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JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE
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THE JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE was endowed by the Meyerhoff family in 1994 to honor excellence in research and foster dissemination of cutting-edge scholarly work on the Holocaust and its legacy. Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff of Baltimore, Maryland, were active philanthropists in the United States and abroad, focusing especially on Jewish learning and scholarship, as well as on music, the arts, and humanitarian causes. Their children, Eleanor Katz and Harvey M. Meyerhoff, Member and Chairman Emeritus of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, have endowed this lecture, which is organized by the Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

It is now some sixty years after the death of millions of Jews in the ghettos, camps, and killing fields of Nazi-occupied Europe. Thanks to the writings of survivors and other eyewitness accounts, the dedicated work of scholars, and the energetic efforts of public institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), we know a great deal about these victims today, as we do about those who made them victims; and while major questions remain to be answered, our knowledge base is, in fact, a large one. When attention turns from the empirical evidence of the Nazi genocide of Jews to its interpretation, though, matters become more difficult. The historical record continues to be filled in but its meanings remain elusive. In addition, the dissemination of the words and images of the Holocaust to the broader public is often highly problematic. To help clarify some of the problems, it is essential that scholars do more than simply add to the chronicle of this massive crime; they must also raise questions about how its history is transmitted and remembered, especially on a popular level.

Particularly with reference to the victims, whose names and stories have been copiously recorded, why is it that *one name* and *one story* continue to have a resonance that no others come close to matching? This one person, of course, is Anne Frank, who for decades has been singled out as the preeminent victim of the Holocaust—the one

who, above all others, has given a face and a name to the catastrophe visited on the Jews of Hitler's Europe.

REMEMBERING ANNE FRANK

Who is the Anne Frank we remember? And why is it that, among the more than one million Jewish children destroyed by the Nazis, it is she who has emerged as such a commanding presence? The Anne Frank whom we remember is the Anne Frank we *want* to remember. That answer sounds simple, but the formation and transmission of historical memory are complex affairs, and a range of factors—cultural, ideological, political, and religious—variously shape and misshape what we recall from the past. It is essential to understand, therefore, not only what is being remembered but who is doing the remembering and for what purposes.

With these thoughts in mind, let us examine some of the cultural and ideological influences on Anne Frank's development as a primary emblem of victimization and some contemporary uses and abuses of her image for political purposes. In both instances it is important to clarify the gap between history and memory when a strong figure is dislodged from its historical base and assumes mythic form. There is probably nothing that can prevent this process of "dehistoricization" from occurring, but some of its negative effects can be mitigated through a counter-process of "rehistoricization." Within the category of Nazi perpetrators, no one exemplifies this phenomenon more strikingly than Adolf Hitler, who successfully cultivated a mythic status for himself while he was alive and whose posthumous career as a dominant symbol of malevolent power continues long after his death. Within the category of Nazi victims, no one is more in the foreground of our imaginations than Anne Frank, who during the past sixty years also has assumed larger-than-life status as a symbol—although one that in some ways belies the true nature of her life and death and stands in need of correction.

Since its initial publication in 1947, Anne Frank's story has circulated more widely than any other personal narrative from the Second World War. It was by no means the only diary written by a Jewish youngster during the war years, yet it remains the best known and most cherished text of its kind. Translated into some sixty languages and published in more than 25,000,000 copies, it has reached a huge audience of readers around the world. In addition, the figure of Anne Frank has been transformed and transmitted through a broad range of other popular media—the stage, the movie screen, television, dance, song, opera, painting, ballet, postage stamps,

commemorative coins, and more—to the point where it is no exaggeration to say that Anne Frank is very likely the best known child of the twentieth century (her only possible rival might be Shirley Temple). The ubiquity of her story, then, can be taken as a given. What is not entirely clear is why it remains so popular and why particular images of Anne Frank, and not others, continue to be favored.

To repeat the earlier question with a slight variation, who is the Anne Frank we *choose* to remember? This question is crucial because there has been a multiplicity of Anne Franks among whom to choose. One in particular, though, has been elevated above all others: the Anne who stands as a positive symbol of articulate innocence and transcendent optimism in a world of brutal and ultimately lethal adversity. One can find grounds for this sense of Anne Frank in the diary, but it hardly encompasses the whole of her self-presentation, nor was it the image of the girl that necessarily prevailed among the diary's earliest readers.

EARLY PERCEPTIONS OF ANNE FRANK

Het Achterhuis (The Secret Annex) first appeared two years after the end of the war, when memories of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands were still painfully fresh. Many people wanted to move beyond the horrors of those times and (it was thought) would not be eager to look at the book at all, so it is understandable that Otto Frank had a hard time finding a publisher. When Contact—a small Amsterdam publishing house—ultimately issued it, the initial audience was relatively small. Some Dutch readers found in Anne's story a disturbing echo of their own wartime deprivations and were not moved to celebrate the book as a triumph over suffering. Rather, in the words of Jan Romein (a professor of Dutch history who published the first significant notice of the diary), there were reasons to regard Anne Frank's story in a pessimistic light, for it described "the real hideousness of fascism" and showed that "we have lost the battle against the beast in man."¹

Romein saw Anne's story as a dark one and valued it primarily as a historical document that revealed important truths about the political dimensions of the Nazi catastrophe. Other readers, however, were more inclined to read the diary as a personal testament. They admired the honesty and courage of the child's voice, reacted favorably to her lively intelligence and quickness of spirit, and believed that the diarist expressed a message of hope transcending the misery of the events that she recorded.

Not surprisingly, therefore, one can observe from the start differing responses to the book and the presence in it of contested meanings. After a relatively short time, however, the range of interpretations began to narrow and soon gave way to more fixed or formulaic readings. Many American reviewers, for instance, idealized Anne Frank's story and preferred to interpret it as inspiring rather than disconsolate. American readers favored seeing the diary as a testament of hope from which, as one reviewer put it, "a gleam of redemption may arise."² Another insisted that, no matter how poor and constricted the conditions under which she lived, Anne's spirit could not be "imprisoned or thwarted."³ And no less a public figure than Eleanor Roosevelt affirmed that the diary "makes poignantly clear the ultimate shining nobility of the [human] spirit."⁴

This tendency to stress the uplifting aspects of Anne's story and subordinate its more harrowing dimensions reached its culmination in the 1955 stage play *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. More than any other reading of the diary, the Goodrich and Hackett adaptation projected an image of Anne Frank that was cheerfully buoyant and ultimately positive. In essence, the two authors re-created Anne Frank as a triumphant figure, characterized by such irrepressible hope and tenacious optimism as to overcome any final sense of a cruel end. The playwrights even went so far as to have Otto Frank utter at the very end of the play, "It seems strange to say this, that anyone would be happy in a concentration camp. But Anne was happy in the camp in Holland where they first took us."

The notion is as implausible as it is silly, but it struck a resonant chord. Reviewing the play for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Walter Kerr wrote, "Soaring through the center of the play with the careless gaiety of a bird that simply cannot be caged is Anne Frank herself. . . . Anne is not going to her death; she is going to leave a dent on life, and let death take what's left."⁵ Echoing this view, the reviewer for the *New York Post* wrote that the play "brought about the reincarnation of Anne Frank—as though she'd never been dead."⁶ Audiences would leave the theater knowing, of course, that Anne had died but nevertheless feeling that she had not been defeated.

In short, the Anne Frank who emerged in this play—as well as in George Stephens's film version that followed in 1959—was fashioned to evoke the most conventional responses about "man's inhumanity to man," the "triumph of goodness over evil," the eternal verities of "the human spirit," and other such banalities. Both the play and the film drew on the conventions of theatrical melodrama to link audiences to

the war years but in a way that would not be too upsetting. The harshness of history and much of Anne's Jewish identity were left behind, and in their place softer, more universal, and more acceptable images of a young girl's gaiety and moral gallantry came to the fore. This image, it is important to note, conformed very much with Otto Frank's own views of his daughter's diary: he did not regard it as an especially "Jewish" book and did not want to see it dramatized as a "Jewish" play.⁷ Anne's message, as her father understood it and wanted it presented, was a universal one not tied specifically to her Jewish origins—an emphasis that Goodrich and Hackett themselves favored and to which they gave dramatic shape in their script.

What we have here, in short, is a piece of European history repackaged on Broadway and in Hollywood as a protest against war and discrimination-in-general. It produced a version of Anne Frank that was far more palatable to people in the 1950s than the image of a Jewish teenager hounded to an early death by the Nazis. As played by Susan Strasberg on stage and by Millie Perkins on screen, Anne appeared as a vivacious and lovable girl next door—a figure who suited the general spirit of postwar prosperity and conformed to a political mood that was generally "feel good" and conservative.

LATER PERCEPTIONS OF ANNE FRANK

In thinking about Anne Frank in these terms, we need to keep in mind that the Holocaust as we know it today had not yet begun to inform public consciousness in any deep sense. It was only in the early 1960s that a much fuller and grimmer understanding of Jewish fate during the Nazi period emerged with the publication of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Hannah Arendt's writings on Adolf Eichmann. With the appearance of these books and other books and films that followed, the Nazi genocide was disclosed to mass audiences in far starker ways than had been the case a decade earlier.⁸ During the 1950s the popular centerpiece of the war years was Anne Frank, but a very particular image of Anne Frank—radiant, fun loving, and ever optimistic, even as the shadows of war were deepening around her. Largely shaped by the Goodrich and Hackett stage play and Stephens's award-winning film, this affirmative sense of Anne Frank culminates in the line for which she is best known: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." This uplifting image resonated worldwide and, to this day, remains the dominant sense of who Anne Frank was and what she symbolizes.

Dominant does not mean exclusive, however, and in recent years numerous other representations have emerged—some of which challenge the dehistoricized, “de-Judaized,” and largely sentimentalized version of Anne Frank as a saintly figure who in the end will defy her persecutors and escape the indignity and finality of a gruesome death. Dozens of such rewrites have been produced and continue to emerge, including new film and television versions of Anne’s story; a plethora of children’s books, videotapes, CD-ROMs, and school curricula, all of which feature the heroine of the diary; Miep Gies’s memoir and memoirs by several other people who knew the Frank family; musical shows and cantatas; a widely seen traveling exhibition entitled “Anne Frank in the World”; and more. The Franks’ famous house on the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam is one of the most frequently visited memory sites in Europe and certainly one that has had a major impact on how millions of people view Anne Frank.

Of the many sources that shape and reshape Anne Frank’s image, three or four stand out in particular. Each represents a turn away from the sentimentalizing trends of representing Anne Frank that characterize so much of the attention to the diary over the past half-century. Whether the Anne Frank they give us is the Anne Frank whom mass audiences are prepared to embrace, however, is another matter.

In 1986 a team of scholars at the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation compiled a large and copiously documented critical edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (the American version appeared in 1989).⁹ From a scholarly standpoint, this volume’s importance cannot be overemphasized: unlike anything published before or since, it draws attention to Anne Frank as a writer. It has long been recognized that the youthful author of the famous diary was precociously gifted, but it is only through the critical edition that one sees the full extent of her literary ambitions and grasps the complex compositional history of her work.

The story is fascinating but still not widely known. In brief, Anne not only wrote but rewrote many of her diary entries. She was aware of the exceptional nature of the experience through which she was living and recognized that a well-crafted account of it would have historical value. And so, even as she composed her sentences anew each day, she revisited her earlier jottings and set about shaping a manuscript for publication (perhaps as a novel) in the postwar period. Tragically she did not live to see that project realized. To be sure, a book widely known as “The Diary of Anne Frank” exists and for decades has been an established part of the literary canon of the twentieth century. The latest version of it is even called “the definitive edition,” but this is only a

version prepared by Anne's newest translator Mirjam Pressler, who has shaped the book in large part on Otto Frank's early editing of his daughter's writing as well as on some of the material in the critical edition. The truth is that we will never have a text of the diary that might be regarded as definitive for the simple reason that Anne Frank did not live long enough to complete such a book, nor did she authorize others to finalize a version in her name.

Nevertheless, by examining the textual variants gathered in the critical edition, readers can study her innumerable editorial changes and appreciate how serious and accomplished a writer Anne Frank truly was. The volume is laborious to read and is not for everyone, but inasmuch as it takes us behind the symbol and discloses Anne Frank the writer, it makes a unique and valuable contribution.

One cannot think about Anne Frank as a writer, of course, without looking carefully at what she has written. And the more one looks, the more one sees how intelligent and even complex an author the young girl was. Here, by way of illustration, are some sentences from her entry of April 11, 1944.

We have been pointedly reminded that we are in hiding, that we are Jews in chains, chained to one spot, without any rights but with a thousand duties. . . .

Who has inflicted this upon us? Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up until now? It is God who has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again. If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason only do we have to suffer now. We can never become just Netherlands, or just English, or representatives of any country for that matter, we will always remain Jews, but we want to, too. . . .

God has never deserted our people. Right through the ages there have been Jews, through all the ages they have had to suffer, but it made them strong too; the weak fall, but the strong will remain and never go under.¹⁰

This passage is remarkable for what it reveals about Anne Frank's understanding of herself within the stream of Jewish history. And without making undue claims for her as a Jewish religious thinker—she was, after all, only fifteen years old—one can appreciate the thoughtfulness with which she reflects seriously about

God. This passage, however, was deleted from the Goodrich and Hackett play entirely and replaced by a weak substitution. “We’re not the only people that’ve had to suffer. There’ve always been people that’ve had to . . . sometimes one race . . . sometimes another.” These lines are altogether without source or analogy in the diary itself and generalize the figure of Anne Frank to the point of deracinating her. However, they are typical of the major thrust of the play that has given the world an Anne Frank who is emotionally much thinner, intellectually less thoughtful, and spiritually and psychologically far less serious than the Anne of the diary.

To get her at her most authentic, therefore, one should bypass Goodrich and Hackett’s pallid and conventional rewrite of Anne Frank and read her in her own words. Like no other source that we have, the critical edition of the diary enables us to do that.¹¹

RECENT PERCEPTIONS OF ANNE FRANK

What the diary cannot do in any of its versions, of course, is complete the tale of Anne Frank, for hers is a story that does not end so much as suddenly stops. Following her last entry of August 1, 1944, Anne and the seven other occupants of the secret annex were arrested; sent first to a prison in Amsterdam; then to Westerbork, a transit camp in the north of Holland; and then, on the last transport to leave Westerbork (September 3, 1944), to Auschwitz. These facts, plus that of Anne’s death in Bergen-Belsen (perhaps in early March 1945), have long been known. In 1958 the German writer Ernst Schnabel published a book¹² that traced some of this history, but Schnabel’s account—while interesting—is undocumented, so it is impossible to verify what the author reports about Anne Frank’s life beyond the secret annex. The book also idealizes Anne Frank and contributes to the mystique that was rapidly growing up around her and sanctifying her image as that of a martyr.

What is lacking in Schnabel fortunately has been provided by the Dutch writer and filmmaker Willy Lindwer, who produced both a valuable film and a book about Anne Frank’s fate in the months following her arrest and incarceration in the Nazi camp system. Lindwer’s *The Last Seven Months of Anne Frank* is harrowing to read but also essential for anyone who wishes to know the final chapter and, thus, the full truth about Anne Frank’s life. Based on the testimony of six Jewish women who survived the deprivations and torments that wore Anne down and ultimately took her life, Lindwer’s book offers documented eyewitness accounts of Anne Frank’s time in Westerbork,

Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen. Here in the words of Rachel van Amerongen-Frankfoorder, a former inmate of Bergen-Belsen, is an account of Anne Frank's end.

I saw Anne and her sister Margot again in the barracks. . . . The Frank girls were almost unrecognizable since their hair had been cut off. They were much balder than we were. . . . And they were cold, just like all the rest of us.

It was winter and you didn't have any clothes. So all of the ingredients for illness were present. They were in bad shape. Day by day they got weaker. . . . You could see that they were very sick. The Frank girls were so emaciated. They looked terrible. They had little squabbles, caused by their illness, because it was clear that they had typhus. . . . They had those hollowed-out faces, skin over bone. They were terribly cold. They had the least desirable places in the barracks, below, near the door, which was constantly opened and closed. You heard them constantly screaming, "Close the door, close the door," and the voices became weaker every day.

You could really see both of them dying. . . .

They showed the recognizable symptoms of typhus—that gradual wasting away, a sort of apathy, with occasional revivals, until they became so sick that there wasn't any hope. And their end came. I don't know which one was carried out earlier, Anne or Margot. Suddenly, I didn't see them anymore, so I had to assume that they had died. Look, I didn't pay any special attention to them because there were so many others who also died. . . .

The dead were always carried outside, laid down in front of the barracks, and when you were let out in the morning to go to the latrine, you had to walk past them. That was just as dreadful as going to the latrine itself, because gradually everyone got typhus. In front of the barracks was a kind of wheelbarrow in which you could take care of your needs. Sometimes you also had to take those wheelbarrows to the latrine. Possibly it was on one of those trips to the latrine that I walked past the bodies of the Frank sisters. . . . [They] had been put down in front of the barracks. And then the heaps would be cleared away. A huge hole would be dug and they were thrown into it. That I'm sure of. That must have been their fate, because that's what happened to other people. I don't have a single reason for assuming that it was any different for them than for the other women with us who died at the same time.¹³

This description of the last days of Anne Frank is corroborated by the testimony of other women cited in Lindwer's book, and there is every reason to credit its veracity. Typhus was rampant in Bergen-Belsen at the time of Anne Frank's incarceration; the winter was harsh; there was little food and, for many, no suitable shelter. As a result of

disease and deprivation, tens of thousands died in the camp, their remains piled up in the huge corpse mounds that are marked to this day by signs that read “Here lie 3,000,” “Here lie 5,000,” etc. Anne Frank—not yet sixteen years old but malnourished, exhausted, disease ridden—is in one of those anonymous heaps of the dead at Bergen-Belsen.

Encountering such grim information, readers of Lindwer’s book are not likely to endorse the notion that Anne Frank was “happy” in Hitler’s camps or that she could have retained the view that “in spite of everything, . . . people are really good at heart.” It is difficult to think about, but her final lot must have been one of unimaginable misery. Lindwer’s portrait of the last months of Anne Frank’s life is unnerving, but it is also necessary if one wants to move beyond the popular images of the young girl as a courageous and implacably optimistic figure and recognize that, like one million or more other Jewish children, she succumbed to a cruel and premature death.

The history leading up to that end is ably told in Melissa Mueller’s *Anne Frank: The Biography*,¹⁴ which became the source of a four-hour television series produced by ABC in 2001. The book fills in much of the historical and familial contexts of Anne Frank’s story and thereby helps to demystify it.

Jon Blair’s well-received 1998 film *Anne Frank Remembered* works similarly and usually to good effect. The opening and closing frames of Blair’s two-hour film, however, deliberately present Anne’s story in ways that affirm the universalizing tendencies of Otto Frank’s loving but tendentious management of his daughter’s image and Goodrich and Hackett’s further elaboration of this image in their dramatization of the diary. Nevertheless, Blair’s film is a valuable chronicle of the German Jewish lineage of Anne Frank, Hitler’s murderous war against the Jews, and the collaborative role of a portion of the Dutch population.

According to Blair, however, Anne’s story is not “only” a Holocaust story but one about discrimination-in-general. Faithful to this notion, the film closes with a brief interview with Nelson Mandela. Otto Frank is quoted to support the view that his daughter’s diary is not so much an expression of Jewish experience during the Holocaust as a universal message of personal courage and hope in the face of oppression. To underscore this view, one hears Anne’s famous passage (“In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart”) at the end of the film. None of this is wrong, but any artistic work that sees the Holocaust as a metaphor of the evils of intolerance or discrimination-in-general risks not seeing it clearly in its specific

historical dimensions. In this respect Blair's *Anne Frank Remembered*, which in important ways is a corrective to the Goodrich and Hackett play, shares an ideological affinity with the latter.

Wendy Kesselman's adaptation of the Goodrich and Hackett play, which opened at the Music Box Theater in New York on December 4, 1997,¹⁵ set out to loosen the hold of the universalizing trend in a bold way. It succeeds only in part, but the author's effort itself is commendable. Because she was bound by contract to retain the main lines of Goodrich and Hackett's presentation of Anne Frank's story, Kesselman was not as free to rework the earlier version of the theater piece as extensively as she might have wished. Nevertheless, in several important ways, she managed to neutralize some of the "feel good" sentimentality of the 1955 stage play.

Through dialogue that makes explicit references to Judaism, Jewish suffering, and a sense of Jewish national belonging, and also by having prayers recited in Hebrew, Kesselman reshaped the Goodrich and Hackett version to emphasize the Jewish identities of Anne and others hiding with her. And by foregrounding the yellow stars that these Jews were forced to wear right from the beginning of Act I and by bringing Nazis on stage at the end of Act II, she makes more graphic some of the horror of the Holocaust, which was muted in the earlier version of the play. Here, too, one is presented with "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart," but the voiceover of this line at the end of the play is immediately followed by a Nazi officer shouting "Raus!" His harsh command—delivered as a scream—not only drowns out Anne Frank's optimistic words but shows that, in the face of Nazi terror, they lose their resonance. The final words of the play are spoken by Otto Frank, but this time nothing is said about Anne being happy in a concentration camp. Instead, they reveal the overwhelmingly sad fact that of the eight former occupants of the secret annex, all but he lost their lives in the Nazi camps.

In sum, Kesselman's rewriting of Goodrich and Hackett is evidence that we need not remain forever wedded to perceptions of Anne Frank popular in the 1950s. At the same time, however, others are content to write in that vein and—in presenting their own versions of Anne Frank—they show that almost nothing has changed.

Enid Futterman, for instance, who wrote the lyrics for the musical *I Am Anne Frank*, which opened in New York in 1996, offered these words about Anne Frank: "She knew evil, but she also knew something about the essential goodness of the soul. . . Evil triumphed in Bergen-Belsen, but the spiritual war was won. . . . Anne died, but

she won. . . . [She] transcended her own suffering, and her own death.”¹⁶ Futterman spoke these words in an interview dated February 3, 2000—well after Lindwer’s book, Mueller’s biography, Blair’s film, and Kesselman’s play had appeared—but they register no awareness whatsoever that other perceptions of Anne Frank are in circulation that stand against the cheery sentiments about Anne’s transcendent triumph over death.

The same holds true for the following, taken from a review of the 1998 musical *Yours, Anne*. “Regardless of knowing that Anne and her family were discovered and killed in Nazi death camps, you can’t help but watch *Yours, Anne* with that strange, impossible hope that somehow she is going to make it. It is hard to imagine that the light of this impressive young spirit can be taken away.” The writer concludes her review, with no irony whatsoever, by quoting the famous words (“In spite of everything . . .”) that are said to sum up the meaning of Anne Frank’s story.¹⁷

THE MEANING OF ANNE FRANK

By now readers know these words and can repeat them by heart. They are not false to a certain side of Anne Frank—the cheerful, optimistic side—but they hardly suffice to encapsulate the full meaning of her life and death. Many are reluctant to confront the more gruesome aspects of Anne Frank’s story, though, just as they are to acknowledge the specific nature and extent of the Jewish catastrophe under Hitler. It is not easy to make sense of, but the millions of innocent Jews murdered in the Nazi Holocaust were not primarily casualties of ordinary racism or discrimination (as abhorrent as these are) or even of war, but of something else—something that we still struggle to understand and properly name. We call it “Holocaust” or “Shoah” or “Khurbn,” but these terms can take us only so far toward clarifying precisely what it was that led an advanced nation such as Germany to marshal all the powers of a modern state to single out, condemn, hunt down, and ultimately destroy a young person as innocent and unthreatening as Anne Frank. What kind of peril, after all, did she pose to the German people that brought so many of them and their allies to construct and implement a campaign of genocide against her and those like her across an entire continent?

To this day we have no fully satisfactory answer to this question. All we know is that the fact of Anne Frank’s Jewish birth served as a death sentence, which was ruthlessly carried out against her and at least a million other Jewish children. No meaning can be drawn from her atrocious end other than the obvious one: to be a Jew

in Nazi-occupied Europe was to be an unwilling candidate for a program of systematic deprivation, persecution, terror, and almost certain death. No consolations or positive “lessons” can be derived from these cruel facts, and certainly no affirmations of life as beautiful should be drawn from them.

And yet, as her own father and countless others have preferred to see it, Anne Frank’s message to the world was to be remembered as one of hope, faith, tolerance, and understanding. Such ideals are admirable and do indeed have a presence in Anne Frank’s writings, but to lift them above everything else in her famous book and award them something akin to transcendent value is a feat that can be performed only by uncoupling Anne’s story in Amsterdam from her story in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen—that is, uncoupling her story as a Jewish victim of Nazism from that of millions of other Jews who shared her fate. Otto Frank, however, devoted his postwar life to consciously shaping an image of his daughter that would shine as an emblem of resilient optimism and lasting hope in mankind. He considered it his mission to spread what he called Anne’s “ideas and ideals” to as broad an audience as possible, and if such a task required subordinating the Jewish elements of his daughter’s story to what he took to be its global significance, then so be it.

Others have been only too ready to follow his lead. Kermit Bloomgarden and Garson Kanin, the original producer and director of the Goodrich and Hackett stage play, sanitized Anne Frank’s diary of almost all its Jewish references in order to project what they considered to be its general theme of universal suffering and its transcendence by undying goodness and hope. More recently Blair, declaring that he also took his cue from Otto Frank, commented on his Academy Award-winning film *Anne Frank Remembered*.

The message of this film, in my mind, is the same as Otto Frank’s. . . . He felt that it should not just be specific to the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. There are many who feel that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish experience and that Anne’s story should be about the genocide of the Jews specifically. I don’t agree. . . . I have firmly hooked my flag to Otto’s universalist message.¹⁸

Like all significant works of literature, Anne Frank’s story can yield many messages, but the only way to discover these is to see her story within the specific contexts in which it unfolded. Anne’s experience is simply inexplicable apart from the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, and to forego or dilute the latter is inevitably to distort or falsify the former. Such falsifications (intentional or otherwise) have

accompanied the diary almost from the time of its initial publication, and they continue to this day as a result of persistent tendencies to sentimentalize and idealize her story. As a consequence, Anne Frank has emerged as a figure more closely aligned to the Christian tradition of celebrating those whose beatific nature lifts them above the ravages of human suffering than to the Jewish tradition of mourning the victims of unjust and unredeemed suffering—precisely the experience of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe.

MANIPULATING ANNE FRANK’S IMAGE

In Anne Frank’s case, history also gets bypassed and subverted through the political exploitation of her image—as is evident to anyone who observes how the diary is evoked in various quarters today. In March 2004, for instance, a Dutch television crew visiting North Korea reported that Anne Frank’s book had been adopted as a required text for secondary schools throughout the country—a surprising and, at first glance, encouraging development. Looking further, though, the Dutch team discovered that teachers in this strongly Stalinist state were using the diary to brainwash their pupils into believing that the experience of their country directly parallels that of the Frank family in hiding, that the Americans of this generation are the Nazis of the Hitler era and the American president is as evil as Hitler himself. As interpreted in Pyongyang, the so-called “legacy” of Anne Frank is unambiguously clear. In the words of one North Korean youngster, “For world peace, America will have to be destroyed. Only then will Anne’s dream of peace come true.”¹⁹

Blatant misappropriations of the diary regularly appear in the Arab world as well. In what is now commonly called the “Palestinian Holocaust,” Anne Frank has become a ubiquitous point of reference, and a search for the “Palestinian Anne Frank” is, not surprisingly, being pursued quite deliberately. A recent story in *Al-Jazeera* presents the following plan.

Consider. A propaganda book [the reference is to Anne Frank’s diary] that is designed to elicit sympathy for the Jewish people, via the mechanism of a young girl who is hiding from bad men is required reading in many USA schools. How many young growing children that do not understand propaganda and manipulation, read the story for what it is, a girl in hiding in trouble. They do not realize that subconsciously they are feeling sympathy for not just any girl but a Jewish girl. . . .

That got me to thinking. If it works for Jewish people, why will it not work for someone else? If a Palestinian writer were to find a young

Palestinian girl who had trouble. Maybe her brother was killed by a sniper. Or her parents were crushed by a bulldozer. Or her home was destroyed by Israeli explosives. If a Palestinian writer were to take his story and give it the same treatment and the same style as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, maybe the book would become as popular as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Maybe it would bring home to average people exactly what life for this young Palestinian girl was like. Just like *The Diary of Anne Frank* brings home to regular people how life was for the young Jewish girl Anne Frank. . . .

There must be literally thousands of young . . . Palestinian girls with stories of horror that will wrench the collective heart of the world.

It would not hurt to try.²⁰

Actually Arab writers have been trying all along. In her diary entries about life in a Palestinian refugee camp, Muna Hamzeh implores, “Where are you Anne Frank? Where are you? Is this the reason you died for? So that your people can turn around and commit these pogroms against another people? You were so young and didn’t deserve to die, yet you died because of your identity. The same reason they’re killing us now.”²¹ Anyone familiar with the ongoing Arab-Israeli war knows that Palestinians are being killed, as are Israelis, but not because of their “identities” or anything else that bears resemblance to the motives behind the killing of Anne Frank. And yet, like her employment of the word “pogrom,” Muna Hamzeh reaches into the lexicon of Jewish suffering to make Palestinian suffering indistinguishable from that of the Jews at its worst.

Others do the same. Reviewing Ghada Karmi’s memoir *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*,²² Muhammad Khan notes that Karmi’s story of a “Palestinian girl forced out of her native country along with her family . . . instantly reminded me of the plight of Anne Frank and her family in Nazi Germany.” He goes on to note that the picture of the young Karmi on the cover of her book is so strikingly similar to the picture of Anne Frank on the cover of her diary “that a non-suspecting reader would think that they were, in fact, sisters.” The reviewer then continues:

Soon after the Second World War ended, . . . European Jews, the victims of European anti-Semitism and Nazi persecution . . . move[d] into the heart of the Middle East and rapidly colonize[d] the country of an unsuspecting Palestinian people. This way, the one-time victims of mass persecution in Europe were overnight turned into the oppressors of another wholly innocent people in the historic land of Palestine. As soon as the story of Anne Frank, the beautiful German Jewish girl, came to an end, another tale, the tale of another unspeakable horror, indeed one of the

worst crimes in the history of the modern era, was to be recorded and related to us by a Palestinian, who too was forced out of her native country as a young girl. That is the story of Ghada Karmi and the people of Palestine.²³

For a number of years, the rhetorical trick of turning Jews into Nazis and Palestinians into Jews has been part of the Arab discourse on the Middle East conflict. Although the historical parallels are far fetched, a narrative of Palestinian victimization by Israeli Jews on a par with Jewish victimization under Hitler is now broadly accepted—and not only in the Arab and Muslim world, but among sizable numbers of people in Europe and elsewhere. The notion of a “Palestinian Anne Frank” fits into this context, although on closer inspection the fit reveals itself to be wholly fabricated. Since 1949, for instance, Ghada Karmi has lived in London, where decades ago she readily adopted British culture and assimilated into English society. Anne Frank, by contrast, never saw her sixteenth birthday and lies in some anonymous corpse mound in Bergen-Belsen. For all the obvious differences in their stories, though, in this instance and countless others, there has been a steady melding of Anne Frank’s experiences with those of other young girls undergoing hardship of one kind or another.²⁴

The effort—patently a form of usurpation—is a regular feature of the Arab media. “Meet today’s Anne Frank,” writes Yusuf Agha in an article entitled “The Anne Franks of Palestine.” The author then goes on to present several youngsters who are meant to be Palestinian stand-ins for Anne Frank and describes the first of these surrogates, Suad Ghazal, a seventeen-year-old Palestinian girl serving time in Ramle prison in Israel, employing these lines:

[T]he minute I was alone I knew I was going to cry my eyes out. I slid to the floor in my nightgown and began by saying my prayers, very fervently. Then I drew my knees to my chest, lay my head on my arms and cried, all huddled up on the bare floor. A loud sob brought me back down to earth. . . .

I’ve reached the point where I hardly care whether I live or die. The world will keep on turning without me, and I can’t do anything to change events anyway.²⁵

This is not Suad Ghazal’s voice in a Ramle prison cell, however, but the voice of Anne Frank in a rare moment of resignation. Although the experiences of the two girls are presented here as almost one and the same, in fact they are simply not

comparable. Suad Ghazal ended up in an Israeli jail not for being a Palestinian, but for trying to stab to death an Israeli living on the West Bank; Anne Frank, on the other hand, was penned up in her Amsterdam attic as a Jew in hiding from her Nazi hunters. The Palestinian teenager has been imprisoned for attempted murder but will eventually be released. The Jewish girl had no chance of a reprieve from her sentence of being a Jew—a capital offense in the Europe of her time—and was murdered. For all of their differences, though, Suad is projected as an Anne Frank lookalike. “I am the Palestinian Anne Frank,” she proudly declares, “and Israeli Hitlers who are all around me take pleasure in torturing me. . . . Though I am guilty of no crime, all the crimes in the world have been committed against me.”²⁶

It is impossible to know whether Suad Ghazal actually believes what she is saying, but it is easy to get trapped within hyperbolic rhetoric of this kind and to genuinely imagine oneself a victim on a par with the Jewish victims of the real Hitler. The case of Binjamin Wilkomirski, the author of the notoriously fraudulent Holocaust “memoir” *Fragments*, comes prominently to mind as an admonitory example. In an age when victims have become valorized, though, it is both tempting and advantageous to project oneself as a target of extreme and unjust suffering. One solicits the world’s pity and also neutralizes any sense of personal responsibility for one’s situation.

Of course there is nothing opaque or subtle about the politics of such maneuvers, and depending on one’s own political biases, one may agree or disagree with them. One should be fully aware, however, that rhetorical moves of this kind are inherently manipulative and transgress against historical memory and the integrity of truth itself. For appropriations of someone else’s history, in this case that of Anne Frank, are inevitably misappropriations—the propagandistic use of one person’s tragic experience to augment and promote that of another. No doubt Muna Hamzeh, Ghada Karmi, Suad Ghazal, and other Palestinian Arabs have led hard and unenviable lives, but it is deceitful to link their stories to that of Anne Frank—just as it is a distortion to idealize and sentimentalize Anne Frank’s story and have it appear as a generalized symbol of oppression in a tyrannical world.

If these trends continue unchecked, the Holocaust’s most famous victim will still be remembered, but in ways that may put at risk an historically accurate and morally responsible memory of the Holocaust itself.

NOTES

1. Jan Romein's essay is reprinted in *A Tribute to Anne Frank*, ed. Anna G. Steenmeijer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 21; in a slightly altered translation, it also appears in *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, eds. David Barnouw and Gerrold van der Stroom (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 67–68; the citations here are to the version in the former book.
2. *Newsweek*, June 16, 1952.
3. *Saturday Review*, July 19, 1952.
4. "Introduction," *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Pocket Books, 1953), p. ix.
5. *New York Herald Tribune*, October 23, 1955.
6. *The New York Post*, October 8, 1955.
7. For more on Anne Frank's father and his role in shaping his daughter's image, see Carol Ann Lee, *The Hidden Life of Otto Frank* (New York: William Morrow, 2003). For two well-informed but strikingly different interpretations of Otto Frank's influence on the dramatic versions of his daughter's diary, see Ralph Melnick, *The Stolen Legacy of Anne Frank: Meyer Levin, Lillian Hellman, and the Staging of the Diary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997) and Lawrence Graver, *An Obsession with Anne Frank: Meyer Levin and the Diary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
8. See Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust" (David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs, University of Michigan, 1995).

9. *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, eds. Barnouw and van der Stroom.
10. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), pp. 186–87.
11. Between June and December 2003, large numbers of people came to the USHMM, toured the exhibition “Anne Frank the Writer,” and witnessed first hand just how thoughtful, gifted, and caring a writer Anne Frank was. Whatever other impressions of the young girl that they may have taken home with them, surely they would have seen and been moved by her dedication to record and reflect on her experiences in thoughtful and articulate ways.
12. Ernst Schnabel, *Anne Frank: A Portrait in Courage*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Harbrace Paperback Library, 1958).
13. Quotation in Willy Lindwer, *The Last Seven Months of Anne Frank* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), pp. 103–105.
14. Melissa Mueller, *Anne Frank: The Biography* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).
15. The text of the play is available under the title *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, newly adapted by Wendy Kesselman (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000).
16. See “The Artist, Enid Futterman: My Journey with Anne Frank,” [www.musicalheaven.com/i/i am anne frank.html](http://www.musicalheaven.com/i/i%20am%20anne%20frank.html).
17. Barbara North, “Anne Musical Moves,” *See Magazine* 257 (October 29, 1998).
18. See “An Interview with Jon Blair,” [www.sonypictures.com/classics.annefrank/misc/interview.html](http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/annefrank/misc/interview.html) (accessed 7/21/2004).

19. Quotation in Damien McElroy, "Anne Frank Diary Used to Portray Bush as Nazi," *Telegraph* (London), March 8, 2004.

20. David Little, "Could a Little Girl Be the Key to Stopping the Violence in Iraq and Palestine?" *Al-Jazeera*, June 13, 2004.

21. Quotation in Rodney Carmichael, "Jewish Studies Class Draws Fire from Some Local Jews," *WACO Tribune-Herald*, April 28, 2001.

22. Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (London: Verso, 2004).

23. Muhammad Khan, "Voices of a People Living in Exile," www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article'1582 (accessed 7/20/2004).

24. At the time of the war in Bosnia, for instance, Zlata Filipovic—the teenage author of *Zlata's Diary*—was hailed as "the Anne Frank of Sarajevo." After a period of intense publicity about the plight of this "innocent and wise child," whose narrative voice was modeled directly on that of the famous Jewish diarist of Amsterdam, Zlata moved to Paris where she still lives.

25. Quotation in Yusuf Agha, "The Anne Franks of Palestine," *YellowTimes.org* (June 20, 2002), www.yellowtimes.org/article.php?sid'410 (accessed 7/20/2004).

26. Quotation in Edna Yaghi, "My Humanity on Hold," www.hejleh.com/edna_yaghi/suad.html (accessed 7/20/2004).

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