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A Child in Time

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The "mysterious and fundamental" subject of Anne Frank's diary, the poet John Berryman wrote, is "the conversion of the child into a person." Although the posthumous story of Anne and her diary has been the transformation of that specific person into a universal symbol of martyred innocence, the documentary *Anne Frank Remembered*—produced, written, and directed by Jon Blair—can be said to reverse that process.

The title is misleading. Has Anne ever been forgotten? The attic where Otto Frank hid his family from the Nazis is an Amsterdam shrine as well as a site for anti-Semitic agitation. Anne is at once a heroine of puberty (her name given to a Japanese brand of sanitary napkins) and a Jewish saint. In *The Ghost Writer*, Philip Roth conceptualized her as miraculously saved and imagined his narrator imagining himself married to her. "To be wed somehow to you, I thought, my unassailable advocate, my invulnerable ally, my shield against their charges of defection and betrayal and reckless, heinous informing!"

Last year, on the 50th anniversary of Anne Frank's death at 15 of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, her diary was published in a definitive edition and became the subject of a scholarly book chronicling Meyer Levin's decades-long obsession with dramatizing it. The diary was also adapted into an off-Broadway musical and turned into a Japanese animated feature. Amazingly, Blair's oral-history documentary, *Anne Frank Remembered*, is the first eyewitness account of Anne Frank's life.

Blair locates his subject in the colony of German-Jewish families who, after Hitler came to power in 1933, sought refuge in the Netherlands. The milieu is vivid and the movie takes off as soon as the first of Anne's aging childhood friends appears before the camera: Anne Frank, she grumbles, was "what you would call naughty . . . really impertinent." Another recalls Anne's attention-grabbing trick of dislocating her shoulder from its socket. No less than its subject, *Anne Frank Remembered* transcends all manner of genteel frills (not the least of which is Kenneth Branagh's narration), in part through the sharpness of personal observation. "Peter van Pels was a blue-eyed boy with very little mental capacity," says one friend of the teenager whose family shared the secret annex with the Franks and the dentist, Fritz Pfeffer, from July 1942 to August 1944.

The eight hidden Jews were supported mainly by the extraordinary efforts of Otto Frank's Austrian-born employee, Miep Gies, who visited the annex every day and is extensively interviewed in the movie. Blair also records the pathos of the first meeting between octogenarian Gies and Pfeffer's son (who died not long afterward). After the Franks, the van Pels family, and Dr. Pfeffer were betrayed and arrested, Anne's diary ceased, and

Anne Frank Remembered

Written, produced, and directed
by Jon Blair

A Sony Classics release
Opening February 23

BY J. HOBERMAN

the movie goes deeper into the shadowy realm of oral history. Still, these memories and glimpses serve to reconstruct the last six months of Anne's life as she and her family were taken to the Westerbork transit camp, then Auschwitz, and finally, Bergen-Belsen.

Anne's prewar acquaintances describe her as lively, loquacious, "spicy," supporting the characterization by her childhood crush, Solly Kimmel (not in the movie), who, interviewed in Haifa in June 1993, remembered her as a starstruck little chatterbox and an average student—no suggestion of literary talent or ambition. But Anne Frank was some sort of genius, and what *Anne Frank Remembered* documents, along with her miserable fate, is her transformation, through force of circumstance, into the artist who, four months before her capture, wrote "I want to go on living even after my death!"

As this cry (with *The Ghost Writer*) suggests, Anne Frank belongs to literature. "She's like some impassioned little sister of Kafka's, his lost little daughter—a kinship is even there in the face," Roth's narrator declares. "Kafka's gar-



Anne Frank with father Otto and older sister Margot

rets and closets, the hidden attics where they hand down the indictments, the camouflaged doors—everything he dreamed in Prague was, to her, real

Amsterdam life. What he invented, she suffered." On the eve of D-Day, Anne Frank began reworking her entire diary for publication. ❖