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Author's journey is road to understanding

By Ellen L. Weingart

NEEDHAM —

David Gumpert always felt close to his aunt, Inge Joseph Bleier, but it wasn't until many years after her death that he began to really know her.

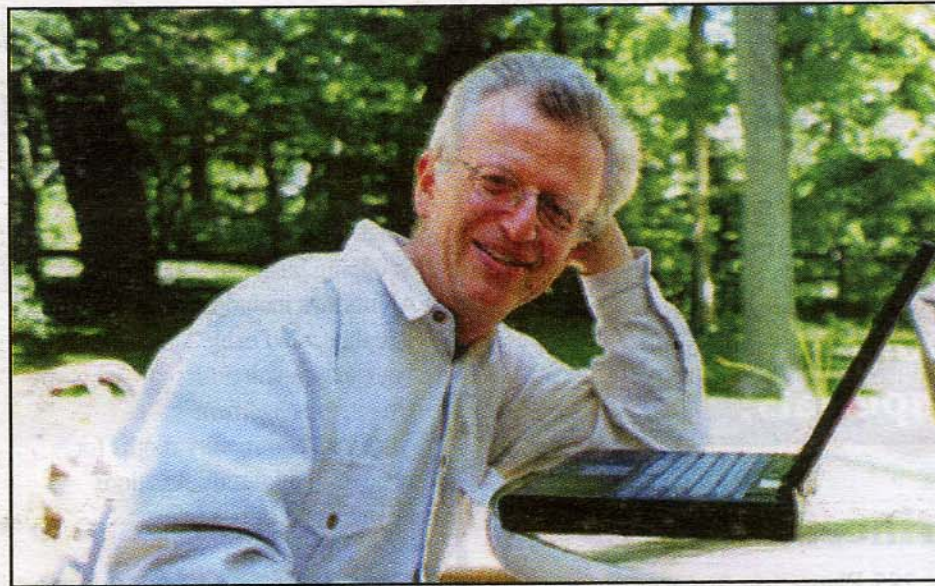
Inge was a Holocaust survivor, saved from the Nazis' "final solution" by the Swiss Red Cross.

Ten years after Inge died in 1983, her daughter, Julie Hernandez, gave Gumpert a 66-page manuscript Inge had written in the late 1950s about her experiences as a teenager attempting to elude the Nazis. The manuscript had been rejected by several publishers and sat in the basement of Inge's Chicago townhouse for more than 30 years when Hernandez, who was living in the house, found it.

Inge had been urged to write the story of her life by her husband, Frank Bleier, and had imagined "a happy version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*." Instead, starting in Darmstadt, Germany, in 1936 when her life began to fall apart and ending with her outwardly successful life in Chicago in 1959, she opened "a Pandora's box," ripping into emotional wounds that had never really healed.

Reading the manuscript gave him the opportunity to learn more about his aunt, said Gumpert, 57 and a resident of Needham. "It was a major 'a-ha,'" he said. "It explained her bizarre behavior in the last few years of her life. It had seemed inexplicable, but the manuscript explained a lot."

Commenting on her decision to write



David Gumpert completed his aunt's story of the Holocaust in *Inge: A Girl's Journey through Nazi Europe*. (photo courtesy sherry alpert corporate communications)

her memoir, Inge herself talked about "the darkness enveloping" her and the way her husband and daughter tried to avoid her. She mentioned drug overdoses, physical frailties her doctors couldn't cure and days spent crying.

Gumpert remembers his hurt when the aunt he so fondly recalls playing Ping-Pong with him on her dining room table took a vacation in Hawaii instead of attending his wedding.

A journalist who was a reporter at *The Wall Street Journal* and an editor at *Inc.* magazine and the *Harvard Business Review*, Gumpert was determined to learn more about Inge's experiences and

fill in the gaps in her thin manuscript.

It took Gumpert 10 years, but the result, *Inge: A Girl's Journey through Nazi Europe*, by Inge Joseph Bleier and David E. Gumpert (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), tells a story that is as thrilling as it is heartbreaking.

Gumpert has had a long-time interest in World War II and the Holocaust and had done extensive reading on the subject, but he had little knowledge about Inge's experience when she was alive.

"While today the Holocaust is openly discussed by most survivors, in my

Turn to AUTHOR, page 3

Author delves into aunt's past on a journey to understanding

Cont'd. from page One

growing-up years such discussion was forbidden," he explains in the afterword of *Inge*. "Survivors didn't want to talk about it, and their children and nephews and nieces learned not to pry. I knew Inge had been in hiding in Europe during the Holocaust, but I knew none of the details."

Emotional meetings

Inge's manuscript gave Gumpert a start, and one-by-one he was able to find a number of Inge's co-survivors and the adults who had cared for them.

The people Gumpert met willingly shared their personal recollections, documents and photos with him. Like the manuscript, he never before had seen the photos, a number of which are included in *Inge*.

He read letters his aunt had written to her sister, Lilo (Gumpert's mother), and others. He also read several letters Inge had received — amazingly, like the memorabilia of others, cherished and protected throughout her ordeal, surviving to stand witness to the Nazi nightmare.

He spent one summer following Inge's path through Europe, identifying many of the locations that figured prominently in Inge's life during that horrific time. And he read more books, some by people who had known Inge, some by people who had cared for other young targets of Nazism.

Inge, 13, had remained with her mother when Lilo, 15, left for the United States in 1938. Lilo, who was sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, was one of 1,000 Jewish children accepted by the United States over a six-year period.

The following year, Inge also left Germany, but only got as far as Brussels, one of just a few hundred children Belgium allowed in during "the other Kindertransport," which brought a relative handful of Jewish children from Germany and Austria to other countries of continental Europe.

Sent originally to live with her cousin Gustav, Inge is abandoned by him to a group home. With the Nazis closing in, she and her housemates embarked on a chaotic journey to France.

Joined by other children trying to escape the Nazi madness, they found shelter in Chateau la Hille, a 15th-century French estate, where they were cared for by the Swiss Red Cross. They were 100 Jewish children, ages 4 to 19, without their parents and with only each other and a few adults to look after them.

Miraculously, 90 of the children survived.

Asked in an interview with *The Jewish Chronicle* how he so seamlessly blended his research with Inge's writing, Gumpert said, "I've gotten to know her better. I didn't know her during the Holocaust, but I was able to apply what I learned about her to that period."

More details

For example, a sentence or two Inge wrote about being sent to Belgium to live with her cousin is fleshed out in letters Inge wrote to Lilo in America.

"Inge leaves out (of her manuscript) unpleasant things ... but in her letters to her sister, she talks about her life" as it was happening, Gumpert said. "So the information is there to extrapolate from. The letters she wrote are more immediate and give a better sense of her mood at the time" the events occurred.

Talking with people Inge knew was also important. "Some incidents were very vivid to them even so many years

later," Gumpert said. "Friends she told about a particular event had very clear memories when the event was particularly emotional."

In the early years of his research, he was frequently upset by Inge's suffering. "But I got past that — I hope," he said.

"I was touched by the people I met along the way," Gumpert told the *Chronicle*. "The adults were caring people, even if they were a little strange."

He described one of the adults, Alex Frank, "as being as unsmiling and humorless in old age as he was as a young man." Frank settled in East Germany after the war, a surprising move for someone who had undergone such a struggle for his freedom.

Frank always kept with him a large folder of photographs of each child that had been under his care, referring to them as his children and welcoming the opportunity to pull the photos out and identify each child by name.

"What they (the adults) — and the (former) children — were willing to do in terms of revisiting their own lives by agreeing to be interviewed was incredible," Gumpert said. "The other survivors — and the adults — are very special people to me."

"I was impressed by how much they appreciated Inge."

Gumpert said he also had the emotional experience of being a resource for Holocaust survivors, answering questions for siblings of la Hille residents who were killed by the Nazis.

Finding what worked

He acknowledged that he struggled with finding the right voice for the story. "I rewrote it many times," he said. "I had people read it and they could tell me when it wasn't working."

He tried writing the book in the third person and he tried alternating his voice and Inge's. "It didn't work," he said.

He finally concluded the story needed to be told by Inge. "Inge's voice was enough inside my head that I could do it," he said. When his writing triggered memories in others, he knew he was "on target."

Inge's story has been compared to Anne Frank's, but separated from family, Inge faced different problems. In addition to trying to stay ahead of the Nazis, she had to deal with the loneliness of separation, her feelings of having been abandoned by her family and her concern for her mother. Alone, she had to make life-and-death decisions.

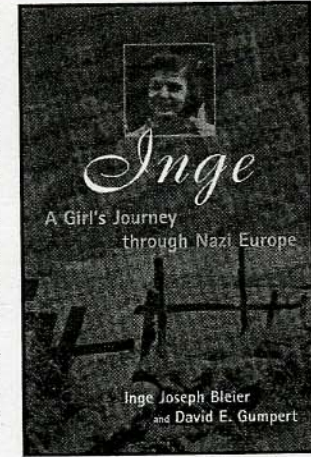
And unlike Anne Frank, who never got the opportunity, she somehow had to rebuild her life after the war. For Inge, that meant marriage, a child and a successful career as a nurse and author of two textbooks on nursing that were widely used in nursing schools.

The guilt over the circumstances of her survival, as well as the annihilation of her family structure, took a heavy toll on Inge, but Gumpert asked that a more specific explanation not be included here for fear that it would reveal too much of Inge's story.

"She had among the worst experiences" of the children, Gumpert said. And while she had the survival instincts that saw her through, she didn't have the kind of personality that allowed her to be content.

Gumpert mentioned one of Inge's la Hille co-survivors who was captured while trying to escape to Spain. Despite having been sent to Auschwitz, Gumpert said, he was quite upbeat, in contrast to Inge.

"In a very real sense, my family has been in a state of turmoil over the



Inge Joseph's photo is highlighted on the cover of *Inge*. (photo courtesy sherry alpert corporate communications)

Holocaust since family life imploded beginning in 1936," Gumpert says in the book's introduction. "While other families managed, despite all the pain, to put the traumatic events behind them, my family keeps reliving the past, wondering how certain events could have happened ... and what might have happened 'if only.'"

Gumpert said his aunt didn't seem depressed while he was growing up. She was fun, although she did have personality issues, he said. But by the 1970s, she was becoming more erratic in her behavior. Discussions with mental health professionals have convinced him that Inge suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Help possible

"She never realized she could have gotten help — but that also would have meant she'd have to talk to someone about her experiences," Gumpert told the *Chronicle*.

Gumpert said his work on *Inge* left him with different feelings about his relatives. He developed a better understanding of his grandfather, Julius Joseph, who died in 1959, and the problems he had had. Gumpert said the only relative he felt anger toward was Inge's cousin Gustav, who, he felt, could have done more when Inge came to him in Belgium as a young teenager.

Gumpert had been concerned about the effect his delving into the past and publishing *Inge* would have on his relatives. Only one cousin seemed resentful. Perhaps the person most affected by

Gumpert's work was his mother. He said his research made him realize there were issues between his mother and his aunt.

"I thought they got along all right, once they both were in the United States," he said. "In retrospect, I think there was some distance between the two. They didn't confide in each other as much as other sisters might, but there was no open hostility." His mother, Gumpert said, hadn't known all that Inge had been through.

With tears often clouding her vision, Lilo translated letters — she had kept all the letters Inge and other relatives sent to her during the Holocaust — and other documents for Gumpert and she even joined him during telephone calls to non-English speaking survivors in Europe and Israel. She since has become friendly with a Chateau la Hille survivor who lives near her in Florida.

Gumpert spent several weeks this summer traveling through what had been Nazi-occupied Europe with Walter Reed, a former Chateau la Hille resident. With the help of relatives, Reed, formerly Werner Rindsberg, and a handful of other children had been able to leave France for the United States in 1941. Once here, he completely changed his identity.

On their recent trip to Europe, Gumpert and Reed pored through Red Cross records about the la Hille children and other documents that Gumpert hadn't known about. "The challenge is that they're all in French and German," Gumpert said. And while Reed helped translate, Gumpert said he needs more help.

More to tell

"There's probably another story there," Gumpert said, adding that story would focus on the adults who looked after the children. "The people who did what they did and what strings they pulled to get things done," he said. "But I question how would that story be told. I don't know if I want to spend another 10 years on this."

Gumpert said *Inge* is more than the telling of his aunt's story. "The Holocaust was more than horrible events and ongoing killing — which of course it was," he said. "But there's a personal aspect to it that might not have gotten all the attention it should have. I tried to portray another story that doesn't always get told — from the perspective of a young person, which also doesn't get all the attention it should. The story communicates the Holocaust in a somewhat personal way — and it communicates that family relationships are not always as happy as they're often portrayed."

"There's a need to tell people that these events affected people in many ways."