

## Review

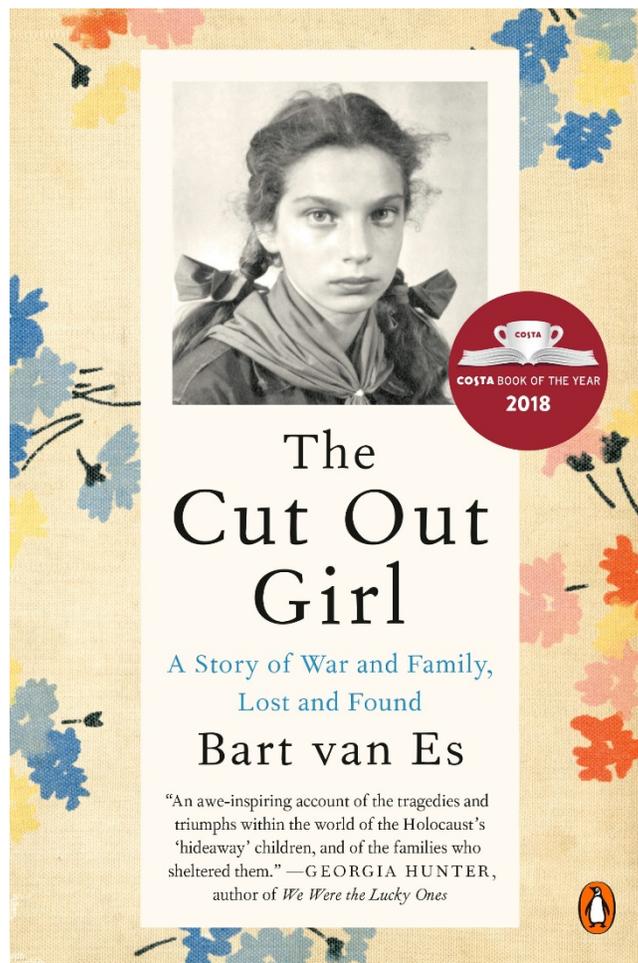
**Bart van Es:**

### ***The cut out girl: A story of war and family, lost and found***

New York: Penguin Books, 2018. 288 p.

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*Reviewed by Michiel Horn*



This book defies easy categorization. It is part biography, part autobiography, part family history, part Holocaust history. It deals with difficult subjects in an engaging, even moving way, yet at times it is a bit irritating. Van Es tells a good story, but his manner of telling it is occasionally confusing.

Van Es is a professor of English at Oxford University and a fellow of St Catherine's College. Dutch by birth, he lived with his parents in Norway, Dubai, and Indonesia before they settled in England in 1986, when he was 14 years of age. He is an author and editor of books about Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, subjects far removed from the topics of this book. This at once raises the question: what led him to research and write it?

It is the very question asked by the woman he wants to interview, Hesseline (Lien) de Jong, in December of 2014, by that time 81 years old: "What is your motivation?" His response: "I'm not sure. I think [yours] could be a complex and interesting story. Recording these things is important, especially now, given the state of the world, with extremism again on the rise. There's an untold story here that I don't want to lose."

Lien is known to him because she hid with his paternal grandparents for most of a year starting in August 1942, and lived with them for several years after the war. By the summer of 1942 the relocation of Dutch Jews to Westerbork, an internment camp in Drenthe, had begun. From there weekly transports were leaving, ostensibly to labour camps in Poland, but in fact to camps like Auschwitz, where some were put to work while most were gassed and cremated. This was not known in the Netherlands, but Jews were uneasy about entering a future as slave labour in a distant part of Europe. Like many other Jewish parents, Charles de Jong and Catherine de Jong-Spiero evidently wished to guard their child from such a dark and menacing future, and they took the difficult and wrenching step to entrust their eight-year-old daughter, weeks short of her ninth birthday, to the care of strangers, to become an *onderduiker* ("an illegal stowaway on land").

This raises an issue of translation, not for the only time. Seeking an equivalent to *onderduiker*, Van Es chooses "hideaway" rather than "hider." (He could and perhaps should have used the more descriptive Dutch word.) His use is idiosyncratic: "hideaway" refers not to a person, but to a place, as in "Hernando's Hideaway," the well-known song from *The pajama game*. And why, on another occasion, does he refer to a "stick" of bread rather than a piece, where the Dutch word is obviously *stuk*? He does speak Dutch, but he is evidently not fluent in the language. The book is for him a process of learning, however, not only about Lien and her history, but about himself, his family, and his country of birth and its language, and that is part of the book's charm. Among other things, it is a grab-bag of aperçus about the Netherlands past and present, the Second World War, the persecution of the Jews, the resistance to the German occupation, and a host

of related subjects. Many of his insights are illuminating, especially to those not already familiar with Dutch history and society. Some are less so. One example: commenting on the countryside and the suburbs of the city he drives through from (presumably) Schiphol to Den Haag, he writes that they “feel almost artificial” compared to the English countryside with which he is familiar, and concludes: “Holland, when seen through a car window, looks devoid of history of any kind.” This is plain silly. I’ve been on that stretch of road many times, and it seems to me that Van Es simply did not know how to look at what he saw.

Although this book is in part an exercise in self-discovery, however, it is primarily about Lien, the girl “cut out” of her family to become a Holocaust survivor. Van Es is determined to tell her story, although he has to augment from his research parts that she cannot remember. With admirable sensitivity he depicts her experiences and her often conflicted responses to them, as he becomes aware that she suffered from PTSD for many years. One contributing factor was surely that at age twelve she was repeatedly raped by a male relative of the family she was hiding with at the time. Not surprisingly, she found herself unable to complain about his actions.

Van Es tries to puzzle out why, in 1988, a breach occurred between his grandmother, *Ma* van Es, and Lien. The cause of the event seems trivial: a case of mutual misunderstanding and of skins that were perhaps too thin. Insofar as Lien shared responsibility for the breach, this reflected in part the PTSD she was suffering from. On the surface Lien lived a fairly normal post-war life, marrying another Holocaust survivor, an orthodox Sephardic Jew, in 1959. He worked for Philips; they were well-to-do. Albert and she had three children, a daughter and two sons, and she found comfort fitting into the observances of the Orthodox faith. The past haunted her, however, as it did her sole surviving relative, a male cousin who committed suicide shortly after Lien’s wedding. Lien herself made an almost-successful suicide attempt in 1972, an event that enraged *Ma* van Es. Relations with *Pa* van Es were complicated by an attempt he made to kiss Lien when she was twenty. When he died in 1979, he left instructions not to list her among his children, even though she had been the Van Es’s foster child after the war. This hurt her terribly. In 1980 her marriage broke up, and a new relationship she embarked on a few years later ended abruptly when her partner died of a brain tumour. The breach with her foster mother, whom she did not see again until the latter’s death in 1995, was a further source of distress.

Not until her late sixties, when she attended the August 1992 “Conference of the hidden child” in Amsterdam, was Lien able to begin confronting the full horror of the calamitous crime that destroyed her family, leaving her to depend on the kindness of strangers. The mayor of Amsterdam, Ed van Thijn, who himself had been in hiding during the war, captured the difficulty that telling the story of

that experience involved: “The story of hiding has defined our whole existence, but we – at least most of us – have tried desperately all our lives to drive that story away.” A decade later Lien, who had moved from Eindhoven to Amsterdam, felt “ready to face Auschwitz.” In 2003 she visited, in the company of a Buddhist group, the extermination camp where her parents had been murdered and was able to talk at last about all her lost relatives. “And I want to tell you. And I missed them the rest of my life.”

In his 1962 collection of essays, *Er groeit gras in de Weesperstraat*, Meyer Sluysker repeatedly refers to *het grote verdriet* (‘the great sadness’) caused by the Nazi war on the Jews. The book that Bart van Es has written is partly about himself and his family, which somewhat undermines its coherence, but by telling Lien’s story it also testifies to that sadness, one that non-Jews can only barely begin to comprehend, let alone share. It is to his great credit that, in telling Lien’s story, Van Es has brought us closer to sharing the great sadness.

### **About the reviewer**

Michiel Horn is professor emeritus of history and University Historian at York University (Toronto, Canada), as well as Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and Senior Fellow of Massey College in the University of Toronto. His interest in the Second World War began during the infamous “Hunger winter,” when he was a five-year-old living in Baarn, the Netherlands. He came to Canada with his family in 1952, studied at Victoria College (British Columbia, Canada), Freiburg University (Germany), and the University of Toronto, where he earned his Ph.D., joining the History department of Glendon College, York University, in 1968. Among his books is *A liberation album: Canadians in the Netherlands, 1944-1945* (1980), written with David Kaufman. His other publications include *The dirty thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (1972), *The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual origins of the democratic left in Canada* (1980), *Years of despair, 1929-1939* (1986), *Becoming Canadian: Memoirs of an invisible immigrant* (1997), *Academic freedom in Canada: A history* (1999), and *York University: The way must be tried* (2009). Further, he translated *Dagboek geschreven in Vught*, by David Koker, which appeared in English as *At the edge of the abyss: A concentration camp diary, 1943-1944* (2012).