

# After kidnap: Natascha Kampusch on being freed after 8 years in captivity

Three women abducted years ago in Cleveland, Ohio were freed this week. But freedom has its own challenges, as kidnap victim Natascha Kampusch recalls in this extract from her book



'One headline followed the next, and more and more absurd speculations dominated the reports' ... Natascha Kampusch on the media reaction to her release after eight years. Photograph: Barbara Gindl/EPA

Natascha Kampusch was abducted at the age of 10 in Vienna, Austria, and held for eight years in a secret cellar by her kidnapper, Wolfgang Priklopil, until her escape in August 2006. Priklopil committed suicide before he could be arrested. Here she describes life after her release.

I spent the first few days of my new life in freedom at Vienna's general hospital in the psychiatric ward for children and adolescents. It was a long and wary return to normal life – and also a taste of what awaited me. I received the best care, but I was not allowed to leave. Cut off from the outside world I had just escaped to, I talked in the common room to anorexic young girls and children who self-harmed. Outside, a media feeding frenzy raged. Pictures of my dungeon appeared in the newspapers. The concrete door stood wide open. My precious few possessions – my diaries and the few items of clothing – had been uncaringly thrown around by the men in white protective suits. I was forced to watch as my tiny private world, locked away for so long, was splashed across the front pages. Everything I had managed to hide, even from the kidnapper, had now been dragged out into the public eye, which cobbled together its own version of the truth.

Two weeks after my escape, I resolved to put an end to the speculation and tell my story myself. I had been advised by many people to change my name and go into hiding. They told me that I would otherwise never have the opportunity to lead a normal life. But what kind of life is it when you cannot show your face, cannot see your family and have to deny your name? What kind of life would that be, especially for someone like me, who during all those years in captivity had fought not to lose herself? Despite the violence, the isolation, being locked up in darkness and all the other torments, I had remained Natascha Kampusch. Never would I now, after my escape, relinquish this most important asset: my identity. I stepped in front of the camera with my full name and my undisguised face and provided a glimpse into my time in captivity.

But despite my openness, the media wouldn't let go. One headline followed the next, and more and more absurd speculations dominated the reports. It seemed as if the horrible truth by itself wouldn't be horrible enough, as if it had to be embellished above and beyond any bearable degree. The house in which I had been forced to spend so many years of my youth was surrounded by curious onlookers. Everybody wanted to feel the cold shudder of terror. For me it was an absolute horror that a perverse admirer of the kidnapper might purchase that house, that it might become a place of pilgrimage. That is why I made sure that it was not sold, but was granted to me as "damages". By so doing, I had reconquered and reclaimed a part of my past.

At first, the wave of sympathy was overwhelming. I received thousands of letters from absolute strangers who rejoiced at my escape. After a few weeks I moved to a nurses' residence near the hospital, and after a few months, to my own flat. People asked me why I wasn't living with my mother again. It had been my plan to be self-sufficient once I turned 18 that had sustained me all those years. Now I wanted to make it a reality, standing on my own two feet and finally taking charge of my own life. I had the feeling that the world was my oyster: I was free and could do anything I wanted. Anything. Go for some ice cream on a sunny afternoon, dance, take up my schooling again. I had lost my entire youth, and had such an infinite amount to catch up on.

Only gradually did I notice that I had slipped into a new prison. Inch by inch, the walls that had replaced my dungeon became visible.

The sympathy extended to a victim is deceptive. People love the victim only when they can feel superior to him or her. Already in the initial flood of correspondence, I received dozens of letters that provoked a queasy feeling. There were many stalkers, love letters, marriage requests. But even the offers of help were indicative of what was going on inside many. It is a human reflex that makes you feel better about yourself when you can help someone weaker, a victim. "You could live with me and help me with the housework. I'm offering board, wages and lodging. Although I'm married, I'm sure we'll find an arrangement," wrote one man. Don't get me wrong. I was deeply touched by all the genuine expressions of sympathy and all the honest interest in my person. But it becomes difficult to be reduced to a broken girl in need of help. That is a role I have not acquiesced to, nor is it one I would like to assume in the future.

It quickly got around that I was ungrateful. Gradually, the sympathy turned to resentment and envy – and sometimes to open hate. What people could least forgive me for was that I refused to judge the kidnapper the way the public expected me to. Of course, the kidnapper had taken my youth away from me, locked me up and tormented me – but during the key time between the 11th and 19th years of my life, he had been my only attachment figure. By escaping, I had not only freed myself from my tormentor, but I had also lost a person, who was, by force of circumstances, close to me. But grief, even if it may seem difficult to comprehend, was not something I was entitled to. I was not permitted to work through my experiences; it was glibly dismissed as Stockholm syndrome.

The authorities, as well, have begun to treat me differently over time. It seemed that, in a way, they resented the fact that I had freed myself. In this case they were not the rescuers, but rather those who had failed all those years.

Now, four years after my escape, I can breathe and dedicate myself to tackling the hardest chapter in dealing with what happened: coming to terms with the past myself, and looking to the future. The majority of those I meet have supported me along my path. Slowly and cautiously, I am taking it one step at a time, and learning to trust again. In these four years I have become reacquainted with my family and have once again established a loving relationship with my mother. I have got my secondary school leaving certificate and I am now learning languages. My imprisonment is something I will have to cope with my whole life, but I am gradually coming to believe that I am no longer dominated by it. I survived imprisonment in my dungeon, freed myself and remained intact. I know that I can master life in freedom as well.