very difficult. We were in the war. And, and the soldiers were around us, guns were being fired, and the activity of violence was around us. And then suddenly two planes flew very low over our wagons and gunfire came from the tops of trees about a third of a mile away, Russian soldiers ran between our wagons they fell to the ground and they were shooting and we were literally in a battlefield. I remember my grandmother just shouting and lifting my youngest brother out of his space and giving him to me and I shoved him down in the wagon and she gave us a, a small mattress and we covered each other, mattresses are wonderful protectors against bullets, and in order to be safe. I don't know how long this lasted, it seemed a long time. It probably was just minutes, maybe just ten, fifteen minutes or so. And finally when it was over we checked each other and were extremely grateful that none of us was hurt. But then we saw the casualties. About a hundred steps away was the body of a Russian soldier just lying flat on the white, white snow. Maybe twenty steps away from him was another one. He however was only injured and he was twitching severely and in pain. And then in a, maybe twenty-five steps away, and my grandmother tried to shield us from that sight, but she was too late, laid the body of perhaps a nineteen year old Russian soldier who had caught a shrapnel in his abdomen and his intestines spilled all over the white, white Polish snow. In a humane gesture that minimally redeemed the moment, a woman from the wagon behind us stepped from that wagon, took a blanket and covered that young man the way a mother might a child she is about to put to bed. It was quite obvious that we would not succeed, that is to outrun the forces of war. And it was quite obvious that nobody was going to make a decision. Once again, we are not sure whether we made the decision on our own or whether some official figure did so, but we turned around. In order to return whence we had come, and seek whatever safety might be found where we knew our home to be.

But we entered into a rather different world. Devastation and destruction was all over the place. It was wanton, it was arbitrary, it was unnecessary, but that is war. And we now were the obviously defeated enemy. And we experienced the, the animosity of the local population and the danger of the Russian forces. Especially we worried about vodka. Do you know what the word “vodka” means? Water. It is anything but that. Especially when it is made from potatoes. The only time when I have been resoundingly drunk in my life was when I was seven years old. From vodka. Russian soldiers were often given vodka and they stood in front of us with withdrawn guns babbling and asserting themselves while in the back people took what they wanted from us because we carried our most precious possessions and they were valuable and people just took what they wanted. I remember seeing a woman triumphantly lifting my father’s guitar and I became angry and shouted at her. I still feel my mother’s hand across my mouth to have me shut up. This was too dangerous. I still see them come, and I’ve told the story several times because it is defining, come toward us and officer flanked by two soldiers each having a gun, and they sauntered toward us with the arrogance of those who knew they could easily and were, in fact, in charge. In surprisingly good German the officer in the middle asked me, “Where are you going?” My mother said, “We are going home.” This response infuriated him. “You are not home! You are trespassers here!” And he became agitated and assaulted us verbally and became very emotional and angry. In an act of intuitive wisdom, my mother raised the family Bible and put it into her lap. The impact was dramatic. The soldier to the right took off his helmet, the one to the left wanted to but didn’t. For awhile neither, none of the three spoke. And then in a gesture of gentleness the officer reached out and touched the cross in the center of the, of the book, and in words quite different than the ones he had used a moment ago, he wished us a good journey, and turned around.

You may rightly conclude that this story was defining for a religion professor and one who teaches the Bible. I would not like to claim that there is a, an immediate causal connection, but I also don’t want to say that there was no influence. To have a book change human violent emotions from anger to gentleness requires explanation.

Eventually, well let me tell you a humorous story. My grandmother was a forceful and decisive and a courageous farm wife, and in the last stop we had been robbed and our vegetables had been taken. Now those of you who live near mothers know that vegetables simply cannot be taken. And so my grandmother asked me when we came to accompany her and she and I went to the village in order to buy some vegetables so that when we prepared our next meal it would be, well, vegetable-rich. We came into the center of town and saw a problem. The people were gathered, and three Russian soldiers drunk, very drunk, were moving toward them in a meandering fashion, and one man had brought a calf. What he was doing there he didn’t know, which the soldiers appropriated. And with a peculiar mixture of biblical knowledge and cultural exaggeration, they identified that as the, as the, calf from the Bible. And they wanted, and then they discovered that we were all standing in front of the church. And so they banged on the door and they wanted to have this calf sacrificed by the priest of the church. Their language was a mixture of Polish and Russian, Polish I understood, Russian my grandmother did. Finally the priest came out. Utterly amused, utterly bemused, frightened, and uncertain by what was taking place and he was roughly told to open the door so that this calf could be sacrificed. It was the golden calf that needed to be sacrificed. Of course this was ludicrous. And he gently protested, and then one of the soldiers smacked him in the face. That generated an outcry from the people,

from the Polish people behind us. And when the soldiers turned and saw the anger of the people, they threatened them. Said, "Do you want to have fist in mouth? Do you want to be shot?" and they lowered their guns. She was frail, she was old, and she probably weighed less than one-hundred pounds. She stepped to these three soldiers and said, "I will take fist in mouth for the church." The three soldiers, drunk as they were, did not know what to do. Finally they took recourse into, into ridiculing the whole enterprise but she held her ground and stood there. Vulnerable, without pretense and she meant it and they knew it. Finally, embarrassed and defeated, they left. We returned home without vegetables. But we returned home with a remarkable experience and a remarkable insight of what courage can do even when confronted by guns.

When we arrived back home, our brand new farm was a mess. Russian soldiers had come through and they had housed themselves wherever they could, and they had taken straw and dragged it through our hardwood floors and living room, bedroom, elsewhere and had slept there. I was offended. How many times have you not been told by your mother scrape your shoes when you come in, or take them off? So was I. And now straw, and barn debris was scattered throughout our nice, our nice home. And I was, I was agitated. I still feel my anger. It was then that my grandmother, sensing my agitation, came to me and said, "Things have changed. We live now in a world where people don't know the difference between a living room and a barn."

Overnight we became servants on our own farm. We were given a landlord and I at the age of, this was forty-five, I at the age of seven had my first job. My job was to take care of the one Russian horse, we lost the other one, to attend to it, to look after the cows, in my grandmother's farm, and in the summer of all things to grow tobacco. And cut it and make it available so that our landlord could have, could have some cigarettes. I got up very early, came home very late, and worked. What was frightening to us were two things. We never knew who would show up, and everybody had a gun who did show up, and vodka. Everybody drank it, and drank it copiously. The first visitors were odd. There were twelve Russian soldiers who came on horses, lead by an incredibly peculiar officer, and they wanted chickens. They had gotten tired of the rations the army provided and they wanted chickens. And so they did what soldiers usually do when they want something, they shoot at it. Well, if you, I mean these big army carbines you aim that at chickens, nine out of ten times you're going to miss, the one time you're going to hit the chicken is going to explode and it's going to be a royal mess. I mean it offended something in me and I began to shout at the shooting dumb soldiers and protested, my dog joined in and the two of us made enough noise so that they finally stopped shooting. Looking at their officer for direction what they would do and I said, "This is not how you get chicken, how you catch chickens." So they finally said, "Well how do you do it?" So I said, "Well first of all you let them calm down." And then I spread the soldiers out and had the chickens calm down and we slowly walked into the chicken coop where they walked in and each reached a couple of them which they brutally killed and then prepared on an open fire in our yard. I guess this is the only time in the annals of World War II where a seven-year old boy commandeered twelve Russian soldiers.

The other time was more, was more troublesome. About forty men came, and they all had guns, and they all emphasized their strength, and they were looking for things. They seemed to be much more organized. They showed up at my grandmother's farm first, and were rather violent

in their assent. Then they came to us and took us out and lined us up underneath our kitchen window and as was now going to be the custom we had to listen to political speech. Every time the leader wanted to make a point he would fire into the air, and everybody else would applaud with another shot in the air. Then their requests became specific. They were looking for my father which made some sense, and they were looking for my uncle who was our minister which made no sense. But they had come to believe that they were hiding on our property, and that they were to be found. And then the leader made a threat. If we will find these two or any other German man [sic] on the premises, you will be digging your own grave beneath this window. I looked down at my feet and saw the hard ground. And somehow the danger in which we found ourselves caught me and I began to cry. I still see him coming, he was a big burly man with a moustache, and as he came toward me he had to change his gun from the right hand to the left, and then he walked up and tousled my hair and said, "It's going to be all right." And as the soldiers were searching very thoroughly our property going from building to building he stayed close to me and to the family in a gesture of familial assurance.

We were awakened in the middle of the night and somehow our mother and grandmother who stayed with us were gone. We were just the four children, our landlord, he too found a way to be absent when danger was. Six drunken men had broken into our house, and they were looking for the women. How they knew to escape I have no idea, they were reluctant to talk about this. But, though drunk these men were, they were thorough. And they looked into all the crevices of the house and all the, all the spaces where anyone could hide, and they looked repeatedly. And finally somebody decided that I knew this and slapped me around and I became very angry at that. And then a peculiar mischief took hold of me. And I said, "Well maybe they are hiding outside of the house." Somehow the sense that if you speak to people who are a threat to you or who are drunk maybe therein lies a high degree of safety. That persuaded four out of the six, and two stayed behind. We went into the yard and then one of them needed to urinate and we needed all to turn our backs so that he could do it with civilized, in a civilized fashion. For some reason I directed them that we take a look at our cows. That is, many had been taken in our absence, and only, as it turned out six were left. And they walked to the barn and tried to open it. Two of them were pushing, two of them were pulling, and the laws of physics validated themselves. Finally the doors opened and the cows looked at us in the silliest of ways, it was dark, and somehow these four drunken men decided they needed to count them, and they began counting. And of course they could not agree as to how many cows there were. They came to very diverse conclusions, and finally the most assertive of them became very dramatic and said, "there these are twelve cows, and I am right because there are twelve apostles and these are twelve cows!"

I still remember and I still feel somehow the impulse of caution. It is one thing to be sober in the presence of people who are drunk. It is something else to overplay your sober hand. Because even people who are intoxicated will soon sense that they are being made fun of, and I was on the verge of overstepping that boundary. And finally I cautiously suggested that we return to the house and see if perhaps something might have happened. And that is what we did. And eventually they left. To go where I have no idea. I put my two sisters and my young brother into bed and told them to go to sleep, and I sat down in the middle of the bedroom waiting for my mother and grandmother to return, where I also fell asleep to awaken in the morning in my own bed. It was like that, that is everybody had a gun, there was no law, and the realm of the land was [inaudible]. Communism was taken hold and no one quite knew what that meant. And everybody

believed that it meant all the wonderful things that I've always wanted. And people would show up. It is very difficult to fight with a drunken man who wants to rape your mother when you are five years old or six years old. Somehow, I knew how to hurt him.

Twice we were rallied in the neighboring town, in order to, as it turned out, to listen to political speeches. But we had no idea where we were going, whether we would return, or what might lie ahead for us and so we were dressed, when we were told to go we were dressed up for Siberia. We always worried about Siberia. Where people might be taken into that forbidding and empty land, in order to populate it, in order to, well, in order to do just that. When we arrived we were perhaps sixty, seventy or so women and children, and what we had to do was listen to political speeches. These were low political functionaries, and they just spoke gibberish. But we had to listen because there were young boys, teenagers, who looked at our faces, and if our faces were not attentive, they would beat us. Toward the end, two of the, well, the intoxication simply took over. And they ran out of things to say, and so we finally drifted away and returned home. A few weeks later, we were brought back. And now the situation was a little more official. The speakers were more sophisticated, they wore uniforms, and the attentiveness required of us was much more formal. It is then also that one of the speakers, a particularly enthusiastic one, engaged us in what he was saying. And it invited us to echo his emphases. And it is then that we began, that we were told to do so and began to cheer how great Stalin was. Or Marx was. Or Lenin was. I had no idea who these people were, but I cheered for them. It was also then that the violence began. For either real, mostly imagined reason, some individuals, again mostly women, were simply singled out, taken into the barracks and severely beaten. My aunt was beaten and she hurt the rest of her life, my grandmother was beaten, but she was spared because she fought back as older women can. A neighbor was disfigured. Why that happened, I do not know. Our relationship to the local population had always been good. We cooperated across the centuries, we spoke Polish, politically we felt Polish. Ethnically we felt German, religiously we felt Protestant. Why this now had turned so ugly was very difficult. And I remember on our way, on our walk home what bothered my grandmother most was not the fact that she had been beaten, but that the man who had beaten her she had known.

Two things from that situation: somehow a young man came and was employed by, on my grandmother's farm, and he came significantly accompanied. He had lice. And very quickly we got lice. They are miserable things. Not only because they do what they do, and they specialize: you have pubic lice, you have hair lice, you have body lice, but they symbolized in our eyes that we now had fallen below the level of civilization. Civilized people do not have lice. We had lice. And that bothered us severely. That bothered us severely. The other occasion was my intoxication. For some reason our landlord needed to go to the county seat, and for some reason he took me along. And so we packed the, used the buggy and our Russian horse, and we set out. Well he would go from this office to that office and I had to stay outside and watch the horse. It was cold and I would hug the horse to stay, to keep myself warm and I was getting hungry. I was not getting any food while he was eating and doing things. Finally late in the afternoon, he came to the realization that I needed some nourishment so he took me into a restaurant, but instead of getting me a sandwich he brought me a large glass of vodka. Which I, of course, downed, and it warmed me but it also had me intoxicated. Later that evening, we finally, way too late for prudence we finally made it home. Well we finally set out for home. How we made it I have no idea, my landlord was resoundingly drunk, and I was significantly drunk, if the distinction

matters. And somehow this Russian horse in a country which it had only lived a few weeks or perhaps months, knew the way. But during our trek home, in the dark road, and it was pitch dark, it finally decided to stop and made a three-hundred sixty and then continued to go. If it had made a one-hundred eighty we would have been in trouble. But it made a three-hundred sixty, good mathematician that it was. I reached out somewhat belatedly and rescued my landlord who was about to fall off and drag them in, and I knew that I was at the verge of passing out and I tied the reigns of the horse around the post, and then I fainted. We woke up in front of our gate. How the horse knew where we were I have no idea. Our landlord got out and immediately fell to the ground, and to my mother's utter delight that we were safe I did the same, and fell right on top of him.

Life was this way. You never knew what would happen on any given day, who might show up, what might be demanded of you, or who might come and assert himself or simply take whatever they wanted to take. Finally after a year as a result of the Potsdam Agreement between the allied forces, the German nationals were allowed to make a choice. Either to leave, in this case Poland, and only take along what they could carry, or to stay behind and renounce their German identity, their German language, and whatever possessions they had. We chose the latter, as did the majority of people. And so, in late spring of 1947, 1946, late spring, we went, we were carried by this buggy to a train station, and there we waited for hours, in conjunction with many other people like ourselves. Once again, women, children, and the occasional older man. We had not heard from our father for over a year, we did not know whether he was alive or not, we had not heard from relatives, we did not know how things were gone [sic], we were completely isolated.

Eventually a train came. It was a reeking freight train, but it was going west, and we cheered for whatever future we imagined for ourselves. A western future seemed to make more sense and hold more promise. We would be carried along a few miles and we would stop, sometimes we would even go backwards, sometimes we were robbed, people just jumped us and took what they wanted to take, we were in crowded condition, often we were hungry. Hunger is a miserable thing. It gnaws at you, not only because you do not have anything to eat, but also because you don't know that there is any food supply close. Children cried continually, and you hurt all the time. We were in a journey that should have just taken hours. It took weeks. Eventually we crossed into Germany proper and therefore the first time our ethnic identity and the country that held us were the same. We came to Berlin, I had never seen a large city, and I had never seen a rubble heap this great. The streets were few, and the standing buildings were even less, and everything else was a rubble heap. We were housed in a military camp with hundreds of others, communally fed, when there was food, we received some, when there was not food we ate a lot of water. We were full of lice, they tried to de-lice us by simply taking our clothes and burning them in baking ovens, well that worked up to a point, but lice are resilient. Food was a perennial issue. I remember sneaking up at the truck that supplied the potatoes, and behind the guard who was, the Russian guard who was watching this, with my small fingers I took two small potatoes out, and then the guard saw me and yelled at me to stop. No way in the world would I relinquish these two potatoes. And I ran. The son of a gun actually shot at me, but probably not to miss. I ran never having seen a John Wayne movie, I dove into a bomb crater and crawled out the other side, and at a safe distance with matches I had found in a rubble heap, I built a fire. And in the manner in which you and I have often roasted marshmallows, I roasted these two small potatoes. I still taste them. I still taste them.

On a more humorous note, my cousin, and we were lucky to travel two, the two families to travel together, we tried to entertain ourselves, and we fashioned a small wire and found some wheels from a buggy and we just, you know, ran around and entertained ourselves, and one day we ventured too far and all of a sudden the Russian soldier yelled at us and said, "Come here, boys!" and I looked up, and my heart stopped. My cousin saw the danger and took off. I was afraid that this was the same guard who still remembered me as the potato thief. He, however, was friendly, and he was delighted with this and he bent down to me and said, "Do you see barrack number nine?" I said, "No I don't see it." How could I not, it was this huge number, eventually he showed me how. He said, "Why don't you go there, and ask young and pretty women and come and visit me?" Even country boys are not naïve in all sorts of things. Here was a lonely man who needed some female company, and I could resonate with him. What bothered me however is how do you do something like this? The practicality of, okay, do I just walk into this large barrack where there might be a hundred people and say, "Young and pretty women please all come over here!" I mean how do you do this? It was the mechanics of this that overwhelmed me rather than the, whatever other issues that might arise in conjunction with that. So, I did not do it. But the next few nights I dreamt a lot with a Russian soldier chasing after me with a drawn gun.

Finally we were told that we were about to leave. And so I, so we packed our things together, we had been there maybe five weeks at this camp, and we were about to be moved farther west. And so a truck came, a couple trucks came, and they would pick us up and they would take us to the train station, and we waited there. Waited and waited all day but no train came. But what was emerging was the weather was changing. And the weather was turning ugly, and was turning threatening. And this is something that was very, very troublesome. We had no medication, we had no access, just to catch a cold could be a very lethal experience. How a, this is '46, I was about eight, seven. How someone that young knows something like this I cannot explain. But I had sense when the truck will come, they will again pull over here because that makes some sense for them to do it. So, I positioned my family and my cousin's family, our bedding and all right there, and when the truck came everybody rushed it as a storm was brewing and I was one of the first one on the truck and then trying to help my family and my mother especially up there, but one woman just simply took my mother and pushed her aside and hefted herself up. I turned around and kicked her in the face. We were the only ones who were not drenched by the storm. We were the only ones who were dry, the others were in severe danger. And we simply positioned ourselves, I'm horrified by what I did then, but not at that point. It seemed a most necessary and unreflective and untroubling sort of thing that you do.

Eventually we left. And we were once again moving into a western direction, and my mother discovered that our train was getting shorter. The people in charge were simply uncoupling cars and leaving them in certain localities and towns and villages, who were now under obligation to look after these refugees, and to provide housing and nourishment for them. We wanted to go as far as we could into a western world, and we therefore went to the car most immediately adjacent to the engine. And in doing so we ended up in the British zone. Remember Germany was divided into four zones: The British, French, American, and Russian zones, and we now had left. And then before we left, the British intervened and de-loused us. I was utterly delighted and I will always be grateful to the British for having done that. They took our clothing, they pumped us full of chemicals, and for the first time in over a year and a half, we did not have lice. And that

felt great. That felt great. We were housed in a wonderful little town in the Harz Mountains that had escaped the ravages of the war. It was as picturesque as anything you would do, the people there seemed to have been spared, and we lived in a house, we lived in a very crowded space, but we were now relatively well cared for. Twice a day we were communally fed, walked through town, and received nourishment, again very insufficient nourishment, and we suffered from that. It was then that some people were saying, well maybe we need to go in the villages and ask if we could get some food. And this is what we did. Trains were running, and so my mother and I went on a train, and then simply stepped off someplace and went and begged for food.

We were never rich, but we were prosperous. My father employed two men to help him on the farm, my mother employed two women. She was accustomed to pay people to provide for them. Now, we begged for food. The first house, I will never forget it, the door was opened by a strong man, and my mother said, "Could you spare some food?" Without a word he turned around and brought one large potato, two tomatoes, and one carrot. When he heard the extremely grateful words my mother expressed, he returned and added to the carrots. In a park fifty steps away from that house, my mother took a pocket knife and cut the tomato into two, and before she ate, she cried.

Another time, when food had run out and we needed to return, the train schedule was such that we didn't have enough time, and so my mother asked us to split up. And I was on my own. She opened the door, perhaps she was twelve or thirteen, and with a choking voice I repeated my mother's request and she said, "Are you a refugee?" and I said, "Yes." And she said, "I hate refugees." And slammed the door in my face.

We were religious people and we wanted to go to services but the churches were empty. There was no minister, there was no pastor, but finally we heard that there was an old, elderly minister someplace else, and my mother asked me to change my shirt, and we walked for an hour in order to reach a small country church where a service had been announced. And when we arrived, people streamed in from all sorts of directions. We were squished in, and people were standing in the aisle, and when an elderly minister, in his late seventies to be sure, limped in, he was astonished at the packed house. And he offered the usual liturgical languages. It was then that someone behind me said, "the fortress song." He didn't know what we meant. Somebody else did. "Ein feste Burg ist Unser Gott." "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." A cappella, and without professional prompting, these refugees sang as they had never sung before. Sang from hurting, and debilitated, and damaged human experiences, they sang their faith, they sang their affirmation, they sang their hope clinging to that which is life affirming, over against that which is destructive, and they affirmed their claim to a greater humanity than we were presently able to experience. When we left the service, my mother's observation hit the mark. "Today," she said, "today we were not just a bunch of refugees."

Inexplicably, my father found us. He had become a prisoner of war of the Russians, had been treated there very well, had been released, and through the help of the Red Cross and the assistance of people by word of mouth he discovered where we were, and we were told by the Red Cross that shortly he would be coming to get us, and he did with his youngest sister, our aunt. We were utterly thrilled. And then we moved from the British zone to the American zone. There we moved into extremely crowded conditions, that is our first room was probably a bit

smaller than your regular dorm room. Slept in the hallway, my parents slept in the barn. In all of this, we had not received an education. I was now almost, I was now nine years old and I could not read or write. And that is something that bothered me immensely. For to be illiterate was next to having lice, and I could not bear it. But there was no education. Finally through the help of a local Baptist community we moved into a small town where a larger room was available, and we were given a chance to move in before Christmas. And the possibility of regular education now existed. And I, we were planning that we would start after Christmas. But where to start? Of course in the first grade. Don't all nine and a half year olds start in the first grade? The trouble was that in the first grade sat my sister. Sibling rivalry kicked in with a vengeance. And I could not imagine, my sister and I have always gotten along, but I could not imagine our, myself being in the same classroom, in the same grade as my sister! So how do you get out of that? Well you need to learn how to read or write! Need to learn! So I borrowed a primer from the boy downstairs who are [sic] [in] the first grade, and over Christmas vacation I taught myself how to read. Motivation of this sort of thing is peculiar. And I started my formal school in the third grade. And I sat where you are sitting. In the second seat slightly to the right of center. And there was no prouder student.

We tried to catch up. We were backward in many ways, illiterate, uneducated, uncultured, we came from a small town, we didn't know many things, and we were amazed by all sorts of things that were taking place. But we took up. That is, we went, I studied with a vengeance, and so did my brothers and sisters. We tried to catch up all the things we did not know of the world. One thing that utterly bothered me is when I for the first time encountered the physical shape on a map of Italy. Nowhere, no way, no how, under no circumstance does a country look like this! I consulted all sorts of people, and they were not at all astonished as I was! Finally, I consulted the Bible, where there was a map, and lo and behold the map that the teacher had given us matched the map that was in the Bible. And somehow I became persuaded that a country that has, that is shaped like a leg kicking a soccer ball, does, in fact, exist. A thought took hold of me, and I still feel it in my gut. This, Schmeichel, will never happen to you again. That you will not know something that others know. That you will be ignorant about the world in which you live. This will never happen to you again. This was a profound commitment that has fueled my education and brought me here. Perhaps I have spoken too long, let me end at this point. Thank you very much.

[applause]

If you have a few questions and if you have time I'd be glad to, to speak to them. If you are in need to leave, feel free to do so. I will respond to questions. Yes.

[Confusion from the audience]

Dr. Schmeichel: Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Audience member 1: When did you come to America?

Dr. Schmeichel: When?

Audience member 1: Yeah. Or why or when?

Audience member 2: How.

[laughter]

Dr. Schmeichel: We came in October 31, 1955, and by means of the general length it was a two transporter, and we came in a very, very tumultuous sea, I actually saw the bottom of our boat, when for the first time I made a commitment to American craftsmanship that we would not perish in, in this. We came because others of our relatives had emigrated and some have had hope that we might once again be farmers because that is the only thing we knew, and then some, you know some relatives emigrate, you follow them, and so did we, and we ended up in Chicago.

Audience member 3: I'm sort of confused about which way you traveled and went, you went back to your hometown but did you, to get out, did you go through Berlin, or, you went to Berlin and then you went back, or...

Dr. Schmeichel: No, we tried to escape just a few miles, we didn't, then we returned.

Audience member 3: Yeah.

Dr. Schmeichel: Then, as a result of the Potsdam Agreement, we were shipped out and eventually then made it to Berlin, and as far west as we, as we could go.

Audience member 3: And did your did your mom help the Trümmerfrauen, the rubble women who dug physically...

Dr. Schmeichel: We were never in big cities. No, no we were not in big cities and therefore we were not there. We were always in small towns and in, in many ways that was a very helpful thing. We experienced remarkable kindnesses from people or from all sorts of walks of life, and I would always deeply be grateful. I'll be deeply grateful for the contribution Americans made for the relief efforts that reached us, and I've worn many used pieces of clothing from American, from American children. And we were deeply grateful for that. Yeah.

Audience member 4: What sort of person was your landlord?

Dr. Schmeichel: In Poland, he was an easygoing individual who was not much of a, he didn't know much about farming and, but my mother, my mother read the situation right and she said, "Look, he's a decent guy, let's not provoke him. Let's not give him occasion to be violent." There was, he had a girlfriend next door and they got in an argument that was very ugly and very embarrassing, and you could you could have laughed your head off at this. Next day my mother took me aside and said, "What happened yesterday neither of us saw. Neither of us saw." So her strategy of, to prevent injury was: do not give offense in any conceivable way. So the landlord as such was a decent man. Yeah.

Audience member 5: When and why did you decide to become a religion professor?

Dr. Schmeichel: I really had no choice. Why would I become a religion professor? The Bible was always very influential. It interpret [sic] reality, there were a good number of instances, when my grandmother was beaten and our neighbor was beaten, and we all saw it. I remember my grandmother taking us all aside and we were way too young to make sense of it, but now I understand that she was interpreting reality for herself and for her daughter-in-law. What happened, what happened my mother, let me add this. My mother escaped injury because my youngest kid brother needed to go to the bathroom. And with the urgency of a, what, two and a half year old, demanded immediate attention. And so she was gone when the man came and took my grandmother. My grandmother then took the Bible and interpret [sic] this and said, "There is a reality we understand and there is a reality we don't. A faith invites us to look at the reality we don't understand and believe it to be real as well. And that is embodied in this book." And so I think I was really predisposed to become a religion professor, predisposed to study the Bible, though I really did not know it until much later, it became a very natural thing for me to do. Yeah.

Audience member 6: What did your father do in the army? Just hung out?

Dr. Schmeichel: He looked after, he was just a regular GI as we would call him, just a regular, a regular soldier who, who was attached to a, attached to a sudden, [sic] to a large gun. He said once, I believe once we hit something. That's all he could know but it was just an ordinary kind of , kind of a soldier, because he entered the situation late as a result of the circumstances I had said, because he was a farmer, and the farm effort was essential for the war, for the war activity.

Audience member 6: He was part of the German army?

Dr. Schmeichel: Pardon?

Audience member 6: He was part of the German army? The...

Dr. Schmeichel: Yes. Earlier he had been part of the Polish army, he deserted from the Polish army, became part of the German army, and then became a prisoner of, he tried to give himself up to the Americans but the Americans handed him over to the Russians and the Russians set him free. So he was a bit of... Yeah.

Audience member 7: What did your siblings do with their lives?

Dr. Schmeichel: My father, my father. My father worked, not my sibling, okay. My, the brother, just I was, worked in the space program, recently retired in California, he made it big, and my youngest, my youngest brother born after the war was a freight operation supervisor at various airports, the last one in Portland, Oregon, one in Los Angeles, and he had several hundred people working for himself so he was, he was in management. My two sisters became housewives and stayed that way. But they were on the track to receive an education as well. It's a remarkable thing, there was a debate in our family, what constitutes safety for the future. My father's side argued the land. If you have land it will nourish you, it will house you, you will always have a place to belong. My mother's side said education. If you have an education, it is identical with

who you are, and even when everything else will be taken from you, that cannot be taken from you. Well, the war proved her right, and she would not bend, we were extremely poor, and yet we were all going to school. All five of us. And my mother would not have known it and wanted it to be otherwise. My father supported that but he, had she not given the, taken the initiative, I don't think we would have, we would have done that. Yeah.

Audience member 8: Do you think your experiences made you, or in looking at situations in Iraq right now, and Afghanistan, the displaced families there...

[At this point someone moves the microphone around and the rest of her question is inaudible]

Dr. Schmeichel: I am deeply grieved. Because war is not about soldiers. War is about civilians. They pay a disproportionate price, and that price is really in front of our eyes. Hundreds of thousands of people have perished. And we are minimally attentive to that reality. So that is my perspective. It's the perspective of the civilian. Yeah.

Audience member 9: Do you ever go back and visit Germany and your old farm?

Dr. Schmeichel: I have not gone back to Poland, I've gone back to Germany. In part the difficulty is my cousins have gone back. There is an awkwardness because this was our legitimate property. We didn't take it, we achieved it over centuries of work, and then all of a sudden it was taken away from us and given to somebody else. Now you show up, and the people who presently have it are all too aware of the circumstance and they are not all that welcoming. So it creates an awkward situation. We have made peace with the fact that our situation is what it is and we cannot reverse it. At the same time to continue to visit especially in our case, would not be a positive thing. Although I would love to go back and see it. Yes.

Audience member 10: Did you ever lose your faith while you were... [inaudible]

Dr. Schmeichel: Oh I didn't lose my faith, it went through ups and downs in a variety of changes etc. and maturing things but I always held before my eyes several things, and that is the situation in which I, you know, fought with this one man who threatened my mother. And we wrestled and put the Bible between them. And then the situation with the Bible I mentioned. So I said something that can do that, cannot be abandoned or cannot be jettisoned, it needs to be challenged when such occasion arises, of course, and requires a great deal of modification and it did when I went to graduate school, I came from a very conservative religious background and then went to graduate school and in a very critical liberal environment. That was a shock to me. It took two years for me to find an intellectual adjustment to that. So that was a certain crisis of faith, but it was never an issue of abandoning it. I could not have envisioned that given my, the circumstance of my background.

Audience member 10: Did you ever feel abandoned by your faith?

Dr. Schmeichel: Do I?

Audience member 10: Yeah I mean by God, or...

Dr. Schmeichel: No, no. Have I had difficulties, have I had doubts, of course, but not to the extent that you put it.

Audience member 11: Do you believe in absolute evil as separate from humanity?

Dr. Schmeichel: Pardon?

Audience member 11: Do you believe in absolute evil as separate from humanity?

Dr. Schmeichel: As absolute evil...

Audience member 11: As separate from humanity.

Dr. Schmeichel: As separate from humanity. No. I think evil and humanity are somewhat coterminous, there is, there are natural disasters that we as humans because they affect us we interpret as evil, and when that happens we have a right to do so. But this is a matter that is not easily resolved. You touch on an issue that none of the human efforts at explanation have succeeded, religion has done so more adequately than other attempts, but none has been able to do so to the, necessary satisfaction of most.

Audience member 12: I mean I've been here at Kalamazoo College and you've been telling your story for awhile and I just wanted to know after you retire are you planning on writing a book or doing more speeches at different campuses?

Dr. Schmeichel: I have written this. I am still somewhat reluctant to make it available to others. If you ask me why, I don't think I can very well explain it. But there is a hesitancy on my part to do that. I have a manuscript of two-hundred forty pages where I tell these kinds of things and I believe I tell them well, but somehow to let go of it tugs at me.

Audience member 13: What are you going to do in retirement?

Dr. Schmeichel: [Laughs] Nothing! Absolutely nothing! I mean, by which I mean, that's a good question, by which I mean I will, nothing structured, nothing planned, and very deliberately so. I am a voracious reader, I'll read all sorts of things. I am part of the church community, I'll work and I'll teach something here and there and do all sorts of things. I'll mow the lawn and I fix the yard and do all kinds of things, but as it suits me. As it suits me. Not to have a schedule is wonderful!

Audience member 14: How about K College?

Dr. Schmeichel: Pardon?

Audience member 14: How about coming back to K College sometime?

Dr. Schmeichel: Well, I would like to, I am, as some of you probably know I live north of Ann Arbor and thereby coming to K College is not such an immediate temptation, although I probably would, probably would. I have wonderful memories of this place, and I've invested a great deal of my energy and time, I know many of you and I know many of, students throughout the years, and this has been a wonderful place for me. And so, you know, this is a real question and a good one. Yeah. Thank you very much for coming.

Transcribed by: Arica Ciak

Date: 6/16/2009