THE MOST BELOVED of all Holocaust writers, Anne Frank, through her diary, has exerted unparalleled influence on the literary, educational, and human rights legacy of the Holocaust. Thanks to the postwar discovery of her family photo album, her sympathetic young face has become a twentieth-century icon that is recognized around the world.

Life

Anne Frank was born in 1929 in Frankfurt, Germany, to assimilated Jews, Otto and Edith Frank. With the rise of Hitler, her family emigrated to Amsterdam, Holland, where her father had established a business in pectin and cooking preparations. The vivacious girl’s normal life of friends and school ended abruptly when the Nazis seized Holland in 1940. Fearing such an invasion, her father had prepared a hiding place in the upper stories at the rear of his office building on Prinsengracht, and the family quickly moved there in 1942, when Anne’s older sister, Margot, received a notice to report for labor camp. Through Anne’s writing, the family quarters became known as the “Secret Annex.” Loyal office workers and friends in the business below the hiding place sheltered the Franks and four other Jews for two years.

Anne’s diary gives a vivid account of that time, the relationships among family members and their co-inhabitants—the Van Pels family and a dentist named Pfeffer—as well as a portrait of her own adolescent development under the psychological pressure of war, privation, and intensified searches for Jews. Anne records the daily reports from the family’s protectors on the worsening situation for all Dutch citizens and watches the round-ups of Jews for deportation.

Betrayed by an anonymous informant, the Frank family and those in hiding with them were arrested by the Gestapo on 4 August 1944 and sent to Westerbork transit camp. Their names appear on a list of prisoners on the last train to leave Holland for Auschwitz. At Auschwitz, Anne’s mother, Edith, died. Anne and Margot were later sent to Bergen-Belsen in Germany. Amid squalid conditions, first Margot, then Anne succumbed to typhus fever in March 1945, just weeks before the Allied liberation. Anne was fifteen. Only her father survived to return from Auschwitz to Amsterdam, where the Frank family’s Dutch protector, Miep Gies, presented him with Anne’s diaries and papers, which Gies had salvaged from the floor of the ransacked annex at the time of the Jews’ arrest.

The Diary

Originally published in Europe, the diary was translated from Dutch into English and released, in 1952, in the United States as Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl. It became a surprise bestseller. The popular reception of Frank’s diary in the United States—before the publication of most Holocaust literature in English—signaled the role that personal narratives and testimony would play in arousing public consciousness about Hitler’s extermination of Europe’s Jews. The subsequent adaptations of the diary for stage and screen in the 1950s sentimentalized much of the substance of the diary for popular consumption and stirred a debate about the merits of historical versus popularized representations of the Holocaust and the blurring of distinctions between the two.

The diary, however, remains preeminent in literary history. It still serves for many readers—augmented by the story of Anne Frank’s arrest and murder—as a prolegomenon to the subject of the Shoah. It became the first memoir to gain wide international attention. John Hersey’s novel The Wall had appeared one year
The diary of Anne Frank attained historical canonization across categories: in women’s autobiography, in adolescent life-writing, and in human rights memoirs. The popularity of the attractive, spunky teenager invited infantilization and romanticization, qualities that distort her image, and disregard the penetrating literary style of her text. The diary, addressed as letters to a fictional confidante named “Kitty,” is an epistolary autobiography that begins with Anne Frank’s thirteenth birthday, 12 June 1942, when she received the red-plaid diary as a gift. Approximately one month later, she records the move into the secret annex and begins the account of her family’s difficult years in hiding. The diary is broken off just days before their arrest in August 1944. During those two years of captivity, Anne honed her writing skills. She regarded the cramped attic as a laboratory for the study of human nature, especially her own, as she matured rapidly into adulthood.

In one dramatic episode of the diary (not depicted in either the play or the film), Anne describes the eight Jews listening at their forbidden radio on 28 March 1944, to a London broadcast by the Dutch government in exile. They heard the Dutch minister of education, art, and science announce plans to collect and publish after the war, accounts written by ordinary Dutch citizens, to document their lives under the occupation. He mentioned, in particular, letters, sermons, and diaries. “Of course,” Anne writes, “they all made a rush at my diary immediately. Just imagine how interesting it would be if I were to publish a romance of the ‘Secret Annex’” (The Diary of Anne Frank, the Critical Edition, Doubleday, p. 578). With this goal in mind, Anne began systematically to revise and reshape her diary for publication.

Her revisions on supplemental loose-leaf pages show the writer’s concern for future readers: “No one will grasp what I’m talking about if I begin my letters to Kitty just out of the blue, so, I’ll start by sketching in brief the story of my life” (p. 182). Anne crafts a literary exposition in which she lays out her family origins, explains the tightening anti-Jewish measures in Holland, and attaches a list of pseudonyms to shield the identities of the Jews in hiding and their Dutch protectors. On 11 May 1944 she wrote: “My greatest wish is to become a journalist someday and later on a famous writer. Whether these leanings towards greatness (insanity!) will ever materialize remains to be seen. . . . I want to publish a book entitled Het Achterhuis [the house behind] after the war” (p. 647).

That chosen title was used when the diary was first edited and published in Holland in 1949. In the 1980s, The Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation thoroughly researched, ran forensic tests on, and published the full diary along with authenticating evidence and background essays by historians. The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition is a scholarly, variorum edition and a history of the young woman who is now Holland’s most famous author.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the hardships of confinement with enforced daytime hours of silence, Anne Frank matured as a writer with time to think and to practice her craft. Her stylistic technique displays innovation and variety, while the content ranges from social satire to philosophic reflection to stark terror. She understood writing as a means of psychological exploration and a therapeutic strategy to ward off despair. Inside the front cover of the diary she wrote, “I hope that I shall be able to confide in you completely . . . and that you will be a great support and comfort to me.” On the back cover she inscribed in French, “Be good and steadfast in courage.” In between, she forged a document of searing intellectual independence that weaves together social and historical commentary with psychological and spiritual astuteness.

Books, reading, and education loomed large for the cultured German Jews in isolation. Under their father’s guidance, Anne and Margot kept up their studies and added correspondence courses in French, English, Latin, algebra, shorthand, German literature, history, classical mythology (Anne’s favorite subject), geography, and the Bible. Margot’s academic brilliance inspired the younger, more rebellious sister to keep pace. When Anne fastened her romantic hopes on the only target available, Peter Van Pels, her writing swelled with adolescent pathos, frustration, and sexual curiosity.

The diary builds through scenes of everyday life and internal bickering among the eight trapped Jews to suspenseful scenes of late night break-ins to the office below that threaten to disclose them. Anne records the news they received from their protectors on the worsening conditions for friends and Jews rounded up and
sent to Westerbork transit camp where they “are branded as inmates by their shaven heads” (p. 273). On 9 October 1942, she wonders, “If it is as bad as this in Holland whatever will it be like in the distant and barbarous regions they are sent to? We assume that most of them are murdered. The English radio speaks of their being gassed” (p. 273). Thus, the diary disproves the myth that the fate of European Jews was not known outside the camps during the war.

Anne’s meditations on human suffering, antisemitism, and injustice raise the diary to the level of serious literature. Her thoughts reach a crescendo in 1944 when Allied bombers rend the night skies, and Anne hopes that liberation is approaching. Unfortunately, the vise of terror tightens, as Anne witnesses through the attic windows during the day, the Gestapo roundups of Amsterdam’s Jews, and thus fears her own fate:

In these times, ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death, I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions . . .” (p. 694).

Thus, Anne Frank’s often-quoted pronouncement on human goodness is embedded in a dialectical context that shows her battling to retain hope amid traumatic circumstances. Her thoughts in hiding fluctuate between hope and despair. In the 1950s, the adaptations of the diary suppressed the complexity of the writer by using her words on human goodness out of context to conclude both the play and the film. Anne Frank’s idealism was simplified and emphasized to gain audience sympathy for an innocent “young girl” crushed by brutal totalitarianism, an unfair portrait of the insightful, many-sided writer.

Controversy

When the diary was first published in America in 1952, a brief introduction signed by Eleanor Roosevelt was included that praised Anne Frank as a heroic young victim of war and the diary as an anti-war document. This set the keynote for treatment of the diary during the Cold War. No mention was made of antisemitism or the Franks being targeted by the Nazis as Jews. Anne Frank’s Jewish identity was purposely down-played to serve the purposes of the times. The diary was interpreted as pleading for universal human rights, especially in the diary’s popularized adaptations as a Broadway play in 1955 and then as a Hollywood film in 1959. A controversy was precipitated by the American Jewish writer Meyer Levin, who had helped Otto Frank find an American publisher for the diary and who wrote a glowing review for the New York Times Book Review when it appeared. Levin wanted to dramatize the diary as a way of bringing the fate of the six million Jews to world attention, and he started work on a script that aired briefly on radio, but his efforts were rejected by Broadway producers. Otto Frank then turned to Lillian Hellman for advice, and she recommended the husband-and- wife team of Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Hollywood non-Jewish screenwriters, for the project. Their Pulitzer Prize-winning play was such a hit on Broadway that it went on to success in Europe and was then transformed into a Hollywood movie directed by George Stevens, bringing international renown to Anne Frank. These popularized versions of the diary ingratiated Anne with popular audiences but eliminated her reflections on antisemitism and specific mention of Hitler’s brutality toward the Jews. Hackett and Goodrich deleted Anne’s outcries against antisemitism near the end of the diary and invented a speech on the generalized nature of oppression in a speech to cheer up Peter: “We’re not the only people that’ve had to suffer. There’ve always been people that’ve had to . . . sometimes one race . . . sometimes another . . .” (p. ) This travesty distorts Anne Frank’s thinking as well as her incisive and articulate manner of expression. The story of an innocent young girl unjustly hunted by a totalitarian regime was a marketable message in the 1950s, when American political fears had shifted from fascist Germany to Communist Russia. The 1955 stage play directed by Garson Kanin and Stevens’s 1959 film both concluded with Anne’s line on human goodness and hope.

The play set off a dispute with Meyer Levin, who was infuriated by the suppression of the diary’s Jewish content. In his book, The Obsession, Levin claims that his goal was to translate Anne’s words faithfully onto the stage and to portray her victimization as a Jew. He was appalled by the pabulum of the Broadway production. Charging that the Broadway team had stolen material from his script, Levin sued Otto Frank and Kermit Bloomgarden, producer of the play, in court. The unfortunate case led to years of legal battles that resolved little but provided fodder for Holocaust deniers and revisionists. Levin died in 1981 without seeing his play produced.

A 1997 Broadway revival of the Goodrich-Hackett play, “The Diary of Anne Frank,” re-ignited the con-
trovery. Some reviews were favorable, but others objected to the now-dated, bowdlerized and popularized 1950s version. Cynthia Ozick in the New Yorker lamented the retrograde dramatization (“infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized”) and dared to wonder if history would have been better served had the famous diary been lost (6 October 1997, p. 87).

The debate about whether the diary stands for universalism or Jewish particularism often boils down to the question: How Jewish was Anne Frank? Her case highlights the elasticity of the very term Jewish identity and the fallacy of trying to evaluate retrospectively the temporal and shifting inclinations of a human sensibility. The controversy is particularly vexed in the case of a teenager, whose diary is marked by the fluctuations and questionings of adolescent development. Furthermore, life-writing as a genre records the flux and pulse of a writer’s thinking rather than decisive ideological stands. Anne Frank embraced her own multiplicity, referring to herself as “quicksilver Anne,” and a “bundle of contradictions” (pp. 696–697). She desired an active life but instead was locked away, a confinement that forced her to consider the meaning of the Jewish identity that caused her oppression. Both the universalists and the Jewish particularists who wish to claim her are able to point to passages in the diary that validate their points.

She was not a practicing Jew nor had she received a religious education, but two years of accelerating terror intensified Anne Frank’s sense of what it meant to be a Jew. She began to chart her personal suffering on the historic spectrum of antisemitism. With increased maturity, her sense of Jewish identity was became stronger until toward the end of the diary, where she mentions God and the persecution of the Jewish people more frequently.

Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God that has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again. If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good. . . . We must remain Jews, but we want to, too (p. 600).

In other passages, Anne expresses a desire above all else to become a Dutch citizen after the war. Themes of universalism and Jewish ethnicity are intermingled throughout the diary. Unlike the stage Anne, the diarist astutely recognizes and disapproves of Peter’s infantilized antisemitism, but she also dreams of the wider world, Paris, and a career as a contemporary journalist. In reading the full diary readers are confronted by the transformation of Anne’s character as she passes through the dark isolation imposed by the Nazis. Her ability to look horror in the face and record it honestly makes the diary a moving indictment of antisemitism. Her own victimization causes her not only to empathize with all Jews caught in the Nazi reign of terror but also to speak of human suffering.

In promoting the play and in founding the international Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam with proceeds from the diary, Otto Frank intended to use his daughter’s fame to further the cause of universal tolerance and human rights. He chose to emphasize the broadest possible interpretation of Anne’s writing. Who can legitimately claim that Anne Frank, had she lived, would have disagreed with that purpose? Her sense of political morality and compassion stemmed from the German-Jewish legacy, instilled by her father: “My feeling for justice is immovable” she wrote just months before her arrest (p. 601), as a corollary, she pledged, “If god lets me live, I shall not remain insignificant, I shall work in the world and for mankind!” (p. 601).

The story of this beleaguered, cosmopolitan, and lucid writer, murdered in her youth, helped to focus world attention on the Holocaust at a time when many American Jewish leaders hesitated to raise that issue for fear of arousing antisemitic sentiment. Anne Frank’s voice was praised for its courage, an acknowledgment that the voice of resistance most readily accepted by the public was that of a nonthreatening, astirly young woman. The diary is not graphic and does not describe the atrocities the concentration camps inflicted on victims but its reception must be credited with opening the way for other Holocaust writing and public understanding on a large scale. The diary overcame barriers of time, culture, ethnic bias, and popular indifference to initiate the historical process of memorializing and universalizing the Jewish victims of Hitler’s Final Solution.

Bibliography

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