

ANNE FRANK'S LEGACY

MIEP GIES



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

Miep Gies helped hide Anne Frank and her family for more than two years (1942–1944) during World War II.

It was she who found and saved Anne's diary after the Franks were captured by the Nazis. On March 8, 1972, Yad Vashem recognized Jan Augustus Gies and his wife, Hermine (Miep) Gies-Santrouschitz, as "Righteous Among the Nations." This article is adapted from a speech Miep Gies delivered in June, 1996 in Washington, DC after receiving a lifetime achievement award from the Anti-Defamation League. Miep Gies died in January 2010 at the age of 100.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel deeply moved and honored by the award you gave me, but I sincerely wonder whether I should be the one to receive it. I like to think that I stand here for Anne and all other victims of the Holocaust. In their name, I thank you very much. People often ask where I found the courage to help the Frank family. Yes, it certainly takes some courage, some discipline and also some sacrifice to do your human duty. But that is true for so many things in life! Therefore, this question surprises me, because I simply cannot think of doing anything else.

So why do people ask this question? Step by step I started to understand that many people wonder why they should assist other people, because when we are young most of us are told that if we behave all right, life will work out fine for us. So, if people have a problem, they must have made a big mistake. Why should we then help them? I, however, helped because I don't believe that people in trouble did something wrong. I knew that from my own life.

I was born in Vienna and grew up during the First World War; a war that was lost by Austria. My mother told me that I had always been a good girl, at home and at school. However, I remember that at the age of nine I did not get enough to eat; I still feel the pain of being hungry. I also remember the shock that I had to leave my home in Vienna and go to Holland in order to recover from tuberculosis. Did I deserve to be that sick? No, I had not done anything wrong. Therefore, although



Anne Frank, Amsterdam, Holland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (b1592/65)



Miep Gies, 1987. Courtesy of Rob Bogaerts/ Nationaal Archief

very young, I knew that you can be in trouble, without this being your own fault. From this I learned that I should help victims and not blame them! I felt the same to be true for the Frank family. So, whatever others would think or say, I *had* to help!

I had also another reason to do so. Many children are told to mind their own business only. When those children become adults, they might look the other way if people ask for help. However, I myself lived in Holland with very social-minded foster parents. They had already five children themselves and had to live on a small salary, but still took me—a very sick child—into their home. Whatever they had, they would always share that with others. It made a deep impression on me. It made me feel, I should do the same in my life. Many children will live and express themselves the same way their parents and teachers do. For instance, if children hear their parents and teachers speak about *the Asians, the Blacks, the whites, the Jews, the Arabs*, whatever, they most likely will begin to believe that *all Asians, or all Blacks, or all whites, or all Jews or all Arabs* act the same. It makes them blame the *whole* group, if one of its members commits a crime. Imagine if this would happen to us, because in our own group of people are criminals too!

Once, in Germany, most children were never told that they should always look at somebody else as an individual. Instead, many Germans used to talk about *the Jews*. Hitler knew that many believe that those who come from another country or have another color of skin cause all problems. Therefore Hitler promised that he would make Germany a country for “Aryans” only and that was exactly what many Germans wanted to hear.

Hitler also did other things that pleased Germans. At the time Anne Frank was born, Germany was in deep trouble and very poor. Hitler knew that people in trouble often like to blame others, even if it is their own mistake. So, Hitler offered *the Jew* as scapegoat, which millions of Germans gladly accepted. And that was the way Hitler got the help he needed to kill six million innocent Jews.

We should explain to children that caring about our own business only can be very wrong. When in Germany, step by step, Jewish life was destroyed, most people, all over the world, looked the other way, because they thought that it was safer to stay out. However, during the Holocaust, not only did six million Jews die, *but ten times that number of non-Jews as well*. Not only Jews lost what they had, but others lost billions and billions too. This proves that if injustice happens to your neighbor, there is no guarantee that it will not come to

your home, that it will stop at your doorstep! Therefore, we should *never* be bystanders, because, as we have seen 50 years ago, that can be very dangerous for ourselves as well!

I feel very strongly that we cannot wait for others to make this world a better place. No, *we ourselves* should make this happen now in our own homes and schools by carefully evaluating the manner in which we speak and by closely examining the ways we form and express our opinions about other people, particularly in the presence of children. We should never forget the victims of the Holocaust. I myself think of the family Frank, the family van Daan and the dentist Dussel. Van Daan and Dussel were the names Anne gave them; their true names were van Pels and Pfeiffer. Also, the helpers got other names from Anne, except for me! Why did she decide to use my own name? The answer I will never receive, but it touches me very much. She probably felt too close to me to alter my name.

Together with Jan, my husband, we were a total of five helpers. We all had our own tasks. In the morning I had to enter the hiding place to pick up the shopping list. When I came in, nobody would speak, just stand in line and wait for me to begin. This was always an awful moment for me, because it showed that these fine people felt so dependent on us, the helpers. They would silently look up to me, except for Anne, who, in a cheerful tone, used to say, “Hello Miep, what is the news?” Her mother disliked this very strongly and I knew that the other people in hiding would afterward blame Otto for what they would call, “proof of a too liberal upbringing!” What struck me most about Anne was her curiosity. She always asked me about

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everything that went on outside and not only that! She knew that I had just married and therefore she hoped that I would tell her more about being so close with another person. Well, I did not yield to that and that must have disappointed her. However, usually I shared all my information with her.

Anne felt very strongly about her privacy, which I discovered when I once entered the room where she was writing her diary. From her eyes I saw that she was angry; maybe she thought I was spying on her, which was not true, of course. At that moment her mother came in and said, when she noticed this tense situation: "Oh, Miep you should know that our daughter keeps a diary." As if I did not know that: I was the one who always gave her the paper. Anne closed her diary with a bang, lifted up her head, looked at me, and said, "Yes, and about you I am writing, too." Then she left, slamming the door behind her. I hurried back to my office, quite upset.

However, usually Anne was a friendly and a very charming girl. I say *girl*, but talking to her gave me the surprising feeling of speaking to a much older person. No wonder, since the situation made Anne grow very quickly from child to young adult. I did not pay much attention to this, because there were all the other things, like my daily care for 11 people: my husband and I, eight in the attic and also a non-Jewish student, wanted by the Germans, who we were hiding in our home. Otto Frank did not know about this student. He would have forbidden it. "You take too much risk, Miep," he would have said.

The children-in-hiding had a hard time. They missed so much. They could not play outdoors and could not meet with friends. They could hardly move. We did all that was possible to help them, but freedom we could not give them. This was one of the most painful things for me.

Every year on the fourth of August, I close the curtains of my home and do not answer the doorbell and the telephone. It is the day that my Jewish friends were taken away. I have never overcome that shock. I loved and admired them so much. During two years eight people had to live together in a very small place. They had little food and were not allowed to go out. They could not speak to their friends and family. On top of that came the fear, every hour of the day. I have no words to describe these people who were still always friendly and grateful. Yes, I do have a word: *They were heroes, true heroes!*

People sometimes call me a hero. I don't like it, because people should never think that you have to be a very special person to help those who need you! I myself am just a very common person. I simply had no choice, because I could foresee many, many sleepless nights and a life filled with regret, if I refused to help the Franks. And this was not the kind of life I was looking forward to. Yes, I have wept countless times when I have thought of my dear friends, but I am happy that these were not tears of remorse for refusing to help. *Remorse can be worse than losing your life.*

I could not save Anne's life, but I could help her live another two years. In those two years she wrote her diary, in which millions of people find hope and inspiration. I am also grateful that I could save this wonderful diary. When I found it, lying all over the floor in the hiding place, I decided to stow it away, in order to give it back to Anne when she would return. I wanted to see her smile and her say, "Oh, Miep, my diary!" But after a terrible time of waiting and hoping, word came that Anne had died. At that moment I went to Otto Frank, Anne's father, the only one of the family who had survived, and gave him Anne's diary. "This is what Anne has left," I said to him. "These are her words." Can you see how this man looked at me? He had lost his wife and two children, but he *had* Anne's diary. It was a very, very moving moment.

Again, I *could not* save Anne's life. However, I *did* save her diary, and by that I could help her most important dream come true. In her diary she tells us that she wants to live on after her death. Now, her diary makes her *really* live on, in a most powerful way! And that helps me in those many hours of deep grief. It also shows us that even if helping may fail to achieve everything, it is better to try than to do nothing.