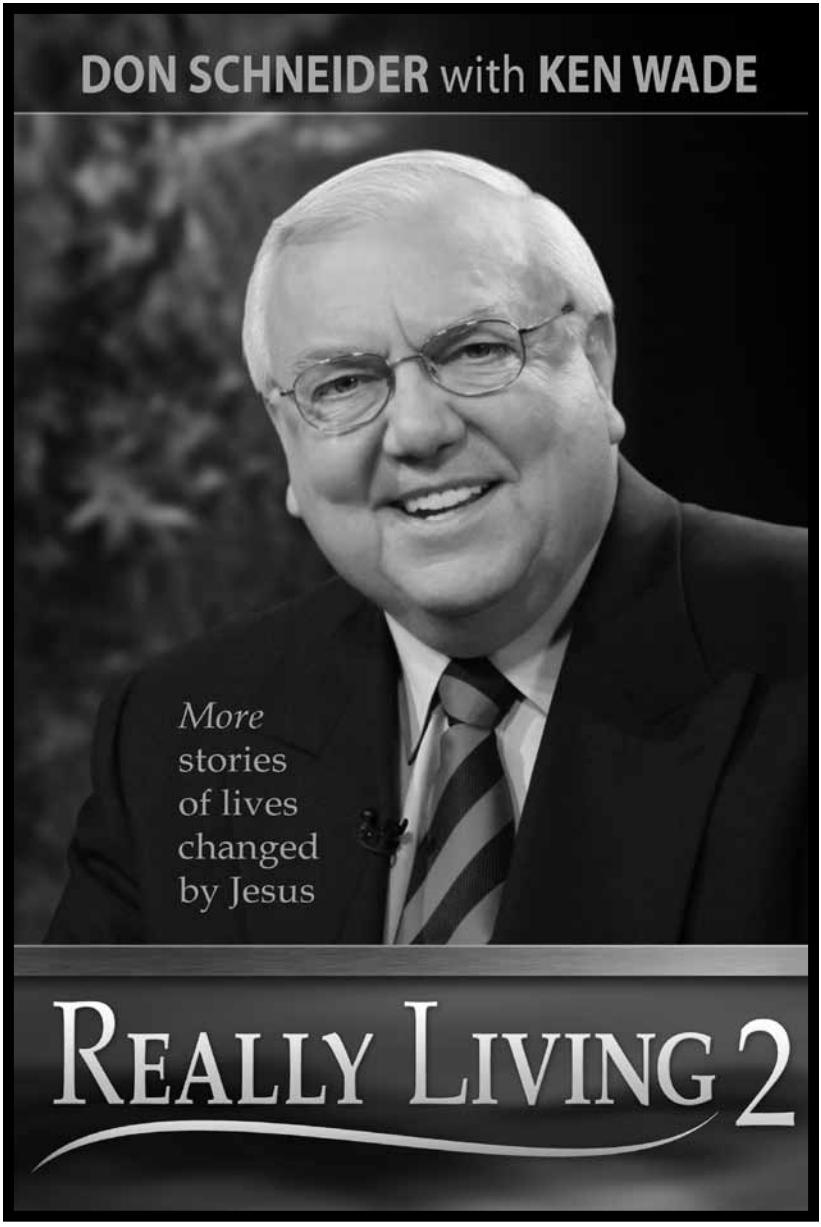
Really Living 2

Other books by Don Schneider with Ken Wade

Really Living



Pacific Press® Publishing Association
Nampa, Idaho
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com

Cover design by Gerald Lee Monks
Cover design resources from The Adventist Media Center
Inside design by Aaron Troia

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Schneider, Don C., 1942-
Really living 2 : more stories of lives changed by Jesus / Don Schneider with Ken Wade.
p. cm.
ISBN 13: 978-0-8163-2449-1 (pbk.)
ISBN 10: 0-8163-2449-2 (pbk.)
1. Christian biography. I. Wade, Kenneth R., 1951- II. Title. III. Title: Really living two.
BR1700.3.S36 2011
277.3'0830922—dc22
[B]

2010045116

11 12 13 14 15 • 5 4 3 2 1

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Care for Your Enemies

Nikolaus Satelmajer

"You better stop, or they'll start shooting at us!" Nikolaus Satelmajer yelled at the man in the driver's seat beside him. Ahead on a dark rural road in the country of Nik's birth, two soldiers with automatic weapons stood menacingly beside the road. To Nik it looked like an official checkpoint of the type one didn't dare ignore.

It was a time of war, and the two pastors were traveling on back roads because the main highways had all been bombed into oblivion.

The reason they were traveling at night, Nik told me, was that it is easier to see tracer bullets in the dark and know when somebody is shooting at you.

The driver cramped on the brakes, and they screeched to a stop just in time. But as they looked around, they realized that they weren't at a checkpoint after all. These two soldiers were out there on their own—probably AWOL—and definitely drunk. And they wanted a ride.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"We didn't have any choice. We gave them a ride."

Once the men were in the car, Nik realized the situation

was even more dangerous than he had first thought, because the soldiers were from a different region of the former country of Yugoslavia than he was. If he dared say a word, his speech would give him away, and they would take him for an enemy. The fact that his family had left that part of the world many years before and that he now carried an American passport would make little impression on their sodden minds.

This frightening episode was just one of many tense moments Nik experienced while making seven trips to the strife-torn region of the world that had been known as Yugoslavia when he was born there just before the end of World War II.

Many things about Nik's story are amazing—not the least of which is that he claimed to never in his life have felt more at peace than he did while traveling in that war zone. But to me, the most amazing part of his story is that he was there in the first place, that he was willing to go back and risk his life bringing humanitarian aid to a country that had rejected his family, nearly starved them to death, and finally driven them out.

Nik's story begins near the end of World War II, but his family's history in Yugoslavia, in the part now known as Bosnia and Herzegovina, goes back even further.

During the 1700s, many German families moved eastward from their native land and settled in Russia, Romania, and other countries. For many generations, Nik's ancestors had lived in what came to be Yugoslavia after World War I. During World War II, there were nine families of Satelmajers all living and farming in the same area.

When the war ended with Germany's defeat, the Communist partisans who had been fighting against the Germans in Yugoslavia came to power, and within two days after the German surrender, Communist soldiers showed up at all of the

Satelmajer farms, telling Nik's family to get ready to move—they were being evicted from their land.

Not knowing what to expect, Nik's mother packed a suitcase and came out into the yard. One of the soldiers looked at her with a sneer, then drove his bayonet into the side of the suitcase, ripping it apart. Then the soldier dumped the clothes his mother had so carefully packed out in the barnyard and let the animals trample on them.

With nothing to their names except the clothes on their backs, the family was marched off to a makeshift concentration camp in a nearby city.

This was no real camp, Nik told me. "What they did, they just threw up a barbed-wire fence and threw the five thousand or so prisoners in there, and you just had to fend for yourself. There were some buildings, some barns, stuff like that, and the fortunate ones found a place in a barn. Otherwise you built lean-tos or whatever you had."

Nik was about eighteen months old when this happened, and soon he was fighting for his life. "The children used to get sick—dehydrated usually—the food was terrible. Usually they had bean soup that was more water than beans, and moldy corn bread. That was our staple. And even that was rationed."

Sanitation was almost nonexistent, and the children were the first to suffer. "What they used to do was take the children off on the side to die, and they would just wait until the child died. It was just a routine thing.

"So they took me there, because they looked at me, and they figured I was dying. My mother would be there with me—they would take turns. My father would be there, my aunts and uncles, my older cousins, just watching me."

Just watching him, wondering when he would die.

But then somebody else came into the picture.

"We had made friends with a Catholic priest," Nik told me. "He came over and said to my mother, 'I would like to pray for the boy.'

"He prayed for me, and she told him how I couldn't keep anything down—even water—nothing. So he said, 'Let me try something.'

"He went back to his little corner, and he had some uncooked coffee, and he brought that coffee and opened my mouth and put the ground-up coffee on my tongue, and it startled me, it shocked me. And for a few seconds, I stopped screaming and swallowed whatever was on my tongue."

The priest kept up this treatment, putting on a little more and a little more, until finally Nik was calm enough for his mother to try giving him a little water. The water stayed down this time, and Nik eventually recovered.

"That man saved your life," I said.

"He did, and I met him. In 1990 was the first time I ever went back there, after we were allowed to finally leave the country, and he was now a Catholic bishop in northern Bosnia."

When Nik asked the bishop if he remembered that story, the bishop replied, "So many terrible things happened—I

don't remember that specific instance. But once in a while, even in the midst of horror, God gives us a chance to do something that is good."

Something good in the midst of horror is what Nik was trying to do the night they picked up the drunken soldiers. Because by the 1990s Yugoslavia had descended once again into turmoil, ethnic hatred, and killing.

In the 1940s, Nik's family lived in the concentration camp for about a year. He has been told that there were about five thousand people all together in the camp, and that of the children his age who were interned there, only seven survived.

He also heard that one of his aunts was held in a camp about two hundred miles away where, over the course of three years, ninety thousand people were killed or died from disease or starvation.

"My family was among the lucky ones," Nik says. "Some families were kept in the camp for three years."

While they were in the camp, the able-bodied family members were forced to work cleaning up the rubble left over from the war. Nik's father was a resourceful man, who would bring home bits of aluminum gleaned from the wreckage of airplanes that had been shot down. From the aluminum, he would make combs to give to guards as gifts, in hopes of gaining their friendship. Later he made small suitcases using the crudest of tools. He even had to make his own rivets. Nik still has one of those little aluminum suitcases today.

In that type of environment, family and friendships became very important. There would sometimes be several days in a row when even the moldy corn bread and watery soup wouldn't be delivered. At times like that, Nik's family members

all pulled together. There were about sixty Satelmajers in the camp, and if any one of them was able to find a food source, the food would be shared with the whole family. By all working together, they managed to survive a day at a time.

"Were you Christians then?" I asked.

"We were. We were Sabbath keepers, and that made it very hard in the camp. My father had to face the camp commander, and the camp commander would say to him, 'You have a choice. Either you go to work, or we shoot you.' And my father said to him, 'What you do, sir, is your choice. What I do is my choice. I'm not going to work.'

"They kept threatening him week after week after week, but they didn't shoot him."

Religion played an important part in survival and in keeping the family together. When I asked Nik whether there were times when he began to wonder if there was a God who cared about all the suffering going on, he replied by telling me about his very spiritual, close-knit family.

"Even when they released us from the camp, life was really, really hard. We were no longer citizens of the country. We had lost our property. You know, I would wonder—what's this all about? But I found a certain warmth in the home that erased the horrors that I experienced from day to day.

"I remember Sabbaths in particular. Friday afternoon, in the midst of the most terrible circumstances, when my father later on had to go to labor camps and work for the government without any pay, and Friday afternoons we would be together with other family members, and invariably one of them would say, 'Thank God, the Sabbath is coming.' And that made it a sacred time. We had no church; we had to meet in secret in our home. But that didn't matter. The spe-

cial sacredness of the Sabbath coming in the midst of the horrors—that has always stayed with me."

After Nik's family had been in the camp for about a year, a group of them were ordered to pack up to leave. The next day, they found themselves being marched deep into the forest. Word quickly spread among the prisoners of what usually happened to people who were marched into the woods—they were never heard from again.

"We felt that was the end," Nik said, "that we were going to be executed."

But the next morning, instead of being executed, they were released. "They just let us go. I mean, it was not like 'Here's a bus ticket,' or 'We'll take you home.' It was just 'You're on your own.' "

They made their way to their homes, which had been totally ransacked and destroyed and were totally unlivable.

But they had good neighbors—Muslim neighbors, in fact.

"We found out that Muslims, when they're your friends, they're really your friends," Nik told me. "They risked the anger of the government, and they took us into their homes. Even though we were declared enemies of the state."

While living with their neighbors, the Satelmajers were able to repair their homes, and after a few months, they moved back to their own farms. But because they were no longer considered citizens of Yugoslavia, they didn't own their farms anymore.

Having been declared enemies of the state and deprived of their citizenship, they had few privileges and many responsibilities. So they naturally began looking for ways to escape their predicament. West Germany had declared an open immigration policy for any German people living in Communist countries, but Yugoslavia would not let them leave.

Then word went around that the government would allow people to emigrate to the United States—all you had to do was register with the local government, and the information would be passed on to the U.S. consulate.

Nik's parents and several other relatives jumped at the chance.

But the offer turned out to be just a ploy to find out who was disloyal. Three of Nik's uncles were thrown in prison just for having registered their desire to leave the country. Nik's own parents were also arrested, but for some reason they were not sent to prison.

Finally, with the aid of an attorney, they found a legal way to leave the country. "But the final insult," Nik told me, "was to say that before you leave, you have to cancel your citizenship, and to do that you have to pay a fee. And it was a large fee—equivalent to one year's wage for just the three of us.

"My father said, 'But we're not citizens anymore. Here's the document that says you took our citizenship away.' "

The government official's response? " 'Oh, you've been made a citizen again,' and so that was the final insult," Nik said. They had to pay the fee.

Finally though, they managed to leave Yugoslavia. Nik has a precious memory of his first Christmas in freedom. They were living in Hamburg, Germany, and he remembers listening to Christmas music on the radio, and for the first time not being worried that this religious activity might be reported to officials who would consider it a crime.

Serving his enemies

This story of persecution and hardship is all background to a phone call that came to Nik's home in Canada one

morning in 1991. The way he told me the story, I couldn't help but think of the story of Paul's Macedonian call in the book of Acts. "A vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us' " (Acts 16:9, NKJV).

If you look at a map, you'll notice that Croatia is not far from Macedonia.

Here's how Nik told the story of his Croatian-Macedonian call: "One morning, the phone rings. . . . I answer. A man says to me, 'Do you speak Croatian?' That's one of the languages in that part of the world. I said, 'Yes, I can manage.' I didn't know who the man was."

It turns out that the man on the other end was part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Croatia, and he said to Nik, "I'm wondering if you would be willing to come and help us. Because you know the language, and you know the situation, we think you would understand. Would you come?"

"The situation" to which the man was referring was warfare between all of the various ethnic groups that had once been a part of Yugoslavia.

The very people who had once played the ethnic card against Nik and his family were now all playing the same card against each other, and thousands were displaced, thousands were being raped and tortured, and thousands were dying.

"The thought had entered my mind," Nik said, meaning the thought that perhaps he should get involved in trying to help bring some humanitarian aid to the people who had driven his family out of their homes so many years earlier. "The thought had entered my mind, but I said, 'Lord, I don't hate those people there. But I'm not sure if I'm enthusiastic

enough to go back there and risk my life. There's a war going on there!' "

In a state of shock at what was being asked of him, Nik told the man he needed a few days to think about it.

And think about it, he did. "It took about three or four days—not to get over hate—I didn't have that. But to develop a sense of this is what God wants me to do. And when I came to that point, it was like an experience of freedom. I finally said, 'I can do what others can't. I don't have any sides to take there. I don't differentiate between a Serb, a Croat, a Muslim, somebody Montenegrin or Macedonian. I don't differentiate. It doesn't matter to me. I'll go.' "

Over the course of the next several years, as war continued to rage and ethnic cleansing led to tens of thousands of deaths, Nik made a series of trips to his former home country—the country that had rejected his family because of their ethnicity.

"I traveled to the war zone, but you know, when God asks us to do something, God also provides the means and the protection," he said. "I remember riding in cars through war zones, where we would have to stop. The military would stop us, and they would say, 'Wait, there's too much shelling going on.' And at night—we would travel at night because you could see the tracer bullets easier at night than in the daytime. And so we would stop, and we would watch the fireworks, and then they would subside, and then we would travel.

"I have never been as calm in my life as at that time. I just felt that if God saved me the first time, He'll do it again. So I made seven trips."

That's how Nik found himself in a car with two drunken soldiers who would just as soon shoot him as shake his hand that dark night.

Fortunately, the man who was driving understood the

danger, and he carried all of the conversation with the soldiers. Nik uttered an occasional "Uh-huh," but made sure the men didn't figure out that he wasn't from their part of the country. After about fifteen miles, the men got out, and Nik and his friend breathed a sigh of relief—along with a prayer of thanksgiving!

During those seven trips, Nik saw things that nearly broke his heart. "I remember people in a nursing home. If you could call it a nursing home. It was really a kind of a warehouse with beds. Old people cold, freezing. No heat in that building at all."

Nik had to pause at this point as the emotion of that situation overcame him again. "I cried. Then I called my wife. I said, 'Call my cousins. We need some blankets.' "

I interrupted Nik then. "Nik, those are the people of the age that could have been carrying the guns." I was referring to the guards who had kept his family penned up behind barbed-wire fences in 1945.

"Yeah. But . . . but . . . you—you don't allow a person to freeze to death. You don't do that.

"So we, as a family, collected a fair bit of money and just bought the blankets, and said, 'Cover them up.' You know, even if they're going to die, they need to die warm."

My breath was taken away by that story.

To me, that was one of the greatest miracle stories I've ever heard.

It took a miracle for God to give Nik the ability to forgive the very people who had done so much evil to his family.

We talked quite a lot about that, because I knew that Nik had not only carried humanitarian aid to the people of Bosnia and Croatia, he had also gotten involved in proclaiming the gospel to them.

"Do you hate the people who imprisoned you?" I asked.

"I never have," he told me. He gives a lot of credit to his parents and their generation, who talked a lot about the hard days in Yugoslavia, but never spoke of it with hatred. "They spoke of the horrors of dictatorship, of the horrors of the camp. But they never spoke hatefully. Their attitude was always 'We thank God that somehow He rescued us.'

"So, while I don't have any fond memories of that period, I do have fond memories of a tightly knit Christian family."

"But if you met one of those men who was carrying the gun, threatening your father—could you invite him to receive Jesus?" I asked.

"I would embrace him. I would. Because—you're not inviting the evil person—you're inviting what the person can become. And when Christ comes into one's life, he or she is a new person—totally transformed. You don't recognize the former person."

Nik went on to tell me about one of his cousins whose wife met a former guard in church. He was now a church member, and they embraced and shed tears together.

That, to me, is the miracle-working power of the gospel of Jesus Christ who died to forgive sins—all sins, no matter how heinous—if we will just bring them to Him and let Him bear them for us.

Just before the warfare ended in his home country, Nik, along with his relatives and friends, helped a congregation rebuild their church in the very city where his family had been forced to live in a barbed-wire enclosure. The church is just two blocks from the former site of the camp.

On the day the church was dedicated, Nik spoke to the nearly five hundred people gathered in and around a building designed for two hundred. He told the assembled congregation,

"I pray that this will be a place of justice, where the right thing will always be done in God's name. That people, whoever they are, will be always welcome, no matter what their ethnicity is, no matter what language they speak, that you will always welcome them. That's what God would like this place to be."

Nik's own life of serving those who did not welcome him sets an example of that very type of openness and receptivity.

He's Really Living and helping others get a new lease on real life.