

# On Publishing Holocaust Memoirs: An Interview with Liesbeth Heenk, Founder of Amsterdam Publishers\*

**Liesbeth Heenk**

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**Interviewer: Rachel Leket-Mor**

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**Thank you for accepting my interview invitation. How did you become a publisher? How did your academic career in art history and other life experiences prepare you for that role?**

I am trained as an art historian and have a PhD from the University of London in Van Gogh's drawings. After an international career in the commercial art world, I began investigating how I could make my knowledge of Van Gogh widely available to a global, art-loving audience without scaring them off with overly academic discourse accompanied by unnecessary footnotes. Having discovered the ease of publishing via Amazon, I wrote and self-published a few short ebooks in English on Van Gogh, all aimed at a general readership. These booklets are still online, and although I am not too happy with their quality now—they are rather simplistic, but that is precisely what I wanted—they still serve a certain audience. That experience led me to realize that many people wanted to publish their own work but did not know how. So I started providing self-publishing and editing services and gradually also began publishing the books of my clients. It was a wonderful adventure, and I took many courses to educate myself in this new area. During the first years I did all the editing myself. From the start I have only published in English and other modern languages, but never in my own language, Dutch.

**What made you focus on Holocaust memoirs in 2019, five years after embarking on your publishing project? How would you describe the decisive moment in that conceptual switch?**

A Dutch author asked me to publish his Holocaust book in English. Since I was just starting out and did not have that many projects, I was able to dedicate a lot of time to marketing each publication. The book did very well and came to the attention of Manny Steinberg, a Holocaust survivor in Florida. Manny had published his memoirs with a small American publishing house, but much to his disappointment, the book received little notice, so he asked me to republish it.

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\* Liesbeth Heenk established Amsterdam Publishers in 2012 and is editor in chief of the publishing company.

It was in book form and the text was in rather bad shape, but in September 2014 I launched *Outcry: Holocaust Memoirs* by Manny Steinberg,<sup>1</sup> and I did my very best to make it into a success. And what a success it became! The author emailed me day and night commenting on the flood of five-star reviews on widespread bookselling and book discovery online platforms; for months on end, it was the number one bestselling title in various categories. It meant a great deal to Manny that his story was finally heard worldwide. He felt heard. When the German government invited him to Germany in April 2015, I was asked to join him and his family. Together we visited Dachau and Vaihingen an der Enz, two of the four camps he had been imprisoned in.

It was then that I truly realized the importance of publishing stories by Holocaust survivors. I made a promise to myself that I would focus on this genre as soon as I could afford it financially. It is not as popular as sci-fi, romance, or detective fiction, so it took a few years—in fact until 2019—before I could entirely apply myself to Holocaust memoirs.

**According to the Amsterdam Publishers website, it is the “premier international publisher of Holocaust memoirs in Europe.” Who are the other European publishers competing in this market? What other worldwide publishers are working in this area? In what way is your approach to the genre different?**

To be honest, I don’t know of any other European players operating in the same niche. A few publishers, such as Vallentine Mitchell from the UK/US and some Jewish publishers in the US, publish Holocaust memoirs alongside more scholarly publications. Of course, the big five publishers (Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster) also release Holocaust memoirs, but it is not their sole focus. I may be wrong, but I believe I am the only international publisher in Europe focusing on Holocaust stories. I am often asked to publish scholarly books, but I never accept such manuscripts: I very much believe in the power of narrative to make people remember what happened during the Holocaust.

**According to the Amsterdam Publishers Author Information page, you accept a “very small number of all manuscripts.” Can you estimate your acceptance rate? What parameters do you use in your manuscript review process? What type of manuscripts would you never publish? Do you have any guidelines for your editorial team, and would you share them? Could you share any recollections from your work on specific manuscripts?**

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1. Manny Steinberg. *Outcry: Holocaust Memoirs* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2014). <https://amsterdampublishers.com/books/outcry-holocaust-memoirs>.

I am not a numbers person. What I do know is that most authors submitting a manuscript get rejected or are asked to rewrite. In previous years, I had an editorial assistant read a manuscript before I did. I now read all manuscripts myself and try to do that as swiftly as possible and decide whether to accept the book for publication. Since I regard first-hand accounts written by survivors as the most important genre in the portfolio, I tend to be more flexible with accepting those. With approximately twenty publications per year, Amsterdam Publishers is too small to have hard and fast guidelines, and as a matter of fact, I do not need to have them. And yes, I do make mistakes! A well-written manuscript does not necessarily mean that it will be popular. I have Holocaust memoirs that have been written by highly intelligent survivors who have a great writing style. These, however, are not necessarily more popular than those written in simple prose. My first published Holocaust memoir—a rather straightforward, simply written book which sold more than 160,000 copies—testifies to that. Ten years after its launch, it still sells very well.

**How do you navigate difficult conversations with authors whose manuscripts are not accepted? What do you recommend authors do with rejected manuscripts?**

Unless a manuscript is very badly written, I tend to give suggestions, and sometimes offer a Zoom conversation, to guide authors in how to improve it. Whether or not they resubmit their manuscript is secondary. Once, after rejecting a manuscript, I was called an antisemite, but I took that in my stride and simply carried on. Since I know that few publishers, except for vanity presses, accept Holocaust manuscripts, I sometimes advise people to self-publish. Occasionally, I get a triumphant email from an author whose manuscript I rejected, informing me that it has been accepted for publication elsewhere. It only delights me when I see this; the more books about the Holocaust the better. I simply need to keep standards as high as possible. I owe it to my great group of authors!

**How do you explain the fact that your readership comes mostly (75 percent) from the United States while many of the Holocaust memoirs in English are published in Europe? Why are American publishers hesitant about publishing them?**

The latter is a question you would need to ask American publishers. I suppose it is a question of money. The Holocaust genre is a niche market, one that doesn't necessarily draw in a huge readership. I sell through Amazon and IngramSpark, and therefore I am not in direct contact with readers. My Amazon dashboard shows where readers are based: United states (75.7 percent), United Kingdom (10.1 percent), Germany (5.4 percent), Canada (3.1 percent), and various other countries (5.7 percent).

**What does the readership of Amsterdam Publishers books published in the other languages look like?**

The German series of ten standalone books, *Holocaust Überlebende erzählen*, is doing particularly well. It is good news that Germans seem to be appreciative of the genre, whatever the reason may be. Almost every week, at least one book of the series manages to be a number one bestseller in a particular genre on Amazon.de (Germany), such as Holocaust History or Jewish Biographies.<sup>2</sup> The rights for several books have been acquired by foreign publishers and audio companies. For instance, *The Redhead of Auschwitz: A True Story* by Nechama Birnbaum (2021) has been translated into ten different languages and does very well in all. One would think that since I am based in the Netherlands, Dutch publishers would be interested in purchasing the rights, but that is not the case. Instead, we have the books translated by a professional and then published under our own name. I tend to have our bestselling books translated into languages such as German, French, Spanish, and Italian.

**What engagement opportunities do you have with your readers through social media, book reviews, or other means? How do social media tools help you in promoting the Amsterdam Publishers mission? Do you participate in public events to promote the books and if so, in what venues and contexts?**

Marketing is limited to social media platforms such as LinkedIn, X (previously Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok every now and then, all managed by my assistant. If asked, I offer guidance to authors when it comes to public speaking events at synagogues, libraries, or museums. I have connections with institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and many of my authors have been able to hold book signing events there. Authors are always looking for opportunities to present their book in libraries and book clubs, so do drop me a line!

I do engage with my second- and third-generation authors and a few survivors in a private Amsterdam Publishers authors group on Facebook. The group was set up two years ago, during an author get-together sponsored by the Dutch consulate in New York. The group consists of almost ninety authors from all over the world. In September 2024 we gathered again, at the Marlene Meyerson JCC in Manhattan. I am not aware of any other publisher who sustains such a support group. It is heartwarming to see them together, like one big family, with similar aspirations and similar backgrounds. Quite a few friendships have formed.

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2. “Bestseller in Biographien von Juden” (Bestseller in Jewish Biographies): [https://www.amazon.de/-/en/gp/best-sellers/books/16153814031/ref=zg\\_b\\_bs\\_16153814031\\_1](https://www.amazon.de/-/en/gp/best-sellers/books/16153814031/ref=zg_b_bs_16153814031_1).

**Do you mentor and train the next generation of editors in light of your mission and the current events?**

I use professional freelance editors, all of them Jewish. They know what they are doing and do not need any guidance from me. I have an Amsterdam Publishers style guide that is edited every now and then. That is all.

**What are your thoughts about publishing memoirs of those who survived the October 7 massacre?**

I have been asked by various institutions, among them a couple of American university presses, to publish stories of the October 7 massacre. Since that date, however, I have been receiving nightly harassing anonymous calls and have decided to stick to World War II, offering free guidance instead. These institutions know they can always ask me for help. I think it is very important that the National Library of Israel is documenting the events online, so the world can remember. Libraries, museums, and publishers all have a role to play in this process.<sup>66</sup>

**According to the banner on its homepage, Amsterdam Publishers is “keeping Jewish history alive.” In what sense does your project contribute to that mission? Do publishers have a role in memory preservation, similar to that of heritage institutions like libraries and museums?**

The reservoir of true Holocaust stories continues to grow. I will consider my job to be unfinished until six million stories are told. I am 62 years old now, so hopefully still have a long time to go, but I want to ensure that even after I am gone the reservoir of stories will remain and be read. This is very important to me.

Prior to October 7, I believed Amsterdam Publishers’ books would help combat antisemitism, but I do not think that anymore. The hatred is so extensive that a small publisher from the Netherlands cannot make such bold claims. The events of October 7 have made me realize that my aims should be more modest, and I should just do what I do best: tell the stories of those who were murdered in the Holocaust.