

## Book Reviews

# Bernard Kops, Poetry & Peril

## Peace Will Come, Anne Frank insists, You Will See

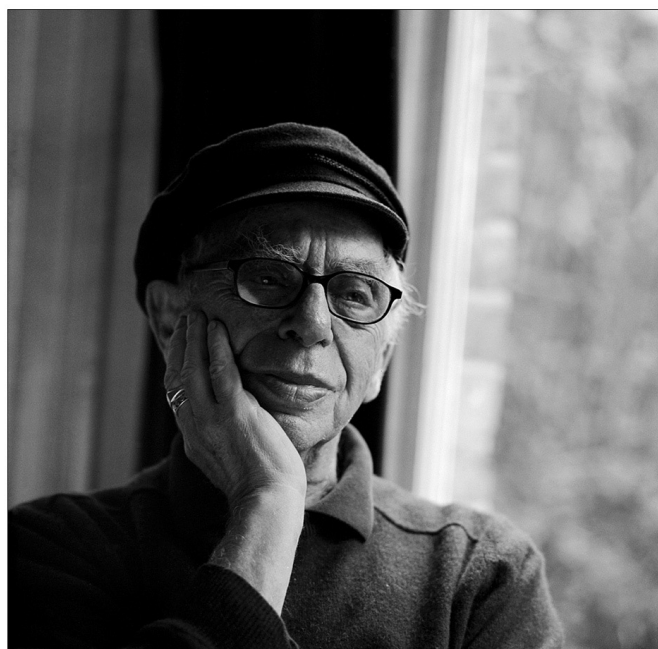
### A Book Review

by Thomas Ország-Land

**B**ERNARD KOPS, the doyen of Anglo-Jewish letters, has responded to a global resurgence of violent anti-Semitism by issuing a new collection of verse called *Anne Frank's Fragments from Nowhere*. This is his second major work exploring the legacy of the teenage diarist. Anne was murdered in Bergen-Belsen after hiding with her family for two exhausting years in a secret annex at the back of an Amsterdam building.

She returns in Bernard's poetry to assure worried Jews everywhere:

*...peace will come.  
And the tired will lie down and sleep.  
And the dreamers will awake  
and embrace the beauty  
of world, of existence, of love.  
And peace will come,  
and love and lovers will transcend  
the wars of earth.  
And they will plant their love.  
And the tree of love will grow forever.  
And you'll see. Peace will come. And peace  
will come.  
And people will come and go and live.  
And live again and again.  
And peace will come. You'll see!  
You'll see. And peace will come!  
And peace will come!  
And peace must come.*



Bernard Kops

Bernard, a poet and playwright at last basking in world fame at the age of 89, is slightly older than Anne would be if she had been allowed to live. He is a descendant of working-class Dutch immigrants to Britain, whose entire extended family back in Europe perished during the Holocaust. He is, like all Jews alive today, a survivor acutely aware of a looming, ubiquitous presence of racist intolerance.

Seven decades after the Holocaust and a year after the horrendous *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris replicated worldwide, Jewish institutions in hundreds of population centres survive un-



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counts, "including my family and Anne's. Her fate could so easily have been mine..."

He all but met her. He explains: "My first play, *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*," first performed at the Oxford Playhouse in 1957, "was

translated into Dutch by Rosie Pool, an author who joined the Dutch Resistance during the war. She had escaped from the Nazi transit camp at Westbork," a collection point from which the Jews were being dispatched to mass murder, "and her first task was to smuggle herself back and organize others.

"There she met and tutored Anne. Rosie talked to me endlessly about Anne's character, personality, dreams and nightmares. All this has fed my imagination, and Anne became my close relative."

The experience eventually led to Bernard's play, the *Dreams of Anne Frank*, which opened in the Polka Theatre, London, in 1992. The play (Methuen Drama, England, 1997) has been touring the world ever since. The Hungarian version performed in 1998 at the Mahatma Gandhi School, Pécs, employed a cast of teenage Romany actors, perhaps a quarter million of whose people had been murdered during the Holocaust. The atmosphere was electric.

In Act One, Anne holds up a star on an empty stage as she turns to the audience. (The following text of her song is not included in the new collection.)

*Fate gave me a yellow star.  
A badge to tell them who I am.  
I'm Anne from Amsterdam.  
I'm Anne Frank and I'm a Jew.  
And I'm the same as you and you.  
Or you and you and you.  
But fate gave me a yellow star.  
Yellow star.  
The star to put me in my place,  
To wear it as a badge of shame,  
But I'm Anne from Amsterdam.  
I'm proud of who I am.  
We have to hide away from light  
Because they come for us at night.  
And pack us off to God knows where,  
And all we have is where we are.  
But fate gave me a yellow star.  
Yellow star.*

Like Bernard, the real-life Anne had consciously prepared for a writing career, and she spectacularly succeeded. Her diary describing the fears as well as the tensions, loves, dreams and irritations of people hiding away from death in a terrorized city was published posthumously in 1947 as *Het Achterhuis* (The Annex). Subsequent editions were titled *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Diary of a Young Girl*. The book has been sold in more than 30 million copies.

A fierce controversy is now raging over an extension of its copyright protection that would normally expire 70 years after the death of its author. Another book of the same period controversially just reissued upon entering the public domain is *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) by Adolf Hitler, a screed campaigning for the annihilation of the Jewish people.

Bernard is one of the best known writers of our time. All his writing is steeped in poetry. He is extraordinarily creative, prolific, fearless and compassionate, the author of some nine collections of verse, more than 40 plays for stage and television, 11 novels and two autobiographies.

Many of his books are constantly in print and his plays in production. His range of concerns is enormous, embracing Jewish identity,

the many shades of love, family relationships, aging, fear, passion and mental illness. *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, whose roots reach back to the tradition of Yiddish theatre, is widely recognized as an originator of Britain's revolutionary, new wave, "kitchen-sink" theatre.

A seminal, book-length critical analysis of his growing corpus (*Bernard Kops: Fantasist, London Jew, Apocalyptic Humorist*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014, 168pp.) has been issued by Professor William Baker of Northern Illinois University and Prof. Jeanette Roberts Shumaker at San Diego State University. The monograph describes him as an influential innovator of British drama, an important social critic and a careful chronicler of the Anglo-Jewish society as well as the London Bohemian subculture of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, of which he was a part.

He is also a stubborn optimist convinced that well chosen words are mightier even than fleets of nuclear warheads. With a comradely wink towards Anne, Bernard includes in the new collection one of his best loved, old poems, *Shalom Bomb*. Here is one timely passage:

...I want a one-man-band-bomb.  
My own bomb!  
 My live long and die happy bomb.  
 My die peacefully of old age bomb;  
 in my own bed bomb.  
 My Om Mane Padme Aum Bomb.  
 My Tiddly Om Pom Bomb.  
 My goodnight bomb, my sleeptight bomb,  
 my see you in the morning bomb.  
 I want my bomb. My own private bomb.  
 My Shalom bomb. •

...an influential  
 innovator of  
 British drama,  
 an important  
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 Anglo-Jewish  
 society

**Thomas ORSZÁG-LAND** is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes from London and his native Budapest. His last book was *Survivors: Hungarian Jewish Poets of the Holocaust* (Smokestack/England, 2014). His work also appears in the new anthologies *Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for Those Seeking Refuge* (Five Leaves) and *Random Red Candles grouping the best of Candelabrum Poetry Magazine, 1970-2010* (Spinnaker), both published in England in 2015.

This book review has previously been published online at the Great American Poetry Show: <http://tgaps.net/reviews/anne-franks-fragments-from-nowhere-bernard-kops/>

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