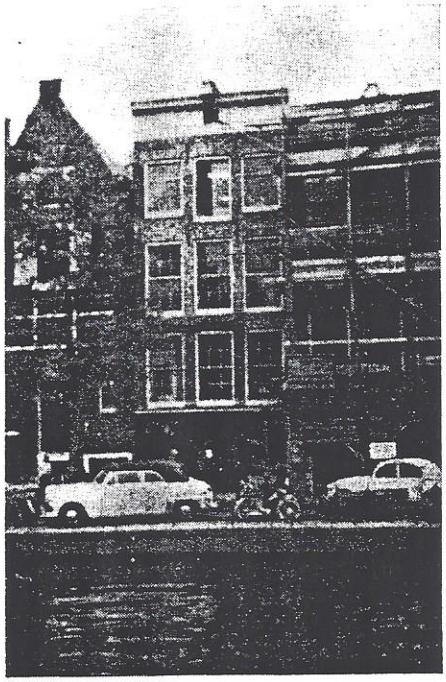
Echoes From A Shrine



The Anne Frank House (center) in Amsterdam, as seen from across Prinsengracht Canal. This part of building housed Anne's father's business; the "Secret Annexe" faced the rear.

"In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."—Anne Frank

By JACK GOLDFARB

In the heart of Amsterdam, which is replete with history and a tradition of tolerance, a new and poignant landmark has been added to the picturesque city scene.

This bustling city of bridges, boats, and bicycles has few visible reminders of the five-year German occupation which tried the souls of the Dutch burghers from May, 1940 to May, 1945. There is an impressive World War II Memorial monument in the Damplein opposite Queen Juliana's Royal Palace. There are detailed historical records on display in the National Institute for War Documents. There is the ghostly wasteland in the once flourishing Jewish quarter where thousands of deserted houses were demolished for fuel. And there is now the enshrinement of the four-story building at 263 Prinsengracht—The Anne Frank House.

It is a typically narrow, cramped-looking structure with an almost solid front of windows facing the Prinsengracht Canal. Not far to the right is the venerable Westerkerk with the tallest tower in Amsterdam and its quarter-hour carillons which gave Anne such a feeling of security. And in the back of the house is the *Achterhuis* where Rene Descartes lived.

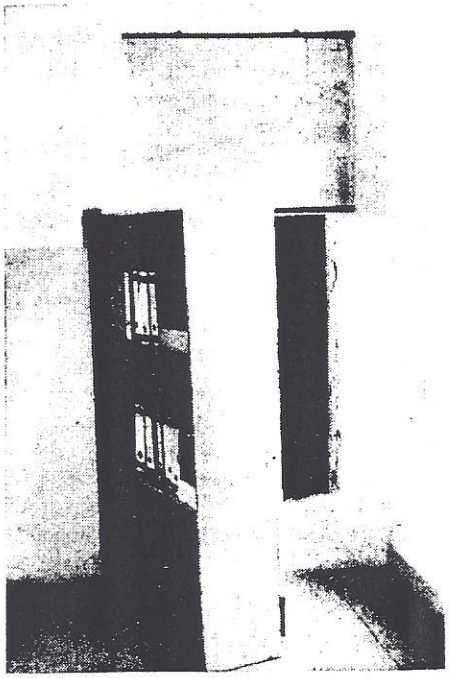
The time-worn building at 263 Prinsengracht once lodged the offices and storerooms of *N. V. Nederland Opekta Maatschappij,* Anne's father's business firm, in that half of the structure which faces the street. The so-called "Secret Annexe," in which the Frank family, the van Daans, and Mr. Dussel concealed themselves for two years, faces the courtyard and garden in the back.

SAVED FROM DEMOLITION

The old structure had been scheduled for demolition after ten years of vacancy until it was saved through the intervention of the Anne Frank Foundation, which now occupies the street level of the premises. In addition to repairing and remodeling the ground floor, the Foundation through contributions is constructing a student dormitory next door and undertaking the care of orphan children.

Visitors to the Anne Frank House are greeted at the door by a winsome, blonde Dutch girl, who is fluent in a repertoire of languages. Her linguistic talents serve her well, for since the house was opened last year large numbers of callers have come to this shrine from all over the world.

One visitor who has been back several times is Otto Frank, Anne's father, the only survivor of the eight "Secret Annexe" occupants. He travels from his present home in Switzerland in connection with the work of the Foundation.



The famous swinging bookcase, which concealed the entrance to the "Secret Annexe," where the Frank family and others hid from the Nazis. Pictures are by Igor Jongman.

From the Foundation headquarters and auditorium on the ground floor 13 narrow steps lead up to the stark vacant rooms of the Opekta Company. In the restoration of the building upstairs only slight changes have been made, one of which was the sealing off of the back staircase from the offices to the entrance to the Annexe. Nothing clandestine now. The public comes directly up the main stairs. And in the Opekta offices all is bare. No desks. No chairs. Only out in the passage hangs a map of the former Dutch colonies in the East Indies. Underneath it stands a bookcase with Opekta company ledgers lining the shelves. This bookcase creakily swings away from the wall, and one enters the "Secret Annexe" with feelings of curiosity and reverence.

On the back of the hinged bookcase is the long steel hook and a piece of cloth to deaden the sound of metal against wood. There are so many "ifs" connected with the Anne Frank story—"ifs" on how her life might have been saved. One is a lingering doubt as to whether the hook was properly fastened that day the Gestapo came to search the house.

Inside the doorway a three-step turn to the left and one enters the room which

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Otto Frank and his wife Edith occupied. On a wall map kept by Mr. Frank the advance of the Allied Forces is charted with red pins. The steady German Army retreat in the summer of 1944 is marked with blue pins. But the battle line remains frozen at this point for all time, to those who were taken from here before the liberating armies could reach Amsterdam.

Near the doorway leading to Anne's adjoining room there is a series of two parallel height markings which register the growth of Anne and her sister Margo. At the last measurement, which bears the date 29 July 1944—just six days before the Gestapo raid—the sisters had reached an almost equal height.

ANNE'S PIN-UPS STILL THERE

Inside Anne's room the low-hanging rafters and the slender casement windows give a cramped feeling, even though the room is devoid of all furniture. No wonder Anne and Mr. Dussel, who also slept here, were forever on each other's nerves. Anne's pin-up keepsakes, now covered with long panes of glass, make the room even more diminutive.

The pin-ups are pictorial mementoes of Anne's temperament and her abounding hobbies. Tacked to the faded beige wallpaper, just as she left them, are: photographs of pretty children, an outline map of Germany's western frontiers done in a fine hand, sketches of her own dress designs, a comical print of nattily-dressed chimpanzees frolicking at a tea party, a poster advertising Opekta jam, a copy of the Dutch underground newspaper, photographs of the Dutch and British royal families, a picture of a sculptured head of Hermes, and a profusion of smiling Hollywood movie stars.

Enshrouded in the heavy silence of the tiny room, one's gaze is drawn to the black wreaths and bouquets lying in the corner against the green and cream woodwork. School children of a new generation of Germans have tendered the floral homage. Peering through the half-opened, black-papered window one sees the hoary, sheltering chestnut tree which gave Anne her solitary communion with the beauties of nature she loved so well.

Next to Anne's room is her sister's even tinier sleeping chamber. With the nearby water closet door open, there seems scarcely room for a bed. And when the door to this water closet is ajar, a startled smile comes to the faces of visitors when they see the gaily-decorated blue delft toilet bowl.

Up the creaky stairwell to the next floor one comes upon the largest of the Secret Annexe rooms. This spacious, barren room, which was used as a parlor, kitchen, and van Daan sleeping room, seems the most haunted of all. Here was the place where the women prepared the meals, where the sequestered ones, often joined by their Dutch benefactors, gathered at the dining table, where vital matters were discussed, and where frequent quarrels exploded. By virtue of a newly-cleared area behind the *Achterhuis* and the deterioration of the blackout curtains, the bright light of day pours into the room and illuminates the bleak emptiness. In the corner a stone sink and a small pot-bellied stove with a rusty skillet on top give the only evidences that people once lived here. The Gestapo, as was their procedure, had stripped the house of all its furnishings, carrying them off to the Vaterland for the use of the bombed-out *Herrenvolk*.

A look inside the uniquely concealed wall closets sets a trio of forlorn clothes hangers into motion. The closet air is musty. The plaster shows through the molting wallpaper, and one suddenly feels the guilt of over-prying.

Adjoining is the little room used by Peter van Daan, where Mr. Frank was giving Peter his English lesson the morning that the Gestapo arrived. A set of stairs inside this room leads up to the broad attic. The rough-hewn boards on the garret floor would have been fair game for any child who wanted to carve a name into them for permanence. Some crude marks appear that might be interpreted as a "D" or part of an "A".

The attic window looks out on a panorama of spires, chimneys, and gable-topped roofs. A look upward and the majestic Westertoren hovers in view. Below the Westertoren lies buried one of mankind's greats—Rembrandt van Rijn.

It was in the attic that Anne enjoyed her private seclusion within the larger hideaway. Here she meditated and observed and recorded in the spiritual retreat of her diary. Here she and Peter sat for long hours discussing with adolescent avidity the range of subjects from philosophies to the pettinesses of their hidden household.

STORY KNOWN TO MILLIONS

The intimate jottings in Anne's red-checked journal have evoked a world-wide response to an extent achieved by few other literary works of World War II. Since its first publication in Amsterdam in 1947, the Diary has been translated into twenty languages and in dramatized form has been seen by many millions. What is the explanation of its universal appeal? Is it because of its tender portrait of an adolescent discovering herself and life's mysteries under the most adverse conditions? Or is it, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, because in the midst of the "degradation of the human spirit" brought on by war and persecution, Anne Frank's Diary "makes clear the ultimate shining nobility of that spirit?"

Anne called her diary the "unbosomings of an ugly duckling," but many of those who had known her remember the vitality, intelligence, and charm of this lovely, raven-haired girl with the alert eyes and delicate mouth. Her greatest aspiration was to be a writer. "I want to go on living after my death!" she wrote. "And therefore I am grateful to God for giving me this gift: this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me. But will I ever be able to write anything great? I hope so, Oh! I hope so very much."

Anne would have been a young woman in her early thirties today and most probably a successful and prolific author. When she died of typhus at the age of fifteen in the Belsen concentration camp, it was not for her to know that through the vagaries of fate the diary which would make her immortal had been salvaged from a paper-strewn room by her Dutch friends, Elli and Miep.

"WE STILL LOVE LIFE"

In the last entry of the diary Anne describes herself as "a little bundle of contradictions." There were many elements in her complex, evolving character. She was impetuous, moody, and impudent, yet she was also considerate, keen, contemplative, affectionate, and devout. But her most outstanding quality was her irrepressible optimism. "For we still love life," she wrote, "we haven't yet forgotten the voice of nature. We still hope, hope about everything . . ." And in one of the most memorable passages, written shortly before she was taken into custody, Anne affirms, "If I look up into the heavens I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end and that peace and tranquility will return again."

Anne Frank and her co-occupants of the Secret Annexe were but eight persons out of 75,000 Amsterdam Jews. And, as she acknowledged, the eight were "luckier than millions of people" to have a place to hide out and to be cared for by kind and heroic friends. In the end they followed the overwhelming majority of the Jews of *Mokum*, as they affectionately called their city, in being deported via the Westerbork and Vught Detention Camps to a merciless fate in the death camps of the East. But Anne Frank does go on living, as she so fervently wished, and this sensitive little girl of Amsterdam has somehow given voice to millions of martyred victims who perished in silence.

Along the Prinsengracht today there are the audible sounds of boat whistles on the canals, barrel-organs in the side streets, and the timeless chimes of the Westertoren clock. But if you listen very carefully you can also hear the echoes of Anne Frank reaffirming ". . . in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."