



Children's Diaries in the Holocaust: Religion, Escape and Empowerment

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Introduction

Diaries are among the most important Holocaust primary sources. They illustrate what happened to victims as well as how they used writing to cope with their suffering. I analyze four Holocaust diaries from Eastern and Western Europe that all reflect on the relationship between **religion** and **writing**. In these diaries, the young writers idiosyncratically use religion and writing to escape their horrifying situations and to empower themselves.

Elsa Binder

Writing from Stanislawów, Poland, Elsa **speaks to God for guidance**, but does so with uncertainty and discomfort. She does not want to relinquish her power by relying on another being.

When she needs help, she writes hesitantly, "God, if you exist, make me strong." Elsa's doubt that God exists, even in a traumatizing time, distinguishes her from other Jews and highlights her independent character.



Born: c. 1923
She was either shot near her home by the Nazis or sent to die at the Belzec concentration camp c. 1942.

Peter Feigl

Peter is Catholic but comes from Jewish heritage. Writing from the south of France, he **communicates with God** only when he is in a group setting because groups have more power than individuals.

After being separated from his parents, he writes, "I went to communion and I prayed for you." Peter practices Catholicism, suggesting that he finds his faith flexible and changeable. In contrast, the Nazis do not.



Born: 1929
Peter is still alive, but his parents were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 1942.

Yitskhok Rudashevski

Writing from the Vilna Ghetto, Yitskhok is unconcerned with religious teachings. Instead, he defines Judaism in terms of its **exciting cultural traditions**.

Before it is time to celebrate, he writes, "We were in the mood for Purim, so let it be Purim." His excitement for celebrating a festive holiday while living in the ghetto illustrates that religious celebrations are his method of escape from the horrors of the Holocaust.



Born: December 1927
He was killed by the Nazis in October 1943 in Ponary, outside of Vilna.

Anne Frank

Writing from Amsterdam, Anne defines Judaism through Jewish *and* Christian **cultural traditions** as well as through a **distant connection with God**.

After discussing the Bible, she comments, "Jesus and Hanukkah don't exactly go together." Anne's exploration of a variety of religions is her escape; learning about Christianity expands her worldview, even while she remains trapped.

After dreaming of her friend, she recalls, "All I can do is pray to God."



Born: June 1929
She died of illness in February 1945 at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.

Conclusion

Whether Jewish or Catholic, young Holocaust writers learned to understand religion in a way that met their individual needs and protected their already diminishing sense of power. Through their diaries, we learn about the power of writing as a coping strategy during the height of European antisemitism. The use of diaries is significant because diaries empower the writers and grant them good spirits and hope, even if only for a short time.



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