

Bep Gomperts

Title: *Amsterdam: 1940-1945: The Shadow of My Life*

Author: Bep Gomperts

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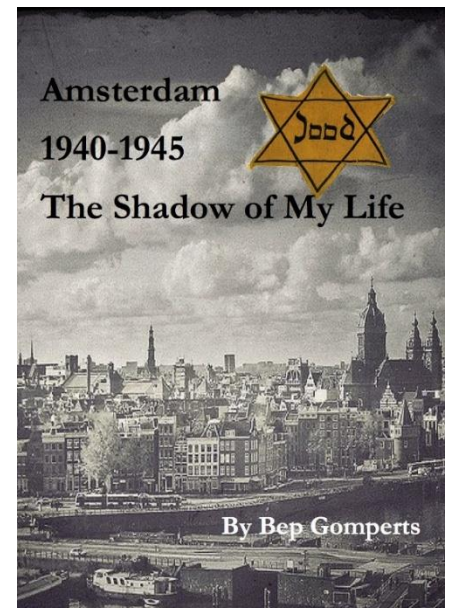
Location of Book: Melbourne Holocaust Museum and Sydney Jewish Museum.

Cities/towns/camps: Netherlands: Amsterdam, The Hague;
Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoir

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



Amsterdam 1940-1945: The Shadow of My Life is the 251-page memoir of Bep Gomperts, a Dutch child survivor, who was two-years old when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands. She and her family went into hiding and she spent several years separated from her mother, living undercover as a Christian child while her father was deported to Auschwitz and murdered. Decades after the war, she immigrated to Australia and has been a dedicated volunteer at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

Pages 1–15 describe the author's family background and early childhood. Pages 16–46 cover the German occupation of the Netherlands, the onset of the war, and the author's experiences in hiding. Pages 47–80 describe the liberation of the Netherlands, her reunion with her mother, and their attempts to rebuild their lives after the war. Pages 81–106 recount her mother's remarriage, Bep's schooling, and her teenage years. Pages 107–156 describe Bep's marriage, the birth of her children, and family business. Pages 157–180 recount the family's migration to Australia and life in Melbourne. Pages 181–251 comprise reflections on the Holocaust, its enduring impact, and her relationships with her mother, husband, and children.

Bep-Rie Gomperts (née Gerritse) was born 4 May 1938 in Amsterdam, the only child of Jeanette (Netty) Kwetser and Abraham Gerritse. She was raised in a middle-class family; her father and grandfather were a tobacco brokers and her mother worked as a hairdresser. Her maternal grandparents, the Kwetser's, were emigrants from Germany who were politically active and knew many Jewish refugees from Poland and Germany. Her maternal aunt Bertha married a non-Jewish communist Dutchman, Uncle Henk, who became active in the underground. Her maternal grandfather also became involved in the resistance.

On 10 May 1940, when Bep was just two years old, German troops invaded and occupied the Netherlands. In 1941, Nazi measures began targeting Jewish citizens, at

which point her family, aware of the danger through her family's resistance contacts, resolved to go into hiding.

On the day the family was meant to go into hiding in July 1942, her father travelled to his office to settle some work matters. On the way home, he walked into the first major Jewish roundup in Amsterdam while wearing the Star of David; he was arrested and never seen again by his family: he was deported to Westerbork and then to Auschwitz, where he was murdered.

Sometime later, Nazi officers arrived at the house to arrest her mother and the Bep, but after Netty faked a severe illness, they permitted her to stay. This incident drove her to action and Netty renewed arrangements with the Dutch resistance to go into hiding with her daughter. Armed with forged identity papers and only a handful of belongings, Netty and Bep left their home and took refuge in the attic of a flat in Amsterdam.

Unable to remain there for long, they relocated to The Hague, where they were sheltered by the Baggerman family, a large Catholic household with ten children. While there, Bep attended a Catholic kindergarten alongside the family's children. When the Germans prepared to occupy the district, the entire household moved to an apartment in Scheveningen, a seaside suburb of The Hague.

Before long, Scheveningen also became too dangerous as nearby homes were commandeered by German forces and their families. Acting on instructions from Netty's underground contacts, Netty and Bep returned to Amsterdam, where they were sheltered by a member of the underground who was hiding eight other Jews. When the apartment was raided by the Nazis, Uncle Henk – ironically, the only non-Jew among those in hiding – was arrested, while the remaining occupants escaped and dispersed to separate hiding places. It was then decided that Netty and Bep should separate as the two of them together were more likely to attract suspicion.

In April 1944, Bep was placed in hiding with a childless Christian couple in Heemstede, who introduced her publicly as their niece. Although they treated her with warmth and affection, life in hiding was marked by secrecy, constant danger, and severe deprivation. Because Bep was living there illegally, her foster parents received no ration coupons for her and shared their meagre supplies, forcing Bep to survive on whatever food they could spare. During the Hunger Winter of 1944–45 she resorted to eating tulip bulbs and potato skins.

At this time Bep formed a friendship with a local boy. When her foster family learned a German pilot would be billeted with them, they arranged for her to stay with the boy's family where she remained until the liberation of the Netherlands on 4 May 1945. After the war, Bep was reunited with her mother, though she initially did not recognise her after their long separation. During their time apart, Netty had been arrested in September 1944, imprisoned, and transferred to Westerbork transit camp where she was liberated by Canadian forces in April 1945.

Mother and daughter returned to Amsterdam to rebuild their lives. However, Netty's health had been permanently affected by her imprisonment and she suffered recurring bouts of illness that frequently required lengthy hospitalisation.

In 1962, Bep married Herman Gomperts and the couple had three children: Marcel, Saskia and Riwka. In 1979, the family migrated to Melbourne, where Bep became actively involved in Holocaust education, sharing her experiences with students and visitors at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum to preserve the memory of the Holocaust for future generations.

Amsterdam 1940–1945: The Shadow of My Life is a moving account of survival, resilience, and the enduring impact of the Holocaust on a child survivor and her family. Bep was too young to remember some of the events described and her narrative relies in part on the detailed recollections of her mother and other surviving family members, resulting in a vivid, novelistic account of their wartime experiences. The memoir devotes considerable attention to her mother's story and the experiences of her wider family, while also reflecting candidly on the Holocaust's lasting legacy, particularly its effect on her post-war relationship with her mother and the challenges of rebuilding their lives. Written with the assistance of a writer and editor, the memoir combines personal memory with family testimony to preserve the experiences of those who survived, while exploring the enduring legacy of trauma across generations.