

# **Anne Frank: Symbol of Hope or Holocaust victim?**

## **- on a conundrum of modern (not just Jewish) Identity**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me, if I may, to start on a personal note. My interest in Anne Frank and what she stands for goes back to a paper I gave at a conference in Germany almost fifteen years ago, bearing the title: „Do the Mass Media trivialize the Holocaust? - Reflections on Horkheimer and Adorno's 'culture industry' concept“. The crux of this paper - in a formulation that has had something of a minor career on the internet since then - went as follows:

The Mass Media's representation of the Holocaust is mythological: it fosters, in the mass public of the industrialised world (which increasingly means the vast majority of the human race now alive) attitudes, orientations, beliefs and convictions with regard to the past which make a rational reflection upon the causes of the European and world catastrophe of this century impossible. Put differently: the mass media make a repetition of the Holocaust in some form - nuclear, ecological, or whatever - likely, and perhaps inevitable; they fulfill, in the contemporary world, a comparable function to that of the propaganda ministry in this country a mere sixty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

Now, if one subtracts from that the somewhat apodictic tone, which is something that rubs off if one has worked on Horkheimer and Adorno for a

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2 [fvg1996\\_Mass\\_Media\\_trivialisation\\_bonn.html](http://fvg1996_Mass_Media_trivialisation_bonn.html)

long time, what one is left with is perhaps the following. There's something about the way publicity works, the way the *public sphere* functions, that is seriously distortive with regard to public memory and our conceptions of the past.

One question hence that I started out with was: how far do we get, with regard to the icon Anne Frank, when we apply to it these ideas from the *Frankfurt School*?

Before getting into that, a couple of interesting connections between Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Anne Frank's *Diary*. Neither was intended for publication<sup>3</sup>, both were published in a very limited edition in Amsterdam immediately after the war, all four - Horkheimer and Adorno, the Franks - had strong connections to Frankfurt. Otto Frank and Max Horkheimer are of the same generation, both moved in the same social circles in Frankfurt before the war,<sup>4</sup> both came from well-to-do banking and manufacturing families, both came from an assimilated Reform Jewish background<sup>5</sup>, both were able to emigrate after the 'Machtergreifung' of the Nazis in 1933, both spent their post-war lives dedicated to 'Holocaust education' broadly conceived, both eventually settled in Switzerland. Both were what Isaac Deutscher once called 'non-Jewish Jews', refusing to put an ethnically particularist interpretation on their experiences in Germany, and both were coerced into the *self*scriptive appellation 'Jewish' only through the Nuremberg Laws. Their *wartime* experiences could, of course, not have been more different. Otto Frank was to

- 3 In Anne's case her decision to rework what was originally a private diary in letter form (what would later come to be called the „A-version“) into a second version intended for publication (the „B-version“) was the call by Radio Orange from England, in the spring of 1944, for all war-time diaries and other texts to be preserved for posterity. (c.f. <http://www.annefrank.org/en/Anne-Frank/A-diary-as-a-best-friend/At-last-seriously-taken-as-a-writer/> )
- 4 Perhaps there's an archive photo somewhere, showing the Horkheimers, the Franks, the Adornos, attending the Alte Oper in Frankfurt, say in the late Twenties.
- 5 At the *Institute for Social Research* in Frankfurt I had an office for many years that overlooked the *Beethovenplatz* as well as the building next door, which housed in those years the Philosophy Faculty of the University, at Dantestrasse 4. Never realizing, in all those years, that I was looking at the exact spot where the Frank residence had stood eighty years earlier, and where Otto Frank had spent some of his formative years. Quite possible that Max Horkheimer, who played a leading role at the annual Anne Frank commemorations at the university, knew that the rebuilt Institute for Social Research stood almost on the site of the old Frank house. „In der heutigen Dantestraße 4,... erwirbt die Familie Frank 1901 eines der neuen mehrgeschossigen Häuser. 1902 zieht die Familie ein. Auch die Großmutter zieht zu Kindern und Enkeln.“ in: *Historisches Museum, Frankfurt, Anne aus Frankfurt*, 1990, p. 21.

survive Auschwitz and come to prominence through the publication of the diary of his daughter; Max Horkheimer came to head the American Jewish Committee's research division (which would produce the notable *Studies in Prejudice* series), before returning to Germany and becoming famous as the spiritus rector of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory - in which capacity he would exert lasting influence on the German post-war education system.

As with the Frankfurt School, the question of the relationship to Judaism was not just a personal problem for all of the figures involved. As is well-known, in the famous conceptual break that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes with the Hegelian-Marxian assumptions of the Institute for Social Research during its pre-emigration Frankfurt days, it is not the *proletariat* or the *working classes* that is seen as the essential, the 'make-or-break' issue facing the 'bourgeois world' and the 'Enlightenment' (modernity altogether), but *Antisemitism* and what this means for the fate of the Jews.<sup>6</sup> In a related way, the controversy which accompanied the story of Anne Frank from the outset, long before she would become a household - indeed, a *global* - name, was the question whether she represented something *universal*, or something specifically *Jewish*. Already before writing had begun on the stage adaptation of what would become the world-wide success, Otto Frank emphasized, in response to a query by the stage-writing pair Goodrich and Hackett, „his belief that the play should not be focused on a distinctively Jewish situation but should emphasize the universal appeal of the girl's personality and growth“, that it should „,propagate Anne's ideas and ideals in every manner' in order 'to show to mankind whereto discrimination, hatred and persecution are leading.'“<sup>7</sup> This he writes at a time when he is already fully engaged in an acrimonious and litigious dispute with the American 'discoverer' of Anne Frank, the author of the original 1952 rave review in the *New York Times*, Meyer Levin. A dispute that came close to scuttling the Broadway production altogether, that darkened Otto Frank's last years, and has continued in full force to the present day, long after the death of the protagonists themselves. Is Anne Frank a symbol of the *Holocaust*, or is she a symbol of the dangers of *discrimination* and *prejudice*? Did the play „de-Judaize“ the *Diary*, or is it the converse: that 'claiming' her for the Jewish and then the Israeli-Zionist cause

6 "Elements of Anti-Semitism: The Limits of Enlightenment" in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

7 Lawrence Graver (1995): *An Obsession with Anne Frank. Meyer Levin and the 'Diary'*. p. 78.

detracts from what is really „an exalting comment on the human spirit“?<sup>8</sup> Is she a stereotypic American teenager, or the singular Dutch girl of the *Diary*?

I know of no 1950s work of popular fiction - the stage adaptations and the films are after all works of *fiction* - the *interpretation* of which would eventually impinge on American foreign policy; or at least come to influence the way in which many US voters came to see Israel and the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

Back to something more pedestrian. A couple of weeks ago I joined the queue, stretching around the block, outside the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam. Thus adding my modest bit to the one million or so visitors who annually traipse up and down the narrow stairs of the ‘achterhuis’ - the secret Annex - that has come to represent to billions around the world the fate of the Jews during the war. Why was it *this* teenager that captured the popular imagination of the world?<sup>10</sup>

The statistics on the Anne Frank industry are staggering. Her *diary* is up there with the *Bible* and the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* in the top ten books in the world, „the single most widely read document of the Holocaust“<sup>11</sup>. The Broadway production inspired choreographers, composers, painters, and sculptors, even judges. There’s a Ballet<sup>12</sup> and a choral work.<sup>13</sup> Teachers use it in their classrooms. Presidents have quoted from it. „She’s the ‘world’s most famous child.“<sup>14</sup> Not to mention a small cottage industry of reminiscences, dedications, monographs, fictionalisations, semi-official investigations, academic publications. The Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam and the Anne Frank-Fonds in Basel annually organise a travelling exhibition on 100 different locations worldwide, and that’s not counting two permanent centers in New York and Berlin. As I write this the local

8 Director Garson Kamin, quoted in Graver 88.

9 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/josie-ensor/how-anne-frank-was-sent-b\\_b\\_401251.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/josie-ensor/how-anne-frank-was-sent-b_b_401251.html), *Huffington Post*, June 27, 2010.

10 Or adults for that matter: Jacques Presser, the ‘Raul Hilberg’ of the Netherlands, author of the standard work *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry* (English translation 1988) *also* wrote a diary while in hiding during the war, at the same time as Anne Frank, which is much more informative than the latter. *Homo submersus - Een roman uit de onderduik*. However deserving of translation, it is of course, compared to Anne Frank, not likely to receive comparable attention.

11 Max Page (1999): „The Life and Death of a Document: Lessons from the Strange Career of the *Diary of Anne Frank*“ in: *The Public Historian*, vol. 21, No 1, 1999.

12 Adam Darius: The Anne Frank Ballet - PremiÃ“red in Long Beach, California in 1959.

13 "Annelies", first performed 2005.

14 Jacob Boas (1996): *We are Witnesses - Five Diaries of Teenagers who died in the Holocaust*.

Amsterdam popular daily *Het Parool* headlines with „Anne Frank’s name sullied“, after the publication of a novel for adolescents, in the form of a diary by Peter van Daan (van Pels), ‘revealing’ his love affair with Anne. Complete with protests from the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam, and from the last living Frank relative, Buddy Elias.<sup>15</sup>

She’s been commemorated by Eleonor Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Shimon Peres, Hillary Clinton, Vaclav Havel, Primo Levi, and Simon Wiesenthal. *Time Magazine* declared her, at the end of the Millenium, as one of the „100 most important people of the Century“. <sup>16</sup> The death of Miep Gies a few months ago was - according to *Haaretz* - the occasion for a message of condolence from the President of Israel to Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Nelson Mandela, whose thoughts on the subject will not have harmonised entirely with those of his colleagues in Israel, „likened her struggle against Nazism to his struggle against apartheid, drawing a parallel between the two philosophies with the comment ‘because these beliefs are patently false, and because they were, and will always be, challenged by the likes of Anne Frank, they are bound to fail.’“<sup>17</sup>

With such a world-wide movement, criticism can hardly be far behind. Hannah Arendt, with the German reception of the play in mind, spoke of „cheap sentimentality at the expense of great catastrophe“<sup>18</sup>. Bruno Bettelheim, himself a survivor of Dachau, complained that „If all people were indeed good at heart then Auschwitz would not have happened, and a future repetition would be inconceivable.“<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Benz, director of the Berlin *Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung*, voiced a widespread criticism made by historians:

„How representative, how reliable, how informative are the notes that Anne Frank, in her short life, left behind? What do we learn from her diary that goes beyond the emotional life of a young girl living in oppressive circumstances? In ef-

15 <http://jta.org/news/article/2010/06/22/2739728/controversy-arises-over-anne-franks-inferred-sexuality> reports Jewish News organisation JTA. Last year here in Amsterdam an initiative „Anne’s Tree“ went public with a financial drive to shore up the chestnut tree that Anne once described from her attic window - endangered by a fungus, it’s about to go the way of all things mortal.

16 "With a diary kept in a secret attic, she braved the Nazis and lent a searing voice to the fight for human dignity."

17 Wikipedia.

18 Robert Alter (1995): „Review of Lawrence Graver: *An Obsession with Anne Frank*“ in: *New Republic*, 213, nr. 23, p. 38-42.

19 Quoted in Wolfgang Benz (2004): „Mythos Anne Frank“ in: Inge Hansen-Schaberg (ed.) *Als Kind verfolgt. Anne Frank und die anderen*.



fect not very much, and that is the key to the success of the document. It is the transformation of the mass persecution into the private life-world of someone in a hiding, in which the facts of the million-fold murder are not themselves part of the narrative. It is this that make it possible to read it while at the same time avoiding the existential dread that otherwise accompanies recollections of Ghetto, concentration camp and death camp.“<sup>20</sup>

„Telford Taylor, U.S. chief counsel for the prosecution of war crimes at Nuremberg in 1946, once asked Goodrich and Hackett why they thought their play was such a remarkable success in Germany. When they answered that it was a heartrending work about a lovable young girl and her family, he replied that he believed the audiences liked it because the play never pointed an accusing finger at anyone and because it took place in Holland, not Germany.“ (Graver 129.)

Benz makes a plausible case.<sup>21</sup> We are able to identify with Anne Frank precisely because she does *not* represent, as Meyer Levin had originally put it, ‘the voice of six million Jewish souls’. This is a teenager in ‘dark times’, if ever there was one, but her diary stops before the real suffering starts - it’s an expression of frustration and teenage travails, rather than a sacred text or a symptom of trauma.<sup>22</sup> Etty Hillesum, Philip Mechanicus, Jacques Presser are more deeply disturbing, in their diaries, but that’s a view from Holland. (Benz too, in the end can do no more than confront his readers with some bleak quotes from the Warsaw ghetto, while conceding that - precisely because they resist our empathy - are utilisable only „as raw material for historians, as building blocks in the historiography of the collective fate of the Jews.“)

For all that, the charge of trivialisation and commercialisation had less impact than an attack coming from a quite different direction, and one that over the years has had a much more lasting effect. It is already anticipated in Meyer Levin’s feud with Otto Frank, and would later be taken up by oth-

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20 Benz: „Mythos Anne Frank“, op. cit.

21 Former Chief Rabbi of Israel and Holocaust survivor Yisrael Meir Lau concurs: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_4FcKjoCy4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_4FcKjoCy4)

22 In the words of another author: „What is appealing about Anne Frank is the absolute teenage normalcy that she manifests in her diary. In fact, she registers the historical disaster around her only to the degree that it concretely compels her attention. The earliest entries, from the period before she goes into hiding with her family in July 1942, are full of anxious observations not about the Nazis but about school grades and promotion and friendships; the ominous German occupation is reflected only in her complaint about the inconvenience of being forbidden as a Jew to ride the streetcar.“ Alter, op. cit.

ers.<sup>23</sup> The charge is that by ‘universalising’ the *Diary* into a “document of consolation and uplift” the specifically Jewish story that is integral to the diary is eviscerated.<sup>24</sup>

Lawrence Graver has devoted a book-length study to this question,<sup>25</sup> concentrating on the personalities of the protagonists, the legal arguments and media coverage, the relative merits of the different stage productions. He leaves little doubt that Otto Frank had been wronged by Levin, both legally and morally. By a man who, in the view of most parties concerned (including his wife), was following what was more a private obsession than a public cause.<sup>26</sup>

He saw „Jewish self-hatred motivated the left-wing, anti-Zionist coterie...“ threatening him from all sides. (Graver 134) From the outset Otto Frank had insisted on a *universal* interpretation of his daughter’s *Diary*.<sup>27</sup>

For Levin on the other hand, the ardent Zionist, the diary is „the representative document ... of all who perished in the great catastrophe...“<sup>28</sup> For him ‘universalising’ the *Diary* amounts to one more injustice imposed on the Jewish people, namely the denial of a potent metaphor for unspeakable suffering. It is at this point, with Levin’s increasing stylisation of the *Diary* as

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23 c.f. Max Page: „The life and death of a Document: Lessons from the strange career of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, op. cit.

24 Cynthia Ozick (1997): „Who Owns Anne Frank?“ in *The New Yorker*, 6 Oct. 1997, p. 76-87.

25 Lawrence Graver, op. cit.

26 "Levin often deplored the omission of the specific reference to Jews in Anne Frank’s lines in the play. In 1976, he told Ira Berkow that ‘the actual psychological effect of omitting such a passionate Jewish speech from the stage ... who can imagine it? The attitude is that the Jew would assimilate and disappear. To take out ‘Jewish suffering’ and put in ‘all people suffer’ is to equalize the Holocaust with any kind of disaster. If you do this, you unhook the search for meaning, you unhook the wrong to the Jews. Then you go on over the years with statements like ‘There weren’t six million. There were four million. There were two million. There were a lot of Russians and Poles who were killed in the camps. So the Jews are just exaggerating.’ And you end up with what they’re using now. The bottom line reads: ‘The Jews did worse to the Arabs in Palestine than the Nazis ever did to the Jews.’ It’s been stated that way by any number of leaders in the United Nations." (Graver 90)

27 "As to the Jewish [issue] you are right that I do not feel the same way you do. I always said, that Anne’s book is not a war book. War is the background. It is not a Jewish book either, though the Jewish sphere, sentiment and surrounding is the background. I never wanted a Jew writing an introduction for it. It is (at least here) read and understood more by gentiles than in Jewish circles. I do not know, how that will be in USA, it is the case in Europe. So do not make a Jewish play out of it! In some way of course it must be Jewish, even so that it works against anti-Semitism. I do not know if I can express what I mean and only hope that you won’t misunderstand." (Graver 54.)

28 Graver 103.

a symbol of the Holocaust - replete with insinuations that objections to this can only motivated by antisemitism or 'Jewish self-hate' - that Otto Franks breaks off contact with him.<sup>29</sup>

That is, much stronger than the criticism coming from the historians and the scholars has been that coming from those who would stylise her into 'one of the six million'. Graver, who is quite sympathetic to what he sees as Levin's quixotic tilt at Hollywood and Broadway („Don Quixote and the Star of David“) notes that it was exactly this abstraction into a symbolic Holocaust martyr (into a „Jewish Anne of the Beatitudes“, p. 228) that robbed Levin's original stage script of its dramatic tension, and that there's no need no look further for the reasons why it was rejected by the professionals. „A fourteen-year-old Dutch girl could not possibly be 'the voice of six million'...“ (227), could not possibly shoulder such a burden. However justified the protest against mass media trivialisation - against the „impossibility of finding an authentic way to bear witness to the Holocaust in a society governed by money, popular taste, media hype, democratic optimism“<sup>30</sup> - turning her into a cypher of the Holocaust is at odds with both the girl, her *Diary*, and her background.

Where are we now, fifteen years on?

For this paper I looked at the last two BBC film versions, and a couple of others besides. I provide a few impressions. Of the two BBC versions the first one is still very much in the cinematic conventions of the Sixties. It contains factual and geographic inaccuracies, casting implausibilities. The Prinsengracht is unrecognizably wide, the Annex impossibly spacious, the accents of the German soldiers implausibly British, the dialogues at times insipidly flat. In the 2008 BBC version - directed by Jon Jones, starring Ellie Kendrick as Anne - much of this has been ironed out. The Prinsengracht now no longer looks like the Thames Embankment, the 'achterhuis' has become more the claustrophobic hole it was, the atmosphere more ominous, psychological depth wins over decor. I found myself empathising with Otto Frank, caught there between necessity and anxiety about his

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29 Levin to Otto Frank: „[T]here were two ways to destroy Jewish life: 'one is physical extinction as practiced by the Nazis. The other is extinction of Jewish identification. In some countries this is practiced through the extermination of Jewish culture.'“ (Graver 121) After this Otto Frank breaks off further contact.

30 Graver 238.



brood.<sup>31</sup> But most of all, the film shifts emphasis to what is indeed the crux, which is not the diary itself, but what the audience knows about the fate awaiting its author. It's the final scene that breaks one's heart, that carries the impact. In the older BBC version the final scene relies more on text than on visuals: the annex inhabitants file singly down the stairs, and as each appears in the doorway the frame freezes, with each inhabitant's fate flashing in a text box. Then, with a minimum of fuss, almost as an illustration of the insulting cliché 'lambs going to the slaughter', they calmly climb into a truck of the „~Grüne Polizei“.

In the 2008 BBC film these final moments are more carefully crafted, perhaps in recognition of just where the neuralgic point lies for a modern audience. The eight residents of the annex file down the stairs, as before. For each one the camera freezes, and again those words flash up that are the stuff of modern nightmares: Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme, Mauthausen. (Sobibor, where most of the Dutch Jews died, my own family included, does not feature.) Anne is the last to appear, and she does something that she doesn't do in the older film. She does a half turn, in mid-stride, still on the stairs, while the camera shifts position to look down on her from the annex. She takes one last look back up, to the now forever receding sanctuary - and straight into the lens of the camera, hence the eyes of the audience. That's the moment she freezes, like the wife of Lot, while the colour slowly bleaches into the sepias of old photographs. The lovable, vivacious, talented teenager of the last two hours metamorphoses into a Yad Vashem artefact. The audience is spared the mass graves of Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald - with which the visitor to the Museum is 'welcomed' - but that's the everpresent background anyway.

The blow is almost physical, and one can wonder just what it is that goes through the audience at that moment. There's something there that hits hard, even now.<sup>32</sup> Something to do with the imponderables of death and

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31 Perhaps that's because I'm a parent myself. He takes the risks - in the end fatal risks, for which Bruno Bettelheim would later reproach him (Novick 139) - but one also understands his motives: he wants to spare these teenagers the trauma of separation. Even though he must have known that splitting up the family, as the resistance usually did in those years, would have been safer. He does nothing about the warehouse workers, neither bringing them onboard nor replacing them with more loyal ones.

32 The English critic Kenneth Tynan, on the premiere in Berlin: „At the Schlosspark I survived the most drastic emotional experience the theatre has ever given me. It had little to do with art, for the play was not a great one; yet its effect, in Berlin, at that moment in history, transcended anything that art has yet learned to achieve. It invaded the privacy of the whole audience: I tried to stay detached, but the general catharsis engulfed me... Yet in the shadow of an event so desperate and traumatic, criticism would be an ir-

hope, with incomprehension, with memory, with the humiliation that comes from being confronted with our impotence in the face of immeasurable injustice.

At the more formal level, it struck me that the Jon Jones film owes at least some of its impact to the skillfull integration of two different genres: of the 'bildungsroman' theme - the depiction of the growth to maturity of this immensely likeable teenager - interwoven with the *documentary* mode, in which reality lurks as nemesis and menetekel. The voice of Churchill, the Normandy landings, the 20 July plot, rumours of gas chambers on the radio. Popular romanticism on the one hand, documentary realism on the other - the 'subject/object' epistemology that has been the foundation of Western sensibilities since Descartes is here translated visually, into an *aesthetic principle*. Realism by itself - in its unmediated confrontation with mega-death - is emotionally intolerable, the 'naturalization' of these unspeakable events impossible - that's what trauma is all about. But popular notions on individualism, autonomy and personal growth - the emotional lattice on which the audience builds its identification with the heroine - don't fare much better; in the confrontation with the reality of the death camps they reveal their hollowness. Faced with this bind, with these 'false alternatives', we seem to fall back on much older emotional reactions. One could speculate that the deep swathes that secularisation has drawn through all spheres of life in the West during the last century have by no means cut an even older association - symbolised, at least for Christians, by the dying Christ on the Cross - between death and hope, between disaster and moral-ethical renewal, between terror and spirituality.<sup>33</sup> Analytic Philosophy and three hundred years of empiricism in philosophy seem not to keep millions every year, - people who would not dream of going to church or to Shul - from reading into the murder of this one teenager a message of hope, from seeking in it a secular epiphany. „The Holocaust knows countless hells but only one shrine. This shrine is located in the center of Amsterdam...“<sup>34</sup> Or in Otto's words to his daughter in the Jones production: „What is our motto? It is 'Work and Hope'.“

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relevance. I can only record an emotion that I felt, would not have missed, and pray never to feel again.“ (*The Observer*, 7 Oct. 1956; cited in Graver 127.)

33 "Olie van olijven, zuivere gestotene, gestoten en geslagen, om leed als licht te dragen." Westerbork. (Exodus). From Eddy de Wind (1993): *Confrontatie met de dood*.

34 The quote continues: „... and each year thousands of visitors clamber up the ancient building's steep and narrow stairs to have a peek at the cramped quarters where many years ago a young girl kept a diary while hiding from the Nazis.“ Jacob Boas. [Correction: 1 million annually - fvg.]

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A last comment on ‘translating’ the Holocaust; on ‘translating the life-world of Anne Frank into the language of the post-war generation’. When I went through this paper for the last time on Sunday, it struck me that I’d not actually said anything of my own reactions to the visit of the *Annex* of the Prinsengracht 263. These are, I’m afraid, impossibly ideosyncratic. I was myself born, you see, in such a hiding place in Holland, at the end of the war. Three weeks or so after Anne died in Bergen-Belsen. In a cellar, where my parents had hidden from the beginning of 1943 to the end of the war. Where they made it through luck, and by the grace of a few courageous helpers - our own ‘Miep Gies’ was the family grocer, whose name I bear.