

# Through Life & War

Prineville author shares her story of war, misery and triumph through writings and speeches.

*by Susan Thomas Springer, for The Bulletin Special Projects*

When Agathe von Kampen was little, she remembers playing with a neighbor girl who ran off and found a live hand grenade. von Kampen turned around at the noise and saw pieces of her friend's dress floating down from the sky.

As wrenching as this memory is, it was daily life for children trying to survive under Joseph Stalin's regime in Ukraine. Von Kampen did survive, immigrated to America as a teenager, lived a life full of pain, and then wrote about her life which was, almost accidentally, published in a book titled "When the War is Over..."

Today, she's a happy grandmother living a more peaceful life in Prineville.

Von Kampen gives speeches about her book to Stonecroft Ministries and other groups. While her stories are tearful, she leaves listeners with her hard-earned wisdom about not judging others.

"Nobody knows what led you to make that choice. So let's be careful how we throw rocks at somebody for doing something that to us might seem like a stupid or destructive thing to do," said von Kampen.

Von Kampen, who was born in 1935, grew up on the front lines of World War II. The war moved her mother to write a lullaby she sang to little Agathe, "Little girl, poor child, can't see yet the trouble in the wind."



Von Kampen poses in a photo taken by her uncle, who was a photographer. They lived in Ukraine under German occupation.

Those troubles are von Kampen's childhood memories. When she was four or five she was told to pull the dog tags off American soldiers who were sometimes not yet dead. In her communist daycare, she was beaten for crying.

And because German speaking children were told not to speak their native language in Ukraine schools, she remained silent and was labeled "retarded."

"That's what a dictatorship does — you don't get any choices, you do what you're told or you die and that's how I knew how to live my life," von Kampen said.

In addition to governmental rules, her choices were limited by her mother's fanatical adherence to religious rules.

Eventually her mother, father, brother and grandmother were transported to Germany in a cattle car with no bathroom for 12 days and nights. Life was no better there. The family survived



Von Kampen, age 14, wears a dress from an American care package.

“ ... So let's be careful how we throw rocks at somebody for doing something that to us might seem like a stupid or destructive thing to do.”



At age 6 years, von Kampen poses for a family photograph with a doll borrowed from a neighbor for the photo.

in train stations or by the side of the road.

Finally at age 15, von Kampen and some family members were granted entrance to America. Unfortunately, Ellis Island was not the start of a better life.

"Until then I had never known of a regular home, I had never seen a kitchen or any of the things that we take for granted here and immediately I was then thrown into an environment of choices," von Kampen said.

Her first choice was marrying a man who was mentally unstable. By her 20s, von Kampen had two girls, an abusive husband and no job skills. Often, she had to move her children in the middle of the night because of threats from her husband. He landed in jail. She attempted suicide but survived.

"I didn't see it as a miracle — I just saw one more strike against me," said von Kampen.



Von Kampen discovered books at the age of 15. She received her first book as a birthday gift and, later, named her first daughter after the book's heroine, Juanita.

Chop for I  
here I have 3 you are  
doing things you are  
I am I feel by you are  
what I'm bringing these  
yes God certainly not just through  
I brought me here years  
all



Von Kampen celebrated her 15th birthday wearing a borrowed dress and pearls

She was sent to a psychiatrist who told her she was suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome, a term that wasn't well known at the time. He advised as her therapy to write her thoughts every morning. As he read her story, he told von Kampen that she was an emotionally well balanced person living in a very unbalanced world.

Von Kampen's story continued with a couple more bad marriages and endless

financial problems. She never read what she had written. Instead, her handwritten pages were passed around by friends until one woman offered to type it and send it to a publisher. It was published in 2008. Von Kampen has since bought the rights back and hopes to find a new publisher who will help market the book so it reaches more people. Even without marketing efforts, her book sold more than 2,500 copies, which allowed her to buy a car.

Today, von Kampen considers herself a "whole, healthy person." She wakes up happy for each new day in her home decorated just the way she likes it - with purple carpet. And that contentedness, she says, is a new experience.

"The freedom I experience now is just indescribable. I am free of everything. I am free of debt, I am free of sin, I am free of terrible men who claim to love me when in essence they are doing the opposite," von Kampen said.

Until "When the War is Over..." finds a second publisher, it is in scarce supply. A few copies can be found on Amazon and at Sisters' Paulina Springs Books.



Von Kampen, age 15 and photographed with her mother, was living with her family in a bombed out building while it was in the process of being repaired.

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