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Book Review

Jennifer Thompson

Many people around the world have read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Few have investigated to learn more about other members of her family. Helene Elias, Anne's aunt and sister of Anne's father Otto, inherited their mother's home, which included over six thousand documents of photos, letters, drawings, poems, and postcards. When Elias died, Buddy (Anne's cousin and childhood playmate) inherited this "treasure trove of historic importance" (inside book cover). Anne's family had written many times to one another before, during, and after the war. Buddy's wife, Gertrude (Gerti), and Mirjam Pressler (who translated Anne's diary into German) have used these documents to tell this extraordinary account of the story of Anne's family. Readers will learn about members of Anne's family, where they were during the war, the impact of the war on their lives, and how they survived after the war.

Readers first meet Anne's grandmother, Alice (Stern) Frank and see her childhood portrait, painted by Frankfurt Professor Schlesinger. This does not bring fond memories for her, as he would sternly reprimand her for any movement. "She knew she would have to stand still, not move her feet even if her legs became stiff and started to hurt, not turn her head to look at a fly, that it was just as forbidden to scratch anywhere if it itched" (p. 14). She could not refuse to go because her governess constantly reminded her that her father had spent a lot of money for the portrait. This painting hung in her parents' home until her father's death, in her mother's room at her grandfather's until her death, and then in her homes in Frankfurt and then in Basel, Switzerland. In 1935, she decided to write her life story to give to her three sons and one daughter on her seventieth birthday. "Alice had the good fortune to be born into a family where many stories were told and much was handed down from one generation to the next" (p. 39). As a young man, her grandfather, Elkan Cahn, had lived in the ghetto in *Judengasse* "Jews' Alley" in Frankfurt. The city council had forced the Jews to move there in 1462. Alice shared how she met Michael Frank. Her mother was against his becoming a son-in-law until Alice convinced her that "she had firmly decided to marry Michael and

no one else” (p. 57). They married in 1886. They were not rich, but lived a better life than many. “The Franks were among the first in Frankfurt to get a telephone,” and they “traveled often” (pp. 66, 67). Readers soon meet the children: Robert, Otto, Herbert, and finally daughter Helene (Leni). They moved several times and finally bought a large house at Jordanstrasse 4. Education, music lessons, and writing were important. The family also enjoyed parties, concerts, and plays. Michael’s sudden death at the age of fifty-seven in 1909 was devastating to Alice. “It was her children that gave Alice the strength and courage to bear the difficult years that lay ahead—the years without Michael, as a widow” (p. 90). Alice inherited and now supervised the successful Michael Frank Bank, which suffered setbacks only because of WWI and the New York stock market crash in 1929.

Readers see the bonds between Otto and his family as they grew up and moved away from one another. The book documented many events in their lives with letters, poems, and newspaper articles. After his father’s death, Otto “all but took over the father’s role for his little sister” (p. 92). All three sons served in the military during World War I. Otto was working at the family bank and was the last one to marry when he married Edith Hollander on his birthday, May 12, 1925. Otto, Edith, Leni, and her husband Erich all lived in the family home with Alice, until after the birth of Margot. Otto and his family moved into a duplex in 1927, where Anne was born in 1929. The families were close, and the children visited Alice often. Erich accepted a job in Basel, Switzerland in 1929. The Frank Bank suffered another setback in 1931 with the arrest of Herbert for tax evasion. “He was accused of breaking the new regulations on securities trading with foreigners” (p. 122). He moved to Paris after his release and was not present for the hearing that pronounced him innocent. Leni and their two sons joined Erich in Basel, Switzerland in 1931. The Franks moved to a smaller apartment in 1931 and eventually back into the family home in 1932. After Hitler became Chancellor of the German Reich in 1933, the families decided to leave Germany. Alice moved to an apartment in Basel to be near Leni in 1933; Otto and his family moved to the Netherlands in 1934. Alice felt like an exile in Basel, but she enjoyed getting letters from her grandchildren, Margot and Anne. In 1938, Erich rented a big home so he could move his mother Ida to Basel. Alice moved in with them as well. News of events in Germany made the family glad they were safe from the Nazis. Alice was able to visit Otto’s family in Amsterdam but fell ill and took awhile to recover. Edith’s family left Germany during this time. “Edith’s two brothers escaped to America and her mother came to join the Franks in Amsterdam” (p. 138). The Nazis invaded the Netherlands in 1940, and things became more difficult for Jews. Otto tried to get a visa for his family to go to

Cuba, the only way they could eventually reach America (since no visas were available to America in the Netherlands). “On December 1, 1941, Cuba actually did issue a visa for Otto Frank, but it was canceled as early as December 11” (p. 151). The family would now need to go into hiding. Leni received a mysterious birthday card from Otto’s family in late July (her birthday was in September). “We can’t correspond with . . . you all anymore” (p. 158). Jews in Switzerland soon learned they were no longer German citizens and must now surrender their passports. Switzerland denied many applications for citizenship from Jewish applicants.

The family in Basel started receiving news about the family. In March 1941, they learned that Leni’s cousin, Jean-Michel, committed suicide in New York. They did not receive any news in 1942 and finally learned that England sent German Jews, including Robert, to a prison on the Isle of Man, where he remained for several months. A business letter from Otto’s friend who had adult children hinted that Anne had grown taller. Erich’s brother, Paul had a visa to go to Bolivia but could not go there from France or Switzerland. Herbert joined them in Switzerland using false papers using Jean-Michel’s name. Leni’s “flea market” became a real store in 1943, where emigrants sold belongings to raise money or to get rid of things they could not take with them. She held tea parties on Sundays and guests shared news of relatives still in danger.

When the war ended in 1945, Herbert returned to Paris. The family learned that Robert and his wife were safe in England. They received a telegram from Otto, who was heading to Paris. Four weeks later, they received a letter from Otto, who revealed their imprisonment in Auschwitz, the death of Edith, and his current search for Margot and Anne. More letters explain about their place of hiding, their capture, and ultimately the fate of the children. “The finality of the news left them nothing but helplessness and despair, especially Alice, who fell apart” (p. 226). Otto began to discuss Anne’s diary. “I can’t let the diaries out of my hands, there is too much in them that is not intended for anyone else, but I’ll make excerpts” (p. 243). Friends convinced him that he should publish the diary. Alice finally saw Otto again on her eightieth birthday; he stayed for three weeks. Buddy became an actor and soon went on tour. He and Alice questioned whether Otto should publish Anne’s private diary, but Otto felt “that she had an intellectual maturity that most adults don’t have and maybe never will have” (p. 283). The family decided to buy the home in Basel, and Alice’s health started to decline. Publishers released Anne’s diary in Germany and France in 1950 and in England and the United States in 1952. In 1952, Erich and Leni finally became Swiss citizens, and Otto married Fritzi Geiringer and moved to the family home in Basel.

Buddy finally read the diary “and was deeply moved, shaken” and now understood “why Otto had said that he had never really known his daughter; Buddy felt the same way” (p. 302). Alice died a few months after her eighty-seventh birthday in 1953. “All four children of Michael and Alice Frank—Robert, Otto, Herbert, Leni—were together once more for their mother’s funeral. It was to be the last time” (p. 317). Robert died two months later. After Anne’s story came out in a play in 1955 and a movie in 1959, the diary became a worldwide bestseller. Otto established several foundations—Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam and the Anne Frank-Fonds in Basel—to manage the income from the diary “to contribute to better understanding between different religions, serve the cause of peace between peoples, and promote international contact between young people” (p. 362). Otto died in 1980. Erich died in 1984, and Leni died on the same day two years later.

“Anne Frank’s diary had touched people, had gotten them to stop and reflect on their own memories of the catastrophe . . . awakened questions of guilt and responsibility . . . really changed people’s lives. Its effects remain visible to this day” (p. 333). Buddy assumed the role to keep Anne’s memory alive. His wife Gerti discovered the treasure trove of letters, photographs, and other documents in the attic of the family home. The Anne Frank-Fonds hired historian Dr. Peter Toebak to organize and archive all the material before moving them to the Anne Frank Foundation’s archive in Amsterdam, “where every page was digitized or microfilmed” (p. 398). The Anne Frank-Fonds asked Gerti to take charge of creating a book from the letters and documents. They hired Mirjam Pressler to write this excellent book, which belongs on every bookshelf to gain a better understanding of Anne and her family.