

Review

Rosemary Sullivan:

The betrayal of Anne Frank: A cold case investigation

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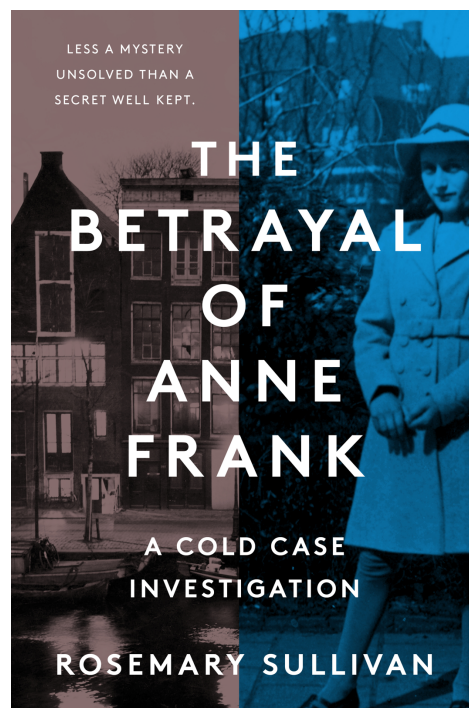
Het verraad van Anne Frank: Het baanbrekende onderzoek van een internationaal coldcaseteam in Nederland

Hans E. van Riemsdijk and Marijke Gheeraert (trans.)

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Reviewed by Bettine Siertsema



The betrayer of Anne Frank and the power of the media

As a teenager I used to devour stories about the great mysteries in human history. Who was the man in the iron mask imprisoned during the reign of Louis XIV? What happened to Hitler's right-hand man Martin Bormann? Who was Jack the Ripper? What happened aboard the abandoned ship *Mary Celeste* in 1871? These are all enigmas, to date unsolved. The question that Rosemary Sullivan's book tries to answer would not be out of place on this list of great mysteries. Who betrayed the Frank family in their hiding place at the secret annex of Prinsengracht 263?

Sullivan is a skilled Canadian author who has earned recognition for her published works of poetry and biography, lacking however prior knowledge of the Netherlands or the Holocaust. At first sight, it appears that she did a commendable job with this piece of historical nonfiction, which she was commissioned to write. It reads like a detective story — and small wonder, since both its terminology and working method were borrowed from that genre by the project's initiators, Thijs Bayens and Pieter van Twisk, and the project's "lead case agent" (12),¹ Vince Pankoke, a retired FBI special agent. Bayens and Van Twisk — a filmmaker and journalist, respectively — amassed significant funding (a subsidy from the municipality of Amsterdam and advance payment from publishers) and assembled a team of criminologists, computer and forensic experts, and a number of young historians at the start of their careers; but they did not include a single established, let alone reputable, Holocaust historian.

Pankoke treated the mystery of the Franks' betrayal as a criminal cold case and focused on three crucial dimensions: knowledge, motive, and opportunity. First, all previous theories regarding the source of the betrayal were carefully examined: the notorious Ans van Dijk, who was sentenced to death after the war because she had betrayed dozens of fellow Jews; the warehouse's manager, Willem van Maaren; a former business partner of Otto Frank, Tonny Ahlers; the sister of one of the helpers who was in love with a German soldier; indiscreet neighbors; or just plain bad luck, since according to one theory the raid was supposedly aimed at exposing black market trade, not Jews in hiding. All of those suspects and theories were carefully weighed and found wanting. Only one name remained, which had been mentioned in an anonymous note that Otto Frank, the only survivor of the eight people in hiding in the secret annex, had received after the war. Frank himself barely took any action in response to the note, and certainly not toward the person who was named. Perhaps he was aware that all kinds of

¹ This is the term used in the Dutch edition of the book under review. Quotations from the book refer to that edition.

rumors and allegations were circulating in the postwar period for various reasons, mostly to leverage some type of advantage over other people.²

When the cold case investigation was completed and Sullivan finished her book, a sophisticated media campaign was launched. Major news outlets received advance copies only after agreeing to sign strict confidentiality agreements, making them unable to fact-check elements of the story before its official release. And so, on January 16, 2022 — the day of the book's release in the United States — the news was made public on the CBS television program *60 Minutes* that Anne Frank and her family had been betrayed by a Jewish notary named Arnold van den Bergh (Wertheim 2022). It admirably profiled the work of the cold-case team and used interviews with Bayens, Van Twisk, Pankoke and team researchers as proof of its claim. Many of the 1,200 newspapers worldwide that published this news story stressed in their headlines that it was a Jew who was guilty of the betrayal, without any reservation about the factuality of the allegation.

The next day, when the news was announced in the Netherlands, initial criticism by historians and representatives of the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the Anne Frank House began to take hold, gradually gaining intensity. In retrospect, the editors-in-chief of the Netherlands' most respected newspapers, *Volkscrant* and *NRC*, expressed regret over having signed an agreement of strict secrecy before publication, which enabled the conclusion of the cold case team to be disseminated unfiltered and unverified.³

Two months after the publication of Rosemary Sullivan's book, six well-known historians specializing in aspects of the Dutch persecution of the Jews, led by Professor Bart Wallet, presented a report in which the conclusions of the cold case team were thoroughly analyzed and refuted (Wallet et al. 2022a, 2022b).⁴ The criticism basically boiled down to the fact that the team had suffered from tunnel vision, and neglecting to critically evaluate the sources. Whatever fit the theory was assumed to be true; what did not fit was dismissed as irrelevant. If the team's prime suspect had been treated with the same judiciousness accorded the other theoretical options, the conclusion never would have been so unequivocally that "the notary did it." But now, the anonymous note led to all sorts of assumptions that gradually seemed to have metamorphosed into purported facts. That no well-informed historians were included in the investigation avenged itself. They could have shielded the cold case team from erroneous assumptions.

To name the most important of those erroneous assumptions: the Jewish Council, of which the notary Van den Bergh was a member, had no lists of hiding

² For readers of Dutch, see Droog (2022) for criticism on the dubious value attached to the anonymous note.

³ This regret was expressed in the TV program *Argos Medialogica* of June 7, 2022.

⁴ See for the English version of the report Wallet et al. (2022b).

addresses, even though this was suggested after the war by an interpreter accused of collaboration. Obviously, such a source, aimed at exonerating himself, should be regarded with suspicion rather than taken at face value. Thus, there is no sound basis upon which to assume that Van den Bergh possessed the necessary knowledge required for the Franks' betrayal. There is plenty to blame the Jewish Council for, particularly its advice to heed the call to report for so-called labour (an obvious euphemism) in the East and not go into hiding; but the accusation that the Jewish Council itself betrayed people in hiding to the Germans is so outrageous that it should be expressed only on the basis of ironclad and watertight evidence. That is not the case. Obviously, neither the cold case team nor the writer can be blamed for not having taken note of Bart van der Boom's (2022) major study of the Jewish Council, *De politiek van het kleinste kwaad*, since that book was published after their work had been completed; nevertheless, earlier studies of the Jewish Council, no more than Van der Boom's work, give any indication that such a form of betrayal ever took place.

The Jewish Council's *Sperren*, the temporary exemptions from deportations, were revoked in the summer of 1943; subsequently, Arnold van den Bergh found a hiding address for his children. When in January 1944 his Calmeyer application came to naught (an effort to attempt to deny his Jewish descent),⁵ he and his wife went into hiding as well, in the village of Laren. This is how the family survived the war. The fact that the cold case team could not find any trace of evidence that Van den Bergh had been in a concentration camp made him suspicious to the team, ignoring the obvious explanation. Would this suspicion also apply to the estimated 25,000 other Dutch Jews who survived in hiding? It is bitter enough as it is that only such a small percentage of the entire Dutch-Jewish population of 140,000 was able to escape deportation and annihilation

That Van den Bergh had sought safety by going into hiding meant that the element of "motive" was absent. In that situation, he would have done everything in his power not to draw attention to himself. His being in hiding is mentioned in two books, one by Raymund Schütz (2016) about the notarial profession during the war, and the other by Petra van den Boomgaard (2019) about the Calmeyer cases. The granddaughter of the notary, Mirjam Gorter, also reported the family's being in hiding to cold case team members, but they chose to ignore her information.

The remaining dimension of the case to be investigated was "opportunity." He had good contacts with high-ranking Nazis because he had been involved as a notary in the sale of the massive Goudstikker art collection to Hermann Göring;

⁵ Calmeyer was an official involved in researching the Jewish ancestry of persons applying to be "de-Jewishized." Van den Bergh had almost succeeded in obtaining that de-Jewishized status permanently when he was betrayed by the non-Jewish notary who was to take over his practice.

he therefore could have had direct telephone access to SS Lieutenant Julius Dettmann, the person who allegedly received the call about people in hiding at Prinsengracht 263 on the morning of August 4, 1944. As far as the cold case team was concerned, Van den Bergh's role in the Goudstikker affair made him suspicious one way or another. Contrary to what they claim, however, Van den Bergh was not himself active as an art dealer. The fact that he simply did his job and notarized deeds until February 1941 — when Jews were expelled from the profession — does not make him a suspect in any way either, although the book implies otherwise. ('The cold case team came across documents showing that in 1940 Van den Bergh was still acting as a notary on numerous transactions' [258-259]).⁶ Van den Bergh may have been in contact with Göring in 1940, but that does not justify the assumption that he was on good terms with high-ranking Nazis in 1944, apart from the question of whether that category would include Dettmann. It seems that the picture of Van den Bergh painted by the cold case team makes him fit the age-old image of a wealthy Jew who slyly uses contacts and circumstances to his advantage. That Van den Bergh was well off cannot be denied, but an examination of his pre- and post-war activities reveals that he was an engaged member of the Jewish community who used his knowledge and business contacts in the service of socially and economically disadvantaged fellow Jews. The book assumes that his alleged betrayal could have been a *quid pro quo*: in exchange for the betrayal of the Frank family, his own family was to be left in peace. Protecting his family as a motive could be considered an extenuating circumstance, but that does not remove the faint odor of the anti-Semitic stereotype in his portrayal.

The Dutch publisher Ambo Anthos responded to the counter-report by immediately withdrawing the book from publication and sale, while the German publisher abandoned publication altogether after severe criticism by leading German historians. The North American publisher HarperCollins apparently did not consider taking the same step as Ambo Anthos, although the counter-report by Bart Wallet et al. (2022a, 2022b) is available in English, while its initial presentation was conducted in English, making it readily available to a global audience. In any case, the damage has already been done. The reputation of a respectable and—until proven otherwise beyond a shadow of a doubt — innocent person has been irreparably damaged, especially in countries beyond the Netherlands, where the Dutch uproar barely made the newspapers.

⁶ Dutch version in *Het verraad van Anne Frank*: "Het coldcaseteam stuitte op stukken waaruit bleek dat Van den Bergh in 1940 nog altijd optrad als notaris bij tal van transacties" (258-259).

There are many lessons to be learned from the whole affair: a history lesson about source criticism, for example, and the necessity of contextualization when investigating cases from the past; a legal lesson about tunnel vision and the value of the presumption of innocence; a media ethics lesson about the dangers of the media that allow themselves to be seduced into going along with pledges of secrecy in the expectation of gaining an interesting scoop, as well as how commercial interests can contaminate sound research. (Tellingly, already during the fundraising stage, prior to the project's launch, a promise was made that a definitive perpetrator would be named, while a number of well-known experts listed in the application for funding as being part of the investigation, but who were only consulted once, now want nothing to do with the whole project.)

Of course, there are some praiseworthy aspects to be noted. The book is well written, and the reader cannot help but be captivated by the unfolding story of the cold case team's quest. The book offers valuable insights concerning the gradual development of the persecution of the Jews, from the first seemingly innocent measures to the later brutal raids and imprisonment, including the cunning ways the Nazis pressured Jews who were caught hiding to betray fellow Jews, as well as the shockingly easy way in which some Dutch individuals were tempted by financial rewards, albeit astonishingly low sums, to inform on neighbours or acquaintances. The book elicits admiration and compassion for Otto Frank and no less for Arnold van den Bergh who before and in the early years of the war sought ways to flee the country, and when that proved impossible, looked for other ways to escape the fate designed for them by planning the hiding place, and by trying for the Calmeyer status. It also shows how the American government created all kinds of difficulties to prevent European Jews from entering the country, even those who were more than capable of providing for themselves. In many cases, such as the Frank family, the delay it caused proved disastrous.

Initially the cold case team intended to present its research in a series of documentaries. It is unclear at the time of this writing, in July 2022, whether that will ever happen. If it does, we can only hope that there will be ample room for the voices of refutation in the counter-report to be heard.⁷

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⁷ I am indebted to Ruth Wassinger for her valuable feedback and linguistic improvements.

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About the reviewer

Bettine Siertsema was, until recently, assistant professor of history at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (Netherlands), where she also earned her PhD. Her scholarship focuses on Holocaust literature and testimony. In English, she recently published *The rescue of Belsen's diamond children* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), "The tension between fact and fiction in Holocaust literature" in *Interdisciplinary Journal on Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 8 (2022), "The Dutch hiding experience in fiction" in *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 40.2 (2020), as well as articles on Etty Hillesum, female Holocaust perpetrators, and the "grey zone" in memoirs and fiction. She also co-edited (with Marc De Kesel and Katarzyna Szurmiak) *See under: Shoah. Imagining the Holocaust with David Grossman* (Brill, 2014). In Dutch, she authored books on the religious views in diaries and memoirs of the concentration camps, such as *Uit de diepten* (Skandalon, 2007), as well as on early Dutch testimonial literature of the Holocaust, including *Eerste Nederlandse getuigenissen van de Holocaust 1945-1946* (Verbum, 2018). Most recently, she contributed a chapter on Dutch diaries written in hiding, titled "Onderduikdagboeken: Anne Frank in perspectief," in *Een joods kind dat weet van eeuwen heeft': Anne Frank als vluchteling, schrijfster en icoon*, edited by Martin van Gelderen and Frank van Vree (Prometheus, 2022). Her essays on Holocaust literature are collected in *Verhalen van kwaad* (Verbum, 2018).