



An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943; and Letters from Westerbork

Etty Hillesum, Eva Hoffman (Foreword by)

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For the first time, Etty Hillesum's diary and letters appear together to give us the fullest possible portrait of this extraordinary woman. In the darkest years of Nazi occupation and genocide, Etty Hillesum remained a celebrant of life whose lucid intelligence, sympathy, and almost impossible gallantry were themselves a form of inner resistance. The adult counterpart to Anne Frank, Hillesum testifies to the possibility of awareness and compassion in the face of the most devastating challenge to one's humanity. She died at Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of twenty-nine.

An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943; and Letters from Westerbork Details

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Maria Carmo says

Etty Hillesum was "discovered" dozens of years after her death, when her diaries were recovered and published.

I would advise everyone to read this book, which includes both her diaries and a number of letters exchanged by her and her friends.

This is an INCREDIBLE HUMAN BEING, someone who's Soul opened up in the midst of the terrible persecutions during the second world war.

A mystic of a kind, Etty made her incredible spiritual development during two plus years, from the age of 27 till her death, aged 29 years old.

This young woman who was cultured, had studied Law and Psychology, could speak, besides her native Dutch, at least German and Russian fluently and possibly other languages as well, who played music and was a writer, dug deeply into the recesses of her soul in order to find beauty and harmony in a time of relentless pain and difficulty. She had friends who could have helped her to escape, but she declined that, assuming her fate with a song in her heart. A Great Soul.

Maria Carmo

7 7 2011

dehorsmaisdedans says

“Il gioco della vita di Etty si dispiega nell’incontro con le persone, in piena gratuità, nell’ascoltare tutti con un’empatia sempre crescente. Eppure il gioco non si esprime compiutamente, anche se è vero che, per essere tale, deve essere proprio ludico, gratuito, fantasioso”.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

This is a diary of Etty Hillesum, 27. Sometimes she's talking to herself, sometimes to God, sometimes self-analyzing, sometimes just recording events. She teaches Russian, has a lover, has had lovers before, and yet more than half, I think, of this diary is devoted to the object of her love/infatuation/sexual desire--a man about half her age older, who reads palms, who wrestles with his students as part of their lesson in his psychology class, and who removes his false teeth before he prays. They eventually became intimate. In one of the entries she hinted of having had an abortion, making as one of its justifications that insanity runs in the family.

This, indeed, sounds like what a city-dwelling, call-center type of young woman would write today in her diary except that this was in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation and Etty Hillesum was Jewish. She was probably writing this diary at some point when Anne Frank was writing hers while in hiding.

Amidst evil, yet so like us. It brings the horror closer to us and our time. That, I think, is where the power of these innocent musings come from.

The entries ended where she began writing letters instead. Also preserved for posterity by her non-Jewish friends who had survived. These were letters she wrote from Westerbork--the transit point before her eventual transport and death at Auschwitz.

Kirsten says

The record of a beautiful, questioning soul who sees life as whole and meaningful, even when it's most visibly divided and meaningless. She kept the diary in the two years before she was sent to Westerbork camp and then sent letters from the camp in the year before she was sent to Auschwitz and died there. She is humble and proud and fearless and scared and yearning, entirely human and brimming over.

“But I still suffer from the same old complaint. For the one word that sums up everything within me, the overflowing and rich sense of life. ‘Why did you not make me a poet, oh God? But perhaps You did, and so I shall wait patiently until the words have grown inside me, the words that proclaim how good and beautiful it is to live in Your world, oh God, despite everything we human beings do to one another.’ The thinking heart of the barracks.” 1942

“People here fritter their energy away on the thousand irksome details that grind us down every day; they lose themselves in detail and drown. That’s why they get driven off course and find existence pointless. The few big things that matter in life are what we have to keep in mind; the rest can be quietly abandoned. And you can find those few big things anywhere, you have to keep rediscovering them in yourself so that you can be renewed. And in spite of everything you always end up with the same conviction: life is good after all, it’s not God’s fault that things go awry sometimes, the cause lies in ourselves.” 1942

Ffiamma says

“è importante che non mi lasci dominare da quel che mi sta succedendo. in un modo o nell'altro deve rimanere un fatto subordinato al resto- voglio dire: non ci si dovrebbe mai lasciar paralizzare da una cosa sola, per grave che essa sia, la gran corrente della vita deve continuare a scorrere”
(fulgido e fondamentale)

Maria Carmo says

It is not the first time that I read Etty Hillesum, but she always amazes and touches me in the deepest possible way. There is so much greatness in her aspiring Soul, her way is carven in suffering but also joy, as she transforms herself through the two last years of her life, during Holocaust. She learns to love and open herself to God. She can bless life even though there were so many struggles to be fought and so much incredible want and suffering. But Etty can bless life and feel at home for as long as she has the sky over her head. She trains herself to lead a more austere life, in order to relinquish some of life's pleasures before this

is imposed on her from outside. Having loved so many people, she learns to love all; having met God inside herself, she wants to become an intermediary to help others open up to God. She becomes a beacon of light ad a tower of strength, even though her body becomes fragile from lack of nourishment and poor health. It is also touching to read her progressive description of all the things that were slowly forbidden to all Jews: riding public transportation, have most professions, ride a bicycle, go to parks, etc. etc.

Etty could have had the help of some university friends to escape to another country, but she could not bear the thought that someone would be taken in her place, to fill quotes... So she accepted martyrdom. She stayed and she was so changed by her own triumphant spirituality that even as she was deported to Auschwitz she left singing hymns and there are testimonies to the fact that she was helping all around her until she died on the 30th. November 1943.

Absolutely a GOOD READ translated into most languages.

Maria Carmo,

Lisbon, 20 October 2014.

Lorraine says

If I could only take 10 books with me to a deserted island, this would be one. Sort of "Anne Frank" for adults, it is the journals of a young Dutch Jew caught up in the Holocaust. She is brilliant and outgoing and living life to the full, when Hitler's ugly shadow begins to fall over her world. The struggles and dramas that ensue highlight the development of her soul into a loving and courageous being, who was able to write, even as the net drew tighter around her: "I know that those who hate have good reason to do so. But why should we always have to choose the cheapest and easiest way? It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I believe, childishly perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter." We need this kind of thinking and living as much in our 21st century world as they needed it in Europe in 1942.

Frabe says

Esther Hillesum, detta Etty, ebrea olandese vittima della Shoah, fu una grande donna, forte e positiva. Il suo diario prende avvio nel 1941 e si interrompe nel 1943 con il trasferimento da Amsterdam al campo di transito di Westerbork, poco prima della fine ad Auschwitz. La tragedia personale e collettiva ancora apparentemente lontana, il diario riporta annotazioni e riflessioni interessanti, con la grande donna che certamente traspare, ma devo dire che il livello letterario si è rilevato inferiore alle mie aspettative.

Abailart says

The writing is wonderfully alive. It is like having a conversation.

That Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman suffering the terrors of Nazi occupied Holland and finally the death camp, that she was engaged in the most peculiar relationship with therapist Julius Spier, that her

age, circumstance, background and education are so different from my own, I feel makes no impact on the sense of my conversing with a contemporary. Her psychological insights, particularly her guards against vanity, self-preoccupation, depression, and lack of centred stability seem for me the best I have read. Her spirituality, simply by being expressed obliquely, seems in that expression to suggest the universality of a genuine inner life as guide and comforter which is so important today, as it was then, when we are assailed by 'spiritual entertainment', 'spiritual' selfishness, 'spiritual' hedonism. Her gradual acceptance of suffering and dread as part of the whole of her Being is marked equally as genuine precisely by its being itself glimpsed (by her) obliquely, partially, through eyes misted with doubt and distrust: never did it become a lump of proud truth, a mere formulaic centre or hieroglyphic scribble of empty nonsense. She seemed the best of humanbeingness. And she has returned me to Rilke.

As the diary crosses over into her letters from Westerbork, the transit camp where Jews were brought en route to the concentration camps, the pathos becomes almost unbearable. It is in the tiny details. She becomes overwhelmed by the madness, the horror, the dread, the continuous losses, the ever-increasing scarcities, bureaucratic randomness, yet still has moments where she wonders at the beauty of the world while witnessing mass murder before her eyes. I can't recommend this book to anybody, It must come by chance or fortune. You get to witness not a memoir, a looking back, but a situation where the writing and thinking make up the situation itself.

Lord Beardsley says

I'm glad I finally got to read her diaries after reading her letters. I have to say, start with the diaries. I actually read "An Interrupted Life" but goodreads wouldn't let me add it twice for some damned reason.

Reading her diaries is like having a conversation with a close friend. She was an amazing, interesting person. The same things she talks about twentysomethings are still grappling with. She had such a tender, sweet soul. All the time I was reading this, it just kept hitting me that she was forced to die in such a terrible way. Out of all the holocaust books I've read (and I've read a lot...I have no idea what this says about me as a person), I'd have to say this is the most human viewpoint of it all. I related to this more than The Diary of Anne Frank, more perhaps because Etty had had a bit more experience in her life and (while Anne was no saint, she has still been unofficially canonized as one by society) could not be seen as a saint. She was complicated and very neurotic, also a philosopher and a bohemian. I think I'll go back to this book many times in my life.

Kat says

Beautiful, incredible book! Basically an older Anne Frank, Etty is a super modern woman in her late-twenties in Amsterdam. Her diaries make her feel so present, with her evocative writing style and intelligent, ahead-of-her-times kind of life. She lives in a house with roommates from all over, takes lovers of both sexes, and works as a Russian teacher and assistant psychologist. What's most spell-bounding is the way in which the Nazi regime appears in her diary: slowly, through comments such as being tired after a day of walking everywhere now that Jews aren't allowed to bike. It really gives you the feeling of what it must have been like, with freedoms taken away so slowly yet so surely. Being so bright, Etty seems to know immediately which way the wind is blowing, but refuses any chance to leave because she wants to share the fate of the other Jewish people. A heartbreaking, unforgettable book that everyone should read.

Karla says

This is the diary (and letters) of a young, sensitive, intelligent, loving Dutch Jewish woman during the Nazi occupation, living in Amsterdam and ultimately dying in a concentration camp. Sounds familiar? Yes, but Etty is older than Anne Frank, more mature, more complex. She is highly spiritual in a completely personal way. Her mind and heart continue to shine even as the Nazi net around her slowly closes, and ultimately kills her. I'll never forget this book, though I find it hard to re-read it - to realize that such a beautiful person was purposefully killed, brings home the madness of war and racism in an almost unbearable way. Still, do read it! It's beautiful, fascinating, both in a historical sense, and as a story of personal growth.

Diabolika says

Ogni due o tre mesi cerco di leggere un libro sulla Shoah, o argomenti simili, per non dimenticare. Questo libro mi è stato presentato come il corrispettivo de *Il diario di Anna Frank*: non un romanzo, ma una testimonianza. Trovo il paragone decisamente fuori luogo.

Prima di tutto, il libro avrebbe potuto essere scritto da chiunque stesse vivendo in qualsiasi momento storico e non da una giovane ebrea che viveva ad Amsterdam nei primi anni '40. Nella maggior parte del libro, sporadici sono i riferimenti a quello che circonda l'autrice: l'introduzione delle leggi razziali, seguita dalla persecuzione nazista, dai campi di concentramento, dalla morte nelle camere a gas. Sembra che EH viva in un mondo a sé stante, fatto principalmente di letture (trascorre le giornate a leggere Rilke, Dostoevskij, Jung) e di un amore difficile con il suo analista. Quasi tutto *Il Diario* è una serie di pensieri intimi sulla letteratura, sull'amore, sulla felicità e su Dio.

Secondariamente, ho trovato la sua religiosità disturbante. EH è una ebrea non osservante, ma non per questo senza fede. Ha una religiosità tutta sua, che permea tutte le pagine del libro, che la induce a cercare Dio in tutto ciò che la circonda, nei rapporti familiari ed amicali, nell'amore verso S. Quando, lentamente, incomincia ad accorgersi di quello che sta succedendo intorno a lei, si rintana nella sue fede, con quel suo personale approccio verso Dio.

Non trovo inconcepibile che la fede possa essere di sostegno in momenti tragici, alleviare pene, offrire consolazione e speranza di una salvezza eterna. Ma la "soluzione finale" non è stato un momento tragico, ma il punto più basso raggiunto dall'umanità tutta. L'idea di sterminare degli esseri umani perché appartenenti ad un'altra razza è un abominio (così come lo è il concetto di razza). Anche da un credente che si rivolge a Dio per comprendere ed accettare mi aspetto parole di sgomento, di insofferenza, magari di rifiuto. Sembra che perfino Gesù Cristo, sulla croce, abbia detto: "Dio mio, Dio mio, perché mi hai abbandonato!". Invece EH è docilmente rassegnata ad accettare tutto, riempiendo il suo diario di frasi di questo tenore:

"Trovo bella la vita, e mi sento libera. I cieli si stendono dentro di me come sopra di me. Credo in Dio e negli uomini e oso dirlo senza falso pudore. La vita è difficile, ma non è grave."

No, mi spiace, cara EH. Pur rispettando la tua tragica storia, mi permetto di continuare a pensare che i nazisti siano uomini in cui non si può credere e che la Shoah non sia stata una vita difficile, ma un inferno!

Consigliato a chi ha una fede... indiscutibile!

Sconsigliato a chi vuole capire veramente cosa sia stata la Shoah!

Anna says

Etty Hillesum's extraordinary diary and letters are a chronicle of the Holocaust unlike any other I've read. They are devastating, uplifting, and above all distinctive. Her voice comes through so clearly and powerfully, as she initially describes her daily life in Amsterdam and then in the Westerbork labour camp. Her final letter was a postcard thrown from the train that took her to Auschwitz, where she, her parents, and her brother were killed in 1943. As circumstances for Jews in The Netherlands deteriorated, she attempted to protect her family and friends, while retaining an incredible inner strength. Her spirituality appears from her writing quite bible-centric, yet her view of suffering recalled Buddhism. Not that I know a great deal about any religion in particular, but I was strongly reminded of *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, a conversation between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. How strange that a book chronicling one of the most horrific crimes against humanity should remind me of such a title! In that dialogue, the essential similarity between Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation is emphasised. Etty Hillesum cultivated habits of introspection and prayer that seem a lot like meditation and her acceptance of suffering while rejecting hatred echoes the Dalai Lama. For example, she wrote in 1942:

Does this mean I am never sad, that I never rebel, always acquiesce, and love life no matter what the circumstances? No, far from it. I believe that I know and share the many sorrows and sad circumstances that a human being can experience, but I do not cling to them, I do not prolong such moments of agony. They pass through me, like life itself, as a broad, eternal stream, they become part of that stream, and life continues. And as a result all my strength is preserved, does not become tagged on to futile sorrow or rebelliousness.

Her diary and letters confront the reader with complex questions about the nature of resistance in extreme circumstances. Etty refused opportunities to potentially escape or hide, despite knowing that if she stayed in Westerbork she would almost certainly be transported to Poland and killed. Her love of life, even the horribly degrading life inside the camp, did not prevent her accepting death. She clearly wanted to help others for as long as she could, while also having reconciled herself to death's approach after careful thought. In this respect and others, her diary reminded me of *The Journal of a Disappointed Man & A Last Diary*, another voice of one long dead that seems so close by as you read their words. Etty wrote this extraordinary passage shortly before being sent to Westerbork:

I shall always be able to stand on my own two feet even when they are planted on the hardest soil of the harshest reality. And my acceptance is not indifference or helplessness. I feel deep moral indignation at a regime that treats human beings in such a way. But events have become too overwhelming and too demonic to be stemmed with personal resentment and bitterness. These responses strike me as being utterly childish and unequal to the fateful course of events.

People often get worked up when I say it doesn't really matter whether I go or somebody else

does, the main things is that so many thousands *have* to go. It is not as if I want to fall into the arms of destruction with a resigned smile – far from it. I am only bowing to the inevitable, and even as I do so I am sustained by the certain knowledge that ultimately they cannot rob us of anything that matters. But I don't think I would feel happy if I were exempted from what so many others have to suffer. They keep telling me that someone like me has a duty to go into hiding, because I have so many things to do in life, so much to give. But I know that whatever I may have to give to others, I can give it no matter where I am, here in the circle of my friends or over there, in a concentration camp. And it is sheer arrogance to think oneself too good to share the fate of the masses.

There is so much in Etty's writing to move the reader and inspire introspection. She rejected binaries and generalisations, always seeking deeper and more nuanced understanding:

A world is in the process of collapse. But the world will go on, and so for the present shall I, full of good heart and goodwill. Nevertheless, we who are left behind are just a little bit destitute, though inwardly I still feel so rich that the destitution is not fully brought home to me. However, one must keep in touch with the real world and know one's place in it; it is wrong to live only with the eternal truths, for then one is apt to end up behaving like an ostrich. To live fully, outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore external reality for the sake of an inner life, or the reverse – that's quite a task.

Throughout the diary and letters, Etty found solace in reading, however she emphasised the importance of books for study in pursuit of understanding rather than escape. I found this especially stimulating:

All this devouring of books from early youth has been nothing but laziness on my part. I allow others to formulate what I ought to be formulating myself. I keep seeking outside confirmation of what is hidden deep inside me, when I know I can only reach clarity by using my own words. I really must abandon all that laziness, and particularly my inhibitions and insecurity, if I am ever to find myself, and through myself, find others. I must have clarity, and must learn to accept myself.

Even while falling victim to the horrific murderous system of Nazism, Etty exhibited incredible empathy:

That was the real import of this morning: not that a disgruntled young Gestapo officer yelled at me, but that I felt no indignation, rather a real compassion, and would have liked to ask, "Did you have a very unhappy childhood, has your girlfriend let you down?" Yes, he looked harassed and driven, sullen and weak. I should have liked to start treating him then and there, for I know that pitiful young men like that are dangerous as soon as they are let loose on humankind. But the blame must be put on the system that uses such people. What needs eradicating is the evil in man, not man himself.

Something else about this morning: the perception, very strongly borne in, that despite all the suffering and injustice I cannot hate others. All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threats from afar, but rise from fellow human beings very close to us. That makes these happenings more familiar, then, and not so frightening. The terrifying thing is that systems grow too big for men and hold them in a satanic grip, the builders no less than the victims of the system, much as large edifices and spires, created by men's hands, tower high above us, dominate us, yet may collapse over our heads and bury us.

I hardly need to point out the continued relevance of these comments today.

Perhaps the most powerful theme in Hillsum's writing is the strength that comes from understanding oneself through a combination of introspection and discussion with a wide circle of loved ones. To read her words 75 years after she was murdered is a reminder of an appalling genocide that must never be allowed to happen again, as well as an insight into the mind of a fascinating, complicated woman who I would love to have known as a friend. She retained her distinctive voice even as the end neared and she wrote, 'For us, I think, it is no longer a question of living, but of how one is equipped for one's extinction'. Yet the phrase from the book that most struck me is this: 'Somewhere deep inside me is a workshop in which Titans are forging a new world'. That's one of the most beautiful expressions of hope that I have ever read. I can hardly recommend Etty Hillsum's writing highly enough.

Cathrine ?? says

How can I put a star rating on edited personal diary pages and letters written from a transit camp just prior to transport to Auschwitz? I cannot. Discovered and published 40 years after the author's death, they introduce us to Etty, a 27 year old Jewish woman in the Netherlands who is on a parallel journey of self-discovery. She reads Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and loves philosophy and Rilke. Facing the Holocaust with eyes wide open, she can write: '...when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop. That is also my attitude to life and I believe that neither war nor any other senseless human atrocity will ever be able to change it.' And: 'Not for one moment was I cut off from the life I was said to have left behind. There was simply one great, meaningful whole. Will I be able to describe all that one day? So that others can feel too how lovely and worth living and just — yes, just—life really is?' Yes, she did, in spite of it all.
