

#Anne Frank Parallel Stories: The young victim of the Nazis

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Sabina Fedeli and Anna Migotto

#Anne Frank Parallel Stories, directed by Italian journalists Sabina Fedeli and Anna Migotto, is a documentary streaming on Netflix that retraces the life of Anne Frank, as well as five living women who survived the Nazi concentration camps in World War II.

The story of Anne Frank and her diary became known to millions in the wake of the Second World War and was famously adapted as a film in 1959, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, directed by George Stevens, featuring Millie Perkins.

Anne Frank was born in 1929 in Frankfurt, Germany to a Jewish family. When Anne was four, the family fled the Nazis, moving to the Netherlands. By 1940, the Franks were trapped in Amsterdam by the German occupation of the country. Two years later, Anne's father started furnishing a secret place in the annex of his business premises.

On her 13th birthday, Anne and her family went underground, and during those two years in hiding, Anne wrote, with a sharp eye and tender soul, about life in the "Secret Annex." When the Minister of Education of the exiled Dutch government in England made a radio appeal to listeners to hold on to war diaries and documents, Anne started rewriting her diary, but before she was finished, she and the others in the annex were discovered and arrested by the Gestapo on August 4, 1944.

Anne, together with her parents and sister, was transported by train to Auschwitz. Later that year, she, her sister and mother were taken to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Lower Saxony, where Anne died in early 1945, probably of typhoid, at the age of 15.

When the war ended, Anne's father Otto, the only surviving member of the family, returned to Amsterdam where he was given his daughter's diary, which was found after the family was taken away. In 1947, he had it published. To date *The Diary of Anne Frank* has been translated into more than 60 languages and has sold over 30 million copies.

The new documentary has chilling and moving elements. Anne's tragedy is brought to life through the heartfelt reading of excerpts of her diary by actress Helen Mirren. That narration is intertwined with the perspectives of five Holocaust survivors—Arianna Szörenyi, Sarah Lichtsztejn-Montard, Helga Weiss and sisters Andra and Tatiana Bucci. Several of them were Anne's age when they were sent to concentration camps.

Aish.com provides an outline of the women's backgrounds.

Andra and Tatiana Bucci are Croatian sisters, who were four and six when they were arrested with their mother and a cousin. "First taken to Risiera di San Sabba concentration camp in Trieste [in northern Italy], they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. When the Soviet army arrived in Auschwitz in 1945, only 650 children of various nationalities were alive, including Andra and Tatiana."

Arianna Szörenyi also lived in Croatia. "She was 11 when deported and went through four concentration camps, from Risiera di San Sabba to Bergen-Belsen. She survived but lost seven members of her family."

Helga Weiss was born the same year as Anne Frank. At age 12, she and her family were deported from Prague to the Terezin concentration camp in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, then to Auschwitz, Freiberg (in Germany) and Mauthausen (in Austria). Since childhood Helga has kept a diary, mainly of elaborate and skillful drawings.

"Sarah Montard escaped the Vel d'Hiv roundup [the mass arrest of French Jews in July 1942—the victims were temporarily held at the Vélodrome d'Hiver (Winter Velodrome), an indoor sports arena] in Paris and went into hiding with her mother for two years until 1944 when she was reported, arrested and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau." She forthrightly tells the camera: "The worst, most terrible thing was the flame from the crematorium. Night and day it rose and made a terrible noise, lighting up the sky that was pink with the flames. After what I experienced, I'm not afraid of anything anymore." Like Anne Frank, Sarah was a prisoner at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

A number of the women's descendants talk about the impact of this history on their own lives, including a gifted violinist and another who tattooed his forearm with his great-grandmother's concentration camp number. One moving scene shows the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague, a memorial to the nearly 80,000 Jewish victims of the Shoah from the Czech lands.

#Anne Frank Parallel Stories explains that 75 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.

As a sidebar, the documentary follows a teenage girl, #KaterinaKat (Martina Gatti), who texts an imaginary Anne while exploring Bergen-Belsen, museums and historic sites. She feels a

generational connection to Anne, trying to relate the latter's story to today's reality. Gatti's texts are an updated version of "Dear Kitty," the fictional character to whom Anne addressed many of her diary letters.

The core of *#Anne Frank Parallel Stories* is Mirren's reading from Anne's diary in a replica of the clandestine refuge in Amsterdam by set designers from the Piccolo Theatre in Milano. Anne's youthful words and thoughts capture humanity's hopefulness and resilience even as she records the Holocaust—the greatest crime in human history. Several entries are worth highlighting:

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!*

April 16, 1944: *Remember yesterday's date, because it was special for me. When a girl gets her first kiss, it's always an important date ...*

It was a kiss through my hair, half on my left cheek, and half on my ear. I ran downstairs and didn't look back! Last night, Peter [van Daan] and I were sitting on the sofa as usual, in each other's arms. Suddenly, the usual Anne disappeared—the confident, noisy Anne—and the second Anne took her place. This second Anne only wants to love and to be gentle. Tears came to my eyes. Did he notice? He made no movement. Did he feel the same way as I did? He said very little. There were no answers to my questions.

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.*

The diary's postscript simply states: "On the morning of 4 August 1944, a car arrived at 263 Prinsengracht, the address of the Secret Annex. The eight people from the Annex were first taken to a prison in Amsterdam. Then they were sent to Auschwitz, the concentration camp in Poland.

"On 16 January 1945, Peter van Daan had to go on the terrible prisoners' walk from Auschwitz to Mauthausen in Austria, where

he died on 5 May 1945 [at the age of 18]. He died only three days before the Allies got to the camp. Edith Frank, Anne's mother, died in the Auschwitz concentration camp on 6 January 1945, too tired and too hungry to live any longer.

"Margot and Anne Frank were taken from Auschwitz to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp near Hanover, in Germany. A terrible illness attacked the prisoners there. They both died in the winter of 1944-5. Anne must have died in late February or early March. All the bodies of the prisoners were thrown together. The British army arrived at the camp on 12 April 1945."

One of the film's commentators observes: "Imagine the talent that Germany destroyed ... when you destroy children, you destroy infinite possibility."

Anne Frank is one of the best known and best loved figures of the 20th century. It is timely and commendable that the documentary revisits her story. Mirren's reading of the diary excerpts is deeply affecting, evocative and sobering. In fact, Anne Frank's words reveal a bright, unflinchingly honest and insightful young girl. They also give some sense of a highly cultured milieu.

Since the late 1950s, there have been almost two dozen theatrical and television films based on Anne's story. In this case, the filmmakers clearly have been impelled to one extent or another by the current political situation, including the rise of far-right movements and the attacks on immigrants and refugees. "With the advent of the wars in Syria, Libya, Iraq," states Mirren, "with the immigration issue that's happening in Europe, it's so easy to start pointing your finger at different races, different tribes, different cultures, different people and say 'you're to blame for my problems.'"

She goes on to explain that Anne Frank's diary "is an amazing teaching tool, an amazing vessel to carry the real understanding of human experiences of the past into our present and very much into our future. I find it very, very important and that's why I wanted to do this piece."

Unfortunately, once again, despite the genuine feeling poured into the project, there is no effort here to explain the origins and rise of fascism. *Parallel Stories* adopts a somewhat amorphous and abstract attitude toward history. Anne Frank herself had some intuitive insights into the driving forces of the phenomenon. There was a general understanding at the time that fascism was connected to the defense of big business and was a response to the Russian Revolution and the threat of revolution in every country.

Global capitalism today has not solved any of the problems that led to the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. On the contrary, its contradictions are erupting with convulsive force.

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