

**Confronting Power and Chaos:  
the Uncharted Kaleidoscope of My Life**  
By Christine Skarbek's

Review by Sandra L. W. Friedman

If what you like about a thriller (besides the thrills) is the pace, you'll find a page-turner in Christine Skarbek's *Confronting Power and Chaos: The Uncharted Kaleidoscope of My Life*. It reminds this reviewer of the kind of novels Kristin Hannah has written recently (i.e., *Nightingale*, *The Great Alone*) but Skarbek's is better because it's a memoir: the characters are real, a true-to-life story – not a work of fiction.

Christine Skarbek has had an adventurous life, some of it by choice, some by chance. She had to invent jobs as a public relations specialist in Iowa, foreign student exchange coordinator and teacher in Georgia and, after the 2009 Great Recession, nanny, teacher, and editor in – of all places – Poland.

Never standing still – and always stepping forward, she spent her junior year abroad in college traveling through Western Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall. This scene succinctly describes her willingness to explore unpredictable avenues:



"She was no spy," (Andrew Kennedy said). "Krystyna was a courier and much more than that. The finest woman I've ever known."

I bolted upright in the bucket seat. "You knew her!"

"We knew each other."

The catch in his voice was unmistakable. The way he said those four words hit me like a thunderclap. Here was love. My heart stopped and my mind went blank: I had no idea what to say.

"I'm sorry," was all I could offer, knowing it wasn't nearly enough. It was as if I were looking into the face of God and I had to pull away. It was too profound, too raw.

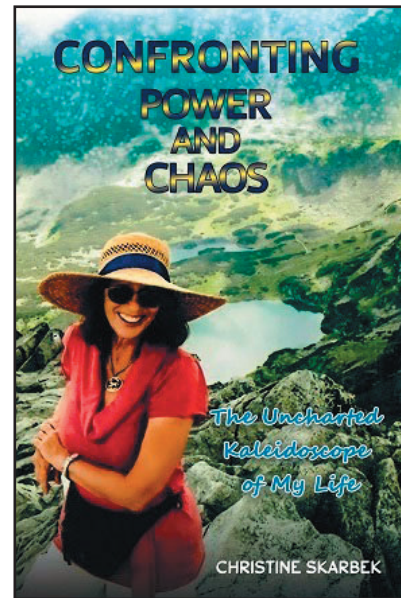


After a pregnant pause, I asked, "What was she like?"

"She wasn't Ian Fleming's Vesper!" His zinged retort had an unmistakable bite to it.

Reaching into his inside jacket pocket, he pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

Out spilled three b&w photos: one of her as a child, the other two of Krystyna and him in happy days. "Oh, my" was all I could say. We drove the rest of the way in silence until he pulled up at the (Dachau) concentration camp gate.



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“Remember her, Christine.”

I froze like a statue. “How do you know my name?” My words came out in a raspy croak.

“Never you mind. You’ll be alright. Now, go.”

He leaned over and opened the door for me. I obeyed and got out. As he drove away, I was rooted to the spot, staring at the departing roadster, trying hard to remember to breathe.



Later, while working on her masters in journalism, Christine married a man who defaulted on her and their four children. Undaunted by her parenting tasks and uncompromising bureaucratic authorities (including nebulous Irish or British forces), Skarbek successfully raises them to adulthood, three of whom had chronic life-threatening medical conditions.

What amazes this writer is that Skarbek, while juggling at times strenuous child-rearing, shaky finances, and dicey career demands, she maintained such good relations with her ex-mother-in-law who often stepped in when the family was in crisis or near-crisis.

In short, this is fifty years of tumult set in a political framework. This is what Skarbek is able to achieve in fewer than 290 pages.

Suppose for a moment you’re an unemployed single parent of four chronically ill children, two of whom are on Social Security Disability, and their SSI has given you thousands of dollars in back payments but with a deadline of only six months to spend it. What would you do? What would you do to reboot your long delayed career as a journalist?

Christine Skarbek didn’t think twice – she accepted Conor Cruise O’Brien’s invitation to come to the UK to interview Dag Hammarskjöld’s UN press secretary, Sir George Ivan Smith, and O’Brien in Dublin Ireland. She did it in the hope it’d revive her journalism career and give her children a broader perspective on their world. She succeeded on only one of those fronts but didn’t exactly fail on the other. It inadvertently led to endangering Rick, her oldest child, but she put an end to that with Bill Clinton’s Secret Service detail.

This is a woman who had no medical background but intuitively knew how to reach her OCD-troubled daughter as she slid into bulimia and anorexia, even though that would take nearly the entire decade of the teen’s adolescence and consume much of Christine’s verve and energy.

To call Skarbek’s life a kaleidoscope is more than fitting. There are two fundamentals to understand her *modus operandi* – the world is a big place and, if she can’t get folks impeding her to see that, that’s their problem, not hers. She just keeps turning that kaleidoscope.

After all, these are the lessons her namesake, the WWII unsung hero countess Krystyna Skarbek (aka Christine Granville), taught her. And where these lessons led were certainly uncharted territory.

But through it all, she remained steadfast to her children protecting all of them while giving each of them the space and opportunity to develop their own gifts. While Christine was bent on meaningful adventures for

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herself and her children (the kaleidoscope) that she hoped would lead to a stable income, she was on a quest to learn more about her famous Polish ancestor Countess Krystyna Skarbek alias Christine Granville. Believing that Countess Krystyna, a trailblazer before her time, had such a colorful and dangerous life as a partisan, Christine's convinced there's a cinematic story to be told but knows she needs more than her grandfather's Chicago newspaper clippings and Krystyna's WWII associates' reminiscences. So, after her last American job as the Great Recession of 2009 takes hold, it's off to Poland to reboot her career as an editor and to flesh out how Krystyna's WWII hazardous partisan successes can be transferred to the Big Screen.

Just as she got all her children through college and on a healthy track, the Great Recession of 2009 hit. She'd ultimately lose her last American job and her house. But that only meant it was time for her to do what she had long yearned for: become an editor in Poland, the land of her ancestors and her distant cousin, the groundbreaking trailblazer who set herself as the equal of any man in matters of war and love.

At the age of 60, Christine starts her real adventure, literally winging it with little money and no knowledge of the language but with the aid of a Polish screenwriter friend who rescues her numerous times. After nearly eight years of gently wheedling him, she finally gets him to help her revise the screenplay she had written decades before about her cousin. (That script, dubbed the *reverse Casablanca*, is currently making the rounds in Hollywood.)

Throughout her dozen Polish years the destitute Christine tries to hack it out there, she grapples with both homelessness and harsh Polish political and social realities. And the same questions that plagued her distant cousin: should there be boundaries, borders beyond which the impoverished stranger is not welcomed? What constitutes a home? A homeland?

This memoir traces the broad strokes of Americana and late 20<sup>th</sup>-century history much the same way the 1994 novel *Forrest Gump* did. Only this is NOT fiction. Skarbek deftly feathers in American and European history with humor and unflinching honesty.

It is this same care with which she treats her children, particularly the overwhelmed youngest, Nick, and the OCD-challenged, in-your-face Mariah. Christine's extended description of the Polish screenwriter, her nemesis who saves her, seems to expose how befuddled he makes her, however. Dominik Rettinger doesn't fit into any simple category: mercurial but steadfast, knowledgeable but proud and humble by turns.

All of these features add up to a mesmerizing pilgrimage through a certainly uncharted history, both on the micro and macro levels. It questions how we confront power in all its forms and create a sustainable – yes, even happy – existence out of the chaos that is thrown at us.

Yes, it is as another reviewer states: "If you're at all interested in strong women and how they deal with life's rigged cards, this is a must read. It will inspire your daughters." However, I believe it will inspire your sons, as well. We all owe it to ourselves to read this memoir.