

FRAME STORY ABOUT TWO ANNAS

Introduction

One of the most famous books describing the tragedy of the Holocaust and World War II is certainly *The Diary of Anne Frank* (*Het Achterhuis. Dagboekbrieven 14 Juni 1942 – 1 Augustus 1944, Amsterdam 1947*). and the story of Anne Frank is the best-known account of all tragically broken children's fates. There is hardly anyone in the world today who has not heard of her, either by reading her diary or watching one of the many films or documentaries describing her family's tragic destiny. Yet she is just one of the millions of children with a broken childhood. Her diary has become the symbol of suffering and persecution of those who were victimized only because they were different, had different religious beliefs, different nationalities or skin colour. Millions of readers, both school-age and adult, have identified with her. Her fate is a reminder of the growing intolerance and hatred that looms over the civilization.

Her diary describes the hiding of the Frank family, their days spent in the cramped space of shelters, and their fears, desires and hopes – until they were arrested. Then begins the journey of no return for many family members, including Anne Frank. We know that the Frank family was separated, that they survived Auschwitz and were taken to Bergen-Belsen at the end of the war, where presumably all trace of the family is lost. The surviving father found his daughter's diary, and Anne Frank goes into legend – into history from that moment on. It is fascinating that people who were with her in the hell of Bergen-Belsen, who remembered her and maintained the memory of her, could testify until recently about her last days, her suffering and death. One of them was Ana Kovačič, née Mislej, from the small city of Tolmin in Slovenia, a brave participant in the People's Resistance Movement and a Bergen-Belsen prisoner. In the following text, I will try to use the frame story

method (Malewitz, 2021), to bring the lives of these two girls who met in the impossible conditions of a concentration camp during World War II closer.

Methodology

This paper employs a combination of narrative techniques and historical methods to explore the lives of two young girls, Ana Mislej and Anne Frank, who met in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in early 1945. The central narrative technique used is the frame story method, a literary structure that allows for the presentation of stories within a larger, overarching narrative (Malewitz, 2021; Rivera, 2021). In this case, the frame story technique is applied to narrate the parallel lives of the two girls, each with different origins and social status, yet sharing the same name and a transformative experience in the camp. This method is used to contrast their backgrounds, illustrating their friendship despite the language barrier and the extreme conditions they faced together in the camp. By framing their stories within a larger narrative context, the frame story technique deepens the thematic exploration of human resilience and the impact of historical events on personal lives. In addition to the frame story method, the paper also utilizes the cultural-historical method, which is crucial for understanding the broader socio-political and historical context in which these events took place (Černelić, 2007). Moreover, this research incorporates oral history, specifically through the interview method, to provide a more personal and authentic portrayal of the experiences of those who lived through the atrocities of the Holocaust (Glučina, 2021).

How we found Ana Kovačič

Ana Kovačič, maiden name Mislej (also known by nickname Anica), was a lady we met in 2006 when we started implementing the project “Istrian destinies.” We learned about Mrs. Kovačič and her story thanks to her fellow camp detainee, Mrs. Rina Smajla, from the village of Muntić near Pula, and we promised her we would interview Ana. Rina went through the hell of Bergen-Belsen as well and was eventually deported from there in late January 1945. She spent the very end of the war in the camp. She was one of those brave women who, after the war, found the strength to move on and did not

let their generation's horrors be forgotten. »Dirt, no food, there was always some kohlrabi cooked with some white crumbs floating on top. For they had to do their experiments on so many women, and pardon me, but what would they do if all women menstruated?« (Smajla, 2017) Rina remembers the hard work of collecting and burying the deceased inmates. Since the crematorium was torn down, the Nazi criminals could no longer hide the traces of their crimes. She remembered:

»The number of dead people was unbelievable. I dragged more dead people on my back than I dare remember. We dug graves for the dead, ten metres long and five metres deep, so we made stairs in the ground and helped each other take out the dirt. You could feel the smell of burning flesh for months and months. The most terrifying thing was when they separated mothers from children. Children screamed, mothers screamed. There were so many dead children there, and nobody did a thing.« (Smajla, 2017)

Until her last years of life, Mrs Rina Smajla was visiting schools and socializing with children, spreading messages of peace and tolerance, and testifying against war and violence. One day, she gave us an excerpt from the daily newspaper *Vjesnik u srijedu*, dated 17 March 1965, with the title »I knew Anne Frank« (Vidić, 1965, 9), and asked us: »Can you find this woman?«. Although it had been over 50 years since this article was published, she kept it as if it were a relic. The article stated that Ana Kovačič from the village of Idrija pri Bači near Tolmin, Slovenia, knew Anne Frank and was a friend until her death. Although she did not know Anne or Ana, Rina seemed to have an invisible bond with them, felt only by those who survived such horrible things. Driven by curiosity, we went to Idrija pri Bači in the spring of 2006, looking for Ana Kovačič, the person who gave the 1965 interview, without knowing anything about her. After several hours of searching, we were informed that Ana was still alive and was spending her retirement days in a nursing home in Zatoľmin (a suburb of Tolmin). We found her on 10 May 2006, had a nice conversation with her and conveyed greetings from her friend Rina. We also visited her again on 6 May 2017 thus preserving her testimony (Kovačič, 2017).

Ana Mislej

Ana Mislej was born on 28 March 1923 in Veliko Polje near Sežana. She spent her childhood in Prestranek near Postojna and witnessed the fascist regime as a young girl. In 1918, Fascist Italy occupied Slovenia, which was split between the guidance of the provinces of Trieste and Pula. Postojna became part of the province of Trieste. Her father was a barrel maker, and her mother a housewife. She had three brothers. Her childhood was harsh. There was poverty. Ana helped her mother, went to school, and worked in the fields. At the beginning of the Second World War one of her brothers joined the so-called Battaglioni Speciali, special battalions of the Italian army that young men were recruited to on the eve of WWII. These battalions were normally working units and unarmed. From 1940 to 1943, the Italian authorities engaged conscripts and reservists for war needs. Instead of joining the regular army, Slovenian and Croatian soldiers formed the Battaglione Speciale, aimed at their isolation from the recruiting resistance and used as free workforce. The other two brothers were taken by the White Guard (Bjelogardejci) to Trieste. The brothers were saved from concentration camps by their then-employer, and Ana personally went to take them to the Trieste prison. The Fascist regime was racist towards the Slovenian people. In 1943, under the illegal name Rinka, she collaborated with the NOP (National Liberation Movement), showing extreme courage in rescuing her brother from the Fascist prison. Her brother later joined the partisans, but Ana had an unfortunate path. After being accused of treason, together with her friend Julijana Sluga, she was arrested, and both were imprisoned in Gorica and deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in January 1945 (Kovačič, 2017).

Anne Frank

Annelies Marie Frank (Anne Frank) was born on 12 June 1929 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Her parents were Otto and Edith Frank. For the first 5 years of her life, Anne lived with her parents and older sister, Margot, in an apartment on the outskirts of Frankfurt. After the Nazis came to power in January 1933, Otto Frank (Anne Frank's father) left Frankfurt, Germany, for Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. The rest of the Frank family soon followed. Anne was the last family member to arrive in Amsterdam in February 1934. In July 1942, German authorities began systematically

deporting Jews from throughout the Netherlands to concentration camps and killing centres in the east. That same month, the Frank family went into hiding. They remained in hiding for the next two years. The German SS and police discovered the Frank family in 1944 and deported them to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Later that year, Anne and her sister Margot were transported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Anne and Margot died in Bergen-Belsen in February or March 1945 (Who was Anne Frank?, 2024).

Life in the Camp

Life in the camp was unbearable. They were sprayed with cold water, battered and insulted. There was complete chaos in the camp. Several testimonies of persons confined in the same concentration camps as Anne Frank have been preserved. Inmates saw her and her family in Westerbork, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Particularly valuable eyewitness accounts concern Anne's stay in Bergen-Belsen. Few witnesses saw and spent time with Anne Frank and testified about her last moments. Marianne Brandes-Brilleslijper, a Dutch Holocaust survivor and one of the last persons who saw Anne Frank, said in an interview: "Anne was sick and hallucinating and had thrown away her clothes because she was afraid of lice." A few days later, Jannie went to check on Margot and Anne and found them both dead. Hannah Goslar saw Anne in Bergen-Belsen and stated in her interview: "It wasn't the same Anne. It was a broken girl... it was horrible. She immediately started crying and told me: "I don't have parents anymore"... I can't help thinking that had Anne known her father had been alive, perhaps she would have found more strength to survive." (Brandes-Brilleslijper, 2003).

Irma Sonnenberg Menkel was in the same barracks with Anne: "One of the children in my barracks toward the war's end was Anne Frank, whose diary became famous after her death. I didn't know her family beforehand, and I don't recall much about her, but I remember her as a quiet child. When I heard later that she was 15 when she was in the camps, I was surprised. She seemed younger to me. She was a nice, fine person. She would say, "Irma, I am very sick." I said, "No, you are not so sick." She wanted to be reassured that she wasn't. When she slipped into a coma, I took her in my arms. She didn't know that she was dying. She didn't know that she was so sick.... Typhus was a terrible problem, especially for children. Of 500 in my barracks, maybe 100

got it, and most of them died. Many others starved to death. When Anne Frank got sick with typhus, I remember telling her she could stay in the barracks – she didn't have to go to roll call" (Sonnenberg Menkel, 2012).

In an interview Nanette Blitz Konig, a friend of Anne Frank from Amsterdam and a survivor of the concentration camp, stated: "When I saw her later in Belsen-Bergen concentration camp I was surprised. I am surprised we recognized each other, we were two skeletons. We hugged and cried together and talked. She only lived another week or two." (Blitz Konig, 2015)

Finally, Gena Turgel, also situated in the same barracks as Anne, gives her account of Anne's final moments: "Her bed was around the corner from me. She was delirious, terrible, burning up. I gave her cold water to wash her down. We did not know she was special, but she was lovely. I can still see her lying there with her face, which was so red as she had a breakout. And then she died" (Sheldon, 2018).

Ana and Anne

The dead ones were left all day at the place where death had found them. The Germans kept bringing in new prisoners. The barracks were occasionally so crowded that there was simply no room for everyone, so you would lie down at one end of the barracks and wake up at the other end. During the night, the exhausted inmates would just push each other, from one body to another. "I was in a group of barracks closest to the crematorium. Every day, I would look at the long lines of people and skeletons, slowly walking towards the crematorium. One of those days, in January or February of 1945, I noticed a skinny, exhausted, young girl crying sadly along the wire fence. "These are ours!" she said in German. "These are the Jews!" It was the first meeting between Ana and Anne. Ana remembered their first encounter very well. After a line of people had walked beside them, a young girl sat on a rock and cried. Ana comforted her and talked to her. Her father was in another camp, and she couldn't see him. We were all friends there because we were better off in a group. Later, I comforted her: "Don't cry, don't. I asked her name. She said I am Anne. And after that, I pressed her close to me and comforted her; she was completely alone". Ana was very moved by that tiny, skinny, big-eyed little girl. "She was so tiny, and she was quite lively, but she was just scared.

Also, she wore a grey dress with a dark square cloth sewn on her back”. Little by little, spending time together, they began to understand each other. They communicated in Polish (perhaps also in Czech) because of the similarities to the Slovenian language spoken by Ana. They were not in the barracks together, but they spent time together daily. Ana was not afraid for her own life, but she said that was not the case with Anne. Left alone, still a young girl (she was only 17 in the last months of her life), she waited for the day of her death (Kovačič, 2017).

After the death of her mother and sister, Anne became weaker day by day, complaining to Ana that she would not last until the end of the war. Ana remembers that Anne Frank was extremely weak, beginning to lose hope. She comforted and encouraged her to find strength and endure a little bit more because the end of the war was approaching. “I saw that she was sick. However, we just told her to be patient, to hold on; I held her, and I kept telling her, don’t die, no, no, hold on. She said, she won’t make it, she said that. I won’t.” Anne got typhus and died in February/March 1945. Ana, like all the other prisoners, was soon released by the Americans, and after her recovery, she returned to her homeland and began a new life. “I was sick at the time, I was in hospitals”. Before we got home, we went there where liberation was. The Americans examined us, and we, since we needed some time to recover, they did not immediately let us go, no? But after that, they drove us; it was in August, and in September, we came home.”

Conclusion

The use of the frame story technique, combined with the interview method and cultural-historical analysis, provides new insights into the experiences of Ana Mislej and Anne Frank, enriching the narrative with a deeper understanding of their friendship and the broader historical context in which it unfolded. The frame story technique adds a layer of depth by framing Ana’s memories within the context of Anne Frank’s legacy. Through Ana’s reflection on their shared time in Bergen-Belsen, the story of Anne Frank’s diary becomes more personal and multidimensional. Ana’s testimony, as shared through interviews, offers a unique and lived perspective of Anne’s final days, which are not fully captured in the diary. This personal connection gives an emotional and firsthand understanding of the broader historical narrative, illustrating

how individuals experience and respond to the horrors of war and genocide. In terms of practical applications, the findings from this analysis can be used in the classroom to teach students not only about the historical events of the Holocaust, but also about the personal experiences and emotional dimensions of the survivors. The frame story technique allows students to engage with the material on a deeper level, fostering empathy and understanding through the lens of personal testimony. By examining the correspondence and transcripts of survivor interviews, students can learn the importance of individual voices in preserving historical memory. This method also encourages students to reflect on how history is transmitted and remembered through the experiences of those who lived it, helping them grasp the lasting impact of traumatic events on individuals and societies.

Anica wasn't aware that the story of the little girl that she had met behind the Bergen-Belsen wire would be published after the war as "The Diary of Anne Frank," a diary describing the fate of a Jewish family going from hiding in a secret shelter to being arrested by the Nazi police. Of course, she could not have known that this would become one of the most-read books on the Holocaust, a must-read for millions of children who, through her story, would identify with the suffering all victims of the Nazis endured. Ana Mislej survived Bergen-Belsen, returned to everyday life, married, and got a job. When the diary was published, she was proud that Anne had left a trace through her diary and raised people's awareness of the proportions of the Nazi regime's evil.

The story of Ana Kovačič, an elderly woman from a retirement home, is one of the many stories of those who survived death camps. This story is not much different from the stories of other people who also survived the sufferings and the horrors of these camps. Yet, her friendship with Anne Frank gives her exclusivity and uniqueness, a new dimension that seems to build on the story from Anne's diary and, in some ways, ends that story.

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