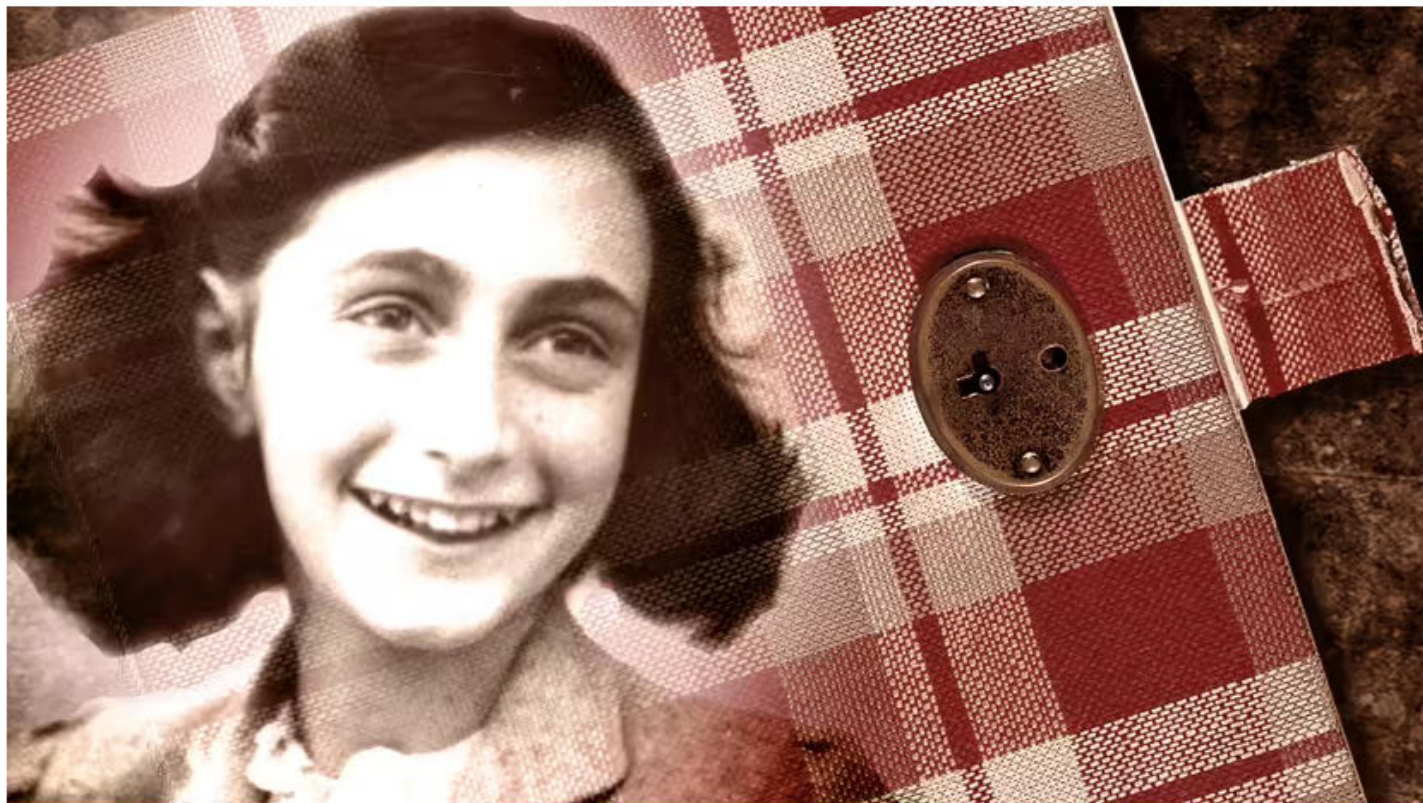


Anne Frank's Diary Is Still Spilling Its Secrets

By: [John Donovan](#) | Updated: Feb 3, 2021



Anne Frank, who was Jewish, was forced into hiding with her father, Otto, mother Edith and sister Margot in 1942. They lived in the "Secret Annex," a lair of rooms in the back of her father's business, with four other Jews. PHOTO COLLECTION ANNE FRANK HOUSE

Seventy-five years after penning the final entry in her acclaimed war-time diary, Anne Frank has earned her place as a literary icon. Her story of fear and laughter, of teen angst and young love, of unspeakable horror and unbreakable hope is as gripping and relevant in today's volatile world as it was during the Nazi-occupied setting of her writings.

Over the decades, her diary — originally, in Dutch, *Het Achterhuis* ("The Secret Annex") and known throughout the world now as "[The Diary of Anne Frank](#)," "[Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl](#)", and other titles — has been translated into more than 70 languages and has sold more than 35 million copies. That's a testament to the story, yes, one that is at the same time both personal and universal.

It's equally a tribute to the storyteller, too.

From the time *Het Achterhuis* first was published in 1947, scholars have pored over the diary, compared its different versions, dissected every page, every entry, every passage to put Anne and her work into a proper perspective. In doing so, a new image of the author slowly emerged. She has morphed from a wide-eyed and precocious child caught in one of history's most tragic episodes to a curious teen on the cusp of adulthood, and an exceptional young writer discovering herself in a world unhinged.

"Anne's story has changed in that it's acquired more texture and nuance over the decades, to have her not just be some sort of beatified martyr, but a teenage girl with mixed emotions, who could possibly be annoying, and a little arrogant," says historian Edna Friedberg of the Levine Institute for Holocaust Education at the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#). "People now have discovered sections that had been edited before about her blooming sexuality, all sorts of things that just make her more of a human being and less of an archetype."

An Anne Frank for the Ages

By now, the story of Anne Frank is well-known. What may be forgotten is that it begins as an [immigrant's](#) story.

Born into a Jewish family in Frankfurt, Germany in 1929, she and her family flee to Amsterdam in the summer of 1933 as Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime comes to power. In the Netherlands, she enters school and learns to speak Dutch. Her father, Otto, opens a small business. The Franks build a new life.

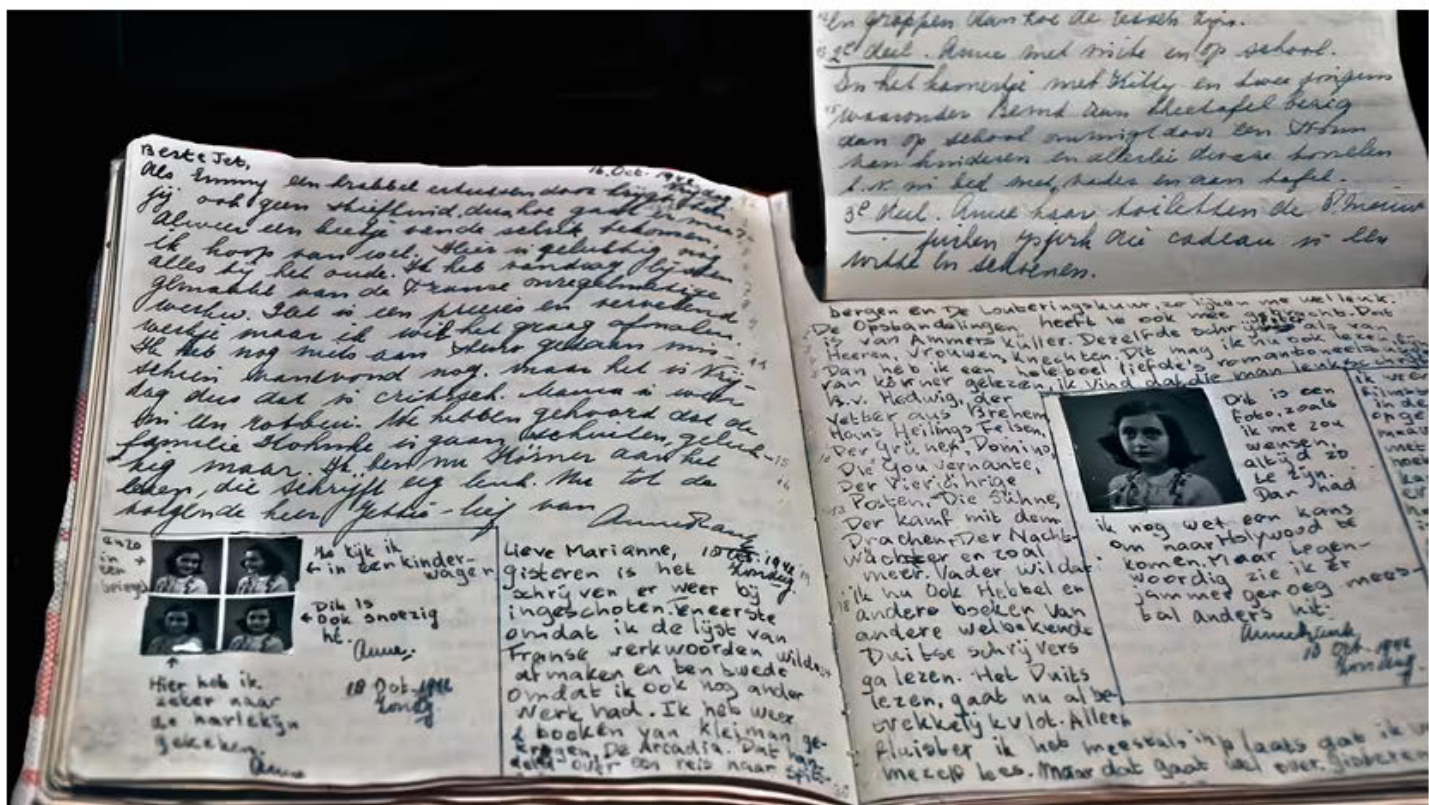
In May 1940, though, with Hitler continuing his march through Europe, the Nazis invade the Netherlands, and Anne's life is thrown into new turmoil. She is ordered into a Jews-only school and, like all Jews, made to live under strict separate laws. A couple years later, as the entire world descends into war, the Nazis call Anne's older sister Margot back to Germany to work in a "labor" camp.

Fearing the worst, Otto moves the entire Frank family — himself, his wife Edith, Margot and Anne — into hiding in a secret lair of rooms in the back of his business. The date is July 6, 1942.

It's there, in the Secret Annex on the Prinsengracht canal in Amsterdam, that Anne, her family and four other Jews spend the next two years hiding in fear from the Nazis. It is there that Anne, who had turned 13 just before slipping into hiding, writes the bulk of [her diary](#).

"It's a young people's story, a teenager's story, about growing up," says Maureen McNeil, the director of education at the [Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect](#) in New York. "It's also a refugee story. And it's also a literary work-of-art sort of story; becoming a writer.

"My own reaction, as a teenager who wanted to be a writer: She really was committed to personal transformation. You can see that in her writing. She wrestled with structural injustice. And, in the midst of that, she refused to live in a world without love."



The original diary of Anne Frank is held in the collection of the Anne Frank House Museum in Amsterdam.
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The Timeless Writings Still Resonate

All that introspection is evident early on in Anne's writing. It is extraordinary, especially for such a young person, and especially considering her circumstances. Her talent shines in simple passages that depict, ironically in some ways, just an ordinary teenage girl.

Here, just weeks before her move into the Secret Annex, Anne describes a typical school-day drama:

Our entire class is quaking in its boots. The reason, of course, is the upcoming meeting in which the teachers decide who'll be promoted to the next grade and who'll be kept back ... If you ask me, there are so many dummies that about a quarter of the class should be kept back, but teachers are the most unpredictable creatures on earth. Maybe this time they'll be unpredictable in the right direction for a change.

Once in the Secret Annex, Anne's diary serves as a friend and confidante — she often addresses her entries to an imaginary friend, "Dear Kitty" — and a way to both pass the time and hone her burgeoning skills as a writer. She covers, in often harsh details, the seemingly mundane: run-ins with her mother and squabbles with others in the annex. She is blushingly honest about her own insecurities and, typically for a girl her age, wonders about her own looks and her emerging sexuality.

In passages kept from the original version of the diary, she describes, in great detail, her changing body. In [pages only recently revealed](#) (Anne had covered them with brown paper), she offers thoughts on sex and prostitution. And as the months in hiding wear on, she writes achingly of falling in love, too, with a fellow hideaway, Peter van Pels.

[At least two versions of the diary exist](#); some say [even more](#). From the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum:

The first is the diary as Anne originally wrote it from June 1942 to August 1944. Anne hoped to publish a book based on her entries, especially after a Dutch official announced in 1944 that he planned to collect eyewitness accounts of the German occupation. She then began editing her work, leaving out certain passages. That became the second version. Her father created a third version with his own edits as he sought to get the diary published after the war.

The third version is the most popularly known. Not all of the versions include Anne's criticism of her mother or the references to her developing curiosity about sex — the latter of which would have been especially controversial in 1947.

Scattered throughout the diary, mixed in with the everyday and her dreams, is an acute recognition of the horrors that exist outside the Secret Annex. Anne describes a permeating fear in her family's prison and wrestles with the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

From an entry in January 1943:

I could spend hours telling you about the suffering the war has brought, but I'd only make myself more miserable. All we can do is wait, as calmly as possible, for it to end. Jews and Christians alike are waiting, the whole world is waiting, and many are waiting for death.

"I think part of what makes her diary so powerful and resonant for so many people has to do with the circumstances in which she writes it. And by that, I don't mean the Holocaust," Friedberg says, "but because she was in a cloistered hiding place for so long. Her diary is her constant companion. A teen who was, let's say, in a concentration camp wouldn't have had the pen and paper, the diary, much less the privacy to be alone with her thoughts and think about what's happening to her.

"They're in this attic. They are terrified. They're also taken out of life. That gives a clarity of voice."

Anne clearly finds strength in exercising her voice and dreams of a future as a writer. In early April 1944, she says:

When I write I can shake off all my cares. My sorrow disappears, my spirits are revived! But, and that's a big question, will I ever be able to write something great, will I ever become a journalist or a writer? I hope so, oh, I hope so very much, because writing allows me to record everything, all my thoughts, ideals and fantasies.

A turning point in Anne's young life as a writer comes one day in March 1944, when the Dutch official urges radio listeners to keep records of their activities for publication after the war. The broadcast prompts Anne to become self-critical of her work. She edits some of the earlier, harsher parts of her diary, especially the entries on her love for Peter and some of the most stringent criticism of her mother.



Anne, who was just 13 when her family went into hiding, was already a prolific writer and yearned to one day become a journalist.

PHOTO COLLECTION ANNE FRANK HOUSE

Anne's Awareness of Self Peaks

On Aug. 1, 1944, more than two years after going into hiding in the Secret Annex, Anne's awareness of herself and her place in the world may have been at its peak. She wrote about a personality "split in two;" flippant and fun-loving on the outside but "purer, deeper and finer" on the inside. *"I keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if ... if only there were no other people in the world,"* she said.

That was the last entry in Anne's diary.

Three days later, on the morning of Aug. 4, 1944, the Nazis discover the eight Jews in the Secret Annex and send them to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where Edith died in January 1945. Margot and Anne were transferred to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.

A month later after their mother passed away, in February 1945, just two months before the Allies liberate Bergen-Belsen, Margot and Anne died as well.

Anne was 15 years old.

Immediately after the war, Otto — the sole survivor from the Secret Annex — returned to Amsterdam and recovered Anne's diaries. Two years later, *Het Achterhuis* by Anne Frank, was published.

"Anne's story resonates today for a few reasons. One is because of the power, clarity and authenticity of her voice," Friedberg says. "The second is because you feel that she almost made it. The Frank family and the other four Dutch Jews in hiding with them survived for two years because of the bravery and sustained support of others, non-Jews. That is inspiring."

Anne Frank's Story Continues

"But the tragedy," Friedberg continues, "is that someone betrayed them. She almost lived to see liberation. That is another part of what makes her story so appealing to people. They see in her the symbol of a missed chance at redemption, a missed chance at a happy ending. The idea that they almost taste freedom ... she almost made it."

A gnawing question surrounding Anne and those in the Secret Annex remains, 75 years later: After two years in hiding, who tipped off the Nazis?

For the past two years, a group that includes historians, forensic scientists and at least one FBI agent has been delving into that question. Many theories abound. Other groups are looking into it, too. But no one yet has an answer. We may never know.

In July, researchers at the [Anne Frank House](#) in Amsterdam and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum revealed more information in another stunning addition to Anne's continuing story: Before going into hiding in the Secret Annex, [Otto tried to emigrate with](#)

his family to America, only to be stymied by stringent American immigration laws at the time.

Some of the subjects that Anne grappled with in her diary were bleak. The threat of anti-Semitism. The plight of immigrants and refugees. The terrors of war. Those were the horrors that Anne faced. They are horrors the world still faces today.

Yet Anne also wrote of love and understanding. She wrote of hope.

"When she was looking at the blank page, she wasn't just a girl, she wasn't just a chatterbox, she wasn't just a refugee. She was a human being wanting to make a difference and willing to take the risk to put it on the page," McNeil says. "So her dream came true. She is in the Western literary canon. Her work is just as important as Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman or anybody else."

Anne never got a chance to live the life that she dreamed of. But all these years later, her words endure.

Now That's Interesting

Anne Frank's diary is considered the most important to come out of World War II, but there are others as well.

Friedberg points to the diary of Dawid Sierakowiak, a teen in the Lodz Ghetto in occupied Poland. (Some excerpts can be found [here](#).) His account of abject poverty, sickness and death in the ghetto paints a terrifying picture of the war's toll that Anne, hidden as she was, could not. Sierakowiak died in the ghetto at 18, probably of tuberculosis. More than 245,000 people, many Jews, were interned in the [Lodz Ghetto](#) during the war. When it was liberated, on Jan. 19, 1945, only 877 Jews remained.