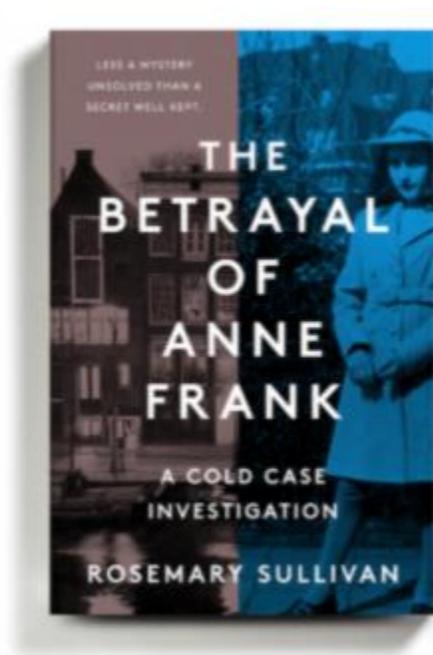


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A Strong New Lead in 'The Betrayal of Anne Frank'

By Alexandra Jacobs Jan. 17, 2022



The title of Rosemary Sullivan’s important new book, “The Betrayal of Anne Frank,” resounds far beyond its primary meaning. Sullivan is chronicling the investigation of a cold case, the unsolved mystery of who alerted authorities in the summer of 1944 to the hiding place of Frank, her family and four other Jewish people, above a pectin and spice warehouse in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, resulting in their arrest and deportation to concentration camps. Two

official investigations, begun in 1947 and 1963, failed to reveal the identity of the informant; the matter has preoccupied multiple biographers since. Sullivan writes with absolute dedication and precision, bringing a previously obscure suspect to the fore.

But Frank, who died at 15 of typhus at Bergen-Belsen days after the death of her sister, Margot, has been betrayed in so many ways. [Some would say](#) by having her diaries published at all: initially in 1947 by her father, Otto Frank, the owner of the warehouse at Prinsengracht 263 and the only survivor of the group, who made omissions for propriety that were restored in [later editions](#). (Mild sexual themes and rebelliousness against Anne's mother, Edith, newly incited the kind of school communities that had previously suppressed the work for being a ["real downer."](#))

Still, Anne Frank wanted fervently to be a professional writer, and had revised her diaries with eventual publication in mind. More questionable than any variation of her text are the shiny-eyed spinoffs that resulted from its global success: plays, movies, musicals, [a graphic adaptation](#), a children's book from a [cat's point of view](#), a [YouTube series](#) that reimagines her with a video camera instead of a pen, postcards, [cotton totes](#): the Anne Frank franchise. Too often she has been idealized as a symbol of the indomitable human spirit rather than contextualized as a victim of genocide deserving justice.

Sullivan, a poet and the prizewinning author of books including ["Stalin's Daughter"](#) and "Villa Air-Bel," about a safe house in Marseille during World War II, is amply

qualified to resituate readers in reality. She is riding tandem here with [Thijs Bayens, a filmmaker](#), and Pieter van Twisk, a journalist and researcher whom Sullivan describes as having “the cragginess of all bibliophiles.” In 2016, Bayens and van Twisk, both of whom are Dutch, hired Vince Pankoke, a retired F.B.I. agent in Florida who “still seems to be living undercover, a mild, anonymous man in a guayabera shirt.” They assembled an international cold case team of criminologists; behavioral, data, forensic and social scientists; psychologists; a handwriting expert; a rabbi; and many others, among them a young student who wondered, in one of the narrative’s few lighter moments, “What’s a telephone book?” They’re eager for any information you might have, too.

The team has used modern [big-data](#) techniques and an artificial intelligence program developed by Microsoft, as well as old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting, conducting scores of interviews and combing through private and public archives. The team has the receipts, as the young student might say — often actual receipts, thanks to the diligent record-keeping of German bounty hunters. Shaped like a procedural or a whodunit, “The Betrayal of Anne Frank” nonetheless hums with living history, human warmth and indignation. It agilely shifts the idea of “collaboration” over eight decades and nearly 400 pages, from dark and insidious crime to noble quest with algorithmic transparency.

Bayens and company were shocked to discover what Sullivan dryly calls “the degree of acrimony among the various stakeholders of the Anne Frank legacy.” Her title also seems to be a nose-thumbing to the Anne Frank Fonds in Basel, Switzerland — one of two charitable organizations started by Otto Frank — which has long aggressively protected its portion of the [diaries’ complicated international copyright](#) and would not cooperate with the cold case team; one trustee even thundered in an early meeting that the investigators couldn’t use Anne’s name. The other, the Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam, which has turned Prinsengracht 263 into a well-trafficked museum, was much more helpful, Sullivan writes.

Possible informants, according to various theories: a “suspiciously inquisitive” warehouse manager, Willem van Maaren; Lena Hartog, his assistant’s purportedly gossipy wife; Job Jansen, a former employee who called Otto Frank treasonous for daring to imply during a casual sidewalk encounter that the Third Reich might lose the war; and a “shady character” and “cocky opportunist” named Anton Ahlers. Still other candidates: a Jewish “V-Frau” named Ans van Dijk — “v” stood for *vertrouwens*, the Dutch word for trust — who turned in fellow Jews to avoid being deported herself; and Nelly Voskuijl, who was the sister of a woman who helped to conceal the Franks, and who consorted with the enemy and suffered from fainting spells.

At least one historian [has suggested](#) that there was no informant — that the police came to the warehouse to

search for counterfeit ration cards or labor violations and happened upon the secret annex hidden behind a moving bookshelf, perhaps noticing marks it had left on the floor. Sullivan circles all of these possibilities like Agatha Christie with Zoom and a time machine. The mingled mundanity and terror of the town square is all too present in details such as what would happen when a moving company, run by Abraham Puls, came to pick up deportees' possessions; gawking neighbors called this being gepulst (pulsed).

Eventually the team wends its way to Arnold van den Bergh, a prosperous Jewish Dutch notary fingered in an anonymous letter to Otto Frank that was uncovered in the 1963 investigation and is given new forensic scrutiny in these pages. The argument the investigators make for van den Bergh's culpability is convincing, if not conclusive. "I truly believe that investigating the past and our interpretation of it is not a finite exercise," Pankoke writes in an afterword.

Thankfully, this is followed by a glossary. The banality of evil that Hannah Arendt provocatively located in the form of Adolf Eichmann is superseded in these pages by the bureaucracy of evil, which is so often also "the bureaucracy of the absurd," as Sullivan notes: an alphabet soup of agencies that helped render the vilest crimes against humanity pseudolegal and systematic. Names and terms accumulate and the mind can blur. But the facts of Frank's devastatingly curtailed life command attention. Here, her

famous diary is not literary work to be plundered at will,
but Exhibit A in a mountain of damning evidence.