

# A step ahead

A Potomac woman's memoir recalls her family's harrowing escape from Russian troops in World War II



**No one meeting** Potomac's Sigrid von Bremen Thomas for the first time would guess that this elegant, composed woman had more hair-raising experiences by the age of 22 than most people have in a lifetime.

Thomas, author of the engrossing new memoir *Goodbye Stalin: A True Story of Wars, Escapes & Reinventions* (Durban House Publishing, September 2007), was born into an aristocratic Estonian family in 1931. When Estonia came under Stalin's control in August 1939, all ethnic Germans—including the von Bremens—were “repatriated.” The Nazis gave the family a farm in Poland where Sigrid, wrapped in the “cocoon of my childhood,” thrived. Her cousin Karin Thomas (coincidentally, she married Sigrid's brother-in-law) remembers Sigrid doing bareback circus tricks on her pony and walking across the perilously high beams in the barn.

But in January 1945, the von Bremens joined the exodus of refugees fleeing westward ahead of Stalin's advancing troops, enduring cold, exhaustion and strafing by Soviet fighter planes. “One plane flew so low that I saw the red star on the pilot's collar tabs ... I saw the first dead of my life ... just bundles of clothes, arms askew in the snow.”

The family settled in an East German village that came under Soviet control

when the war ended in May 1945. The Russian soldiers were as filthy and starving as the refugees themselves. One night, Thomas, age 13, was almost raped by a drunken Russian soldier until her grandmother scared him away—with her white nightgown and white hair in a wild halo, the grandmother looked like a ghost to the soldier.

Determined to avoid a dead-end future, Thomas escaped to West Germany in 1951. Four years later, refugee visa in hand, she sailed to the United States. In New York, she became a film editor at *Life* magazine. At first, famed *Life* photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, a Holocaust survivor, refused to work with “this Nazi,” a legacy Thomas confronted over and over.

In her book she writes, “I am aware that some guilt can be laid upon my parents. After escaping first Lenin and then Stalin, they passed through, and exploited to the full, the Nazi dismemberment of Poland. ... We prospered right up to the time when we left in January of 1945. ... I never discussed this issue with my parents after the war. I know that they felt no responsibility for Hitler. He rose to power long before they left Estonia. They never supported him by joining the party. This was an act of defiance among colonists in Poland, and it brought my father briefly to a Nazi re-education camp in the fall of 1944. If anything, my mother and father

felt themselves to be pawns of history. Hitler represented one in a series of dismal events that they had no hand in creating. My parents met each challenge and survived. Guilt or shame seemed beside the point. As my father often put it, ‘What could one do?’ A final judgment of the moral ambiguities in our story is left to the reader.”

In 1956, she married Rich Thomas, a business writer for *Newsweek*, and had two children. In 1970, the family moved to Potomac, where she became a landscape gardener. Her friend, syndicated *Newsweek* columnist Robert J. Samuelson of Bethesda, observes that, “Sigrid has a sense of the tragic that you can only get by living through horrific personal events ... she knows how thin the veneer is between satisfaction and despair and how easily it can collapse at a moment's notice.”

Despite the hardships, Thomas, now 76, says she's glad she went through it all. “As a member of an old noble family, I thought I was something special and thank God I lost that. [The war] humbled me. I learned to be grateful for everything and I just don't take anything for granted any more.”

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