

Vera O'Brien

Title: Journey to Life

Author: Vera O'Brien

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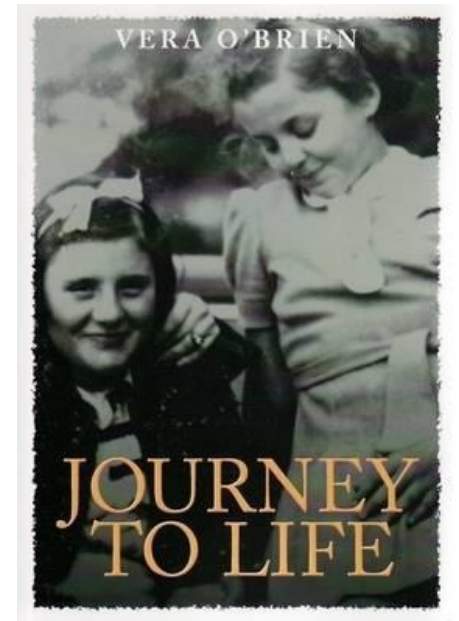
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, State Library of Victoria, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Austria: Vienna; Czechoslovakia: Vrbové, Prague; England: Sheffield; Malaysia: New Zealand: Auckland.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: *Kristallnacht*; Kindertransport; child survivor; Jewish refugee.



Journey to Life is the story of Viennese child survivor, Vera O'Brien, who fled the Nazis on a Kindertransport to England where she survived the war in a foster home.

The memoir is 235 pages long. Pages 1-26 recount the author's childhood in Vienna, her flight to Slovakia and eventually to England in July 1939. Pages 27-73 describe her life in foster care in England. Pages 74-130 detail her time in the British army after the war, marriage to husband John in 1948 and the birth of their children. Pages 131-204 give an account of John's time in the army and Vera's twenty-seven years as an "army wife" stationed in Malaya and New Zealand as well as her travels to Europe. Pages 205-233 document the life of the author's extended family in Europe and New Zealand as well as excerpts from her husband, children and grandchildren.

Vera O'Brien (née Harth) was born in Vienna on 7 February 1929, the only child of middle-class parents Carl and Margita Harth. Vera's childhood years were divided between Vienna, where she attended school, and Vrbové in Slovakia where her beloved grandmother lived.

In March 1938, Nazi Germany annexed Austria. On 9 November 1938, when Vera was eight years old, a violent antisemitic program was unleashed in what became known as *Kristallnacht*. Armed men stormed the family home and used their bayonets to destroy their baby grand piano and ransack their belongings. After this incident, the family fled to Vrbové to live with Vera's grandmother. After a few months they were rounded up by uniformed men, driven to the countryside and abandoned. They then made their way to Bratislava on foot where they managed to shelter at a rabbi's home for several weeks after Vera became ill. They were then smuggled to Prague where, on 1 July 1939, Vera's parents placed her on a Kindertransport to England. She never saw them again.

Under the auspices of the Woodcraft Folk, a British youth organisation, Vera travelled by train to Holland where she boarded a ship to Harwich, England. Alongside other refugees from the Woodcraft Folk, Vera was sent to a youth refugee camp for a week before being taken to Sheffield in Yorkshire where she was placed with her new guardians, Mr and Mrs Hull and their son Ian. Afraid and unable to adequately converse with her English foster parents, Vera suffered terrible loneliness and confusion in her new home. Although she attended school and quickly learned the language, when the war began ten weeks later Vera was deemed an 'enemy alien' and had to be home-schooled.

In the summer of 1940, Sheffield began suffering food shortages and air-raids. As the air raids increased in intensity, Vera was frequently sent to Langholm in Scotland to shelter with relatives of the Hull family. Though Vera had a good relationship with her foster father, her foster mother was often verbally and physically abusive. For years, the only contact Vera had with her parents was in the form of infrequent letters. In 1942, she lost contact with her family entirely. When thirteen, she left school to join the workforce, having only completed her primary education. After working various jobs in hospitality, sixteen-year-old Vera obtained a Red Cross certificate and began working as a nurse.

As her relationship with Mrs Hull became unbearable, Vera left the Hull home to join the British army in 1946 when she was just seventeen, eventually rising to the rank of Sergeant. She was sent to army training barracks at the Catterick camp in North Yorkshire where she met and married husband John, an Irish Catholic, in 1948. Ten months later the couple welcomed twins, Michael and Terence. With John still serving in the British army, the family was stationed in Malaya, and later, the small New Zealand settlement of Waiouru. There, Vera and John raised a family of six children.

After having written her memoir years later, Vera was determined for her story to be told and preserved by a Jewish institution. In March 2007, whilst visiting her daughter in Sydney, Vera approached the Sydney Jewish Museum's Community Stories Department to facilitate the publication of her memoir. Tragically, Vera passed away shortly after. Her memoir was finished with the assistance of her husband John and published in 2008.

Journey to Life is a lucid account of the experiences of a Kindertransport child that poignantly reflects the trauma of dislocation and family separation. Due to her young age at the time, some details are missing from the narrative and the author's account of Nazi-occupied Austria is brief. The memoir primarily centres on her displaced childhood in England and its lasting psychological impact on her life and family. It also contains multiple excerpts from the diary of her foster father, Mr Hull.