

Coronet

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Has Germany Forgotten Anne Frank?

The father of the girl whose diary stirred the world demands to know why the Germans don't tell their children the truth about Hitler

On my desk lies a letter that I recently received from a 16-year-old Hamburg girl who is a member of one of the many Anne Frank clubs that have sprung up among teenagers in Germany. It reads in part:

"Dear Mr. Frank:

I have discussed the matter (of the Hitler years) with other members of my group but no one can give any answers. We always find that grown-ups act disinterested or defensive. Few people admit to any Nazi sentiments but sometimes their views are clear in every word. No one seems concerned about his own involvement in the terrible things that happened under Hitler...

"At home we often discuss this thing but nothing ever comes of it. I am told that I am fresh and ill-bred. But isn't it my duty to say what I feel - even though I risk becoming unpopular? Or am I not supposed to do so, because I am only 16 and must respect my elders?... I suppose I should keep my place. But isn't that cowardly...?"

My young correspondent is one of hundreds of thousands who has read *The Diary of a Young Girl* or knows Anne Frank's story through play and motion picture. They think of Anne as she lived, not as she died in the concentration camp of Belsen along with thousands of other human beings considered "undesirable" by the Nazis. They see Anne as one of themselves, youngsters cruelly hurt and perplexed by a troubled world. They know that I, Anne's father, lived with her through the many anxious months before our arrest by the Nazi police, while she was writing her diary in our Secret Annexe in

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Amsterdam. They know me through Anne's words and they hope that I will understand and sympathize with them, even if their parents don't.

The letter from this 16-year-old girl, together with the troubled words of many of her contemporaries, startlingly reveal the dilemma of Germany today, especially the dilemma facing its youth.

The older generation of Germans cannot yet face up to past history and communicate its lessons to the future. I believe that unless it does, unless the questions of German youth are answered fully and frankly, the fragile growth of democracy in Germany may come to an end.

This particular letter arrived at my home shortly after I had returned from a visit to the Ruhr city of Wuppertal. There I had placed a handful of earth from Belsen—where Anne is buried—in the foundation stone of the Anne Frank Village now being erected as a refuge for displaced persons.

There have been hundreds of Anne Frank observances in Germany. But this is the first time that I have permitted myself to participate in a public ceremony in Germany involving my daughter's name.

My visit to Wuppertal was another step along the road that Anne's diary has sent me traveling in the years since the war. I am intensely interested in Germany, its future and its youth. My concern is that



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never again should Germany experience the madness of racial prejudice and that Anne's life should not have been empty and without meaning.

Only in Germany have I actively sought publication of Anne's *Diary*. Of all the thousands of letters inspired by a reading of *The Diary*, I have been most diligent in answering the ones from German youth. For their education—in democratic ideals and ways of life—is of paramount importance to me.

I have never seen a stage performance of *The Diary*. Neither have I seen the film. I simply could not stand the emotional strain. But more important, I did not want my memory of Anne confused by the image of a Susan Strasberg or a Millie Perkins, no matter how admirably they portray the role. To me, Anne is a very personal memory. So is her sister Margot, a very different child; I want to keep them as I knew them and not as they are known to the world through *The Diary*, the play, the motion picture. Anne, as she told in *The Diary*, "didn't want to be treated as a girl-like-all-others, but Anne-on-her-own merits." Especially by me.

Yet, it is significant that many young girls have successfully played the role simply because youth readily identifies with the spirit of Anne. I have known many girls *like* Anne in real life. I have met them and I have corresponded with them. They share Anne's basic ideals. They are striving to understand life. Frequently frustrated by the adult world, they have a touching faith in man's capacity for goodness in a rather bad world.

The letter from the Hamburg youngster shows her to be unaware that a battle is going on in Germany today for her mind and those of her generation. It is being fought largely between the guilt-ridden older



The education of German youngsters—like these girls from Düsseldorf's Anne Frank School—in democratic ideals and principles is Otto Frank's chief interest.

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generation responsible for Hitler and a middle generation, too young to have been deeply involved with Nazism, but old enough to have fought and been hurt by the war.

Thus far, she is mainly aware of the older people whose attitudes she finds so discouraging. Their younger opponents have not yet made themselves sufficiently felt, but their strength is growing.

Recently, many persons expressed astonishment over the revelations of a school survey which showed that German youth knows little of the Hitler period. Juergen Neven Dumont, a reporter working with television camera and microphone, went into classrooms in 14 different German schools to question the youngsters about German history for the years 1933 to 1945. Here are some of the answers from boys and girls ranging in age from 14 to 19:

“Hitler revived Germany. He did away with unemployment and he built the Autobahns.”

“Hitler ruled from 1933 to 1945 and organized ‘Strength through Joy’ cruises.”

“After the war, people said everything he did was bad and they pointed to ruin and chaos everywhere. But now people come again and say it was not so bad after all . . . anyway he is dead.”

One trade school pupil wasn't sure whether Hitler was for or against the Nazis. Another student thought those buried in Belsen were killed by the Russians.

Like a mad refrain, scores of surveys among school children over the past 15 years have produced similar answers to questions about the most frightful period in German history. They are reflections of the fact that, for many complex reasons, the older generation appears determined to blanket the events of the Nazi years with silence.

I was born and raised in Germany but I do not have any greater insight into the future of Germany than do other Europeans or Americans. I look about me and I am often baffled by what I see. Here are some recent incidents, taken at random, that help give a picture.

—The minister of cultural affairs of North Rhine-Westphalia, Werner Schuetz, has arranged special training courses for teachers in his state to enable them to teach the recent Nazi past.

—An elementary schoolteacher of Neumuenster, Holstein, in a debate before the Youth Union of the Christian Democratic party, made an outright defense of Nazi policies and said that it was characteristic-

ally German that their action against Jews was so thorough.

—The vice chancellor of Freiburg University, Dr. Gerd Tellenbach, inveighed against recent anti-Semitic incidents and asserted that it was essential for young people to be systematically taught the dangers of Nazism.

—A considerable number of young people attended a Reichsparty election meeting at which Germany's leading neo-Nazi spokesman, Hans Ulrich Rudel, made an appeal for a return to the old order.

These incidents may seem like the symptoms of national schizophrenia. They are really the sounds of battle for the minds of the young. Sad to say, the older generation still seems to have a firm grip on the situation.

Because the guilt of the Hitler period rests heavily upon it, this generation tries to blot out the 13-year history of Nazi rule. Under the impact of the new prosperity which one can see all over Germany, this generation often says:

“Why not let bygones be bygones and get on with our work.”

Fortunately there are many “good Europeans” in Germany and they are taking their stand. The hard core comes from the younger group, now perhaps in its mid-30s, which was dreadfully hurt by the Hitler era. This generation was killed off in large numbers in the war, so that it is the smallest in the land. Yet, I see them beginning to dominate the liberal press of the major cities. They are moving into the schools and universities and entering public service. They are struggling hard to revive the intellectual life of the country.

Within the school systems, however, control is still largely in the hands of the older generation. The curriculum is generally weighted toward the classics, literature, ancient history, the sciences. The history texts virtually stop with 1870 or at the latest 1918. The books that come closer to our time treat the “embarrassing” Nazi years briefly, blandly and without interpretation.

Because the curriculum is so crowded, it is easy enough for a teacher so-minded to skip the whole thing; too many of them do. The most common reason is the fact the teacher has no answer to the question: “Where were you when all this was happening?”

Remember that the Nazis won over many teachers to their party. After Hitler, no other teachers were available; even today teaching staffs have a very high proportion of men and women who were fully involved

in Nazi activity. Thus teaching about the period becomes highly embarrassing and a threat to their authority in the classroom.

Parents, too, involved in the debacle of Hitler, are apt to find the subject embarrassing. So they join with the teachers in a tacit conspiracy of silence about the past.

The conspiracy does not always succeed. Sheltered by anonymity, younger teachers in larger cities find it possible to teach the "terrible truth" and yet resist parental pressures. But in small towns, the pressures are often too great even for the courageous younger teacher.

Paul Schallueck, a popular German novelist, has summed up one German attitude toward teaching about Hitler's extermination of the Jews: " 'When I deem it right,' said the headmaster, 'that we give no exact figures and refer merely to several hundred thousands, I consider it rank obstruction for you to insist on 6,000,000.'

" 'There were 6,000,000,' the young colleague replied, '6,000,000 Jews alone, not counting the others.'

"The headmaster: 'Herr Reineke, don't make your position at the school difficult with such trifles.' "

The fact that the older generation cannot come to terms with its past accounts for the real problem of German education. In trying to shut out the past, the older generation makes the shock all the greater when, eventually, youth does find out what happened under Hitler. Think of the sad words of a Frankfurt youth who wrote, after a revealing history lesson: "My head reels because I am still trying to understand what I have read. My reason refuses to accept what I know to be true: that human beings have acted like beasts."

GERMANY IS a busy, busy land. But when it comes to the education of its youth toward democratic values, the clocks of Germany are running all too slowly.

The organized school systems—perhaps inevitably—have moved too slowly. There is urgent need for younger teachers to take over classes devoted to contemporary history—teachers who will not be embarrassed by questions or inhibited by their own roles in the Hitler era.

There is a need not only to teach about the Nazi period, but also to educate for citizenship in a democratic society. This indeed may be easier for many teachers than the direct approach to history.

But the past will not be shut out and in numerous ways the young

are learning. That, for instance, is the significance of *The Diary*. In the two seasons before 1959, the play had 3,409 performances in Germany. The book has sold nearly three-quarters of a million copies; and now the film is being shown throughout the country.

The Diary has taught German youth in a way that skimpy history lessons could not do. In 1957, 2,000 German youths made a pilgrimage to Bergen-Belsen where Anne died. Last May, more than 8,000 participated. The past has not been shut out for them. And no longer can it be shut out for my 16-year-old Hamburg correspondent or for the many others like her who have formed Anne Frank clubs and who, in the future, I hope, can be reached by the Anne Frank Foundation and International Youth Center now being established in the building where we lived in the Secret Annexe.

Finally, of great importance is the student and teacher exchange system. Since the war years, 15,000 German students have visited the U.S. for study. At the present time, 1,000 teachers a year are being "exchanged" between France, England and Germany. What these Germans learn of life in the Western democracies will have a lasting effect upon their own country.

Recently, I participated in a meeting in London in which a young German told me this was the first time he had had personal contact with a Jew. He said that he and his friends would work all their lives for reconciliation. A young girl said: "I take my hat off to Jews for talking to us after all that we did to them."

I had no opportunity to answer them fully, but if I had, I might have said that all Europeans remain concerned about Germany. They are repelled by the past and worried about the future. They know that they cannot very well live without Germans and never have learned quite how to live with them. In that respect, I am a typical European, for those are my reactions, too.

I would have told them that I am a typical European in yet another way. I look forward to the day when Germans will have established themselves as "good Europeans" and that this cannot be done through military alliances or economic cooperation alone. It must be done primarily by a basic change in the way of German life, so that the democratic idea replaces the authoritarian tradition which still largely governs the German mind.

I would have told them that Europe—and the world—would like to

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see Germans stop teaching history lessons—names, dates, dynasties, battles—and begin to teach the lessons of history—what a Hitler has meant to Germany, what a warped political idea has done to Europe.

Finally, I would have told them that I must keep talking to them, for like Anne, “in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death.” ●

Readers interested in the development of the International Anne Frank Youth Center in Amsterdam, Holland, may write to the American Committee of the Anne Frank Foundation, 12 East 94th Street, New York 28, New York.



Otto Frank