



David Gumpert's aunt Inge used this forged ID to attempt escape from France in 1943.

## Knowledge of aunt's difficult journey sends author on his own

By Jack Thomas  
GLOBE STAFF

Growing up in the 1950s, David Gumpert, now of Needham, knew who his best friend was — his aunt Inge.

She took him to amusement parks and funky restaurants, and she never came to dinner without a big box of sweets. She was the older sister he never had, and he looked up to her, laughed with her, confided in her, and sought her solace when he was overwhelmed at home, at school, or on the gritty streets of Chicago's South Side.

Sometime in the late 1970s, however, she began to act strange. Gumpert stood by, helpless and confused, as she became unhappy in her marriage and at work and deteriorated into moodiness, depression, blackouts, an addiction to painkillers, and finally, in June 1983, an intentional drug overdose that killed her at age 57.

What had happened?

He didn't know.

And nobody in the family spoke about it.

For a decade, Gumpert mourned the loss and lamented his aunt's suffering.

Then, one night in September 1993, Inge's daughter gave him a sheaf of papers.

"I found this in the cellar," he recalls her saying. "You might find it interesting."

What she handed him was a typed manuscript of 66 pages written by Inge.

He took it home and went to bed. Into the wee hours of the morning, he read the manuscript, and by the time he fell asleep, he had the answer to the mystery of Aunt Inge.

And his own life never would be the same.

GUMPERT, Page B9



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JONATHAN WIGGS

David Gumpert spent 10 years writing a book about his aunt's life.

# Manuscript inspired author on a journey of discovery

► GUMPERT  
Continued from Page B7

What the manuscript revealed was the Inge Joseph Bleier he never knew — the teenage girl in World War II who barely escaped being sent to a German concentration camp, who refused to buckle when threatened with execution by a Nazi commander, and who was among 100 or so children who fled the Nazis in an odyssey that took Inge from Germany to Belgium to a 15th-century chateau in France, a refuge run by the Swiss Red Cross, and then to Switzerland and, finally, to the United States.

Inge moved to Chicago, married, adopted a daughter, became head nurse at Weiss Memorial Hospital, and wrote two nursing textbooks. As her manuscript reveals, however, she never recovered from her experience with the Nazis.

Gumpert, now 57, sits on the deck of the Flying Bridge at the edge of Falmouth Harbor, and over a plate of Maine oysters and a glass of iced mineral water recalls that his reading of the manuscript had three results.

First, it gave him a context in which to understand Inge's behavior. Second, he wondered whether her story might be developed into a book, and third, within weeks, he began to lose his hair in what a dermatologist diagnosed as alopecia areata, an ailment in which a person loses hair for no apparent reason, although stress is believed to be a factor.

The psychiatrist he consulted confirmed Gumpert was experiencing stress and said it was rooted in the guilt Gumpert felt for not having tried to learn about Inge's experience while she was alive. "The guilt I felt was the awful feeling that if I had known, then perhaps I could have helped her and she wouldn't have committed suicide," he says. Thanks to yoga and meditation, by the summer of 1994, Gumpert had come to grips with the emotional crisis. His hair grew back, and he embarked on an odyssey of his own, a 10-year undertaking in which he used Inge's manuscript, hundreds of letters, and his own interviews with people in Europe and the United States to write a compelling

account of her saga: "Inge: A Girl's Journey Through Nazi Europe" (Wm. B. Eerdmans).

### Dramatic passages

Married with two children, Gumpert, 57, is a former editor of the Harvard Business Review, a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal, and the author of textbooks on business. Even now, 21 years after the death of Inge, he is sometimes overcome by the sense of security she gave him as a boy and then by her degeneration.

Without that persecution by the Nazis, would Inge have lived a longer and happier life?

"No doubt about it," says Gumpert.

Then, in the end, the Nazis got her after all?

"I would take issue with that," he says. "Yes, literally, they did get her, but spiritually she had stood up to them in the strongest way she could. Plus, she had survived to become educated, to contribute to society, and to raise a family. So, in a larger sense, she had made a statement via her survival."

Gumpert marvels that her story was kept secret by the family.

"In a Holocaust survivor family, there are things that went on and didn't go on that, in retrospect, are hard to comprehend. I remember asking about Inge, but then the subject would be cut off. My father would say, 'Well, the bastard' — referring to Hitler — 'killed 6 million people,' and that was it. If I asked about Inge, they'd say she was hidden by nuns in France, and I just envisioned her in a monastery or something."

Not every member of Gumpert's family is pleased with the book. Some have told him the Holocaust is an experience better forgotten.

"But I wrote it to clear Inge's name, because in those last years she acted bizarre. Second, there's something larger here. The Holocaust" — he hesitates, and for a moment the only sounds are made by gulls riding the wind over the water — "we're still close enough to the Holocaust so that we can't appreciate where it fits in historically. But when I think of Inge and the other children running from Nazis, it's a story of biblical proportions, of right and wrong, and



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JONATHAN WIGGS

David Gumpert says he wrote "Inge: A Girl's Journey Through Nazi Europe" to clear his aunt's name.

of strangers risking their lives to help strangers who are kids who were, really, a wandering tribe of Jews, thrown together in flight from their homeland and from evil."

Among the dramatic passages is a description of the night Inge was threatened with execution and then of her flight at night to Switzerland.

"I sometimes get a little choked up about it," Gumpert says apologetically, and then he pauses, unable to speak. "But the thing about Inge standing up to the German commander, that was so heroic."

"Basically, she was saying, you can kill me, but you're going to take me kicking and screaming. Not a lot of Jews did that, but Inge's attitude was that she was going to make it hard for them. You may have only one in a thousand chance of surviving, but take that one chance."

In another provocative scene, Jewish children are reluctant to accept the invitation by Swiss caretakers to celebrate Christmas, although eventually they come to enjoy the day in a secular way, an accommodation that in later years would rattle Gumpert.

"When I would visit Inge, it would certainly bother me, as a Jew, to see a Christmas tree in her house, and I think it bothers other Jews to see Jews somehow making light of their own holidays or embracing a religion that is different.

I don't have any disrespect, but Christians have persecuted Jews for a long time."

### Raising awareness

Perhaps the most spellbinding chapter describes the effort by some of the children to escape across barbed wire from Nazi France to Switzerland.

In darkness and snow, they came to a barbed wire fence. They crossed and felt the exhilaration of freedom. Soon, they came to a second barbed wire fence, and they were confused. They crossed it anyway and enjoyed again the sense of freedom. To their bewilderment, however, they came across a third barbed wire fence, and wondered: Where are we? In Switzerland? Still in Nazi France?

Reluctant to cross again, they sought help, only to be arrested by the Germans.

To explain, Gumpert takes a paper placemat with the emblem of the Flying Bridge and a map of Cape Cod, and in a corner, near the depiction of Provincetown, he draws the barbed wire fence in a serpentine line. What the children had done was to cross from France and danger to Switzerland and safety, and then from Switzerland and safety back to France and danger.

"They couldn't figure it out in the snow and dark," says Gumpert. "Here, they're in German territory, and there, they're in Swiss

territory. But then they cross back into German territory, and here they are, once again, at the doorstep of freedom, only to pause at the third fence and then be captured and, in the case of some, to be sent to a concentration camp and almost certain death."

The book is written in Inge's voice, but readers cannot tell whether dialogue comes from her manuscript, from letters, from diaries, or from interviews.

"In expressing her thoughts, that is, her frustration or despondency, I did take liberties, but any dialogue comes from her manuscript, my interviews, or diaries or official reports."

How has the discovery affected him?

He pauses again. "It's made me more aware of the context of the place where I live. My family was kicked out of Spain during the Inquisition, and from 1939, for six years, they wandered through all these countries. Now, I'm here in the United States, second generation, but that's not a long time."

"I think of myself as an American, but I don't feel as secure or permanent because Jewish people could be uprooted at any time. Jews in the United States are treated better than Jews anywhere else in the world, but it's not beyond possibility — and it can happen anywhere — for terrorists to get the upper hand and say to an American president that if you want us to lay off, you're going to have to change your approach to the Jews. French Jews are urged to go to Israel because they're treated badly in France. Terrorists got the Spanish government to get their troops out of Iraq. Terrorists got the Philippines to take their troops out. Terrorists can have an influence, and I don't like to be morbid, but you ask how I'm different? Here's how: I look at things with more skepticism."

Gumpert smiles, however, to recall the last gift he received from Aunt Inge.

"It was for my birthday," he says.

"It was Herman Wouk's book 'War and Remembrance.'"

Jack Thomas can be reached at [thomas@globe.com](mailto:thomas@globe.com).