



FIG. 17. *Anne Frank 839*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 55 x 59 x 2 inches; 2015.

### **Anne Frank (1929–1945)**

Anne Frank, a diarist and writer, was one of the most discussed Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Her wartime diary, “The Diary of a Young Girl”, has been the basis for several plays and films. She represents the many brave girls during this period and exemplifies the loss and legacy of the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered during the Shoah. Anne Frank was born in Germany and during the time of the Holocaust lived in Amsterdam.

ANNE FRANK

## *A Girl and a Symbol*

David Barnouw

**H**ow do we know Anne Frank? Do we know her because of her famous diary, or from the 1950s American play? Or, do we know her from visiting one of the hundreds of Anne Frank exhibitions? Or, perhaps, we know her from a visit to the shrine at the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam?

These are the facts: Anneliese Marie Frank was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1929 into an assimilated Jewish family. Hitler's rise to power forced the Frank family to go abroad to the Netherlands. Her father, Otto Frank, knew, and everybody expected, that the country would remain neutral.

The Franks felt safe in this small, rather conservative, country. Anne and her older sister, Margot, received a liberal upbringing at home and at school. When the German troops invaded the Netherlands in the spring of 1940, everything changed because anti-Jewish measures were heightened. Otto Frank tried to flee to the United States, but did not succeed. When the Germans summoned Margot to "work" in Germany, the family knew they had to go into hiding. "So there we were, Father, Mother and I, walking in the pouring rain, each of us with a school bag and a shopping bag filled to the brim with the most varied assortment of items."<sup>1</sup> The Franks were on their way to a hiding place at the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam, now a famous shrine visited by more than a million people each year. It was here that we find Anne Frank writing one of the most powerful accounts of the war and the Holocaust. But there is even more: additionally, her diary is about the life of a teenager full of curiosity. It is about hope and love. There is the war, of course, and the family is in hiding because they are Jews, but Anne writes pages and pages without mentioning these facts. We know so much about her 756 days in hiding because of this diary, which for millions of people since the 1950s, has been the first, and only book read about the persecution of the Jews.

For teenagers it represents the story of a high-spirited girl whose energetic personality pulled her through moments of despair and loneliness.

This morning, when I had nothing to do, I turned over some of the pages of my diary and several times I came across letters dealing with the subject 'Mummy' in such a vehement way that it quite shocked me and I asked

myself: 'Anne, is it really you who mentioned hate, oh, Anne, how could you?' (January 2, 1944)<sup>2</sup>

Anne was close to her father and often quarreled with her mother (regretting it later). People can identify with Anne Frank, with or without the anti-Jewish war of which she became a victim.

Perceptions of Anne Frank have been changing over the years: First, in the Netherlands, we see her as a victim of the Holocaust; in the 1950s, on the New York Broadway stage, we see her turned into a symbol for injustice worldwide. On Broadway, Anne lost her *Jewishness* as the Holocaust was conveniently left out of her story, overtaken with crimes against *humanity*. At the end of the 20th century she became, again, a symbol of the Holocaust, due to the rising interest and social consciousness about this terrible episode of modern history.

Now more people are identifying themselves with Anne in a very personal way. Young girls have always mentioned the similarity between themselves and Anne from the first time they read her diary, and that is no surprise. But nowadays, the identification is political: In the queue of people waiting to visit the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, an African-American man from Alabama speaks of the similarities

of oppression between Blacks and Jews; Two monks from Tibet argue that Anne's struggle is comparable to the Tibetan struggle; and a gay man from Paraguay relates connections between his life experience and that of Anne's. The story of Anne Frank has become personal and central to so many around the world.

In the first 30 years after the 1947 publication of *A Diary of a Young Girl* in the Netherlands, Otto Frank acted as the translator of Anne's thoughts. When Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett began writing the play in the mid-1950s, they received a letter from Otto Frank explaining that the playwrights should not concentrate on the Jewish aspect. Frank said that Anne's ideas were universal and that had to be the main focus: to show the world the terrible effects of discrimination, hate and persecution. When Otto Frank answered thousands of letters from readers, he always mentioned that universal message.

When people asked how life really was in the hiding place, he just said, "Read the diary." Otto Frank was the only one of this family of four who survived, and those who helped them during the war remained relatively silent until after 1980 when Otto Frank died. Curious readers and visitors of the Anne Frank House then began asking the Frank protector, Miep Gies, more questions.

Miep Gies was born Hermine Santruschitz in Austria in 1909. After World War I she traveled to the Netherlands, like a lot of other Austrian children. The country had been neutral during World War I and had invited children affected by the war to temporarily stay in the Netherlands to become healthy and strong again. These children generally stayed for half a year with foster parents, and then returned to Austria. Miep Gies stayed longer because she was ill and did not mind staying with her new Dutch family. The Netherlands remained her home until her death in 2010.

Gies was bilingual in German and Dutch, and in 1933, she became secretary of the Opekta-firm, the Dutch branch of a German firm with the same name. Otto Frank was the director of this small company, and Miep, who started at the information desk, soon took on a more general administrative role. A few years later, Miep, and





FIG. 18. *Anne Frank 808*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 55 x 59 x 2 inches; 2015. Collection of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy.

later her fiancé, became close friends of the Frank family, often visiting at their home.

As Gies was still Austrian, she ran into trouble when Austria was annexed by Germany in 1938, because she was now a German citizen. After the annexation she was ordered to return to Austria, her home country. She had already refused to join a Nazi organization, and her marriage to Jan Gies saved her, because after marriage she automatically became a Dutch citizen.

Since Otto Frank was afraid the Germans would confiscate his firm, he decided to officially step down and to transfer the ownership to non-Jewish friends. When that happened at the end of 1941, Jan Gies became one of the directors.

In the spring of 1942, Otto Frank confided to Miep that he and his family would go into hiding since the situation for Jews was worsening daily. Another family, the Van Daan's, would join them with their one son. Otto Frank explained that the hiding place would be in the back of his office at the Prinsengracht. When Miep supported the plan, Otto Frank asked her if she could take care of them, even if the German punishment might be severe. She consented, explaining later that Otto Frank had been a good employer to her before the war and she could not refuse his request for help. She did not see herself as

altruistic, and one wonders what she might have done if Otto Frank had been a bad employer.

A few months later the two families went into hiding, later followed by the dentist Fritz Pfeffer. Known as "Dussel," he shared a room with Anne, who was highly critical of him. Miep Gies and three other helpers took care of them, acting as the link between the Jews in hiding and the world outside.

These extremely brave citizens were hardly acknowledged as Resistance "fighters" after the war. Women in particular were merely seen as "helpers," and until recently the only female heroes were the secret agents parachuted into occupied France. But even they were considered "helping" the male Resistance fighters. In one way, this perception was an advantage, as the Germans underestimated the effective capabilities of women in joining the Resistance.

Seven years after the death of Otto Frank, Miep Gies would publish her book *Anne Frank Remembered: The Story of the Woman Who Helped to Hide the Frank Family*.<sup>3</sup> It was a modest account, just like its author. The belief that people are truly good at heart has fewer adherents in the 21st century than it did in the 1950s. Yet it is primarily Anne Frank's optimism and *joie de vivre* that will continue to attract new readers and new visitors to her story. ■