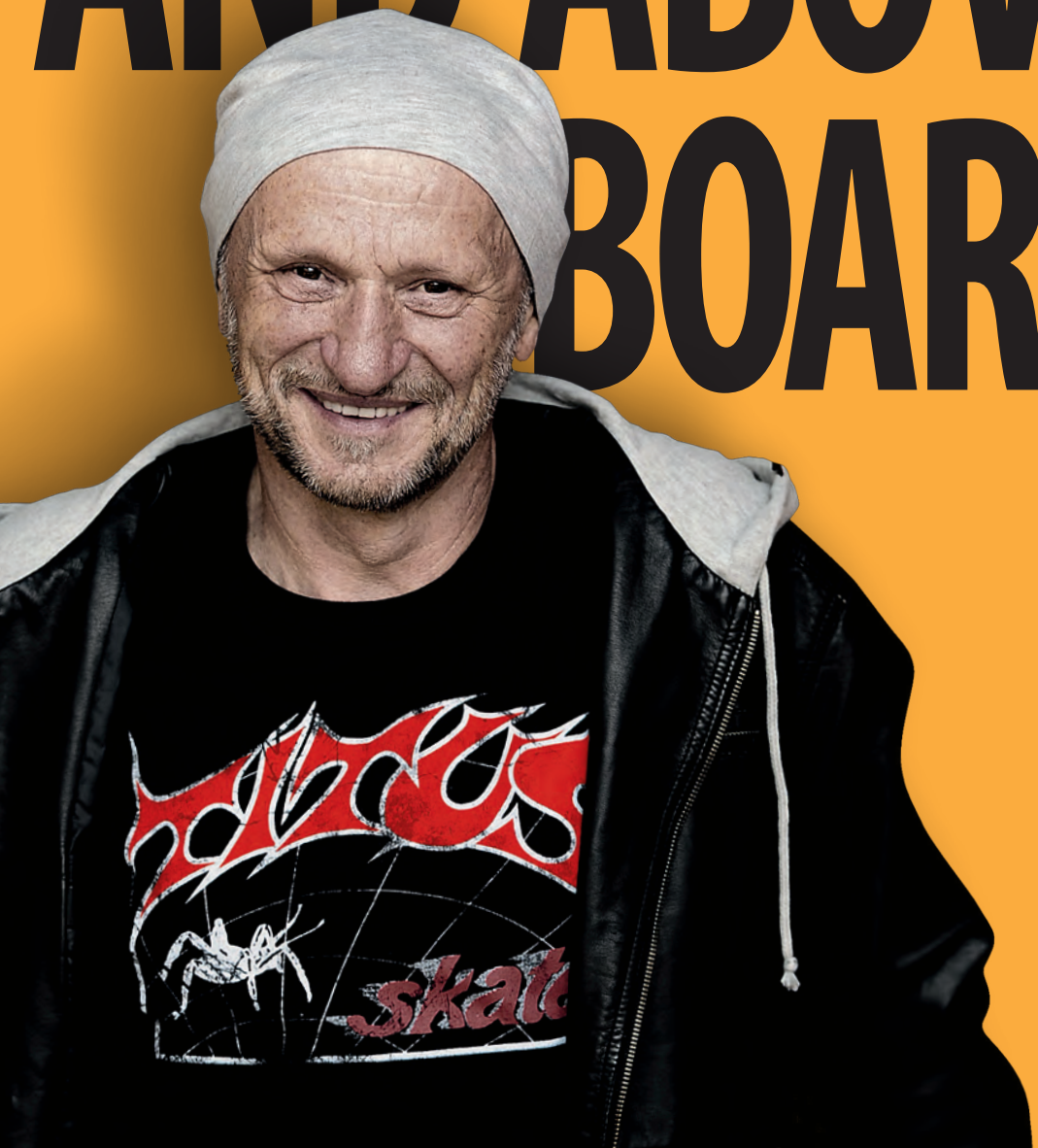
Titus Dittmann

OPEN AND ABOVE BOARD



WAXMANN

Titus Dittmann

with Michael Matthiass

Open and Above Board

WAXMANN

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Introduction

Titus Dittmann, is one of Skateboarding's most famous movers and shakers. Involved with skateboarding since the late 1970s, he has been a rebel youth, a skater, skate instructor, skateboard dealer, skateboard distributor, skateboard brand creator, businessman, promoter of skateboarding, self-promoter, movie producer, magazine founder, unifier, destroyer, father, husband, auto mechanic, race car builder and driver, hang glider, para glider, snowboarder, snowboard producer, skatepark builder, advocate of skateboarding, and friend. No one has promoted skateboarding in Europe more than or as well as, Titus. This is his story, and to a large extent, the story of European skateboarding. It is a wonderful read. If you are a skater, you will be fascinated. If you are a businessman, you will smile, and then your jaw will drop like mine did. Titus' story has universal appeal and will resonate with a wide audience.

Titus was about 30 when he discovered skateboarding, and was instrumental in helping keep a tiny flame going during the 1980–1984 skateboard recession, and then facilitate and lead the rekindling of its glory days flame during the 1985 European resurgence of skateboarding as a recognized sport and one of the epicenters of youth culture. An athletic quick learner and educator, Titus recognized early on, that skateboarding was an individual activity with unique lessons to teach skaters, and in so doing, provide an alternative to the rigidly controlled team sports and guided individual activities that were then the only "adult approved" athletic outlets for young people.

If he had discovered skateboarding at age 12, Titus would undoubtedly have become a skateboard professional instead of the one who paved the way for others to become Pros. Perhaps it was fortunate that he did not discover skateboarding until he was an adult, because he went on to do more for the develop-

ment of skateboarding in Europe than anyone else, almost all of whom were half his age.

In doing so, he became both famous and infamous, depending on whether you were on his good side or bad side. But no matter which side of Titus you were on, you had to recognize that he was "the man" who gave European skateboarding its demonstration teams, the biggest contest in Europe, it's best magazine, some memorable skateboard films, some skate parks, promoted its best German skaters, and got the general public to view skateboarding as a real, constructive, exciting and educational activity.

Titus invested everything he had into building skateboarding, did an amazing job, and when there was credit for a job well done to be taken, Titus was there to claim it. He earned it, but to those who were less daring or far sighted in their approach to skateboarding, he eventually became a scape goat for whatever went wrong at the same time.

Like most explorers, Titus had some spectacular failures, but like a phoenix, he has always risen again to new heights. Many of those who are now making their living in the European skateboard industry, stand on Titus' shoulders, and many were literally trained by him.

As if all the things Titus has done for skateboarding are not enough, he has also started his own non-profit organization, Skate-Aid, to help build skateparks and promote skating in the Middle East, Africa and The Americas.

Entrepreneurs are by nature, not normal or ordinary people. They march to a tune only they hear, and take risks no prudent businessman or banker would ever consider. That is why new worlds and markets are not discovered by the timid, the weak, or the overly cautious. Read on then, and discover the fascinating, funny, brutally honest, story of Titus' life in his own words.

George Powell, the Godfather of Skateboard Manufacturing
and Co-Founder of Powell Peralta

Prologue

January 14th 2011, 800 kilometers west of Kabul

The combat helicopter veers away. It takes a sharp turn back to the second chopper, which was giving it cover from a distance. The sun flashes off the cockpit windshield and a heavy machine gun sticks out of the open cabin door with the silhouette of a GI behind it. Moments later, the two military aircrafts have disappeared behind a nearby mountain ridge. Our little gathering was classified as non-threatening.

Right they are.

I hold the hands of a small Tajik girl. She giggles and shouts with glee as she tries to master the skateboard, and I hope it's not my clumsily fixed turban or my *tombon* – the super-lightweight, baggy pair of pants with a *peron* over it – that make the girl laugh so hard. The concrete under my rubber slippers has turned out perfectly, at least given local standards. The German TÜV[1] would never accept it as a standardized skateboard ramp, but whatever, there's no German inspector anywhere nearby and this is not Münster, Westphalia. We're in Karokh, Afghanistan.

Close to 400 girls are cheering and shouting on the recently inaugurated skateboard ramps surrounding us. They're trying to get their hands on one of the 20 available skateboards. The school principal has given permission for this exceptional situation, which is extremely unusual by Afghan standards because Uli Gack from the ZDF[2] is here to cover it for the *Auslandsjournal*[3]. In a country that pretty much only has poverty, extremism, war or drug cultivation to offer its teenagers, that's something special. The subsequent hustle and bustle after school, however, signifies an utter miracle for a different reason.

Boys and girls, Pashtuns and Tajiks, Sunnis and Shiites, children from poor families and from rich families are skating together peacefully – usually unthinkable, since great attention is paid to strict separation of genders, tribes and religions.

The teachers are squatting at the edges of the facility, bearded men with piercing eyes that are watching and looking rather surprised and clueless themselves:

"What are the kids doing with these weird mouse cars?"

At the nearby neighboring school behind them, countless windowpanes are missing, the mud roofs on some of the buildings have caved in and half a dozen of the windows are just soot-blackened holes. None of this is unusual for Karokh, but the children are laughing and frolicking as if there were no squalid mud huts behind the two-meter-high boundary wall surrounding them, but rather comfortable villas amid sunny meadows at the foot of the Hindu Kush.

All of a sudden, my hands are empty. The girl has let go. She stands, a little wobbly, but keeps her balance, straightens herself, stands on her own wheels. A small, proud smile is spreading across her face. If all goes as planned, many more will be following her lead.

I walk back over to Rupert Neudeck, the man I came to Afghanistan with. We built this facility together with his Green Helmets. He's still talking to his Afghan construction supervisor, Zobair Akhi, who's a friendly, modest man. Without his intuition and unwavering perseverance, nothing would work here.

While I wait, I watch how the kids – instructed by Marc Zanger and Maurice Ressel, two German skateboarders who have supported the project on-site for months – become bolder with every push, how they gain more self-confidence with every little trick they do. As soon as something works out, they look over to their teachers, friends, parents, and relatives, who have come to check out this strange German construction and are beaming with pride. The mullah, whom we eye cautiously, is there as well, but the wise old man with his typical beard nods approvingly. The other adults register this, too, and the atmosphere becomes increasingly relaxed. Karokh is an idyll, and not only by Afghan standards. It stands in stark contrast to the big city of Herat that we came from that morning.

In Herat, everything is different in a way that can hardly be described. The bad smells – diesel exhaust, open sewers, rotting garbage and recently slaughtered goats that are bleeding to death at the roadside – all blend together with the delicious aromas from cooking stalls and spice stands. To call it "breathtaking"

would truly be an understatement. Then there's the noise: a mix of car horns, market vendors, muezzin calls to prayer and police or military convoys which noisily passing by time and again. Even the sky – an endless sea of light blue, hovering above walls full of bullet holes – is different from anything I've ever seen in the Westerwald. It would be so easy to feel like a complete alien here:

"Wrong planet. Get back into the spaceship, guys!"

Foto: Maurice Ressel

But the exact opposite is the case. In the past sixty years, I founded a company in Germany and almost ruined it; I crashed with a hang-glider and on the Nürburgring[4]; I received awards; I had a son and married the most beautiful girl at the Kirchen disco. I was hyped as a skateboard guru and cursed as a racketeer, celebrated in the Westfalenhalle[5] and humiliated by bankers, I designed half-pipes, I posed in front of my Lamborghini and I had breakfast with Tony Hawk. I've experienced enough victories and defeats for three lifetimes, but here in the barren mountains of northwest Afghanistan, I feel more at home than I ever have in my hometown of Kirchen in the Siegerland.

I don't have to think long and hard to know why.

Everyone's skating all around me and I feel this crazy mix of a zest for life and resistance again – it's a feeling of clenched teeth and proud laughter, of being an individual and belonging to the coolest clan in the world. This mixed feeling only exists in the skateboarding scene. I'm exactly where I belong.

But how the heck did I get here?

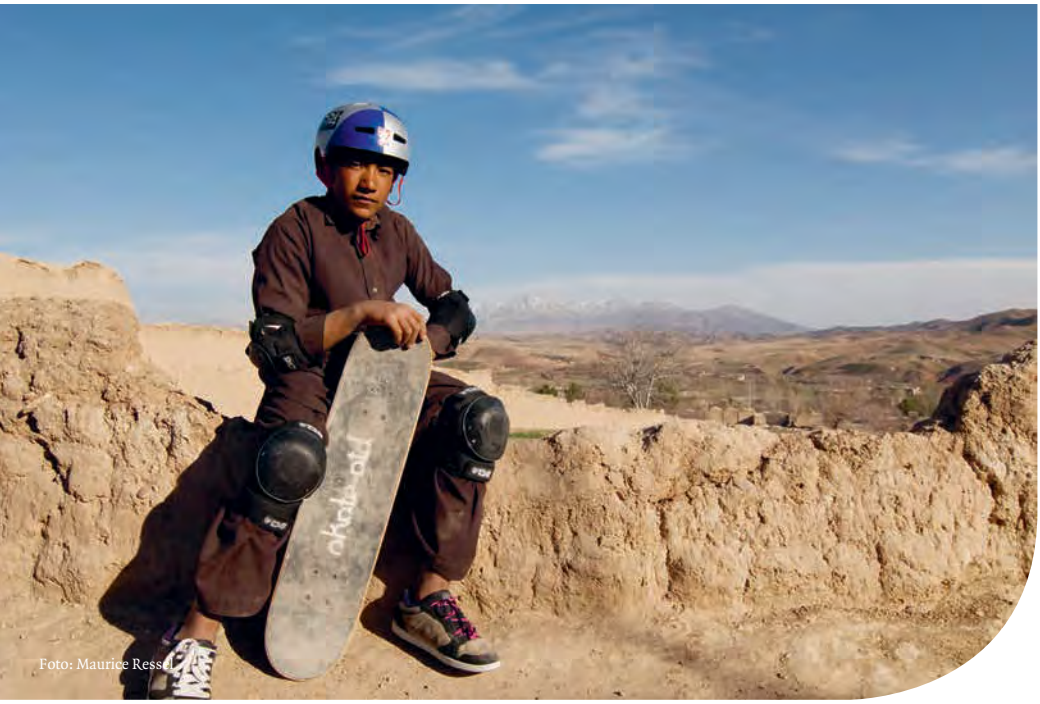

Foto: Maurice Ressel

Part One

1948–1977

A Running Start

Chapter 1

Of Mothers And Other People
Kirchen On The River Sieg, 1948–1960

Stacking Coal

One of my earliest childhood memories is of a dusty, dimly lit room, a mountain of briquettes in front of me, the taste of soot in my mouth. I'm crouching in the coal cellar of our house on the southeastern hillside above the small town of Kirchen and I'm happy as a clam because I know that for the next few days, I have an exciting task to complete: stacking briquettes.

Kirchen's local coal dealer pulled up the hill to our house in his truck a little more than half an hour ago, just like they did every year in the early fall. I was standing on the side of the road, bright-eyed and eager, when the old Opel Blitz from the Wehrmacht[1] fleet finally stopped in front of our house. Soot-covered men unloaded sack after sack full of briquettes from the back of the truck and emptied them into our coal chute. The load must have been close to five tons in total, about 5,000 briquettes, which was our entire supply for one year. I could hardly wait for the men to be done so I could start my job in the cellar. For the next three days, I would be disappearing off the face of the earth entirely.

Of course, the grown-ups don't seem to understand why little Eberhard runs down the basement stairs with such enthusiasm once the workers are finished. (At the time, my brother had not yet renamed me "Titus", the name I never asked for but ended up sticking around anyway.) Grandma Klara thinks I'm the only "man" in the house who is willing to help, my mother calls me her "sunshine", and my father is simply happy that he doesn't have to do it himself.

The truth is that I dash into the cellar before the coal dust has even settled because I have something there I hardly ever get otherwise: free rein. Nobody disturbs me, nobody comes in to interrupt me, nobody "knows better" as I'm figuring out how to turn the untidy heap of briquettes into a meticulously piled, neatly aligned briquette stack. Grandpa Zimdas from next door – who shows up once a day to give knowing advice – is the only person I tolerate. This stacking business is not so easy after all: the briquettes are spread out on the floor just as the soot-covered men dumped them there, and 5,000 is a genuinely large amount of them. And not just for a five-year-old, either. But that doesn't scare me. On the contrary, the basement is an opportunity for me to experience a rare, precious feeling of freedom. And the rarity of such an occurrence has a lot to do with the type of town that Kirchen was.

It's not exactly easy to grow up in a small town at the foot of the Westerwald[2] in the early fifties. The dreary, post-war atmosphere of Adenauer's Germany is present everywhere and is magnified by the narrow-mindedness of a town that has seen better days. The parent generation learned to be tough on themselves and others during world wars and economic crises and passed their attitudes onto their children in an unfiltered, direct way. The largest hurdle for us kids growing up in Kirchen, however, is the two churches that give the town its name. Here, in the secluded regions of Sauerland[3] and Westerwald, caught in the middle between the Protestant Siegerland[4] and the Catholic Rhineland[5], a Protestant and a Catholic church are peacefully coexisting in the center of town like two holy watchmen, keeping tabs on us and making sure that there's enough morality and decency to go around.

As opposed to us.

Our zeitgeist and religion have a stranglehold on us and leave little room for individuality or self-awareness. Personal opinions? New ideas? Free will? The answers were always the same: "Be quiet when the adults are talking." And above all, the German expression: *"Werd du erstmal groß!"*, which means something along the lines of "you'll understand when you're grown." Both expressions came to us in a thousand different variations. We should have responded with a, "well, how are we supposed to grow up, anyway?", but at the time, we didn't real-

ize that we were being systematically deprived of self-confidence and self-awareness. And if we *had* asked, the only answer we'd receive would have been a painful one – like the punishing slaps in the face that were so common back then.

None of that negativity was in the coal cellar. I could create my own plans there, I could try out my own ideas, I let myself fail, start fresh, fail again, try over; I did my own thing. In principle it was just skating without a skateboard. That proud feeling of standing in front of the completed pile and thinking "hey, that didn't turn out so bad after all!" was so transformative for me that I longed for it time and time again throughout the rest of my life, whether that meant learning how to hang-glide, landing the first Titus flip, or climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. It's the same feeling I have more than 50 years later in Karokh as I stand in the schoolyard amongst excited Afghani children and inaugurate a skate park many doubters said would never exist.

On the way home from Sunday school.

Sometimes I think that everything that has happened since then – the exciting, hilarious, unbelievable roller coaster of a life I led between Kirchen

and Karokh – prepared me for this: providing children in an impoverished, war-ridden country, who were never allowed a childhood, with something that helps them grow up big and strong. With my background in mind, you could almost say I'm grateful for all the obstacles, for every "you can't do that!" that was put in my way. I managed to overcome these setbacks, and that's exactly why I'm helping these kids do the same – but this time, with a skateboard.

Me, wriggling on Klara's lap, Werner behind us – no pompadour yet, but already cool.

Swallowing defeat and staying humble is not only the heart and soul of skateboarding, it's also not exactly a bad place to start if you want to rebuild a half-destroyed country, either.

Skateboarding also fosters more character traits that are extremely valuable – and not just at the skate park – regardless of if you live in Kirchen or in Karokh: passion and determination. The passion required to begin to tackle the impossible, and the determination needed to follow through until the end.

Quite a bit of both was already in this little boy's blood as he sat in the coal cellar in Kirchen, long before skateboards even existed. At some point during

the afternoon, our doorbell rings. My best friend Mischa Frost wants to pick me up to go play with him, as he often does. I come upstairs rather unwillingly, covered in black powder, and send him away with a curt "Eberhard doesn't have time. Eberhard has to work," and recede back into the dark basement to construct and carry out my master plan.

A Grand Mother

Tenacity is in our family's genetic makeup and particularly in our women, and Grandma Klara is our best example of that fact.

She became a widow in 1914, only eight weeks after the war had started, and was suddenly all alone with her two children to take care of. The widow's pension provided by the state was nowhere near enough to able to support a family, so she cleaned the villas of Kirchen's local dignitaries for extra money – at the time, plenty of those were still standing. After the First World War, however, that no longer sufficed.

Kirchen came to the rescue: one morning, Klara found a loaf of bread on her doorstep. She didn't know where it came from or who had put it there, but in her time of need, she didn't care. Curiously, similar occurrences began to pop up here and there: sometimes she found a bottle of milk somwhere, or a few coins on the street, often at exactly the point in time when she needed them most. Maybe she had a secret benefactor, or maybe several neighbors had pooled their resources together and were taking turns in giving her a share. At the end of the day, however, it didn't really matter where it was all coming from, because that "giving and taking" was simply a part of life in Kirchen.

Klara gave back to her community, too, however and wherever she could. Many years later, she let an impoverished family with two children stay in the basement of our house for a considerably long time, right where my father was supposed to set up his store. Klara let her poor subtenants live rent-free for a while or provided them with food when they couldn't make do on their own. The family's eldest son later started his own business as Kirchen's first TV technician. When Klara's TV broke, she took it to him to be repaired. It had been the first TV in town, sitting in our shop window as Kirchen's "public viewing" device for a long time. Klara never got her TV back – instead, she received two things in return: a brand new TV sans invoice and a note from her former "subtenant": "Mrs. Dittmann doesn't owe me a single cent."

Going for a Spin

I'm pretty sure that I inherited my love for cars from Klara as well. Since my dad needed a company car for his workshop, we were among the first car owners in town. Klara had grown up without a car on the Brühlhof[6] and was therefore – naturally – a big fan of car rides, but she couldn't drive herself and felt bad having to ask her own son to take her out all the time. And that's how the following Saturday "bath day ritual" was born:

At some point during the early afternoon, my father disappears to take a bath as we clean and polish the car like we're told to. As soon as Klara hears the water running in the bathroom, she sticks her head out of the window on the second floor and asks us,

"Na, Jungs, wommern Dührschen maachen?", which basically means "Alright boys, wanna go for a little spin?" in "Kierscher" slang.

She usually doesn't even bother waiting for the answer, and moments later the three of us find ourselves sitting in the car, driving through Kirchen with a proud, unlicensed Werner at the wheel. Sometimes, the village policeman catches us, frowns, and wags a scolding finger – and everything's okay again. But if it happens too many times in a row and the look on his face gets too angry, we know it's time to take a break from the "Dührschen" – our little outings. You have to show that much respect for the authorities, period.

My father never found out about our secret because we always came home on time before the loud singing in the bathroom had stopped. The only real risk was posed by the conspiratorial glances that Klara threw us over the dinner table until we could barely control our facial expressions any longer. But even if my father had caught on to our little adventures, we didn't really face any danger of getting into serious trouble. As quick-tempered as he was, his wrath usually subsided just as fast, too.

If he noticed a dirty streak – a so-called "souvenir" – that we'd left on his freshly polished car or if we "talked back" too sassily, he would chase us down the road sometimes in a fury, uttering threats until his anger faded or his breath ran out – which usually happened more or less at the same time. But that was it.

Of course, my dad had a genuine respect for Grandma Klara. She had a way of speaking her mind that made the men – the theoretical heads of the family at the time – gulp nervously. She lived upstairs in the attic on the fourth floor of our house. Since we didn't have central heating at the time, we had to heat the stoves on each floor separately. It came to the point where Klara could no longer carry the briquettes she needed all the way up from the cellar by herself, so she called down the staircase for someone to bring her coal.

We usually replied with "yeah, hold on a minute!" – or in the Kirchen dialect, "*Johh, waademoh!*"

It didn't take long for Klara to call the rest of us the *Waademoh* Company because one barking request usually didn't produce desired results. She had to get really angry with us and yell "*Waademoh Company!*" down the stairs until someone finally took pity on our freezing grandmother and schlepped the briquettes up to her room. That "someone" was almost always me. I enjoyed doing something that was difficult for me to do as a little kid and also guaranteed a big dose of praise and recognition in return. She must have decided that I was the only useful man in the house at that point. That's why I never really had to stand in the firing line of her sharp tongue.

With one exception.

The Tinsel Storm

I was about 19 years old and (with the exception of Klara) home alone for Christmas. I had naturally taken advantage of that fact and threw a wild Christmas party. It must've been pretty successful as I can hardly remember anything aside from an abundance of cheap red wine and an excellent boy-girl ratio – at least, from the perspective of us boys. Back then, house parties were our only chance in the wintertime to flirt with the girls without freezing our butts off.

Our party was a so-called "bottle party", common in our little town. Since no one had money to buy drinks, everybody simply brought or stole something from home, depending on how easy-going the parents were or not. Aside from beer, egg liqueur, Underberg and other "adult drinks" were popular choices. We ransacked the pantry of the "host house" for food, and The Who, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Deep Purple, Iron Butterfly and Uriah Heep provided our party soundtrack.

Later that night, my friend Fancy and his girlfriend (and now wife) snuck away to my parents' bedroom on the second floor and were so loud that in spite of her hearing loss, my grandma came downstairs to see what the heck was going on. She wasn't wearing her glasses and just assumed that the entwined bodies lying between the sheets belonged to me and some girl. She was standing in the bedroom door, shaking her head in indignant disbelief and repeating herself to Fancy over and over again:

"Seriously, Eberhard! I can't believe you, Eberhard!"

She was the only one who refused to call me Titus all her life.

The next morning as we're all still lying around in the ravaged living room,

miserably hungover and bleary-eyed, Klara comes downstairs, sees the entire mess, and – given the immoral incidents of the night before – is officially at the end of her rope. She starts the tirade, and I swear, I've never heard a more powerful sermon since that day in my entire life. No topic is spared: the book of Genesis somehow gets mentioned, I'm reminded more than once of the imminent return of my parents, and she's ranting and raving so fanatically that the walls start to shake. And we're sitting there, thunderstruck, staring at her – first in reverent awe, then frozen in shock, and finally in a state of utter panic.

But not necessarily because of her sermon – because with every important sentence (and almost all of them are) she slams her cane against the floorboards furiously, causing the electric Christmas lights strung around the tree flash with a vengeance.

"...if your parents hear about this!"

BOOM, the cane hits the floor, the tree flashes in an almost holy light, perhaps the light of God's wrath -

"...no sense of decency whatsoever!"

Another BOOM, the lights flash again, and it goes on and on.

She saves her strongest statement as the final touch, the cherry on top of the righteous sundae:

"I'd like nothing better than to smack you so hard that your teeth fall out!", which sounds twice as impressive in the Kirchen dialect. The cane's booming sounds shake us to our bones, and the tree blinds us with its electrifying power.

Before we can even begin to repent for our sins, the sermon is over and she's gone back upstairs with a sense of self-righteousness usually reserved for saint and preachers. Since the young people were so obviously moved by her words, it's clear to her that there is still hope in stopping the moral decay of Western civilization.

After emerging from our shocked state, we finally discover the reason for Klara's light show: one of the bulbs on the "modern", electric string of Christmas lights my dad (aka the town's "go-to guy" for all things electric) had draped around our tree had been twisted loose. With every boom from Klara's cane, the light had made contact for a brief moment.

We all agreed that we'd enjoyed the show immensely.

Left: our electronics store; right: the repair shop entrance.
Middle: the company car. I'm on the passenger seat.

Learning To Swim

My father Walter was an electrician with his own business and therefore officially an entrepreneur and member of Kirchen high society. His entrepreneurship was built mainly upon his own self-exploitation, but nobody knew that. In the eyes of the townspeople, the Dittmanns stood for modern innovation: we had our own car before most others did and always had the latest electric devices in our house or on display in the shop windows. It happened quite often that parts of the brand-new model train, a leftover from Christmas sales which my brother Werner or I had found under the tree on Christmas Eve, were sold to whomever came in on Boxing Day with money they had received for Christmas. Business came first.

The TV in our shop window marked our being accepted into the town's social 'premier league' – in the eyes of my friends, at least. It was the only TV in all of Kirchen for quite some time. Friends and neighbors gathered in front of our shop on their kitchen chairs and watched the TV show on the ARD[7] attentively and without sound. There were no other channels at the time.

Electronics shaped our lives. When I learned how to swim, I was attached to a power cord for 'support'. My dad loved to swim. On Sundays, he packed the newly washed car (first a Lloyd Alexander TS, later a Fiat Neckar) full of the necessary snacks and accessories to accompany us on our day trips. My mother Marta packed *Knifften* – thin, double-layered sandwiches – into a picnic basket along fruit from our backyard and the occasional hard-boiled egg. Off we went to the *Dreifelder Weiher*, to the *Listertalsperre*, to the *aggertalsperre* or one of the other numerous artificial lakes in the area.

There were usually no actual "beaches" at the lakes, the embankments were steep and the water was deep. To make sure things didn't get out of control when we were first learning how to swim, my father Walter always took a reel of electrical cord from his workshop, tied a loop around my bellytummy and literally kept me on a long leash as I tried my luck in the cold water. He pulled me back to shore if I spluttered too hard or managed to feign drowning halfway convincingly. We were rewarded with a cruise on our inflatable boat after our lesson. My father was a generally kind-hearted man who liked to turn a blind eye to our troublemaking when my mother wasn't around. She was the true ruler of our house and had other – or more precisely speaking, more rigorous – notions of which behaviors were "tolerable" and which weren't. And yes, "unacceptable" was more common than "tolerable" in our household.

Coffee break with the family. Werner now has an Elvis-style hairdo.

God Is Great!

I understand my mother's strict ways far better these days. My mom became an orphan at the age of five in 1918 and grew up as a foster child under her uncle's care, who already had five children of his own. At least she had a roof over her head and food to eat. That meant a lot at that time. She wasn't a biological child in the family and was considered a "guest", and she never experienced the warmth and love she might have in her immediate family.

Marta grew up to be a strong woman full of energy who was often hard on herself. And if you're hard on yourself, you're often hard on others as well. She never took a break, always went 'full speed ahead', and everything and everyone had to live up to her high expectations. She was never lacking in cheerfulness or warm-heartedness, however, and was almost always in a good mood. Serving lunch was a small-but-exciting daily event: "Can you smell that, kiddos? Freshly picked, freshly cooked! Come and get it!"

With my siblings Ulrike and Werner.

You could call that my first lesson in marketing.

When she was pregnant for the second time after my brother Werner, she desperately hoped for a girl. She had one, but my little sister died when she was still a toddler.

Then I came along and was obviously not a girl. In stark contrast to the crew cut everyone else had at the time, I had a 'Prince Valiant' haircut to make up for being a boy. My brother somehow couldn't really (or didn't want to) differentiate between Prince Valiant and the hairstyles worn by Roman royality and randomly started calling me "Titus", like the emperor. No one knew why, but the name stuck and Titus was born.

Seven years after my birth, my parents then had the daughter they had wished for. My sister Ulrike slowly lost her eyesight before she was 30. Marta pulled our family through those and other hard times with her inexhaustible trust in God. She managed the household, did the accounting for our small company, and was the overall driving force of the Dittmann family, always had a Bible verse on her lips and an infectious, cheerful smile on her face.

She had a secret: she was a master of self-motivation. If she *had* to do something, she wanted to do it; if it didn't suit her, she made it suitable. Every cloud had a silver lining; a lesson to be learned was hiding in every catastrophe. This attitude gave her enormous strength. I inherited this ability to put a positive spin on everything from her, and I'm thankful for it to this day. As long as you're aware of the fact that you're kidding yourself, that's a great technique for leading a positive life.

At the age of 90, Marta fell down a flight of stairs and hit the stone floor underneath it. She ended up going to the hospital. There, she told me:

"Can you imagine? I broke all my ribs. I'm so lucky. God spared me! I could have died!"

Later, the doctor took me aside.

"She's not going make it out of the hospital."

Apparently he doesn't know my mother very well.

Marta decided that since she was "still alive, the Lord must have another purpose in mind for her".

And what do you know: three weeks later, she was out of the hospital.

Her intense faith in God – particularly in its irritating, Baptist form – was taxing at times. It's simple when you're Catholic: every few weeks, you confess you sins and poof, they're gone. Not so with Protestants, who basically carry their sins them around until they die. That was driven into our heads time and time again. Eventually the day of reckoning will come, and when it does, only

one thing matters: where you're headed – aka, heaven or hell. My mother never threatened us with Hell directly, it was more subtle than that. It was more the feeling that, "oh shit, now I make my mom unhappy," because I had insulted her or the "Lord" by doing or not doing something. And no kid wants their mother to be sad.

The pseudo-sympathetic moral pressure that was forced upon us – in particular when it came to the topic of girlfriends – wasn't any better. Since the thought of getting married as a virgin terrified me far more than it filled me with joy, our concepts of morality were worlds apart. Such matters were mostly settled in a serious 'talk', making it clear to me in a typically Christian way that that "thing with the girls" was not okay and that there would be consequences – at the very latest during the great reckoning at the gates of Heaven.

I had little use for this permanent presence of the Holy Ghost and his colleagues (sometimes even doing the dishes was sanctified by moral guidance). Of course, that didn't keep me from having a permanently bad conscience, even if that certainly wasn't my mother's intention. Lord Jesus might have mercy in the end, but he had set more traps for us on the road to redemption than a 10-year-old could possibly hope to avoid. And yet I would still sometimes feel that the Redeemer had done that on purpose so my mother could preach at me regularly.

Today, I can see how important that faith is to her and others. Back then, however, it made the town of Kirchen even smaller than it already was. But there was – thank God! – a way out: redemption!

A Circus In A Tent

Once or twice a year, the 'tent mission' came through the Sieg valley and set up their circus tent in Kirchen, Betzdorf or wherever a village square was available for use. They were usually big, oval tents with two peaks. Inside, the tent was decorated like the interior of a church, with flowers and embroidered sashes with crosses on them. At the front, however, there was an elevated platform with a speaker's podium on it in place of a typical alter and a stage for the supporting acts. The tent mission had to sell themselves too, of course, and that meant entertainment. They didn't exactly play our favorite types of music, but sometimes a girls' choir sang or a trombone band would work their way through some religious songs – just like any normal church, really, just not quite as stiff and heavy on the organ music. Preachers that were well known in the 'scene' made an appearance at the tent missions. When they got going, the feeling of

ease and joy vanished quickly. They got straight to the point, which was a simple one: convert, or be condemned.

I will never forget my "first time": I had persuaded my friend Mischa to come along with me so he could share my pain. We're sitting way in the back of the tent so we can get out as fast as possible after the obligatory visit. Up until then, things have been very interesting; the feeling of community is somehow more intense than in a normal church. Many people seem to know each other well here and are moved by a very 'special spirit'. Or perhaps I should say they're moved by a special sense of self-assurance? Arrogance? *"We are the chosen ones. It is our mission to free as many people as we can from sin, and provide them with this awe-inspiring feeling of redemption..."*

Of course, they wouldn't have said it that way, but the vibes and the attitude are unambiguous. The entire tent (aside from a few lost souls like myself) is full of hardcore, evangelical Christians.

Decades later, I realize that these hardcore Christians basically have the same attitude as hardcore skateboarders: neither one accepts groups of people with different creeds, whether those 'groups' are inline skaters or Catholics. The fact that I find this intolerant attitude as unbearable in skateboarders as I do in religious fundamentalists was the cause of many a discussion I had later on in life. Of course, skateboarding doesn't discriminate based on wealth, skin color or religion. Skateboarding unites, fosters a feeling of community, and is a pure, effective form of integration.

But on this Saturday afternoon, I'm torn between my adolescent bias against the church on the one hand and the increasing sense of tension in the tent on the other. And then the preacher steps up to the stage. Back then, I could have sworn that he used some hidden light effects to make for a more dramatic entrance, but today I know that had simply blown my mind with his impressive sermon. At first, it seems to get darker and darker in the tent. This helps in scaring people, and he knows how to do that really well: "all non-believers will experience something horrible on Judgment Day, and only those who truly believe are going to be redeemed and saved from hell." That much I can follow. I've also heard that there's no other way of escaping eternal damnation than through our devotion to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior plenty of times before. But nobody has ever been so damn convincing about it as this guy on stage with his other-worldly light effects. I sink deeper and deeper into my folding chair, shift my weight nervously where I sit on the lawn of Kirchen's fairground, and can feel the truth burning inside me: "He's talking about me. Me! He keeps looking my way. I can hardly take it." I have flashbacks of every sin I ever com-

mitted like a dying person remembering moments in his life. The voice at the front of the tent keeps thundering, ranting and raving, and even though the man is basically only a caricature of a preacher, I still feel...well... fear. Real, primal fear.

But suddenly the voice changes, becomes soft, gentle, calming. It's getting lighter and lighter in the tent. Seriously, where are they hiding these spotlights? At first I don't understand a thing, but then his voice breaks through my panic: Jesus and God are so loving, they accept everybody – yes, really, everybody – and forgive all sins, including the really, *really* bad ones.

Kissing too? I wonder, but he continues on. Turns out you just have to accept the truth, simply switch sides, and you'll immediately be able to – as an added bonus for making 'the switch', so to speak – check all your sins off your list.

"Cool!", I think to myself.

And then, it happens: the man up front asks us who has not yet been converted, who has not yet seen the light. My parents in the front row don't move whatsoever – they've been over all of this stuff for a while. And me? I think, "It's now or never!", I get up and walk to the front with shaking knees, I repent for my sins, say the appropriate prayer, confess my faith, receive a touch of the hand and a blessing, and the evangelist confirms once more that I now belong to God's elite troops. The entire tent applauds.

This is just totally standard brainwashing, of course, and not very difficult to do to a pubescent twelve-year-old desperately looking for orientation and meaning. But here's the scary part: I'm *thunderstruck*. It's an incredible feeling to be proselytized. Absolutely crazy. Wild. Orgasmic. Okay, an "orgasm" isn't quite right, that's too physical. Head over heels in love or totally, senselessly happy. That's more like it. I can no longer think clearly, I'm smiling to myself, I'm walking on clouds. The Evangelist has just given me the Holy Spirit, and I actually, truly feel him! After one, glorious moment, I'm the happiest person in the world. Today, somebody would compare the feeling to being pumped full of drugs, but no matter how it happened, it feels good. Period.

As I walk through Kirchen the next day, I can feel with a newly acquired sense of clarity that I'm now one of the 'enlightened ones'. I'm out of harm's way. All those other losers, the unconverted, the clueless heathens, are going *down*. That's for sure. But me? Ha! I'm going to survive. More specifically, I'm going to live on in Heaven. Sweet.

Of course, the feeling didn't last long. After a few weeks, the euphoria was gone, and after a few months, my certainty of redemption had shrunk to virtually zero in proportion to my growing list of sins. I even went back two or

three more times to experience the awesome sensation again – because I had kept losing it.

Gangs Of Kirchen

In addition to becoming enlightenment, being redeemed of one's sins or at least receiving a free sip of red wine at the Holy Communion, there was another advantage to the oversupply of religion in Kirchen – at least, if you were a member of one of the gangs. There were distinct religious and geographical lines drawn across town. Catholic hill versus Protestant hill, this side of the Sieg versus the other. Our hillside, too, was split further into Brühlhof und Grindel[8], into "our" side of the woods and "theirs". The group you belonged to was effectively already finalized at the time of one's birth. Territorial behavior, possibly similar to what you may still find in Parisian ghettos these days, became more and more present: you'd better not show your face in certain parts of town, and if you did, you'd best not enter 'enemy territory' alone. We met as often as we could in the woods between our districts of Brühlhof and Grindel. That was our battleground, the terrain that was to be conquered and defended in our gang wars.

However, we carried out the battles in an extremely fair and civilized way: we met in the woods in the afternoon and played the Westerwald's 1960s-version of 'gotcha". First, we crammed as many small pine cones (or *Dännegaggeln)* as we could into our pockets, and then we dashed forward and tried to hit our opponents with them. If you were hit, you had to be honest about it and leave the game of your own accord. That was the rule, and that's how it happened. At least, most of the time.

Of course, there were plenty of verbal attacks and threats of "beatings" and "smashing faces", but nothing ever really happened. The game itself was way too exciting, after all: after the initial "collision" between the two gangs, the whole thing quickly turned into a game of cat-and-mouse, not only on the ground but high up in the trees, too. I was small and a skillful climber and had a much better chance of surviving in the tops of the fir trees than on the ground. So I clambered up one of the 10- or 15-meter trees, my pockets full of *Dännegaggeln*, and when nobody was looking I started swinging my way around from branch to branch until the next treetop was within my reach. That way, I could cross half the forest like Tarzan without touching the ground – and fire off some good shots along the way, too. That wasn't so hard because the tree crowns were soft and could carry an astonishingly large amount of weight. I eventually got the hang of timing my swings perfectly and only had to grab the next tree. If I

happened to miss, the fall was never bad. I never fell far and I only had to spread out my arms and legs and grab at branches that I fell through, because the further down I fell, the more branches would come within my reach and slow me down in the process. The last branch, which was two meters above the ground, was the only one that ran me the risk of falling directly onto the soft forest floor.

I quickly became a very popular member of our team thanks to my climbing adventures and the many surprise attacks I ambushed the enemy gang with from above the treetops. This was in spite of the fact that my life as a "team player" hadn't exactly gotten off to a good start.

"Play Pudge"

I was a late bloomer at my school. My desire to play was greater than that of the other kids and lasted much longer, too. (With hindsight, I'm glad that the horrible practice of pumping problematic kids full of Ritalin didn't exist back then.) My creative spirit made me a mediocre student at primary school at best. Not because I didn't understand the lessons but because I couldn't or didn't want to focus due to a lack of motivation. I wasn't exactly sitting still, either. It was definitely more exciting to build a World War ll fighter jet with a ruler and a pen than to listen to the teacher. I put the ruler through the pen's hook and mastered a few daredevil air maneuvers under my table with my Spitfire or ME 109. I was so focused on getting into a good shooting position behind the enemy's planes that I no longer noticed anything happening around me. I didn't notice that the teacher, notified by my classmates' giggling, suddenly stood behind me. The hefty slap in the face that inevitably followed brought me back to the classroom, but back then physical punishment was normal. I didn't care much. It happened suddenly, hurt briefly and was forgotten almost as fast.

Even when the teacher once banged my head against a steel post so hard that it hurt for two days, that was still somehow within the boundaries of "normalcy". A far worse method of punishment was favored by my teacher: when he realized that his smacks didn't do much, he tried to ridicule me in front of the entire class instead. He started to call me *Spielmops*, loosely translated as "play pudge", and brought toy cars to his classes just to spite me so the class could really laugh their heads off. Whenever I made it onto his "blacklist" again, he made me stand in the corner where the "play pudge" was forced to play with toy cars publicly and amidst everyone's laughter. That was embarrassing, that was humiliating, and in the end I only made it through that experience because deep

inside me, I was sure of one thing: "I'm awesome, and I don't give a shit about this. When I get out, I'll do whatever I want anyway."

Something else helped a lot, too – not all my classmates were laughing at my misfortune. The others (all those who realized, "oh shit, that could happen to me, too!") made up my core circle of sympathizers. I was part of a small clan of students who more or less identified themselves as outcasts, and that's what made being bullied bearable. Since then I've always felt at home in a group of oddballs. Later, as a skateboarder, it was basically the same. In the eyes of the public we were outsiders, got eyed suspiciously and laughed at and were sometimes even met with hostility. That was also made worse due to my age: I was at least 15 years older than the rest of the scene and was soon stuck with the label "late bloomer". I could live with this distinction between "them" and "us". But only if the "us" didn't just mean "me", alone...

Hot Air

Since then, this "Titus + his team against the world" attitude has led to exciting experiences. It's never been easy for me to find the line between persistence and pigheadedness. Even as a kid, I never gave up an argument when I was convinced of something.

I must have been about twelve years old one summer when an airship flew over Kirchen.

A fight breaks out in our group of friends. We all start to argue about what exactly is sluggishly making its way over the Sieg valley.

"Zeppelin," someone says, and the others agree.

"Nah," I say, "That's an airship, not a zeppelin. A zeppelin has a rigid, self-supporting outer shell, held in place by a metal, mostly aluminum framework. An airship, on the other hand, is only held in shape by the pressure in the structure...", or something along those lines. Even back then I was quite the smartass. Too bad I was also right. The combination of being right *and* getting on people's nerves about it didn't always make life easier for me.

One of my buddies disagrees with me, I try to reason with him, he objects, I 'reason' again, he insists it's a zeppelin, I object, loudly and in more detail, dogmatically – and then he smacks me. Just like that, right in the face. Two seconds later we're rolling on the ground, my pants are ripped, my lip is bleeding and he's is holding me in a headlock. Now I definitely won't give in! I *am* right, after all! Should I really just say, "yeah, okay, it's a zeppelin"? I can't do that shit. I'd rather get my face smashed in.

My wish almost comes true, but the other boys eventually pull my attacker off of me. We dust off our clothes, shake hands reluctantly, and life moves on. In spite of my having theoretically "lost" the battle, the bloody lip and the scolding I can expect at home because of my ruined pants, I feel victorious.

Movie Night

Getting slapped in the face was common in our daily lives. Not because of fights with buddies, but because of fights with the "Establishment". In the early 60s, the frontlines were clearly defined: together on one side were parents, teachers, pastors, policemen and all other grown-ups. Or, like we used to say back then, "all the same shit." They were really in cahoots with each other – you had to keep your secrets from all of them at once. No one could be trusted. Today, parents almost automatically take their kid's side, even if he or she really screwed up. Back then, it was exactly the opposite. If a grown-up said, "your son messed up!", there wasn't a lot of facts-checking. You were punished right away because the grown-ups were automatically always right. That's why we were so damn good at keeping secrets, even after the physical punishment had stopped.

My room in the attic.