

anne frank house

One day they simply weren't there any more...

On the desolate expanse of the Lüneburger Heide, the former site of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, stands a small memorial to Anne and Margot Frank. Flowers and tokens of remembrance are often left there, as if it were their grave. In reality they, like tens of thousands of other victims of Bergen-Belsen, died at an unknown time in an unknown place.

What we know of the history of Bergen-Belsen is largely based on a few preserved archive documents, camp diaries and testimonies of survivors, because in March 1945 the camp guards destroyed virtually all of the camp records in order to obliterate the evidence. Moreover, the British troops who liberated the camp burned all the barracks to the ground soon after the liberation on 15 April 1945 to prevent the spread of epidemics, so almost all traces of the camp were erased.

Search

In the absence of adequate documentation, it is difficult to establish the facts. The complex history of the camp has been charted, as far as possible, by Alexandra-Eileen Wenck in her book *Zwischen Menschenhandel und Endlösung: das Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen* ('Between Human Trafficking and Final Solution: the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp') and by researchers from the Bergen-Belsen Memorial. After the war, the Dutch Red Cross had the task of tracing missing persons, or confirming their deaths, and to this end they interviewed as many survivors as possible. The former Dutch National Bureau for War Documentation also collected eyewitness statements. To discover the fate of his daughters, Otto Frank did something similar on a smaller scale after his return to Amsterdam. He tracked down survivors who had been in the same camps as Anne and Margot. On 29 October 1945 he wrote to Nanette Blitz, a former classmate of Anne who was also a fellow inmate of the camps: 'Did you also see them in the last days, when they were sick? I would be very grateful to hear something more from you about this'. Nanette had heard from a fellow camp inmate that Anne and Margot arrived in Bergen-Belsen on 3 November 1944. She wrote to tell Otto Frank this, and added: 'I was not in their barracks, but I often visited them.' These visits continued until January 1945. In combination with the scarce camp diaries and administrative documents, such memories can provide valuable information.

The Anne Frank House has carried out new research into the last months of Anne Frank and her sister Margot, with the aim of gathering more information on their time in Bergen-Belsen and their deaths. Official documents place their death on 31 March 1945, but where does this date come from? The archives of the Red Cross, the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen and the Bergen-Belsen Memorial were studied, together with as many testimonies of survivors as possible. Research was also carried out into the existing literature. From this a picture has emerged of what happened in the camp in the last months before it was liberated. This is the story of the Jewish girl Anne, who was destined to work as a slave labourer in the German war industry and to die in Bergen-Belsen.

Auschwitz

After their arrest, Anne and those who shared her hiding place in the 'secret annexe' in Amsterdam were first taken to the Westerbork transit camp, and then put on a transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau on 3 September 1944. The transport arrived there on the night of 5 to 6 September. Anne, together with her mother Edith, sister Margot and Auguste van Pels, who was with them in hiding, were sent to Birkenau. Like all the other women on this transport who survived the initial selection on arrival, they ended up in a section of the camp that housed prisoners designated for slave labour. The



German war industry was facing a severe labour shortage, and since the summer of 1944 prisoners increasingly served as a solution to this problem.

Anne remained in Birkenau for two months, together with her mother and sister. There she will have undergone the tattooing of a number on her forearm and the shaving of her head, being made to stand for hours on roll call, the violence of the camp guards and other mistreatment. And there was a constant lurking danger: a skin rash, fever or wound could mean being sent to the gas chamber at the next selection.

On 26 October 1944, several hundred women in Birkenau were selected to be sent to work as slave labourers at other locations. Anne, Margot and Edith were not selected.

Another selection followed four days later. Rosa de Winter describes this selection in August 1945 in her book 'Escaped from the gas chamber'. Countless women, including herself, Anne, Margot and Edith, were made to stand naked on the parade ground. Around a thousand women, sick but still considered capable of forced labour, were put on a transport. A camp doctor now also selected Anne and Margot. Because Edith stayed behind, mother and daughters were separated for the first time. Locked in a barracks, Anne and Margot waited for a whole morning, then after hours on roll call they were forced into cattle wagons. A hunk of bread, a piece of sausage or cheese, a little margarine and one small barrel of drinking water per wagon was all they had to sustain them. On the night of 1 November 1944, with around seventy others in a locked wagon, they left Auschwitz-Birkenau, with no idea of their destination.

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The journey lasted for two days. The train often halted, there were shootings, and the doors were occasionally opened for a short time. The destination was unknown, and the fear was overwhelming. There are no accounts from people who saw Anne and Margot during this terrible journey, but the conditions speak for themselves: hunger, thirst, sickness and the loss of their mother. On 3 November 1944 the train arrived near Bergen in Germany. An eight-kilometer forced march through woods and heathland to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp still awaited the prisoners. It was cold and wet, and the women were thinly dressed. They were escorted by armed guards with vicious dogs. The constant gunfire at the nearby Wehrmacht firing range was terrifying. On arrival in the camp the prisoners were given a piece of cloth with a new camp number to be worn on their clothes. The numbers on their arms no longer counted, because every camp had its own registration system.

Inside the barbed wire enclosure of Bergen-Belsen, on an area of flat ground, stood around fifteen large tents, which since August 1944 had served as accommodation for the large transports of slave labourers. Thousands of women had passed through here before Anne and Margot, sometimes for only a few days, in transit to a labour camp or factory. There was no lighting in this section of the camp, and the water supply was primitive. A ditch served as a latrine. The tents leaked, and they were overcrowded. The straw that served as bedding was teeming with lice. Shortly after Anne's arrival, on 7 November 1944, a violent storm caused widespread destruction in the tent camp, with deaths and injuries resulting in the panic that followed. The screaming could be heard in other parts of the camp. Renata Laqueur, who was held in the so-called Sternlager and kept a diary, wrote on 13 November 1944: 'Last week a violent autumn storm blew down several tents in the night in the pouring rain, and the women, with almost no clothing or shelter, are lying unprotected in the cold.' The women from the tent camp were temporarily housed in a number of storage huts, before being moved to barracks. Fellow inmate Annelore Daniel told of how she and her sister Ellen were held in the same barracks in Bergen-Belsen as Anne, Margot and Auguste van Pels. Annelore remembered that she thought Auguste van Pels was the girls' mother. The three always stayed together. The



barracks were separated from the Sternlager by a double barbed-wire barricade.

The Sternlager, or 'Star Camp', so called because the prisoners wore their own clothes with a Star of David on them, was set up as a division of Bergen-Belsen in April 1943. The inmates had papers that meant they could be exchanged for Germans interned in other countries, or for foreign currency. Families stayed together, and could keep their luggage. But little came of the exchange plan in practice. Conditions were less harsh in the Sternlager at first, but soon deteriorated as, from August 1944, Bergen-Belsen became badly overcrowded due to the massive influx of slave labourers.

Meetings

What else do we know about Anne in Bergen-Belsen? There are few eyewitness accounts that might provide evidence. Moreover, the same applies to camp survivors as to anyone else: human memory is fallible. It is extremely difficult to establish a reliable chronology from these sources. But still some general anchor points can be found. Anne and Margot also had to endure the infamous roll calls: standing for hours on end, regardless of ill health or weather conditions, for as long as it took until the number of prisoners tallied. The sick and the weak were not selected for work, and so remained in the barracks. Annelore Daniel, who was in the same barracks as the Frank sisters and Auguste van Pels, remembers that they were not put to work.

Nanette Blitz recalls that she saw Anne the first time behind barbed wire. According to a surviving transport list, Nanette was moved from the Sternlager to the same section of the camp as Anne and Margot on 5 December 1944. She went in search of her former classmate, and they met on several occasions.

Looking back, Nanette said it was a miracle that they recognised one another: 'She was no more than a skeleton by then. She was wrapped in a blanket; she couldn't bear to wear her clothes any more because they were crawling with lice.'

Nanette saw Anne for the last time in January 1945. There were large-scale movements of prisoners within the camp in this period. Nanette wrote to Otto Frank of a 'great migration'. It was impossible for the inmates to keep track of who had been moved where.

The prisoners in Bergen-Belsen constantly searched for their family and friends. The many new transports that arrived in the camp rekindled these searches. Ruth Wiener, who knew Margot Frank from the Jewish Lyceum in Amsterdam, was held in the Sternlager, and wrote in her diary on 20 December 1944: 'Anne and Margot Frank in the other camp'. Prisoners sometimes met in the semidarkness at the fence that separated the two camps, and exchanged messages. This meant taking a great risk, but still it went on.

Various witnesses recount that they also saw Anne at the fence. Several times she met Hanneli Goslar, her childhood friend from Amsterdam, who had been in the Sternlager since early 1944. And it has emerged from recently held interviews that the sisters Ilse and Martha van Collem, acquaintances of the Franks from the Jewish Reformed Congregation of Amsterdam, were also present there.

Hanneli remembers that she threw a package over the barbed wire to Anne in early February 1945. A document from the Red Cross shows that Hanneli's grandmother received a food parcel from that organisation at the end of January. According to Hanneli, the meetings at the fence came about thanks to Auguste van Pels. So the first meeting must have taken place before 7 February 1945, because on this day Auguste was sent to Raguhn for forced labour. According to Hanneli, Margot was already too ill to come to the fence. Hanneli herself places her last contact with Anne in the first half of February.



The end

From December 1944, the Russian army were making such rapid advances that large transports of prisoners were sent westwards as the concentration camps in Poland were evacuated.

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became overcrowded, and emergency measures were taken, intended to resolve the worst of the problems. And so around 20 January 1945 the women's camp was expanded onto the site of the former camp for Russian prisoners of war. Despite this, infectious diseases broke out due to the overcrowding and the appalling standards of hygiene. From January 1945, typhus rapidly reached epidemic proportions in the women's camp. The rations were cut. On some days there was nothing at all to eat, and the water supply stagnated. There were no gas chambers at Bergen-Belsen, but in the two months before the liberation sometimes over a thousand people were dying a day. The crematorium could not handle the sheer volume of corpses, and dead bodies lay all around. The SS guards increasingly withdrew from the camp, and abandoned the inmates to the arbitrary will of the Kapos.

Rachel van Amerongen and Jannie Brilleslijper, acquaintances from Westerbork, saw that Anne and Margot had the symptoms of typhus. Annelore Daniel, who was in the same barracks, also noticed the symptoms. Rachel and Annelore, like Auguste van Pels, were sent to Raguhn for forced labour on 7 February 1945, so their observations must date from before this time.

The symptoms of typhus, after an incubation period of around a week, include severe headaches, muscle pain and high fever, followed some five days later by skin rash and delirium. Because of the lice infesting the bedstraw and her clothes, Anne was exposed to the main carrier of epidemic typhus for an extended period. This puts Nanette's description of Anne as a 'skeleton', no longer wearing her lice-infested clothes, into sharp relief. She saw Anne for the last time in January, and by that time she was clearly already gravely ill.

Margot was no longer able to meet Hanneli by the fence. By now she was in an even worse condition than her sister. The fact that they were both so ill explains why they were not sent to Raguhn. In fact, this is where their trail runs cold.

After the war, the Red Cross attempted to establish an approximate place and date of death of the countless missing persons. At the time this was of vital importance for surviving relatives who wanted to remarry, or to settle questions of inheritance. Jannie Brilleslijper's sister Lientje, who was also held in Bergen-Belsen, told the Red Cross that Anne died in March. The Red Cross concluded that, in its official consideration, her death occurred between 1 and 31 March 1945. The Dutch authorities later set the official date of death at 31 March for both Anne and Margot.

According to the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, most deaths caused by typhus occur around twelve days after the first symptoms appear. Because Rachel van Amerongen, Hanneli Goslar, Nanette Blitz and Annelore Daniel already recognised the symptoms in Anne and Margot before 7 February, and because they were already in a weakened state when they arrived at Bergen-Belsen, it is unlikely that they survived until the end of March. In view of this, the date of their death is more likely to be some time in February. The exact date is unknown. In the words of Rachel: 'One day they simply weren't there any more'.

