

Play

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On June 12th 1929, a little girl was born in the German town of Frankfurt am Main: Annelies Marie Frank. They called her Anne. Anne was the second daughter of Otto and Edith Frank. Her sister's name was Margot. Both Anne's parents came from well-to-do families. Her father worked at the bank owned by his family.

Otto Frank was proud of his country. So much so that he had fought in the German army during World War I (1914-1918). But as Anne grew older, his feelings changed. Germany had huge problems, and was struggling with high unemployment and poverty. At that time, one politician blamed Jewish people for these problems. This politician's name was Adolf Hitler. He advocated a large and powerful Germany. More and more people agreed with him. When elections came they voted for his party. Hitler's followers were called Nazis.

Anne's parents were both Jewish. Her mother went to the synagogue regularly, but her father did not. They both felt comfortable with people who had different beliefs or were not at all religious. It was hard to comprehend that

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they were now seen as the enemy just because they were Jewish.

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In 1933, when Adolf Hitler, with the support of many Germans, became leader of the government, Anne's parents decided to move to The Netherlands. They no longer wanted to live in a country where they were hated because of their Jewish roots. Another reason was that the family bank was not doing well.

Anne was four when the family came to live in Amsterdam. It didn't take her long to enjoy her new environment. They had a nice apartment in a neighbourhood where many Jewish families, who had also fled Germany, lived. Anne and Margot quickly learned to speak Dutch and it wasn't long before they felt properly Dutch.

A happy life

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‘I will never be able to do it!’ Her face flushed, Anne was trying hard to keep the hoop rolling. ‘It keeps falling down.’ Dispirited, she looked at her friend Sanne who managed to keep her hoop rolling beautifully all along the pavement. ‘How do you do that?’

‘Just set it up straight and give it a big twirl.’

Anne picked up the hoop and followed Sanne’s instructions. Yes! It rolled over the pavement, only... to collapse again a few seconds later.

‘Well, I’m fed up,’ Anne muttered. ‘I’d rather ride the scooter.’

Merwede Square, where Anne lived, was a good place to play. Mother kept a watchful eye from the window of their apartment, but knew the girls would be quite safe. As it was not a thoroughfare street, only people who lived on the square cycled or drove their cars there. The pavement and the road were fairly empty. The area was also on the edge of the city. Walk much further, and you would find yourself in fields with cows. The neighbourhood was still very much a construction site. Not far from Anne’s apartment block was a

large sandy plain where she spent hours playing. Thus Anne grew up in a wonderful home, in a nice street with lovely friends and a great school nearby.

‘Peep-peep.’

It was just another normal weekday on Merwede Square, early and even still a bit dark outside. Mother walked to the bedroom Anne and Margot shared.

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‘Anne, Hannah is waiting downstairs. I can hear her whistle,’ she said. Time to walk to school, Anne knew. She put down the book she had been reading, grabbed her coat from the stand, hurried to get it on and was ready to go. ‘Wait a minute,’ Mother sounded stern. ‘It is winter, you will have to wear your Mütze.’

‘Hat, Mother. The word is ‘hat’, not Mütze. It is not that cold anyway,’ Anne muttered. She was eight and felt perfectly capable of deciding for herself whether or not it was necessary to wear a hat.

‘You’re not leaving the house without it,’ Mother said, and Anne knew from her mother’s face that it would just be better to obey. She then rushed down the stairs. Mother shouted: ‘Take it easy, it could be slippery outside!’ But Anne was no longer paying attention. She was in a hurry. She had news for her friend Hannah, whom she always called Hanneli, and she couldn’t wait to share it.

‘Hanneli, Hanneli! I’m going on a trip. With Father! Just the two of us. Isn’t that great? We are going to Switzerland, to Grandma Frank in Basel. Aunt Leni and Uncle Erich live there too, with my cousins Bernd and Stephan, of course. Omi, I always call Grandma ‘Omi’, has her birthday, as has Stephan and...’

Hannah had to laugh. 'What?' Anne asked in surprise.

'You are talking so fast, it is hard to keep up.'

'Oh, but I'm so excited! Bernd is brilliant at ice-skating, you know, and Omi can tell the greatest stories and...'

'I'm very happy for you, Anne. Really! When are you going?'

'In a few weeks' time. I can hardly wait,' she exclaimed happily.

'Look,' she continued and pointed ahead. 'There are Kitty and Ietje. Shall we give them a good fright?'

Hannah had to laugh. Anne just loved playing tricks on people.

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Anne put a finger to her lips and sneaked up on both girls. When she was near enough she poked a finger in their sides and let out a loud 'Boo!'

'Oooh!' Kitty yelled, and Ietje even jumped in fright. Anne collapsed laughing. 'You're a real nuisance!' Kitty said, but she couldn't help but grin.

A few weeks later the day came for Anne and her father to leave on their trip. They took the train to Basel. 'Are we there yet?' Anne kept asking. She knew the answer of course, because only fifteen minutes previously Father had told her they were not even halfway yet. Phew. It was a long way away, Switzerland.

Once they arrived, the long train journey was soon forgotten and she enjoyed playing with Bernd. She had to get used to speaking German again with the family, as it was something they hardly ever did at home anymore. Father and Mother tried to speak as much Dutch as possible.

‘I know a fun thing to do,’ she whispered in Bernd’s ear one afternoon. Bernd and Anne, Aunt Leni, Uncle Erich and Anne’s father were visiting Grandma Frank. ‘Let’s sneak into Omi’s bedroom and then you dress up in her clothes.’

Bernd looked at her mischievously. ‘And then what?’

‘Then you’ll pretend to be Omi.’

Bernd grinned. He liked the plan. Together they snuck into the bedroom and Bernd found himself a pretty dress to wear. Anne was choking with laughter. ‘A hat!’ she said. ‘Surely it has a hat to match!’ And so Bernd started to rummage for a hat. Then shoes needed to be added. ‘The highest heels you can find,’ Anne giggled. Bernd grabbed a pair of black high heels. ‘Yes, those!’

Bernd proceeded to stride through the room, pretending to be Grandma. Back straight, chin up, nose in the air and

pulling a very proud face. Just like Grandma. It was very funny indeed. Bernd was really good at it! 'You should become an actor!' Anne laughed and Bernd bowed deeply at his enthusiastic audience. 'Thank you, ma'am, thank you!'

Their stay was wonderful, but over far too soon. They had to go home. Father had to go back to work and Anne had to return to school. At home, she looked at a photograph of Bernd. 'I'll be back, Bernd, for sure!' she whispered to the picture. 'After all, you still have to teach me how to ice-skate!'

Thankfully though there were also nice boys to play with at school. 'Last one at the top of the stairs is a loser!' Anne started running at Blankevoort bookshop and turned the corner to Merwede Square. Two boys chased her. 'You're not going to win!' one of them shouted. The other ran as fast as he could, but could not keep up with Anne and his friend Appy.

'I've won!' Appy gasped.

'I'm second,' Anne panted.

'Alright,' Sally said. 'You guys win.'

'I have to catch my breath for a minute,' Anne said, sitting down on the top step of the stone stairs to their first floor apartment. 'Mother doesn't want me to run.'

'Because of your heart?' Sally asked. He looked at Anne with a friendly smile. He had messy blond hair and his chubby cheeks had turned rosy. That was one of the things Anne liked so much about him: his rosy cheeks.

'It's not that bad. Mother just worries a bit too much.'

'But last week you were not at school for a few days because you were sick,' Appy said.

'Just a minor cold,' Anne answered. A challenging look

appeared on her face. 'I may not be strong, but I am certainly pretty!' The boys laughed. That was Anne! Never lost for words!

Anne jumped up, pulled up her socks and straightened her skirt. Mother would have no reason to complain now. Mother liked things neat and orderly. She looked the part now. A neat nine-year old.

'Come on,' she said and rang the doorbell.

Mother opened the door. 'Well, Anne, there you are. Hello Appy. Hello Sally.'

'We're planning to play Monopoly, Mum, if that is okay?'

'Yes, that's fine. How was school?'

'Oh, the usual, Mrs Frank,' Sally answered politely.

The three of them sat at the table and Anne prepared the game, setting out the board, the money, the houses and the pawns.

'Looks difficult,' Appy sighed and he gave Sally an uncertain look.

'Don't worry,' Anne said, 'I'll explain.'

Mother put a plate of biscuits on the table. 'And for each one of you a glass of Milch,' she said.

'Milk, Mum,' Anne said. 'Not Milch, but 'milk'.' She rolled her eyes and looked at her friends as if to say: that mother of mine will never learn... but Mother just ignored her and returned to the kitchen.

'Look,' Anne said to Appy and Sally. 'You throw the dice and you move forward with your counter. You might end up on a street. All those coloured squares with names represent streets.'

'Traf... Tra-fal-gar sq-ua-re???' Sally read out aloud. 'What's that?'

‘That’s English, dummy. These are all streets and squares in London. This is a board game from England.’

‘This one’s easy,’ Appy pointed out. ‘This street is called Strand.’

‘Pronouncing these English words isn’t easy,’ Anne said, picking up the dice.

‘It sure isn’t,’ Sally muttered. Soon they were so engrossed in the game they forgot all about their milk and biscuits.

Time passed. It was 1938 and five years since the Frank family had moved to Amsterdam. Their life was as normal as any family during that time. Father left in the morning to go to

the office and Margot and Anne went to school. Mother cleaned the house, did the shopping and made sure the clothes were washed and neatly folded in the wardrobes. Whenever possible she took the girls out, to the shops, a museum, the cinema or even sometimes on a daytrip to the beach. Margot, who was three years older than Anne, often invited friends over and Anne enjoyed playing with other children.

Father worked long days. Busy as he was, he sometimes had to spend Sundays at the office too, just to catch up on the odd little job. Anne and Margot understood. Father owned the company. He had to work hard for them to keep their beautiful home, to have nice things and of course to put food on the table and pay for clothes.

Anne's days were filled with school and fun. Everything was just fine. Until one morning in 1938 when she came to the breakfast table and she noticed Father had a stern expression on his face. With one hand he patted Mother's arm. She had obviously just been crying. Margot had gone very quiet.

'What's wrong?' Anne asked in fright.

'Don't worry. It's fine now,' Mother said.

'I want to know what happened!' Anne demanded. 'I can tell something has happened.'

Father answered quietly: 'Things are not going well in Germany. And that is hurting us, as we have always loved that country so much. That's all. Come now, eat something. It is almost time for school.'

'But Dad...'

'Enough, Anne.'

Mother tried to give Anne a little smile. Still, it did not

take away Anne's worry. She bet it had something to do with that man Hitler, the leader of Germany. But to her parents the subject was closed. They did not want to talk about it. Later Anne would discover what had really happened. Both her uncles had been arrested by the Nazis during a dreadful night of violence against Jewish people. A night which later became known as the *Kristallnacht*. Mother was worried sick.

A few weeks after that particular incident, Mother and Margot were getting ready to go to the synagogue. It was

Saturday morning. Father went to the office for a few more hours and Anne went to school, a usual thing back then. Mother and Father had invited a few Jewish acquaintances who lived in the area and also came from Germany to their home that afternoon, something they did quite regularly on Saturdays.

‘Don’t forget to get some *Kuchen* at the bakery, Otto!’

‘Cake, Mum. Not *Kuchen*.’

‘Of course, Anne,’ Mother sighed. ‘And I would like you to wash your hair when you come home from school and put on the *Kleid* I have put out for you.’

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‘Dress, you mean.’

‘Anne, we’re getting your point,’ Father said sternly.

‘How many people are you expecting this afternoon?’

Anne asked.

‘There will be some new people, Anne. And the regulars: Hannah’s parents, Sanne’s parents and my colleague Mr Van Pels with his wife. It’s going to be nice and busy.’

‘Will Miep and Jan be coming too?’ Miep was Father’s assistant at the office and she and her fiancé Jan had become friends of the family.

‘I think so. I have invited them.’

‘Great!’ Anne said. She really liked Jan and Miep.

The morning at school flew by. Every Saturday they tidied, dusted and cleaned the classroom before going home. Some of the Jewish children, like Hannah, would not attend Saturday class as they went to the synagogue. But there were plenty of other children around. Some were Jewish like Anne, others Christian, or just not at all religious. Some children came from Germany, but that didn’t matter at all. It was neither important nor talked about.

Anne's job was to open the door to their guests that afternoon. 'Don't forget to introduce yourself and shake hands,' Mother had said. Anne already knew most of the guests. Then a man and a woman she hadn't met before rang the doorbell.

'I'm Fritz Pfeffer,' the man said in a friendly voice. 'And this is my wife Charlotte Kaletta.' He spoke German.

'Welcome to our home,' Anne said politely. While she escorted the couple to greet her parents, she noticed that the atmosphere in the living room was not at all relaxed. There were indeed many people, as Father had predicted. But the faces of many guests were somber and the cake and nibbles were mostly left untouched.

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Later Anne saw her mother putting her hand to her mouth while she was listening to Mr Pfeffer, obviously shocked by what he had just told her. Anne recalled her mother's words at the breakfast table some weeks earlier: 'Don't worry, my girl.' But to her it was obvious now that everyone was worried.

Still, Anne had plenty to be happy and cheerful about in the months that followed. Her birthday party, for example. June 1939 came around and it was only a few more days before Anne would turn ten. She was glad that her birthday was on a school day, because this meant she would see all her friends first and have a party later on at home. She would ask Hanneli and Sanne of course. Hanne, Sanne and Anne was what they were called. They had been good friends ever since they were toddlers. This was no surprise, as all three came from Jewish German families. She would also invite Ietje, Lucie, Martha and Mary. And Juultje and Kitty, of course. They were all good friends. Nine girls. It would be such fun!

One girl after another rang the doorbell that Monday afternoon, 12th June 1939. Anne welcomed them all at the door. 'That's how it should be done,' Mother had said. The weather was gorgeous. Anne was wearing her favourite dress with a floral print and a small white collar. Martha was wearing a festive bow in her hair and Mary topped that by having two. They were all in their summer dresses as the sun was beaming down on them. Anne was beaming too. She enjoyed being the centre of attention. Mother had baked a cake and had put drinks out. She softly started to sing: 'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you...' Anne's friends joined in and Anne was in her element. Then it was time for presents. Anne ripped off the paper. She adored presents! When all presents were unwrapped and the cake was eaten, it was time for games. Father asked all the girls to sit down in a circle.

'Why, Mr Frank?' Juultje asked cautiously.

'You'll see,' Anne's father answered mysteriously. 'And now, shoes off everyone!'

Some of the girls started to giggle. What could this mean?

Father picked up a large rug and put it over the girls' feet. 'And now,' he said, 'without seeing your feet, I will put on everyone's shoes again.'

'But that is impossible!' Ietje cried out.

'Just watch,' Father said and he picked up a shoe and started to rummage around under the rug feeling the different feet. It didn't take long for all the girls to fall over laughing. Anne looked at her father with admiration. What a wonderful man he was. Nobody had a father who was so much fun as her Pim, as she lovingly called him. Later that

day Pim took a lovely photo of all the nine friends together. This surely was the best day ever. You'd wish every day would be like this.