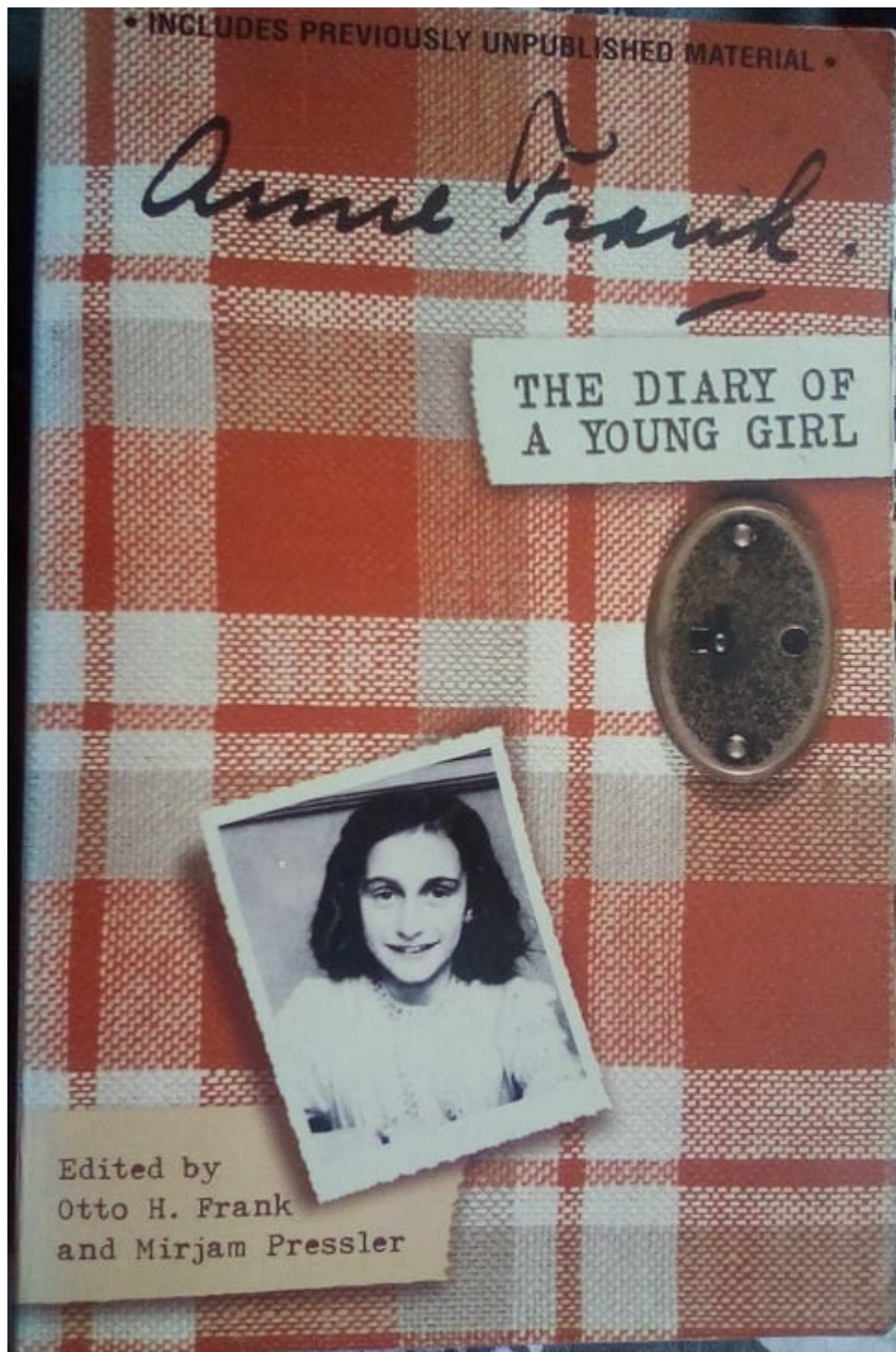


The main lesson of Anne Frank's Diary seems to be ignored

By Lev Tsitrin

An email announcement of a public lecture titled "*Anne Frank's Diary: The Making of an Urtext of the Holocaust*" brought me half a century back to the former Soviet Union, and my parents' excited talk of a chance to lay hands on this seemingly unobtainable book. Though I did not know specifically why it was important for them, I knew that it had to do with the nearly-taboo topic of Jewishness.



At our home, all discussions on that subject were conducted in half-whispers, my mother being particularly anxious to not be overheard by neighbors, giving me a vague feeling that Jewishness was something undefinable, but was to be borne with a dignified resignation. The only clarity I got when trying to get from my parents an explanation of what "Jewish" actually meant

(as if they themselves knew!) was an explicit instruction from my father: "if any boy calls you "zhid" – a Russian word for "kike" – don't talk back, but kick him straight on the nose." As I was the smallest boy in my class, that advice was all but wasted on me. I used it but once – and promptly ran away from the ensuing fight (though oddly, after a few weeks all was forgotten and we became friends.) Except for this oddball incident, I instinctively practiced, without knowing it, the maxim that prudence was the better part of valor – though I

did talk back plenty, discovering in the process the surprising fact that at times the energetic verbal counter-attack cowered bullies into silence.

When the much-coveted paperback finally arrived, my father, who was a first-rate handyman and would happily make or fix almost anything, gave it a nice binding (book binding was one of the do-it-yourself skills he taught himself, mostly to organize articles about science, and about art and artists that we pulled out of large-format magazines, the art books being essentially unobtainable.)

Strange to to say, I never read that book. Nor, for some reason, was I encouraged to. Now, half-century later, I thought I'd attend the lecture – at least in memory of my parents – and, since sitting through an hour-long discussion of a book I did not read made no sense, I thought I'd finally read it.

It turned out to be an ex-library copy, the Soviet library ink stamps bleached out, and it was heavily worn and dog-eared. The book was published in 1960, during the period that became known as Khrushchev's "thaw" which came as a huge relief to the country after Stalin's brutality. Even so, the fact that the Soviets would publish this book at all astonished me, given Anne's description of what befell the Jews, and the frank self-examination of her budding sexuality. Clearly, the translation wasn't "abridged," as was the common Soviet practice, and I wonder why (though I understand why it was never republished in the Soviet times, making it a highly-desired treasure – and why my parents weren't particularly eager that I read it, for that matter). Most likely, its publication was a foreign policy decision – the Soviets wanting to show the world that they broke with the paranoid antisemitism of the last years of Stalin's rule, so it was best to not make cuts to the text; doing so would only confirm that Soviet Union remained unreformed.

(Stalin's anti-Jewish paranoia was related to the newly-created state of Israel. Stalin put a lot of effort into making it happen – both to spite the “British imperialists” who opposed the move given their Arab alliances, and in expectation that Israel would become, in its international outlook, a Soviet-block country – and internally, a Communist “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Neither thing happened – and on top of this, when Israel's then-ambassador to USSR Golda Meir showed up at a Moscow synagogue during High Holidays, she was ecstatically mobbed by the Soviet attendees, raising the specter of “Jewish bourgeois nationalism” that went counter to the only loyalty one can have – the loyalty to the working class. Stalin's typical reaction followed – the arrest and execution of the leading Yiddish-language writers, and planning of the mass deportation of Jews to Russia's undeveloped Far East region, to be framed as an act of humanism because it would shield the Jews from the righteous and rightful ire of public indignant at their betrayal of the cause of the Communist Party that culminated in a sensational discovery that the Kremlin doctors, who were largely Jewish, planned to kill Stalin through medical malpractice. They were imprisoned and tortured – but suddenly, Stalin died on his own. Upon his death, the surviving doctors were released, their accuser stripped of her awards, and things calmed down for the Soviet Jews – and not just for them).

So I went to the lecture, and learned that after the war, the European countries were preoccupied with their own traumas, and the Holocaust of the Jews was not on anyone's radar. The publication of Anne Frank's Diary (as edited by her father who elided the too-explicit sexual passages, and softened Anne's condemnation of Germany) brought that awareness to the non-Jewish world – though its value as the memorial to the Holocaust was not necessarily the main reason for the book's success. In some places – particularly in Japan where it became immensely popular among women, it was due to its vivid description of a young woman's adolescence. Only gradually, as

the Diary's popularity spawned plays – and a movie – did Anne Frank become the instantly-recognizable face of the victims of the Holocaust, and the symbol of their shattered humanity.

Well, my lessons from reading the Diary were different. To me, it was a prime exhibit of the well-known discrepancy between the perception and the reality (which Kant called the “thing-in-itself.”) To the perceiver – in this instance, Hitler – Jews were the world-manipulating, exploitative monsters who should be eliminated for the sake of humankind. The Jews gone, there will be no exploitation, just universal happiness. Yet, if Anne Frank's Diary fell into Hitler's hands so he could examine the Jewish “thing-in-itself” for what it actually was, he would have discovered that his perception was a pure figment of his imagination, and had nothing whatsoever to do with reality. In vain would have Hitler sought out entries like “today, Papa told me to memorize the secret code-words by which we Jews control the world. Those are contained in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* of which he gave me a copy and told me to learn it by heart, which I gladly did – for, besides putting into my hands the full command of the world which I relish having, it delayed my working on the algebra assignment with I hate with every fiber of my soul.”

One indeed discovers by reading the Diary that this “thing-in-itself,” Anne Frank, does hate algebra, and she indeed reads plenty of books – though not the *Protocols*. She diligently studies languages, English and French. She has several absorbing hobbies: she collects pictures of the movie stars and she is engrossed in figuring out the genealogies of Europe's royalty, and to that end she diligently reads tomes like the massive “Life of Charles V”. She feels alienated from her parents, and is attracted to Peter, a boy few years older than her, who is also in hiding. Her father's greatest pleasure is to read Dickens. As to the innate desire to suck blood out of the innocent Aryans that is the most prominent Jewish feature as per Hitler, there is not a trace of it.

It is this factual discrepancy between the conclusions of social theorists like Marx and Hitler (and their modern ilk like DEIers and intersectionists), and the actual reality that is, to me, the most prominent feature of Anne Frank's Diary.

In fact, the ilk of Hitler and Marx make generalizations where generalizing itself is invalid. As the 19-century French writer Marcel Schwob observes in the preface to his *Imaginary Lives*, in contrast to generalizations of the historians life (Schowb uses the word "art," but it is clear from the context that the proper word he should have used is "life"), "does not classify, it unclassifies." Humans are not the cookie-cutter identical atoms obeying strict and identifiable laws. As Schob proceeds to eloquently show, no human is exactly alike. Thus, bunching people into a "class" or a "race" as Hitler and Marx do, is – however convenient it may be to a demagogue or an academic (and the two are not necessary separate) – nonsense.

The division of humanity into Aryans and non-Aryans, into proletarians and capitalists, into the oppressors an the oppressed is garbage, pure an simple. All kinds of people pursue all kinds of happiness – yes, using other people as tools if they can.

Because it takes years to muster a profession, tasks have to be specialized. Given the need for coordination between those with different skills, there will always be managers – people who give orders to those who have to follow. Thus, a society – any society – is always a "class" society, whether its constituents can freely pursue their understanding of happiness, or whether the form of their happiness is dictated to them from above, by the likes of Marx and Hitler who manage to convince, or bully others into showing conviction, that their leaders know better than themselves what's good for them.

Anne Frank's Diary shows her as a highly individual, individualistic, and thinking person – an "unclassifiable"

one, to use Schob's term. As such, it is not just a condemnation of Nazi brutality against the Jews that is perhaps better documented in other books on the Holocaust, but is an exhibit A of the fact that any theorizing which "classifies" people, theorizing of which Marx and Hitler are the best-known practitioners (but which is also much practiced in today's academia, though happily, with much lesser "success") – is, in and of itself, garbage. And that, to me, is the main lesson of the Diary of Anne Frank.

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