

States of the Union

'YOURS, ANNE'

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



DIANE AND I spent some time in Holland recently, with the following consequences.

SATURDAY: We have found a sunny room at the Hotel Ambassade, 341 Herengracht, Amsterdam. It fronts a brown canal decorated with houseboats and, looking very small and disoriented, an occasional mallard. Diane rejects my notion that the Dutch *gracht*, or canal, is an etymological ancestor of our "creek." Nobody, she points out, has ever been up a *gracht* without a paddle.

It is 7 P.M. Armed with our *Baedeker*, we walk down the narrow staircase that guards our door and enter the street, where we are nearly flattened by a fast-moving bicycle. The rider rings his little

bell—an angry chirp—and then favors us with a guttural freshet of Dutch invective. There are moments when one can be grateful for language barriers.

A few blocks away we board a tour boat made of glass. A young woman holding a microphone stands at the bow and, as the boat churns through Amsterdam waters, tries to tell us what we are seeing. Alas, she must speak sequentially in four languages. By the time she has gotten around to English, what she is describing is no longer in view. Somewhere near the Royal Palace I fall asleep, a victim of gentle tides and jet lag. We are happy to return to our Herengracht haven.

SUNDAY: It is Easter, so we decide to

visit the Anne Frank House, the closest we can come to sharpening our sense of death and renewal. Actually, it is something less than a decision: We are drawn here by powerful magnets of history. This is *our* house, too.

We are not alone. The old place—it was built in 1635—is packed with pilgrims like us, mostly Americans, mostly Jews. Together we climb the steep steps that lead to The Annex, where the Frank family hid themselves for two years. In the main room, not much bigger than our hotel quarters, the parents slept alongside Margot, their older daughter. A map of Normandy still covers part of a wall, with ink markings to show the Allies' progress toward Holland. Deliverance must have seemed just inches away before August 1, 1944, when Nazi police stormed up the stairs shouting "Open up! Open up!" Near the map one sees signs of a different sort of progress—thin, horizontal pencil lines on the plaster, to mark the children's increasing heights.

The room Anne shared with Mr. Dussel is next door. Some of her Hollywood movie star pictures remain pasted on the walls. From the bathroom another stairway leads up to Mr. and Mrs. Van Daan's apartment, which also served as the Franks' kitchen and living room. Cohabitation with the Van Daans—he was a business associate of Mr. Frank's—was not an unmixed blessing. "There have been resounding rows again between Mr. and Mrs. Van Daan," Anne wrote in October 1943. "The yells and screams, stamping and abuse—you can't possibly imagine it! My family stood at the bottom of the stairs, holding their breath, ready if necessary to drag them apart! All this shouting and weeping. . . ."

Diane and I stand at a window facing the back yard. When the Franks were hiding here, all the windows had to be covered with black paper, but now we can look down and see people cultivating their tiny gardens on Easter Sunday. The grass glistens. A woman in a red hat works the dirt with a hoe. Two roosters, their crowns strangely matching the woman's hat, peck at the earth. The contrast between what we see and

where we stand saddens me. Light and darkness. Life and death.

Yet even up here, in the enforced gloom, there was hope and there was growth. The pencil markings on the wall have already been noted. Note, too, Anne's diary: "I am the best and sharpest critic of my own work.... Anyone who doesn't write doesn't know how wonderful it is. . . ." And: "I must have something besides a husband and children, something that I can devote myself to! I want to go on living after my death! And therefore, I am grateful to God for giving me this gift, this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me."

I think of her as a child, of course—as the little girl with black hair and prayerful eyes who stares out at us from bookstore shelves. But in reality she is my contemporary, born exactly 18 days before I was. The diary, which must have looked luxuriantly blank and beckoning, was given to Anne on her 13th birthday, June 12, 1942.

Later in the afternoon we walk to the Old Church (*Oude Kerk*) to hear an Easter Sunday organ recital. Sitting in the nave beneath a vaulted ceiling of cedar wood, we listen to the astonishing rumbles of Bach and Handel, Schumann and Dupré. No doubt there are scientific explanations for the miracle that occurs when air is forced through pipes, but at the moment I am not interested. The music is therapy. It suggests the reasonableness of Anne's simple prayer: "I want to go on living after my death!"

MONDAY: As in Mussolini's Italy, the trains in democratic Holland run on time. This morning we take one to Haarlem to see a friend who lives down the block from the Frans Hals Museum. It houses many portraits—only a few of them by Hals—of sturdy Dutch burghers wearing improbably large black hats. Holland was the cradle of capitalism, and the rich merchants we see here, so somber and substantial, paid their artists handsomely for the privilege of immortality.

When we have had enough, our friend leads us out and down a narrow lane to the old marketplace, flanked on one

side by the 13th-century Town Hall (still in use) and on another by the Church of St. Bravo, where Hals is interred. Church and state facing off, as usual. Until about 150 years ago, the Town Hall boasted an outdoor scaffold for hangings. Executions were occasions for holidays. People would crowd into the square to enjoy the spectacle.

Today is also a holiday—post-Easter—and a small carnival Midway has been set up in the marketplace. Children gleefully ride the rubber-bumpered "Dodge-Ems." Like their forebears who came here to attend hangings, the children can momentarily satisfy their aggressions without fear of reprisal. This observation runs contrary to the old nursery rhyme:

*The children in Holland
take pleasure in making
What the children in England
take pleasure in breaking.*

After lunch we board a bus for Leyden, and then a second bus for Lisse and the Keukenhof Gardens, resplendent with blossoms. "Here," as Rupert Brooke remarked, "tulips bloom as they are told. . . ."

Our spirits brighten under the sun. We have discovered spring, a state of mind we cannot resist exporting. From a local flower producer we order scores of tulip bulbs, having been assured they will arrive in Connecticut next September. We will cultivate our garden amid falling leaves, and await another spring.

TUESDAY: The long holiday weekend kept us from knowing. Now, on this Amsterdam workday, we see that many people are out of work. Most of them are young, and they are everywhere in evidence—sitting on cathedral steps, lounging by the fountain in Dam Square, nursing their cups of coffee at sidewalk cafes. The official unemployment rate in Holland is just over 14 per cent, and we are told by our academic acquaintances here that the real figure is considerably higher. Nobody starves in Holland, because anyone in need can go "on the dole." But the slack-jaw looks of these young people with nothing to do suggest an-

other kind of hunger—for rewards and favors only an expanding economy can confer.

WEDNESDAY: "I hope to have some luck with my picture of the potato-eaters," Vincent Van Gogh wrote his brother Theo in April 1885. The luck was all ours. "The Potato-Eaters" turned out to be Vincent's first great painting, although no one except Theo thought so at the time. To the very end, which came all too soon—on July 29, 1890, after Vincent shot himself with a revolver—he hoped in vain for recognition. It finally materialized here on the Paulus Potterstraat in Amsterdam, where the citizens of Holland have erected a museum devoted entirely to Van Gogh's remarkable works.

Only a few years separate his darkling peasants of Nuenen from his luminous sunflowers and cypresses of Arles, and the similarities seem clear enough. As Vincent himself pointed out, "Black has a glow all its own."

I am gazing at the Nuenen original for the first time. The family sits around the table, eating potatoes and drinking coffee, amid an ether the color of potato peelings. A weak gaslight flares overhead. Through a window behind the little circle no light enters. One assumes it is nighttime.

Looking to my left, I notice something I have not seen in the reproductions—a wooden clock. The hands point to 25 minutes before 12, a puzzling signal. Did Van Gogh intend to depict a midnight meal, to show how hard and long the peasants had worked? Or did he wish us to conclude the clock was broken—another sign of agrarian poverty?

Anne Frank might have appreciated the riddle of the clock. Certainly she could have identified with the scene in the painting. "We eat potatoes at every meal," she wrote in her diary, "beginning with breakfast.... I must tell you about the dumplings, which we make out of government flour, water, and yeast. They are so sticky and tough, they lie like stones in one's stomach—ah, well!

". . . But we're still alive, and quite often we even enjoy our poor meals.

"Yours, Anne"