

*William D. Schaefer*

### In the Annex

I didn't see it happen. I was in Anne's room examining the faded photos she had pasted on the wall some fifty years ago—Greta Garbo, Princess Elizabeth, Deanna Durbin. When I heard a scream and a shout (“Ach Gott, Ach Gott”), I rushed back to the family room and from the window could see the woman lying on the wet path, her legs and arms grotesquely splayed, pieces of her camera scattered within a few feet of her outstretched arms.

When it happened, Mr. and Mrs. Miyoshi were in the washroom. They claimed to have heard nothing and it was obvious they did not want to be involved. Grunwald had spoken with the woman in the family room and was convinced that she was unbalanced, was what in English we would call a “fruitcake.” She had claimed that the brochure was full of lies. “See here, look here,”—she spoke to him in German—“that's not true, that couldn't be true.” He had tried to ignore her but she was insistent. Finally, he asked her to show him what was untrue, to point it out. Crying, she had gone to the window, put the brochure in her pocket and looked down at the little garden three stories below. He had moved away in disgust (crazy lady, fruitcake) and was about to join me in Anne's room when something caused him to look back. He saw, or thought he saw, the woman place her camera on the windowsill. He saw—and of this he was certain—the woman lean out the window and bend over the sill. Then she was gone.

Julie had heard the woman and Grunwald speaking in German and thought the woman might have been crying, but Julie had her back to them, examining the lines that marked Anne's and Margot's growth during their years in hiding. Turning, she screamed as she saw the woman's legs, upside down, framed in the window. She told me later she had probably imagined that because what had flashed through her mind at that moment was a poem she had read in college about Icarus falling from the sky. “Wasn't that odd?”

All this was what the five of us recalled, and shared, as we stood there in the secret annex waiting for the police.

At the time (this was 1993) I had not read Anne Frank's diary. Never got around to it. I knew the plot, more or less, and I may have seen the movie (Susan Strasburg? Natalie Wood?), but I had no intention of visiting Anne Frank's house on that rainy, unseasonably warm, May morning. I had spent a jet-lagged night in the Krasnapolski—that glorious old hotel where I stayed during what in those years was my annual sojourn to Amsterdam (I dealt in rare books, am now retired). I had an early breakfast and, in spite of a light rain, decided to take a walk. I wandered aimlessly for an hour or so, ended up along the Prinsengracht, one of those tree-lined canals that ring the inner city. It began to rain harder so I opened my umbrella and was about to return to the hotel when, several houses ahead, I noticed what seemed to be a queue—if four people standing in line can be said to constitute one. The rain had now become serious, a virtual downpour and the woman at the head of the line was pounding on the door of the house yelling “Il pleut, il pleut à seaux!” Then, in a language somewhat resembling English, she screamed, “It's pooring, you sheet, let us een!”

A bearded man standing behind her held a large umbrella with which he was trying to protect her as well as the camera she was waving in one hand. An Asian couple behind him had their own umbrellas open. I glanced at my watch and saw it was ten to nine. Then I noticed the white sign above the door that read “Anne Frank Huis.”

It was as the door was being unlocked that the girl ran up to me from where she had taken shelter a few houses away. “I say, is it open? May we go in?” she asked, pushing under my umbrella, clutching its handle, leading me into the “huis.” She was, as I later discovered, a very mature twenty-four, but on first sight I would have sworn she was at most fifteen. She was short, barely five feet tall, had brown hair, neck length, parted. Under a tan raincoat she wore a white blouse with a little round collar, gray sweater, short brown skirt, white anklets, brown shoes. Not a hint of make up. She appeared as God had intended.

Once inside the reception area the man told us he was not supposed to open the door until nine but, because of the rain (and, I suspected, potential damage to his door), he would let us wait inside for ten minutes, which was about how long it took him to sell us tickets (seven guilders) and hand out brochures (“Anne Frank House: A Museum with a Story”). The Asians were pleased to discover there was a Japanese version of the brochure, the bearded man with the large umbrella, who I guessed to be in his forties, preferred German, and the girl and I of course requested English (“I’m Julie Ashford,” she informed me with a pronounced British accent, “I’m an actress, aspiring, from London, by way of St. Louis, like T. S. Eliot”). The woman looked at the choices, thought a bit, and then selected the Dutch version. It was the only time I had a good look at her. She wore a blue raincoat buttoned to the neck, and orange slacks. She seemed to be about my age, mid-sixties, or maybe somewhat older. There was something odd about her face—her jaw sagged, her eyes didn’t focus—and she had butterfly wrists in constant motion. Although she seemed harmless enough, she was not someone you would choose to sit next to on a transatlantic flight.

At nine sharp, led by the woman’s orange slacks, we ascended steep stairs to the second floor of the main building, then passed through the false bookcase and climbed a ladder into the secret annex where Otto Frank, his family and four friends hid from the Nazis. The room we entered was the Frank family’s room, in which the Franks and their daughter Margot had slept during those twenty-five months. It was a small room, empty, barren, haunted and incredibly close on that warm May morning. As if she had done it many times, the woman unlatched and opened one of the two windows—high, single paned, the kind you push out to open. It was still raining, although not as hard. The woman ran her hand on the sill, held up a finger to show us it was dry. Then, astonishingly, she did a little soft-shoe dance in front of the window, making a circle and bowing when she again faced us. She was smiling, a silly smile, a happy face.

That was the last time I saw her alive. Ten minutes later it happened.

When I returned from Anne’s room, Grunwald was already scrambling down the ladder, shouting for help. Julie was standing at the open

window, her hand covering her mouth. “She jumped,” she told me. “Or fell, I don’t know, I didn’t see.” The Japanese couple appeared, went to the other window, pushed it open, looked down. In a few minutes we saw Grunwald and the man who had sold us our tickets enter the garden, three stories below. The woman was sprawled obscenely on a cement pavement, her camera smashed to pieces. The men were there less than a minute, just long enough to determine that she was dead before they reentered the house. Grunwald climbed back up the ladder, told us that an ambulance was coming, that the police had been called, that the “Anne Frank Huis” would be closed for the day. The police wanted us to remain where we were, instructed us not to touch anything, although there was little there to touch. After a while, we heard sirens, saw two men wearing yellow slickers enter the garden and examine the body. Shortly after, a uniformed officer and a police inspector joined us.

The inspector, who was apparently familiar with the house, walked quickly through the three rooms then examined the window from which the woman had fallen or jumped. The sill was by then quite wet. Speaking in perfect Brit English, he asked each of us to go to where we had been when what he called the “incident” occurred. We did so, and again he walked through the rooms. Finally, we were led downstairs to the museum shop where we waited half an hour before being interviewed. We were told not to discuss the “incident,” although we were free to talk about anything else. We did.

During that half hour I learned that the Japanese man, Mr. Miyoshi, taught western art at a university in Tokyo, and that his wife was a painter. They had been touring Europe’s museums, had arrived from Paris the previous evening, and were going to London next week. They knew nothing about Anne Frank—Mrs. Miyoshi was under the impression she had been a movie star—and were in the “huis” only because the Rijksmuseum didn’t open until ten. Having a free hour, they had decided to visit what their guide book assured them was one of Amsterdam’s major attractions, five stars.

Grunwald explained that he was an architect on a five-day “Holland Holiday” with his wife and daughters. Although born in Hamburg in 1953, he had not learned about the Nazis or the death camps until he was

in school. His parents never talked about Hitler. He had read the *Diary* in college and became intrigued by the house and its hidden rooms. He told us that the house was built in 1635 and was one of many such houses merchants had constructed along the new canals to serve as both warehouses and residences. Although in recent years many of the buildings have been replaced or renovated beyond recognition, the Anne Frank house has not been significantly altered since before the war. So to Grunwald, this was a rare opportunity to walk through a seventeenth-century architectural oddity—the front house and the annex (he called it the “achterhuis”) being remarkably intact. His wife and daughters, he informed us, did not share his architectural interests and while the girls knew all about Anne Frank, they considered the *Diary* to be ancient history. They had chosen instead to visit the new Madame Tussauds where he was to meet them at noon. He hoped the police would not keep him all morning. The Dutch, he noted, still “have it in” for Germans. His wife would be furious if he were late.

And then there was Julie, with whom I spent most of my time. The first thing she did was apologize for being “in costume.” She was dressed as Anne Frank had been dressed in one of her photographs, which is why I had at first assumed her to be fifteen. Having read the *Diary* three times (“Het Achterhuis” she called it, explaining that was the original title), as well as everything else she could find about Anne Frank, she considered herself an authority on the “Annie stuff.” She had been an English major at a liberal arts college in the Midwest but was now an actress, soon to audition for the part of Anne in a new play, her big chance. The play, which she described in some detail, sounded dreadful. The playwright, who was also her boyfriend and was still asleep in their hotel, had brought her to Amsterdam so she could visit the house and, in costume, absorb its atmosphere. Julie was concerned that she hadn’t absorbed nearly enough during her aborted tour and wondered if it would be tacky, given the circumstances, to request a refund.

I was the first to be called to the museum director’s office, where the interviews took place. There were now two police officers, a tape recorder and the inspector. After giving my name and address (local as well as in

San Francisco) and explaining how I had come to be in the annex that particular morning, I was asked if I had known the deceased. I had not. Had I ever seen her before that day? No. Had I seen her use her camera, perhaps taking photos from the window? No again. I was then told that the camera was imitation Japanese, cheap, no serial number, and, of greatest interest, contained no film. Was it possible, the inspector asked me, that when the two men were examining the body one of them removed the film from the broken camera? As best I could recall, neither of the men touched the camera, or what was left of it. They had been down there less than a minute, just long enough to ascertain that the woman was dead.

The inspector then asked if the woman had a purse. I didn't know, had not seen a purse. It seems that none had been found, not in the annex rooms or near the body. In the pockets of her raincoat—apparently all there was in way of identification—were the brochure about the “Huis,” the ticket stub from her admission, three one-guilder coins, a token for the New York City subway, and a dog-eared paperback copy of *Howl and Other Poems*. The slim volume was inscribed “For Anna” and signed by Allen Ginsberg. There was nothing else in the woman's pockets.

I was then asked about her nationality. I said that I had no idea. Although she spoke German, I only heard her say a few words in English and her accent could have been anything—French, German, Polish, Russian, anything. The woman, I told them, was strange—her blue raincoat with orange slacks, her little soft-shoe dance, her curious smile. She was disturbed even before we entered the annex, shouting to be let in, pounding on the door and then crying when arguing about the brochure with the German. She could very well have set the camera on the windowsill, accidentally knocked it off, and fell as she reached for it. I noted her butterfly wrists. But it was just as likely that she threw the camera out the window and jumped after it. It seemed to me, I said, to have either been an accident or an accident on purpose. Those were the only alternatives.

One last question. As an American book dealer, was I familiar with the poet, Allen Ginsberg. Yes, I had met Ginsberg several times at City Lights in San Francisco. I told them that Ginsberg was a famous, somewhat eccentric, beatnik poet whose “*Howl*” is a classic poem revered by the 1960s hip-

pie generation. I personally found the poem to be tedious, but my interest was in British, not American, Literature. The inspector then thanked me and told me I was free to leave. Mr. and Mrs. Miyoshi were being led into the office as I announced I would be having coffee in the café a few doors away, should any of them want to talk more about the “incident.”

A few minutes later the Japanese couple entered the café. Mr. Miyoshi told me the inspector had asked if they had ever seen the woman before. They had not. Had they spoken to her while they were waiting outside, or seen her do anything unusual before the rain began? No. End of questioning. They were in a hurry to get to the Rijksmuseum so we rushed through the obligatory bowing and exchange of business cards. I have never seen them again.

Julie arrived some twenty minutes later, excited about the absent purse and the missing film. It was an adventure, like playing a role in a thriller. Dropping the British accent, overflowing with speculation, she whispered (in good old Midwest English) that perhaps the woman hadn't fallen or jumped at all, but had been *pushed* by the German! Perhaps, having discovered that he was the son of the Nazi in charge of the camp where Annie died, the woman had followed him, threatened him and his daughters! Think about it, she said. He has two daughters, like Anne and Margot! Or if not that, perhaps the woman had recently learned that it was her own father who had betrayed the Franks to the Germans! Burdened with guilt, she had jumped to atone for his sins! How about that! Or perhaps—.

I interrupted Julie and told her, as kindly as possible, that her theories were charming but it was far more likely, as Grunwald claimed, that the woman was mentally ill, had become obsessed with Anne Frank's story—not the first or last person to do so—and had decided before entering the house (no purse, no film) that she was going to jump. Who knows what visions had taunted her, what ghosts had haunted her? It was not because of the rain that she had opened the window. As soon as she entered that room she knew she was going to toss the camera and then jump.

Julie smiled and, reverting to her British persona, said, “Well, Ducky, we'll see. Time will tell.” She no longer looked fifteen. Before leaving the

museum shop she had changed her hair, put on make-up. She was now a sexy young woman eager to return to her lover. So be it. We exchanged addresses and as we were saying farewell, kisses on each cheek, I noticed Grunwald passing the café. He had no intention of entering but he saw me, and saw that I had seen him. He stopped, turned back, gave me a “thumbs up” sign, then hurried off.

The next day I found a notice in the paper reporting the death of an unidentified woman outside the Anne Frank house. I sent it to Julie but never heard from her. I also sent her a copy of Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts*, the poem that had no doubt flashed through her mind when she saw, or thought she saw, the woman fall. The poem describes Brueghel’s painting of Icarus falling from the sky. Those who hear the forsaken cry and see the white legs disappear into the water turn away from the disaster because they have other things to do, places to go, and people to see.

I never found out who “Anna” was or why she did what she did. I have no idea if the woman’s name *was* Anna, or if the copy of Ginsberg’s poems, inscribed to someone with that name, was just a book she found on a bargain counter in a used-book store. Was it the similarity of the names—Anna and Anne—or was it perhaps the title of the poem—*Howl*—that caused her to bring the dog-eared paperback with her on that fatal day?

I returned to Amsterdam last month and, along with several hundred other tourists, stood for an hour in a line that wound around the block. I didn’t recognize the place. No longer was there a little white sign declaring it to be the “Anne Frank Huis.” Indeed, the house itself now seemed to be incidental to what is called the “Anne Frank Museum.” There is a new enlarged entrance, a bewildering bookstore, an exhibition hall, a computer room where one can take a virtual tour of the annex and see the room refurbished, and a massive collection of material involving not only Anne and her relatives but also the Nazi occupation of Holland and the Holocaust. There is even a café where one can buy bagel sandwiches. All it lacks is a neon marquee with flashing lights.

The secret annex is, of course, unchanged. Both the hinged bookcase and the little ladder up which I followed the woman with the blue raincoat and orange slacks are intact, as are the rooms, even Anne's bedroom with her photos still tacked on the wall. It is all as it should be—as it was when I first saw it and will always choose to remember it—barren, shocking, haunted.