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Book Review

The Betrayal of Anne Frank
by Rosemary Sullivan

Review by Kalman Goldstein

On August 4, 1944, acting on a tip from an informant, Nazis raided the warehouse on 23 Prinsengracht, where 8 people had sheltered for two years. Despite Anne's posthumous apotheosis, the identity of who had betrayed them remained a mystery. After over 80 years, all involved were dead, relevant documents of the German Occupation of Amsterdam destroyed or scattered. In 2016, a group of forensic investigators, Dutch and American, set out to solve this classic "cold case." Sullivan, emeritus professor of History, University of Toronto, describes how technology, logic, and serendipity combined to establish means, opportunity, and motive for the betrayal—and identifies the guilty. Investigators also uncovered a paradox: Otto Frank allegedly knew his family's betrayer, but inexplicably shielded him from postwar justice.

Wartime Amsterdam was a warren of Dutch Nazis, informants, collaborators, and German officials preying on the fearful or unwary, setting up "stings", and extorting information in ferreting out hidden Jews. The book includes a map showing the Jewish Quarter as a metaphorical landmine, and offers a number of examples of how the Nazis could turn pawns into accomplices. Dutch gentiles guilty of minor infractions were threatened with concentration camps. Local police offered bounties or looting opportunities to informants, though usually keeping most of the goods for themselves; the postwar government would purge almost 20% of their police force. Some Dutch volunteered to comply; Nelly Voskuijl, sister of Otto's helper Bep, was a serial collaborator, though playing no role in betraying the Franks. Though also not involved, Anna van Dijk was the most avid of Nazis, becoming the only Dutchwoman executed for war crimes.

Using up-to-the-minute computer technology, the forensic investigators were able to sift evidence and pare down possible scenarios and perpetrators to half a dozen; the book describes how each was studied and rejected. Then they discovered an anonymous note. Its examination: notepaper, typeface, inks, Otto's handwritten endorsement, even shape and location of punch holes, is immensely fascinating, revealing clues to the betrayer's identity. This cryptic piece of paper led to accusing Arnold van den Bergh as the Frank family nemesis.

The betrayal, to borrow from "The Godfather" movies, was "just business, nothing personal." Van den Bergh, a notary, though a Jew, was living high, witnessing secret art collection sales to Hermann Goring. He had purchased certification as a "Mischling" and exemption from anti-Semitic regulations, until he becoming involved with Alois Miedl, a German secret intelligence agent. Miedl lost face among feuding Nazis, and fled to Spain, so could no longer shield him. To save himself and his family, he revealed a list of addresses of hidden Jews, including the Prinsengracht warehouse, apparently unaware and unconcerned who was sheltering there. Otto would learn all this through friendship with another Jewish notary, Jakob van Hasselt, an enemy of van den Bergh, who had survived the war in Belgium. Van den Bergh's elderly granddaughter confirmed the shady dealing, with Anne Frank as "collateral damage". But insoluble mysteries remain.

After scathing criticism by leading Dutch historians that Van den Burgh's alleged guilt was based on "assumptions and inadequate historical knowledge", publisher Ambo Athos apologized, ceasing its further editions, and removed unsold copies from Dutch bookstores. It is exciting for its exploration of Dutch collaboration, and its "cold case" deductive techniques, but its conclusion remains melodrama rather than historical breakthrough.