

These Forgotten Essays Reveal the Secrets and Dreams of Jewish Teens As Hitler Drew Near

A 1930s writing contest celebrates the inspiring endurance of the teenage spirit — in the form of heart-bursting crushes, angsty soul-searching and secret sexcapades.

By Kristina Gaddy

I honestly couldn't believe it. *Are they all waiting to get in?* You'd think it was one of Amsterdam's most popular clubs, with some moody, hipper-than-thou DJ spinning from his throne. But nope, it was the Anne Frank House, and apparently, it's like this every day the museum is open, the line of visitors stretching from the door, along the canal, and through the cobblestone square, hoping to experience just a glimmer of Frank's life, and death. Frank is of course no head-bopping DJ but she is a celebrity, arguably the most famous victim of the Holocaust, if there can be something so bizarre, so tragic. She's actually probably the only Holocaust victim most people can name. And when I think about that, with all due respect to Frank and her family and legacy, it's kind of bullshit.

I didn't wait in the line because of any problem I have with Anne Frank or the museum. (On my next visit I was smart enough to get tickets in advance.) But the truth is that Nazis murdered another 6 million people *besides* Frank, including millions of teenagers. And yes, Frank's book, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, is a perennial international best-seller that introduces younger audiences to the Holocaust, and her story is one of boundless courage and perseverance. In fact, back when I read it in middle school, she was my introduction to the lived experience of someone who had died at the hands of Nazis, and I found her resilience inspiring. But because Frank's diary is so widely known, and because she wrote about circumstances that most of us will never have to endure, I found it hard to connect to her on a deeper level. And, more importantly, I knew there are so many other stories. Too many. What's more, the people who wrote those stories didn't just become people when they died. They had full lives before World War II and those who were teenagers and young adults had their whole lives ahead of them. I wasn't curious about how they died. (I, like you, had learned all about the atrocities of the ghettos and concentration camps and had the nightmares to match). I'm much more interested in how they lived.

This is why I became totally fascinated by a collection of hundreds of autobiographies written by Jewish youth in the 1930s. Most of them lived in Poland and wrote about their lives before the war with intimacy and candor as part of a contest sponsored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and yet, unlike Anne Frank, most people have never heard of these writings, let alone read them. While Frank self-censored and edited out her love for the teenage boy hiding with her, the authors of the contest were asked to be super honest and wrote using initials or under fake names that made me think of my own AOL Instant Messenger screen name from the late 1990s (daydreem12 in case anyone's wondering!) and the handles of teens on TikTok and Instagram today: The Stormer, Forget-Me-Not, Fayvl the Wanderer, The Future, A Galician, and Orchid.