

The Diary Speaks for Millions of Jews

Meyer Levin

Meyer Levin is a Jewish-American writer and filmmaker who became obsessed with Anne Frank's *Diary*. With expectations of receiving rights to an American dramatic adaptation of the *Diary*, he prepared the script of a play based on it. When the script was judged structurally and dramatically weak and someone else was given the stage rights, Levin began a long vendetta against everyone involved, including Anne Frank's father, Otto Frank. Levin wrote the following article shortly after the first English translation of the *Diary* was published. In the article, he contends that the diary holds a double significance. On one level, it is a poignantly classic portrait of a young girl growing into womanhood under "astounding circumstances." On another, the voice of its author represents the voice of the millions of Jews who did not survive the Holocaust.

Anne Frank's *Diary* is too tenderly intimate a book to be frozen with the label "classic," and yet no lesser designation serves. For little Anne Frank, spirited, moody, self-doubting, succeeded in communicating in virtually perfect, or classic, form the drama of puberty. But her book is not a classic to be left on the library shelf. It is a warm and stirring confession, to be read over and over for insight and enjoyment.

The diary is a classic on another level, too. It happened that during the two years that mark the most extraordinary changes in a girl's life, Anne Frank lived in astonishing circumstances: she was hidden with seven other people in a secret nest of rooms behind her father's place of business, in Amsterdam. Thus, the diary tells the life of a group of Jews waiting in fear of being taken by the Nazis. . . .

This is no lugubrious ghetto tale, no compilation of horrors. Reality can prove surprisingly different from invented reality, and Anne Frank's diary simply bubbles with amusement, love, discovery. It has its share of disgust, its moments of hatred, but it is so wondrously alive, so near, that one feels overwhelmingly the universalities of human nature. These people might be living next door; their within-the-family emotions, their tensions and satisfactions are those of human character and growth, anywhere.

Because the diary was not written in retrospect, it contains the trembling life of every moment—Anne Frank's voice becomes the voice of six million vanished Jewish souls. It is difficult to say in which respect her book is more "important," but one forgets the double significance of this document in experiencing it as an intimate whole, for one feels the presence of this child-becoming-woman as warmly as though she was snuggled on a near-by sofa.

CONFIDENCES OF A THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD

We meet Anne on her thirteenth birthday, "Quicksilver Anne" to her adored father, but "Miss Chatterbox" and "Miss Quack-Quack," she tells us to her teacher—for the family is still at liberty. Indeed, her teacher makes her write a self-curing essay on chattering; she turns in a poem that convulses teacher and class, and is allowed to remain her talkative self without further reprimand.

Yet, with the moodiness of adolescence, she feels lonesome. "Let me put it more clearly, since no one will believe that a girl of 13 feels herself quite alone in the world, nor is it so. I have darling parents and a sister of 16. I know about 30 people whom one might call friends—I have strings of boyfriends, anxious to catch a glimpse of me, who . . . peep at me through mirrors in class. I have relations, aunts, uncles, who are darlings too, a good home, no—I don't seem to lack anything. But it's the same with all my friends, just fun and joking, nothing more. I can never bring myself to talk of anything outside the common ground. We don't seem to be able to get any closer, that is the root of the whole trouble. Hence, this diary. I want this diary itself to be my friend, and shall call my friend Kitty."

What child of 13 hasn't had these feelings, and resolved to confide in a diary? Anne carried it through, never shrinking from revealing the ugly things about herself.

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Her father had already brought the family out of Germany in 1933. In June, 1942, a few weeks after the diary begins, the SS sends a call-up for Anne's sister, Margot, and the family goes into hiding. "I began to pack some of our most vital belongings into a school satchel . . . this diary, then hair curlers, handkerchiefs, schoolbooks, a comb, old letters." The Van Daans, with their 16-year-old son Peter, join the Franks. Later, because "Daddy says we must have another person if we can," an elderly dentist named Dussel is squeezed into the Secret Annex. He gets Anne's bed; she sleeps on a settee lengthened by chairs.

A born writer, Anne zestfully portrays the Annex inhabitants, with all their flaws and virtues. The common life effect . . . flowers with utter spontaneity. But Anne Frank's diary probes . . . into the core of human relations in bringing us an understanding of life under threat.

And this quality brings it home to any family in the world today. Just as the Franks lived in momentary fear of the Gestapo's knock on their hidden door, so every family today lives in fear of the knock of war. Anne's diary is a great affirmative answer to the life question of today, for she shows how ordinary people, within this ordeal, consistently hold to the greater human values.

The Franks' Dutch friends in the office on the other side of the secret door sustained them to the end. "Never have we heard *one* word of the burden which we certainly must be to them . . . they put on the brightest possible faces, bring flowers and presents for birthdays, risking their own lives to help others." These Dutch friends, Miep, Elli, Kraler, Koophuis, even managed to smuggle in Chanukah gifts, and shyly offered their Christmas remembrances to the hidden Jews.

Two years passed in disciplined activities. The hidden ones kept busy with smuggled correspondence courses in speed shorthand, in Latin, in nursing: Dussel even attempted dental operations, hilariously described by Anne. She herself studied mythology, ballet, "family trees," while keeping up her school work. She records the family disputes—Mrs. Van Daan violently resisting the sale of her fur coat, only to see it smoked up in black market tobacco! And the comic moments, as when her father lies on the floor trying to overhear an important business conference downstairs; Anne flattens herself beside him, lending a sharp ear. But business is so dull, she falls asleep.

Most wondrous of all is her love affair. Like a flower under a stone fulfilling itself, she came to her first love in her appointed time. "I give myself completely. But one thing. He may touch my face but no more." All is told from her potato-fetching devices for going up to Peter's attic lair, to the



WHEN IT COMES TO SEX

On Saturday, March 18, 1944, Anne Frank confided to her "Dearest Kitty" her feelings about sex. Her opinions on the subject remain universal, shared by many adolescent girls then and now.

SATURDAY, MARCH 18, 1944

Dearest Kitty,

I've told you more about myself and my feelings than I've ever told a living soul, so why shouldn't that include sex?

Parents, and people in general, are very peculiar when it comes to sex. Instead of telling their sons and daughters everything at the age of twelve, they send the children out of the room the moment the subject arises and leave them to find out everything on their own. Later on, when parents notice that their children have, somehow, come by their information, they assume they know more (or less) than they actually do. So why don't they try to make amends by asking them what's what?

A major stumbling block for the adults—though in my opinion it's no more than a pebble—is that they're afraid their children will no longer look upon marriage as sacred and pure once they realize that, in most cases, this purity is a lot of nonsense. As far as I'm concerned, it's not wrong for a man to bring a little experience to a marriage. After all, it has nothing to do with the marriage itself, does it?

Soon after I turned eleven, they told me about menstruation. But even then, I had no idea where the blood came from or what it was for. When I was twelve and a half, I learned some more from Jacques, who wasn't as ignorant as I was. My own intuition told me what a man and a woman do when they're together; it seemed like a crazy idea at first, but when Jacques confirmed it, I was proud of myself for having figured it out! It was also Jacques who told me that children didn't come out of their mother's tummies. As she put it, "Where the ingredients go in is where the finished product comes out!" . . . When I came here, Father told me about prostitutes, etc., but all in all there are still unanswered questions.

If mothers don't tell their children everything, they hear it in bits and pieces, and that can't be right. . . .

Yours, Anne M. Frank

first misplaced kiss, on her ear. And the parents worrying about the youngsters trysting up there in the dusk, sitting by the window over the canal. And her fears that her older sister is lonely and jealous, leading to an amazing exchange of letters between the two girls, in those hidden rooms. Finally, there is even the tender disillusionment with Peter, as Anne reaches toward maturity, and a character understanding replaces the first tug of love. In all this there are perceptions in depth, strivings toward mother, father, sister, containing love-anguish of the purest universality.

As is arch-typical for a girl in this period, her relations with her mother are difficult. Unflinchingly, Anne records each incident.

Dear Kitty—Oh dear, I've got another terrible black mark against my name. I was lying in bed yesterday evening waiting for Daddy to come and say my prayers with me, and wish me good night, when Mummy came into my room, sat on my bed, and asked very nicely, "Anne, Daddy can't come yet, shall I say your prayers with you tonight?" "No, Mummy," I answered.

Mummy got up, paused by my bed for a moment, and walked slowly toward the door. Suddenly she turned around, and with a distorted look on her face said, "I don't want to be cross, love cannot be forced." There were tears in her eyes as she left the room.

I lay still in bed, feeling at once that I had been horrible to push her away so rudely. . . . It is hard to speak the truth, yet it is the truth: she herself has pushed me away, her factless remarks and her crude jokes, which I don't find at all funny, have now made me insensitive to any love from her side.

THE MATURATION OF ANNE FRANK

But her understanding grew, until she could write, "The period when I caused Mummy to shed tears is over. I have grown wiser and Mummy's nerves are not so much on edge."

It is this unfolding psychological drama of a girl's growth, mingled with the physical danger of the group, that frees Anne's book from the horizontal effect of most diaries. Hers rises continuously, with the tension of a well-constructed novel. On the plane of physical suspense, a series of burglaries in the office-warehouse dreadfully endangers the hidden group. And there is the race of the Nazis' intensified hunt for victims, as against the progress of the Allied campaign, followed over a clandestine radio.

Psychologically, the diary contains the completely rounded story of the development of a social nature: one lives in suspense, watching it unfold: will she understand her mother? will she surmount her perplexities? will she comprehend her body-changes, so frankly described?

The girl's last entries rather miraculously contain a climactic summation, a maturing self-analysis: "If I'm quite serious, everyone thinks it's a comedy, and then I have to get out of it by turning it into a joke," she remarks with typical adolescent self-consciousness. "Finally I twist my heart around again, so that the bad is on the outside and the good is on the inside. . . . I am guided by the pure Anne within, but outside I am nothing but a frolicsome little goat who's broken loose."

This frolicsome little goat could write, "It's twice as hard for us young ones to hold our ground, and maintain our opinions, in a time when all ideals are being shattered and destroyed, when people are showing their worse side, and do not know whether to believe in truth and right and God."

It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.

"I want to go on living even after my death," Anne wrote. "I am grateful to God for giving me this gift, this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me." Hers was perhaps one of the bodies seen in the mass grave at Bergen-Belsen, for in August, 1944, the knock came on that hidden door in Amsterdam. After the people had been taken away, Dutch friends found Anne's diary in the debris, and saved it.

There is anguish in the thought of how much creative power, how much sheer beauty of living, was cut off through genocide. But through her diary Anne goes on living. From Holland to France, to Italy, Spain. The Germans too have published her book. And now she comes to America. Surely she will be widely loved, for this wise and wonderful young girl brings back a poignant delight in the infinite human spirit.