

## EXCERPT

*'People are really good at heart'*

Seventy years after her death, it's time to ask: was Anne Frank right?

**Eli Rubenstein**

As we mark 70 years since the death of Anne Frank – in Bergen-Belsen some time in March of 1945, just weeks before liberation – it is worth recalling the devastating critique Cynthia Ozick wrote for the *New Yorker* almost 20 years ago.

In her well known essay, Ozick actually suggested that it would have been better if Anne Frank's work had been burned, and never seen the light of day.

Yet, when one re-rereads her writing one can't help but be amazed by the literary skill and idealism on display in *The Diary of a Young Girl*, a work that has been translated into 67 languages and read by 30 million people.

Anne Frank was thinking and writing about subjects that many – myself included – would only begin to contemplate much later in life, and expressing herself in ways which most writers far beyond her years could only hope to aspire to. And this from a 14-year-old girl locked in an attic for two years...

Here are just a few small examples:

"No one has ever become poor by giving."

"The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be."

"You can be lonely even when you are

loved by many people, since you are still not anybody's one and only."

Perhaps her most famous quote is this one: "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

So what disturbed Ozick so much?

Of course, Ozick was not criticizing Anne Frank but, rather, what had become of her after her death – the way her story was diluted and distorted – especially by the overuse and misuse of the "good at heart" quote mentioned above.

Ozick argued that the Broadway play and film about Anne Frank removed almost all references to Anne Frank's Jewishness and the culpability of the Germans, along with most expressions of pessimism and sadness recorded in her diary, transforming her ultimately tragic story, into an upbeat, redemptive tale of humour and hope.

Ozick was especially infuriated by the prevailing usage of the phrase "people are really good at heart," because it eclipsed many other foreboding statements Anne makes in her diary. Most importantly, Ozick felt that Anne's betrayal, deportation to Auschwitz and death in Bergen-Belsen, belie the sentiment that "people are really good at heart." In Ozick's words, the damnable phrase is "torn from its bed of thorns," "pulls the wool over the eyes of history," and obscures the ultimate fate of the person who wrote it.

Perhaps camp survivor, Bruno Bettelheim best summed up the challenge to Anne Frank's most famous line by responding: "If all men are good (at heart),

**Anne Frank**

there never was an Auschwitz."

Indeed would Anne Frank have ever written these words in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen? Would she have stuck by them had she survived?

So, then, how do we preserve in our young people the innocent belief in the goodness of humanity, expressed by Anne Frank, when faced with the grim reality of Auschwitz? Should we? Does the Holocaust, in fact, not teach us that humanity is inherently evil? And if we concur, are we not, in a strange twist, proclaiming Hitler victorious? For, if humanity is so utterly hopeless, so beyond salvation, why should we indeed care one whit about each other?

Here, I believe, lies the answer to the divide between Anne Frank and Cynthia Ozick/Bruno Bettelheim. Anne Frank was right – one may argue. The majority of people are good at heart – but that is not

nearly enough. We must also act, stand up, make a difference. Otherwise we become accomplices to the victimizers – and ultimately, the enablers of Auschwitz.

This message, indeed, has much resonance in Jewish thought, for, as often noted, Judaism is a religion of "deed and not creed." We care much more about your actions, than about the interior landscape of your thoughts and beliefs. Moral action is always to be preferred over pious sentiment.

Indeed the Holocaust did not happen only because of its infinitely evil perpetrators – but because most of the world's good people did not stand up straight enough or soon enough.

Anne Frank died because not enough people who were "good at heart" mostly people like you and I acted upon their beliefs.

Perhaps Anne Frank's words were more of a wish, a prayer, than a hard and fast statement about human nature.

It is up to us to not only fulfill Anne's words, but to surpass them, to not only be good at heart, but to act on those good intentions.

So that one day, no more precious children like Anne Frank and millions of others, will have their pure and hope-filled ideals so utterly betrayed, and left to a fate no child should ever suffer. ■

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