

INTERVIEWS

"The Melody of My Life is to Do All Things to Hinder War": An Interview with Rev. Dr. Werner Krätschell – Part I

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Keywords: German Military Chaplaincy, East Germany, Berlin Wall, Communism

<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.147526>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2026

Military Chaplaincy Review sat down with Werner Krätschell in his home in Berlin via MS Teams on August 29, 2025. Werner Krätschell was born in Berlin during World War II and lived in East Berlin after the war until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. He was a pastor and later a superintendent over twenty-four pastors in northern East Berlin. He was active in the [Pankow Peace Group](#) in the 1980s and later facilitated round table talks in East Berlin after the fall of the wall. He was asked to lead the effort to establish a military chaplaincy for the federal states that had been part of the former East Germany. He oversaw those efforts as the Chief of Chaplains from 1997 to 2005. He is also the author of *Die Macht der Kerzen: Erinnerungen an die Friedliche Revolution Mit einem Essay von Timothy Garton Ash* [*The Power of Candles: Memories of the Peaceful Revolution with an Essay by Timothy Garton Ash*]. Retired Furman University professor Don Lineback, an old friend of Werner's who made the connection with *Military Chaplaincy Review*, also joined the conversation along with Johannes Sasse who assisted at key points with translation. This interview has been edited for clarity.

Werner Krätschell: My childhood is full of experiences of violence, especially [the bombing campaigns of] the Air Forces of the United States and of Britain. And unforgettable in my fourth year of life. I had a traumatic experience. There was a special bulletin for the parents of Berlin that the children from the age of three to nine could take buses for a safe night in bunkers. All the parents were very anxious about the air bombing and wanted to have their children in a safe place. My parents decided that they would have us do this. And you cannot believe it, the bunker was in the Grand Headquarters of Adolf Hitler. The so-called *Reichskanzlei*.¹ This administration and power center of Adolf Hitler had a lot of cellars, and we were brought into the cellars every night by buses. And one time when I was four years old, together with two of my siblings, there was another bus in front of us, and it was totally destroyed by an American plane. We passed by

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¹ The *Reichskanzlei* was Hitler's Grand Headquarters finished in 1939. It was known as the *Neue Reichskanzlei*, the New Reich Chancellery. Thanks to Johannes Sasse for this translation note.

this bus as it was burning, and we were safe and could sleep in that night in this center of Adolf Hitler's power. And therefore, you can imagine that the melody of my life is to do all things to hinder war.

And I must add a short experience when I was on a visit in the United States. I had visited the center of reconciliation at the Coventry Cathedral in the United Kingdom. One year later, I visited my friend in Syracuse, New York. He was the Dean of the Cathedral of Syracuse, and he asked me to come with him to visit a parishioner. And this parishioner lay in his bed when we visited him, and he could only speak by a machine. We discovered that he was one of the bomber pilots over Berlin. We were shocked by this information. He was dying and I, the suffering child of 1944, stood by his bed as a healthy man of 45 years. And all of us were in tears and we prayed the prayer of Coventry: "Father, forgive." And that was the moment when this trauma of my childhood was healed.

Military Chaplaincy Review: What a beautiful way to start the conversation.

Werner Krätschell: Was my story understandable?

MCR: It absolutely was. And thank you for jumping right in and sharing this formative moment in your life that has colored, as you said, the melody of the rest of your life around trying to prevent war.

I'm the editor for *Military Chaplaincy Review* and this is both a new and old publication. It is the restarting of an older publication in the U.S. for military chaplains, and our focus now is not just on military chaplaincy in the U.S., but also on military chaplaincy around the world and trying to bring in voices from around the world. This conversation is central to what we're hoping to do in terms of cultivating a conversation about military chaplaincy that is global.

Katherine Voyles: And it's worth making explicit that *Military Chaplaincy Review* is an official publication of the Department of the Army.

MCR: It's an honor to be with you. For our readers, I want to set up our time. You shared that you were born in an undivided Berlin, in 1940, and grew up there during the war and in the aftermath of the war. You worked as a pastor in East Berlin in the late '60s into the '70s, became a Superintendent in the late '70s and in the 1980s you were a very important part of the peace movement in East Germany and East Berlin. I'm going to be very interested to hear about your connections to military chaplaincy in what was East Germany. But I think before we get to that part of the conversation, I'd love to get a fuller sense of who you are and your life and work as a pastor, how you came to that work and some of the contours and melody as you were describing it.

In Every Generation You Find One Pastor from 1521 to Today

Werner Krättschell: I belong to a long line of clergy going back to 1521. A few years after Martin Luther published the ninety-five theses in Wittenberg, one of my ancestors who lived in Vienna converted from the Roman Catholic faith to the new Martin Luther Reformation faith. They expelled him and his family from Vienna. He had to flee from there to a place in Europe where he and his family were tolerated, which was about 100 kilometers east of here [in Berlin]. It is in Poland now. At that time, it was in Prussia, Germany. He prayed to God in the new place where he was tolerated and said, “Dear God, I am in a safe place, and I want you to arrange that after me in every generation will be one worker in the vineyard of the Lord.” Meaning a pastor. From that time, in every generation you find one pastor from 1521 to this year where I sit here. Two of my children are pastors too. I have seven grandchildren, and I am sure that one of them will also become a pastor. That is my background.

MCR: That’s incredible.

Don Lineback: Could I suggest one story? The story from August 1961 of your decision to return to East Berlin.

Werner Krättschell: Yes, that was the key moment in my life.

At that time in 1961, I was twenty-one years old. And I had a wonderful trip to the land of our dreams. We were a little bit like scouts to a land that was forbidden in communism. Our dreams were of Scandinavia. My favorite brother Albert and I had the chance to go to Scandinavia, and we went to Finland and then to Sweden to the property of a noble friend.

I Was Led by God’s Power to Go Back

One day a man came to us at breakfast and said “boys, you can’t go back to your home in East Berlin. They have built the wall.” We were shocked and had to decide our life. My brother decided to stay in the West. He went back to West Berlin and lived there. I decided my life in front of a fireplace in that holiday home. I said no, I want to go back to East Germany. All my family members declared me crazy to go back. They said, “look at the photographs in the newspapers and so on.” But that is the moment where I think the leading of God’s power began. It was, you could say, my decision, but I’m sure I was led by God’s power to go back and to have twenty-eight years behind the wall to be with the suffering East Germans who were the losers of the Second World War. West Germany had much better conditions in the American, British and French zones. They helped the West Germans to mature in the direction of democracy and to forget the brutality of nationalism and Hitler.

The East Germans were the losers because they had no chance at democracy. They were under the German communists, but the real power in East Germany until the last day in 1989, when the wall came down, was always Moscow. They dictated all the conditions of life in East Germany. Therefore, I want to correct the question that you asked. You asked what I had done in East Germany for the army chaplaincy. That was impossible because the army, the East German army, the Communistic army, was totally atheistic. If you wanted to make a career in the East German army, you and your family had to officially leave the church.

This Army was the Army of the Communist Party

And so, I was a conscientious objector because this army was the army of the Communist Party. If you address a military person, you say the communist word, comrade. It was the army of the Communist Party and not of the people. It was impossible to have any influence in questions of military chaplaincy in the GDR [German Democratic Republic]. After the wall came down, then it was possible and then there was a new start for me in these questions.

MCR: It is helpful to hear that distinction and it opens up some important questions. It's not something that I am not familiar with in a firsthand way. Americans, in general, aren't familiar with it in a firsthand way, the notion of the army being the army of one political party or group. Though partisan politicization of the military in the U.S. is a worry. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that later, but for now I'd like to stay focused on your time in East Berlin and your work as a pastor there. What does it look like to be a pastor in East Berlin?

It Was a Kind of Paradox Existence

Werner Krätschell: It was a kind of paradox existence. On the one hand, you and your family and all confessing Christians were under the pressure of the ideology of the state. You have fewer chances at education and leading positions. You were only able to serve in positions of policy and culture if you were a member of the Communist Party. I want to bring in one statistic so that you can imagine what ideology meant for East Germans. After the Second World War, more than ninety percent of the inhabitants of East Germany were members of a church.

In Germany, we have two main churches: the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant church. The membership is about fifty-fifty. After the Second World War, more than ninety, maybe ninety-five percent, belonged to one of these big churches. When the wall came down in 1989 only twenty percent of the inhabitants of East Germany belonged to one of the churches.

Under pressure, you can see that the human being is a very weak construction. The pressure of ideology means that you bow your neck, that you make false compromises. We are all anxious people. Those who are rooted in faith and not ideological, they are in a minority in every country, also in the United States, where you also have anxieties in the recent days.

Therefore, to be a pastor—to answer your question—to be a pastor in East Germany was to belong to a minority. But the paradox is, on the other hand, most of the people knew that Christians were well educated, very sensitive. To give an example, in school, Christians might be the best intellectually, but they were not able to continue their studies. The children of the communists would get the job or advance educationally.

You Can See Light

To be a pastor in the midst of the official ideology of the East German state you were in a very bad position. The people knew that Christians would help people in difficult situations, especially in this political conflict. It was important that in the vicarages that the lights were always on. And sometimes in my vicarage they knocked, even when it was dark. Communists also came. It was funny that one of the leading communists in the village where I started as a pastor came and said to me, “pastor, can you have a look at my paper? I must speak tomorrow at a Communist Party Congress.” That was the paradoxical situation of being a pastor in East Germany and caring for people who live under the conditions of a dictatorship. I always tried to follow Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount.

MCR: That’s a helpful window into what it meant to be a member of the church, a pastor at the time. It sounds like a time of deep compromise, uncertainty, and anxiety and that Christians at the time were and the church as an institution was able to largely maintain integrity and credibility.

Werner Krätschell: Right.

MCR: When those things seemed to be in very short supply. That helps me understand a little bit how someone like yourself or the churches could then play such an important role in the development of the peace movements and movements for reform. Would you mind sharing about how you came into that kind of work and how the church was able to support that work, and what it meant to be part of those movements and groups.

I Was Chosen by God

Werner Krätschell: Yeah. I had eight siblings. But I told you the story of my spiritual generations from 1521. It was not my decision. I was chosen by God. I had eight siblings and, in every generation, only one pastor. And when I was a little child, all my siblings knew that I was the chosen person, Werner. There was no question. I must become a pastor. My teachers wanted me to

become an actor because I did a lot of theater during school. I played a lot of roles. My teachers wanted me to become an actor. But this inner voice was stronger. You must become a pastor. Therefore, that is the answer to your question about how I came to this work.

East Germany is a good case for understanding the importance of a good rooting in faith and in a religious and spiritual world. I told you about ninety-five percent and twenty percent. People felt the pressure of the state and ideology, and therefore they left church more and more, and so on. And thus, only twenty percent.

I can bring in an example of my two oldest children. Joachim, who is also a pastor today, he was a very anxious child. One day he came from the school to me and said, “dear father, you have the wrong profession. The boys and girls, they ridicule me because you are a pastor.” And Konstanze, my daughter, who is three years younger and also a pastor. She was also picked on by boys. And she took a compass from her pencil case and pricked the person who was picking on her, and she wasn’t teased again.

These are two different ways of reacting in a dictatorship or an ideological situation. It depends on the strength of the individual. Some are courageous. Some are weak. That is all over the world. Human beings are that kind of construction. Therefore, the way is clear when you are in this strong position. And so, our vicarages were always the centers of the opposition. In our house, a lot of opposition people came forward: intellectuals, workers, quite a mix of people.

At that time, I had begun a strong friendship with my British friend Timothy Garton Ash, an historian. He came to my vicarage in East Berlin in 1978 and our long friendship began. Because he was a very influential intellectual and historian in the Western world, the Security Service of East Germany were very irritated about him. My house was always bugged. Secret microphones were installed when I was on holiday with the family. The telephone calls were always taped. The security organized six informal cooperators to inform on me. They had to write reports to the security officer about what Werner Krätschell had done or said. And therefore, you lived always in such a situation.

And in This Situation, You Must Go to Work Upright

I learned about the microphones and other things after the wall came down and you could look in the files of the Security Service. When I lived in the GDR and Timothy [Garton Ash] was there or the opposition met, we didn’t know that when we had a group of ten people who came together to discuss or to read books one or two of them would be members of the Security Service, informal cooperators. And in this situation, you must go to work upright. That is for me a wonderful picture, to have to go upright. That is the best way to know under those conditions the truth and love of Jesus.

MCR: Those are incredible experiences, and your life and integrity in the midst of them, and the role that you played, that your house played, in cultivating important conversations and relationships that helped to provide a space of openness and light in the midst of some really difficult times. I had imagined that the church itself was hosting these conversations. And you even brought it into the context of your home and how this very private space was also surveilled and how those conversations unfolded, and those relationships developed in the direction of these movements for reform and peace. Would you say a bit more?

Werner Krätschell: I want to give an experience that is true, I think, in every country in the so-called free world—although I have my questions if it really is the free world—or in a world that is not free where I lived for twenty-eight years.

The Main Point in Your Life is to Have a Strong Connection to a World that is Helpful for Your Spiritual Life for Your Inner Personality

The main point in your life is to have a strong connection to a world that is helpful for your spiritual life for your inner personality. You can discover in every country that those people who seem to be sometimes a little bit outside or are a little bit naïve or a little bit not so clever to find the right way. They are not very interesting to those who want to be successful. But sometimes those personalities are rooted also in the invisible world of God's angels and the spiritual world. Others see that those people are sometimes more interesting. The percentage of followers of communist or other ideologies will move more and more toward the side of this minority of intellectuals or pastors or non-religious people who were also in the opposition.

The communists were increasingly irritated because their efforts to marginalize religion did not work. They found that the critical parts of society, the opposition groups, were increasingly interested in the church. In the last years of the GDR, we had a lot of people who came to the church without religious reasons, but they saw that here is more truth, here is more courage than in this impoverished ideological world. Therefore, you can learn from the 40 years of existence of East Germany that you may never give up the hope that good values are stronger than ideology of any kind.

MCR will publish part II of this interview next week.

Published: December 01, 2025 EDT.



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