



The art of medicine

Visiting—and revisiting—Anne Frank

The queue snaked around several city blocks. The wait was going to be 3 hours in a chilly drizzle. This was our third attempt at visiting the Anne Frank House in as many days and it was tempting to give up, since the prospect of a long cold wait with an 11-year-old was daunting.

Amsterdam hadn't even been on our itinerary. The decision to bring my younger daughter to visit her ailing grandfather in Israel was last-minute enough to put the direct flights out of our price range. Amsterdam turned out to be the cheapest stop-over, so we decided to take several days and make it a true visit. For the trip, my husband had given our daughter a copy of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. 11 years old is well past the read-aloud stage, but the diary seemed to beckon a shared experience. And so my daughter and I read together all through the trip—in airports, on trains, in parks, or curled up in a hotel bed.

I had read the diary in junior high school and didn't remember much beyond the vague outlines. But reading it aloud now, with the more dramatic voicing and pace required to keep a restless kid's attention, I found the book absolutely mesmerising. It was impossible to put down.

When we saw the intimidating line on Prinsengracht Street, I'll admit that I wavered. Yes, it was an important historical site, but shivering in the queue for hours was not especially inviting. But how could we possibly visit Amsterdam and miss this iconic site? Who knew if we'd ever be back?

What really moved us to join the queue, however, was the line itself. Just gazing down at the stream of people waiting in the rain was stirring. Teenagers with piercings, 20-somethings with *Lonely Planet* guides, older adults with walkers, and

families with small children all cramped on this vast snaking queue for a chance to connect with an ordinary Jewish girl who kept a diary more than 75 years ago. There were many grander places to visit in Amsterdam, but somehow everyone was drawn here. Perhaps everyone wanted—maybe needed—to touch a little piece of Anne Frank.

My daughter and I staked out our bit of the sidewalk and huddled close for warmth. We pulled out our copy of the diary and read under our umbrella. At this point in the book, Anne and her family had been in hiding for almost a year. But we flipped back in the book and reread the entry about the day they entered the hiding place that Anne came to call the Secret Annex.

The diary entry described the walk from Anne's home to the warehouse of her father's business. They weren't allowed to use the tram or ride a bike, so they walked an hour in a summer rain. Because carrying suitcases might reveal their aim, they layered on as many clothes as possible and walked stiffly in the steady drizzle. Anne wore two pairs of stockings, three pairs of pants, a dress, a skirt, two vests, a coat, a hat, and a scarf, stifling on the muggy July day, the rain soaking through her layers. She recalled the sympathetic looks given to them by the Dutch citizens driving by, who might have wanted to offer a lift to a wet family but weren't allowed because the "gaudy yellow star spoke for itself".

As we crouched on the sidewalk on a rainy miserable day, my daughter and I imagined Anne walking up this very same street, in this very same rain, approaching this very same building. We shivered, but it wasn't just from the cold.

Over the course of the afternoon, a camaraderie developed along the line. People held each other's spots during runs for hot cocoa. Umbrellas were shared, as were travel tips and speculations about when the doors would open. Behind us were a French woman and her 9-year-old daughter. The mother spoke almost no English and the daughter none at all. But we somehow managed to coax our daughters to play together under a nearby awning. My deck of cards did not translate well, but luckily I had stuffed an origami packet in my bag. With the universal language of arts-and-crafts, the two girls managed to pass the time creating paper chains, boxes, and animals.

3 hours later, we were finally admitted to the house. We brushed off our wet clothes in the same ground floor entranceway, aware that Anne might have done the same thing in the same place. We gazed at the pre-war photos of the Frank family, paging back to the beginning of Anne's diary that documented those relatively carefree times. Even when Anne and her sister Margot were forced out of their school by Nazi laws and made to attend the Jewish Lyceum, Anne still maintained her upbeat mood.



Anne (Annelies Marie) Frank (1929–45)

We climbed the steep narrow stairs into the Secret Annex, keeping our book open to the pages where Anne had drawn the layout of the house. She had described the building so accurately that the rooms—now restored to how they'd been in her time—felt eerily familiar. It was captivating as well as unsettling to walk in Anne's steps in this tiny space that was both her protector and her prison for more than 2 years.

Anne's detailed accounting of daily life in the Secret Annex allowed us to envision life inside these walls. The narrow kitchen and living space seemed even smaller in real life, and we struggled to imagine how eight people negotiated the cramped space, all while trying to stay as quiet as possible. We gazed at the faded movie star pictures torn from magazines that Anne had pinned to her wall and the diminutive washroom, where a teenage girl eked out fleeting moments of privacy.

The tour finally ended, and after all those hours of waiting and standing, I expected that my daughter would be cranky and want to go. But strangely, she didn't want to leave. And neither, I found, did I. So we sat in the small café built into one room of the house and read more of Anne's diary. We couldn't bring ourselves to leave.

Apparently, this is not an uncommon response among visitors. The café staff let us sit for more than an hour, even though we didn't buy anything. We read and talked and read some more. We followed Anne's railing against the injustice of adults discounting the opinions of adolescents, her frustration at having to share a room with the fussy, self-absorbed dentist, her growing disappointment with her mother's character, her relentless quest for self-improvement, her quivering interest in the teenage boy of the other family, and her desperation to inhale a whiff of fresh air from a barely cracked-open window.

I could sense my daughter developing an emotional connection to this girl, who so openly confided her feelings, and so incisively captured the awkwardness and conflicts of adolescence. It's hard not to be riveted to the story, of course, because of the preordained ending. Every page is an agonising countdown to the inferno. It was almost unbearable when we reached the part where she writes, "in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart". Her unshakeable faith in humanity was piercingly painful to absorb, along with singular unfairness that we readers know the outcome of the story while our trusted narrator does not.

I found myself especially aching for Otto and Edith Frank, struggling to save their children. Reading the diary shields us from the agony of the parents, but walking through the Secret Annex is a gut-punch for any adult who has cared for a child. The frantic desperation of the parents seemed to seep from the very walls, knotting tightly around my throat.

I had been trying to tamp down my anxiety levels all through the tour, but the breaking point was when I came to the now famous photo of Otto Frank after the war. He had

returned to Amsterdam, bereft of wife and daughters, and revisited the Secret Annex. In the photo, he stares mournfully into the pocket-sized space that had cocooned his family and that had almost saved them from the murderous clutches of the Nazis. The sadness in his face—the loss of everyone he loved—it was simply too much to witness. When I broke down in audible sobs, it was my 11-year-old daughter who had to comfort me.

At the end of the tour, there was a video of an interview with an elderly Otto Frank, in which he talked about the experience of reading Anne's diaries (by the end of their 2 years of hiding, there were several notebooks of her writings). He was astonished by the beauty of her writing, overwhelmed by its thoughtfulness and depth. But he was most struck by how much there was of Anne that she had never revealed to him.

"A parent never really knows his child", he said, and this comment sent a chill through my body. Like most parents, my husband and I struggle to do the right thing for our children. We hope we are raising them well, though our own shortcomings are harshly and regularly reflected back to us. Otto Frank's words terrified me—we think we know our children, but maybe we don't. What might we be missing?

At the time of our visit, my middle son was 14 years old, Anne's age when she entered the Secret Annex on that hot July day in 1942. My older daughter was 16, Anne's age when she died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. These palpable connections in age twisted my heart mercilessly. My children are so alive and tangible, and I'm sure that's how Otto and Edith Frank felt too. To imagine children sent to their death at this tender age is more than any parent can bear.

When my daughter and I finally tore ourselves from the Anne Frank House, the rain had let up and a soft azure had settled over the evening sky. We walked quietly down the graceful blocks of Prinsengracht Street. The water of the canal lapped beside us, following our steps with a sober, steady rhythm. I was relieved that we'd not given in to the temptation to skip this visit, and that the long queue and the cold rain hadn't precluded an extraordinary experience to share with my daughter.

The sidewalks of Prinsengracht were narrow, urging us to walk single file, but still I put my arm around my daughter so that we could walk as one, both still steeping in the emotions of this day. Perhaps Anne had walked with her mother in this same way, listening to the lap of the canal. I hoped she'd found it as comforting as we did.

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