

Everyone's a Critic

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The recent death in the Netherlands of Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank and preserved the diary that stirred the conscience of the world, was especially significant to Ann Arborite Irene Butter--a retired U-M professor, Dutch Holocaust survivor, and one of the last people to see Anne Frank alive

Butter met Gies in 1994 when she came to Ann Arbor to receive the University of Michigan's Raoul Wallenberg Award. News of Gies's death "reminded me how fortunate we were to have such a treasure in our presence," recalls Butter. Butter cherishes photographs of herself with Gies, along with a faded, Dutch first edition of the diary--autographed by Miep.

Butter had known Anne Frank by sight when both were growing up in Amsterdam. Later, imprisoned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Butter accompanied Anne's friend, Hannelli Pick-Goslar ("Lies" in the diary), as Pick-Goslar tossed a bag of clothes to the young diarist over a barbed wire fence. "Anne was bald and covered only with a blanket," Butter recalls. "That was the last I saw of her."

Butter helped establish the Wallenberg medal, which honors individuals who risk their lives to help others. It is named for 1935 U-M grad Raoul Wallenberg, rescuer of Hungarian Jews. Gies, Otto Frank's former office manager, was one of a small group of employees who hid and fed the Franks in their office building for two years. When Gies spoke at the awards ceremony, Butter recalls, the auditorium was packed, including students no older than Anne was when she wrote the diary. Enthralled, they listened and asked questions ("Would Anne have married Peter?").

Gies "came to my house for dinner," during her Ann Arbor visit, recalls Butter, and the two women talked in Dutch. Although they didn't stay in touch, Butter had heard from people close to Gies that she was failing--she was 100 when she died.

Gies always insisted she was just an "ordinary person, no hero," Butter recalls. But she also "felt she had a message only she could tell," says Butter. "Many parents raise their children to believe that if you behave, nothing bad will happen to you. But the Jews were good people, and looked what happened to them."

Butter, whose father perished in the camps, and who herself gives talks about her experiences, does not consider Gies "ordinary." "She could never have considered not doing it [helping to hide the Franks]," says Butter. Such a clarity of moral vision, Butter speculates, characterizes people like Gies "who care so much about other human beings that they took the risks and made the sacrifices."

