Anne Frank and the Holocaust

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In an entry in her diary, dated Tuesday 4 April 1944, Anne Frank, aged just fifteen, made the following comment: ‘I want to go on living even after my death!’ Anne was at that time in hiding with her parents, Otto and Edith Frank, and her sister, Margot, at their refuge in Amsterdam at 263 Prinsengracht, and it seems as if she foresaw her imminent death. For less than a year later, in late February or early March 1945, she and her sister, alone, without their parents, met their untimely end in the notorious concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, situated near Hannover: their mother had already perished on 6 January 1945 in the equally notorious death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, while their father, who was to survive Auschwitz, did not know where his daughters had been taken.

In 2005 the twenty-first Triennial Congress of the International Arthurian Society was held in Utrecht, and as an excursion to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam was scheduled, the organizers of this conference, Bart Besamusca and Frank Brandsma, thought that it would be appropriate for someone to give a talk on ‘Anne Frank and the Holocaust’. Since my own mother, Johanna Bogdanow, also went through hell in Bergen-Belsen, it was suggested that I should give this talk.


1 M-D, 170; P (Wednesday 5 April 1944), 248.
As is well known, Anne Frank was born in Germany, in Frankfurt am Main, on 12 January 1929. Her sister, Margot, was born on 16 February 1926. For the first three or four years of their short lives, Anne Frank and her sister had a normal childhood. When Hitler came to power in 1933, however, normal life for Anne Frank, and for all the other Jewish people living in Germany at that time, including my parents and myself, came to an abrupt end. Those who could, emigrated to France, Great Britain or the United States, or to other countries they considered safe or that would accept them. After the events of 9 November 1938, the so-called ‘Kristallnacht’ (the ‘Night of Broken Glass’), some 8,000 Jewish people found refuge in Holland, to where Anne’s father, Otto Frank, had emigrated already in 1933, and where he had set up a company in Amsterdam known as Dutch Opekta Ltd. His wife and elder daughter followed him at the end of 1933, while Anne joined them in their new home at 37 Merwedeplein in February 1934. My own parents, despite every effort, were unable to get out of Germany prior to the outbreak of the Second World War at the beginning of September 1939.

The growing anti-Semitism in Germany from 1933 onwards was to influence the fate of not only Anne Frank but all the Jewish...
people living in Germany at that time; and after September 1939 all the Jewish people living both in Eastern and in Western Europe, including France and the Netherlands, which had been occupied by Nazi troops in May 1940. The same anti-Jewish laws that were in force in Germany came into force in all the occupied countries.7 For instance, just as from 1 September 1941 all Jewish people in Germany had to wear the yellow Star of David on their outer garments,8 from May 1942 it became compulsory for all Jewish people in the Netherlands to wear this symbol on their garments. And, just as in Germany, in occupied Europe Jewish people were entitled only to certain rations and were not allowed to occupy seats when using public transport. In her diary, in her first entry for Saturday 20 June 1942 (M-D, 16–18; P, 6–9), Anne Frank describes vividly the restrictions imposed on the Jewish people after the German occupation of Holland. I quote her words (M-D, 17; P, 8):

The rest of our family ... felt the full impact of Hitler’s anti-Jewish laws, so life was filled with anxiety. In 1938 after the pogroms, my two uncles (my mother’s brothers), escaped to the U.S.A. My old grandmother came to us, she was then 73. After May, 1940, good times rapidly fled: first the war, then the capitulation, followed by the arrival of the Germans. That is when the sufferings of us Jews really began. Anti-Jewish decrees followed each other in quick succession. Jews must wear a yellow star, Jews must hand in their bicycles, Jews are banned from trams and are forbidden to drive. Jews are only allowed to do their shopping between three and five o’clock and then only in shops which bear the placard ‘Jewish shop’. Jews must be indoors by eight o’clock and cannot even sit in their own gardens after that hour. Jews are forbidden to visit theatres, cinemas, and other places of entertainment. Jews may not take part in public sports. Swimming baths, tennis courts, hockey fields, and other sports grounds are all prohibited to them. Jews may not visit Christians. Jews must go to Jewish schools, and many more restrictions of a similar kind.

But this was only the beginning of the tribulations of the Jewish people in Germany and the occupied countries. Shortly after the conference on 20 January 1942 convened by Reinhard Heydrich at Wannsee, near Berlin, where the ‘Final Solution’ to the Jewish question was formulated, the Nazis set up extermination camps in Poland, at Treblinka, Terezin (Theresienstadt), Sobibor, Belzec, Majdanek and Chelmno. Auschwitz-Birkenau had already been built in 1940 on the orders of Heinrich Himmler, while Dachau, Buchenwald, Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen, all four in Germany, and Mauthausen in Austria were already in existence prior to 1938. As for Bergen-Belsen, near Hannover, this notorious concentration camp was established in 1943. The victims were sent to all these death camps in cattle trucks. In order to speed up the process of mass extermination, gas chambers were built in

8 I still have the yellow Star of David that my mother had to wear.
Auschwitz and other death camps, into which Zyklon B gas was pumped, produced by a firm called Degesch (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Schädigungsbekämpfung mbH — the German Society for Pest Control), with headquarters in Frankfurt am Main and forming a part of I.-G. Farbenindustrie AG.9

The Frank family were, of course, aware of the mortal danger that they were in, and their fears were fully realized when, on 5 July 1942, Margot received a call-up notice. For although such call-up notices were allegedly for work in Eastern Europe, in reality they were for deportation to Auschwitz and Sobibor. The Frank family, having anticipated this, had planned to leave their home at 37 Merwedeplein on 16 July 1942.10 The arrival of the call-up notice, however, meant that their plan had to be brought forward by several days, and on 9 July 1942 they went into hiding in the ‘Secret Annexe’ that they had already prepared for this purpose, in the house at 263 Prinsengracht, occupied by Otto Frank’s company since December 1940.11 But moving into the Secret Annexe had to be done with great caution for, as Anne Frank stresses in her diary entry for Wednesday 8 July 1942 (M-D, 26; P, 21): ‘No Jew in our situation would have dreamt of going out with a suitcase full of clothing.’ And as she adds in the entry for 9 July 1942 (M-D, 27; P, 22): ‘So we walked in the pouring rain, Daddy, Mummy, and I, each with a school satchel and shopping bag filled to the brim with all kinds of things thrown together anyhow.’ On their arrival at the Secret Annexe, Anne’s sister Margot was ‘already waiting for us, having come much faster on her bicycle’ (M-D, 29; P, 25, diary entry for 10 July 1942). Shortly thereafter, the Frank family were joined in the Secret Annexe by four of their acquaintances, the dentist Fritz Pfeffer, and Mr and Mrs van Pels and their son, Peter, all of whom Anne Frank mentions in her diary.12 But even in this

9 See the article ‘Zyklon B’, published in the Jewish Virtual Library, a division of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org SOURCE/Holocaust/Zyklon.html, accessed 25 September 2009]. Dr Bruno Tesch, Managing Director of Testa, and his ‘Prokurist’, Karl Weinbacher, were two of the first Nazis accused by the United Nations of having recommended the use of Zyklon B gas for the purpose of exterminating the Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Dr Tesch was arrested on 6 October 1945 by the British and hanged in 1947. Other Nazi death camps in which Zyklon B gas was used include Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Sachsenhausen, Stutthof and Ravensbrück. Prior to the use of Zyklon B, the Jewish inmates of other Nazi concentration camps (including Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka) were exterminated in gas chambers into which carbon monoxide was pumped: see ‘Killing people through gas in extermination and concentration camps’, Jewish Virtual Library [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org SOURCE/Holocaust/gascamp.html, accessed 25 September 2009]. See also Dwork, Children with a star, Chapter 6, ‘Death and slave labor camps’, 209–49.

10 Anne Frank mentions this date in her diary, in the entry for Thursday 9 July 1942 (M-D, 27; P, 22).


12 Ibid., 82–116. The arrival of the van Pels family (referred to by Anne as the ‘van Daans’ family) in the Annexe is related in her diary in the entries for 11 July 1942, 14 and 21 August 1942, 2, 21, 25, 27 and 28 September 1942, etc. (M-D, 30–42; P, 26–46).
hiding-place, Anne and her family lived in constant fear. As Anne remarks in her diary entry for Saturday 11 July 1942 (M-D, 31; P, 27):

We are very nervous … that the neighbours might hear us or see something going on. … We have forbidden Margot to cough at night, although she has a bad cold … I can’t tell you how oppressive it is never to be able to go outdoors, also I’m scared to death that we shall be discovered and be shot. That is not exactly a pleasant prospect. We have to whisper and tread lightly during the day, otherwise, the people in the warehouse might hear us.

And as she comments in her diary entry for Thursday 1 October 1942 (M-D, 43; P, 48): ‘We are as quiet as mice. Who, three months ago, would ever have guessed that quicksilver Anne would have to sit still for hours — and, what’s more, could?’

As Mirjam Pressler has indicated, the position of the Jewish people was by that time becoming more and more intolerable. Quoting from a letter dated 14 September 1942, which had been sent to Heinrich Himmler by the Nazi Chief of Police in The Hague, who was responsible for the Netherlands, Pressler recalls the deportation of the Jewish people to the death camps:

To date we have marched 20,000 Jews to Auschwitz, those intended for punitive deportation being assigned to Mauthausen. Holland contains some 120,000 Jews in all for deportation, although this figure also includes those of mixed race, who will remain here for the time being. By agreement with the Reich Commissar, however, I am deporting all Jewish partners in mixed marriages where there are no children of such marriages … The new units of Dutch police are performing extremely well in the matter of the Jewish question and are arresting hundreds of Jews both day and night.¹³

The necessity to remain in hiding became even more evident when, on Friday 9 October 1942, news reached the Frank family of the barbarous treatment by the Gestapo of many of their Jewish friends. To quote Anne Frank’s account (M-D, 45; P, 53–4):

Our many Jewish friends are being taken away by the dozen. These people are treated by the Gestapo without a shred of decency, being loaded into cattle trucks and sent to Westerbork, the big Jewish camp in Drente. Westerbork sounds terrible; only one washing cubicle for a hundred people and not nearly enough lavatories. … It is impossible to escape; most of the people in the camp are branded as inmates by their shaven heads and many also by their Jewish appearance. If it is as bad as this in Holland whatever will it be like in the distant and barbarous regions they are sent to? We assume that most of them are murdered. The British radio speaks of their being gassed. Perhaps that is the quickest way to die. I feel terribly upset.

¹³ Pressler, 139–40.
Nor was this the only tragic news that the Frank family had of their fellow Jews in Holland, as Anne recalls in her diary entry for Thursday 19 November 1942 (M-D, 56–7; P, 72–3):

Countless friends and acquaintances have gone to a terrible fate. Evening after evening the green and grey army lorries trundle past. The Germans ring at every front door to inquire if there are any Jews living in the house. If there are, then the whole family has to go at once. If they don’t find any, they go on to the next house. No one has a chance of evading them unless one goes into hiding. ... In the evenings when it’s dark, I often see rows of good, innocent people accompanied by crying children, walking on and on, in the charge of a couple of these chaps, bullied and knocked about until they almost drop. No one is spared — old people, babies, expectant mothers, the sick — each and all join in the march of death. ... And all because they are Jews!

Similarly, on Wednesday 13 January 1943 (M-D, 64; P, 83) Anne relates the sufferings of the Jewish people that she witnessed:

It is terrible outside. Day and night more of those poor miserable people are being dragged off, with nothing but a rucksack and a little money. On the way they are deprived even of these possessions. Families are torn apart, the men, women and children all being separated. Children coming home from school find that their parents have disappeared. Women return from shopping to find their homes shut up and their families gone.

Two months later, in the entry for Saturday 27 March 1943 (M-D, 74; P, 97), Anne ominously gives details of the latest threatening speech made by a Nazi named Rauter:

All Jews must be out of the German-occupied countries before 1st July. Between 1st April and 1st May the province of Utrecht must be cleaned out (as if the Jews were cockroaches). Between 1st May and 1st June the provinces of North and South Holland.

Unable for this reason to leave their hiding-place, the Frank family and the other four people in the Secret Annexe were dependent for their survival on outside help.14 Four of the people who helped them for two years, and who had previously been employed by Otto Frank’s firm, included a lady called Miep Gies and Victor Kugler, the latter referred to in Anne’s diary by the name of Kraler.15 Anne never forgot her family’s indebtedness to these helpers. In her diary, in the entry for Friday 26 May 1944 (M-D, 203–4; P, 303), she stresses how ‘Miep and Kraler carry the heaviest burden of the eight in hiding, Miep in all she does, and Kraler through the enormous responsibility, which is sometimes so much for him that he can hardly talk from pent-up nerves and strain.’

15 Pressler, 117 ff.
During their time in hiding, Anne Frank and her family had no real information about the progress of the war except what they could hear on their clandestine radio (see M-D, 80; P, 108, diary entry for Tuesday 15 June 1943). The long-awaited news — the landings of the Allied troops in France — finally came on Tuesday 6 June 1944. As Anne remarks in her diary entry for that day (M-D, 206; P, 308): "This is D-day," came the announcement over the British Radio and quite rightly, "This is the day." The invasion has begun! This news filled the Frank family with fresh hope, although the anxiety that they felt did not leave them for, in Anne’s words, it all seemed ‘too wonderful’ (M-D, 207; P, 309):

Great commotion in the ‘Secret Annexe!’ Would the long-awaited liberation that has been talked of so much, but which still seems too wonderful, too much like a fairy-tale, ever come true? Could we be granted victory this year, 1944? We don’t know yet, but hope is revived within us; it gives us fresh courage, and makes us strong again. Since we must put up bravely with all the fears, privations, and sufferings, the great thing now is to remain calm and steadfast … Oh, Kitty, the best part of the invasion is that I have the feeling that friends are approaching. We have been oppressed by those terrible Germans for so long, they have had their knives so at our throats, that the thought of friends and delivery fills us with confidence!

But their hopes of delivery were short lived. Just two months later, on 4 August 1944, Anne Frank and her family, and the other four people in hiding in the Secret Annexe, were arrested by an SS sergeant named Karl Josef Silberbauer, accompanied by at least three Dutch members of the Security Police.16 They had obviously been betrayed but, despite every effort of the Dutch police in 1948, three years after the war had ended, it was not possible to discover who had denounced the Frank family and revealed their hiding-place.17

The Frank family spent the first month of their captivity in the internment camp of Westerbork, which by that time had become a Jewish transit camp. From there, they and the others were transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau in cattle trucks.18 Men and women were separated in Auschwitz, and so Otto Frank was not allowed to remain with his wife and their two daughters. Nor did the two girls have their mother’s comfort for long. Within two months of their arrival in Auschwitz, Anne and her sister were transferred to the equally notorious death camp Bergen-Belsen. As for their mother, her end, as already mentioned, came in Auschwitz on 6 January 1945.19

What Anne Frank and her sister must have suffered in Bergen-Belsen I can attempt to describe from what my own mother told me

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16 Pressler, 164–5; see also the afterward in the Penguin edition (P, 337–9).
17 See Gies, Anne Frank remembered, 199–201.
18 Pressler, 165–8.
19 Ibid., 169.
of her ordeal in that camp. On arrival there, the first thing that Anne and Margot would have seen was the barbed wire all around the camp. Then they would have seen that the huts in which they were to be housed stood in deep mud. The walls of the huts were wooden planks with gaps in between, letting in the cold and rain. Their beds were wooden planks, their pillows were their shoes, their blankets were their coats, and at night rats would come in through the gaps in the walls and jump onto their beds. They would have to stand in the cold for roll-call every morning and evening. As for food, this was no more than a starvation diet: a piece of dry bread and black coffee in the morning; some watery soup at lunchtime; and nothing more until the following day unless they had kept a portion of their bread for the evening. It is therefore not surprising that Anne and Margot did not survive for long. Both contracted the deadly disease typhus early in 1945, Margot dying shortly before Anne in February or March of that year.20

It is quite by chance that my own mother did not perish in Bergen-Belsen, where she had been taken on 26 September 1943, after having been compelled since 1941 to undertake forced labour in Germany. How they were selected my mother never knew, but on 29 January 1944 she and a number of other women were transferred to the so-called transit camp in Vittel. From there, transportations were constantly going back east to the death camps. There were also British citizens in Vittel, who had been stranded in France after the fall of that country to the German invading forces. The British prisoners very generously took my mother into their care and did not let the German guards near her. It is thanks to them that my mother was still alive when Vittel was liberated by the Allied forces on 23 October 1944.

As for myself and 10,000 other Jewish children, we owe our lives to Great Britain and a wonderful Dutch lady, Mrs Geertruida Wijsmuller-Meijer of Amsterdam. Within ten days of the events of 9 November 1938, both Houses of Parliament in London voted unanimously to bring up to 10,000 Jewish children to Great Britain. Wonderful British families who had never seen or heard of the children before volunteered to take them into their homes. The actions of Great Britain alone, however, would not have been enough to save our lives, as we also had to obtain permission to leave Germany. This is why the action of Mrs Wijsmuller-Meijer was so vital. Shortly after 9 November 1938 she went to Vienna to see Adolf Eichmann, and persuaded him to allow the first children’s transportation to leave Nazi territory. Yet this wasn’t all: throughout 1939, and right up until the last children’s transportation crossed the Dutch border on 1 September 1939 on its way to Great Britain,

20 Gies, Anne Frank remembered, 190; see also Pressler, 181.
she and many other Dutch ladies did all they could to ensure the safe passage of these children over the German-Dutch border.\textsuperscript{21}

I myself still remember crossing the border on 27 June 1939. As soon as the train stopped at the first station in Holland, wonderful Dutch ladies came onto the train and brought refreshments for us children. I cannot even attempt to describe what a difference that made. We had just left our parents and did not know whether we would ever see them again. The memories of the events of 9 November 1938 were still fresh in our minds. But now, instead of being persecuted as we had been in Germany, we were overwhelmed by the kindness of these wonderful Dutch ladies. I would like to express here my deepest gratitude to them. And of course my even deeper and eternal gratitude will always be to Great Britain. If it had not been for the wonderful generous action of Great Britain in giving refuge in 1939 to me\textsuperscript{22} and the other 10,000 Jewish children, our fate would undoubtedly have been the same as that of Anne Frank. For of the 6,000,000 Jewish people exterminated by the Nazis in the Holocaust, 2,000,000 were children, of whom at least one was a baby of just fourteen days old.\textsuperscript{23} As Anne Frank reminds us in her diary entry for 19 November 1942 (M-D, 56; P, 72–3), the Nazis spared no one, neither ‘old people, babies, expectant mothers, the sick …’.

\textsuperscript{21}For details see Tydor Baumel, Double jeopardy, 28-9; the article on Geertruida Wijnsmuller-Meijer in The encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations: rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust: the Netherlands, volume editors, Joseph Michman and Bert Jan Flim; editor-in-chief, Israel Gutman; associate editor, Sara Bender (Jerusalem:Yad Vashem, 2004), 838-9; and L.C.Vrooland, Geen tijd voor tranen [No time for tears: the wartime memories of Truus Wijnsmuller-Meijer] (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen, 1961). As mentioned in the article in The encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations, Geertruida Wijnsmuller-Meijer, in recognition of her heroic endeavours to rescue Jewish children, was honoured by many countries: on 30 September 1948 she received a Medal of Gratitude from the French Republic; in May 1957 she was honoured in Bonn by the German Red Cross; in 1959 she received the Star of Merit of the Order of St George of Antioch; and on 18 October 1966 Yad Vashem honoured Geertruida Wijnsmuller-Meijer as Righteous Among the Nations.

\textsuperscript{22}I was given a loving home by a Quaker family, Mr and Mrs H.A. Clement, who at that time lived in Haughton Green, near Denton, Manchester, and for whose four children I have remained their elder sister.

\textsuperscript{23}See F. Bogdanow, ‘Lest we forget: childhood memories of the Holocaust’, forthcoming article.