

Former WWII refugee sends hope in a box to young Syrian boy

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.22.16 Word Count **794**

CHICAGO, Ill. — In 1945, when he was 8, Gunter Nitsch and his family fled their home in the German territory of East Prussia. They were trying to escape the Russian army. Captured six weeks later, they were forced to live as refugees for much of Nitsch's childhood.

Today, Nitsch is 78 and retired, living in Chicago with his wife of 40 years. He has worked and raised two sons here. He exemplifies the strength of the human spirit, and is proof that, for many former refugees, life gets better. Which is why, a few weeks ago, Nitsch wrote a letter to Zaher, an 8-year-old Syrian boy. Like Nitsch, Zaher fled his home and is living as a refugee in Jordan.

"I Was 8 Years Old Like You"

"Hello Zaher," Nitsch begins. "Seventy years ago, when I was 8 years old like you, I was also a refugee. I'm writing to share my story with you to let you know that, no matter how bad things may seem, there are good people in this world who can make everything better." The letter was delivered to Zaher by CARE USA. Founded in 1945, the organization delivered packages of food, clothing and other lifesaving items to World War II survivors. Nitsch received a CARE package as a boy, and wanted to offer the same sense of hope to another child.

A Bounty Of Riches In A Box

In 1948, Nitsch, his mother and his brother escaped the Russian state-run farm where his mother worked 12-hour days. They crossed illegally into a West Germany refugee camp.

"One day there was a knock on our door, and the mailman said, 'I have a parcel for you from the United States,'" Nitsch said. "My mother said, 'We don't know anybody in the United States.'" Still, Nitsch and his mother walked 2 miles to the village, where they collected a large box tied in metal string. It was filled with a bounty of riches.

"Rice, ham, cocoa powder, corned beef, a bar of chocolate that must have weighed a pound. I had never seen anything like it," Nitsch said. A letter, from a Mennonite Christian family in Pennsylvania, was also enclosed. It was written in old-fashioned German with English words sprinkled throughout.

Six weeks after his mother wrote back, they received another box filled with coffee, shoes, even canned fruit salad. "I had never eaten anything like it. I thought, 'If there's a heaven and there are angels, this must be what angels eat,'" Nitsch said.

Packages Have Deeper Meaning

Over the next two years, Nitsch's family received more than a dozen packages. Nitsch and his mother and brother eventually were reunited with his father, and moved to Cologne, Germany. In 1964, Nitsch immigrated to the United States. Ten years later, he and his new wife, visited the Mennonite family in Belleville, Pennsylvania. They had sent CARE parcels to two dozen families. This was the first time that one of the recipients had come to

thank them in person.

CARE keeps in contact with many former refugees who received packages, said Brian Feagans. He is head of CARE's communications.

"We see these original CARE package recipients as this incredible group of people who have a deeper understanding ... of what it means to get help in your lowest moments. Particularly from a stranger in America," Feagans said. Here they were the "enemy" from Germany, or so they thought. "And they get this package that, as Gunther says, very much saved their lives," he added.

Sending Hope

CARE recently asked five original package recipients to write letters to Syrian refugee children. As a result, Gunter came to be in touch with Zaher.

"March 15 is the five-year anniversary of the Syrian crisis," Feagans said. "We've reached over 1 million people with food baskets, blankets, hygiene kits. On the five-year anniversary we wanted to send something else: hope." Gunter folded paper airplanes to accompany his letter to Zaher. He also included childhood photos of his German shepherd, Senta, who was left behind when the family fled their home. Zaher also had to leave his beloved pet cat and several pigeons.

"When I see refugee kids on TV, I don't care which country or which color or what religion," Nitsch said. "I feel sorry for them. They lost whatever they owned. But the worst, to me, is not having school."

From One Boy To Another

You can hear Nitsch read his letter to Zaher on CARE's website. The paper airplanes were a hit.

"I hope that your life will also change for the better soon," Nitsch writes to Zaher. "No matter where you are, always try to learn as much as possible by reading books. The day will come when it will pay off."