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Travel Section

### **Destination: Amsterdam**

By Daniel Akst

### **Fifty years after her death in a Nazi camp, diarist Anne Frank's 'Secret Annex ' still haunts its many visitors**

AMSTERDAM, The Netherlands — You've read the book. Maybe you've even seen the movie. But nothing quite prepares you for your first glimpse of the bookcase.

The bookcase, in Amsterdam, is the one that served to disguise the entrance to what Anne Frank called the "Secret Annex" deep within Prinsengracht 263, a four-story brick row house on a quiet canal in the heart of the city. It was in a cramped warren of half a dozen rooms behind this bookcase that Anne, her sister, her parents and four other Jews hid for more than two years in an ultimately futile attempt to escape the Nazis.

Pass behind the bookcase--empty now, save for a few yellowing account books--and you pass into the eye of that long-ago storm. Here, young Anne maintained the chronicle that survived the Nazis to become one of the most remarkable--and widely read--literary documents of the 20th Century, the work officially known as "The Diary of a Young Girl."

Last month, when I visited Amsterdam, was the 50th anniversary of Anne's death from typhus at age 15, in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The occasion has been marked in the United States by a significant literary event: publication of a newly translated expanded edition of Anne's diary. The original version--which sold more than 25 million copies in 55 languages and later became a Broadway play and popular film--was edited by her father, Otto, the only survivor of the group that hid in the annex. The new edition includes previously unpublished entries dealing with Anne's emerging sexuality and her troubled relationship with her mother.

I had never read the diary, but I was in Amsterdam on business so it seemed natural to get the new edition (Doubleday, \$25). Once I'd read this riveting work I couldn't wait to visit the house and perhaps take a day to check out the rest of what remains of Jewish Amsterdam. Before the war, the vast majority of Holland's 140,000 Jews lived here, many of them playing an important role in the city's cultural and commercial life. All but 36,000 were murdered by the Nazis.

The structure now known as the Anne Frank House was built in 1635 on the banks of the Prinsengracht (Prince's Canal), just 100 yards or so from Westerkerk, the 375-year-old neoclassical church that contains Rembrandt's tomb. The surrounding neighborhood is one of Amsterdam's most charming, filled with bars, cafes, art galleries and handsomely restored warehouses and merchants' homes.

The enduring popularity of Anne Frank's diary accounts for the biggest problem facing visitors to her family's hiding place, which is the presence of so many other visitors. The building, now operated by the nonprofit Anne Frank Foundation, attracts about 600,000 tourists each year.

I was fortunate enough to avoid the throngs on my first visit by showing up relatively early on a cold, rainy Thursday, and I managed to get in without having to wait in line. Once I'd paid for my ticket, I climbed the first of what would prove to be several long, steep stairways in the house, and entered a large, dark room devoted to a video that tries to convey what the place was like when the Franks were hiding there. At least, that's what the foundation says it does. When I arrived, the room was full of people, and I knew that once the video was over all of them would be unleashed on the annex at once. I didn't come here for a televised experience, I thought haughtily, so I darted past the others to explore the place in peace.

In retrospect, I'm glad I did. I think of myself as a hard-headed person, but if you manage to avoid the crowds you'll sense a spirit in these rooms that makes all who enter tread softly across the dilapidated linoleum. People keep quiet, not just out of respect, I think, but because a tragic sense of furtiveness persists here. Silence is fitting, since those who hid in these rooms spent a good deal of time being quiet.

In her diary, Anne explains that the annex was a perfect hiding place because the space, above and behind the spice business that Otto Frank ran, was so long unused and so little known.

"No one would ever suspect there were so many rooms," Anne wrote. The offices below were occupied only during the day by workers in Frank's firm. Not all could be trusted, and thus the hidden Jews--including Otto's friend and business partner, Hermann van Pels and his family, whom Anne referred to as the van Daans--were kept alive thanks to the great courage and resourcefulness of a handful of trusted managers and employees. When the wrong people were downstairs, the Franks and van Daans enforced total silence in the annex, but since the neighborhood was much more commercial during the war than it is today, they could relax a bit after hours and on weekends.

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The bookcase that hid the entrance to the hideaway was custom-built by one of the Franks' Gentile helpers. As Anne explains in the diary, "It swings out on its hinges and opens like a door."

Standing before this portal set my stomach to churning. I tried to imagine what it must be like to hide for two years, without seeing the light of day or having the carefree pleasure of sleep without fear. Behind the bookcase is an entryway that is barely five feet high, nearly 1 1/2 feet too short for me, and so I bent deeply to enter, as if humbling myself.

Passing through this doorway, I came immediately to a staircase so narrow and steep, its steps so shallow, that it seems almost a ladder.

Although not atypical for such Dutch buildings, its stringent proportions and aged wood emphasized I was climbing to no ordinary place. When I finally hauled myself to the top, I had that sense confirmed. Except for the missing furniture--the Nazis cleaned out the place when they discovered the annex and arrested its occupants--the room I'd just entered felt as if its occupants were freshly torn from it. It's the Frank family room, the yellowed wallpaper marked in pencil to track the children's growth during the time in hiding. Otto and Edith Frank and Anne's older sister Margot slept here.

Next door is Anne's room, where she wrote much of the diary. The room is barely large enough to contain the two cot-like beds and tiny writing table that furnished it while she lived here. The cramped quarters are all the more amazing because she shared them with the boorish dentist she called Alfred Dussel, whom the adults had invited to join them in the conviction that it was important to save even a single additional life.

I tried to picture the windows of this tiny cell plastered with newspapers to prevent the residents from being seen. The view today is roughly the same as the one Anne sometimes caught snatches of--the backs of the buildings on Keizersgracht, the next canal over, and the courtyards in between. The light-blocking newspapers are long gone, but the walls remain covered with the movie-star pictures Anne so enjoyed, including Ginger Rogers, Norma Shearer, Deanna Durbin, Ray Milland and Robert Stack. Although she couldn't leave the annex and spent most her time studying, Anne was mad for movies. She soaked up reports from the family's helpers when they visited for meals until, she boasted, she could recite the entire cast of movies she hadn't seen.

Next door is the bathroom--a water closet, really, with a delicately beautiful toilet of Delft blue and white that presents a striking contrast to the starkness of its setting. This is the bathroom that Anne complained always seemed occupied (by Dussel, mostly) and that couldn't be used during office hours in the business establishment downstairs.

"If you go up the stairs and open the door at the top, you're surprised to see such a large, light and spacious room in an old canal-side house like this," Anne wrote. Doing as she suggested, I climbed up into the room that doubled as the van Daans' bedroom and common living area for all those in the annex. It was around a table here that they ate, fought, fretted and hoped for an Allied victory. Today, the room seems stark; there is a sink, a heater and the same worn, gray linoleum as in the rest of the house, but little else that belonged to the occupants.

Next door was where the van Daans' teen-age son Peter slept--"a tiny side room," Anne called it--and above that, but closed to the public, the attic in which Anne and Peter sat together when their romance was in full flower. Years ago, visitors could climb to the top of the stairs leading to the attic and look around, if not walk around, but the lines of tourists that formed at the base of the steps caused custodians to close them.

The Franks and their friends hid in the back of the house on Prinsengracht, but the museum has taken over the front as well, making use of space that once housed Otto Frank's spice business. After walking through the annex, visitors enter an exhibition area that contains a history of the Frank family set against the rise of the Nazis and their war against the Jews. This is a permanent exhibit and contains a number of heartbreaking photographs, as well as the first album of Anne's diary, opened to a page in her own handwriting. (Deciding her account might be published someday, she edited and rewrote it.) On the floor below, there is a similarly permanent exhibit on the inglorious history of anti-Semitism.

When I visited, the floor below this--we've descended to the second floor by now--contained a somewhat dismaying temporary exhibition. Running until mid-September, the exhibit attempts to make the destruction of European Jewry relevant by relating it to other forms of discrimination, including women's rights and negative views of immigrants. The problem for me was one of scale, illustrated by the exhibit's low point: an installation rigged up as a sort of cartoon nightclub that asks us to think about what it's like when bouncers at popular nightspots let some people in and not others. You get to press buttons for your hair color, shoe size, gender and so forth, and the machine flashes "sorry, members only." The accompanying text explains that "this disco also distinguishes between people for no good reason."

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## GUIDEBOOK

### **The House Where Anne Frank Wrote**

Getting there: KLM Royal Dutch, Northwest and British Airways offer nonstop flights from LAX to Amsterdam several times a week for about \$880 per person, round trip; Martinair Holland has two nonstop flights weekly starting at about \$650 round trip. United offers direct service from LAX, and other airlines offer connecting flights.

You can reach the Anne Frank House by tram or museum boat; the latter stops at a number of Amsterdam's most popular attractions. The house is also within walking distance of Amsterdam's Central Station.

Touring the annex: The Anne Frank House (Prinsengracht 263, telephone 011-3120-556-7100) is one of Amsterdam's most popular attractions. Thus, it's important to arrive early, preferably by opening time at 9 a.m. Visitors walk through the house on their own.

The Anne Frank House is open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays and holidays 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. From June 1 to Sept. 1, it stays open until 7 p.m. It is closed Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Yom Kippur. Admission is about \$5.75. Note that there are several exceedingly steep stairways, and officials consider the place

"not accessible to people with walking difficulties."

Other Jewish sites in Amsterdam: Portuguese Synagogue, Mr. Visserplein 3; tel. 011-31-20-624-5351. Jewish Historical Museum, Jonas Daniel Meijerplein 24; tel. 011-31-20-626-9945. Hollandse Schouwburg, Plantage Middenlaan 24; tel. 011-31-20-626-9945. Etty Hillesum house, Gabriel Metsustrast 6.

For more information: Netherlands Board of Tourism, 225 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 326, Chicago, IL 60601; tel. (312) 819-0300.