

“EVERYBODY’S WAR”

QUESTION: In your latest book called Everybody’s War, everything seems to appear through a lens that’s colored “WAR”. I see a chapter called Lilli Kirschbaum’s War – another one called Al Kampen’s War – A Drinking War – Chester Kauffman’s War, and so on . . .

WIM: Right; and there are a lot more besides. The book has forty chapters, most of them with a war theme. And the chapters that don’t deal with war either deal with differences in national attitudes, or they set the stage for the war chapters. For instance, a couple of my chapters deal with the German economy during the Nazi era, which is important because Hitler never would have come to power if he had not presented himself as a Strong Man who would set the depressed German economy right. Those chapters also explore how well that  worked, because despite all the propaganda that was being repeated on this side of the Atlantic, it didn’t. The Nazis ran a totalitarian war-economy, and the only reason the German consumer did OK was because of the products supplied by the countries Hitler’s armies had conquered; and of course those countries were acting under duress. You see, in that respect Hitler was no different from any of the conquerors the world had seen before him. They all thought the way to make economic progress was to steal other people’s stuff. In the end that doesn’t work, and the German people proved it when after the war they put all their energies into the creation of the German economic miracle. And that really did work: the universal human drive to create a better life for oneself, coupled with German energy and discipline, did the trick, not micro-management from Berlin.

But despite those lessons from history, that yearning for a Strong Man to bring us prosperity is still alive and well, especially here in little ole’ Coos county.

At the center of the book, though, are individuals, real people. That’s why it’s called “Everybody’s War”. It’s about

real people touched – and often harmed – by war. But human life is resilient, and most of them got over it, albeit with indelible memories and often with permanent physical injuries. But they managed.

QUESTION: You talk about lessons we must learn from history. Are there others in the book?

WIM: Oh yes, there are quite a few but I would say another important one was the idea that people who speak different languages can't live together in one nation. That was the big reason, a trumped-up reason, why Hitler went to war against Poland, which set off World War II, and the idea was absorbed by the allies as well, which led to some horrible decisions on their part.

QUESTION: How's that?

WIM: The allied leaders including Roosevelt and Churchill had become convinced that people who spoke a different language ought to be separated by national borders from people of a different tongue. And that was the very same justification for Hitler's wars. So then, towards the end of the war, the allies agreed to Stalin's demands that all the borders in central Europe be changed to create linguistically homogeneous nations, and that all the German speakers who lived all over that part of the world be expelled and forced to flee for their lives to what was left of Germany by that time. It's documented that decision cost at least a million civilian lives. And it was unnecessary. It IS possible for people of different languages to get along. It's been proven in Switzerland, in the Austro-Hungarian empire, in the European Union, and also in the United States.

QUESTION: Can you summarize the chapter "Lilli Kirschbaum's War"?

WIM: Lilli Kirschbaum was the maiden name of Lilli Clausen, who with her husband Max started Clausen's oyster farm on Haynes Inlet. Lilli was born in 1936, into a German farm family living in a German village in a part of eastern Europe known as Volhynia. Back then it was part of Poland but three years later it was invaded and taken over by Stalin, the

Soviet dictator. After many hardships Lilli's family ended up in West Germany as part of that enormous movement of ethnic Germans who were driven out of the east-European countries where they had resided for centuries. It was ethnic cleansing on a massive scale, approved by the allied powers.

QUESTION: What was Al Kampen's war?

WIM: In the spring of 1944 Al Kampen was a 19-year old farm boy living in Friesland, in the northern Netherlands. An American B-24 bomber, damaged during a bombing mission over Germany, crash-landed on their farm, and he helped the crew escape the Germans. One of the crewmen gave Al his .45 pistol. Years later Al was living in California, running a restaurant, when a man came in who identified himself as the crewman who had given him his pistol.

QUESTION: What was Chester Kauffman's War?

WIM: Chester Kauffman flew B-17 bombers from southern Italy during the war. What those airmen had to endure is amazing, and appalling by today's standards. But they did it; he was a great guy, Chester.

QUESTION: Is he gone?

WIM: Yes, I interviewed him at length in 2011, and he died in February this year, 89 years old. It's very important, you know, to record as many of those vets' stories as we can, before they are all gone.

QUESTION: Tell me about this one chapter: "Woofter's War"?

WIM: Woofter was my dog, and he was a feisty one. Fought a lot of battles, until he was defeated during his final, most intrepid assault. That small chapter was an obituary for Woofter, who went M.I.A., vanished without a trace, and he deserved an obituary.

You see, part of my approach is to write from my own perspective, in my own present tense, which is that of a German restaurant owner in Coos Bay, a pretty ordinary guy who has a house and a family and a dog, and who just happens to have a passion for history.

QUESTION: I see that your subtitle reads: "People who rebuilt their lives, and enemies who became friends, in the long shadow of World War II." Why do you find

history so fascinating?

WIM: Because I'm totally convinced that if we want this world to improve, nothing is more important than for people to know history. History shows us what works and what doesn't, in a process of trial and error that may destroy a lot of beautiful theories – but it's irrefutable. Nevertheless, people and politicians and philosophers keep re-inventing the same square wheel that brings us nowhere except to grief. That's why wiser men than I have sadly observed that history proves that we learn very little from history. 'Course, that's assuming we actually study history, which some people say is not happening either. And looking at the results, they may be right.

Now, it's true that the past never looks EXACTLY like the present; that's impossible. But evidently to most people the past looks different enough so they feel no need to learn from it. Big, big mistake, to think that we're so advanced that human history can teach us nothing.

QUESTION: Can you give an example?

WIM: Well, it's the very same problem that drove me to write my book about the history of "economic development" in Coos county, "The JOB Messiahs". Because nobody seemed to know we had been down the same road so many times before, we kept on doing the same stupid things over and over, and again and again. It's still happening, and it's depressing, really, how little has changed. But I'm getting off-topic.

QUESTION: Yes. I was going to ask if you were in World War II.

WIM: Not as a combatant, no. I was just a little boy during the war years in Europe. But I did have a few memories of those days, and of course my family talked about it for years afterwards. Not my dad so much, although during the occupation he had done some things that would have made the Germans very mad. He mostly kept that to himself, but my mother and my grandparents, they kept telling stories, mostly, I think, to explain how scary everything had been. And those early memories, theirs and mine, became the basis for my book about that war. They set the stage.

QUESTION: So what do you consider the biggest stories in the

book?

WIM: In terms of length – well, length as such may not reflect the quality of a story, but I credit myself with not giving any story a lot more space than it deserves. Of course, the reader will be the final judge of that. Anyway, the longest stories are those of Al Kampen, of Chester Kauffman, Lilli Kirschbaum-Clausen, and Heide Funke-Cummings. Those are all war stories, lengthy but very interesting, reflecting personal experiences that the subjects of those stories related to me. And I purposely included stories from all sides of the war. The Al Kampen and the Chester Kauffman stories are about the American bombing campaign on Germany; the other two are of the forced exodus of the scattered German people to what was left of Germany at the end of the war. Talk about ethnic cleansing; that was the biggest case of ethnic cleansing ever seen, and it occurred with the full approval of the allied leaders. It's estimated that some 12 million people took part in that mass-migration, mostly during the terrible winter of 1944/45, and about ten percent of them died in the process, because of cold, starvation, and abuse.

Both Lilli Kirschbaum and Heide Funke live here, in Coos Bay. Lilli's married name is Clausen, and she and Max Clausen built the oyster farm on Haynes inlet. But the way Lilli told the story of her life, with her and her family ending up destitute in defeated Germany, you can tell she wanted most of all to regain the prosperity they had lost, and build up a solid business, which she and Max did.

So now you can see why I included pictures of people on the cover. All relate to stories in the book. One shows a Jewish little girl who was being hidden by our neighbors; one is of Chester Kauffman before his B-17; and another shows a poor Berlin woman happy with the CARE package that the Americans provided to those starving people.

QUESTION: Will you continue to write about World War II?

WIM: Well, it seems likely. We're at a critical time, you know. A lot of those people are getting on in years, and their stories are too good to depart with them. So I spent a great

deal of time recording them, and writing them to play out against the events of those years. Chester Kauffman is already gone; a majority of the World War II vets are already gone. But of course, we should be concerned about anybody who was seriously impacted by that war, whether veterans or civilians, on all sides.

Besides his latest work, Everybody's War, local author Wim de Vriend has published three earlier books: Betsy Boerhave's Diary, the translated journal of a 19th century Dutch housewife; Odd Customers, fun, frolic and flippancy in a German restaurant on the left coast; and The JOB Messiahs – how government destroys our prosperity and our freedoms to 'create jobs'. Many of his contributions on this website are based on materials from The JOB Messiahs, which is written in an easy, entertaining style and contains hundreds of historical pictures, many by the author himself. Although twenty years of work went into The JOB Messiahs, its price is a mere \$35. It is available for sale at the office of The Sentinel in Coquille, at Farr's Hardware in Coos Bay, at the Blue Heron restaurant in Coos Bay, and at Books-by-the-Bay in North Bend. Odd Customers is available for \$19 at the Blue Heron restaurant in Coos Bay, as is Everybody's War, for \$25.