

HOUSE AND TABLE COMPANION (1942-1944)

During the hiding period, Bep developed the habit of usually having lunch in the Annex. She was always welcome, especially to Anne, who always demanded that Bep sit with her at the table. Apparently, Anne considered her to be a permanent fixture at the afternoon table. When she discussed the goings-on during lunch in her diary, she described Bep as well as the eight hidiers: “No. 9 is not an Annex family member, but certainly a house and table companion. Bep has a healthy appetite. Doesn’t leave anything on her plate, is not picky. One can please her with anything and that pleases us. Happy and cheerful, willing and good-natured, those are her traits.”¹

Bep was aware that her presence at the lunch table was a positive addition to the Annex. She let the hidiers express their wishes and needs, after which she tried to grant those with the limited means at her disposal. Additionally, Bep had an infor-matory role at the table. She was able to paint a truthful picture of the outside world and while she concealed some of the sadder events, she had everyone’s full attention when she spoke.

Moreover, Bep was an outspoken participant in discussions on the war. Later, son Joop was told by his mother how things went at such times: “They discussed politics. The people who were running things at the time, or the people who weren’t there

at all, and who they felt should have been there. The developments of the war were followed closely. Maps and drawings were used to show where the Germans were. [...] The encouraging role, making sure the residents didn't all get depressed, was taken on by those from the outside. Because it's no easy feat to be locked up for two years, having to rely on hearsay [...]. The conversations that were held were quite heavy.”²

The hidiers enjoyed the visits from their helpers immensely – their only link to the outside world next to the radio – and always missed them greatly when one of them was ill. Anne carefully detailed the wellbeing of her helpers in her diary. According to Kugler “our visits [...] interrupted the daily rut for those locked up. When they got nervous and started quarreling, we could break the tensions and keep the peace.”³

That knowledge was also the reason why Bep was talked into spending the night in the Annex on October 30, 1942. Initially, the plan was that Bep would join the hidiers for dinner that evening, but when she got ready to leave Anne refused to let her go. That moment had often occurred before: Anne who tried to prolong Bep's visit and Bep who forced herself to say goodbye with a heavy heart. This time, however, Bep decided to grant Anne's wish.

On this evening, Bep became more intensively acquainted with Anne's passion and talent for writing. She was given a few stories to read that Anne had come up with and was sincerely surprised by the fact that such a young girl was so literarily developed. In a letter to Otto Frank, she later remembered the moment that Margot read from Anne's stories. “I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I could not believe that Anne had written those words. I can still see Margot's face: ‘Yes, Anne wrote these all by herself.’ Then I thought, you've got to be older to be able to write such a thing, or perhaps it was her

inner self that came out.”⁴

This revelation was the reason for Bep to speak to Anne about her vision of the future. When Bep asked if she would like to become a writer or journalist, Anne was caught off guard. After a few moments, her face lit up and she beamed: “First I want to get married to the man of my dreams and have lots of children!”⁵ Cok van Wijk says that his mother also played games with the hiders that evening.⁶

The hour grew later and later in the hiding place and finally Bep went with Anne to her bedroom, where the air mattress she would be sleeping on was taken out. When Bep had agreed to grant Anne’s wish, she hadn’t realized she was facing a sleepless night. That realization came later, when the lights went off and hours went by without her being able to fall asleep. She would later describe the night as “completely and utterly horrifying.”⁷ Her sleeplessness was mainly due to the sounds around the hiding place: “A beam or a door would creak, then it was something outside on the canal, a gust of wind moving a tree, or a car in the distance coming closer. And those bells of the Wester Tower! Those are all very familiar sounds, of course, but that night all they did was keep me awake.”⁸ This was all connected to the fear of being discovered. Later, Bep realized she was lucky the air-raid siren – a truly bone-chilling sound – didn’t go off that night.⁹

“I was grateful when morning came, and I could get back to work,” Bep told years later.¹⁰ While she got up feeling dead tired, she noticed how well-rested Anne looked. After four months in hiding, she had apparently gotten used to the background noises. In her diary, Anne reported that Bep “[had] not slept well because she’d [had] wine.”¹¹ Bep clearly wanted to spare Anne the story of her frightening night.

Bep recounted her nightly adventures to Miep in great

detail. A few months before, she had experienced the same thing – with her husband she too had spent the night in the Annex.¹² Bep and Miep agreed that it was a macabre experience, but they felt it was only right they now had an idea of what it meant to be in hiding. According to son Joop, she referred to that night “when she was talking about her respect for the people who were hiding there. She could vividly imagine that [...] each squeak and crack [...] was associated with ‘I’ve been betrayed’ or ‘they’ve heard me now.’”¹³

At the end of the workday, Bep didn’t go home like the other helpers. She had not been herself all day and had been unable to keep her head at her tasks, so she wanted to catch up on some work at the office. It was around 8 o’clock in the evening when the office door opened and Anne’s face appeared in the doorway. After office hours, the hiders often moved freely through the building to have a little more privacy. “Is everyone gone?” Anne whispered, meaning the company’s warehouse employees.¹⁴ “The coast is clear,” Bep reassured her.¹⁵ Anne snuck into the office and stood by the window, obscured from view by the curtain. As she looked outside, Bep heard her utter a deep sigh. Anne loved getting a glimpse of the outside world, but it also frustrated her that she was unable to go outside. It was the second time that day that Bep was confronted so directly with the confined position of the hiders.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 Paape, Barnouw, and Van der Stroom, *De Dagboeken van Anne Frank (The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition)*, page 435. Diary entry August 9, 1943, version B.
- 2 Interview with Joop van Wijk by Teresien da Silva (Anne Frank Foundation), August 12, 2009. Collection Anne Frank Foundation.
- 3 Eda Shapiro and Rick Kardonne, *Victor Kugler. The Man Who Hid Anne Frank*, page 42.
- 4 Letter from Bep Voskuijl to Otto Frank, March 22, 1951. Collection Anne Frank Foundation.
- 5 Bep Voskuijl cites Anne Frank in Hiroo Kawamura, 'Hunger and fear in the Annex', in Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, April 3, 1965.
- 6 Interview with Cok van Wijk by Teresien da Silva (Anne Frank Foundation), August 12, 2009. Collection Anne Frank Foundation.
- 7 Bep Voskuijl in Bob Wallagh, *Verfilmd verleden. De camera's op het dagboek van Anne Frank (The Past on Film. The Cameras on Anne Frank's diary)*, page 44.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Interview with Bep Voskuijl by Oskar Morawetz, Ocer 9, 1978, in Toronto. Sound recording from the collection of Claudia Morawetz.
- 10 Bep Voskuijl in Bob Wallagh, 'Elli van Wijk knew the secrets of the Annex', in *Rosita*, February 27, 1960.
- 11 Paape, Barnouw, and Van der Stroom, *De Dagboeken van Anne Frank (The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition)*, page 334. Diary entry November 2, 1942, version A.
- 12 The other helpers, Kugler, Kleiman, and Johan Voskuijl, never spent the night in the Annex.
- 13 Interview with Joop van Wijk by Teresien da Silva (Anne Frank Foundation), August 12, 2009. Collection Anne Frank Foundation.
- 14 Bep Voskuijl quotes Anne Frank in Ernst Schnabel, *Anne Frank. Spur eines Kindes (The Footsteps of Anne Frank)*, page 86.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Bob Wallagh, 'Elli van Wijk knew the secrets of the Annex', in *Rosita*, February 27, 1960.