

The following interview was conducted with Klaus Yurk, for the Star City Treasurer's Oral History Project. It was conducted on July 19, at the 'F' Street Community Center. The interviewer is John Schuff.

JOHN: Klaus, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood and where you're from?

KLAUS: Yea, I was born in (Karbimor), Germany, uh, which is a little south of – a small village uh, a little southeast of Munich. 'Bout uh, fifteen kilometers. Uh, if you go too many more miles, you're in Austria. It's down in that southern corner of Germany. Um...

JOHN: That's fine. Um, why did your family come to the U.S.?

KLAUS: Well, um, it was an accident. [Laughs]

JOHN: [Laughs] Hopefully a good one!

KLAUS: Yea, well. Um, yea, after the war, times were tough there, you know, in Germany. And we had, I can recall, you know, being on /very/ thin rations. [Laughs] I can recall going to eat at the American concentration camp, um, hoping that the guards wouldn't shoot me until *after* dinner. [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Uh, not that I had done anything, I was born after the war. But I was just a little kid, you know how you have weird thoughts. [Laughs] So, anyway. Um, then uh, my father was – he got a coat from Lutheran World Relief, and um, it was one coat that sort of fit him, out of a big box of coats. And, just so happened that, that particular coat had a name in the pocket, and the name was Karl Ulrich of Hastings, Nebraska. And, he said, 'Hey, this guy has a name sort of like ours, or like mine. Can't be that *usual*', you know. Um, so he wrote to him, and he thanked him. He said that, 'I, you know, I got your coat, the Lutheran World Relief gave me your coat, and thank you very much.' And, they started corresponding. And, they found out that they're distantly related on their mother's side, and that Karl Ulrich had come – his family had come here in the 1890's, I believe. And, settled in Hastings, and they have a little Mom 'n Pop restaurant. So, anyway, after a few letters of correspondence between my father and Karl, you know, Karl said, 'Why don't you come to the U.S.?', you know, 'Things are better here, you know, than in Germany.' And, so, at first dad didn't want to, you know. Although, he always thought of Russia as his home, he could never go home again, after what happened in the war. And uh, uh, but Germany really wasn't his home, either. He had never *met* a German before he defected to the German army. Um, so he didn't really want to go to the U.S. either. [Laughs] But then um, it just kind of was bad there for a long time. And then, there's was the Berlin blockade. Father was always terrified of the Russians. And of course, if they had got their hands on him again um, you know, the best he could've expected is a fast bullet, or you know, slow torture would be the worst. So, they finally decided, you know – he was having difficulty making ends meet there. He had a wife, and first me, and then another kid. And so, they finally said, 'Okay, let's go to the U.S.' And uh, Karl Ulrich paid some and um, there was a Lutheran

congregation in Hastings, Nebraska that still – they were German Russians, a lot of them, and they still had church service in German, at the time. You know, it's a small congregation. They have since merged in a much bigger, much bigger congregation, and they no longer have that. But um, that uh, that congregation and Karl Ulrich um, came up with some money and uh, we came on Flying Tiger Lines, which is – was started by a bunch of the pilots from the famous era, that fought in Indo-China and China um, against the Japanese. You wanna know how we came here?

JOHN: [Laughs] Sure!

KLAUS: Well, um, I can remember waiting in the snow, to go to America, where no one is every hungry or cold –

JOHN: [Laughs] Started out cold!

KLAUS: – The streets are paved with gold.

JOHN: If you don't mind me asking, how old were you at that time?

KLAUS: Five.

JOHN: Five?

KLAUS: Yea. Um, so this was in 1952, and we uh, came on Flying Tiger Lines. And uh, because the cabin wasn't pressurized – uh, we were originally gonna take a boat, 'cause it was cheaper. But um, my brother (?Hamil?) had just been born, and he was still under six months old. And, you can't take a baby that young on a ship, because of sea-sickness. [Laughs]

JOHN: That makes sense.

KLAUS: So, um – but the cabin wasn't pressurized at the time, on the plane that we came, and he screamed *all* the way to America. [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And as a matter of fact, we had to, had to gain altitude or lose altitude, one or the other – we originally went in to Toronto, I think, and – because of a storm. And, while doing that, he bust his, uh – one of his eardrums broke. So, he had a good reason to cry. Um, and um, still to this day he is kind of deaf in one ear. Never stops him from talkin', but stops him from listenin'!

JOHN: [Laughs] He's only half-listening.

KLAUS: He's a minister's son! He has an excuse to talk! You know?

JOHN: [Laughs] It's worked out for him, then?

KLAUS: Yea, right. As a matter of fact, my mom dug out our old report cards a few years ago,

and gave them to us for Christmas, and we all laughed about it. One of his said something like, 'Will not shut up!' [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: So now, he's a public speaker, and it worked out well for him. [Laughs]

JOHN: [Laughs] At a young age, had already determined a career.

KLAUS: He already was going on that path, and being very mouthy. [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Yes, so anyway, yea. We landed then in Toronto, and then hopped in to New York, an um – because we came by plane we didn't go into Ellis Island. Um, but we – I remember being in this, I don't know where it was, in this huge holding area where we stayed for days. Um, we had kind of slept on these hard benches, and stuff like that. And, finally we were passed through. I think they do various checks to see if you have diseases, the same thing they did at Ellis Island. See if the people had diseases, and check your papers out, everything else. And then we boarded the train for, for, um – for Hastings, Nebraska, where Karl Ulrich was. And um, and then I remember riding forever, and it just seemed like America was so huge.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Um, there is no place you can ride in Germany from, for – you would have to ride for more than a day to get from one end to the other.

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: Uh, you know, that just doesn't exist. And we rode for *three days*.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And, we're gonna only be half way across the country!

JOHN: [Laughs] Right, going to the middle.

KLAUS: America was *huge*! You know? Especially to a little kid. And, we didn't have much money, so we – my dad, we arrived in Hastings, my dad had a \$1.56. And I think for those three days we had hardly anything to eat. Um, [Laughs] so again, my brother was crying, and I was probably crabby, and mom and dad were probably crabby. And, you know, I don't imagine that was a very fun trip. I don't remember much about it, except that, part of the way – my dad liked to fight trains, that had the little above thing, you know, which — where they get the power from above lines? And uh, then part of the way we had uh, we were on the City of Los Angeles Union Pacific, or somethin' like that. Um, or Burlington, I don't know, but whichever. And, that came

right through Hastings. And we arrived like uh, I don't know, early in the morning sometime, in January. [Sighs] I hadn't looked at the date, exactly.

JOHN: Oh, that's all right.

KLAUS: Early in the morning, in January. Cold – it was just *freezing* cold, and...

[IN UNISON]: Great Nebraska winter! [Both laugh]

KLAUS: Yes, yes, terrific Nebraska winter. And, and they had, uh – I remember Dad asked the conductor, and he could read English pretty well, but he couldn't speak it. And he uh, he said, 'I will Hastings.' [Laughs] And the conductor, you know, the conductor said, you know, was giving him like a countdown: so many hours, and then so many hours.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know, so um, finally then, yea, we arrived there and Karl Ulrich took us in tow, and uh, had some rooms prepared. He had a big house, and his wife had recently passed away, so he had plenty of room. And his, and his children were kind of already moved out, um, on their own. And so, he had plenty of room in that huge house for four or five Germans!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Uh, five by that time 'cause, you know – my father, mother, me, my sister Ana and baby Helmut, who still was crying.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Um, and, so he put us all up. And, I remember thinking, 'Man, this guy is rich! He has a TV! Wow!' Uh, and uh – everything was big and new – and yea, it was totally different, than Germany, which is kind of small, and the houses are smaller. And so, um – and there's no, like, yards in between the houses, or very little. It's all cramped together, you know. And, so this guy had a *huge* yard, looked like a park –

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: – you know, for his yard! [Laughs] And it's, you know – looking back on it now, it's not that big! But, you know.

JOHN: When you were five...

KLAUS: You know, and it seemed like very, *very* big, so. Anyway, he took us in tow with him, and he put us up, and he got Dad a job at his restaurant. And, Dad washed dishes, for about a year. Like I say, he had \$1.56, and a wife and three mouths to feed, you know? So, you have to do something.

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: Even though he had a Master's degree, you know, in college, you don't say, 'Hey! I won't *do* this job, because it's beneath me.' You know? 'I've gotta feed some kids!' And, he did it. And, um – then, you know, so he washed dishes for almost a year. And uh, then he finally got a little better job um, with um, one of the very big companies, still, in Hastings. (?Dutton Lansing?) –

JOHN: Mmhmm.

KLAUS: If you've ever been there, you can't, you can't miss, you know...

JOHN: Can't miss the Lansing building! [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yea, Lansing's own a lot. And he had, had a weird relationship with old man Lansing. Now, here's this guy who had become wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, off the war. And Dad, who had seen it from the mud angle, uh, slopping through the mud. And they became friends, and – I learned English from the neighbor girls. My father learned it from this multi-multi millionaire, uh, who he started out as working as a gardener for. And they sit down and, you know, to Hal – uh, the old man Lansing – it was fascinating to hear about, you know, the other angle of the war, 'cause I mean, he had just *made* stuff, and got rich, you know? And to him, it was fascinating to hear about what the war was like for, you know, especially in Russia. Which most people in the U.S. don't even know about. Um, but which was where the was turned, really.

JOHN: Mmhmm.

KLAUS: Um, because eight out of every ten German soldiers that died in World War II were killed in Russia. So, without that contribution, the world would have been in deep trouble. So, anyway, but they developed this really weird kind of relationship. Uh, a *close* friendship. I remember my dad crying when he died. Uh, and um – but then, he was hired on by his sons, who were also, also out there. And also, you know, then wanted to run in the company. And um, they were also – they all shared in their father's good fortune, and they're – so, were also millionaires on their own, so. He became their gardener. So, then when Father actually decided he had the call to the ministry, uh, they didn't want him to leave. Uh, Hal – Hal Junior – who Dad was working for then, promised Dad that if stayed with him uh, he would put all of his kids through college. You know? Because, he was a big donator to Hastings College.

JOHN: Sure.

KLAUS: He was a big benefactor there. Been nothing for him to pay all our way, which later, when I *wanted* to go to college –

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: – I was like, you know, 'Why didn't Dad stay there?' It would have been all free. But uh, that's not how it worked out. So, um... You want to hear about some of my traumatic experiences?

JOHN: If you want to share them, sure.

KLAUS: Well, yea well, you know – I said once, my first memory of life was going to eat at the concentration camp. Wondering if the guys would shoot me, and hoping that they wouldn't shoot me 'til after dinner. And then uh, you know, we came here. And I never forget, we were uh, walking down the street, had just got some groceries or were going to get some groceries, something. And, somebody came up to us and spit on us, me and my mom, and said, 'Get on the plane you came in, and get the hell out of the country. And go back to the goddamned Germany'. or something like that. I never forgot that. I don't know, it was kind of a – yea, well, traumatic experience.

JOHN: It would stick with you, yea.

KLAUS: Then uh, then later um, they had an article in the Hastings Tribune, about this new family of German immigrants that had moved in. And, it mentioned that Father was a soldier, and it had all our pictures, and our address where we lived, and everything. And, our neighbor came over and tried to arrange a fight between me – I was like, five or six – and his son, who was like, eleven. And, this was to prove the superiority of Americans. Nothin' like stackin' the odds!

JOHN: Right!

KLAUS: But uh, my dad found out about it and uh, that was the only time I'd seen him just furious and ready to fight, that was seen. It taught him a lesson, though, and he never again raised his hand against anybody else. But that day, he was ready to fight. And uh, 'course, I didn't know any better. I was just standing there.

JOHN: [Laughs] Right.

KLAUS: Uh, why did they – why did they want me to fight? You know? Uh, and then later, we moved to Fremont and uh, my dad went in to the ministry. And there, I can recall being 'depantsed' in front of school, and beaten up by kids that I thought were my friends. Well, that's, that's kind of, you know, um – if I were to look back on my life I'd say these things had a negative effect. [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And, I never wanted to trust anybody. Um, that's probably why I'm single today. Um, I've found it very hard to establish trusting relationships, um, outside of my family. Um, because they never turned on me and wanted to beat me up. And, I always had an interesting nightmare all my life. And it was like, um – I described it as from the book 'The Invasion of the Body Snatchers'? Or, from the movie uh, where, uh – I had seen that when I was a kid.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: For some reason, I think on a Saturday Morning Special, or *somewhere*, um, where suddenly the whole town turns against – it was essentially a metaphor for anti-Communism, how people can change and stuff like that. And uh, if you've ever seen the movie.

JOHN: Mmhmm.

KLAUS: Um, and I – at one point in the movie, he's running away. Even the girl, the girl that he liked, suddenly changed in to this alien. 'Cause they take you over when you are asleep. And, she suddenly changed, and then everybody in town is running after him. [Laughs] And that's the one nightmare I've had all my life. Of running away, and *everyone* is out to get me. [Laughs]

[Interviewers laughs]

KLAUS: Which is bizarre and foolish, and uh, childish. But, uh...

JOHN: But it still had some basis, as you were talking about. You know, growing up.

KLAUS: Yea, well, that's the stuff that happens. And uh, you know, now if I were to meet the people that 'depantsed' me, or the guys that beat me up, or anything like that...I would understand what they were going – what they were feeling about me, you know? Um, this sudden German kid, you know? And, because of the media and everything else, all Germans were obviously Nazis, and my dad had been in the German army, therefore he was obviously a Nazi. And it wasn't true, but um, you know, I –

JOHN: But, yea, most Americans don't realize that, that they weren't *all* a part of the party.

KLAUS: Yea, yea. I mean, I was even born *after* the war, so, you know –

JOHN: [Laughs] Right! You had nothing to do with it.

KLAUS: How did I have anything to with it? So, but – you know, that even, it like, shows how little people know, in this country. Um, about the war and everything. Even in like, 1978, we had this guy – found out later he had never even *been* overseas. He had, like, spent his – done his patriotic duty at Ft. Dixon –

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: [Laughs] Defending New Jersey, defending the United States from, from the Japanese and the Germans. Um, never even been. You know, but he had kind of broke in, forced his way in to the parsonage in Cordova, Nebraska, which is only like, fifty miles from here. And this was in 1978, um – and, demanded to talk to Dad about the war and about the Holocaust. And uh [laughs], my brother – well, at the time, my *little* brother – was working on the railroad. That was a tough little S-O-B!

JOHN: Wasn't such a little guy! [Laughs]

KLAUS: No, no, no! He had started out on a tie gang –

JOHN: Okay.

KLAUS: – where you run a little five-pound sledge, repairing uh, railroad ties – *all* day. And, he had some pretty big arms! [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And, this guy was like, I don't know, fifty, sixty years old. The guy who had, you know, wanted a explanation of the Holocaust, you know, from my father. And, Harry, you know, kind of rudely escorted him out to his truck. And, my dad said, 'Don't hurt him!' And that was just, you know, the way he was, you know? Um, well, it's just something that happens, you know?

JOHN: Yea.

KLAUS: And like I said, you – if you look –

JOHN: Even what, thirty-three years later, roughly, or thereabouts. Thirty-some years later.

KLAUS: But, you know, it kind of – it seemed like, for our family, that kind of stuff was always in the background. I mean, it was *always* there. You know, and I was working for the State, and I had told some guy, you know, that I was working with that my father was a German soldier. And he said, 'Well, which concen – which Nazi concentration camp did he work at?' Like he – as if he had worked at Auschwitz, or something like that. And, it was just like, a stupid comment. I said he was a *soldier*, I didn't say he was a death camp guard.

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: Um, he was far too busy ducking Russian bullets to worry about, you know, killing people, you know? So, you get just stupid, ignorant comments like that. Um...

JOHN: Lack of understanding?

KLAUS: Yea, a little. It's just, I felt like – man, how can I even start to explain something, when there's that little understanding –

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: – you know, of what the situation was.

JOHN: When you have to start pretty much at the ground floor, you'd have to explain everything.

KLAUS: At the ground floor, right, exactly. So, so yea, well. Well, what else?

JOHN: Well um, how about, when you were a kid, how was learning English? I mean, was that something that was tough? Or, was it part of school?

KLAUS: No, it was actually very easy. I learned it from the neighbor girls.

JOHN: Oh.

KLAUS: Like I said, they had learned English from this multi-multi millionaire.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Because, yea, he used to mow the lawn –

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: – and then they, he said, yea, they'd always bring out a pitcher of lemonade, and they'd sit under this tree. And, they'd speak, you know, at first in very broken, you know? But my dad was avid in learning English *immediately*. And he had a picture dictionary, and a regular dictionary and he tried to read a lot. And, he always was reading like, the newspaper, and there was the dictionary, there.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And then, pronouncing out words, and stuff like that. But, I had it *very* easy. Um, I learned from the neighbor girls.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And, plane – uh, we came here in January, and by that fall, I knew enough English that I could start in school. And uh, of course, my sister, she didn't have to (unintelligible) all this, she was still only like, three at the time, so she still had a few years to pick it up, you know? But uh, yea, the two neighbors girls uh, taught me English. And, I actually met one of them when I was in college.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Uh, because – this is kind of embarrassing, because at the time, when I was little, I had promised to marry her. [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: I had said, 'I'm gonna marry you.' And she said, 'No! I will run away if you do!' Or, something like that.

JOHN:[Laughs] The way kids play.

KLAUS: Yea, and so, so then – but, we laughed about that when we met again. And, she is – you know, I lost track of her. I have no idea where she is now, but I should thank her for teaching me English! You know, and they were extremely nice people. But, you know, we had a lot of cultural misunderstandings, too. Like uh, the first time we went over to a family – I think I mentioned that in the book – uh, we went over to some – we were invited somewhere for dinner. And we uh, they brought out the dinner and everything, and it was sittin' there, and then they put like, a ear of corn on each person's plate. And my parents, at first, looked at each other aghast. I mean, you know, 'cause in Germany corn is only fed to hogs, and were these people trying to –

JOHN: Were they trying to insult you? Right.

KLAUS: Yea, yea, was it an insult?

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know, a subtle insult? Thinking, you know, you're all pigs? Or something like that. And, then, you know, of course these people dug in themselves!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Into the corn. And so then, you know – uh, at first, you know, it was like, 'Oh, this tastes funny.' You know?

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: And we kind of stayed away from it. But, I mean, later we all came to love corn, in *everything*! It's just the American thing! But at first, you know, it was like, the corn – was, you know, they weren't real sure if that was an insult or, 'Should we get up and leave?' And then uh, you know, they asked us over for dinner and a visit, you know? And, we ate dinner and sat around for half an hour, and then they kind of acted like they wanted us to leave. Not, not really like that, but like, you know, it was – and Dad said, 'Well, in Germany, for a visit – you go somewhere for a visit, you stay like, five or six hours!' You know, it's not like dinner, and half an hour and good-bye [Laughs]

JOHN: Sometime before bed, you leave.

KLAUS: Yea, you know. But uh, you know, there is just a – so I said, that was kind of different. And then, um, our neighbor once, um – we were over there for a little visit, and um, he uh, he thought he was being really gracious by offering us all a soda. And, of course, you know, that tasted like something we had never, ever tasted, you know? But it fizzed a little bit like, you know, maybe, you know, soap bubbles or somethin' like that. So my brother took off his shoes and his socks, and started washing his feet with it.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: [Laughs] Well, you know, there might be soap bubbles in there, or something, you know?

JOHN: Right, right.

KLAUS: And, it's like, yea, what? We're supposed to drink this?

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: I don't know, you know? So, yea, he washed his feet with that, with uh, pop.

JOHN: I'm sure that had an interesting result. [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yea well, you know, it's like – cultural differences, you know?

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: You didn't know that this is what this was. Now, of course, America is known worldwide for our Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know uh, and you know, now probably, even coming from Germany, you would understand what that was. You know, but uh, I found a lot of differences when I went back in Germany, in like 1982. You know, for instance, like they will – they won't drink an entire pop, you know, that's too, you know – um [laughs], they'll like have a, a ceiling, lid, you know – give you about half of it, and put the rest away. You know, for another day. So, it's like, 'You're not gonna give me a whole pop? What is this?'

JOHN: I don't know if you've encountered this too, but um, I noticed – they don't really like ice?

KLAUS: Mmhmm.

JOHN: If you ordered a pop, there was no ice.

KLAUS: Mmhmm. Well, it's not – the whole refrigeration thing is totally different over there, you know? And, a lot of them, like my aunt, I don't think they had a real – well, they had the little refrigerator, where they kept food and other stuff. But, like all their pop and all their beer was just down in the basement. You know, um, there's no such thing as ice in your pop. Um, there's no such thing as an ice cold beer. Uh, you know, it was *cool* at most – at best, you know?

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Um, and uh – that was just completely different, but that's the way they do it, so.

JOHN: Any cultural things? Any traditions your family had, from Germany, that you kept when you moved to the U.S.? You know, like, Christmas traditions, or things like that?

KLAUS: Yea, well we kept one of those. Um, Christmas was always my father's favorite holiday. And uh, we – and it was the German tradition of Christmas Eve. We don't, you know – what? You do it Christmas morning? Oh! What's that about? You know? It was always Christmas Eve, was *the* day. Uh, you know, and he'd always have an early afternoon sermon – service – and then we'd just *rush* to get home!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: 'Cause, and then of course –

JOHN: Of what's at home. [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yes! We know what's at home. The *presents!* You know? But it was like, uh – you know, I remember our first Christmas here, I think, we wouldn't have really had a Christmas, except for the Salvation Army brought over some uh, uh – they brought over a tree, and they brought a few fixings for the Christmas dinner. Some potatoes, and I think, a roast or something like that. Or a ham. And uh, and then uh, they brought each of us kids a toy. And, you know, that was a pretty good Christmas. Even though, you know, you know, we didn't have thirty presents apiece. You know, it was a -- we were all thankful for what we *did* have. Um, so. And, we continued that tradition. I mean, my dad used to love to decorate the Christmas tree, and everything had to be just so, kind of put a lot of icicle on there. He was – well, he was kind of an artist, artistic type, too. And he had a real arrangement, uh – arrangements for stuff like. And a real eye for symmetry and everything. Always had a beautiful tree. And, but that was always our, our main holiday, was that. Um, that Christmas. And, I can recall how we used to, how we'd always get like, one toy. And then, the other presents would have socks. Socks and underwear! You know uh, we of course, you know, 'Oh, rats! Mom bought us more socks.'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: But um, you know, it was a necessary thing and so you got it at Christmastime. We were extremely, always extremely poor. Even then when my dad went on into the ministry. Um, I have no idea how he managed – mom managed to feed us all, you know? Um, so I mean, I can recall her doing stuff like reusing aluminum foil. [Laughs] We had a stack of it! You know, and it – you know, 'Don't throw that away!' You know, 'That's expensive!' You know, uh, 'Eat everything – ', especially Dad, was, 'Eat everything on your plate! That food isn't, you know, there's people in the world today who would love that, have that dinner!' You know? And, he was *right*, but you know –

JOHN: Half the time! [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yea, well, yea. And, you know, from his background, you know, where they were starving a lot, and stuff like that. And they have the background of the (unintelligible) Germans, where they had a lot of forced starvations. Those uh, famines they had? Um, in the 1920's, and 1932, where his own father died during that. Uh, you know, to think of wasting food was just not done. And I, today still, *hate* wasting food. You know, and you'd tell, half of the time. You know, if – like, if I work at the house or something, there's just a little bit left. Well, I'll eat it!
[Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Rather than throw it in the garbage, you know? Uh, I just hate doing that. There's just something wrong. Uh, well, you know.

JOHN: Waste not, want not.

KLAUS: Yea, but that was the kind of thing that he grew up with, and that was the thing that uh, you know, they uh, passed on to us. As for other traditions, I don't know. Um, he was, uh – he demanded that we do very well in school, always. Um, and uh, would not tolerate anything, you know, any kind of sloppy grades. And if you got a 'C' – oh, you know, you just might as well consider joining the French Foreign Legion, because – [Laughs]

JOHN: Leavin' home! [Laughs]

KLAUS: Not even goin' home, yea! You know, because you were gonna have a little talk about that situation. But that's, you know, his background. You know, he was very educated, intelligent man, and he demanded that of his children. Um, we don't really have many other traditions that we carry on, as far as German traditions. Um...

JOHN: Were there any special foods or anything that, culturally, that you liked?

KLAUS: Oh yea, yea. Um, my mom still makes um – not so much for the other kids, but for me especially, she'll make uh, a couple German dishes that I just, uh – well, let me put it this way: you can feel your arteries harden, as you look at 'em!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And it's like, uh, (?German?) is one of the things she makes, which is potatoes and um, dumplings. And it's all covered in, well, this chopped up bacon, which is uh, fried and then you pour all the bacon and all the grease over it. Over the potatoes and dumplings! And, it is – like I said, just looking at it you feel your arteries harden! It's like, oh! It's a heart clogger, but it's just *so* good.

JOHN: Oh, yea! Makes me think of – we're doing the interview in the summer, obviously, but during the winter, that kind of dish...

KLAUS: Oh, yea. Well, you know, and it's – it would be perfectly okay, if you were out, out in the – you know, doing like hard, hard farmer work, you know?

JOHN: Like you said your little brother was doing, with the railroad.

KLAUS: Yea, or like, like it's a German peasant dish, you know? If you were hoein' potatoes for twelve hours a day, in the sun, yea! There's nothin' wrong with it!

JOHN: Yea, you're gonna work it off!

KLAUS: You know, because you *do* work it off, and it doesn't... But if you're – have a sedentary American lifestyle, where you sit at a computer, or you don't really work hard physically, then you know it's – it's *not* good! [Laughs] But, it is delicious!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And then, there's, there's – you know, it's a lot of...Germans make anything with potatoes, you know? And so, we had – there were several dumplings and potatoes. You know, like make pancakes out of potatoes, and um, bake 'em, fry 'em, do every single thing in the world with 'em, and uh – I love potatoes. But uh, and then, she has another couple dishes that she makes, with uh – one there with big dumpling and have kind of a, a vanilla sauce over it, which tastes really, really good, and it's *really, really* bad for you!

JOHN: Is it like a desert, or is it like a main dish?

KLAUS: Yea, no, it's main dish.

JOHN: Oh.

KLAUS: Heaven forbid, it's a main dish! I mean –

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: It's like, *way* – I wouldn't even begin to count the calories in that kind of dinner. But it's ridiculous. Um, yea well, and then you know, they'd like – when the (?German?), when my mom makes that, then it's also a tradition that they drink buttermilk! Which is like, the hugest, hugest, fattiest milk there *is*!

JOHN: Right!

KLAUS: You know?

JOHN: Liquid butter, almost! [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yea, it's like, you know, you eat this stuff that has potatoes in it, and dumplings in it, covered with grease and bacon bits, you know? And, then on top of that you eat – drink uh, you

know, buttermilk. And then, uh, not too bad, you have to have like, pickles or something. Dill pickles on the side.

JOHN: [Laughs] A vegetable, per se.

KLAUS: Well, you know, it's like – oh man, it was, you know, it was heart clogging. You know, and like I said, Dad and we had, uh – my mom is still a great baker and cook, you know. And she makes all kinds of baked goods, you know. Christmas at our house, there's always a million little cookies, and stuff like that, and cakes and everything. One thing I've found, when I went to Germany um, is they eat all day long. [Laughs] They start with breakfast and like, at ten o'clock we went out and had some sort of like, torte or little – with coffee. And then, couple hours later we ate, ate for you know, lunch. And then um, a few hours after that, you had to take your afternoon break, you know? And eat another like, doughnut or cake or *something*, you know? Along with coffee, again. And then a few hours after that, you're eating dinner! [Laughs] So, it was like, I'd always tell my aunt, you know, 'What, time to eat *again*'?

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know, 'You guys eat all day long!' You know, 'You take like, an hour break in between!' [Laughs] Well, but I mean, it was a great time.

JOHN: Well, I don't know how it was there, but uh, when I was in (?Sharin?), the whole city shuts down for those, like, the extra two meals.

KLAUS: Yea.

JOHN: Like we do for lunch, especially in a lot of smaller towns, just... [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yea, yea. Oh yea, there's like, hey. Now, it's like, 'Gone to coffee', or, 'Gone to – ', you know, 'Coffee, get some coffee and cake.' You know? And they have all these little restaurants. And what I was amazed at in Germany, in Germany when I was there, every little town has a *great* restaurant in it. Um, it's like, the 'chain' thing doesn't exist over there, or it was just starting. Uh, they had McDonald's. Which, was interesting to go to McDonald's and actually have a beer.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Have a 'McBeer'. Uh, that's the only reason we went. But, you know, I mean, when you have these – you know, I mean, like (unintelligible, name of German city) had a real nice restaurant. And it is only, less than a thousand people. Um, and then Rosenheim, which is right like, five miles from (unintelligible, name of German city), uh, had a number of really great little restaurants. There was one restaurant um, we went one place, where you had fish and you could go out back in their little stream, and like, pick them up.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: 'I wanna eat you!' 'You are my dinner!' And, you know, and they'd get a net and pop 'em out. Flop 'em in the, you know, it was like, 'Yea, all right!' It was like now, where you – there's restaurants where you can pick out a lobster. 'He's dead! He's mine!'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know? Uh, but it was like that. But they had tremendous restaurants in *every* little town. Um, you know, we stopped in the little village, and there was a great restaurant there, that had like...And, I noticed that food was always cheap, and *beer* was expensive. [Laughs] The *beer* they socked you with!

JOHN: They know where to put the value! [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yes, yes, you bet! They had like, you could get a great dinner, like several courses dinner, and it'd be like, five dollars. And then, a beer for four! [Laughs] You know –

JOHN: It was worth it!

KLAUS: Of course, it was like, three American – it was like, three American beers. You know, when they give you the stein of beer, they don't chintz around.

JOHN: Those liter steins (unintelligible).

KLAUS: You know, when it takes you two hands to pick up your beer, that's when you know that's a real beer. But um, yea. Uh yea, we uh – I still love a lot of German food, brats and stuff like that. I know –

JOHN: I know it's a strange question, and I apologize for interrupting –

KLAUS: – it's all right.

JOHN: – um, what's the difference between a German brat and an American brat? I notice, personally, I think there is a difference.

KLAUS: Yea, there is. Well, there's a difference between everything.

JOHN: Yea.

KLAUS: And even – even you go over there, even the coffee is different. And, *strong*. You know, and they, then they make it strong. But everything, um...Um, there's different spices, different – you know, it just *tastes* very different. Uh, you know, there's no way you could sit an American meal down, and it could be like, brats and stuff – and then have the same thing, supposedly, from a German, and the two would taste *entirely* different. Um, I happen to – you know, one of my aunts who I stayed with in Germany, had a little <bakeri>, a bakery uh, like right on the next block. And you wake up in the morning and you can just smell – you just smell

all this stuff. You know, the fresh baked bread. And, it is not like here where, you know, you just go down to like, the supermarket. Uh, they already had a few supermarkets, but it was – they still had mostly a lot of the little shops. You know, where they had the bakery. They even had – in this small town – they even had their own brewery. And uh, it was good beer. And uh, you know, you don't get it cold, but it's just drank at a different temperature, but it was okay. You know, it was very good. The combination between the bar staying open 'til four, and the strong German beer, could be absolutely lethal!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Um, one night as I was coming back my – back to my aunt's place, where I was staying. And, she's kind of this old, big, tough German house Frau.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know, big, you know. And she's Aunt Gila, which is short for Gisela. Um, and my cousin had dropped me off at the place, her place. And I walked in, and I *tried* to get in to the apartment. She had left me, you know, I had a key because, 'You'll be coming back late, I assume.' I tried to open the door and I just could not get the key in the lock. [Laughs] You know, so they suddenly the door opened and my aunt was standing there with a real disapproving look.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And I, I just wanted to go back to America, bye! I don't need to come back in. [Laughs] Uh, just shoot me now.

JOHN: Was it an aunt on your mom's side, then?

KLAUS: Yea, yea. Well, on my father's side, almost everybody – well, his mother...Because he defected to the Russians, or defected from the Russians to the Germans, his mother – his uncle was shot, and his mother...His sister was taken off by NKBD soldiers – uh, secret police. And was never seen from again. You know, you wonder what her fate was, but...His mother was sent to Siberia, and – she was kind of a tough old bird, she survived. And, she didn't die until...1990? Or something like that. She outlived him by several years. And uh, but uh, we got a letter from her once, and the Russian censors had just – there was nothing left except like, small words. 'Of', 'and' – there were no names, there was no like, verbs or anything, uh...'Such-and-such did,' you know, it was like, 'and', 'of' –

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know, and it was like, no you couldn't read a word. And then, Dad tried to write her back, or did write her back, and uh – 'cause we had uh, we had some also German relatives in Wisconsin, around Sheboygan. And they had kind of, uh – they were like cousins or something, of Dad. And uh, from them he had found out that mom – his mother was still alive.

And that they had, you know, corresponded. But then, because Dad – you know, when Dad wrote to her, he found out later through his cousins that Mom had been punished for getting a letter from a traitor. A traitor to the state. To the great Soviet state. And um, so Dad got word back saying, 'Don't write me again. I don't want you to suffer because of me.' And, of course, you know, they had already suffered because of him. Like I said, his uncle had been shot, and whatever happened to his sister, you know. You can only imagine. Um, but she never was heard of again, so. Uh, then uh – but his mom was a tough old bird, she survived. She found a way to survive, and she did. So, kind of the story of our family, surviving. Um, and his story. I mean, the stuff that he survived is just incredible. So, I always think, you know, for me to have a bad attitude about something, I'd be a real whiner. Because, I went through nothing compared to what he went through. You know? So what, somebody spit on me. Hey, at least they weren't shootin', shooting at me, you know? Um, somebody beat me up and took my pants off in front of the school. Yea, well, they at least weren't, you know, artillery barrages. So, I don't know, I got off easy. You know, and I think everything in life is how you look at it. Um, and like I said, for a long time I never – I just never trusted people. Um, and um, still have a hard time trusting people beyond a certain level, you know? We can be friends, and we can, you know – but, will you turn on me once you find out that my dad was a German soldier? You know, you might, so better keep a little distance, you know. So um, that's, you know – the kids that I work with now, they kind of taught me to trust. Um, 'cause they trust completely, and they're completely helpless. Um, so, you know.

JOHN: Is there anything you'd like to add, or anything you'd like to comment on otherwise?

KLAUS: Um, well I mean, I'm as American as you!

JOHN: [Laughs] Yea!

KLAUS: You know, I don't think I have any kind of accent. Once in awhile –

JOHN: And you've got your Husker hat on today, so... [Laughs]

KLAUS: Yea, oh yea! I mean, we – my father was a, became a Husker fan, you know, before he died. And he was, he always said, 'Tom Osborne will never win the national championship because he's too nice a guy!'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know uh, he didn't live to see the great days.

JOHN: Right, right.

KLAUS: He lived through the –

JOHN: The rougher...

KLAUS: Yea, the rougher days. Um, you know, when uh, when I first told him I wanted to go out for football in high school – 'Oh, real football is played with a soccer ball!', and all that.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: *That's* football! You know, this is space men! And, you know, everybody gets up to the line, and they all fall down. You know, that's football. You know? Um, and um – but when I, you know, when I actually played then, um – at first it was, 'No, no, no. You're not going to.' You know. Um, but then they eventually relented, and hey, I never got hurt. I mean, we had other members on the team who got arms broken, legs broken, things dislocated, you know. But me, I had a charmed life.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Never had a thing broken on me. Um, which surprised my mom, 'cause she was sure I was gonna get killed every game.

JOHN: Right! [Laughs]

KLAUS: She, she didn't – you know, she said, 'No, there's no way I could come watch'. You know, uh, 'You're gonna get hurt. I don't wanna see it! I'll come visit you in the hospital!'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: So, um – but then uh, my dad, you know, I was the only one of the boys who ever scored a touchdown in a high school game. And I went on an end-around, one time. I was an end on a team that had no passer, so you know. But, they used me once in awhile on an end-around, and I went like, seventy yards or something for a TD.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: I have no speed anymore, but I used to be fast. Anyway so, so then he – I know he actually was very proud of that. Um, even though, you know, and then he kind of had to watch games a little bit. And as the other boys um, then went to high school and played, I was the oldest, you know, as they went to play. You know, he became to appreciate – he came to appreciate football a little bit. And then, we of course – us kids, we were always Nebraska fans, and so he kind of, you know, and then he became a Nebraska fan!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: So uh, yea, from the German army to a Cornhusker fan! You know? Um, and like I said, his famous comment was always, 'Yea, we'll never win the national championship because Osborne's just too nice a man!' You know, uh, 'He's not like Switzer, you know, who drinks, cusses and spits, you know? And smokes cigarettes on the sidelines and tries to hide it, you know?' And all this stuff!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: You know, and

JOHN: It was fun to watch though!

KLAUS: It was, like, always be that burn mark there, where ol' Switzer was. But, you know, you know – he, Dad, came to love the game, and he eventually told me, he said, 'You know, it's kind of like chess with human pieces, you know? You have your, you have your pawns up front, and you have your knights and quarterback, and uh – or uh, the king, queen with the quarterback, running back, and each piece has a different role. You know, and they all have to work together, you know, for everything to work.' And, he was a great chess man, you know? He taught me how to play chess when I was seven, simply because he was bored.

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: So, I had to learn how to play chess. And, never been real good at it. But uh, I beat him a couple times, probably when he was just sloppy and bored. But uh, yea, he uh – were as, now, a family that's as American as you come, you know? My – I think my little brother Arnold, his favorite holiday is the Fourth of July, because you get to blow up illegal fireworks! And that's where I was this Fourth of July, and he said, 'Could life be any better, getting drunk out around the pool, blowing off illegal fireworks?' You know.

JOHN: [Laughs] Right.

KLAUS: And it just can't be any better. And, we also had some, I don't know, brats or something. Uh, food.

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: Uh, so I mean, it was great! [Laughs]

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And uh –

JOHN: It was a good time!

KLAUS: Yea, it was a great time! But that, I think that's his favorite holiday, is because he says, 'I wouldn't – *me* limit myself to things that don't blow up? No!'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: 'I'll go down to Missouri, and spend *money*!' You know? And uh, he does, he does. But, of course, that's not gonna be used for – in court, for prosecuting him! [Laughs]

JOHN: Right, right.

KLAUS: Uh, I hope.

JOHN: No.

KLAUS: Uh, so but – you know, the rest, you know – my sister's married to um, a former minister. And, he uh, he operates, or he is the manager of Casey General Stores. Uh, one of 'em, I think, is sort of a regional manager now, too. And uh, you know, we've all, you know, married – you know, never had any thought of, like, 'We have to marry a German!' Or anything like that, you know.

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: That was, get real! C'mon, there was no such thing. You know? Uh, but uh, you know, all melded into this country. And now, like I said, the reason I really started this book was so that the younger generation who – you know, they know, they've seen pictures of Grandpa, but they know nothing of him. And, so that his life – you know, even if it doesn't get published, which I hope it does, but uh, so that his life is preserved. And so that they know something about their history.

JOHN: Mmhmm.

KLAUS: Is, sadly, in this country, most kids know –

JOHN: The reason we're doing the project!

KLAUS: – very little of their history, and even their own, much less in the larger picture of, you know. And, someday one of them might say, 'Well, where do I come from? What kind of man was Grandfather?' You know, um, you know – then they can, you know –

JOHN: They can find out.

KLAUS: You know, they can look and say, 'Yea, this is – I'm lucky to be here, 'cause he had a very, very touchy life!'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: There was times where he should've died, very easily. Um, he survived. And then we came to this country totally by accident, you know? 'Cause at one time, Dad was kind toying with idea of, of moving to Australia. Uh, and didn't really wanna be part of the British empire, you know? But um, you know, Australia was another country that was open for immigrants, so he kind of toyed with that idea, of um – of course, things could have turned out completely different!

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: If we now lived in Sydney, or someplace like that, in Australia. Uh, or in the outback, you know, fightin' off the snakes! [Laughs] And the wombats! Uh, so, you know – but uh, yea, we're as an American family as you could get. Um, well, like I said, most of the younger ones – um, like my sister Linda and my brother Arnold, who loves the fireworks. He works for the Saint E's hospital. Um, yea, um those people don't even know any German. Um, like I said, when my brother went over there, oh about fifteen years ago, or so. He said, 'They have a different word for everything! I can't even order a beer!'

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: Of course, you know, over there, there's many more Germans that speak English. And people that come over there, they speak German, you know? And it's a – bilingual is very common throughout Europe, and English is kind of an accepted second, you know? And so, there's a lot more people. But, my brother and, uh – I had two brothers went over there at the same time. Harry, who worked for the railroad for years, and Arnold. They are like, completely lost! [Laughs] They, they got into the – somehow they were on a train, taking a train somewhere. And, they had gotten in the first-class section, by mistake. Which, costs more of course. So, the conductor came and told them, 'You have to leave', in German of course. So, neither one of those knew anything about – you know, knew a word of German. And they just knew that this guy was trying to get them to leave. So, my brother Harry keeps doing the ugly, stupid American thing. He keeps handing him money! More money, and more money and more money. And they still insisted, 'No, you gotta leave!' And, 'Here's some more money!' You know? It's like, you idiot, how much money did you blow?

[Interviewer laughs]

KLAUS: And this conductor was going, 'Well, if this guy wants to hand me money, okay!'

JOHN: Right.

KLAUS: You know, 'I'm not gonna argue with it, he's just handin' me American dollars'. Or, you know, Deutschmarks. You know, and he's just, 'Why should I refuse?' [Laughs] 'I'll take 'em!' You know? So, I know they were completely lost. They speak no German whatsoever, they're – like I said, we're 'bout as American – you know, the next generation, hey they won't even, the generation beyond this one will have *no* clue! And that's really why I wrote this. And uh, so.

JOHN: Very good.

KLAUS: And why I wanted to do this, you know.

JOHN: Well, I appreciate you taking the time.

KLAUS: You bet.

JOHN: It really helps us out. I thank you for taking the time. I guess this concludes the interview. Thank you very much, Klaus.

KLAUS: You're welcome.