

Review

**Jeroen De Bruyn & Joop van Wijk:
*Anne Frank, the untold story: The hidden truth about Elli
Vossen, the youngest helper of the secret annex***

Tess Stoop (trans.)

Laag-Soeren: Bep Voskuyl Producties, 2018. 268 p.

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Reviewed by Charlotte Schallié



This recent publication sets out to retrace the life story of Elisabeth (“Bep”) Voskuijl (1919-1983), one of the four Dutch rescuers who sheltered Anne Frank and seven other persecuted Jews in the rear annex of 263 Prinsengracht in Amsterdam. Whereas Miep Gies, Johannes Kleiman and Victor Kugler (who emigrated to Toronto in 1955) became well-known public figures, Bep Voskuijl kept a low profile for most of her life and only reluctantly agreed to provide eyewitness testimonies. The two authors, Belgian journalist Jeroen De Bruyn and Joop van Wijk (who is Bep Voskuijl’s youngest son) present several narrative threads: Bep’s own modest upbringing, her employment at Opekta, a company which was under the ownership of Otto Frank, her friendship with Anne Frank, her rescue efforts, and her postwar struggle to come to terms with the fact that she was unable to save those who trusted her with their lives. As the subtitle suggests, the book also advances a betrayal narrative that, as it cannot be corroborated by other evidence, remains speculative. It is suggested in the penultimate chapter that Bep largely kept the past to herself because she knew the identity of the Nazi informant who revealed the hiding place to the secret police: according to De Bruyn and Van Wijk, this person was Bep’s own sister Nelly Voskuijl (1923-2001). Ultimately, it will be up to the reader to decide if the weight of evidence pointing at Nelly Voskuijl is substantial enough to render the authors’ claim credible.

Given the voluminous amount of literature and research on Anne Frank, the authors are first and foremost tasked to demonstrate that their publication sheds a new light on the (hi)story of the failed hiding mission. Their focus on Bep Voskuijl accomplishes this objective as it presents the biography of a remarkably courageous rescuer who is undeservedly not widely known. In reconstructing Bep Voskuijl’s life, the authors consult a broad range of primary sources that are available in the collections of the Anne Frank Foundation, the NIOD Institute of War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, the National Archives of the Netherlands, the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach* and the *Landgericht Lübeck*, among others. Furthermore, the authors consulted personal documents that remain in the private collection of Joop van Wijk and conducted oral history interviews with family members, such as Bep’s sister Diny Voskuijl (b. 1932), and her former fiancé, Bertus Hulsman. Bep herself officially testified to the authenticity of Anne Frank’s diaries but gave few public interviews and shared her personal memories with only a small number of confidants. (According to Joop van Wijk, his mother corresponded with both Miep Gies and Otto Frank in the early sixties. Yet only very few of her letters to Otto Frank have survived.)

The earlier chapters illustrate how the well-known rescuers (Gies, Kleiman and Kugler) were instrumental in saving Otto Frank’s two companies in 1940. Although Otto Frank had to officially relinquish his companies to Jan Gies (Miep’s boyfriend) and Victor Kugler, the latter agreed that Otto Frank remained in charge

of his business that had been moved to 263 Prinsengracht. These chapters also give an insightful overview of the slew of anti-Jewish measures that were implemented in the wake of the German occupation. In “Our Duty (1940-1942),” the authors elaborate on how the initial plans for hiding were conceived in May and early June of 1942 between Otto Frank, Johannes Kleiman and Victor Kugler. Shortly after, the three men confided in Bep – who was at that time 23 years old – and initiated her into their rescue plans. On July 6th, the Frank family moved into the rear annex; the Van Pels family arrived one week later (they were joined by Fritz Pfeffer in November). Starting on July 15th, Dutch Jews were being deported to concentration and extermination camps in Germany and German-occupied Poland. What followed were “[t]he twenty-five most radical months in Bep’s life” (52); they are carefully reconstructed in the next four chapters referencing personal letters and eyewitness testimonies. Bep, who was mainly responsible to source and deliver food to the eight people in hiding, also made sure that the hidiers were intellectually stimulated (she signed up a few of them for correspondence courses in stenography and Latin). Bep also supplied the hidiers with small items and artefacts (flowers, postcards, and the like) that provided a link to the outside world. Bep was forced to keep all of her activities a secret that she could only share with close family members. One of her confidants was her father who worked at the warehouse at 263 Prinsengracht and ended up building the bookcase that hid the entrance to the secret annex. Various anecdotes reveal how Bep oftentimes went upstairs, joined the hidiers for lunch, and skillfully mediated disputes. A number of primary sources also suggest that Bep developed a close bond with Anne Frank who confided in her on some occasions (Bep is portrayed under the pseudonym of “Elli Vossen” in Anne Frank’s published diary). The ensuing chapter titled “The defeat (1944)” reconstructs the events on August 4, 1944; it was the day on which the secret annex was exposed. Given the importance of the betrayal narrative espoused in this book, this chapter meticulously details the events unfolding on location. The leader of the raid, Karl Josef Silberbauer, refrained from interrogating Bep (although the authors do not profess to have an answer for this procedural anomaly; it is at a later point insinuated that Bep might have been protected by her sister Nelly who was the alleged Nazi informant).

The rendering of Bep’s postwar life depicts her ongoing struggle with severe PTSD. She built walls of silence around herself that proved to be all-pervasive. In one scene, her son (and co-author of this book) Joop van Wijk recalls how he prevented his mother from overdosing with sleeping pills (139-140). It is a strength of this book that these heartbreaking episodes – including scenes detailing Bep’s marital breakdown – are depicted with deep empathy and integrity, carefully avoiding a sensationalist or melodramatic treatment.

In the later chapters, the authors probe the still unresolved question why some of the rescuers – including Bep – provided contradictory statements recounting the discovery dates of the individual diaries. Yet, the most controversial chapter of this book is “The hidden truth.” Here, the authors put forward the theory that “Nelly could be involved in the betrayal of the hidiers in some ways” (239). De Bruyn and Van Wijk also argue that Otto Frank was reluctant to pursue an investigation into the identity of the informant “out of loyalty for Bep” (239). Again, as a line of reasoning, this claim is speculative and cannot be substantiated in this publication. Moreover, the authors imply that letters with incriminating information might have been intentionally destroyed as much of the extensive correspondence between Bep and Otto has gone missing: “It’s not implausible that at least part of the missing correspondence was about Nelly” (240). It is not implausible, one could respond, but it is also not likely. Why would either Otto Frank or Bep Voskuijl have been bent on obliterating such damning evidence? This chapter – and in some ways, the final narrative thread in this multi-layered biography – ends with a more reasoned and balanced version of the initial argument: “Claiming that Nelly was the betrayer is taking it too far” (241). Whether or not Bep had suspected Nelly to be the informant, will remain a matter of conjecture – unless proven otherwise. In the same vein, it is impossible to know the reason for Bep’s reluctance to stay out of the public eye for most of her postwar life. Like many rescuers who ultimately failed to protect the lives of those entrusted to them, Bep Voskuijl may have decided to silence herself as she struggled with immense feelings of guilt.

Finally, placing Anne Frank’s hiding into context, it is estimated that 28,000 Dutch Jews went into hiding. About 13,000 of them were discovered and arrested. Approximately 104,000 Dutch Jews (75% of the Jewish population in Holland) were murdered during the Second World War. Among all the Western European countries occupied by Nazi Germany, the Netherlands had the largest percentage of Jewish victims (Romijn & Boender 2012).

Reference

Romijn, Peter & Barbara Boender, eds. 2012. *The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

About the reviewer

Dr. Charlotte Schallié is professor of Germanic Studies in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of Victoria (British Columbia, Canada). Her research interests include post-1945 diasporic and transcultural writing/

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