His daughter's father

R. Peter Straus

"in spite of everything, I still believe that people are good" Anne Frank

Envelopes arrive daily from obscure towns in Yugoslavia, Iran, Greenland, and South Africa, as well as recognizable addresses like Tokyo and Scarsdale. In a small flat near the headwaters of the Rhine, Otto Frank and his wife, Fritzi, work as a team carrying out a mission. They respond to an urgent flood of inquiring correspondence.

The questions people ask Otto Frank aren't easy. What was it like in Auschwitz? What kind of relationship should parents have with their teenage children? What would Anne Frank be like today if she had lived to be a middle-aged woman? Do you see parallels between Europe in the 1930's and the world today? Is anti-Semitism growing? Why did you survive while so many others died?

Thirty-three years ago, Otto Frank was handed his daughter's diary. Because he could not bear more, he read only a few pages at a time. His wife and two daughters had died at Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen.

Now Japanese television crews arrive bowing, bearing small gifts, and setting up TV lights. A young Catholic priest drops in from a nearby Swiss town. Mrs. Petersen, who has never in her 81 years risked travel by air, makes light of the six-week sea journey that brought her to the Anne Frank house.

Sixty million people have read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, or attended the play or seen the movie based on her diary. The book is now available in 40 languages and dialects, including six different tongues in the Soviet Union alone. Marc Chagall did a painting; John Kennedy spoke of Anne's gift as "the greatest truth of all"; Jorgi Cervello composed a symphony; Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a preface; the world's rose growers recognize a new class, the Anne Frank rose (yellow, with overtones of cream and red); Yevgeny Yevtushenko includes her in a poem; Pope John spoke glowingly of the diary, which he read in Italian.

Rather than dwell on the reactions of the distinguished and renowned, Otto Frank prefers to talk about Ljuba from Yugoslavia or Arlette Charrier from France, who first wrote to him in 1972 requesting his permission, if and when she married, to name a daughter "Anne." Last spring a brief note reported that Arlette had been married for some time, and that "Anne was born on 28 February, 1974."

Barbara Hauptman writes from Roslyn Heights, Long Island, to ask that if "Uncle Otto" finds time to continue their three year correspondence, would he please write to her as Mrs. Howard Goldstein. She hopes he'll have time to meet her young lawyer husband soon after the impending wedding. Fourteen year old Amy Farrell from Mill Valley, California, holds the record for length. Her 60-page handwritten letter required two answers. Otto Frank replied immediately that a busy schedule would require a delayed response to the innermost thoughts she'd been kind enough to share. Ten days later a more typical reply touched point by point on the personal musings of a 14-year-old girl.

Yet Otto Frank is not a sentimental philosopher or a crusader. In person only a few can penetrate the sophisticated veneer and the military bearing he acquired as a child growing up in Germany. Albert Hackett, author of a play based on the diary, spent a long, emotional day with Otto Frank and only later revised his first impression that "Otto Frank is a cold fish." Otto Frank's responses to his experiences and to his correspondents emerge from the depths of a guarded individual.

Presuming on the long friendship that linked him with my father from their student days at Heidelberg University, I asked him to speak to me not as the wise, empathetic Pim (Anne's nickname for her father in the diary), but rather as Otto Frank. "You cannot separate me out," he said. "It's a strange role. In the normal family relationship, it is the child of the famous parent who has the honor and the burden of continuing the task. In my case the role is reversed."

When Otto Frank was 43 he began to worry about what would happen to his family if Hitler came to power. In the sophisticated—and assimilated—Jewish community of Frankfurt, the Franks traced their roots to the 17th century. Otto's father was a prominent banker; his mother, an active, respected citizen of the community. Otto Frank entered the German army in World War I as a private and became a lieutenant, one of few Jewish officers, before the war ended. For the next decade he led the comfortable life of a wealthy and attractive bachelor, traveling to New York, where he worked briefly at Macy's, returning to Frankfurt to enter the family banking business, then branching off on his own again, as a stockbroker.

In 1933 Frank decided to leave Germany. By 1933, he recalls, the bright fabric of life for a Jew in Frankfurt was beginning to unravel at the edges. Acquaintances, both Jewish and Christian, tried to dissuade him from this stern view. But there were street gangs, anti-Jewish demonstrations, and calls for a strong leader like Adolph Hitler. There was growing pressure to restrict Jewish businessmen and bankers to transactions with other Jews. Corresponding social pressures strained the formerly easy contact between Jewish and gentile families. Even if the deterioration stopped there, Otto Frank, now married and the father of two young girls, knew that he did not want such a life for his children.

"You cannot bring up kids like horses with blinders," he says, "ignorant of the social landscape outside their small group."

On January 30, 1933, Otto Frank recalls, "We happened to be visiting friends. We were seated at the table and listening to the radio. First came the news that Hitler had become Chancellor. Then came an account of the storm troopers' torch parade in Berlin. We heard the shouting and cheers, and the announcer said that Hindenburg was at the window, waving. At the end, Hitler made his 'Give Me Four Years' speech. Our host said cheerfully, 'Well, let's see what the man can do.' I could not reply. My wife sat as if she were turned to stone."

R. Peter Straus is Director of Voice of America. This memoir, written before his appointment, is based on a family friendship which began when his father, Nathan, studied at Heidelberg with Otto Frank.

When his brother-in-law wrote from Basel describing a business opportunity in Amsterdam, Frank welcomed the news partly for material reasons. The employer was an established international company trading in pectin, the base ingredient of jams and preserves. It was a stable position and one that would permit Frank to learn and branch out. Beyond economics, Holland seemed a good choice at the time. For centuries the country had provided refuge for the persecuted, French Huguenots, English Puritans. Holland had stayed out of World War I and therefore seemed likely to resist German encroachment in the future. Otto Frank settled in Amsterdam in the summer of 1933. Shortly thereafter Mrs. Frank and the two young girls, who had been staying with Mrs. Frank's mother in Aachen, joined him.

Before the end of tulip time, 1940, the Franks were trapped again. The Germans had invaded Holland, the Queen had fled to Britain, and Seyss Inquart had been installed as Reich Chancellor. The Nazis were launching their first roundup of Jews in Amsterdam.

Twenty thousand Jews went into hiding in Amsterdam. Half of them survived. Otto Frank survived Auschwitz, as did his present wife Fritzi, although they did not know each other while they were fugitives with their families in Amsterdam, hiding only a few thousand yards apart. They did not meet until after Auschwitz. However, Fritzi's daughter and Otto Frank's daughter Anne had walked to school together, both before and after they had to wear three-inch yellow patches with the Dutch word *'Jood'* at the center of a six-pointed star.

For sixteen months Otto Frank had planned and provisioned a hiding place above the spice warehouse on the Prince Canal. For twenty-five months he presided over life for eight fugitives in this pressure-cooker. He had given Anne a notebook for her 13th birthday, but took no special note of how she used it.

In a general way he was aware that she frequently went to write at the desk which she shared—amid much bickering—with the dentist Düssel. She showed her father no more than a few descriptive phrases, and he did not pry. The diary attests that their relationship was close and loving, but much of his time with her was spent tutoring her in her studies, mediating between her and her mother when the two strong wills collided within their narrow attic, and supervising her emerging womanhood, particularly with respect to 17-year-old Peter Van Daan.

Then Sergeant Karl Silberbauer, who today is a police inspector in his native Austria, led a raid that hauled eight Jews, some nondescript furniture and china, and a silver Chanukah menorah out of an attic above a spice warehouse. He flung an adolescent's diary on the floor as he left.

Elfrieda Frank has always been called Fritzi. A handsome, charming woman, her conversational ease in half a dozen languages makes it unnecessary for her to say that she comes from Vienna. She tells with clear eyes about the hours standing naked under searchlights with her daughter, waiting for the decision of the infamous Dr. Mengele, back to slave labor, or to the gas chamber. The last time this happened she and her daughter were sent to the door of the chamber before being reprieved.

Fritzi recalls an earlier scene from a more carefree time. She was visiting a favorite dressmaker in a small shop in downtown Amsterdam. A girl about the age of her own eleven-year-old daughter was having a dress fitted and was directing the seamstress with great confidence—a bit tighter here, the waist is fine, the skirt needs shortening. Fritzi remembers asking aloud that evening whether her own daughter would ever become as mature and self-confident. That was the only time Fritzi ever saw Anne Frank.

Fritzi and her daughter found themselves on a train of cattle cars riding back from Auschwitz after the liberation of the camp by the Russians. Fritzi knew that her husband and her son were dead. On the same train Otto Frank had been told of his wife's death at Birkenau. The cars kept jolting to a stop to give right-of-way to trainloads of Soviet troops traveling in the opposite direction.

At one of these stops Fritzi's daughter took advantage of her new freedom and climbed down from the cattle car to mingle with the other survivors. She spotted Otto Frank and ran back to her mother. "Momma, Momma, remember Anne Frank? I just saw her father!" Some years later Fritzi and Otto were married by a clerk in Amsterdam's City Hall.

In August 1945, Otto Frank, Amsterdam businessman, survivor of Auschwitz, became, in capital letters, The Father of Anne Frank. He had returned to Amsterdam in June with thousands of other returnees, searching desperately for word that some remnant of their families had survived. Otto went to Miep, Anne Frank's nickname for Hermine Santrushitz Geiss, Otto's secretary who became the family's link to the outside world when they went into hiding. Through courage, luck, intelligence (and not being Jewish), Miep had survived in Amsterdam despite her involvement in helping Jews.

Only after Otto Frank learned that both his daughters had died of typhoid at Belsen that spring did Miep give him the plaid-covered notebook in which Anne had written on 312 cramped pages. Miep had planned to hand the diary, which she had not opened herself, directly to Anne.

Otto crept slowly into the legacy of his daughter. Merely amazed at Anne's accurate and evocative observation, Otto was utterly astounded at the depth of Anne's sincerity and the serenity of her message.

Looking back now, Otto recognizes that he paid more attention to his first-born, Margot. "Anne was not particularly good at her studies. Terrible at arithmetic. Margot was the bright one. Everybody admired her. She got along with everybody. Anne was ebullient—and difficult."

In possession of his younger daughter's diary, Otto's spiritual relationship with her began. "Because I was privileged to read Anne's diary, I perhaps know my daughter better than most fathers can know their daughters." In fact, Anne's diary has helped make Otto Frank a sensitive surrogate father to many

thousands around the world. "You have the task and you must do it," he says.

Fritzi and Otto Frank work as a team. They each read and discuss every letter. Otto dictates and Fritzi transcribes the replies on an old typewriter, significantly improving the grammar if it's an English letter. The traditional burl walnut sideboard sits across from them in the diningroom. Hidden with non-Jewish friends while Anne's family was in hiding, the sideboard survived.

The Franks never duplicate the answers they send out, but certain themes, stemming from the diary, run through these personal letters. Do something to promote peace, to reduce prejudice. Begin with your own circle, your own family. Big plans are fine, but prejudice begins within the individual. Build peace with small blocks. The philosophy is not original. The intensity and authenticity of feeling may be extraordinary, but Anne's diary is not the only writing, squeezed onto precious pages when paper was a scarce commodity, that survived its author. On April 3, 1946, the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* reported, "The Government Institute for War Documentation is in possession of about two hundred similar diaries." That is in Holland alone.

Diaries of introspective teenaged girls are not rare items. But because of the extreme circumstances under which it was written, Anne Frank's is among the finest communications of the special feelings of young womanhood. In a passage deleted from the Dutch version, Anne reports: "Each time I have a period—and that has been only three times—I have the feeling that in spite of all the pain, unpleasantness, and nastiness, I have a sweet secret, and that is why, although it is nothing but a nuisance to me in a way, I always long for the time that I shall feel that secret within me again."

In her diary Anne Frank speaks with such intimacy that the reader is transported to a shared moment in time, a moment moreover that epitomized the ultimate human contradictions. Once someone asked Justice Felix Frankfurter, "How do you know that the human race is worth saving?" He answered, "Because I have read Anne Frank's diary."

Which characteristics of the diary mean most to Otto Frank's correspondents is a matter of conjecture. The letters and visitors from Japan don't mention the bomb very often, but it is a fair guess that Japan's nuclear catastrophe suggests a connection in some Japanese minds between themselves and a young victim of the Holocaust. Letters and visitors have mentioned the anti-Semitic remarks of General Brown, at Duke University. They ask whether Anne Frank's father can generalize about the telltale signs of rising anti-Semitism. Otto Frank is uncomfortable with generalizations. He prefers the specific, the practical, and the positive. He refuses to condemn Germany or Germans in general. He is concerned but optimistic about the future of Israel. He thinks it would be better if Fritzi's grandchildren in London had more Jewish playmates.

And he continues to overcommit himself to travel and meetings, especially with young people. He feels that the young who are moved by Anne's diary and want to meet or have contact with him are unlikely to be those filled with cynicism and hate. "So I see the good young people," he concludes. "Deprived though we are, our lives have been enriched by this work."

Otto Frank's mission might have been to tell young people about what happened. He might be retelling how Buchenwald arose near Goethe's Weimar; how two million died at Auschwitz alone; how the King of the Danes chose to wear the Star of David when that badge was decreed for Denmark's Jews.

He might have recounted these things in response to George Santayana's famous dictum: "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." Otto Frank does ask, "Who can say where it might happen again?" But the message of Anne Frank's diary transcends the history and politics of terror. Her father sees it as his mission to help that message reach as far as it can.

Otto Frank has only twice turned down requests that would have meant further exposure for Anne's thoughts. The Japanese have asked to exhibit the original diary, which is locked in a Swiss bank vault. They have stressed their willingness to insure it and care for it throughout the journey, as they did when they exhibited the Mona Lisa. Otto Frank felt he had to refuse to take the risk. The other refusal was closer to home. Ernst Schnabel, a German scholar, interviewed fifty persons who had had some connection with Anne, and then wrote *Anne Frank: A Portrait in Courage*. The book has been translated into many languages, but Otto Frank will not let it appear in Dutch so that Miep and the others who helped the Franks can continue to live peacefully and inconspicuously in Amsterdam

It is only in Germany that Otto Frank himself has worked to have the diary published. It wasn't easy. After many rejections he went to a small publisher of such erudite materials as the writings of Martin Buber. Although he believed it wouldn't sell, the publisher printed the diary because he felt it should be published. The publisher was right. The diary was ignored for years until the play based on it opened simultaneously in seven German cities. It shook the country from end to end.

One of the most moving elements of the diary is the growth of Anne's faith. In one of her last entries Anne uses a technique of questioning that is characteristic of Jewish study and writing:

"Who inflicted this upon us? Who has made us Jews different from other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God that has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again. If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason only do we have to suffer now."

This entry, like others expounding Anne's philosophy, took her father by surprise. To this day he cannot understand "where Anne got some of her ideas." ✸