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Anne Frank's birthday an opportunity to discover the girl behind the diary

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

In October, the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles launched "Anne: A Premier Experiential Exhibit" to commemorate the life of Anne Frank, who would have turned 85 on Thursday, for a 10-year stay. I had the opportunity to visit the exhibit Sunday as a kind of introduction to a performance of "About Anne: A Diary in Dance" by the Helios Dance Theater company. A second performance will take place Thursday.

I think most of us have read or know about *The Diary of Anne Frank* (or *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*), first published in 1947 by her father, Otto Frank, in Dutch. The book has been translated into at least 67 languages, including into English in the United States in 1952, and has sold 30 million copies. Numerous films based on the diary as well as interpretations for television and stage have been produced since Otto Frank discovered the red plaid diary in his family's hiding place after he was liberated from Auschwitz. Anne and her sister, Margot, died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp just weeks before liberation.

Anne received the diary for her 13th birthday and named it Kitty after her imaginary friend. In it, Anne writes letters to Kitty and recounts the daily life of eight people hidden in a secret annex in Amsterdam for just over two years during the Nazi occupation: Anne, Margot and their parents; the van Pels family, consisting of mother, father and son; and a dentist, Fritz Pfeffer.

Anne does more than recount daily life in the hiding place Otto prepared in the building where his business was located. She explores the meaning of life and love and the beginnings of a romance. The diary reveals that the young adolescent Anne was close to her father but not to her mother.

It takes a good hour to walk through and experience the exhibit. There are a few films to watch -- some

very short, others a few minutes long -- and many photographs, facsimiles of documents, and replicas and artifacts on display. In one tiny theater, the screen is covered in wallpaper copied from the attic's. The docent opens a bookcase door to the theater, a replica of the very bookcase that allowed food and other necessities to be given to those in hiding in the attic. On at least two occasions, this door saved them from being captured by Nazis hunting for Jews. The Franks and the others were eventually betrayed, and to this day, no one knows who reported them to the Nazis.

I enjoyed listening to Otto Frank talk about his daughter in some of the film clips. He admits that the Anne in the diary is not the outgoing daughter that he knew; he is convinced, he says, that parents never really know their children.

It's fascinating to me that Otto Frank and others were able to gather so many photographs of the Frank family. By the end of this contemporary exhibit about a very brief life, I really felt like I knew Anne Frank much better. I still wonder if I would have been so gracious and optimistic about humanity had I been in her place. I would like to hope so.

"About Anne: A Diary in Dance" was first performed 14 years ago, according to artistic director and choreographer Laura Gorenstein Miller. Miller excerpted several dance sequences into six scenes for the event at the Museum of Tolerance, beginning with the Frank and van Pels families going into hiding.

The modern dance is energetic and strong, pulsating with life, with Anne at its center. It begins with the dancers removing layers of clothing they wear into hiding, all marked with the yellow Star of David, and Anne pushing away the Nazi salute, the sign of Nazi oppression. But even in hiding, Anne is an adolescent and struggles with her relationship with her mother. All of a sudden, after we get to know the characters and follow the narrative, the family is captured, and Otto Frank is left alone to find his daughter's diary. The enormity of his loss, which stands for the injury to the world from the loss of millions of people killed by Hitler and the Nazis, and the sound of Marlene Dietrich singing "Das Lied Ist Aus (Frag' Nicht Warum Ich Gehe)" -- well, it breaks your heart. Even though the Franks were not religious, the dance finishes with Anne, from the next life, singing the Shema, a declaration of Jewish faith.

When I arrived at the museum on Sunday, I first went to listen to a Holocaust survivor, Elane Geller, speak about her experience in Auschwitz. She was 4 years old when she entered the camps and a little over 8 years old when liberated. She is not able to explain how she survived, but she did, even though children were usually sent to the gas chambers immediately. This is the fourth Holocaust survivor lecture I have heard, and should you visit the Museum of Tolerance, be sure to plan to hear a survivor speak (usually at 1 p.m., but call ahead or check at the desk when you buy your ticket).

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