

A Small Light: Miep Gies and the struggle to save Anne Frank and her family

Joanne Laurier
23 June 2023

A *Small Light*, an eight-part National Geographic mini-series, now streaming on Disney+ and Hulu, recounts the extraordinary and little known story of Miep Gies, the woman who helped hide Anne Frank, her family and friends for two years during World War II. It is a drama of resistance to fascism and Nazism, at a time when those political abominations have once more lifted their heads.

A *Small Light* is powerfully and artistically done, with the hearts and minds of everyone involved clearly engaged. In that regard, it is the latest in a series of television projects that is historically and socially acute and aesthetically intriguing. Important thoughts and feelings, at conscious variance with the official lurch to the right, are finding expression and attracting an audience.

Starting in 1942, the German-Jewish Frank family hid from the Nazis during the occupation of the Netherlands. After two years of utter seclusion, the family and their friends were captured. Anne perished in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. Her story became immortalized through the diary she kept while in hiding. One of the world's most widely read and inspiring books, the diary was recovered by Gies who kept it safe until she could deliver it to Anne's father Otto after he was liberated from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

Miep was born February 15, 1909 in Austria as Hermine Santruschitz. Due to food shortages after World War I, she was sent to live in Holland and taken in as a foster child by a Dutch family in Leiden at the age of 11.

In 1933, Miep began working for Otto Frank, a Jewish businessman who had moved with his family from Germany to the Netherlands in the hope of escaping Nazi persecution. A *Small Light* deals primarily with the years the Franks are secretly cloistered in an annex above Frank's business office in Amsterdam.

Miep Gies: *We are all ordinary people. ... But even an ordinary secretary or a housewife or a teenager can, within their own small ways, turn on a small light in a dark room.*

Created by Joan Rater and Tony Phelan, the miniseries opens in 1942 as Miep (Bel Powley) steers the elder Frank daughter, Margot (Ashley Brooke), through Nazi-infested Amsterdam, complete with checkpoints, and eventually into the family's hiding place. In the course of their death-defying journey, Margot dejectedly tells Miep that Anne's "only thirteen and she wants to be a famous writer, and I'm sixteen, and I don't have any idea who I want to be."

The series flashes back to 1933. Miep is a 24-year-old, at loose ends, who is hired by Otto (Liev Schreiber) to work as a secretary for his company, pectin manufacturer Opekta. Concerned about her future, her parents urge Miep to wed her stepbrother Cas (Laurie Kynaston), who isn't a blood relative—but, we learn, is a closeted gay man.

Following the German invasion and occupation of the Netherlands in 1940, Miep refuses to join a local Nazi group. In retaliation, German officials invalidate her passport, and she is ordered to return to her native city of Vienna within 90 days. At the time, Austria had been annexed and made part of Hitler's Third Reich.

Miep meets Jan (Joe Cole), a social worker, whom she will marry in part to avoid being deported. It is not long before Jan joins the anti-Nazi Resistance.

In 1942, Otto asks Miep to help his family, now concealed in the annex, with obtaining food and supplies. The Franks are Otto, his wife Edith (Amira Casar), Margot and the rambunctious Anne (Billie Boulet). Otto's business partner Hermann Van Pels (Andy Nyman), his wife Auguste (Caroline Catz) and son Peter (Rudi Goodman) arrive a week later. They are soon joined by Dr. Fritz Pfeffer (Noah Taylor), a dentist who was acquainted with the Franks and Van Pels. (Otto: "If we turn away someone we know we can help, well, we become people we don't recognize.")

Behind an entrance later covered by a large, heavy bookcase, the hiding place consists of two small bedrooms, a common space that doubles as a kitchen during the day and a bedroom at night, a bathroom and an attic.

In her memoir, *Anne Frank Remembered: The Story of the Woman Who Helped to Hide the Frank Family*, Miep Gies describes the Nazi terror: "All summer a rash of anti-Jewish edicts were published, one after another. First, on June 3, 1941, it was ordered that a large black 'J' was to be added to the identity cards of all persons who had registered during the census as having two or more Jewish grandparents. Everyone in Holland, Jew and Christian alike, had been forced to carry an identity card at all times.

"During the late summer and fall of 1943," she goes on, "the Germans had begun to round up non-Jewish Dutchmen between the ages of sixteen and forty. These men were being shipped to Germany for—as they called it—'labor service.' Some were called up, and some were just going about their business out in the street when a military truck would pull up, Green Police with a rifle would jump down, and the man would be told to get into the truck. ... I knew that the stores of food staples ... were running out. Whatever food I could find was now sometimes half-rotten."

A *Small Light*, based on this memoir, effectively conveys the atmosphere prevailing under the German occupation of the Netherlands. In episode five of the series, Jan joins other Resistance fighters planning to bomb the Amsterdam civil registry and thus thwart the Nazis' ability to identify persecuted citizens. For the annex refugees, Miep is the only pipeline to the outside world. To avoid arousing suspicion, she must constantly vary her routine and shop at different stories as she seeks food and supplies—for eight people! ("I'm gonna start getting a reputation as the woman who'll do anything for a sausage.") She is also the hideaways' only conduit for news of the war.

Tension for those both inside and outside the annex is excruciating.

Miep: "Every time the doorbell rings, I think it's a Nazi here to arrest me." To which Jan replies matter of factly: "A Nazi wouldn't ring the bell." All of the conspirators, including Opekta employees Bep Voskuijl (Sally Messham), Victor Kugler (Nicholas Burns) and Johannes Kleiman (Ian McElhinney), risk their lives daily to protect those in hiding. As a social worker, Jan has more freedom to move around the city than most.

Besides being involved in the Resistance, he is able to acquire ration cards and illegal papers. Miep and Jan struggle to maintain a loving relationship while aiding the Dutch Resistance movement and helping other Jews, including children, escape the Nazi dragnet.

With every unexpected turn of events, the stress becomes more heart-stopping. On the fateful day of August 4, 1944, the Gestapo arrests the Franks, the Van Pelses and Dr. Pfeffer, as well as Kugler and Kleiman. Miep is only left behind because, having recognized the Viennese accent of one of the Nazis, she engages him in conversation and he decides to spare her.

At the end of the war in 1945, Jan starts working at an aid center for those returning from the camps. He is particularly concerned with the fate of “our friends.” On June 3, Otto appears at his office, where his employees have kept things going. “Miep, Edith is not coming back,” he says. “But I have great hope for Anne and Margot.” This hope fades in July, when Otto received the heart-breaking news of his daughters’ deaths. At this point, Miep recalls Anne’s diary, tossed on the floor by the arresting Gestapo officers, and hands it to the devastated Otto.

Having never examined the diary so as not to violate Anne’s privacy, Miep eventually reads it in one sitting at the time of its second printing in 1947. In her memoir, she writes:

When I had read the last word, I didn’t feel the pain I’d anticipated. I was glad I’d read it at last. The emptiness in my heart was eased. ... My young friend had left a remarkable legacy to the world. But always, every day of my life, I’ve wished that things had been different. That even if Anne’s diary had been lost to the world Anne and the others might have somehow been saved. Not a day goes by that I do not grieve for them.

Otto, the only annex survivor, lived with the Gieses for seven years (he died in 1980). Miep died in 2010 at the age of 100.

Elegantly directed by Phelan, Susanna Fogel and Leslie Hope, the series was written by Rater, Phelan, William Harper, Ben Esler and Alyssa Margarite Jacobson. They deserve considerable credit. Moving, intelligently done with understatement and humility, *A Small Light* displays sincere, deeply felt respect for its historical figures, both the persecuted Jews and the resisting Dutch, all of them facing almost unrelenting horror. The filmmakers create an oppressive, suffocating atmosphere in which one false move can lead to instant death or a lingering one in a concentration camp.

The eerie, disturbing soundtrack was composed by Ariel Marx, and executive produced by Este Haim, who oversaw the production of cover versions of songs from the 1930s and 1940s, performed by her sister Danielle Haim, Kamasi Washington, Angel Olsen, Weyes Blood and others. The soundtrack album was released May 23.

Numerous sequences stand out. In one especially frightening scene, following the fateful arrests in August 1944, Miep dares, against all odds, to enter Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam, housing a small army of murderers and torturers. She seeks out the Austrian officer who arrested the Franks and offers him a bag of money to buy their freedom. It is deeply unsettling to watch the courageous, vulnerable woman roaming around this vipers’ nest. In the end, a high-level Gestapo official steals the money and has her ejected her from the building.

(In 1963, Karl Josef Silberbauer, then an inspector in the Vienna police, was exposed as the commander of the 1944 Gestapo raid on the Secret Annex who arrested Anne Frank, her fellow fugitives and two of their protectors, Victor Kugler and Johannes Kleiman. A police review board ultimately exonerated him of any official guilt, and he remained on the Vienna police force.)

In one of the film’s most searing moments, the annex inhabitants celebrate Hanukkah. Hermann Van Pels, leading the ceremony, explains that in “lighting this candle, we are connecting to thousands of years of bravery and survival. Just as our ancestors, the Maccabees, rebelled against the Greeks, we are rebelling in our own way, right now, in this

annex. Because despite their attempts to get rid of us, Mr. Hitler, his army of godless officers ... we’re here ... living and celebrating that life, right under their noses, with friends who risk their lives every day to protect us.”

The overtones of dread and strain are nearly remorseless throughout the series. Fascism attempts to crush everything human in its path, and the filmmakers create this reality for the viewer.

Driven no doubt in part by today’s political realities and dangers (including such right-wing attacks as the recent removal of a graphic novel based on Anne Frank’s diary from a Florida high school library), the cast is uniformly excellent. The series’ themes clearly resonated with all involved in the production. Remarkable lead actress Powley, stunning in her humility and decency, castigated rapper Kanye West for his pro-Nazi comments: “All the Kanye West stuff was going on while we were in the middle of filming. And we had been hearing Nazi rhetoric and Hitler rhetoric in our scripts, and then hearing it in real life come from a public figure like him, it was really quite scary.”

Series creator Phelan also noted that the Holocaust was not that far in the past. He told *Paste Magazine* that when “we were scouting locations in Amsterdam, we discovered there was a survivor living there who came and showed us his Auschwitz money. When we went to scout locations in Prague, a quarter of the train station had been taken over with refugees, and you are kind of like ... this is happening now. It’s the same thing.”

In her memoirs, Miep writes: “I am not a hero. I stand at the end of the long, long line of good Dutch people who did what I did or more—much more—during those dark and terrible times years ago, but always like yesterday in the hearts of those of us who bear witness. Never a day goes by that I do not think of what happened then.

“More than twenty thousand Dutch people helped to hide Jews and others in need of hiding during those years. I willingly did what I could to help. My husband did as well. It was not enough.

“I’m told that every night when the sun goes down, somewhere in the world the curtain is going up on the stage play made from Anne’s diary.

“My story is a story of very ordinary people during extraordinarily terrible times. Times the like of which I hope with all my heart will never, never come again.”



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact