

Little girl lost; We thought we knew all about Anne Frank, the teenage refugee whose plight personified the Holocaust. But now a new film purports to tell some uncomfortable truths about her life, and even Steven Spielberg has been caught up in the bitter tug-of-war over her memory.

Adam LeBor, *The Independent*, February 2001

Anne Frank always wanted to be a world-famous writer. It was an ambition that she recorded in her diary and that she achieved, although not in the way she had hoped. Her true-life record of two years spent hiding in an Amsterdam attic with her family before she was sent to her death at Bergen-Belsen is now one of the most famous books in the world. It humanised the Holocaust, bringing home its terrible reality more than any number of academic accounts.

Her diary is certainly the best-known literary work of the Nazi genocide, translated into 55 languages. Her face, full of intelligence, vivacity and promise that would never be fulfilled, has become, for many, the overriding symbol of the six million. There are no saints in Judaism, but she has undergone a secular canonisation, with her diary given the status of quasi-holy scripture. The house where the Franks hid, on the Prinsengracht canal, is now a museum. That much, at least, is universally agreed. Britain recently commemorated the first Holocaust Memorial Day, a time of commemoration, reflection and determination to prevent future genocides.

But a bitter dispute is raging over how we should remember Anne Frank, the teenage German-Jewish refugee who became the Holocaust's most famous victim. Her very memory is being fought over, a rancorous conflict between what may be dubbed "universalists" and "realists", a struggle that has already drawn in Steven Spielberg as well as Anne's surviving relatives.

Championing the "universalist" viewpoint is the Basel-based Anne Frank- Fonds (foundation), which owns the right to all of her writings. In line with the wishes of Anne Frank's father, Otto Frank, the AFF presents a universalist message of tolerance, funding anti-racist and charitable projects.

Otto Frank wrote: "It was my point of view to try to bring Anne's message to as many people as possible, even though there are some who think it is a sacrilege

and does not help the greatest part of the public to understand [the Holocaust]". In this spirit, the AFF supports, for example, meetings between young Germans, Israelis and Arabs; and medical aid for elderly Holocaust rescuers, many of whom now live in poverty.

Lined up against the AFF are the "realists", who say they are seeking a more nuanced and complex picture of Anne Frank's life and death. They include the Austrian journalist Melissa Muller, author of an unauthorised biography, and academics such as Dr Tim Cole of Bristol University, whose controversial book *Images of the Holocaust* argues that Anne Frank has been Americanised and desexualised in pursuit of a misguided universalist message of liberal tolerance.

A four-hour TV mini-series, *Anne Frank: The Whole Story*, is currently being shot in Prague, planned for broadcast later this year on ABC television. A British actress, 13-year-old Hannah Taylor-Gordon, plays Anne Frank, while Ben Kingsley takes the part of her father, Otto. The series is based on Melissa Muller's book *Anne Frank: The Biography*. Steven Spielberg was announced as executive producer: it seemed natural for him to take on the project, especially after *Schindler's List*.

But Ms Muller ignited a controversy after she obtained five pages that Anne's father Otto had deleted from the first editions of the diary, after he returned from Auschwitz to Amsterdam. The pages - paraphrased in Muller's book - include Anne's observations and judgements on what she saw as the passionless marriage between Otto and his wife Edith, and Anne's pity for her mother.

Anne Frank's name and copyright are zealously guarded by the Anne Frank-Fonds, the legal heir to her estate. After a request from Buddy Elias, Anne Frank's first cousin and president of the AFF, Spielberg pulled out of the project. "I wrote to Steven Spielberg, because they are doing this without our authorisation. They said they do not need the diary or our copyright. They refused to give us a script, and we are quite upset and worried," Mr Elias said. "The diary is Anne Frank's life and work, and we will take care of it."

Instead, the AFF has sold the rights to Fox 2000, who will use its actual prose in their forthcoming production. "The [Muller] book was not based on an original source and as soon as Steven heard that, he decided he didn't want to take part. He did not want to do anything that would upset a relative of Anne Frank or do anything to harm her memory," said a spokesman for Mr Spielberg.

Now 75, and living in Basel, Mr Elias spent the war as a teenager in Switzerland. His mother was the sister of Otto Frank. The family kept in sporadic contact. Anne's diary entry of 30 June 1944 notes that Buddy (listed as Bernd) had acted in a drama school production. "Anne and I played together when we were children. We got along wonderfully. She was happy and playful. At first you couldn't notice her talent for writing. That came out later, under that horrible pressure of being locked in for years, when the child developed into a woman."

But it was that process of maturing and developing her skills of observation, in the unbearable pressure-cooker conditions of the attic, that Otto Frank sought to censor when the first edition was published in 1947. Perhaps understandably, for few fathers would wish their deceased daughter's observation of their marriage to be known to the world. "Otto wanted those things left out; a few things were not printed and that was correct in 1947. Anne had no friends to talk to in the attic about things such as the changes in her body, so she wrote everything down, she made the diary her friend. But in 1947 you could not talk about these things," said Mr Elias.

How to remember, how to portray the Holocaust on screen and what lessons to draw from the genocide are part of an increasingly vociferous debate. For some, films such *Life is Beautiful* and even *Schindler's List* are part of what has been called the "Hollycaust", which sanitises the genocide by focusing on redemption and being saved, when most Jews in Nazi-occupied countries were not saved.

Dr Cole argues that to present the specific circumstances of the life and death of Anne Frank as a modern-day totem of universal tolerance, dilutes the opportunity for any genuine understanding of the Nazi genocide. Anne Frank died, after all, because she was a Jew living in Nazi-occupied Holland, not because of some nameless, amorphous evil. "The Anne Frank Foundation puts forward one version, with a fairly universal message, but a universalist message denies certain historical realities, specifically why she was hiding in an attic, and leads to a dilution of what actually happened. What happened to Anne Frank was a historical reality that happened in a particular time and place. Using her as a symbol of tolerance means that people bring their own agenda and apply that to Anne Frank, rather than deal with the reality of her life and death," said Dr Cole.

It is only in the last couple of decades, as awareness of the Holocaust has spread, that Anne Frank has come to symbolise the Nazi genocide. The first play and film based on her diary, made in the 1950s, portrayed her primarily as a teenager

caught up in the horrors of war, rather than as someone targeted by the Nazis. "Initially she was not seen primarily as a Holocaust victim, but she emerged as one when the Holocaust came into popular consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s," said Dr Cole.

Anne Frank does not present us with the complexities of a man such as Oskar Schindler, a war-profiteer and womaniser who consorted with Nazis, as well as being a brave rescuer. The complications of human behaviour demand a more nuanced understanding of how individuals behaved under Nazism. Anne Frank meets the needs of some for a pure, unsullied figure, said Dr Cole: "She is seen as an emblematic figure, she is young, a child and innocent. She is not a problematic figure such as Oskar Schindler. Her death represents the loss of potential. There are plenty of child Holocaust victims who kept diaries who are not fought over because no films have been made about them. There is a lot of money to be made here, and vested interests."

A cynic may wonder if commemorating the Holocaust is not a convenient substitute for bringing its perpetrators to justice. In 1963, almost 20 years after the deportation of the Frank family, the Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal traced the Nazi officer who had led the raid on 263 Prinsengracht, Karl Josef Silberbauer. Like most low- and middle-level Nazi functionaries, Silberbauer had made a seamless transition from the Third Reich to post-war Austria and West Germany. He was then working in the Vienna police force. The Austrian interior ministry opened an investigation into his role and then closed it. The man who despatched Anne Frank to Belsen continued his career.

Back in present-day Prague, the producers of the television mini-series say that the four programmes will present a comprehensive account of the brief life of Anne Frank, from her arrival in Amsterdam to her death in Bergen-Belsen in March 1945, just a few weeks before its liberation by British troops.

"Anne Frank's story is usually only told by what is in her diary. We aim to show the complete and whole story of what happened to real people, not an idealised version," said the executive producer, Hans Proppe. "This is a much richer portrait. Traditionally, Anne Frank has been depicted as being almost angelic. We start when she is nine years old, a precocious child, immensely talented, who holds strong opinions. Her inclinations towards men and boys are seldom dealt with in the official version; this is a much more rounded and broader picture. We will also show scenes from Auschwitz and Belsen."

The realists, it seems, are winning the battle for Anne Frank's memory.

'Surviving Hitler: Choices, Corruption and Compromise in the Third Reich' by Adam LeBor and Roger Boyes, is published by Simon & Schuster