

The Diary of a Young Girl

Anne Frank, born on June 12, 1929, was the second daughter of Otto and Edith Frank, both from respected German Jewish families engaged in commerce for many generations. Anne and her older sister, Margot, were raised in Germany in an atmosphere of tolerance; the Franks had friends of many faiths and nationalities.

However, the circumstances of the early 1930s dramatically altered the situation for the Frank family. The National Socialist German Workers' Party, the Nazis, ascended to power in 1933 and launched a campaign to rid Germany of its Jewish citizens. The Nazis blamed the Jews for the economic, political, and social hardships that had befallen Germany, though less than 1 percent of the German population was Jewish. Many German Jews decided to leave Germany. The Franks decided to move to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, which had been known for centuries as a safe haven for religious minorities.

By the mid-1930s the Franks were settling into a normal routine in Amsterdam. In 1938 Otto expanded his business, going into partnership with the spice merchant Hermann van Pels, also a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany.

Unfortunately, the Frank's belief that Amsterdam offered them a safe haven from Nazism was shattered when, in May 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands and the Franks were once again forced to live under Nazi rule. In the first years of the occupation, Anne and Margot continued to socialize with their friends and attend school. But the Nazi administration, in conjunction with the Dutch Nazi Party and civil service, began issuing anti-Jewish decrees. All Jews had to register their businesses and, later, surrender them to non-Jews. Fortunately, Otto Frank, in anticipation of this decree, had already turned his business over to his non-Jewish colleagues Victor Kugler and Johannes Kleiman.

By 1942 mass arrests of Jews and mandatory service in German forced-labor camps were becoming routine. Fearful for their lives, the Frank family began to prepare to go into hiding. They already had a place in mind--an annex of rooms above Otto Frank's office at 263 Prinsengracht in Amsterdam. In addition, people on the office staff at the Dutch Opekta Company had agreed to help them. Besides Kugler and Kleiman, there were Miep and Jan Gies, Bep Voskuijl, and Bep's father--all considered to be trustworthy. These friends and employees not only agreed to keep the business operating in their employer's absence; they agreed to risk their lives to help the Frank family survive. Mr. Frank also made arrangements for his business partner, Hermann van Pels, along with his wife, Auguste, and their son, Peter, to share the Prinsengracht hideaway.

While these preparations were secretly under way, Anne celebrated her thirteenth birthday on June 12, 1942. Her parents gave her a small red-and-white-plaid diary for a birthday present. More than fifty years later, this diary has become one of the best-known memoirs of the Holocaust.

Even though the hiding place was not yet ready, the Frank family realized that they had to move right away. On the evening of July 6, they moved into their hiding place. A week later, on July 13, the van Pels family joined the Franks. On November 16, 1942, the seven residents

of the Secret Annex were joined by its eighth and final resident, Fritz Pfeffer. For two years the Franks were part of an extended family in the Annex, sharing a confined space and living under constant dread of detection and arrest by the Nazis and their Dutch sympathizers.

Since the Annex was above a business, and buildings on either side were occupied, the eight residents had to be extremely quiet so they wouldn't be discovered. They also lived in fear of break-ins, which became common during the occupation. Their only link to the outside world was through their helpers and radio broadcasts from the BBC.

At approximately 10 a.m., August 4, 1944, the Frank family's greatest fear was realized. A Nazi policeman and several Dutch collaborators appeared at 263 Prinsengracht, having received an anonymous phone call about Jews hiding there, and charged straight for the bookcase leading to the Secret Annex. The residents were taken from the house, forced onto a covered truck and taken to Weteringschans Prison. Two of the helpers, Victor Kugler and Johannes Kleiman, were also imprisoned, for their role in hiding the prisoners. Miep Gies and Bep Voskuijl were not arrested, although Miep was brought in for questioning by the police.

On September 3, 1944, the residents of the Secret Annex were transported to the Auschwitz death camp in Poland. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, the men were separated from the women. Hermann van Pels was the first to die. He was soon murdered in the gas chambers. Fritz Pfeffer was moved to Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany where he died on December 20, 1944.

In October 1944 Anne, Margot, and Mrs. van Pels were transported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Edith Frank remained in the women's subcamp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she died on January 6, 1945. Thousands died from planned starvation and epidemics at Bergen-Belsen, which was without food, heat, medicine, or elementary sanitary conditions. Anne and Margot, already debilitated, contracted typhus and grew ever sicker. Both Anne, fifteen years old, and Margot, nineteen years old, died in March, 1945.

The Legacy of Anne Frank

For the two years that Anne lived in the Annex, she wrote down her thoughts and feelings. She wrote about her life with the seven other people in hiding--her parents, her sister, the van Pels family (called van Daan by Anne), and Fritz Pfeffer (called Alfred Dussel by Anne), as well as the war going on around her and her hopes for the future.

Anne Frank's story succeeds because it is a personal story that enables individuals to understand one of the watershed events of our time, and because it communicates what can happen when hate, discrimination and intolerance prevail. The essence of Anne Frank's message has become a universal symbol of tolerance, strength, and hope in the face of adversity, resonating with the feelings and attitudes of teenagers in the post-Holocaust generation.

