A Tragedy Revealed: A Heroine’s Last Days

Based on the article by Ernst Schnabel

Last year in Amsterdam, Holland, I found an old reel of movie film on which Anne Frank appears. She is seen for only ten seconds. The film was taken for a wedding in 1941, the year before Anne Frank and seven others went into hiding. For just a moment, the camera swings to the left, to a window. There a girl stands alone, looking out into space. It is Anne Frank.

Anne Frank is dead now, but her spirit has shaped the world. Her diary has been read in almost every language. The play based on the diary has been a great success.

Last year I set out to find out what happened to this girl who has become a legend. I traveled to the places where she had lived. I talked with forty-two people who knew Anne or who survived the events that killed her. They said the same thing the diary shows. Anne Frank, even in the worst times, had a strong spirit.

The story written in the diary is a story of relationships between people. It is the story of a smart girl who is thirteen when her diary begins and only fifteen when it ends. It is a story without violence, yet it is caused by the worst act of violence in the history of man, Adolf Hitler’s murder of six million European Jews.

In the summer of 1942, Anne Frank, her father, her mother, her older sister Margot, and four others were forced into hiding during the Nazi takeover of Holland. Their hiding place was a tiny apartment they called the Secret Annex. It was located in the back of an Amsterdam office building. For twenty-five months they all lived in the Secret Annex. They were protected only by a swinging bookcase and by a few Christians who helped them. Anne Frank’s diary talks about their difficult lives in the small space.
The actual diary ends with an entry for August 1, 1944. The play goes further. It tries to recreate the events of August 4, 1944. That was the day the Secret Annex was found and the people inside were arrested.

What really happened on that August day fourteen years ago was far less dramatic than what is shown on the stage. That morning everyone had finished a poor breakfast of fake coffee and bread. Mrs. Frank was about to clear the table. Anne Frank was very likely at work on one of the short stories she often wrote. In a tiny attic room Otto Frank was correcting the English lesson of Peter Van Daan, an eighteen-year-old boy who lived in the Secret Annex. A

In the main part of the building, two men and two young women were working at their regular jobs. For more than two years these four had risked their lives to protect their friends. The workers gave them food and brought them news of the outside world. The women were Miep and Elli. The men were Kraler and Koophuis, spice merchants who had worked with Otto Frank before the Nazi takeover.

I spoke to Miep, Elli, and Mr. Koophuis in Amsterdam. The two women had not been arrested after the raid on the Secret Annex. Koophuis had been released in poor health after a few weeks in prison. Kraler, who now lives in Canada, had later escaped from a forced labor camp. B
Elli remembered, “A car drove up in front of the house. But cars often stopped. Then the front door opened, and someone came up the stairs. I could hear that there were several men.”

Miep said, “The footsteps moved along. Then a door creaked, and a moment later the door to Mr. Kraler’s office opened. A fat man said in Dutch, ‘Quiet. Stay in your seats.’ I did not know what was happening. But then, suddenly, I knew.”

Mr. Koophuis is now in very poor health. He added, “I suppose I did not hear them because of the spice mills in the warehouse. The fat man’s head was the first thing I knew. He came in. ‘You three stay here, understand?’ he barked. So we stayed in the office and listened as someone else went upstairs. Doors rattled. Then there were footsteps everywhere. They searched the whole building.”

Mr. Kraler wrote and told me, “A police sergeant and three men entered my office. They wanted to see the storerooms in the front part of the building. At the end of the corridor they drew their revolvers and the sergeant ordered me to push aside the bookcase and open the door behind it. He knew everything. The policemen followed me. I could feel their pistols in my back. I was the first to enter the Franks’ room. Mrs. Frank was standing at the table. I managed to say ‘The Gestapo is here.’”

Otto Frank is now sixty-eight. He has remarried and lives in Switzerland. Of the eight who lived in the Secret Annex, he is the only one who survived. Mr. Frank told me about the events of that morning: “I was showing Peter Van Daan his spelling mistakes when suddenly someone came running up the stairs. Then the door flew open and a man stood before us holding his pistol aimed at my chest.

“In the main room stood a uniformed policeman. He stared into our faces.

“Where are your valuables?” he asked. I pointed to the cupboard where my cash box was kept. The policeman took it out. Then he looked around. His eye fell on the leather briefcase where Anne kept her diary and all her papers. He opened it and shook everything out. Anne’s papers and notebooks and
loose sheets lay scattered at our feet. A The policeman put our valuables into the briefcase and closed it. He asked us whether we had any weapons. But we had none, of course. Then he said, 'Get ready.'

Otto Frank remembered, “No one wept. Anne was very quiet. Perhaps that was why she did not think to take along her notebooks. All was lost now. She walked back and forth and did not even glance at her diary.” B

As the people left the building, Miep listened. “I heard them going,” she said, “first in the corridor and then down the stairs. I could hear the heavy boots and the footsteps, and then the very light footsteps of Anne. Through the years she had taught herself to walk so softly that you could hear her only if you knew what to listen for. I did not see her. The office door was closed as they all passed by.”

At police headquarters the prisoners were questioned only briefly. Otto Frank pointed out that after two years in the Secret Annex, they knew little about other Jews who might be in hiding.

The Franks and their friends were kept at police headquarters for several days. The men were in one cell, the women in the other. They were fairly comfortable there. The food was better than the food they had had in the Secret Annex. The guards left them alone.

Suddenly, all eight were taken to the railroad station and put on a train. The guards said they were going to Westerbork, a work camp for Jews in Holland, about eighty miles from Amsterdam. Mr. Frank said, “We rode in a regular passenger train. We were together and had been given a little food for the journey. We were actually cheerful. We knew what was happening to Jews in Auschwitz. But we hoped our luck would hold.” C

“As we rode, Anne would not move from the window. It was summer outside. After two years it was like freedom for her. Can you understand that?” D

One of the people who had known the Franks at Westerbork was Mrs. de Wiek, who lives in Holland. I visited her home. She
told me that her family, like the Franks, had been in hiding before they were captured. She said: "We had been at Westerbork three or four weeks when the word went around that there were new arrivals. News of that kind ran like wildfire through the camp. My daughter Judy came running to me, calling, 'New people are coming, Mama!'

"The newcomers were standing in a long row. We looked at them. Judy pressed close against me. Most of the people in the camp were adults. I had often wished for a young friend for Judy, who was only fifteen.

"In the long line stood this girl. And I said to Judy, 'Look, there is a friend for you.'

"I saw Anne Frank and Peter Van Daan every day in Westerbork. They were always together, and I often said to my husband, 'Look at those two beautiful young people.'

"Anne was happy there, incredible as it seems. Things were hard for us in the camp. We "convict Jews" who had been arrested in hiding places had to wear blue overalls with a red bib and wooden shoes. Three hundred people lived in each barrack. We were sent to work at five in the morning. The guards all screamed 'Faster, faster!' But Anne was happy. Now she could see new people and talk to them and could laugh. She could laugh while the rest of us thought: Will they send us to the camps in Poland? Will we live through it?

"Otto Frank was quiet. He lived in the men's barracks, but once when Anne was sick, he came over to visit her every evening. He would stand beside her bed for hours, telling her stories. Anne was so like him. When another child, a twelve-year-old boy named David, fell ill, Anne stood by his bed and talked to him. David and Anne always talked about God."

Anne Frank stayed at Westerbork for only three weeks. Early in September a thousand of the "convict Jews" were put on a freight train, with seventy-five people in each car. The Nazis were losing the war. But it was too late. The Franks and their friends were already on the way to Auschwitz, the camp in Poland where four million Jews died.
Mrs. de Wiek was in the same freight car as the Franks. “Now and then the train stopped,” she told me. “The guards came to the door and held out their caps and we had to toss our money and valuables into the caps. Anne and Judy sometimes pulled themselves up to the window of the car and described the villages we were passing through. We made the children repeat the addresses where we could meet after the war if we became separated. The Franks chose a meeting place in Switzerland.

On the third night, the train stopped and the doors of the car opened. The tired passengers saw bright lights shining on the train. On the platform, guards were running back and forth shouting orders. Behind them stood officers with huge dogs. As the people poured out of the train, a loudspeaker roared, “Women to the left! Men to the right!”

Mrs. de Wiek, her daughter, Mrs. Frank, Margot, and Anne had a long, hard march to the women’s camp at Auschwitz. The next day their heads were shaved. Then the women were put to work digging up grass. As they worked each day, thousands of others were killed in the gas chambers. Black smoke rose from the stacks of the huge buildings where the bodies were burned.

Mrs. de Wiek saw Anne Frank every day. “Anne seemed even more beautiful there,” Mrs. de Wiek said. “Of course her long hair was gone. Now you could see that her beauty was in her eyes, which seemed to grow bigger. She was still alert and sweet.

“Though she was the youngest, Anne was the leader in her group of five people. Many people were dying, some of starvation, others of weakness and despair. It was almost impossible not to give up hope. When a person gave up, his face became empty and dead. The Polish woman doctor who had been caring for the sick said to me, ‘You will pull through. You still have your face.’

“Anne Frank, too, still had her face, up to the very last. To the last also she was moved by the dreadful things. Who was troubled that every day new people were being selected and gassed? Most of us were beyond feeling. But not Anne. Anne cried when we marched past the children who had been waiting half a day in the rain in front of the gas chambers.”
Late in October there was a selection to send prisoners away from Auschwitz. Only those able to do hard work were being chosen. The women waited naked for hours outside. Then, one by one, they went back inside for a doctor to check them. Many of the women lied about their age and health in the hope that they would escape the almost certain death of Auschwitz. Mrs. de Wiek was rejected. So was Mrs. Frank.

“Next it was the turn of the two girls, Anne and Margot,” Mrs. de Wiek recalled. “Anne still had her face. She encouraged Margot. There they stood for a moment, naked. Anne looked straight and stood straight. Then they were approved and passed along. We could not see what was on the other side. Mrs. Frank screamed, ‘The children! Oh, God!’”

The record of most of the other people from the Secret Annex ends at Auschwitz. Mrs. Frank starved to death there two months later. When the Nazis fled Auschwitz just before the Russians arrived in January 1945, they took Peter Van Daan with them. It was bitter cold and the roads were covered with ice. Peter Van Daan was never heard of again. Only Otto Frank
remained there alive until the prisoners were freed. Anne and Margot had been selected for shipment to Bergen-Belsen, a camp in Germany. 

Last year I drove the 225 miles from Amsterdam to Belsen and spent a day there walking over the grounds. My guide first showed me the cemetery where 50,000 Russian prisoners of war, captured in an early battle, were buried in 1941. Next to them is a cemetery for Italians. No one knows exactly how many bodies are in that mass grave.

About a mile farther we came to the main site of the Bergen-Belsen camp. Anne Frank is buried there somewhere.

The Allies were getting closer, but that did not help the prisoners much. At Bergen-Belsen there were no roll calls, no organization, and almost no sign of the Nazis. Prisoners lived without hope. They died of hunger, thirst, and sickness.
The Auschwitz group had at first been assigned to live in tents. One night a great windstorm brought the tents crashing down. The people living in them were then put in wooden barracks. Mrs. B. of Amsterdam remembered about Anne: “We lived in the same block and saw each other often. In fact, we had a party together. We had saved up some stale bread, and we cut this up and put onions and boiled cabbage on the pieces. Over our feast we nearly forgot our misery for a few hours. We were almost happy in spite of everything.”

One of Anne Frank’s best friends in Amsterdam was a girl named Lies Goosens. Lies is often mentioned in the diary. She was captured before the Franks were found in the Secret Annex. Anne wrote of her great fears for the safety of her friend. Lies now lives in Jerusalem. But she was in Bergen-Belsen in February 1945 and heard that a group of Dutch Jews had been moved into the next building.

Lies said, “I waited until night. Then I went over to the barbed wire which separated us from the newcomers. I called softly into the darkness, ‘Is anyone there?’

“A voice answered, ‘I am here. I am Mrs. Van Daan.’

“We had known the Van Daans in Amsterdam. I told her who I was and asked whether Margot or Anne could come to the fence. Mrs. Van Daan answered that Margot was sick but that Anne could probably come.

“I waited, in the darkness. It took a long time. But suddenly I heard a voice: ‘Lies? Lies? Where are you?’

“Then I saw Anne beyond the barbed wire. She was in rags. I saw her sunken face in the darkness. Her eyes were very large. We cried and cried as we told each other our sad news.

“My block still had food and clothing. Anne had nothing. She was freezing and starving. I called to her in a whisper, ‘Come back tomorrow. I’ll bring you something.’

“And Anne called across, ‘Yes, tomorrow. I’ll come.’

“I saw Anne again when she came to the fence on the following night,” Lies continued. “I had packed up a jacket and
sugar and a tin of sardines for her. I called out, ‘Anne, watch now!’ Then I threw the bundle across the barbed wire.

“But I heard only screams and Anne crying. I shouted, ‘What’s happened?’ And she called back, weeping, ‘A woman caught it and won’t give it to me.’ Then I heard rapid footsteps as the woman ran away. Next night I had only a pair of stockings, but this time Anne caught it.”

In the last weeks at Bergen-Belsen, Germany was attacked from both sides by the Russians and the Western Allies. There was almost no food at all in the camp. The roads were blocked. The railroads had been bombed. Still, bodies were burning night and day. Then came an outbreak of typhus, a deadly fever.

Both Anne and Margot Frank caught the disease in late February or early March of 1945. Margot lay unconscious for several days. Then, she somehow rolled from her bed and died.

The death of Anne Frank passed almost without notice. I met no one who remembers being with her in that moment. So many were dying. One woman said, “I feel certain she died because of her sister’s death. Dying is easy for anyone left alone in a camp.” Mrs. B., who had shared the pitiful feast with Anne, knows a little more: “Anne, who was very sick at the time, was not informed of her sister’s death. But a few days later she sensed it. Soon afterward she died, peacefully.”

Three weeks later British troops freed the prisoners at Bergen-Belsen.

Miep and Elli, the heroic young women who had protected the Franks for two years, found Anne’s papers the week after the police came to the Secret Annex. “It was terrible when I went up there,” Miep recalled. “Everything had been turned upside down. On the floor lay clothes, papers, letters, and school notebooks. And among the clutter lay a notebook with a red-checked cover. I picked it up, looked at the pages, and recognized Anne’s handwriting.”

Elli cried as she spoke to me: “The table was still set. There were plates, cups, and spoons, but the plates were empty. I was so
frightened. We sat down on the floor and leafed through all the papers. They were all Anne's. We gathered all of them and locked them up in the main office.

“A few days later M. came into the office. M. now had the keys to the building. He said to me, ‘I found some more stuff upstairs.’ He handed me Anne’s papers. How strange, I thought, that he should be the one to give these to me. But I took them and locked them up with the others.”

Miep and Elli did not read the papers they had saved. All of them were kept in the safe until Otto Frank returned to Amsterdam. Thus Anne Frank’s voice was saved out of the millions that were silenced. It speaks for those millions and has outlasted the loud shouts of the murderers.