Writing from the Secret Annex: The Case of Anne Frank

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Ever since the Gestapo entered into the rooms where eight people had been hiding for almost two years, the so-called Secret Annex in the center of Amsterdam has become one of the most famous and visited hiding places of Jews persecuted during the Second World War. Anne Frank's diary, begun in 1942 as a confidential correspondence to an imaginary friend and then revised with an eye to future publication, now counts as the most widely read document of the Holocaust. The diary has appeared in several edited and unedited editions since it was first recovered from the floor of the evacuated Annex. [1] A comparison of these versions reveals how Anne's voice has been shaped, some even say censored, by different editorial hands. This fact was again brought to the fore with the recent discovery of five previously unpublished pages which Anne's father had withdrawn from the manuscript before his death in 1980. By request of the extended Frank family, these were again excluded from the otherwise unedited, critical edition published in 1986. The missing pages have sparked discussion about authorial intention, posthumous control, familial privacy and discretion in the public domain. When the Austrian journalist Melissa Müller published her biography of Anne Frank in 1998, she was allowed to use only paraphrases of these deleted passages while issues of copyright were being fought out in the Swiss courts. A Dutch newspaper, however, did get away with posting them on the Internet and future editions of the diary will include the entries that have caused so much controversy. The question remains whether we should be allowed to read material that was either deliberately excluded by the author herself or that compromises the family involved. Are private hiding places meant to be fully uncovered for the public eye?

It seems ironic that once carefully guarded places of refuge and hiding—the Annex and the diary—have now been exposed to the world many times over. One cannot help but feel like a voyeur, privy to the thoughts of a thirteen-year-old girl who never wanted all of her schoolgirl "musings" to be revealed beyond the version she explicitly edited for posterity. For decades, Anne's diary stood in and spoke for, but perhaps also eclipsed the individual stories of thousands of other Jewish children who were forced into hiding places during the Second World War. Amidst public rhetoric of the postwar years that relegated children to silence by casting them in a paradoxical, no-win situation as either "too young to remember" or "old enough to forget," the success of the diary was a remarkable exception. In fact, for many readers today, it remains the first, sometimes the only, introduction to the Holocaust. This essay explores the various manifestations of hiding in and surrounding Anne Frank's diary. It engages the ongoing dynamic between hiding and exposure, refuge and vulnerability, secret and public personae. Hiding takes on multiple meanings, both literal and metaphorical. Within the confines of the Annex, we observe how Anne carves out a private, secret space for herself through writing. As with most diaries, hers functions as a place of refuge, a safe niche in which to construct and explore her various, but carefully hidden, selves. The marked difference from other adolescent diaries is that Anne writes within a historically specific context that has forced her into hiding. The typical teenager's need to salvage a private space for herself is magnified in this claustrophobic, constantly threatened hiding place. As readers, we are witnesses to the twofold hiding—physical and psychological—of a hidden self in actual hiding. The life of the diary since its first publication in 1947 also exemplifies different forms of hiding, including censored, screened, and missing memories and voices.

The Secret Annex

*Faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. . . . Come what may, the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world.*

—Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

The Annex which Anne first describes resonates with this archetypal, universal image of the house as shelter and fortress that both protects against and resists the world outside. Otto Frank had spent months transforming the rooms, attic, and
Anne dedicates many pages of her diary to the description of the Annex as both physical and metaphoric place. When the diary was first published in Holland, it was called Het Achterhuis (The House Behind) rather than The Diary of a Young Girl, foregrounding the spatial over the autobiographical dimension. At first, Anne experiences the Annex in benign terms as part of an adventure or an interlude from reality: "I don't think I'll ever feel at home in this house, but that doesn't mean I hate it. It's more like being on vacation in some strange pension." In her writer's imagination, it gets transformed into a ‘unique facility for the temporary accommodation of Jews and other dispossessed persons’ with strict rules and regulations she describes in a characteristically playful manner: “Diet: low-fat. Free-time activities: None allowed outside the house until further notice.” Irony functions as the house does: it is a protective screen that blocks off or hides the anxiety associated with matters of life and death. By choosing to laugh about the absurdity of the situation, she resists its power to defeat her. The Annex is a world away from the world, existing in spite of the world.

The resilience of this miniature, hidden world is continuously tested from the inside and the outside. Drawing her metaphor from the restricted view of the external world she has through the attic window, Anne describes the Annex's increasingly uncertain function as shelter:

[We are] a patch of blue sky surrounded by menacing black clouds. The perfectly round spot on which we're standing is still safe, but the clouds are moving in on us, and the ring between us and the approaching danger is being pulled tighter and tighter. We're surrounded by darkness and danger, and in our desperate search for a way out we keep bumping into each other. We look at the fighting down below and the peace and beauty up above. In the meantime, we've been cut off by the dark mass of clouds, so that we can go neither up nor down. It looms before us like an impenetrable wall, trying to crush us, but not yet able to.

The encroaching external menace and constant terror of discovery corrode and suffocate life on the inside. The Annex, once seen as a safe haven, an adventure, a self-contained and sheltering world, is transformed into a prison. She feels like a “songbird whose wings have been ripped off and who keeps hurling itself against the bars of its dark cage.” Circumscribed by safety measures, the days follow the same monotonous routine with long hours of oppressive silence and sluggish movement. Anne describes how, after more than a year in hiding, everyone has almost forgotten how to laugh and that she takes daily doses of valerian to help combat anxiety and depression.

Secret Selves

Anne transforms the privations of everyday life into amusing anecdotes, fear into an interesting adventure story, longing and loneliness into a romance plot. The narratives allow her to distance herself from the situation at hand through irony or retrospective analysis, rather than being submerged by it. They also allow her to explore alternative, more assertive or honest roles she wished she had played. In the claustrophobic context of the Annex, the diary becomes a world into which Anne retreats. Here she can fully express the feelings she must otherwise contain. One can read the diary in spatial terms as a safe place for her real, but still hidden self. It can also be understood in functional terms as a performative sphere in which Anne tests out different versions of herself, giving them a voice and watching them grow. She secures this private domain for herself in direct response to the relentless scrutiny and evaluation of her character by other members in the Annex. These confined quarters where people's moods, thoughts, and fates are so closely intertwined allow very little room for personal enfolding. The diary, like her own person, is under constant threat of being discovered and must therefore be carefully guarded. "Daddy is grumbling again and threatening to take away my diary. Oh horror of horrors! From now on, I'm going to hide it." To assuage the curiosity of the Annex members and to provide them with much-needed comic relief, Anne occasionally reads passages aloud. These readings also serve the purpose of gathering critical feedback on her success as a writer. For the most part, however, Anne considers the diary her own private business and writes under the assumption that it will remain completely confidential. Those from whom she must protect her diary are not the Annex members alone, but also the outside world. Two months after arriving in the Annex, Anne rereads her first diary entries about this initially “ideal place” and adds that she is terrified that the hiding place will be revealed and its inhabitants shot. This fear explains why she omits the name of the man who supplies the Annex with potatoes. She knows that, if discovered, the diary could potentially be used as incriminating evidence against their helpers. Later, when she begins revising her diary for a future audience, she uses pseudonyms to protect the real identities of the Annex members. This coded language reveals yet another level of hiding.

On one level, the diary offers a classic, almost textbook example of the process of individuation from childhood into adolescence, away from externally imposed definitions and parental expectations. Generations of young girls searching for, slowly discovering, and eventually affirming their "true" selves have found a positive role model in Anne. Critics applaud her feminist qualities and trace her development from a girl who has her "own ideas, plans and ideals, but is
old-fashioned disciplinarian and preacher of unbearably long sermons on manners.” We never get to know the man who
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suffered the “fury of her pen.” Edith Frank, whom Anne at one point angrily disavows as her mother, and the middle-aged
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her diary, Anne describes the most intimate details of the other seven members of the Annex, yet we never come to know
them as complex individuals. At times, they seem to be mere caricatures of qualities Anne either emulates or despises:
“embarrassingly indelicate” descriptions. Often she found herself face to face with a stranger whom she barely
recognized. These self-evaluations reveal how she used the diary to trace and measure her own maturation process. In
preparing her “memory book” for publication, however, she begins to consider what would be most interesting or relevant
for the future reader. A few sentences after describing the impact of the radio broadcast, for example, she writes:
“Although I tell you a great deal about our lives, you still know very little about us.” Here, the direct address to her
imaginary friend, Kitty, seems to have shifted to us, her new audience. Anne also suggests that, up to this point in the
diary, she may not have been conveying the kind of details about hiding to which historical testimonies should aspire.
With its new status as historical and public document comes a prioritization of information that involves editing out certain
passages and adding new ones written from memory.
This careful screening of information deemed public and private, relevant and irrelevant, was most pronounced after
Anne’s death. After returning to Amsterdam from Auschwitz, Otto Frank, Anne’s father and the sole survivor of the Annex,
began assembling the diary entries into a manuscript to share with family and friends. Upon suggestion that he publish the
manuscript, he chose material from Anne’s original, unedited diary and her revised version, cutting out sections to meet
the page number requirements of the Dutch publisher. These posthumous modifications to Anne’s diary were not merely
guided by practical considerations. More significantly, they reflect the father’s desire for privacy and discretion, as well as
the social ethos of the time. Passages that were unflattering toward his wife, that dealt too frankly with Anne’s sexuality,
or were otherwise considered unimportant were omitted. In this first, highly acclaimed edition, Anne comes across as far
more even-tempered and gentle than in the most recent unedited version (1991). With the inclusion of formerly deleted
passages, Anne is more complex, lively, self-reproaching, and biting. Comparing these versions, one can see how Otto
Frank molded Anne’s voice to fit into his idealized, paternal image of her. While his revisions may have been well-
tentioned, they ultimately kept part of Anne hidden.

Revisions and Omissions

Upon hearing a radio broadcast in the Spring of 1944, in which the exiled Cabinet Minister of Education and Culture
announced that the Dutch government would be collecting wartime diaries and letters as testimony of “Holland's struggle
for freedom,” Anne began revising and writing her diary for future publication. How did this internal assessment of “good”
and “bad” selves affect the revision process as Anne was consciously constructing an image of herself and life in the
Annex for the outside world and posterity? Were there parts of herself she wanted to keep hidden because she
considered them too personal, immature, or shameful? Her decision to cut out a passage (one of the missing pages) that
relays her physical attraction to a childhood girlfriend and her “ecstasy” at seeing female nudes in art history books
suggests that she considered this revelation inappropriate within this new, public forum. Even before hearing the radio
announcement, Anne would read through earlier entries, criticizing her former “childish innocence,” her “sentimental” or
“embarrassingly indecent” descriptions. Often she found herself face to face with a stranger whom she barely
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them as complex individuals. At times, they seem to be mere caricatures of qualities Anne either emulates or despises:
Margot, ever-patient and selfless; Otto, compassionate and understanding; Mrs. van Daan, nosy and bossy. Recent
biographies and documentaries have sought to give a voice to—and bring out of hiding—those Annex members who
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dentist Fritz Pfeffer, whom Anne nicknamed Dussel (dope), bear the brunt of her criticism. Of the latter, we only see the
“old-fashioned disciplinarian and preacher of unbearably long sermons on manners.” We never get to know the man who
present clandestine love letters to a woman he was forced to leave because racial laws made it illegal for them to marry. Nor
do we learn that he had a son, approximately Anne's age, whom he had put on a children's transport train to London in
1938 so that he would survive the war in safety with an uncle. In Jon Blair's documentary film Anne Frank Remembered
(1995), Pfeffer's son conveys the bitter imprint Anne's diary has left on his life. Whereas Otto Frank became an icon of the
perfect, caring father for generations of young girls, his father, with whom he had lost contact after the outbreak of the
war, was harshly and unfairly portrayed. As Melissa Müller reveals in Anne Frank: The Biography, the recently recovered
pages present a fuller picture of Anne's relationship toward her mother. In the pages Otto Frank removed because he felt
the public did not need to know about his marriage, Anne expresses sympathy and understanding for her mother whose
passion for her husband was not reciprocated. Without this piece of information that explains why Edith Frank may have
become "somewhat defensive and unapproachable," we see her only as a source of deep disappointment and frustration
for her daughter.

Screen Memory

Not only does the diary contain silenced or hidden voices within it, one can also observe how for many years Anne Frank
stood in for all children during the Holocaust. Generally speaking, scholarship did not begin to focus on the fate of children
until forty years after the war, even though being a Jewish child in Europe meant certain extermination. Only 6-7% of
Jewish children survived the Holocaust, compared with a 33% survival rate among adults. Most of these children survived
the war in hiding. Some remained "visible," passing as Christians in convents, monasteries, orphanages, or with foster
families. They were forced to live double lives with new names and assumed identities. Survival depended upon
concealing their emotions, remaining silent, and playing roles. Others remained "invisible" for months, even years, hiding
out in attics, woods, barns, and other makeshift places, constantly vulnerable to discovery. Many lost not only their
childhood, but also their identity, their families, and their lives. The prolonged public silence about hidden children may
have to do with a general inability or reluctance to reconcile ideas of childhood with war. As countries grappled first with
the shocking revelations of the death camps in the immediate postwar period and then tried to put the past behind them
in the years of reconstruction, no room was given to the fate of children in public discourse. Anne Frank's story—that is,
the one that ends before her deportation to and death in Bergen-Belsen—was the exception.

As Laurel Holliday argues in her introduction to an anthology of other children's secret wartime diaries: "Maybe it was as
much as we could bear to designate Anne Frank as the representative child and to think, then, only of her when we
thought about children in World War Two." Hers became the story of a Jewish childhood during the Second World War.
Anne's life, not her death, became the "human face" of the Holocaust. Her diary functioned as a bearable, collective
screen memory that hid the more widespread experiences of children in ghettos and concentration camps, who went
hungry in the streets, witnessed their family members die, suffered disease, physical abuse, abandonment and
horrendous deaths. Most readers remained unaware of the particular circumstances of Anne's own death. Willy Lindwer's
television documentary The Last Seven Months of Anne Frank(1988), along with Jon Blair's aforementioned film and
Melissa Müller's biography, have since extended the story to describe how Anne was first deported to the Westerbork
detention camp, then to Auschwitz-Birkenau and finally to Bergen-Belsen, where she contracted typhus and died within a
few weeks of liberation. Her body was thrown onto a mass grave. Some argue that the lasting power and relevance of the
diary lies in its indirect, modulated approach to the Holocaust. Even though the terrors of persecution, physical suffering,
and death exist only on the margins of the diary, they overshadow and determine our reading of it. Our sense of outrage,
loss, and despair is enhanced because we know that Anne's optimism, faith in humanity, and future dreams will be bitterly
deceived. Others argue just the opposite; that the diary's "naive idealism" allows us to ignore the genocide taking place
beyond the Annex's walls. Rather than feeling horror, despair, and a radical uprooting of conventional frames of reference,
we are able to feel sympathy and sadness for Anne, perhaps even a deep sense of identification, within the safe
boundaries of familiar feelings.

Identifications and Appropriations

Identification with Anne's story has been particularly strong among adolescent girls who feel alienated from their parents
while observing their own rapid internal changes with bewilderment and fascination. The diary mirrors their struggle for
independence and search for a genuine voice. For adults, Anne is frequently seen as a universalized victim and "symbol
of the oppressed." Her diary stands in defiance of injustice and serves as a "testament to courage, hope, and the faith in
human goodness." In some political situations, Anne has functioned as a role model. Nelson Mandela describes how the
diary was smuggled into South African prisons during the years of apartheid, giving inmates the will to endure their
suffering. Anne has also been an inspiration for writers who recognize and admire in her their own nascent desire to write.
These multiple points of identification explain the ongoing, deep impact of the diary, but can also be problematic. Reading
the diary as a classic portrait of adolescence, for example, glosses over the anxieties and all-too-real dangers associated
with the particular historical context of the Holocaust. Early Broadway and Hollywood adaptations of the diary
Alvin Rosenfeld is troubled by the cultural trend to apply the term "Holocaust" to a wide range of contexts (from the AIDS epidemic to the war in Bosnia) and is skeptical of those who suggest an affinity with Anne when they speak of her as a "sister" or a "double." Such appeals to a common suffering, he argues, "flatten history into the shapes we wish it to have." The Holocaust is then transformed into a trope that expresses a "personal and collective sense of 'oppression' and 'victimization,'" thereby losing its historical specificity and meaning. How are we still appropriating and molding Anne Frank's voice for our own personal or political ends? Does the Chilean poet Marjorie Agosín fall into this identification trap when—as a Jew, a woman, a writer, and an exile—she recognizes in Anne something of herself? In *Dear Anne Frank: Poems* (1994), she sees themselves connected through the reciprocal acts of reading and writing: "I name you and you are alive, Anne, although I died while reading you." They also share a history of persecution and of being Jews in predominantly Christian environments. Agosín's family escaped the Holocaust by settling in Chile before she was born and, in her own life, she left Chile to flee the violence of Pinochet's military regime. For her, Anne's abrupt end recalls the fate of thousands of victims in Latin America who were abducted and murdered during the 1970s. "When Chile's military junta smashed down the doors of our neighborhood to arrest women—yanking them off by their hair, which would later be shaved off—when they 'disappeared' them on dense, foggy nights, I thought of Anne Frank." Like Anne, these *desaparecidos* are people without graves. Their deaths filter into Agosín's poems in the form of decapitations, mutilations, and rapes that Anne herself did not suffer, but which evoke the horror of Anne's death. When Agosín writes "the gentlemen of the Gestapo listened to Mozart" and then "descended to ephemeral prison cells to bite into your ears, cut off your delicate breasts, your hands of a little princess, to strip you of your thirteen lived years," she is no longer recalling Anne's story alone, but rather, torture in its essence—be it in the Nazi concentration camps or in Argentinian and Chilean prisons. The radical disjunction between Anne's image and her end is reflected in this juxtaposition between high culture and barbarism, delicacy and brutality.

In her poetry Agosín initiates an imaginary dialogue with Anne through direct address and questions. She challenges Anne's optimism (Did you really believe that all men were good?), draws attention to things left unsaid (How did you sleep during those nights riddled by airplanes delivering dread?) and inquires about what happened after the diary's end (Was there light behind that barred fence?). The questions suggest that, if Anne could speak again, she would be unlike the one so many young girls "carry in their hearts, tucked under their arms, in their illusory gazes." Her answers would reflect a voice hardened by the cruelty that followed. Agosín describes how Anne appears to her "emaciated, transformed, like a demon. . . . You and I watching each other, without recognizing each other, with history's equivocal gaze, and you tinge with blood the room and windows." This passage briefly suggests Agosín's awareness of the pitfalls and illusion inherent in her identification with Anne Frank. In defense of her proclaimed kinship, however, she observes that victims' families try to preserve the humanness of the deceased "by means of remembrance that speak the soul's language, that see from within, that question and exclaim." Her poems seek to perform this kind of personal, familial commemoration.

### Conclusion

The present collection of writings has been exploring the real and imagined "secret spaces" children create for themselves in different contexts and for a variety of reasons—from play to outright survival. In Anne Frank's case, finding a hiding place was neither a matter of choice nor a game. Next to exile, hiding was one of the few alternatives Jews had to escape or postpone death. Examining this most extreme, literal form of hiding in conjunction with its other, more metaphorical meanings yields a nuanced understanding of the external and internal conditions that created the diary. With the inclusion of five new pages into future editions of the diary, yet another part of Anne Frank's emotional and fantasy life will have been brought out of hiding into the public sphere. With them, the once intimate hideaway will be fully exposed. Just as the diary and its reception reveal different levels of hiding and uncovering, it has, for better or for worse, invited many kinds of identifications and appropriations. The blank page that follows the final signature "Yours, Anne M. Frank" has been and will continue to be an invitation for writers to fill. Their responses may open up new questions and readings between the lines of the diary. It is this multi-layered quality that lies at the heart of the diary's success both as historical testimony and as literature.

### NOTES

1. The different diary versions include a) Anne's original unedited entries beginning June 12, 1942, b) Anne's second diary which she began to revise after March 29, 1944, upon learning that the Dutch government would be collecting diaries and letters as testimony after the war, 3) Otto Frank's edited version of the diary, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), which excluded passages about Anne's sexuality, as well as the unflattering descriptions of the other Annex inhabitants, 4) the unedited version, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition* (1986), which contains all three versions of the diary, as well as biographical essays, other historical materials, and an analysis of Anne's handwriting, 5) and the expanded diary, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* (1991), which adds 30% more material to Otto Frank's original version by including the deleted passages.
2. This transformation of real events into aspects of an imaginary, surrogate world is a common theme in works by and about hidden children (see, for example, George Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood* Louis Begley's *Wartime Lies*, Elisabeth Gille's *Shadows of a Childhood*, or Jurek Becker's *The Wall*). These stories function as an escape, a protective shield, an alternative world in which the protagonists can assume more heroic or active roles denied to them in reality. 

3. In her diary *Behind the Veiled Curtain: A Memoir of a Hidden Childhood During World War Two* Nelly Toll avoids dangerous, potentially incriminating words such as "ghetto" and "Jews." She understands the danger of revealing her Jewishness and uses coded language to help disguise her true origins. "I reasoned that if the Gestapo ever found my writing, they would not realize that I was Jewish and thus would not destroy it! In the foreword of my diary I wrote, 'If I should be killed, at least my *paśćetnik* (memory book) will stay alive so that the whole world can see the terrible things that happened to us.'" The many colorful, joyful watercolors she painted while in hiding must also be understood as a cover-up or sublimation of her actual feelings. They are the inverted, symbolic expression of real and constant fears of being discovered. 


5. Alvin Rosenfeld attributes Anne Frank's immense popularity to the fact that her story reflects "common teenage fantasies of desire and dread" and recalls for adults the "longings and apprehensions of their youth." The generalized pathos and melancholia the diary evokes, he argues, has undermined our understanding of real Nazi terror.


**Works Cited**


