

## FOREWORD

*Spur eines Kindes* by Ernst Schnabel (known in English as *The Footsteps of Anne Frank*) is a special book, a book with a history. Special because of its origins, because of the place that it occupies in the 'world of Anne Frank', because of its proximity in time to the events described, and not least, because of the emotional involvement of the author in the fate of Anne Frank. A book that 50 years after its first publication in German, and many reprints and numerous translations later, is now rightly available again, because it brings to life history through the words and perceptions of those who were directly involved.

Ernst Schnabel began his career as a writer in the years before World War II. During the war he served in the German navy, and afterwards found himself working for the Northwest German Broadcasting (NWDR) in Hamburg. This radio broadcaster was created by the military government in the British zone of occupation in Germany, and it had close ties with the BBC. Schnabel made a cultural programme for the NWDR, and gained experience at the BBC in London. Here he became familiar with a genre of radio documentary, the so-called radio feature: a subject is brought to life through a combination of reports, interviews, documentation and elements of the radio play, all in a dramatic setting. For Germany, this was something completely new, and in the early fifties Schnabel acquired a great reputation as a pioneer in the field. As chief dramatist and controller at the NWDR he made countless documentaries.

*Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank* (*The Diary of Anne Frank*), from the publisher Lambert Schneider, first appeared in Germany in November 1950, in an edition of 4,600 copies. The sales figures were disappointing and it took a long time for a second edition to appear.

The mid nineteen-fifties saw increasing worldwide interest in Anne Frank and her diary. This was the time when the stage adaptation by American writer couple Goodrich and Hackett was drawing full houses in America, and in the meantime Europe had had its own premiere of the play. Negotiations were also under way to perform the play in Germany. Around that time, in 1957, the Anne Frank House was established as an independent non-profit organisation so that the family's hiding place at 263 Prinsengracht in Amsterdam could be preserved.

Otto Frank considered the wide distribution of the diary among young Germans to be very important, but in his view that was only possible with a cheaper edition. He was right, for in March 1955 after the paperback of *The Diary of Anne Frank* was printed by Fischer Bücherei in an edition of 50,000 copies, 30,000 were sold within the first month. Then, with the arrival of the 375 thousandth copy of the paperback in the spring of 1957, the publisher suggested that Otto Frank provide a brief introduction to the book. The publisher had received many letters, and an increasing number of people wanted to know more about this girl, the author of the diary. Who was she, where did she come from? The Dutch and German editions differed from each other. That prompted questions. And not all the questioners appeared to be in good faith. During this period the first voices raising doubts about the authenticity of the diary were heard, and Otto Frank was

determined to dispel these doubts. Eventually, in collaboration with Otto Frank, Dr. Fischer of the publishing house decided on approaching Ernst Schnabel – not for an introduction, but for a whole new book in the same paperback series. In 1955 Ernst Schnabel had already considered the idea of making a radio adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and he had been in contact with Otto Frank. Frank had been very interested, but before the premiere of the play in Germany a radio adaptation was out of the question.

Fischer arranged a meeting in May 1957 with Otto Frank and Ernst Schnabel in Frankfurt am Main. They were quick to agree. Ernst Schnabel would write a book for Fischer Bücherei and also make a radio adaptation based on documents, interviews with people whom Anne Frank had known, and especially with Otto Frank himself. The final version would be subject to Otto Frank's approval. They had to act quickly, because the book was due for release in the spring of 1958. The German premiere of the play was scheduled for October 1, 1957. Otto Frank was fully behind the project and lost no time, as is shown by a letter written the day after the meeting in Frankfurt and sent to *Aufbau*, the leading German-Jewish immigrants' magazine in New York:

'Fischer Publishers is planning to create a book based on authentic information about Anne. I only came into contact with a few people that were together with my wife and my two daughters Margot and Anne in Birkenau-Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen. Those that I spoke with briefly after the war, I've lost track of again. I would now like, through an announcement or small article in *Aufbau*, to ask anyone who was together with my family in the camps to get in contact with me. I leave it to your judgment, how best to proceed. Of course, I will pay for the cost of an advertisement or an article.'

In *The Footsteps of Anne Frank* and in the radio adaptation, the hand of the documentary maker is clearly recognisable.

The book reads like a radio report and Schnabel's notes for it convey real atmosphere. In a letter he wrote to Miep Gies in 1957 about this:

'I need living people. Otherwise the result will be a dead thing. And I need also living, tangible people so that the reader can feel that Anne was living among real people and not among paper witnesses.'

Ernst Schnabel followed the 'trace' of Anne Frank and interviewed a large number of people who had consciously or unconsciously crossed her path. In the spring of 1957 Ernst Schnabel was in Amsterdam, and he literally followed her footsteps: to school, to her favourite ice cream shop, and around the neighbourhood she described in her diary. He made several visits to the hiding place, talked in particular with Otto Frank, and together with him visited friends, teachers and other acquaintances of Anne. Schnabel also spoke with Dr. Lou de Jong, director of the Institute for War Documentation created after the war in the Netherlands, and did his own research there. During his time in Amsterdam, Schnabel met several times with George Stevens, who at that time was working on shooting the Hollywood film version of the diary for Twentieth Century Fox. After Amsterdam he visited Bergen-Belsen, Frankfurt am Main and met once again with Otto Frank and his second wife in Switzerland. In early July 1957 Schnabel had finished his research and he set himself to writing. Based on the

data gathered from his witnesses, on documents and his own observations he created *The Footsteps of Anne Frank*, a personal, passionate portrait of Anne Frank.

As agreed Schnabel presented the manuscript to Otto Frank. Miep and Jan Gies, Bep Voskuijl, Johannes Kleiman, Victor Kugler (faithful helpers while in hiding) and Charlotte Kaletta (widow of the dentist Pfeffer) and Dr. Lou de Jong also got to read the manuscript. They all gave very precise comments to Schnabel, most of which he took into account. He acted upon their comments meticulously, and with integrity. Whilst he was working on the book he always kept in mind – as he had written to Otto Frank – what Dr. Rudolph Hirsch at the publishing house had told him: ‘Do not under any circumstances, disturb the legend that is forming.’ And that is why he chose to let the trail of Anne dissolve in Bergen-Belsen.

But for Schnabel this legend had to be truthful and he did not want to give the story an end, a ‘death certificate’ based on someone’s dubious testimony about the last moments of Anne. At that time he had to take care in how he told Anne Frank’s story, to avoid being met with disbelief and hostility. Schnabel wanted to stir awareness and empathy and gradually a willingness amongst people to accept responsibility for what had happened to Anne Frank and the millions of Jews under Hitler.

Schnabel was not a historian or scientist, but a writer and radio producer. He let the witnesses speak, and this is precisely the characteristic of the book.

In the vast sea of publications about her that have appeared since *The Footsteps of Anne Frank*, the memories of those interviewed have often been accepted as established fact, and repeated again and again. It is obvious that in the past 50 years, some of these recollections have been overtaken by historical research, and also many new facts have been discovered. But despite this aspect, the book remains of great value, because of the integrity of the author, his connection with his subject and the fact that he was close to the historical events. He heard everything first hand. The overwhelming awareness of Anne Frank was still new. On his visit to Bergen-Belsen, he saw the remains of the barracks burned by the British to prevent the spread of infectious diseases after the liberation of the camp. He made several visits to the hiding place on the Prinsengracht, then not yet a museum, and only recently saved from demolition. The pictures on the walls of Anne’s room were taken to safety by Otto Frank, the hinges of the bookcase hung loose. On the floor of Anne’s room, he saw a bunch of flowers, left by one of the first visitors – visitors who increasingly sought out the former hiding place on their own.

*The Footsteps of Anne Frank* has had many editions, and been translated into 21 languages. Surprisingly there has never been a complete edition in Dutch. This was at the express request of the helpers. They did not want their real names to appear in the book. They understood the importance of the book for Otto Frank and therefore granted it their full cooperation, but they did not want to be known themselves. The radio adaptation was not allowed to be broadcast in the Netherlands, either. The helpers felt that they had ‘just’ done their duty, and for them the tragic outcome was still too fresh in the memory.

For the radio broadcast of *The Footsteps of Anne Frank*, Ernst Schnabel received in 1958, the Prix des droits de l'Homme at the Prix Italia, and in 1959 the Heinrich Stahl Prize from the Jewish Community of Berlin.

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