

Anne Frank and us. How can we learn from history?

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Ladies and gentlemen, It is a great pleasure and a privilege for me to be here in Beijing on the occasion of the opening of our exhibition, and of the beginning of the tour of this exhibition in China. On behalf of my friends at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam I thank you for the opportunity to speak a few words about this project.

A special word of thank you to Mr. Chen, the vice-president and the directors Zhang and Yan and their team for their support. Without your help we would not have been here today: so Thank you very much!

I want to take you back into history, because the work of the Anne Frank House is a double effort: to tell what happened during the Second World War, to remember and to make a connection between what happened then, and what is happening now - not only in Europe, but also elsewhere.

One of the main reasons why the diary of Anne Frank has been such a success around the world is that it is the story of one girl, of one family, of the people hiding in one house. An individual story, that gives a face and a name to the victims. Anne Frank's diary is a child's voice. The voice of one girl in the middle of history. Anne Frank's diary is also like a window that you can look through, to get an idea of the larger history of the Holocaust: the carefully planned, systematic killing of 6 million Jews in Europe during the second world war.

All countries have their own histories. All countries have their painful memories, about which it is difficult to talk. I must admit that I do not yet know a lot about your country's history. But of course one episode, that of the mass killings and raping, the massive abuse carried out in Nanjing by the Japanese army, springs to my mind. This is a period that has left and still leaves deep scars for many people in China. When perpetrators and bystanders and even active participants refuse to admit their involvement - till this very day, it makes it even harder for survivors to live with these memories.

We all have to come to terms with the more difficult sides of our histories.

In our country, the Netherlands, there are painful sides of history as well: the history of the war, but for example also the history of the slave trade and slavery, and our colonial history. It can take a long time before people and governments are able and prepared to face their past in a more honest way. The Netherlands used to see itself as a small, heroic country, full of heroes resisting the German occupiers. We did not like to admit that many Dutch also worked together with them, and that many others looked away when the Jews were deported. It was easier to blame the Germans for everything.

We are now in a slow process of admitting that there was a lot of passivity. Anti-Semitism had not vanished in 1945. Most non-Jews did not want to be reminded about the fact that so many Jews from their midst had been killed. It was an uncomfortable memory, that most preferred to put aside. For some time until the 1960s and 1970s this worked. But then, with a new generation, questions about the Holocaust returned. Children began to ask their parents, and grandparents: What did you do during the war? What exactly happened here, in this town? What did my family know about this? Who knew what? Could more Jews have been saved? What happened to the Jews, and the Gypsies, in the immediate surroundings of my family and my home town? With these questions, a new generation began to look for the

facts. A wealth of projects, books, films, exhibitions, local initiatives and school materials result from this by now.

We have also learnt to recognize and honor those who did make a difference, for example by helping Jews in hiding. Because their often spontaneous actions were so rare and so seldom, they especially deserve mentioning. This is why, in this exhibition, we mention the story of Mrs. Miep Gies with some prominence. She was an ordinary girl, originally from Austria, who worked as a typist for Otto Frank, the father of Anne and who was the only person of the family who survived in the extermination camps, in his office on the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam. When in 1942 the Frank family decided to go into hiding behind their office, in the Annexe, Otto Frank asked Miep if she wanted to help by providing food and by doing the shopping for them. She immediately said yes. Perhaps because he was her boss, and she was used to obey his requests. But it was an almost impulsive response, and only later she began to realize the consequences and the dangers of this work.

Miep Gies always says: I am not a hero. I think she means: What I did, more people could have done as well. Studying the helpers of Jews during the Holocaust has made me feel very humble about education. Ordinary human courage is so rare. It is so much easier to look aside and to try to live your life as undisturbed as possible.

These are the sort of questions we would like children who visit this exhibition to ask themselves - and not only the children: What would I have done? Where would I have been? Could I have helped? Would I have dared? Those questions are universal and actual for today as they were 60 years ago. There is a direct relevance for all these topics in our societies. Because today exclusion and hatred as well as indifference are all around us. Who really cares about the illegal immigrants, the asylum seekers, the refugees, or the poor, today?

Ladies and gentlemen, The main message of this exhibition can be put into four words: remember and respect diversity. Remembrance and gaining respect from others takes time. Do not expect too much too quickly. But the younger this attitude can be learnt, the better the changes for mutual respect are. I wish you all the strength and courage you need with this important project for the next weeks and months, and once again I thank everyone who has given time and energy to make it possible. Thank you.

