

Margaretha Goldman

Title: *If I Were a Bird: Escaping Hitler*

Author: Margaretha Goldman

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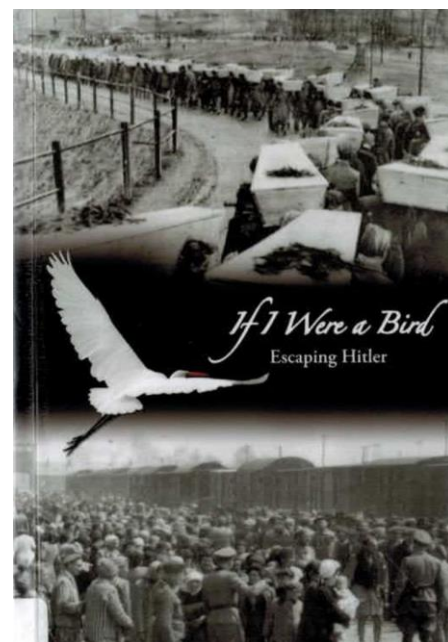
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, State Library of Victoria, National Library of Australia and other libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Netherlands: Amsterdam; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: adolescent survivor; in-hiding.



If I Were a Bird is the 149-page memoir of Dutch survivor Margaretha Goldmann, who spent nearly three years in hiding in the attic of a brewery with her parents and twenty other Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Pages 1-17 discuss the author's motivation for writing, including a memorial list of murdered family members and "cameos" from her childhood. Pages 18-32 recount the German invasion and introduction of antisemitic restrictions. Pages 33-60 describe her life in hiding from September 1942 until liberation in May 1945. Pages 61-93 cover the immediate post-war period, her marriage, emigration to Australia in 1948, and eventual divorce. Pages 94-124 detail her second marriage and career in the arts. Pages 125-49 offer reflections on trauma, survival, and memory. The memoir includes 53 photographs of the author and her extended family.

Margaretha Goldman (née Koopman) was born 10 April 1928 in Amsterdam, the only child of Sara and Izak Koopman. She was raised in a liberal, middle-class Jewish household. Her parents ran a successful textile business.

In May 1940, when Margaretha was twelve, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands. Over the next two years, antisemitic laws were gradually introduced: Jews were banned from public schools, forced to register with the authorities, and increasingly segregated. In 1941, her parents' business was confiscated. After being expelled from school, Margaretha, a gifted artist, was enrolled in a Jewish-run art college.

Antisemitic measures escalated sharply in February 1941, when Margaretha witnessed a mass roundup of Jewish men by German soldiers while attending a theatre with relatives. Following the raid, her father relocated the family to another part of Amsterdam to avoid detection.

By May 1942, all Jews were required to wear the Star of David and observe a nightly curfew. In June, large-scale deportations began. The first members of Margaretha's family to receive a summons to present for deportation were her maternal uncle, his wife, and their six children. Margaretha accompanied them to the station to say goodbye, holding the hand of her beloved eleven-year-old cousin until SS officers wrenched him away. None of the family was ever seen again.

At first, the family believed the transports were for forced labour but as deportations increased and more friends and relatives vanished the grim reality became clear. In desperation, they began making plans.

On 4 September 1942, fourteen-year-old Margaretha and her parents went into hiding in the attic of the Amsterdam Brewery, owned by a couple (described only by the pseudonyms "Boss" and "Wife") who employed Margaretha's cousin. The attic was already sheltering several relatives. In total, twenty-two people – eighteen adults and four children – lived together in stifling confinement, without privacy or basic sanitation, using buckets as toilets and living in constant fear of discovery. The brewery also neighboured the Dutch Nazi Party headquarters and was routinely visited by German soldiers, making silence a necessity.

Margaretha endured the nearly three-year confinement with quiet stoicism, quickly learning to suppress her emotions, a survival mechanism that left lasting psychological scars. Contact with the outside world was limited to brief visits from their rescuers and, occasionally, members of the underground who brought food and information.

Over time, paranoia and tension mounted among the attic's occupants. During an altercation, Margaretha's father was struck in the head and knocked unconscious. Fearful for his life, the distressed Margaretha stayed awake all night, guarding him with a knife.

As the war dragged on, food supplies dwindled. News of arrests and killings filtered in, deepening the family's anguish. In 1944, the family's rescuers warned them of an imminent Nazi raid. The attic dwellers hid for two weeks behind a false cupboard hastily constructed for the purpose. They later discovered that the raid had been fabricated by the "Boss" and "Wife" as a ruse to sell off the family's assets, including several vehicles stored at the brewery.

On 5 May 1945, Amsterdam was liberated by Allied forces. After nearly three years of confinement, the Koopmans emerged from hiding. That same day, Margaretha was reunited with her eighty-year-old maternal grandmother, who had survived in hiding with another family.

The family was given housing and began searching for relatives, discovering that all ten of her uncles, their wives, children, and three grandparents had been murdered. Margaretha was diagnosed with severe malnutrition and placed on a strict diet and bed rest.

She resumed her studies at art college, where she met her first husband, René. They married in 1947 and, amid lingering antisemitism and grief, emigrated to Australia the following year, sponsored by her cousin Debby. After their divorce, Margaretha relocated to Sydney, where her parents joined her around 1951 and opened a fabric shop. She later remarried Martin, a fellow Holocaust survivor. Together they adopted two sons.

If I Were a Bird is a candid memoir of the author's life and wartime experiences that recounts the psychological and social realities of a youth spent in hiding through vivid, emotionally charged vignettes. Not strictly chronological, the narrative moves fluidly between past and present, mirroring the fragmented nature of the author's memory. The memoir also addresses taboo subjects such as forced abortion, sexuality, and the long-term impact of trauma on personal and family relationships, including the burden of second-generation trauma on her children. The result is a powerful, intimate portrait of survival, loss, and the enduring legacy of trauma.