

Het Parool, Thursday 21 June 2007

Rescue on the way for Anne's tree?

Is or isn't the Anne Frank Tree doomed to die? Tree experts disagree.

Patrick Meershoek

Green leaves and blossoms all over. For a tree that's lethally ill the chestnut in the garden of 188 Keizersgracht certainly looks very healthy. Sylvio Mutal, who lives near the Anne Frank House, has a spectacular view from his window of the ancient tree, about which Anne Frank wrote in her diary on 13 May 1944: 'our chestnut tree is in full bloom, from top to bottom. It is full of leaves and much more beautiful than it was last year.'

As a consultant to Unesco, Mutal (73) used to develop plans for the preservation of cultural heritage in Ethiopia, Peru, Mali and Curaçao. Now he has set his sights on protecting the Anne Frank Tree in his own back yard. In cooperation with alarmed local residents and tree experts Mutal attempts to prevent the cutting permit that the Amsterdam Centre District Council issued for the tree from actually being used.

The opponents to cutting disagree with the District Council's conclusion that 'cutting is the only realistic option.' They believe there are numerous options to keep the tree alive for a longer period, or at least to keep it standing. 'The tree is old and decayed, that much is true. But the District Council's acts out of fear for liability claims in the event the tree collapses and causes damage. But we say: use every possible option to save this monumental tree.'

And these options do exist, according to Amsterdam tree conservationist Hans Kaljee. 'The District Council claims that the Anne Frank tree is hopelessly lost. But on the basis of research I have perused I would never dare draw that conclusion. Not enough study has been made of the options for preserving the tree, such as building a construction around the tree or managing the tree's gradual death.'

Kaljee's colleague Evert Ros of New York Tree Care in Waarland supports his views. 'The tree is estimated to be 170 years old. It's the oldest chestnut tree in Amsterdam. It's an old rascal with geriatric complaints. If this were just any other tree, it would have been sawed down ages ago. But of course this is no ordinary tree. It is a tree with a special cultural and historical significance. If preservation is the aim, it may last for another ten years at least.'

'Every tree is entitled to a natural death'

This already became evident in March, when on the invitation of the local residents a dozen of tree experts expressed their views on the chestnut's future. 'Various forms of conservation are possible,' claimed Frans van Vught of Tarzan Tree Care in Amstelveen. 'Every tree is entitled to a natural death,' said Frans Baltussen of Boomadvies in Eindhoven. And Alexander van der Dussen of Tree Motion Arboriculture in Haarlem: 'In Britain there are many examples of ancient trees that live on with a trunk that is quite hollow.'

This last remark encouraged Mutal to conduct a search in the United Kingdom, where he found Neville Fay, arboricultural expert in Bristol and chairman

of the Ancient Tree Forum. The Englishman visited the Keizersgracht last month and concluded that the Anne Frank tree is not, as the District Council decided on the basis of research, irreparably diseased, nor is it irreversibly decayed.

Mutal presented Fay's report to the objections committee that studies the objections raised to the issued cutting permit. Mutal hopes that, following a negative advice of the committee, the District Council is prepared to take over his proposal to invite experts from across the world to Amsterdam to jointly work out a solution for the Anne Frank Tree. 'Money is not an issue. Companies are lining up to sponsor the Anne Frank Tree.'

He isn't entirely sure he will succeed. 'I find it remarkable that nobody wants to take responsibility. In the past few years the District Council was responsible for maintenance, but it has washed its hands of the tree. The owner doesn't mind the tree remaining where it is, and the Anne Frank Foundation does not deal with this matter at all, even though last year the foundation opened a website featuring letters from children across the world on a virtual chestnut tree. I find that very curious. How do you say that in Holland? Nobody wants to get his feet wet?'

Paris Honours Anne Frank

Paris – Since yesterday, Paris has a city garden named after Anne Frank. The garden, measuring four thousand square metres, is situated in Le Marais district that has a rich Jewish history and was opened by Paris mayor Bertrand Delance.

Also in attendance were the ambassadors of Israel and the Netherlands. The Anne Frank House was also represented.

A sapling of the Anne Frank Tree was planted in the centre of the garden.