

ANNE FRANK REMEMBERED

by Anna Schafer

Most of us have read the story of Anne Frank and her diary. In much of the world it has been part of the school curriculum ever since the book's first publication in 1947. Anne's main message has always been seen as one of optimism and conciliation in the face of the utter barbarism of her time. At the age of 14, in her diary entrance of the 15th of July, 1944. she makes her famous statement:

“Still, I keep my ideals, because, in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.“ (p.237)

Anne was born July 12 1929 in Frankfurt. Because of rising Anti-Semitism the family left Germany in 1933 and settled in the Netherlands.

I myself was born ten years later, in April 1939 in Vienna, a year after the annexation of Austria and six months before the German attack on Poland. When I was three I was sent by train to North Germany to non-Jewish relatives, who lived in the small village of Andorf, near the Dutch border.

Anne and I shared our first names, Anne. We also shared two languages and cultures, German and Dutch. However, Anne knew that her family was in hiding because they were Jews. I did not discover my Jewishness until I was an adult.

We both lived through all six years of WWII. They were Anne's last and my first years of life. There are barely 200 km between Amsterdam and Andorf and the Bergen-Belsen camp where Anne died in early March 1945 is only 150 km east of Andorf.

In her diary Anne describes her war experiences, the sirens, the explosions, whole streets of Amsterdam in flames. My earliest memories are similar. Many times I was pulled out of bed in the middle of the night, women gathering with children in their arms. There were airplanes whining, whispering in the dark. Someone put a blanket around me. And yes, across the fields I saw our village in flames.

The saddest day was when my beloved Uncle Heini, in whose home I lived, was

called up. I remember him in his uniform. I remember my aunt's – Tante's - tears and his brave smile when he left the village on his bicycle. We never saw him again.

Growing up in Germany in the 1940s we heard and knew nothing about Jews or the Holocaust. Any questions we may have had remained unasked and unanswered.

Later on, when I was in High School, it was our history teacher, Herr Seele, who saw it his duty as an educator to inform us. He did so by reading The Diary of Anne Frank with us.

How did we respond? I only remember stunned silence. Being so close in age to the young hidiers, we felt deeply for them and were horrified that those atrocities had been committed by our own parent generation such a short while ago.

In that same year 1957 I also read in a letter not intended for my eyes, that on September 28, 1942 my father was executed as a 'political Jew' at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. It took many years before I shared this discovery with anyone.

The same year, 1957, saw the publication of THE WHITE ROSE by Inge Scholl, an account of the fates of her own brother and sister, Hans and Sophie Scholl. In 1942 a group of university students and staff had produced and distributed anti Nazi leaflets at several German universities. Five of these young people, including Hans and Sophie, then 25 and 22 were captured and executed in Munich on January 22nd 1943.

In the German postwar era, Anne Frank and Hans and Sophie Scholl became our idols of courage, endurance and resistance in a Germany that had fallen into barbarism.

How did we respond? Many of us joined international efforts, to rebuild what had been so callously destroyed. The most popular destination was a kibbutz in the newly founded Israel. We were often met with suspicion, hostility and derision. Most of us remained silent. After all the author Herrmann Hesse had told us:

"It is incumbent on the youth of Germany to realize...the ignominy which...the massacre of the Jews has brought on Germany, and it is the duty of German youth to

reject...the false thinking of that generation...".

Does Anne ever express anger with her elders? She mentions many run-ins with the adults in the attic, especially with her mother and coolly concludes:

“Grown-ups are such idiots”

However, rage against a generation that had sacrificed its young to war IS expressed, especially in the 1955 stage adaptation:

“We’re young, Margot and Peter and I!...but look at us...it isn’t our fault that the world is in such mess. We weren’t around when all this started...so don’t take it out on us.”

In Anne’s Diary especially her mother comes across as a rather cold, unfeeling woman. However, according to a survivor of Auschwitz where the family had been interred, it was there in the absolute misery of the camp that Mrs Frank had the bitter opportunity to show and receive love:

“They were always together, mother and daughters...whatever discord you might infer from (Anne’s) diary, was swept away now...by giving each other mutual support, they were able to keep each other alive....”

In recent years Anne’s diary has received renewed attention. The greatest eye and mind opener for me was the author Rachel Brenner’s [Writing as Resistance, Four Women Confronting the Holocaust \(1997\)](#). Here Anne Frank stands among four accomplished Jewish Women intellectuals, the Czech-German Edith Stein, the French Simone Weil, and the Dutch Ety Hillesum. All left behind diaries and all died in the Holocaust. All were Anne’s seniors by at least 15 years.

Their writings express their will to endure, to resist the horrors of dehumanization, and to maintain faith in humanity under hellish circumstances. As for their common Jewish heritage, Brenner sees Anne as the “least Christian”, (least assimilated?) of the four, the one who in her search for self-identity is most inspired by a truly liberal Jewish ethos: Religious tolerance, human solidarity and openness to all cultures. These are the

principles that had been transmitted to her by her German-Jewish ancestors, especially her father.

So I think a special homage to Otto Frank is due, although he received little but criticism for what he tried to do and be. Anne describes him as a truly good person, rational, peace loving, optimistic to a fault and above all, forgiving.

With sadness but also with joy I am now thinking of the similarities between Otto Frank and my own beloved Uncle Heini. Both were veterans of WWI. Both were liberal German thinkers, for which they paid dearly. Otto Frank lost his entire family. Uncle Heini was denounced as a non-party member and, despite age and ill-health, was sent to Russia, where he perished in early 1945. Both never once lost faith in a Germany, truer and better than the one that had rejected them.

In the words of Heinrich Heine, the beloved Jewish-German poet, who in 1830 wrote from his own exile in France:

I once had a beautiful fatherland.
The oak tree grew tall,
the violets nodded gently.
It was a dream.

May I say these words in German:

Ich hatte einst ein schoenes Vaterland
Der Eichenbaum wuchs hoch
Die Veilchen nickten sanft
Es war ein Traum