By Becca Kantor

Diaries play a unique role in Dutch World War II history. While Anne Frank's The Diary of a Young Girl is known worldwide, Frank was only one of thousands of Dutch citizens who saved their wartime diaries. They did so at the urging of the Dutch Minister for Education, Arts, and Sciences, who believed that journals and letters would be essential to painting "the picture of our struggle for freedom … in its full depth and glory."

Two recent books — one nonfiction, the other fiction — add new detail to this picture by shedding light on overlooked diaries. Nina Siegal's The Diary Keepers interweaves excerpts of journals written by people who had a wide range of professions and political leanings. Yael van der Wouden's debut novel, The Safekeep, depicts a relationship between two women in the 1960s that is profoundly changed by the discovery of a wartime diary.

In the following conversation, the authors discuss long-held beliefs about Dutch resistance questioned in their books, the antisemitism that still lingers in the Netherlands, and a cultural shift that might change the way the country will remember the Holocaust in the future.

Becca Kantor: When did you first encounter Anne Frank's diary? What impression did it give you of the Netherlands? I know that both of you grew up elsewhere.

Yael van der Wouden: Even though my father is Dutch and my mother Israeli, it wasn't a story that I remember featuring prominently in my early life. I grew up in Tel Aviv and first heard of Anne Frank when I was nine. There was a book display at the school entrance that included The Diary of a Young Girl, an edition with her picture on the cover. You know the one: she's writing, pen in hand, looking up at the camera. My friend stared at it for a while and then at me, and then exclaimed that hey, I looked like Anne Frank. I was flattered to be compared to someone important enough to be on the cover of a book.

The Dutch connection was both affirming and confusing: As a kid, I always hoped that being half-Dutch would make me exciting, set me apart somehow. The Netherlands was a vague, Europe-shaped blob in my mind — the place where my grandparents lived in a pretty little house with a garden,

which I understood wasn't far from a place called Paris. I knew it was clean and I knew it smelled like wood and coffee. The fact that Anne Frank lived there, and that she was killed in the Holocaust because she was Jewish, and we shared a passing similarity — would take us moving to the Netherlands for me to fully comprehend.

Nina Siegal: We were assigned to read it in my middle school in Great Neck, Long Island when I was about twelve. Yael, it's interesting that you were told you looked like Anne Frank. I immediately thought Anne looked like my mom, who had been a raven-haired young girl when she went into hiding in Hungary during World War II. I actually don't entirely remember what I thought of the book the first time I read it, but I do remember that the same year an elderly woman who was a Holocaust survivor visited our class. I already knew many Holocaust survivors, including my grandfather as well as my mother, so at the time, I thought, I don't need anyone to tell me this story. But the woman who spoke to us made a deep impression on me, because she told her story in a very direct, clear, and powerful way. It had been hard for me to get my mother or grandfather to tell me much about their experiences in the war.

My understanding from Anne's description of her life was that there was strong resistance to the German regime in Holland. I assumed that if these non-Jews had worked so hard to protect the Franks from the Nazis, there must have been many more Dutch people who did the same for their friends and colleagues.

BK: How did this impression compare to your actual experience as a Jewish person in the Netherlands?

YW: We moved here when I was ten, so just a year after I'd first heard of Anne Frank. I hadn't read the diary — I didn't read much at all at that age (I was too restless and found it tedious). During my first school year here, kids quickly picked up on the resemblance between me and Anne Frank and for a while her name became my nickname. I came to understand what happened to her through context. Whatever confused thrill I had felt before was gone very quickly. Here, the comparison between her and me wasn't a shallow one anymore, but a marker of something startling: the idea that I should be recognizably something, and that once upon a time, in this very place, that something would have marked me for persecution and death.

NS: I first came to the Netherlands in 2006, when I was in my thirties. I'd

received a Fulbright Fellowship to work on my novel about a painting by Rembrandt (which was later published as The Anatomy Lesson). While I was doing my research, I lived in the old center of Amsterdam, just around the corner from the Rembrandt House, where the artist lived and worked. It's situated on the Jodenbreestraat, which in English might be "Jewish Broadway." Jodenbreestraat is the center of the old Jewish district, where there was once a very vibrant Dutch Jewish culture. I learned that before the war, Amsterdam had been about ten to fourteen percent Jewish. The old Jewish street market was in the square just behind Rembrandt's house, and there were five synagogues within spitting distance — including the gorgeous Portuguese Synagogue with its enormous brass candelabras, which are still lit only by candlelight.

But where were the Jews? I rarely came across anyone in traditional Jewish garb, or even wearing a basic yarmulke. It was an odd feeling, to see all these monuments and markers of Jewish life but no Jewish presence, especially after growing up in a Jewish community in New York.

I was shocked to find out that seventy-five percent of the Netherlands' Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust. I'd always thought that Eastern European countries, especially those where my family had come from, like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, had taken the greatest hit. But in fact, the Netherlands had the second-highest death toll (proportional to the Jewish population), after Poland. I wondered how this could be. I'd thought that the Netherlands was protective of its Jews, like the people who helped Anne Frank.

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BK: How did your experience of present-day antisemitism in the Netherlands inform your book? Would it be fair to call your book (in some sense) a rebuttal of the common Dutch national narrative of World War II?

NS: Yes, to a certain extent. I don't know how many people in the Netherlands currently think that "everyone resisted," but that was a commonly held belief for many decades, especially in the immediate postwar period. Now, I think many people know better, because there has been so much work done by Dutch historians on the various ways in which Dutch institutions — the police, the stock exchange, the railway companies, the big manufacturers — collaborated with the Nazis. The last section of my book, "The

War in Memory," traces how the "myth of resistance" crumbled over time, although there have also been moments of what you might call "memory backlash," during which people rebelled against the notion of seeing the nation's history in a negative light.

YW: What's always struck me as deeply frustrating about the way the Dutch engage with their own history is that refracted knowledge. Some days they don't know the big picture, but they know details; other days they know details but not the big picture. There's this Dutch narrative about the Germans stealing Dutch people's bikes during the Occupation. And they did — several million bikes were confiscated. For years after the war, when a German tourist would, say, order a beer at a bar, a joking response might be, "First give me my bike back!" My somewhat glib emotional reaction to that piece of history is always: I wish they would've cared about the Jews as much as they did about their bikes. That's what I mean about detail versus big picture.

And with the big picture, the story is always: the Germans came in and did the bad deeds; the Dutch resisted and helped Jewish people hide. The truth is more specific, more chilling: in comparison to most other European countries, the resistance in the Netherlands was minimal. The majority of people who helped Jews hide during the war asked for monetary compensation in return. Most exterminated Dutch Jews were poor, people who couldn't afford hiding, and so were shipped off to the camps earliest. People don't know about the small realities of living as a Jew in the Netherlands before the war or after the war, but they know about Anne Frank, and that her story was sad. Some people might know where a Jewish family used to live. Some might know where Jews were rounded up for transport. The inspiration for my novel came from me asking myself what might it have been like, to grow up on different ends of the spectrum of knowing and not knowing.

BK: Could you both say more about your work in terms of bringing forgotten historical stories to light?

NS: I started my career as a journalist covering poverty in the U.S., and I found early on that people can connect to social justice issues if they read a single, moving personal story. It's much easier than trying to tell the whole huge history of a crisis or a problem. And perhaps because I was raised on folk songs, I have always been drawn to the voices of regular people, people who are just trying to get by. I think the diaries spoke to me for

that reason. The diary keepers in my book were not statesmen and policy-makers; if they were heroes and heroines, they were accidentally so. The Holocaust is not a forgotten story, but millions — without exaggerating — of the individual voices, ordinary stories of people whose lives were decimated have been lost. These days, I'm trying to move into different realms of reporting on this issue. For example, we hear almost nothing about the lives of Roma and Sinti people during World War II, except as a kind of addendum in lists of "other" Nazi victims. I've been trying to cover that story as a journalist lately.

BK: Yael, what about the queer stories that are often erased by history?

YW: When I was still in the phase of magpieing this book together from the themes and colors and flashes of scenes I had in mind — there were two things at the forefront of my thoughts: postwar stories of those who stayed, and queerness. This didn't come from a very noble place of, These stories haven't been told and now they must be told! I got frustrated that I was having conversations with myself that I never saw played out in popular culture. A lot of historical queer stories focus on queerness and desire despite something; despite living at a time when it's dangerous, despite being surrounded by people who don't allow it. I wanted to write a story that didn't have to deal with the despite—a story where the forces keeping characters from their queer desire were primarily internal … Or at least that's what we think at first, before the full story unfolds. I did hear that some early readers had an issue with the fact that this is a story both about sex and trauma. I understand the initial shock of it, but I also think, That's my life you're reacting to. Living and dating and falling in love while being Jewish in the Netherlands means dealing with the intersection of Holocaust memory and desire.

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BK: Looking at the diary stylistically, what makes it unique as a narrative form? Nina, you point out that diaries can contain valuable insights because people write them when "their memories are still vivid, detail oriented, and potent." What are the particular challenges in relying on diaries to understand history?

NS: For a long time, World War II scholars considered diaries to be suspect texts because they — like a lot of eyewitness accounts of Nazi savagery — were thought of as subjective, or too narrow in scope. For example, wartime

diaries often contained rumor and conjecture. Or they contained reports of "news" based either on underground newspapers or on outright propaganda.

In the postwar period, historians relied at first on "official" sources, and those often included the very meticulous records the Nazis kept themselves. But these were also problematic sources. So, from an epistemological perspective, it's hard to think of any wartime sources that aren't tainted in some way. No source is entirely objective, and that has become clearer as time wears on and we attempt to move away from ideologically defined historiography.

Diaries give us a combination of fact and fiction, a mélange of subjective and objective, some moment-by-moment detail and then conjecture about the bigger picture, wishes for the future, analyses of the past. For me, that's what makes them riveting. A single page of a diary can touch on the grand, sweeping strokes of history, and the smallest, most intimate moments of living a life. We went to buy cherries this morning; they were rounding up about 15,000 Jews in the main square; we played a game of tag, and the cherries were delicious.

BK: Instead of trying to reconcile the contradictions among the different war diaries, you intentionally juxtapose them. Why did you decide on this structure for The Diary Keepers?

NS: The diaries I excerpt in my book are all from the diary collection at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. This collection opened a few days after the Liberation of the Netherlands in and was meant, from its inception, to be a repository of personal documents and correspondence from ordinary people across a broad spectrum of society. The curators of the collection were interested in having a rounded view of Dutch life under Nazi occupation: farm hands, school teachers, politicians, Nazi group members, resisters, members of the Jewish Council, et cetera. I wanted to use the collection as it was intended: to tell the story of a whole society.

A lot of the diaries have been published individually; and while I do like to read them that way, it sometimes makes me feel as if I'm burrowing my way through a narrow tunnel, as the diary writer lives one individual life, under a mountain of chaos. With Anne Frank's diary, for example, we understand her life in hiding, but it's hard to see the war outside. We don't know from

her diary that a few blocks away, there are thousands of people being forced into a theater to wait for deportation. Anne didn't know this. So I thought that if I could juxtapose the voices of many people in order to see what's happening from multiple perspectives at the same time, I could tell a larger story, a story that functioned like a multi-character novel, with both villains and heroes and people in between. So, in my book we see what it was like for a seventeen-year-old factory worker to decide to join a general strike, and for a policeman who thinks these strikers are morons and can't wait to put them in prison; then we hear from a Jewish striker who waits for the sound of the police coming up the stairs every time the outer door of his building creaks open or closed.

BK: Yael, the contents of Eva's diary aren't revealed until two-thirds of the way through The Safekeep—but when they are, our understanding of everything that has previously happened changes. What was your process of writing a fictional diary? How did you decide which parts of Eva's past to include?

YW: Oh, that was hands-down my favorite chapter to write. I wrote the first half on a six-hour train ride to Berlin, and the second half on the return. It was such a relief to cast off Isabel's restrictive narrative voice, and especially to do it in the form of a grand reveal. It scratched an itch I often have when in conversation with non-Jewish Dutch people, when the war comes up: this desire to shout, You don't even know what you don't know! Choosing what went in and what would go was a more collected, restrained exercise. I did so much research that didn't make it in — I had to be careful and make sure that it still sounded like a diary, not a mouthpiece for a list of facts. When I sent it in to my editors for a first round of edits, I was sure they would say that half of it had to go. Surprisingly they both said, More of this chapter, more of Eva's voice. Great news for me, of course — I had plenty more to say!

BK: Isabel and Eva have such distinct narrative voices. How did you go about creating those voices, and how would you characterize them? Is one more similar to your own than the other?

YW: I knew Isabel inside out from the second I thought her up. I first wrote about her in a short story for a workshop. The story was titled "Louis's New Girl," and it was about three siblings who go out for dinner, and one brother brings his new girlfriend along. Everyone hates her, especially the main character, the middle sister, Isabel. Isabel is a repressed woman who is at

once possessive and obsessive, and has very little self-knowledge. It's all my worst qualities blown up to the extreme, combined with things I sometimes wish I could be: careless, rude. I gave Isabel all my worst anxieties and ticks, poor thing.

Eva is who people think I am when they first meet me: social and extroverted and a little flirty. All of which I am! In reality, I am both characters. The feeling that they both have, that they've been treated wrongly by life, and the desire to seek some form of revenge — that can be me, too, at my most tired and self-absorbed. Again, these are little flecks of personality that I know in myself or in others that I blew up to an extreme in both of these characters — in part to exorcize them and in part to experience them fully. Both Isabel and Eva eventually get taken down a peg and have to go through a learning moment to arrive at the ending. This is probably also a hope of mine: that I can learn, grow, and become better.

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I know in myself or in others that I blew up to an extreme in both of these characters — in part to exorcize them and in part to experience them fully. Both Isabel and Eva eventually get taken down a peg and have to go through a learning moment to arrive at the ending. This is probably also a hope of mine: that I can learn, grow, and become better.

BK. Both of your books address the idea of physical spaces — especially homes — as repositories for memory or legacy. Yael, how does the title of your book speak to this theme?

YW: It's a bit of a strange title, isn't it? You expect it to be followed by an "-er": The Safekeeper. But I wanted there to be some ambiguity in the nounness of it: it sounds like it's referring to a place more than an action or a person, and that's the question that I wanted to start the book with: what place, what "keep" are we talking about? Isabel's home, the things in that home? We learn very quickly that Isabel functions as a sort of archivist of her family's memory in that house, keeping everything in order and in one place. This order gets disrupted by Eva, who upends everything for Isabel: if Isabel can't keep the home "safe," if she can't guard memories embodied by belongings, then what's her purpose, really?

BK: Nina, you write that it wasn't until you were physically in Amsterdam, living in an apartment that resembled Anne Frank's annex, that you truly felt the weight of the Holocaust on your family and decided to research it. Could you explain how that came about?

NS: There is dark irony in the fact that the Franks lived in the kind of space that some people rent these days, a converted storage attic, because there's such a huge demand for housing in Amsterdam that every available space has been converted into modern living quarters. My first apartment in Amsterdam was a fifth-floor walk-up that you had to enter by climbing up four flights, then going up a ladder through a hatch. I'm sure it was once a storage attic, too. If someone didn't know there was an apartment up that high, they wouldn't have found it.

Amsterdam is a small, densely packed city, and I could see so much of it from up there. When I started to read the diaries, I realized how often people talked about looking out their windows to witness things happening in the street. The first round-up of four hundred Jews, which happened in February 1941, was witnessed by hundreds of people. There were accounts of people standing on the bridge nearby who could see it all unfolding, and

others who gazed out from their apartments. It made me realize how close it all was, how much people must have seen and known. Before living in Amsterdam, I'd thought of the Holocaust as taking place in shtetls and ghettos and forests, away from public view. Living in Amsterdam, inside this physical space, I started to understand just how close the Holocaust could actually have been to those who witnessed it.

BK: Nina, you also write that when you first arrived in Amsterdam, you had the sensation of "mov[ing] daily through a neighborhood filled with monuments and museums for a Jewish community that seemed to exist as mere ghosts." Yael, the house at the heart of The Safekeep could easily be called haunted, too (at least figuratively!). Can the past be described as a kind of haunting?

NS: I hope I don't sound too crazy when saying this, but because I have immersed myself in so much history, I imagine ghosts around me quite a lot. When I was researching The Diary Keepers, particularly when I went to places where certain key historical events had unfolded, I could conjure the past before my eyes. That's in part because Amsterdam's landscape is historical; much of it hasn't changed in hundreds of years. But it's also because the stories of these individuals feel so close to me that, after reading and writing about them, that they feel like a presence in my life.

Throughout writing The Diary Keepers, I distinctly felt that I was being guided to observe or discover things. Here's an example: I was deep into reading and translating the excerpts from the diary of Philip Mechanicus, a Jewish journalist for the Algemeen Handelsblad newspaper, who spent 17 months in the Westerbork transit camp. One day, my daughter had a play date with one of her new friends from school, and I went to pick her up at the child's home. As I was entering the building I saw the Algemeen Handelsblad sign on the facade, and while my daughter was getting ready to go, her friend's mom explained that the apartment had once been the office of a famous journalist, named Philip Mechanicus, who had been killed in the Holocaust. I got chills from that experience. I was standing where he had worked. That's just one example of things that happened during the course of writing the book.

YW: Nina, that's such an apt and recognizable feeling. I've often talked about existing within Dutch culture as being a ghost yourself, like you are a memory haunting the city, even haunting the language — Dutch is peppered with Yiddish. I certainly channeled that feeling into my writing when

I gave shape to life in post-war Overijssel, a province that once had solid-enough Jewish communities that some villages even had a synagogue, but was devoid of Jewish life postwar. Growing up there, I certainly felt the past, and me within it, as a haunting thing.

BK: Speaking of the fantastical, are there connections between your magical realist short story "Into the Mud," which was published in the 2022/5782 issue of Paper Brigade, and The Safekeep?

YW: Oh, absolutely! In "Into the Mud," I think you can see me working out dynamics and themes that become central in The Safekeep. For example, the way queerness in teen girls can get muddled, how these intense friendships can be confusing. Isabel has a very rigid and negative view of the value of friendship, and I think this comes from the fact that as a teen, she couldn't understand her own relationship to other girls. Desire and dislike and wanting to be thought of as beautiful by another woman, not knowing what that means, wanting to be around someone who also brings out the worst in you: all little threads I started pulling on in "Into the Mud"!

BK: Has your perception of the Netherlands changed the longer you've lived there? Has the Dutch approach toward remembrance changed? Would you say that you feel "at home" in the Netherlands?

NS: My perception has changed over the past eighteen years as I've become more integrated into Dutch society. At the same time, there has been a massive shift in memory culture. Research has revealed the various levels of systematic collaboration between the Netherlands and Nazi Germany, and I think the average Dutch person is now more aware that they "weren't all resistors." I hope that my research and reporting on the subject for The New York Times has helped to shift the understanding of Dutch World War II history outside of the Netherlands as well.

When I first moved here, there was only one memorial in Amsterdam that named those killed in the Shoah, and it only listed surnames. Moreover, one surname applied to whole families — multiple generations — as well as non-relatives who just happened to share the same last name (Cohen, or Polak, or De Vries, for example). In 2021, Amsterdam finally got a national monument that recognizes every single individual murdered in the camps: the National Holocaust Memorial of Names, designed by Daniel Libeskind. It includes more than 102,000 inscribed bricks, one for each victim, which I find to be a beautiful tribute. This year, the National Holocaust Museum

opened. Both of these important projects took years to come into being. It's at last a recognition of what happened here.

YW: I've lived here longer than I haven't by now, and my feelings seem to cycle through phases. I'm often frustrated with a lot here — with the influence of Calvinism and the desire for simplicity and ordinariness above all else. I can get so riled up by it. At other times I'm fascinated by it. For instance, right now I'm doing research into how water landscapes changed across the country in the early twentieth century and how that has fed into a culture where any piece of land had to be made "useful," — the intersection of Calvinism and capitalism. Although I'm engrossed by the question of what's given shape to this place, I can't say that the place is equally engrossed by me. I often feel that I live here by the good graces of the Dutch, even with my Dutch passport and last name. This Netherlands is built on conformity, and when you don't conform, living here is a princess-and-the-pea kind of existence: fine and doable and often very privileged, but always with something small and uneasy sixteen mattresses below, reminding you not to get too comfortable.

BK: Do either of you keep a diary? If so, I would love to hear your thoughts about diary-keeping and the relationship between this and your other writing.

NS: Actually, I don't. I kept a diary until I was about thirty, but it was mostly about my crushes, my loves and losses. I doubt anyone would be interested in reading even a page. And I kept lists of things I was thinking about before bedtime. I write so much now, on such a regular basis, that I don't really use writing anymore to unwind. I often think I should go back to keeping a diary.

YW: I go through spells of doing morning pages. I wouldn't necessarily call them diaristic. Most of them are utter rambling nonsense: three to five pages of run-on sentences of base anxieties and what-ifs without punctuation. I put them down on the page in the hope of getting them out of the body and brain. Sometimes it works, too. I encourage all my creative-writing students to take up the habit, especially when they're starting out and dealing with where-to-start issues; if the "bad" words are already in the diary, you can just start wherever, it doesn't matter anymore. My issue with keeping a diary is, and always has been, consistency and boredom. I get bored reporting back on events and I am very bad at consistently doing just about anything. But occasionally picking up a notebook and rambling about

worries and desires in the hope it'll make me feel better, or make me a better writer? That I can do.

Becca Kantor is the editorial director of Jewish Book Council and its annual print literary journal, Paper Brigade. She received a BA in English from the University of Pennsylvania and an MA in creative writing from the University of East Anglia. Becca was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to spend a year in Estonia writing and studying the country's Jewish history. She lives in Brooklyn.