



MIEP GIES

*“Look at how a single candle can both
defy and define the darkness.”*

— ANNE FRANK



On January 29, 1991, President George H. W. Bush stepped to the podium in the House chamber of the United States Capitol Building to deliver the State of the Union Address. One phrase in particular captured the imagination of those listening. The president challenged the attendees and, indeed, all who heard when he opined:

We have within our reach the promise of a renewed America. We can find meaning and reward by serving some purpose higher than ourselves—a shining purpose, *the illumination of a thousand points of light*. It is expressed by all who know the irresistible force of a child's hand, of a friend who stands by you and stays there—a volunteer's generous gesture, an idea

that is simply right. The problems before us may be different, but the key to solving them remains the same: it is the individual—the individual who steps forward . . . we must step forward and accept our responsibility to lead the world away from the dark chaos of dictators, toward the bright promise of a better day.⁵ (Emphasis mine.)

These same words could well have been conveyed to the Dutch people—and indeed, all Europeans—in December 1941 when the Nazis began to draw the noose tighter on Jews in Holland and the Dutch were forbidden to give succor to them. Yet there were many brave people who defied those orders and provided aid to their Jewish friends and neighbors; imminently notable names are among those who risked their lives to save some, including that of Hermine “Miep” Gies, the short-in-stature, tall-in-courage woman who harbored Anne Frank and her family.

The Franks were a German-Jewish family who had moved from their native Germany to the Netherlands to escape Adolf Hitler’s “Final Solution”—the annihilation of the Jewish race. Anne, her parents, Otto and Edith, and older sister, Margot, hid in rooms above her father’s office

in an attempt to escape deportation to the German work camps. While there, she wrote her thoughts daily in a diary that would be published in 1947. Anne disguised the names of those in hiding and those who aided them in an attempt to protect their identities should the Nazis raid their secret place. Her diary was a powerful message of perseverance and courage during those dark days.

Miep and her husband, Jan, were two brave souls who felt that people mattered, and they were determined to make a difference even in the face of adversity. Miep soon realized that she could not stand idly by and see men and women destroyed simply because they were Jewish. And those of similar conviction—brave rescuers all—knew that a decision made in the blink of an eye could mean life or death for an innocent victim of rabid anti-Semitism, and for themselves. Many of those who acted on principle did so as a result of a caring, compassionate upbringing.

Hannah Senesh, herself a victim of the Holocaust, wrote:

There are stars whose radiance is visible
on Earth though they have long been extinct.
There are people whose brilliance continues
to light the world though they are no longer
among the living.⁶

Leery of being labeled a hero by others, Miep wrote:

I am not a hero. I stand at the end of the long, long line of good Dutch people who did what I did or more—much more—during those dark and terrible times years ago, but always like yesterday in the hearts of those of us who bear witness. Never a day goes by that I do not think of what happened then.

More than twenty thousand Dutch people helped to hide Jews and others in need of hiding during those years. I willingly did what I could to help. My husband did as well. It was not enough.⁷

Miep, born in Vienna, was frequently ill as a child. In 1930, after a rather severe bout with tuberculosis and suffering the debilitating effects of malnutrition, the eleven-year-old was sent to live with total strangers at Gaaspstraat 5 in Amsterdam. The Nieuwenhuise (aka Nieuwenburg) family and their five children opened their hearts and home to the sickly young girl.

Miep had been born into the Catholic working-class Santruschitz family in Austria on February 15, 1909, just short years before the launch of World War I. Following the

privations caused by the fighting in Europe and the addition of a sister, Miep was slowly dwindling to nothing. Her sticklike legs barely supported her small frame, and the lack of proper nutrition left her susceptible to various ailments. As a means to save their daughter, her parents, in an act of incredible love and sacrifice, made arrangements for her to be sent to a foster family in the Netherlands in order to save her life.

One bitterly cold winter day, Miep's mother bundled her into whatever could be found to keep her warm and tied Miep's long hair back with a length of cotton fashioned into a large hair bow. Soon thereafter, her father took her hand and walked her to the Vienna train station. There he waited with her while she was examined by physicians. A lanyard with the names of her foster parents written on it was draped around her neck, and she boarded the huge, noisy train headed for she knew not where. As Miep settled into her seat, the train lurched forward and slowly moved away from the station. She and a large group of other terrified children soon began to realize that their parents were outside on the station platform and they were inside being borne away, not knowing what would become of them at the end of the journey.

Miep was so weak from the bout of tuberculosis and

malnourishment that the rocking motion of the train car soon lulled her to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the cold, dark night, a hand shook her awake and Miep struggled to focus on her surroundings. The sign outside the depot read: Leiden. The sleepy children were led from the train into a cavernous room where they were placed in chairs lined around the walls.

Suddenly, as if a horde of locusts had descended from the skies, a group of adults rushed into the room and began to clutch at the cards that swung from the necks of the boys and girls. Soon, a very solid and sturdy man walked up to Miep and reached for the card. He read the name printed on the tag and uttered a strange sound: “*Ja!*” (Dutch for “yes.”) He had found the child whose nametag was a match. Gathering the little girl and her meager belongings, the two strangers to each other began the long trek to the Nieuwenhuise home outside Amsterdam. Miep struggled to keep up with her benefactor; the journey seemed to last forever.

Finally the two reached their destination and the man turned and led them into the hallway of a house. A woman, her face unremarkable but her eyes filled with compassion, took Miep by the hand and guided her to the kitchen, where she gave the child a cold glass of milk. Then again taking her hand, she led Miep up a flight of stairs to an attic room,

which held twin beds. One bed was occupied by Catherina, a daughter of the house; the other, piled high with quilts, was for their new foster child. Miep's layers of clothing were quickly removed; she was slipped into a nightdress and tucked beneath the warm bedding. Trepidation was soon replaced by welcome sleep. The sickly young girl had found a welcoming and loving family—one she would never again leave. She was home.

A three-month stay turned into six months, and then nine. She was incorporated into the new household, learned Dutch, and began school, where she soon excelled. Despite their modest income, the family shared with her everything they had. The love and compassion she received impressed Miep profoundly and she later decided to make Holland her permanent home. Miep was deeply influenced by the values of her foster family. She would never forget the kindness shown by her hosts:

Despite the language problem, all children were kind to me. Kindness, in my depleted condition, was very important to me. It was medicine as much as the bread, the marmalade, the good Dutch milk and butter and cheese, the toasty temperature of the warm rooms.⁸

After two years living on the outskirts of Amsterdam, the family and Miep moved into an area of the city known as River Quarter, South Amsterdam. It was quite a change from country life to streetcars attached to overhead electric cables, boats plying the canals, outdoor shops filled with brightly colored tulips, theaters and concert venues. After Miep turned sixteen, the Nieuwenhuises took her back to Vienna to visit her parents. Her five-year absence made the reunion awkward. Miep discovered she could no longer be happy in Austria, a fact that her parents soon echoed. Sadly, they agreed that their little Hermine should return to Amsterdam with her foster family. Her one mistake, she would later discover, was in not having her passport changed to indicate that she was no longer an Austrian citizen, but a Dutch citizen. Miep subsequently visited her parents again in 1933. After that visit, she wrote:

When I bade farewell to my mother, father, and sister in Austria, I did so with a clarity about my identity. I knew I would continue to write and send money regularly, that I would periodically visit them and bring my children to see them when that time came, but that Holland would be my home forever.⁹

Also in 1933, at the age of twenty-four, Miep met the man to whom her destiny would be forever tied—Otto Frank. A neighbor, Mrs. Blik, had supplied Miep with a referral for a temporary job in Mr. Frank’s office. Soon after being hired, Miep discovered that Mr. Frank, a Jew, and his family had left Germany because of the rise in power and influence of Adolf Hitler. Although Otto had taken up employment in Amsterdam, his family was still in Aachen, Germany, but planned to join him.

After several months of working in Otto’s office, Miep was offered permanent employment at Opekta. She learned one day that Otto had rented an apartment in the same South Amsterdam area as her adopted family where the Franks were to join their husband and father. Her first meeting with Anne Frank took place in the office where she sat with Anne while her mother and father took coffee. Miep remembered that encounter: “Watching Anne, I thought, ‘Now, here’s the kind of child I would like to have someday. Quiet, obedient, curious about everything.’”¹⁰

Little did Miep know that as the clouds settled over Germany and Hitler implemented his infamous Final Solution, Anne would look to her for safekeeping. Miep had a taste of the anti-Semitism that plagued the Jews when the lady she had replaced, Miss Heel, returned to the office

and began to spout disdain for all the Jewish refugees who had fled Germany. Miep quickly silenced her vitriol, but the atmosphere in the office descended into one of taut detachment.