

My Best Friend Anne Frank: “We were just children ... People should know about the cruelty”

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Directed by Ben Sombogaart; written by Marian Batavier and Paul Ruvén

Anne Frank, author of the famous diary and victim of the Holocaust at 15, embodies the horrifying cost of Nazi barbarism. She represents for millions all over the world the youth, life, intelligence and potential that were obliterated by the fascists. Anne Frank has not disappeared. She will be an imperishable part of human culture long after the system responsible for those heinous crimes has been swept away.

So, she continues to emerge in different forms, with differing degrees of artistic skill and social insight.

Anne Frank is the most famous young author of all time. *The Diary of a Young Girl* is one of the most read books in the world, having been translated into more than 70 languages. Her fate has been the center of scores of novels, non-fiction works, music pieces, television programs, plays and over two dozen films, including the soon-to-be-released animated movie *Where is Anne Frank*, by Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman (*Waltz with Bashir*, 2008).

The newest film on the subject is *My Best Friend Anne Frank*, a Netflix Dutch production directed by Ben Sombogaart, and scripted by Marian Batavier and Paul Ruvén. The film focuses on the friendship between Anne Frank and Hannah Goslar, who went to school together.

In Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, Anne Frank (Aiko Beemsterboer) and Hannah Goslar (Josephine Arendsen) are the closest of friends. The feisty, ever-rebellious Anne is constantly ruffling the feathers of her more cautious pal. Both have dreams and even though Hannah wants to be a nurse, “like Florence Nightingale,” Anne delights in shocking her with pictures of the female reproductive organs.

Hannah always asks herself “What would Anne do?” before she embarks on illicit adventures, such as sneaking into a cinema to watch a German propaganda newsreel, breaching the law that Jews aren’t allowed into theaters.

Hannah is the main caretaker of her toddler sister Gabi.

Her family, including her pregnant mother (Lottie Hellingman) and father (Roeland Fernhout), feel relatively safe from Nazi arrest, a brutal daily occurrence, because they have Palestinian passports. Soon Anne disappears, leading Hannah to believe she and her family have made it safely to Switzerland.

After Hannah’s mother dies in childbirth, however, the Goslar family is arrested, sent first to the Westerbork transit concentration camp and then to notorious Bergen-Belsen. Hannah discovers that Anne and her sister Margot are being starved to death in another part of the camp from which her section is separated by a high, hay-filled barbed wire fence. Hannah risks everything to try to keep her precious Anne alive.

A postscript informs us that Hannah and Gabi between them had seven children, 38 grandchild and 27 great-grandchildren. They call the numerous progeny their “revenge on Hitler.”

Sombogaart’s film is efficient in its story-telling but lacks inspiration and fire. It is crucial that Anne Frank’s story be told and re-told, but it would be even more valuable if the processes that made her tragedy possible were seriously, artistically explored and made known to wide layers of people. Fascism is not a relic of the past, but a threat to humanity as long as the working class does not do away with capitalism.

Hannah “Hanneli” Elisabeth Pick-Goslar was born in November 1928 and at age 93 is still alive. In 1997 and 1999, Hanneli visited the Scholastic web site giving students the opportunity to ask questions about her close friendship with Anne and how she survived a concentration camp.

The pair met in 1934 when both families came from Germany to Holland, after Hitler’s coming to power, Goslar explained in the interview. In later years, “Anna would sit in class between lessons, and she would shield her diary and write and write. Everybody would ask her ‘what are you writing?’ And the answer always was ‘it’s none of your

business.”

Neither Anne, the “very spicy little girl,” nor Hanneli had ever heard the words “concentration camp” or “Auschwitz.” Hanneli was deported to a concentration camp on June 20, 1943.

“The war, for me,” she said, “started when the Germans set up laws against the Jewish people. This started around the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942. We were forced to wear yellow stars; we had to carry identification cards with a ‘J’ for Jew; we weren’t allowed on public transportation; we had to give in our bicycles (bicycles are the major form of transportation in Amsterdam); we weren’t allowed to shop in any store—only in Jewish-owned ones and only between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. At 8 p.m. we had to be home until 6 in the morning.

Goslar went on: “We weren’t allowed any nice things like going to the swimming pool and tennis courts. Even sitting on park benches was forbidden. [On] the benches in the park were written ‘Not for Jewish people,’ or ‘Forbidden for Jewish people and dogs.’ They opened schools for Jewish children. Christians were not allowed to go to Jewish doctors, lawyers, etc. My father had to register the amount of money he had. I remember my mother gave our radio away because the BBC (British radio) was forbidden.”

Describing Bergen-Belsen, Goslar explained: “At the end, when people came from death marches to Bergen-Belsen, the beds were changed from two stories to three stories high, and we had to sleep two in a bed, instead of just one. There were no benches to eat on. There was only cold water to wash clothes and hair. So, the warm, brown water that was supposed to be coffee, we used to wash our hair because it was the only warm water we could get.”

After having smuggled food to Anne through a hole in the wall separating them in the camp, Hanneli thought that they would be liberated together. She learned from Anne’s father Otto that Anne, who was born in 1929, and her sister Margot, born 1926, both died of typhus in February 1945 in the nightmarish Bergen-Belsen.

“To think about why did it happen at all. We were just children. They started to make a war on us—took our freedom without any reason. People should know about the cruelty—it was unnecessary. It’s important to understand what happened so it doesn’t happen again. People need to understand that discrimination doesn’t lead to anything good. I always say that the only thing Anne Frank did was that she was born Jewish, and for that she had to die. She could’ve given a lot to mankind.”

Seventy-five percent of Dutch Jews were deported and eventually killed. In February 1941, there was a general strike in the country organized by the then-illegal Communist Party against the Nazis’ anti-Jewish arrests and

pogroms. The strike is considered to be the first mass protest against the Nazis in Europe. After three days, the strike was brutally suppressed by German forces.

Something about Anne Frank’s extraordinary character is revealed in these excerpts from her diary:

November 19, 1942: The news is terrible. The authorities have taken away so many friends and people we know to concentration camps. Army cars go round the streets day and night to arrest people. They’re looking for Jews; they knock on every door, and ask whether any Jews live there. When they find a Jewish family, they take everybody away. They even pay money for information. In the evenings, when it’s dark, I often see long lines of innocent people walking on and on. Sick people, old people, children, babies—all walking to their deaths.

April 5, 1944: I want to make something of my life. I want to be a journalist. I know I can write. A few of my stories are good, a lot of my diary is alive and amusing, but... I don’t know yet if I can be a really good writer. But then if I can’t write books or for newspapers, I can always write for myself. I don’t want to live like Mother, Mrs. van Daan, and all the other women who simply do their work and are then forgotten. I need more than just a husband and children! I want to be useful, and to bring enjoyment to all people, even those that I’ve never met. I want to go on living after my death!

May 3, 1944: Why do governments give millions each day for war, when they spend nothing on medicine or poor people? Why must people go without food, when there are mountains of food going bad in other parts of the world? Oh, why are people so crazy?

May 25, 1944: The world is turned upside down. The best people are in concentration camps and prisons, while the worst decide to put them there.



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