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Nate Guidry/Post-Gazette

Retired FBI agent heads international team trying to solve World War II mystery



TORSTEN OVE Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
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Vince Pankoke, a native of Richland Township outside Johnstown and a former cop there, spent 27 years as an FBI agent.



He tracked down kidnapers and fugitives in Wisconsin, intercepted Colombian cocaine shipments in Miami, worked the perimeter of the Branch Davidian complex as a SWAT member in Texas, posed undercover as a yacht-owning high-roller to nab corrupt politicians, helped re-trace the movements of the 9-11 hijackers.



He retired from the Miami office in 2014 at 57, the

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mandatory retirement age for federal agents, and lives in Parkland, Fla., with his wife Mary Pat.

But while his law enforcement career may be over, he's not quite ready to lie on the beach.



Torsten Ove

The Next Page: The storied career of retired FBI agent Vince Pankoke

At 59, he's using his skills to solve one of the most infamous crimes of the 20th century: Who sent Anne Frank to her death in 1944?

Rooted in the dark years of World War II, her story symbolizes the depravity of the Nazi regime for generations who have read "The Diary of Anne Frank."

Identifying her betrayer is the "ultimate cold case," says Mr. Pankoke.

It's also a good fit for an ex-agent whose father, a combat engineer in World War II, liberated a concentration camp in 1945.

"I consider it the most significant case of my career," he says. "If we could solve this one mystery I think we're sending a statement to the people out there who are committing crimes against humanity that it doesn't matter how long it takes, the world has a conscience."

This effort has made Mr. Pankoke, who spent eight years as a police officer in Richland and still has deep roots there, something of a global celebrity.

In the weeks since his "Cold Case Diary" project was announced, he's been fielding dozens of interview requests from around the world.

"There is a lot of interest in the United States, but Europe is just fascinated with it," he says. "I've done interviews with media in 10 different countries."



Undated photo of Anne Frank (Anne Frank Center, USA)

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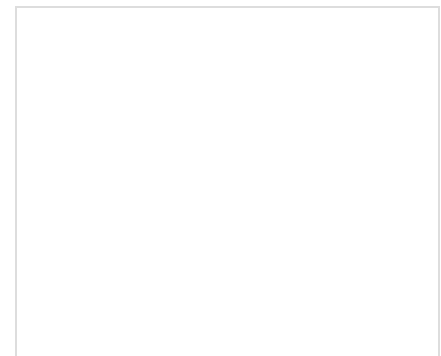
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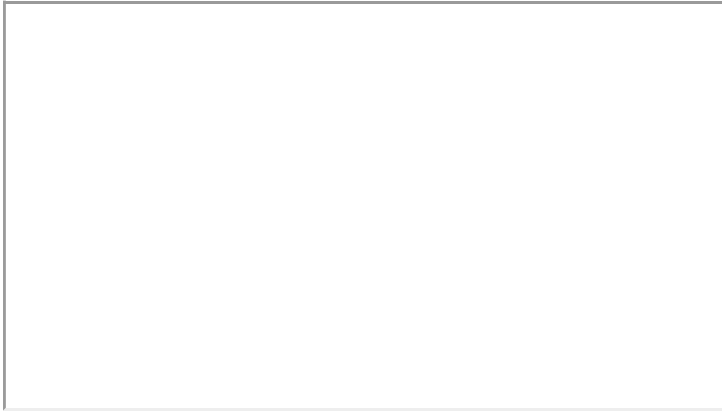
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As the leader of a team of 20 researchers, historians, ex-cops and analysts, including a former chief of the FBI's famed behavioral science unit, Mr. Pankoke's job is to comb through millions of documents to figure out who tipped off the Nazis about Anne Frank's hiding place behind a bookcase in the annex above her father's business in the heart of occupied Amsterdam.



A Dutch production company, Proditione Media, contacted Mr. Pankoke to head the investigation and is soliciting donations online to pay for it. The company is filming the project in the hopes of making a documentary.

Mr. Pankoke's team has been digging through archives on two continents and making use of special software designed to cross-reference documents, such as police reports, Gestapo files, property records, lists of Nazi sympathizers in Amsterdam and the like. The software, created by a Dutch data company, can find matches that otherwise might be missed.

"It's something a human could do but it would take a very long time," says Mr. Pankoke.

The project is also asking for tips on its website. So far the team has received 10 good leads. Mr. Pankoke won't discuss them in detail but one came from the relative of a witness and another from the relative of a suspect. The idea now is to interview them in detail and see what documentary evidence they may have.

Mr. Pankoke says he feels honored to head the project. He was recruited for it largely by happenstance.



He had been in Amsterdam in



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The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, Netherlands, looks much the same today as it did when the young Anne Frank wrote her famous diary. (The Commercial Appeal)

2005 on a case he can't talk about, working with a member of the Dutch National Police. He and his Dutch colleague drove by the Anne Frank house. They didn't go in because the line was too long. But the Dutch officer asked him: "Do you realize that crime has never been solved?" That hung with me all those years."

More recently Thijs Bayens, the Dutch filmmaker behind the production company and a man whose grandfather hid from the Nazis, knew the Dutch officer and asked him why the Dutch police never did an investigation. The officer thought of his American friend and the idea was born.

"This is where the discussion started," says Mr. Pankoke.

Mr. Bayens said he wanted a foreign police officer as team leader to provide a "fresh pair of eyes" and that an FBI agent was a natural choice.

"The FBI has such a good reputation," he says.

The goal of the project, he says, is simple: "Shedding light into the dark."

Mr. Pankoke had read the Anne Frank diary in school back in Richland and knew the general story, as do most Americans.

He also has a strong connection to World War II. His father, a Johnstown steelworker, and his three uncles all served. In his later years, Vince Pankoke Sr. had begun talking about his experiences with the 36th Combat Engineers in Europe. After father and son saw "Schindler's List," Vince Sr. said, "You know, we liberated a camp."

It was a sub-camp of Dachau outside of Mittenwald. He'd never said a word about it before.

"He told me about it after that," says Mr. Pankoke, who has since spent time tracing the history of the 36th and reading its detailed



the job and reading its detailed action reports.

The Anne Frank story resonates with him. And there's another personal connection. As an undercover agent, he could never tell anyone about his work. But now he can, and he's been making recordings of his progress on the Anne Frank project and keeping a diary for his adult daughter, Kate, who lives in Washington, D.C.



"I appreciate her insights and she is a great inspiration to me," he says on the Cold Case Diary website. "She says it's time to share my experiences with the rest of the world."

Anne Frank, her family and four others hid from the Nazis for more than two years until the Gestapo found them in August 1944. She died of typhus at Bergen-Belsen in March 1945, a few months before the liberation of Europe by the Allies.

Born in Frankfurt am Main in 1929, she and her parents, Otto and Edith, along with her older sister, Margot, fled to the Netherlands as anti-Semitism grew in Germany. Otto started his business, Opekta, in Amsterdam. But then the Germans invaded Holland in 1940. After Margot received notice to report to a labor camp in Germany, the family went into hiding in the annex of Otto's building. They were joined by the Van Pels family and a dentist, Fritz Pfeffer.

This is the setting for Anne Frank's remarkable diary, in which she recorded daily life in the annex and her thoughts and feelings.

It ended Aug. 4, 1944, when the Gestapo raided the building. The Frank and Van Pels families, along with Fritz Pfeffer, were shipped to Auschwitz. Otto Frank was the only survivor of the war and later published his daughter's diary in 1947. It became one of the most famous books in history, later adapted for stage and film.





Miep Gies, front row left, and the helpers Bep Voskuijl, front row right, Johannes Kleiman, back row left, and Victor Kugler, back row right, provided food, books and good cheer while the Frank family hid for two years from the Nazis in a tiny attic apartment in Amsterdam. Otto Frank is front row center.
(Anne Frank House/Associated Press)

But one part is always missing. Who alerted the Gestapo? Or was the annex discovered by accident by agents searching for fake ration cards, as the Anne Frank House museum suggested most recently in 2016?

War-time Amsterdam was swarming with Nazi sympathizers and Jews living in fear. About 25,000 Jews were in hiding throughout the Netherlands. Some 9,000 of them were caught, usually as a result of informant tips.

There was plenty of incentive to turn them in.

The police paid informants a "kopgeld" - head price - for each one.

Yet two Dutch police investigations in 1947-48 and 1963 reached no conclusions about the tipster. Various books have fingered suspects, but with no evidence to back up the claims. Over the years some 30 people have emerged as "persons of interest." But no documents have ever surfaced to prove any one of them was the culprit.

Several theories have focused on Otto's warehouse employees. While four office workers knew of the hideout and helped the families, the warehouse workers on the ground floor did not know. Those in the annex, as Anne Frank's diary reveals, were worried about them finding out and didn't entirely trust them.

One of the main suspects has always been Wilhelm van Maaren, who took over the warehouse operations in 1943.

Otto Frank, who reportedly said "we were betrayed by Jews," thought he was the informant. Van Maaren was suspicious and inquisitive by nature. He thought people were visiting the warehouse at night and lay subtle traps for them to prove it.

"He places books and bits of paper on the very edges of things in the warehouse so that if anyone walks by they fall off."

in the warehouse so that if anyone talks by they talk to,
Anne Frank wrote.

The family also suspected him of stealing from them.

The Dutch police investigations focused largely on him. The 1963 case did prove that Van Maaren was a thief, but it revealed no evidence to show he was the informant.

Other theories have zeroed in on different employees, such as Joseph Jansen, who suspected Otto Frank of having an affair with his wife and wrote a letter denouncing him in 1941 for making anti-German comments, according to a 2003 biography of Otto Frank by Carol Ann Lee. Anton Ahlers, a Dutch Nazi party member, intercepted the letter and presented it to Frank as part of a blackmail scheme. The book concludes that he was the likely informant.

But it's all speculation.

"Did Ahlers even know about the annex, and if he did, why would he betray the person who was paying him money?" asks the Cold Case Diary website.

Other writers and amateur sleuths have suggested the betrayer was Lena Hartog-van Bladeren, the Franks' cleaning lady, who was married to a warehouse worker, or Ans van Dijk, a Jewish woman who became an agent for the Gestapo and betrayed dozens of Jews in hiding.

Mr. Pankoke and his team know all of these stories. But their job is to find the smoking gun in the troves of records.

Among the team members who could provide that link is Roger Depue, 79, the former head of the FBI's behavioral science unit who successfully identified Mark Felt as Deep Throat in the Watergate investigation by studying the quotes from the book "All the President's Men."

A pioneering profiler, his mission is to examine statements to try to assemble a portrait of the suspect.

"Hopefully I can make a contribution," he said from his



Photo shows the house where Anne Frank lived in Amsterdam and where she hid with her parents to escape from Nazis between June 1942 and August 4, 1944.
(DESK/AFP/Getty Images)

CONTRIBUTION, HE SAID FROM HIS

home in Virginia. "We can do a great deal in constructing the profile of anyone by examining their words, either orally or written."

He says he is happy to work with Mr. Pankoke, who recruited him, and says Mr. Pankoke is the type of strong leader who will take charge of the investigation and make sure it is done right.

"Vince is one of the best investigators I know," he says. "He's very thorough. Very courageous."

Mr. Pankoke's first order of business was to examine the police investigations. And what he found was that they were more like inquiries than real police cases.

"I wanted to find out what had been done. Reading reports, I found myself saying, 'This was not thorough,'" he says. "It was nothing like an FBI investigation."

The first case in 1948, handled by the "political investigation" division of the Amsterdam police, was substandard because most of the experienced police officers in Amsterdam had been kicked out after the war for cooperating with the Gestapo.

"Looking back, we can say that the investigation was flawed," the Anne Frank museum website concludes. "Many questions were not asked, and the whole inquiry was rather superficial."

The 1963 investigation was more professional. It was launched after Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal tracked down Karl Silberbauer, the Nazi officer in charge of the Anne Frank arrest. Silberbauer, who died in 1972, remembered the arrest but not the betrayer. His superior, Julius Dettman, who had reportedly taken the phone call from the informant, killed himself shortly after the war.

The 1963 case closed without any conclusions.

In addition to the deaths of witnesses, earlier investigations were hindered by the fact that many of the World War II generation were unwilling to deal with the legacy of the Nazi era.

But Mr. Pankoke says that has changed. The second and third generations following the war are much more open, and the

internet gives them an easy way to share information. One tip recently came from a woman who lived near the Anne Frank house and had first-person knowledge of staunch Dutch Nazis in the area.

"We're getting some fantastic tips through the website," says Mr. Pankoke. "It's gaining steam."

He wasn't sure how involved this project would be when he signed up. His wife also had reservations. She was hoping for some time to take cruises, relax, and spend time together now that his all-consuming FBI career was done.

"She said, 'How long is this going to take?'" he says. "But after she had seen the passion I had for it, she's 100 percent behind me."

The project sounds glamorous at first, as if Mr. Pankoke is roaming Amsterdam back alleys and kicking in doors in the middle of the night. But the job amounts to spending lots of time in rooms full of documents, examining microfilm or taking photos of old papers with a cell phone and feeding them to the central database. It's kind of business as usual for an FBI agent. Hollywood makes FBI work look exciting, but usually it's about digging through documents.

"It does get monotonous," he says. "But certain documents are more relevant than others. It's just that one little bit of information that gets your energy level up. It's really not that much different from what I did before."

The problem is not too little information but too much. But it's a good problem to have.

"The Nazis were excellent record-keepers," says Mr. Pankoke.

Records are scattered in far-flung places. Some are in the Dutch national archives in The Hague. Others are in Amsterdam city archives. There are records in Berlin. And there are records in the U.S. at the national archives that no one knew were there.

"Part of a cold case is never accepting what people say as gospel until you prove it yourself," Mr. Pankoke says.

Those Gestapo records are an example. They were presumed destroyed in a British bombing raid in 1944. But Mr. Pankoke discovered that some of them ended up in the National

Archives. Even before the war ended, U.S. teams in occupied areas grabbed as many documents as they could to send home. They sat in crates for years in various places until they ended up consolidated in an old torpedo factory in Alexandria, Va., where they were microfilmed. The originals were then returned to Germany and the microfilms sent to the National Archives.

Massive amounts of those records were declassified in 1999, but no one has looked through everything. Clues to the Anne Frank mystery could be there.

One question Mr. Pankoke has been asked again and again is why it's necessary to solve a war crime from 73 years ago.

But he has a ready answer.

"Time doesn't heal the effects of evil," he says. "If we can show the world that even after 73 years there is a group of people from law enforcement trying to solve this, it will demonstrate that, 'Listen, it doesn't matter how long it takes. There is somebody out there.'"

He also points out that the project has already uncovered details about other victims of the Nazis in Amsterdam. That's important, Mr. Pankoke says, because while Anne Frank has become a symbol of the Holocaust, there were many others just like her whose stories were lost to history. The only thing that separates her from the others is her extraordinary diary.

Another aspect of the project he is careful to explain is that he will not be hauling anyone into court when the investigation is done. The team will write a report timed for release on Aug. 4, 2019, a date chosen to honor the eight people in the annex. They will allow it to be peer-reviewed and then give it to the Anne Frank museum. The report may identify someone as a suspect or a likely suspect, or it may not.

But there will be no action beyond that.

"We're stressing that this is not a prosecution, this is a fact-finding mission," Mr. Pankoke says. "There is no judgment."





An undated file photo of Anne Frank.
(Associated Press)

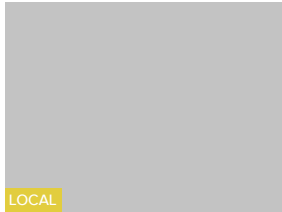
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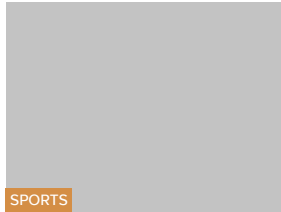
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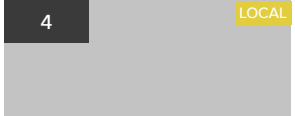
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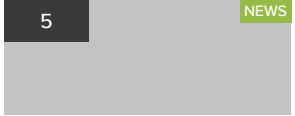
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