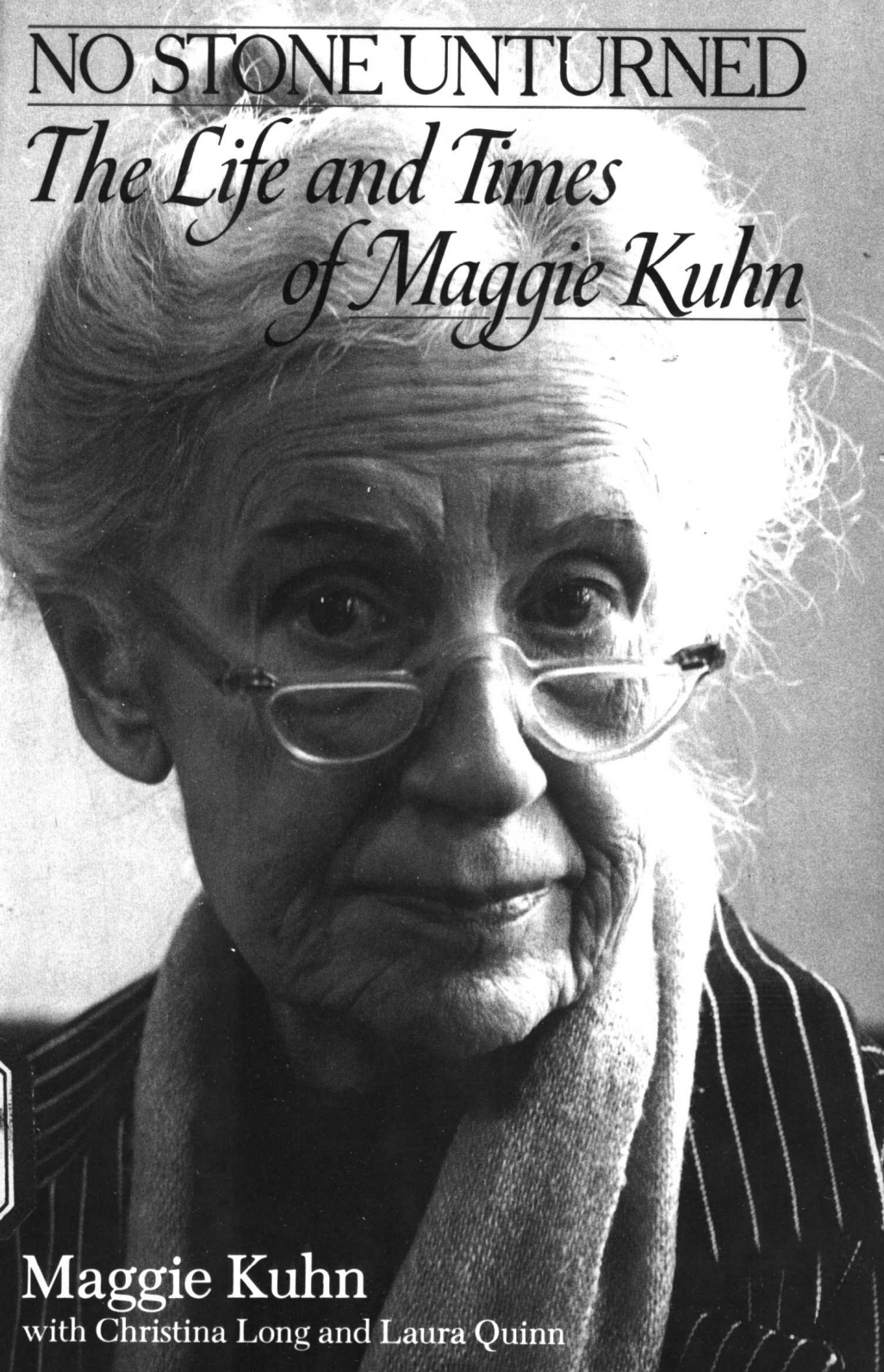
NO STONE UNTURNED

The Life and Times of Maggie Kuhn



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with Christina Long and Laura Quinn

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CHAPTER 1

A Thread of Continuity

As I was standing on a platform at Thirtieth Street Station in Philadelphia the other day, waiting for the Garden State Special to roll down the tracks, I was struck by a vivid image from my childhood. I saw myself, at age four, standing on a train platform with my mother as an enormous steam engine approached, snorting and bellowing huge clouds of smoke. The noise was deafening. I was sure the train would crush us. Overcome with a paralyzing mixture of elation and fear, I stood rooted to the spot until my mother tugged my hand and we climbed onto the train.

As I waited in the Philadelphia station, a ninety-five-pound, eighty-five-year-old woman on her way to Washington, D.C., for a meeting, I felt a semblance of that old excitement. I have always loved a journey and, even now, my bags are almost always packed. There are hazards, of course: escalators make me dizzy, people with large canvas bags over their shoulders nearly knock me to the ground, and the space between the platform and the train seems like a gaping chasm. But the world beckons and I answer.

Over the years, I believe I have climbed aboard almost every type of vehicle this amazing, revolutionary, confounding century has had to offer. As a child, there was nothing

more pleasurable to me than riding in the berth of a Pullman car with all its homey touches. Later, I came to appreciate planes just as much. During the 1950s, as a working woman, I frequently traveled in two-seater Piper Cubs, with a pillow and a briefcase wedged between myself and the plane door to keep out the draft.

Once, many years ago, I was flying from Anchorage to Valdez, Alaska, in a six-seater plane. We were flying close to the ground when I happened to look out my window and, to my amazement, saw a big eagle flying alongside us. An eagle! He looked directly at me with his unforgettable, piercing eyes, and his expression seemed to say, "Who is that other bird?"

When I think of that eagle, those old steam engines, and those tiny planes, I marvel at the sweeping changes that have occurred in my lifetime. Of course, my life story and the changes of this century are intertwined. As C. Wright Mills wrote, history and biography intersect; every personal experience is part of a larger story. The advent of the automobile, the women's vote, the Great Depression, World War II, advances in health care, and the prolonging of human life—the procession of history has intimately affected me.

It is not always easy for me to look back on all those years. Contrary to the myth about very old people, I do not spend much time in nostalgic reverie or life review. Like many of my peers, I was taught early on that there are more important things to do than dwell on one's own life. In my parents' household, self-absorption was frowned upon, and we were encouraged to direct our attention to things beyond ourselves, especially in times of adversity.

It is the connection between the personal and the historical that makes telling my story so compelling. I like to think that my private struggles and thoughts provide a window onto a certain era. And because I have been an activist for more than sixty years, perhaps my story will remind people of the important social issues of our century and demonstrate the power of grass-roots efforts.

It has been a century to celebrate. The women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the labor movement have proved that ordinary people can organize and shape the world. For me, a woman born to the task of organizing, it has been a great time to be alive.

I see a deep connection among the past, the present, and the future. I love the inscription set on the cornerstone of the National Archives Building in Washington: "Past Is Prologue." Indeed, in an era of rapid change, we all need to seek meaning in the past, to find its message for the future.

On the wall in my bedroom, there is a photo, taken before I was born, of my Aunt Paulina. There is a certain look in her eye, unfaded even in such an old picture, that reminds me of myself. Indeed, as I look around the room, it seems my past is everywhere. Would Charlotte and Emily Brontë, my two cats, be here if my father had not loved cats? Don't the curtains and the wallpaper show my mother's taste for cheerful order? Would I be in this house at all if it weren't for my grandmother, Margaret Bauer Kooman?

When I am asked to tell a little of my life story, I often start with my grandmother. Though I knew her for only the first five years of my life, I consider her a major influence. She gave me my first sense of what it was to be part of a happy home. My mother's mother was an industrious widow who reigned over a bustling house at 330 Eagle Street in Buffalo. It was a large, roomy house—very much like my home today—with a shiny mahogany banister, a summer and a winter kitchen, an elegant parlor, and a gazebo in the backyard. Two teenage girls, brought over from Germany as hired help, were always dusting and scrubbing, removing the fine layer of soot the coal burner in the basement left on the floor and furniture.

I felt such contentment in that house. In my own home, with just my parents and brother, I was always watched and guarded. But at my grandmother's, the rules were relaxed. I was free to run out to the backyard, explore the attic, hide in the basement. There were often big family dinners, and I loved being one of the crowd. Every sort of family event took place in that house: christenings, holiday celebrations, weddings and funerals. It was not unusual for my father's family to join the activities on Eagle Street. I recall eighteen and twenty children lined up for supper in the dining room: all boys but for my cousin Ruth and me. The chief occupation of the day among the children was riding the banister, and we would all fight and pummel each other to get to the top of the stairs first.

There was a feeling of intimacy among that strange

and wonderful clan. My grandmother, a plump figure dressed in widow's black, sat at the head of the table. Men were treated with great deference, but the house was ruled by women. Before my great-grandmother died, there were four generations of women living there, including my grandmother's younger sister, Aunt Lou; my mother's sister, Aunt Paulina; and Paulina's daughter, Charlotte. They were all widows, except for Charlotte, and they brought order and graciousness to their domestic domain.

There was an independent streak among the women in my grandmother's house. For instance, my Aunt Lou, who was widowed fairly young, was known to have a lover across the Canadian border. Every once in a while, she would go off on a little vacation by herself. It was never openly discussed, but everyone knew where she was going.

I know little of my grandmother's early life except that her parents had emigrated to Buffalo from Amsterdam. As a young woman, she met my grandfather, Leonard Kooman, a merchant from Clymer, a small Dutch community in central New York where the inhabitants replicated the manners and customs of the old country. They were married and, as the story goes, my grandmother brought a trunkful of fancy silk dresses with her to Clymer, never to wear a single one thereafter. Life in Clymer was simple and a sturdy cotton apron was good enough.

My grandfather ran a dry-goods store, and my grandmother, who learned to speak Dutch, made the shirts that were sold in it. Every Sunday my grandfa-

ther went to services at Clymer's Dutch Reformed Church. Mealtimes he would bring out his Dutch Bible and pray from it for precisely twenty minutes. When he began to pray, my grandmother would put the potatoes on the stove; when he had finished praying, she knew they were done. Years later, to make me and my cousins laugh, my mother would imitate the booming voice and twitching eyes of her father praying.

My maternal grandparents had two girls and two boys. Walter died in infancy, and John died of appendicitis as a teenager, leaving my mother, Minnie, and her sister, Paulina. In the 1870s my grandparents moved with their two daughters to Buffalo to open a larger store on Seneca Street in the city's Dutch community. The store prospered, but my grandfather's health began to fail. The family bought a gentleman's farm ten miles outside Buffalo in the hope that the country air would help his ailing heart. However, he died a few years later.

After his death everyone expected my grandmother to sell the store, but she was determined to keep it open with help from Paulina and Minnie. In the winter months, when travel was hazardous, my mother and her sister would work in the store during the day and then sleep in the back room at night. In an unusual move for a woman back then, my mother attended the Bryant and Stratton Business College in Buffalo to learn accounting to help in the management of the store. In those days it was extremely rare, if not improper, for women to run a business of their own,

and I take some pride in my grandmother's decision to keep the store.

My mother was a bright, capable young woman with dimples and crystal blue eyes. She was famous in the family for her sense of humor. In 1893 she met a young man at the Second Presbyterian Church on Humboldt Parkway. His name was Samuel Kuhn. He was tall and handsome, his eyes so dark they were almost black and his high-button shoes polished to a fashionable gleam. I can picture my parents smiling at each other across the church aisle, their flirtation interfering with their usual concentration on the sermon. They continued their courtship on Delaware Lake, where they skated hand in hand.

My father was twenty-four years old at the time, a hardworking assistant manager in a local credit agency. He was of humble origins. His grandfather had been the mayor of a small town in southern Germany, but lost everything when he fled in the 1840s. Fearing the oppressive rule of the Prussians, my great grandfather left his homeland in the middle of the night, joining the wave of immigrants to this country. He brought his family to East Aurora, New York, outside Buffalo, where my father was later born.

My paternal grandfather, Frederick Kuhn, was a carpenter who struggled to support his wife and ten children in East Aurora. Family legend has it that my grandfather cut off his own leg with a saw after he maimed it badly in a fall from a ladder. I remember sitting on his one leg while posing for a family portrait; the expression on his stern face, buried beneath a

white cloud of hair, suggested that the story was true.

My father was the eldest child and, though he rarely discussed it, I imagine that his early life was bleak. Four of his siblings died from diphtheria or scarlet fever as young children. The enmities between German factions followed the family to America. When he was a boy, my father and the other children of southern German families would, for fear of being beaten up, avoid walking through neighborhoods where the northern Germans lived.

As the oldest son, my father was forced to leave high school to go to work to help support the family. He found a job as an office boy and file clerk in Buffalo at the Bradstreet Company, the business and credit reference firm that later merged with its competitor to become Dun and Bradstreet. Extremely intelligent and a quick learner, my father had risen to the post of assistant manager of the Buffalo office by the time he met my mother.

In 1894 my parents married in the parlor at Grandmother's house. My mother was twenty-seven and my father twenty-four. With her daughters both married, my grandmother sold the dry-goods store and the farm and settled into 330 Eagle Street.

As with all married couples in those days, my parents expected to have their first child right away. When they didn't, their hopes turned into longing. My father was immersed in his work, so I imagine my mother felt the lack of children more than he. But she was a gregarious woman, never prone to brooding or dark thoughts, and she threw herself into church activ-

ities and the usual commotion at her mother's house.

By 1903, after ten years of marriage, they were still childless, and as there was little knowledge of infertility then, my mother's doctor gave her no explanation or reason to hope for a pregnancy. However, their lives took a dramatic turn that year when my father was transferred. He was needed to manage the Bradstreet office in Memphis, where the city's cotton farmers and river merchants were providing ample business for the firm. The couple packed their bags, bade farewell to family and friends, and set out for the growing city on the Mississippi. They could have been headed for a foreign country, so different would their new home be from Buffalo.

My mother never felt at home in Memphis, a rough-hewn city known for its vice and corruption, whiskey and prostitution. It was a relatively small city, with a population of about 100,000, but it had five hundred saloons and a homicide rate that was seven times the national average. Buffalo was refined and sophisticated by comparison. My mother was particularly shocked by the disparities between the city's black cotton pickers and domestic servants, who lived in ramshackle dwellings, and their white employers, many of whom occupied stately homes. The city's blacks had barely emerged from slavery, and the white community had a haughty indifference to their decrepit living conditions.

Carrying on a practice in her mother's home, my mother regularly invited her black cleaning woman, Ellie, to eat lunch with her. While Ellie cleaned, my

mother made lunch, and then they sat down and ate together in the dining room. I can just imagine her neighbors' indignant whispers: "In the dining room!" This was a serious transgression of the Memphis social code. When my mother's white neighbors found out, they ceased to speak to her. My mother, who thrived on daily interchanges with neighbors, must have felt very alone.

But another turn of events took her mind off her situation. In 1904, the year after they moved to the South and eleven years after they were married, my mother became pregnant. My parents were surprised and cautiously jubilant. My mother was thirty-nine at the time and attributed her first pregnancy to the change in climate. They immediately wrote to relatives up North to tell them the news.

Early on, my mother decided she would not have her first child in Memphis. She felt that having a child there would be a form of acquiescence to the city's segregated way of life. She made up her mind to travel back home to Buffalo to give birth. This was welcome news to my grandmother, who had been pressuring my mother to return home to have the baby. There was great concern about my mother's health, her pregnancy having come at what was then considered an advanced age. In July 1905 my mother took a train to Buffalo, leaving my father behind to see to his duties at the office.

They say the delivery was long and difficult and that my mother barely survived. Nevertheless, on August 3 I was born in my grandmother's front bedroom.

I was named Margaret Eliza, after my two grandmothers. Word was telegraphed to my father, who took the next train to Buffalo. My parents brought me home to Memphis a few weeks later.

With my parents' narrow escape from childlessness, they doted on me in my early years. I remember how lovingly my mother would comb my thick wavy hair, as if she were handling gold threads. She would first brush them and then take a strand and twist it around her finger and mold it there with a comb. She had a special blue "baby book" and lovingly recorded all the little details of my early years: my first celluloid dolly, my first carriage ride, my first pair of white satin shoes. I was the center of my parents' world until I was three years old, when a rival for their attention entered the scene. I remember vividly the day my brother was born. We were staying at my grandmother's house. Being so young, I had only a vague idea of my mother's pregnancy. One day my mother was sequestered in my grandmother's bedroom, and I heard a cry of pain from behind the closed door. I froze. Barely able to breathe, I listened and heard another cry from the bedroom. I panicked. "She's dying!" I thought. I ran down the stairs, through the center hall, out the door, through the front yard, and onto the street. I ran several blocks until I reached Bennett Park, where I curled up on a bench and cried.

I will never forget how bereft I felt there on that hard bench. In a short time my absence was noticed and my Aunt Lou came to take me back to the house and up to my mother's bedside. I practically collapsed