

Anne Frank Was Not Alone

Merwedeplein 1933-1945

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After Anne Frank's family left Germany in 1933 to make a new home on Merwedeplein in Amsterdam, many other German-Jewish refugees followed. The newly built apartments on the square had just been delivered, with the "skyscraper" – at that time, the tallest residential tower in the Netherlands – as the centerpiece of the complex. People with differing backgrounds lived there together in a quiet and friendly atmosphere. Children played outside until late in the evening while the adults exchanged the most recent news of the day.

Cover Photo: Anne Frank's 10th birthday in 1939.



(Her neighborhood friends from L to R)

However, the tide turned once Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940 and the Jewish residents were increasingly marginalized. The first Jews rounded up for deportation by the Nazis in July 1942 were forced to walk to Amsterdam's Centraal [Train] Station in the dead of night. Jews who made the difficult decision to go into hiding had to proceed with utmost caution, so the Dutch Nazi Party (NSB) members living on the square wouldn't notice anything suspicious. Some even created a hiding place in their own homes. But each time police vans arrived in the neighborhood, they were stricken with terror.

Based on extensive archival research and in-depth interviews with still surviving residents and their family members, Dutch historian Rian Verhoeven paints an intimate portrait of daily life, persecution, betrayal, and resistance that took place on Merwedeplein. *Anne Frank Was Not Alone* tells the gripping story of a microcosm of society against the backdrop of World War II and the events leading up to it.

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1933, The First German Jewish Residents

On a chilly November day in 1933 Edith Frank-Holländer made her way to Merwedeplein, in Rivierenbuurt on the south side of Amsterdam, to take a look at a modern housing complex. This new neighborhood was part of the city's urban expansion Plan Zuid designed by the renowned Dutch architect H.P. Berlage. All around the square workers climbed up and down scaffoldings and trucks rode back and forth. The area was still under construction.

For some time already, this thirty-three-year-old German-Jewish woman from Frankfurt am Main had been in the market for a suitable home for her family. Her husband Otto, eleven years her senior, had no time to assist her. He had been busy since the summer setting up a small office for his new company, Opekta, in the city's canal area. Edith commuted between Amsterdam and Aachen, just across the Dutch border in Germany, where their two daughters Anne, who was four, and Margot, who was seven, were temporarily staying with her mother Rosa.

Somewhat concealed between the two wide boulevards that crossed the Rivierenbuurt, in those days Noorder and Zuider Amstellaan, was Edith's destination. She encountered a spacious, practically empty, triangular expanse of about 245 by 395 feet that you could leisurely stroll around in five minutes. In the middle was something of a park with a large

lawn, a few shrubs, and flowerbeds, surrounded by a low hedge. It was a typically Dutch square: functional and without any embellishments or further ado. A fountain, a pond, and a statue reminiscent of a glorious past were all missing. Perhaps because Merewedeplein was only two years old and still didn't have a history.

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For more than a year, Edith's life has been turned upside down. In the summer of 1932, the Nazi's paramilitary wing – *Sturmabteilung* (SA) – marched through the streets of Frankfurt am Main wearing swastika armbands. These Brownshirts, as they were called because of the color of their uniforms, loudly sang: "When Jewish blood spurts from the knife, things will go well again." Upon hearing this, Edith and Otto discussed their concerns with each other. How long would they be safe in their country? How could they get away before it was too late? It was impossible for them to leave their homeland immediately because making a living abroad was of course an issue. Many others in Germany didn't believe a lot would change so they decided to wait and see what would happen.

This also applied to acquaintances of Edith and Otto who they visited on the 30th of January 1933. They were sitting around the table listening to the radio when the news that Adolf Hitler had been appointed Chancellor of the Reich was suddenly announced on the air. This was followed by the cheers of thousands of Hitler's supporters marching through the streets of Berlin celebrating his victory. Also, the Frank's host wasn't all that concerned about Germany's future. He said in a cheerful tone: "Let's see what this man can do." Edith froze, unable to utter a word; Otto was stunned.

As the Nazis hoisted the swastika flag on Frankfurt's City Hall, Edith and Otto Frank urgently explored their options. Where could they go? To Switzerland, where Leni, Otto's sister, lived with her husband Erich Elias and their two sons? Or to England, where Otto's second cousin with whom he had a good relationship lived? Or perhaps to the United States? Otto still had contacts in New York because he had worked at Macy's Department Store after his university studies.

Eventually, Erich Elias, Otto's brother-in-law, came up with the solution. Erich headed the Swiss branch of Opekta Werke, a German company that sold pectin, which was a jelling agent housewives could use to make their own jam. With the help of his brother-in-law, Otto had the opportunity to set up an independent subsidiary in Amsterdam. According

to the Franks, the Netherlands held many advantages: the country was not unknown to Otto because he had done business in Amsterdam before, it was close to Germany, and had remained neutral during World War I.

It was a freezing cold day in early December when Otto and Edith Frank received the keys to their new home on Merwedeplein. Some of the neighbors, toting ice skates under their arms, were headed towards the nearby Amstel River, which was crowded with people. Also, at the ice rinks and on the city's canals masses of people skated until late in the evening. Because of the severe cold, fire pots for warming up hands stood scattered throughout the city. And with the persistent freezing temperatures, you could feel the excitement in the air building among the population. Would there be an *Elfstedentocht* this year, they wondered? "SATURDAY: ELEVEN CITIES TOUR. PREPARATIONS ARE BEING MADE. THE ICE IS GOOD" read the front page headline of *Het Volk* on the 14th of December. But the Franks had more pressing matters on their minds. Otto was completely absorbed by his work and anxious about the future. He went about hiring staff for his new company, visited trade fairs, and did a lot of advertising so Dutch housewives would get to know the Opekta product. Edith also had her hands full with arranging everything for the move. She wanted to get the house in order before Christmas. Other things also needed attention, including finding a school for Margot so she could start immediately after the Christmas break.

Although the Merwedeplein's residents weren't entirely sure what to make of the German-Jewish newcomers, they were used to having foreign neighbors. While most of the residents of the complex in 1933 had the Dutch nationality, people with French, Luxembourg, Belgian, Czech, Swiss, English, and Russian backgrounds also called the square home.

The occupations of those who lived there also varied: from diamond cutters, merchants, journalists, and lawyers to teachers, secretaries, and milliners. Yet, the one thing they all had in common was their socio-economic standing: their income was substantial enough to pay the Merwedeplein's considerable rents.

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Most of the German-Jewish children living in the neighborhood behaved like immigrant children of all times. More than anything else they didn't want to be different and they quickly adapted to their new environment. The Franks were not the first German Jews to begin a new life on Merwedeplein that year. Also, nine Jewish families from other parts of

Germany had come to live on the square ahead of them, including one of a journalist from Berlin and another a merchant from Gelsenkirchen.

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Despite the brisk weather, a few days after New Year's Eve, Anne and her good friend Hanneli spent the entire afternoon outside jumping rope. The next day, when the newspaper reported an earthquake in Limburg that shook the houses on their foundations, the two girls were convinced: "We must have caused that with all our jumping!" The fact that Anne Frank had an opinion about everything didn't go unnoticed by Hanneli's mother Ruth, especially since Anne spent so much time at their house. Whenever Anne was being her opinionated self, Ruth would smile and remark: "God knows everything, but Anne knows everything better."

The year was barely two weeks old when Anne stood in front of her house with Juliane Glaser, her (German-Jewish) friend who lived next door. While movers were busy hoisting the Glaser family's belongings through the window, Anne laughed aloud and pointed to an object being tackled to the ground along with other household goods: Juliane's white enamel chamber pot. As they bid each other goodbye, their mothers Edith and Lieselotte promised to keep in touch. Once the Glaser family had settled in New York, Lieselotte repeatedly wrote to Edith saying: "You should come to America, too."

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1938, Growing Concern

While everyone assumed the Netherlands, which had been neutral in World War I, would again avoid taking part in an eventual war, the city of Amsterdam decided to take precautions anyway. Pamphlets with instructions about what residents needed to do in the event of an air raid were dropped into people's mailboxes on Merwedeplein. With a sense of urgency, a siren was placed on the skyscraper's roof.

On Friday night the 21st of October the neighborhood was buzzing with activity. Curtains were hermetically sealed and people walked up and down the stairs carefully inspecting all their windows and doors. Groups gathered and conversed in the street when, around ten o'clock, the siren on the skyscraper's roof sounded along with twenty other sirens in the city. During this infernal racket, the streetlights went out and it was suddenly

completely dark. Under a star-covered sky, cheering resounded on Merwedeplein. This blackout drill was organized throughout Amsterdam. Volunteers from the Dutch Air Raid Defense Service accompanied by the police went door to door to make sure no light was escaping. In the skyscraper high above the square, Mayor De Vlucht inspected the darkened city with a handful of reporters at his side. They heard people in the street below laughing and talking, but they couldn't see anyone. Others understood the immense seriousness of the situation. 'Imagine if something like this really happened . . . that we were forced to sit in the dark all evening, and planes came to drop bombs everywhere!' said a man around the corner on Jekerstraat. "That's never going happen in our country," his wife reassured him. The mayor was satisfied with the drill and spoke into the microphone of a radio reporter saying he was proud of his citizens because they understood what was at stake.

Kristallnacht, The Night of Broken Glass

On the 10th of November 1938, once the news from Germany became known, a sense of despair hung over Merwedeplein. The previous evening, terrible scenes of brutal violence had broken out against Jews. Nazis set 1400 synagogues on fire, and wielding clubs and iron bars they smashed the windows of thousands of Jewish shops and homes. During *Kristallnacht*, as this pogrom would later be called, more than a hundred Jews were murdered and over 30,000 Jewish men arrested.

Shocked groups of distraught people gathered on the square to talk and comfort each other. They inquired about each other's families and exchanged the terrible stories they had heard. After all, many of the residents still had family, friends and acquaintances in Germany. Mirjam Cardozo's brother lived with his family in Hamburg. The parents of a young refugee staying with the Asscher family were in Cologne, Edith's brothers and mother were in Aachen, the parents of Ruth Goslar lived in Berlin, and the brother and parents of Rudolf Jacob in Schmalkalden. Rudolf heard about what had happened from his mother. That previous night her husband Karl, her son Ludwig and she, along with other Jewish families, had been dragged from their homes. They were herded together and forced to watch the Nazis throw the Torah scrolls, the benches and the rest of their synagogue's interior into the street only to be set on fire. Then what was left of the *shul* was completely destroyed. All of them spent the night locked up, but Rosa and the other Jewish women were allowed to go home in the morning. The boys and men were forced to clean up the glass shards of the shop windows, the wreckage in the city, and the remains of the synagogue. Then they were all put on transports to the Buchenwald concentration camp.

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Germany Attacks the Netherlands

On Sunday, the 12th of May 1940 – the Christian holiday of Pentecost – the siren sounded at four o'clock in the morning and German bombers flew overhead. During the eight air raid alerts that followed, everybody tried to stay calm. In a side street of Merwedeplein, a neighbor managed to convince others that wearing an iron pan on your head was good protection against falling debris and shrapnel. At the next air alarm, they all sat together in front of the building with a comical array of pans on their heads. Yet, nobody was laughing, because the situation was far too serious.

The neighborhood residents reacted to a new rumor making the rounds in Amsterdam. The English consul general in IJmuiden was supposedly issuing visas for England and there was a boat waiting to ferry Jews across the channel. Several Jewish families on Merwedeplein decided to seize this opportunity to escape the Nazis. But how would they get to IJmuiden? Most people didn't own a car. Some decided to cycle the twenty miles to the coast. Others saw no other option than to take a taxi.

The Karlsberg family wasted no time deciding to leave. A Dutch friend offered Bernhard and his wife Ilse, his secretary Hannah, their three small children and grandmother Zis a lift. As they drove out of the city in a bumper-to-bumper stream of cars, taxis, and buses, they saw large smoke clouds rising above the Amsterdam Petroleum Harbor. The strategic supplies of oil had been set on fire to keep them from falling into the hands of the Germans. In IJmuiden, where thousands of people had assembled, the chaos was complete. English visas were only available to British citizens and the boat that would take Jews to England turned out to be nothing more than a myth.

Most families returned disillusioned to Merwedeplein the very same day. The Karlsberg family had searched for a fisherman willing to sail to England, but they were too late. They arrived back on Merwedeplein, only to find many people in a state of disbelief. While they were gone, their neighbors had received somber news: the Royal Family and the Dutch government had fled to England, Rotterdam had been destroyed by German bombs, and on the radio General H.G. Winkelman had officially announced the capitulation of the Netherlands.

On the morning of the 15th of May, after Mayor De Vlucht had called on the people of Amsterdam to remain calm when German soldiers arrived in the city at midday, an ambulance

pulled up in front of an apartment on Merwedeplein. Moments later, orderlies carried the lifeless bodies of 51-year-old Benjamin Jessurum Lobo and his two-year younger wife Jeanette outside. The Dutch-Jewish couple, who had lived on Merwedeplein for seven years, had asphyxiated themselves with gas.

Ambulances rode in and out of the surrounding streets. On the 14th and 15th of May, a wave of suicides engulfed the neighborhood and the city. Most people who took their own lives were Jewish.

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A Razzia in 1942

While hiding in the Secret Annex, Anne heard that many of their old neighbors had been picked up: “Mr. Holland the sports commentator [with] his son and wife are also gone,” she wrote in her diary in October. But Fritz Pfeffer knew even more, and Anne also confided this to her diary: “He had sad news. Countless friends and acquaintances have been taken off to a dreadful fate. Night after night, green and gray military vehicles cruise the streets. They knock on every door, asking whether any Jews live there . . . I get frightened myself when I think of close friends who are now at the mercy of the cruelest monsters ever to stalk the earth. And all because they're Jews.”

In November 1942, one of those “cruelest monsters” visited Clara Habermann, the mother of Ruth Kohnstam. She had hoped and prayed all evening that the *Grüne Polizei*, Green Police – due to the color of their uniforms – would overlook her. Friends from the square had been dragged out of their homes; an old woman was even removed on a stretcher. She heard the police shouting, neighbors crying. What had happened to the civilized German culture of the past, she thought. Why do these men inflict so much pain on the young and old? Don't they have children of their own?

When one of them banged on her front door with the butt of his rifle at eleven o'clock that night, it was her turn. She gathered all her strength and calmly went to open the door, trying to keep her emotions under control. The policeman came inside and looked around the entire house without saying a word. Clara followed behind and said: “I am the widow of a German Army Captain who fought in World War I.” Although the man didn't seem the least bit interested, to Clara's amazement he said: “We have enough Jews for tonight,” and abruptly left. Clara couldn't believe what had happened but was thankful she had been spared. Still, she was so shaken by the countless arrests she needed a tranquilizer to sleep through the night. It was more than clear that she needed to leave as soon as possible . . .

Johannes the milkman pulled up in front of her door. After Clara managed to lie down in his delivery wagon, he quickly covered her with two horse blankets. While Clara bumped along at the bottom of the wagon, Johannes said aloud “Maasstraat,” as if he were a conductor announcing the next streetcar stop, followed by “Geleenstraat.” And so, the journey continued, until Clara arrived at her hiding address. However, within a few days, she felt uneasy and unsafe there because her hosts had helped themselves to some of her belongings. Shortly afterwards, assisted again by the resistance, she was moved to a new hiding place in Amstelveen, a town bordering Amsterdam. That family had seven children. Those children, like so many others in the Netherlands at the beginning of December 1942, were busy preparing to welcome *Sinterklaas*, who despite the ongoing war still arrived in the country for the Dutch holiday’s traditional celebration. More than a thousand children of Dutch men who had volunteered to fight for Germany on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union were treated to a festive afternoon complete with presents in Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw music hall. However, many parents wanted nothing to do with the *Jeugdstorm*, Hitler’s Dutch Youth Party, which would be handing out toys to the crowd. Instead Sinterklaas was celebrated at home with homemade toys and marzipan figures made from potatoes instead of almonds.

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Forgery and Herbert Nelson’s Illegal Cabaret

In the attic of no. 6 Merwedeplein, the twenty-three-year old Jewish Riete Gompertz was up late falsifying documents for the resistance. After Riete had been arrested more than twenty times because of her Jewish appearance, she decided it was safer to focus on forgery work. She had been released each time because of an official document stating she was “half-Jewish”. But when the Germans invalidated it and threatened to deport her, she went into hiding on Merwedeplein. Having studied drawing at the art academy for a few years, she was skillful as a forger. Sometimes she did such a good job on a document, even she couldn’t tell it was a fake.

Along with the forgery work carried out by the resistance, there was the ongoing care for Jewish people in hiding, many of whom had lived in constant fear and uncertainty for a long time. Herman Waage, another member of their resistance group, had an idea to surprise the people in hiding, and at the end of 1943 he approached his friend Herbert Nelson for a favor: “What do you think about performing for them one time, so they can hear live music and laugh again?”

So one evening, Herbert – who by then was living on the second floor of no. 23 Merwedeplein – pulled up a chair at the piano in Herman’s living room. The windows had been blacked out and in the darkness a group of Jewish people in hiding gathered around him like silent shadows. Of course, “silent” was the key word that evening: Herbert had to play as softly as possible and the audience wasn’t allowed to clap. After Herman’s word of welcome, Herbert played well-known chansons from his *Nelson Revue* along with several Dutch songs. Despite the silence, he felt a wave of appreciation and noticed that everyone was truly enjoying themselves. At the end of the evening Herman placed an envelope in Herbert’s hand with a permit to be on the street after curfew. He assured his friend: “Don’t worry, it’s such a perfect copy that not even the most suspicious policeman will doubt its authenticity.”

Even before falling asleep contently, Herbert had come up with a new plan: he wanted to start an underground cabaret at his place: with songs, satire and sketches mocking the Third Reich. In the middle of the night, Herbert, Herman, and their resistance friend Rudi slipped out to steal chairs from the outdoor cafes in the neighborhood. For this cabaret they would need dozens of seats, so there were many nightly missions to swipe more chairs. A curtain borrowed from friends fit exactly between the sliding doors that divided the space, so Herbert’s living room was already starting to resemble a theater. The décor was made from closet shelving, on which Herbert painted a globe. The piles of stones lying on the square to repair the road came in handy. In the dark of night, the three friends dragged some of them inside to stand the scenery pieces upright against the wall. Herbert already had a piano, and they even managed to hoist a second one into his house.

The day of the first performance finally arrived. Herbert, Herman and Rudi Gerson had decided that Sunday afternoon at two o’clock, when many policemen took their afternoon break, was the best time. The men only invited people who they knew were trustworthy. Of course, everybody couldn’t arrive at no. 23 Merwedeplein at the same time, so they did this gradually to be as inconspicuous as possible. In the hallway, a neighbor collected a donation from the audience members: a ration card, money, or some food they could spare. “Come and Listen” was both the show’s title and the opening song that Herbert and the others softly sang:

Close the windows, lock the door
Turn off the lights, that’s an order
Come sit a bit closer my friend.
Utter not a word: let the show begin
Be a good listener
Above all whisper

The song lyrics that followed made it clear that the walls had ears, and everyone had to do their best to be as quiet as possible.

The first time the audience heard jazz music, which had been forbidden by the Nazis, they rose from their stolen chairs, but of course they weren't allowed to dance. "Shh, shh," repeatedly sounded in the living room. Satires on Hitler, comic sketches about the losses of the Wehrmacht, and other subjects dear to people's hearts were included. At the highpoint of the performance, Herbert pulled a radio from under a floorboard and everyone listened with baited breath to the most recent news from the BBC.

Afterwards, the enthusiastic visitors left one-by-one to return to their hiding places. A satisfied Herbert stayed behind in his makeshift theater. But, of course, it flashed through his mind: what if one of the guests couldn't keep their mouth shut and betrayed the cabaret?

Just like past performances of the *Nelson Revue* in renowned Amsterdam theater venues such as La Gaîté and the Hollandsche Schouwburg, the illegal living room cabaret was "sold out" every Sunday afternoon. It was a great relief for Herbert to finally be able to write uncensored texts and to entertain an audience like he had once done with such immense success before the war.