

A hero's boy

THE game was up. Renier Nyst had been warned. The Germans were out to get him and he wasn't taking any chances.

It was 1943, and Mr Nyst was the Dutch consul in the war-torn seaside French city of Marseille, in the south of France.

For several months, with the Nazis occupying France, Mr Nyst had been smuggling Dutch Jews into farmhouses around Provence to keep them away from the marauding Germans, who were throwing them into concentration camps just outside Paris.

At weekends, the Nyst family would take long walks in the countryside, armed with food and clothing for their countrymen hiding at these secret locations.

Renier Nyst knew Jews were being exterminated and he also knew Hitler's reign of terror was drawing to a close.

But now, the German administrator was furious lecturing Mr Nyst about the dangers of secreting Dutch Jews, writes Edmond Nyst in his autobiography, *The Old Fellow's War*.

"You will tell me the names of these people (the Dutch Jews) and where they are hiding by tomorrow night or you and your family will be sent to a concentration camp," said the German, whose caveat to Mr Nyst was that he was 'just following orders'.

Renier came home and immediately told his Italian wife Concietta that their three young boys, Edmond, 16, Phillipe, 14, and Doudou, 6, must go.

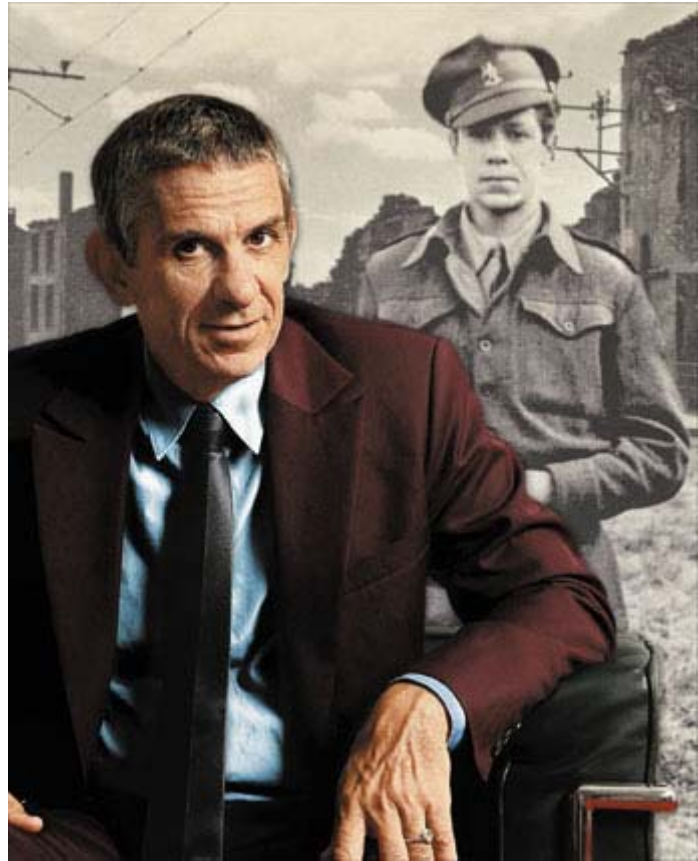
That night the boys were bundled on to a train and Eddie, being the oldest, was given instructions from his father.

"You take the boys and stay on this train until you get to Limoges (handing him a note on which the town's name was scribbled)," said Renier.

"Do not fall asleep. When you get off the platform there will be a Monsieur De Boom there waiting to meet you and you will go with him. You will be safe."

Eddie writes that his greatest fear was to fall asleep and miss the stop. But he didn't and in the middle of the night they arrived in the small French town, where the three boys were placed in various safe houses while Renier stayed in Marseille.

Renier's wife Concietta was also sent to a safe house.



Mr De Boom, a Jew, told Eddie he was returning a favour to Renier. But it was too dangerous for the boys to live with him, so they were sent to stay with a French Christian family.

Mr De Boom, his wife and their son were arrested a few months later and the three of them died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Eddie and his brothers were taken in by Madame Stivill, a stern-looking woman who had three children of her own who eventually came under the active scrutiny of the local Vichy authorities.

Soon after, the boys were separated, and Eddie was moved to the local inn.

Aged just 17, Eddie Nyst was eventually smuggled through the French underground, but not before joining the Maquis, the fighting force of the French Resistance.

He fought in several battles against the Germans, witnessed many atrocities and was in Oradour-sur-Glane days after the Germans had executed every man, woman and child in the town and set fire to the place.

Ultimately he made his way to the Dutch East Indies, where he became a soldier in the Dutch Army and eventually shipped to Brisbane and on to fight jungle warfare in New Guinea, Borneo and Timor.

In 1945 his infantry company, after fighting alongside the Australians against the Japanese at Tarakan Island in the east of Borneo, was sent to the Jungle Training School at Canungra before going to re-survey the border between Dutch and Portuguese Timor.

Finally the war ended and Eddie was able to turn his thoughts to going home.

It was on his journey back he was offered work by former Ethiopian ruler, Haile Selassie.

Selassie believed him to be a great horseman after Eddie helped remove wild brumbies, being shipped to the Ethiopian cavalry, off the boat they were travelling in.

In Addis Ababa, the terrified brumbies refused -- for several hours -- to disembark with their Ethiopian handlers and only did so after Eddy blindfolded the horses and ran them down the gangplank.

Selassie promptly offered Eddy a job as his personal horse trainer -- a position he refused, instead carrying on his homeward journey. He reached Marseilles in early 1947. He was just 20 years old and had been away for five years.

Despite this, in October that year he returned to Australia and for 3 1/2 years trapped wildlife such as kangaroos, wombats, snakes, possums, galahs and more to send to Rotterdam Zoo in Holland.

Eventually, and after much soul-searching, he decided to remain in Australia, fortified by an independent streak honed during his years in the war.

It was Australia, and particularly Queensland, where the Nyst name has become synonymous with the law and arts.

Eddie Nyst is the father of prominent Gold Coast lawyer, film-maker, novelist and art impressionist, Chris Nyst.

The creative juices of Chris Nyst can certainly be traced back to his dad, beginning with criminal law and moving on to writing, film and art.

Chris Nyst's exploits have been well documented but it is necessary to trace his genealogy to see how and why this creativity has developed.

Chris was born in 1953 to Eddie and Teresa, the youngest of three sons, the others being Phillip and Malcolm, both of whom are doctors.

Eddie Nyst met Teresa in Toowoomba in the late 1940s.

Living in the UK, Teresa was visiting her sister Marge, who had married an Australian, Charlie Lewi, after the war and settled at Tara in the state's west.

Chris says there is little doubt his parents have played a major role in the way he has developed, both personally and professionally.

"He's always been a pretty strong character, my father," says Chris.

"He's always been a bit of an individual and I think that's because he was on his own pretty early. I don't think he was able to rely on people a lot.

"He admits to having an arrogant streak. He just got on with things and did them his way, not worrying about what others thought."

As a child, Chris remembers asking his father what it was like in the army and if he had any friends.

"You don't have friends in the army ... they just don't last," Eddie replied.

But Chris Nyst says his father was a loner.

"I mean, he's 81 now and as we speak he's touring India, because it's just something he wanted to do," says Chris.

"The week after the 9/11 terror attacks, he said he was going to Istanbul in Turkey.

"I said to him 'Dad isn't that in the middle of it all?' and he said 'oh yeah, but there'll be no tourists, it will be great'.

"He went to China a week after the Tiananmen Square slaughter and he just said it was fantastic because there was no-one around (and) he could have his own driver, that sort of thing."

Chris says he became a lawyer because of his father.

"As a kid I wanted to be an artist or an actor," he says.

"Dad said it was best to do something where you can make money and the next best thing to an actor is a lawyer.

"Perry Mason was big on the television in those days and it kind of convinced me at a young age that the law was where to go.

"He genuinely had a love of the law. He used to take us to the courts when we were young. Dad was a great admirer of the famous lawyer, Dan Casey, who was really the first popular lawyer in Queensland, a very famous criminal lawyer. Casey was also the Queensland founder of Alcoholics Anonymous ... he liked a tippie as well.

"In the 1960s, when there was no real television, Casey was a well-known character and it was that early influence that ultimately led me to study law."

When his father retired from building factories around Brisbane, the father and son decided to study law together at Queensland University.

The pair was even in the same classes and Eddie, who became a barrister of the Supreme Court of Queensland and High Court of Australia, practised for 10 years.

"I was a bit of a ratbag back then and he was deadly serious," says Chris.

Ratbag or not, Chris has gone on to have a long and distinguished career.

During his long criminal law career, Chris Nyst has represented 'Postcard Bandit' Brenden Abbott (Abbott painted a portrait of a bemused Chris, who posed for him at the Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre at Wacol, and that was entered into the Archibald Prize in 2004) and helped to acquit former Mayor Gary Baidon and former Deputy Mayor David Power on charges they had breached the Local Government Act.

He has represented One Nation founder Pauline Hanson, conman Peter Foster and controversial former council alderman, Kerry Smith. Mr Nyst's most recent high-profile clients are the Lacey brothers, who this week faced Southport Magistrates Court for an attempted murder committal hearing.

Chris Nyst describes criminal law as the 'purest form of law, the most vital part of the law' and says he was inexorably drawn to the criminal, rather than civil, side of the profession.

"Dan Casey was a hero of mine and he was a criminal lawyer and I just fell into it, more than anything," he says.

"I don't know what it is. Maybe I can empathise with ratbags, I really don't know."

Chris says you don't have to be a genius to be a good lawyer but there are 'certainly a lot of bad lawyers around'.

"I think it essentially comes down to having pride in the product," he says.

"It's not about how many billable hours you can achieve. It's not about you, it's about the client.

"I've had young lawyers come into the firm and they work like crazy and earn all this money, but they just don't get it.

"They are not good lawyers, they're in it for the money. A good lawyer isn't in it for the money. And yet if you are a good lawyer, you get the big jobs and the money looks after itself."

Chris, the best-selling author of *Cop This!*, *Crook As Rookwood* and *Gone*, says his other love, writing, has always been in his blood.

At age 12, he wrote a play which was performed by his fellow school students.

"As you go through life you pick up experiences and stories," he says.

"They help to colour your writing, I guess. Writing really comes from an overactive imagination and I think I've always been a lateral thinker, someone who's prepared to think outside the square.

"Having a career as a criminal lawyer is a great adjunct to that and as part of your work you find out lots of people's stories.

"I have always been interested in film and I'm quite visual in my writing.

"I grew up in an era when motion pictures were in their halcyon days. Our Friday and Saturday nights would consist of Mum and Dad getting us kids in our dressing gowns and going to the cinema.

"Humphrey Bogart, Alan Ladd ... we grew up on those sorts of guys."

Chris drew inspiration from such characters when he wrote and produced the screen play for hugely successful Aussie flick *Gettin' Square*. He also wrote and directed short film *The Hat's Last Roll*.

Chris is putting the final touches in the editing suite to his first full-length feature as a director, *Crooked Business*, a crime tale set on the streets of Surfers Paradise.

"Film can be very rewarding," he says.

"It's very artistic but it's also an interesting combination of part art, part project management, part human relations, part technical, part financial and distribution; it's such a multi-faceted beast.

"I enjoyed the whole exercise. It's interesting because most people in film know only their own particular discipline. They can't tell you what someone else does.

"If you try to be a master of them all, you'll mess it up.

"My director of photography in this film, Mark Wakeham, says as a director you need to know what you like and to get the people you need to get what you want."

Mr Nyst says *Crooked Business* is 'a piece of pop culture and it's certainly not *Gone With the Wind*'.

"That's what I wanted to capture ... a snapshot of a certain world and I think I've done that," he says.

"I am hoping to do another feature film this year, an edgy, off-the-wall piece and I've got another four feature film scripts written and in development.

"There's also a television series in progress. It's about a Gold Coast lawyer ... "

Juggling his many commitments is not easy and Chris says one of the difficulties during the five-week *Crooked Business* production shoot was finding the time to make sure the law firm kept ticking over.

"I was able to do that and still keep the practice running along and on that score it's fortunate that I have good people around me," he says.

"I don't know anything about my life. My wife Julie (they have four children, Carly, 24, Brendan, 23, Annabell, 18, and Jonathon, 15) knows everything about my life. I don't know how to change the channels on the TV.

"My personal assistant runs this side (the professional aspect) of my life and it's a very satisfactory arrangement.

"I'm not in the trenches everyday like I used to (be) and I'm now at the practice to add value as we go through the process so I can step in at strategic times."

The rigorous filming schedule during *Crooked Business* did take its toll, however.

"At the 2 1/2-week mark, I thought it would be great to see it finished," he says.

"But we had to have a busy shooting schedule because it was a low-budget film. We set ourselves certain targets every day and we had to reach them.

"Every day we filmed, I knew we had to get a certain amount of film in the can. It was that simple.

"We dropped a couple of scenes from time to time but, like anything, you do what you have to do.

"In some scenes, we couldn't afford to have 10 takes. It had to be done in two ... and we nailed it in two.

"You do what you have to do."

In the latest chapter of the Chris Nyst story, a new art gallery will be opened to the public this weekend, at the top of the law firm's stairs at Southport.

Art, and more particularly painting, is another of the Nyst family passions.

"My father was a painter and I am a painter but we're similar in that we'll just get this urge (to paint) and do it and then not touch a brush for five years," he says.

"I think I am a product of my mother as well. She still works with my brothers. We've always been a close family."

Chris Nyst says the family bonded as a close-knit unit because of its ethnicity and living on a farm in a small country town with few friends nearby.

"We grew up on a farm at Blackall," he says. "I'm still very close to my brothers.

"With parents that were new Australians, we were always going to be a little bit isolated. Dad always used to say 'we'll do it my way'."

For the boy from Blackall, it's been a full and fortunate life.

The Gold Coast has been good to him, a city he has watched grow from the mid-1960s when he would travel down from Brisbane to go surfing.

He has no illusions about strolling the red carpet in Cannes or Hollywood.

"They're pretty good places to get on the drink," he says with that typical Nyst smile. "I am a lawyer. Everything else is a diversion."

His success, says colleague and friend Jason Murakami, is because of his work ethic and a talent that has not been fully acknowledged.

"I've got no doubt that Chris will become one of the best film-makers this country has every produced," he says. "It's a gift and he's got it."

When Chris Nyst first arrived on the Gold Coast, he immediately struck up a strong friendship with John Witheriff, now one of the city's leading lawyers and businessmen.

They formed the law firm Witheriff Nyst, at Southport, and it quickly developed a reputation as one of the city's top-tier firms.

Mr Witheriff is amazed at Chris's extraordinary work ethic and capacity to concentrate for long periods.

"His escapism from the law in those early years was to paint," explains Mr Witheriff.

"He loved nothing better than sitting down for hours on end and painting. Oh, and surfing. He loved to surf."

Mr Witheriff says there is little doubt Edmond, Chris's father, played a major role in his son's creative development.

"Of all the things Edmond did, and there were many, I remember him being this great chef," he says.

"In respect to Chris, I am not surprised he has done so well in other creative disciplines like film and writing.

"But he will first and foremost have an overwhelming passion for the law and that comes from his empathy for others, his want to help people.

"Yet he's a very creative person and when you combine that with his capacity for work, you get the Chris Nyst you have today."

One of Eddie Nyst's favourite sayings has stuck with Chris and it is an axiom that has no doubt contributed to his success. Eddie would often say to his son, particularly when he was at school: "They say it can't be done -- but they've never met Eddie Nyst."

Chris Nyst, it seems, is certainly a chip off the old man's block.