

The death of Miep Gies (February 15, 1909—January 10, 2010)

Protected Anne Frank from the Nazis

Sybille Fuchs
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Shortly before her death, Miep Gies said: “Never a day goes by that I do not think of what happened then.”

On August 4, 1944, Austrian-born SS Staff Sergeant Karl Josef Silberbauer and three Dutch Nazis from the so-called Green Police stormed the hiding place of the Frank family in Amsterdam after their whereabouts had been betrayed.

Anne Frank and her family were transported to concentration camps, and Anne died of typhus at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northwestern Germany shortly before her 16th birthday (and only a few weeks before the camp was liberated). Her mother and sister both died in Auschwitz. Of Anne Frank’s immediate family, only her father survived the Nazi concentration camps.

The Jewish Frank family’s last living protector died Sunday at the age of 100 years old. It was Miep Gies who rescued young Anne’s diary, a document of enormous historical and human value, which depicted so vividly and sensitively the fate of a family persecuted by the Nazis.

Miep Gies was born February 15, 1909, as Hermine Santrouschitz in Vienna. Her impoverished parents were barely able to feed their daughter due to the economic conditions, and sent her to the Netherlands in 1922 as part of an aid project. Her host family, who went on to adopt Hermine, gave her the nickname Miep.

In 1933, the young woman took up a job as an office assistant in the spice business of Otto Frank, who had

emigrated to the Netherlands with his family following the Nazi takeover. After refusing to join a Nazi women’s organization in 1941, Miep only escaped deportation to Austria by marrying her Dutch friend Jan Gies.

Following the occupation of the Netherlands by the German army in 1940, the young couple, together with four other employees of the Frank business, provided for the Jewish family in the latter’s house located at Prinsengracht 263 in Amsterdam.

The mass deportations of Jews from the Netherlands to concentration and extermination camps began in the summer of 1942. On July 5, 1942, Margot Frank, Anne’s older sister, received a request to register at a “labor camp.” At that point, Otto Frank decided his family must go into hiding.

Miep Gies accompanied Margot to the agreed hiding place. Margot was followed some time later by Otto, Edith and Anne. They were subsequently joined by the family of Otto’s business partner—Hermann, Auguste and Peter van Pels—and also Gies’s dentist, Fritz Pfeffer. Over the following two years, Miep ensured that the two families and Pfeffer were supplied with food, books and newspapers.

For nearly two years, a total of eight persons hid away in the rear building of Prinsengracht 263. Otto Frank’s business, at the same address, was resumed under non-Jewish management with Miep Gies continuing her work for the firm. The entrance to the hiding place was camouflaged by a bookshelf.

Gies and three collaborators ensured that the Franks and the others received all they needed for survival.

Anne named Gies the “donkey,” because she delivered the families so much, in particular the books from the library that Anne yearned for. Miep was their most important contact to the outside world, and this period is graphically described in adolescent Anne’s diary.

On one occasion, Miep and her husband Jan, a member of the resistance against the Nazis (referred to as Henk in Anne’s diary), stayed overnight with the two families in order to better understand their plight. Their own apartment was just a few minutes by bicycle from Prinsengracht, and the Gieses also offered refuge there to a student who had opposed the Nazis.

Miep Gies was only able to rescue Anne’s diary and some personal objects belonging to the Frank family because she pointed out to Silberbauer from the SS that she too originally came from Vienna. On that basis, he declined to report her, but nevertheless threatened her with consequences should she seek to flee. Later, she even tried to bribe Silberbauer to gain the release of the captured families. He turned down the bribe, however, claiming that he was “not in a position to make such a decision.”

Gies recounted the two years of terror in Amsterdam in her own book *My Time with Anne Frank*, following encouragement to do so by the American writer Alison Leslie Gold. After the war, Gies traveled the globe intent on ensuring that the Holocaust and its horrors should never be forgotten. Despite many international awards for her behavior during the war, Gies repeatedly rejected any attempt to celebrate her as a hero.

The Diary of Anne Frank, rescued by Miep Gies together with her friend Elli, has been translated into 70 languages. “That is no small thing,” declared Teresien Da Silva, head of the research department at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, on the occasion of Miep Gies’s 100th birthday. “However, she never wanted to be looked upon as a hero, she always opposed this.” Miep said again and again: “I did what I had to do. Full stop.”

On another occasion, she said: “To help a fellow man in emergency is not a question of courage, but a choice which every person must make in the course of their lives in deciding between good and evil.”

The identity of the person who betrayed the whereabouts of the Frank and van Pels families—one of only a few people aware of the hiding place—still remains unknown today. In her book, Gies writes that

the Dutch police possessed a document noting “that a person received 7 and 1/2 gulden per Jew—i.e. in total, 60 guildens.”

Miep Gies was outraged at the repeated attempts by right-wing Holocaust deniers to declare Anne Frank’s diary a falsification. Immediately after the war, she was reluctant to read it and handed the diary over to Otto Frank, who organized its publication. Then, when she read the diary for the first time, which the talented Anne had wanted to publish, Gies felt liberated: “Now Anne’s voice will never be lost.”

Just as Anne Frank, through her diary, became a symbol of the victims of Holocaust, so too, Miep Gies became a symbol of those many courageous people who considered it second nature to help those threatened by the Nazis despite the enormous dangers involved.



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