

Extraordinary Lives Anne Frank

Most of us enjoy a childhood filled with fun and friends and school. Imagine a childhood interrupted by hatred and fear. Imagine having to spend your teenage years hidden behind a moveable bookcase, where any sound made during the day could result in your discovery. Imagine that discovery leading to you being shot and killed, simply because your family was Jewish. This was the childhood of Annelies Marie Frank, known throughout the world as Anne Frank.

Annelies, or Anne to everyone who knew her, was born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1929. She was the second of two daughters born to Edith and Otto Frank. Anne's father was a business man and Anne was able to enjoy a comfortable early childhood even though the shadow of Nazi Germany was never far away. The Franks were a liberal Jewish family and did not observe their religion generally, but this did not stop them from being persecuted by the Nazis when they came to power. By the time Anne was four years old, the Nazis had taken control in Germany and Otto Frank had decided to move the family to Amsterdam, in the nearby Netherlands, for their safety.

Otto Frank continued to develop his businesses and was soon running two successful companies in Amsterdam, including one called Opekta. His business success, however, could not save his family from the threat of Nazi occupation. In 1940, the German army invaded the Netherlands and Anne and her family began living under the Nazi regime. The list of rules and regulations by which Jews were meant to live seemed endless. Anne and Margot, her sister, could no longer attend a school alongside Aryan children and so had to attend a segregated Jewish school. They couldn't enter certain parks or cafés and couldn't move freely around the Netherlands.

By 1941, all Jewish citizens of Germany lost their citizenship and Anne and her family were therefore effectively stateless. Otto Frank tried to arrange passage and settlement for them in the US, but immigration policies were becoming stricter because of an influx of European refugees trying to escape the Nazis in Germany. The Franks were unsuccessful in their attempts to flee and, by 1942, the situation became desperate.



In July 1942, Margot received work papers. These demanded that she report for work in Germany. The family could not allow her to be separated from them and so they hastily made arrangements to move into a secret hiding place. Otto had been working on plans for a hideout for some time. He transferred his shares from his companies into non-Jewish hands so that the companies could not be confiscated, left a note indicating that the family might have left for Maastricht or Switzerland and moved the family into the disused part of his Opekta business premises at 263 Prinsengracht. The staircase leading to this area was disguised by a bookcase across the small doorway, making it impossible to see from the room below. Eventually they were joined there by another family, the van Pels (Hermann, Auguste and Peter) and a dentist friend, Fritz Pfeffer. The place became known later as 'The Secret Annexe'.

Only four people in the offices and warehouse below knew of the hiding place: Johannes Kleimann, Miep Gies, Victor Kugler and Bep Voskuijl. The other people who worked in the offices and warehouse were not to suspect a thing. This meant the group of eight could make little noise during regular working hours.



They could only flush the toilet in their bathroom, run water and move about freely when all the employees had returned home for the evening. At that time, they would congregate in the offices downstairs to listen to the radio, wash in the kitchen and exercise in the larger rooms downstairs. They were never able to go outside the office building and relied on their helpers for food, books and news of the outside world. The children could not attend school and so Margot, Anne and Peter took a correspondence course in shorthand, enrolled under Miep Gies' name.

For her thirteenth birthday in June 1942, Anne had received an autograph book with a lock and a red and white check cover. She decided to use the book as a diary to record her daily life. She gave the diary a name: 'Kitty'. Every time she wrote in the diary, she addressed Kitty as if she were a friend far away. This is the diary Anne used to record life before and during their period of hiding. She recorded, in honest detail, her arguments with her mother, her feelings for her sister and father and her awakening interest in the boy who lived with them, Peter. The work shows a forthright young girl, obsessed with the same things that worry everyone at that age.

The difference is that, every now and then, the shadow of the war seeps into her writing as she discusses what she has heard of her old friends, the war effort, the Nazi regime. Through this diary, Anne discovered her love of writing and a desire to write stories. Little did she know that it was the diary itself that would make her world famous.

Other Young Diarists of the Second World War

Since the amazing success of Anne Frank's diary, a wealth of other diaries from young people caught up in the events of the Second World War have come to light. Here are just a few you might want to find out more about.

Miriam Cheszczewascki

Miriam was 15 years old in 1939, when she began to write about being interred in the Radomsko Ghetto in Poland. She probably died at Treblinka concentration camp in 1942. Her notebooks were given to her old teacher after the war who took them to Israel.

Rut 'Rutka' Laskier (1929-1942)

Rut wrote about her teenage years spent in the Bedzin Ghetto in Poland. The diary remained with an old friend for 64 years until finally being published in 2006.

The family managed to keep their location a secret throughout the rest of 1942 and 1943. In August 1944, however, time ran out for the Frank family. On the morning of 4th August, a police car pulled up outside the office building and armed men got out. The man in charge asked to see the storeroom and immediately went to the bookcase that hid the entrance to the Frank's hiding place. It seemed someone had spoken to the police about the family's whereabouts. The Dutch nationals who had helped them were questioned and some were detained for the course of the war. The fate of the Jewish occupants of the secret annexe was far worse.

By 8th August, the eight Jews – who had been hidden in the Opekta building for over two years at this point – were transported to Westerbork, a transit camp for Jews. The group were then transferred to Auschwitz in Poland, where they were all separated. Anne, Margot and Edith Frank managed to stay together for a time, but the girls were later parted from their mother to be sent to Bergen-Belsen in Germany to work. The pair survived the winter at the camp, but died of typhus in February or March 1945.

The fate of the other occupants of the annexe was equally horrible. Fritz Pfeffer died on 20th December 1944 at Neuengamme concentration camp. Edith Frank had died in Auschwitz on 6th January 1945. Hermann van Pels had been sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz and Peter van Pels had died of exhaustion at Mauthausen concentration camp in May 1945, the day the Netherlands was liberated from the occupying forces. Auguste van Pels died at Buchenwald camp in Germany. Only Otto Frank survived the war and returned to a liberated Netherlands.

It took Otto Frank four months to travel from Auschwitz to Amsterdam after his liberation from the camp. When he arrived on 3rd June 1945, he hoped to find that his daughters Anne and Margot had made it back before him. He immediately returned to see the friends who had helped them during the war, but no one had heard from his children. Otto tried putting advertisements in papers and questioned everyone he could find about the whereabouts of his family. Eventually, he met with two sisters who had been at Bergen-Belsen when Anne and Margot died.

Miep Gies had been a particular friend to Anne during her time in the annexe. She had kept Anne's diary for her, retrieving it after the raid on the annexe had taken place. Now that she knew Anne would not be returning for it, Miep gave the red and white checked book to Otto. On reading it, Otto realised that there were many things about Anne he'd never known. She had written in her diary that 'You've known for a long time that my greatest wish is to be a journalist, and later on, a famous writer ... In any case, after the war I'd like to publish a book called The Secret Annexe.'

Otto decided that he would try to make his daughter's wish come true and, two years after the war, 'Het Achterhuis' or 'The Secret Annexe' was published.

It was published in 1952 in English under the title 'The Diary of a Young Girl' and soon became the bestselling work it is today. Translations now appear in over sixty languages. The building where the Franks, Fritz Pfeffer and the van Pels hid for two years is now a museum dedicated to educating people about the Holocaust.

Esther 'Etty' Hillesum

Esther wrote about the persecution of Dutch Jews and her awakening spirituality. She refused to enter hiding, since she was working with those Jews in transit to Westerbork. She was aged 29 when she died at Auschwitz.

Yoko Moriwaki (1932–1945)

Yoko was a Japanese citizen who recorded daily life in Hiroshima, Japan during the war. Her diary, started in April 1945, came to an abrupt end on 6th August 1945 with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. Her brother made publication of the volume possible.

Tatyana 'Tanya' Nikolayevna Savicheva (1930–1944)

Tatyana was a young Russian diarist who wrote during the Siege of Leningrad in 1944. She had two diaries, but the larger of these was burned when no more wood was available to keep the family warm. The surviving notebook records simply the dates of her family members' deaths.

