

# War as a Personal Narrative: Reading Anne Frank's The Diary of a Young Girl

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## Abstract

Through an analysis of *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, this paper has tried to understand the experiences of people under the regime of Adolf Hitler, one of the key players in the Second World War. It looks at a first-person narrative that portrays the atrocities of the deadliest conflict in human history. Through the eyes of a young girl who significantly remains absent from the pages of history books.

**Keywords:** First-person narrative, Persecution, Holocaust, World War II

After the invasion of the Netherlands by Nazi Germany in 1940, the world witnessed the Holocaust that resulted in the extermination of Jews along with other groups such as the Roma, as well as ethnic Poles and other Slavs under the command of Adolf Hitler. Efforts to save themselves lead many people to go into hiding and Anne Frank's family was one of them. In hiding Anne wrote her diary, filling it with everyday experiences of living in trauma and terror and questioning the futility of war. The *Diary of Anne Frank* published posthumously by her father, Otto Frank, the only survivor of the family in 1945, maps her life in hiding from 1942 to 1944. This memoir is not merely the reflection of a single life; rather it represents the trauma and agony of people living this appalling experience. Though Anne Frank died on 31 March 1945, her diary continues to remain one of the most enduring texts of World War II.

The *Diary of a Young Girl*, also known as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, is a book of entries in a Dutch language diary kept by Anne Frank while she was in hiding for two years with her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Anne's family was apprehended in 1944, and Anne Frank died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. The diary was later retrieved by Miep Gies, who gave it to Anne's father, Otto Frank. The diary has since been published in more than 60 languages.

After the collapse of the German Empire in 1918 as a result of its defeat in World War I, Adolf Hitler rose to power as the leader of the Nazi party and preached the supremacy of the so-called German or Aryan race. German forces vigorously implemented Hitler's racial policies. For the "Jewish question" as he called it, Hitler adopted the

'Final solution'—extermination. To avoid the ghettoization of the concentration camps and escape the painfully slow death under Gestapo, people started to live in hiding and also flee the country if there is time. Otto Frank's family had no time to flee. Sensing the danger of persecution they went into hiding in July 1942 in the secret rooms of Otto Frank's office building.

On June 12, 1942, Anne's 13th birthday, Anne was gifted a blank diary. According to the Anne Frank House, the red, checkered autograph book which Anne used as her diary was not a surprise. She had already chosen it the day before with her father when browsing a bookstore near her home. She began to write in it on June 14, 1942. "Paper is more patient than man", relying on the saying Anne Frank decided to confide in her diary, directing her conflicting emotions to paper. This diary later becomes one of the most significant documents to mirror the sufferings of the Jews under German occupation. Anne documented every aspect of her life during these two years and this gives the readers an insight into the psyche of young girls under Hitler's regime. In an article titled "Holocaust Education Is the Key to Preventing Genocide in the Future" in *The Press*, dated November 8, 1995, Professor Yehuda Bauer remarks "few stories have achieved the mythic quality of Anne Frank's diary, and few stories have so deeply affected millions of people around the world".

Anne's diary reveals her enclosed life in the Secret Annexe spent along with the seven other members. The development of her personality in the two years of hiding is quite evident in her diary. For Anne life under German occupation was not much different from what it had been before. She was compelled to leave the Montessori school and attend the Jewish Lyceum. Later though, things turn around when the Frank family had to move in with the Van Pels and Mr. Fritz Pfeffer. The memoir records her various states of mind and the outbursts of adolescent demeanor.

Disillusionment and the feeling of loneliness led Anne to a state of exasperation making her the reason for most of the conflicts in the Secret Annexe. The constant clashes with her mother and the tumultuous relationship with her sister, Margot, made her lonelier. In one entry she mentioned: "Just had a big bust with mummy for the umpteenth time; we simply don't get on together these days and Margot and I didn't hit it off any well together"(September 27, 1942, p. 35). She found solace in

her father who was very sympathetic to Anne, "I cling to daddy because it is only through him that I can retain the remnant of family feeling"(November 7, 1942, p. 47).

Anne addressed her diary as Kitty, and the inanimate object got to see all sides of its owner—her social views, emotional frenzy, love and compassion for others who are suffering, and a hint of the political denomination. She listened to the radio for news about the war and the political changes that had impacted her life. The constant bombings and rising death tolls worried her. Anne's compassionate nature saddened her as she witnessed the torment and death of countless homeless people while she lived securely and in relative comfort, "I feel wicked sleeping in a warm bed, while my dearest friends have been knocked down or have fallen into a gutter somewhere out in the cold night...and all because they are Jews"(November 19, 1942, p. 55).

Though trapped in the Annexe for two whole years, the people inside did not stop reading and the children of the house continued to have education through correspondence courses. Anne's hobbies mostly included reading, writing, and composing—activities that helped her keep her mind away from anxiety and be informed about the world at the same time. She mentions in one of her entries, "Ordinary people won't understand what books mean to us, shut up here. Reading, learning and radio are our only amusement"(July 11, 1943, p. 84). She also found excitement in searching for family trees of French, Spanish, German, English, and Austrian, Russian, and Dutch royal families in all the newspapers, books, and pamphlets she could find. Hoping to become a successful journalist one day, she kept writing and working on enhancing her talent. She disregarded those unambitious girls who saw themselves only as 'future housewives'; she had a thorough career plan for herself, "I know that I'm a woman, a woman with inward strength and plenty of courage"(April 11, 1944, p. 196).

Anne's diary portrays her romantic interest in Peter Van Pels, the son of Hermann and Auguste van Pels, who was also living in the Secret Annexe. The desire to feel loved, understood, and secure inclined her toward Peter who was as vulnerable as her, and hence the friendship grew quickly. Their shared experiences of living in fear, the impact of war, and of having common issues with their respective mothers helped them to open up to each other.

A very optimistic Anne sometimes became depressed with the war and tried to deny it altogether, "I do talk about 'after the war', but then it is only a castle in the air, something which will never happen"(November 8, 1943, p. 111). At times like this, the helpers who were the source of sustenance for the people in Secret Annexe proved to be an inspiration. They were risking their own lives to help and save others. Throughout their tenure in

the Annexe they came upstairs every day and talked to the men about business and politics, to the women about food and wartime difficulties, and about newspapers and books to the children. They put on their brightest possible faces, bringing flowers and gifts on birthdays and being as helpful as ever. These people such as Victor Kugler, Miep Gies, Johannes Kleiman, and Bep Voskuijl made Anne and the other members comfortable as much as they could for which Anne was very grateful. Meeting and interacting with these people helped her to calm down her nerves.

Life in the Secret Annexe had its moments of crisis. The residents had to remain silent and still during the daytime as there was an office beneath their living area and they could move around only at night. Attempts at a burglary at night in the office below made the situation tense. The door of the Annexe would be bolted and the people would hide behind a bookshelf, holding each other tight, and spend the night without sleep. To avoid any detection at such times they had to often relieve themselves in a bucket. Since the members were dependent on the helpers for food and other commodities, problems in the helpers' lives meant that the lives of the residents were at stake. Miep's problems with her engagement or the ill health of Mr. Kugler or Kleiman were times of great concern and stress for the residents.

At the beginning of the hiding days, Anne was very clumsy and often vented her anger and outrage. However, as the diary progresses by a year and half the entries reveal that she looks back and contemplates and feels very embarrassed about her behavior. She becomes more aware of the point of view expressed by others, the agony, and suffocation that was common to all living in the Secret Annexe. She also felt close to her sister and became more understanding toward her mother. Not only did Anne evolve personally but her experiences made her more gentle and tolerant, "Margot has grown so sweet... isn't nearly so catty these days and is becoming a real friend. She no longer thinks of me like a baby who doesn't count"(January 12, 1944, p. 131).

Anne Frank's diary ends on 1st August 1944 after which on 4th August 1944, the following information was provided by a Dutch informer— the Gestapo discovered and entered Otto Frank's hiding place. All the eight Jews were separated soon after spending a few days in the Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam. On 3rd September, Otto Frank saw the last of his family. The last section of the diary contains the experiences of Anne and the other members in different concentration camps based on the recollections of some survivors. About Anne, one survivor recalled, "I can still see her standing at the door and looking down the Camp street as a herd of naked gypsy girls was driven by to the crematory, and Anne watched them go and cried"(Afterword in *The Diary of a Young Girl*). Otto Frank, the only survivor of all the members, on being released after the war was over, found the notebooks

and papers in Anne's handwriting saved by Miep and Bep. On the insistence of a Dutch university professor, the diary was formally published with the name *Het Achterhuis: Dagboekbrieven 14 Juni 1942 – 1 Augustus 1944* (The Annex: Diary Notes 14 June 1942 – 1 August 1944) as was fantasized by Anne once in her diary. Later the name was changed to *The Diary of a Young Girl* and continues to remain so.

Albert H. Friedlander in an essay titled "The Resonance of Anne Frank in our Time" in *Anne Frank in the World: Essays and Reflection* by Carol Rittner(1998), talked about the frequently asked question "Can one still write to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam?" He remembered how Otto Frank was persistent in answering the letters and did not stop until he had answered the very last, so though there is still a community to answer the letters, the best answers according to Friedlander, were given by Anne herself who had integral belief in humanity more than anything else. A diary gifted to a girl on her 13th birthday made its way into the heart of the whole world. Anne Frank's wish "I want to go on living even after my death" came true.

Life during Holocaust and the suffering became known to the world through Anne's diary. Though many are of the view that it is not an original piece of work but the musings of an ambitious writer who wrote many copies before making the final draft, Anne Frank's diary is remarkable in the manner it had touched the lives of millions of people and the inspiration that it still offers. The diary kept Anne company during the most crucial years of her life and became her confidant. Her entry on 2nd January 1944 is living proof of the testament, "this diary is of great value to me because it has become a book of memoirs in many places but on a good many pages I could certainly put past and be done with"(January 2, 1944, p. 123).

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