

Natascha Kampusch
10 Years of Freedom

Natascha Kampusch
with Heike Gronemeier

10 Years of Freedom

Translated by Jill Kreuer



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Dedicated to all the courageous women who are fighting for their independence in the hopes of being free to live the life that they choose. Dedicated to all those who have succeeded in finding a resolution to a seemingly hopeless situation.

I also dedicate this book to all those forced to experience terrible violence and abuse in childhood without ever receiving outside help. I hope that one day they will be able to overcome their pain and rediscover their true selves. Do not give up, no matter how long the journey before you may appear to be. The last ten years have shown me above all that freedom first takes root in the soul, slowly making its way from deep inside to reach the outside world.

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Prologue

Believe in yourself – you are of value. Find comfort – it will be okay. Be strong.

Persevere – you will make it. You will be rewarded.

Courage. There is always hope.

Never give up! Trust yourself!! Trust in the future. Everything will be okay. Good luck!

If you set a goal for yourself and work toward it, you will reach your objective. Nothing can kill you. Be brave. Everything others do to you should not be your problem. Free yourself.

Hard work pays off. In the end you always get what you want. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

The path to your goal may be difficult, but it will be easier with every step you take!

You can take everything they dish out if you must.

Whenever he rips you to shreds, or is cruel and indifferent, it is not your problem. It is his!

I wrote all of these lines (including all of the spelling and punctuation mistakes in the original German) during my captivity using a number of different coloured pencils on the back of a wall calendar. Additionally, I even circled a number of phrases that I thought were particularly

important. My handwriting was a bit awkward. There was not a lot of room on the page, resulting in one sentence, one line flowing seamlessly into the next. Just like everything in that tiny room flowed together. Days and nights, minutes and hours, light and darkness. Dreams and reality, tense wakefulness and restless sleep. A life, shrunk down to just a few square metres, surrounded by thick, massive walls. Untraceable, perhaps long forgotten and abandoned, as my kidnapper constantly tried to convince me.

When I wrote these lines, I was 10 or 11 years old. I don't remember exactly. I was convinced that these lines, these phrases that gave me courage would only be of importance down here in my underground dungeon. That they would help me through the many years of my captivity, however long that would be. That they would help me find separation between myself and my kidnapper and his actions, no matter what he did to me. Back then I most certainly never thought that these words would be of importance to me once my captivity was ended.

The massive walls of my dungeon, over a half-metre thick and made from gravel, concrete and metal, would be replaced by other walls after my escape. At first glance, these are much more transparent, seemingly easier to penetrate. But even today I have been unable to fully overcome them. Also because new walls are continually being added. Like fortification rings limiting my newfound freedom again and again, the freedom I had placed so much hope in, that I had envisioned as being so infinitely good and wonderful during my captivity. These are limits that I could run at as much as I liked, and they never gave an inch. Limits that seem so arbitrary, thereby depriving me of resources for overcoming them. Running at these walls has always been a setback to my growth, to my attempt to reconcile myself with life, my life.

Many of these rings originated from the outside, arising from the public's interest in me, which at some point knew no bounds. There was a great deal of empathy and honest compassion, but also a lack of tact and sensitivity to ethics and morals, as well as to my needs as a victim,

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even though I had never wanted to see myself that way. In the beginning messages of sympathy were mixed in with the demands and expectations, and facts that were actually quite clear gave way to speculation and crude theories. Many of those who investigated the crime or became involved after my escape failed to consider the people they affected, seeing only an opportunity to become famous, if only for the fleeting minutes of a single interview.

As far as that is concerned, the kidnapping resulted in numerous victims, both direct and indirect. This includes my parents and my family. I know that they went through hell many times over in the eight and a half years of my captivity, torn apart by self-recrimination and the inability to bring about any change in their situation. Accused and condemned, eyed mistrustfully, wavering between hope and resignation, and the willing prey of the media looking to nab the “ultimate inside story”. My classmates, who in their shock turned the blame on themselves and lived in fear of experiencing a fate similar to mine. The many investigators and emergency crews, the pressure of having to produce results despite very few leads. The fear of failure, actual mistakes, a stream of new theories about my disappearance or my time in captivity. All of this was a mixture that has left a very bitter taste in its wake even today.

I myself have become a public person. Not because that is something that I have always wanted, but rather because the “Kampusch case” has never found a peaceful conclusion. Conspiracy theorists, journalists, actual or self-proclaimed investigators, politicians and members of the judicial system – everybody is pursuing their own agenda, abusing me for purposes I have no control over, and whose underlying motives have often not become apparent until after the fact. Getting to the bottom of the case and acting in the interest of the victim were sometimes just a smokescreen.

I have been accused of having planned the kidnapping myself, of covering for possible accomplices, of lying, of wallowing in self-pity and of constantly making a profit off of a story that never could have hap-

pened the way I have repeatedly said it did. After all, a victim, who had undergone years of martyrdom, would never look like me.

I had had enough time to prepare myself for Day X, even if everything has actually turned out quite differently and the full force of it has completely overwhelmed me. I did not wait for a rescuer from the outside to save me, or hope for a miracle, but I rescued myself when I was ready to do so in my mind and when an opportunity arose. I maintained control and did not give myself over to my fate. During the eight and half years of my captivity I played the role that the kidnapper had reserved for me only in part. But I never accepted it as my role in life. I never gave up my inner identity, never allowed my will to be broken. If that had happened, I would probably not have survived all those years.

The strength that allowed me to adapt to such a surreal situation was then held up as a character defect after my escape. As alleged evidence that it couldn't have been as bad as all that. Instead of being happy for me that I had emerged from those long years more or less in one piece, the idea now was to tear me down. The enthusiasm about the "Miracle of Strasshof" was transformed into envy, resentment and in some cases an unabashed hate that lashed out at me primarily from the protective anonymity of the Internet. This is a form of hate that I still fail to fully comprehend today.

It even went so far as to force me to justify myself for a crime that was perpetrated against me. Because the kidnapper was no longer at hand, there was no "Priklopil case". Just the "Kampusch case". In a way, I was made to pay for the uncertainty that the abduction unleashed in society. A criminal act perpetrated by a single man revealed how thin the veneer of civilization is that coats the surface of our society. We are the good guys. Evil lurks in the depths. It must wear an evil grimace. It must be obvious. And yet, it is not. In the end, that is nothing more than an enormous self-deception. When criminals like Josef Fritzl are labelled "monster" or "beast", thereby excluding them from the norm and consigning them to a "superhumanly cruel" dimension, we perhaps

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hope to receive a kind of absolution. We couldn't have anticipated such a thing. After all, that goes beyond even our imaginative capacities, we say to ourselves. That is certainly correct. But is it not also the case that "society" – and here it is not my intention to overgeneralize – continually averts its eyes, ducks its head and allows events to take their course, because it cannot come to grips with the fact that evil lives among us, in our neighbourhoods and in our families?

It is precisely this that leads to an enormous feeling of insecurity. This is precisely what we cannot cope with, tempting us at least to mistakenly conjure up an enormous conspiracy pulling the strings. The act of an individual man, who in actuality was actually quite nice, middle-class, with a properly mowed lawn, perhaps a "mama's boy", but always friendly – that cannot be, and must not be allowed to stand. It must be even more monstrous, and we must read even more into it, so that we can cope with the thought of it.

I was forced to cope with both. The captivity and the vicarious "indictment" afterward. At times it seemed to me like children trying to rescue a strange bug. In fighting over who got to hold it, they ended up squashing it in their zeal. I was forced to conform to so many images, play so many roles that were imposed on me all at once that I sometimes wondered who I actually was. Most people developed their own image of me as a person. Nothing is as alienating as being confronted with yourself. This kind of self-examination is difficult within the confines of your own four walls, but it is much, much more difficult when it takes place in the public eye. Subjectively, every single journalist, everyone on the street had a much better understanding of myself and the story of my life than I did myself. About what I thought, what I needed, what I felt, how I was to act. Sometimes I felt as if I would never be able to live up to Natascha Kampusch. I was not part icon, part saint, something akin to the Virgin Mary that some cast me as on the basis of a photograph that was published alongside my first interviews. I was not an alien or an angel who had been sent to found a new Church of the Enlightened.

I was not a carbon copy of people who had lived through trauma themselves and hoped I could offer them a solution to their situation. And I was not the slut, the piece of filth that had to be ground just a bit deeper into the mud for it to finally understand what it really meant to eat dirt. And not a template for crude fantasies about the correct way to treat girls and women, not an object for further humiliation and debasement. God knows I had experienced that long enough.

I had fled one enemy, and all at once I had gained hundreds more, and in some Internet chat rooms even thousands. Without me having known any one of them or having had any kind of connection to any of them personally. Mainly, however, I was not prepared to be exposed to the “outside world” so defencelessly. After all, this “outside world” had so many facets that I couldn’t have been prepared for. In my underground dungeon I had learned at some point what behaviour would elicit which reaction and/or punishment. In a way, the kidnapper was in fact very transparent. He knew what buttons he had to push to wound me, and after several years I knew what his buttons were as well.

Cut the power, turn off the lights, take away the batteries for the Walkman, deprive me of food. Beatings and other kinds of mistreatment. My refusal to call him “Lord”. The power to do a slipshod cleaning job and leave behind a hair or fingerprints that could prove his undoing. The constant fear, mainly later, when I stood with him in the checkout line at the “Billa” supermarket or at the DIY chain that we would be discovered and people would notice me. There were very few strings that I held in my hand during my captivity, and it took me quite a long time until I realized that I held those strings and that I could sometimes manipulate them.

Outside, in the world of the good people, I hardly stood a chance. It was no longer a matter of predefined reactions, of an action, a transgression and punishment or reward. It was a matter of manifold interests, of much more subtle forms of punishment and reward. It was extremely

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trying for me that the “Kampusch case” continued to smoulder, although the case should have been closed long ago with the solving of the actual crime. The increasingly hair-raising rumours meant that I could find no peace. At the beginning I was outraged. Then angry. Then only sad. I tortured myself by asking what it was about me that made people reject me and brand me as someone that in a way was capable of deeds even more evil than the kidnapper himself had committed. The worst accusation that could be levelled at me was barely insulting enough for them. I did not understand why the boundaries had come to be so blurred. Perhaps because I unwittingly held a mirror up to some people or parts of society. And looking into that mirror frightened them. Frightened them of the depths, of repression, but also of allowing strengths and weaknesses to show.

I really believed that my escape would mark the beginning of what I referred to once in an interview as my “third life”. A completely new phase, a new beginning, full of energy and opportunities. I underestimated how much and for how long external forces would compel me to allow my dark past to take up space in my life again and again. There were phases where I was actually convinced that I could brush off my past, removing it from me much like a glove. Without being confronted with memories of my prior existence in confinement. As if my memory had been erased and I would now lead a completely new life.

That figurative glove was one that over time took on the meaning of a gauntlet. I myself know well enough that I did not lose my memory, and that glove, with its dark fingers, will always serve to remind me that I have a past that I did not seek out myself, but will carry with me all my life. I know this, and I am prepared to deal with it. And I will deal with it somehow, at times rather well, at other times not so well. The fact that others would throw down their very own gauntlets in front of me was something I had not anticipated. And their motives are sometimes even more painful to me than some of the abuse I experienced from my kidnapper. That abuse was at least out in the open.

I completely underestimated how much strength it would cost me to attempt closure for something where closure apparently cannot or must not be achieved. Every time I think that I can do it, that I'm headed in the right direction, "the world" shows me how wrong I am. Sometimes it is my inner world, my memories that prevent me from severing my ties to the past. Often enough it is my external world that appears to have an interest in preventing me from living my life. As if consigning me to a cell much like the one I had been locked up in as a matter of reality for many long years. But this is one I am apparently not allowed to escape.

Because just as the kidnapper had to be made larger than life so that his crime could be bearable, the victim too must be assigned a role. Either to be broken for the rest of his or her life or to deal with the pressure of expectations that can never be lived up to. I don't know whether somebody on the outside looking in would say that I was a failure. For example, because I completed my compulsory secondary education, but not yet my professional training. I don't know whether I will be considered a failure in the future. It always depends on the benchmarks used to determine "failure". For me it is a triumph simply that I am still alive. That I am capable of withstanding everything that has been thrown at me from the outside, also and especially in the last ten years. The fact that I can, for the most part, live independently and self-sufficiently.

I navigate my life between the two extremes of strength as a survivor and weakness as a victim. Maybe recognizing this fact requires taking a second look. What people often interpret as arrogance or haughtiness on my part was in many cases nothing more than retreat, a sign of insecurity. A protective armour that I built up slowly over the years from my childhood and was forced to finish constructing in my captivity. I underestimated how important it would still be once I had gained my freedom. Words can be very hurtful. Certain mechanisms in society can cause painful wounds as well. In some cases I was forced in a very bitter way to recognize interconnections that many were blind to their entire lives, never having had to take notice of them. There are days where I

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wish that I could have been spared exactly this. And while I write these lines, I know that these are statements that many will interpret as pure self-pity. They will elicit comments on blogs, such as “Why don’t you go back in the cellar then”. When they find out that I’ve written another book, many will say, “You don’t always have to go on making yourself all important. Nobody can stand to look at your mug in the media anymore anyway.”

I’m ready for it. And yet, I still don’t want to give up my belief in the good in people. Nor in my courage, if that’s what you want to call it, to address issues I think are important.

In an interview three years after my escape, I once said that I felt like an uprooted orchid, a plant that is washed up somewhere, lays down roots for short time, and then is forced to move on. It is planted where other people would like to have it and see it. I hope that this book will help generate some understanding for my need to grow and to thrive where and how I would like. And that it helps to foster reconciliation by providing a second look, a look behind the façade. And I would like to achieve closure to a story, in which at some point everyone has been at the mercy of outside forces.

I would like to continue to trust in myself and the future. I only have one life to live, and I would like to take full advantage of it. Even if my path in life, toward my future may be difficult, it is getting easier with every step I take. Every day in freedom is a gift that I try to receive with happiness and gratitude. But also with courage and the energy to move forward.

Nelson Mandela once said that being free not only means removing your own fetters, but living a life that also respects and fosters the freedom of others. I must remove my fetters myself – just like anyone else ...