

Sonia Korn-Grimani

Title: *Sonia's Song: A Song of Hope*

Author: Sonia Korn-Grimani

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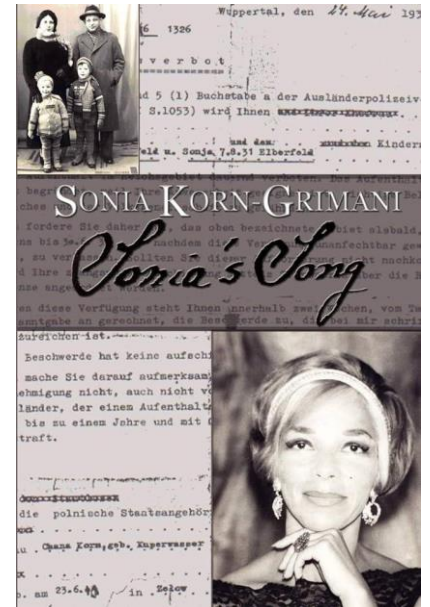
Location of Book: Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

Cities/towns/camps: Germany: Wuppertal-Elberfeld; Belgium: Brussels, Ostend, Dunkirk, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve; France: Pas-de-Calais, Paris; Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: child survivor in-hiding; Jewish refugee; Battle of Belgium.



Sonia's Song is the 204-page memoir of German-born child survivor and Australian radio personality Sonia Korn-Grimani. After years of persecution under Nazism, Sonia escaped to Belgium with her family in 1939 and was caught up in the Battle of Belgium. In 1942, she and her brother were placed in hiding, where they remained for two years disguised as Catholic orphans, alongside twenty other Jewish children. After the war, the family reunited and emigrated to Melbourne where Sonia became a celebrated singer and broadcaster.

Pages 1-48 describe the author's childhood amidst the rise of Nazism and antisemitic measures in Germany. Pages 49-92 recount her family's escape to Brussels, their failed flight to the Pas-de-Calais region in France following the Nazi invasion, and subsequent time in hiding in Brussels. Pages 93-145 cover the children's concealment in a resistance run 'orphanage' in Ottignies from 1942 until liberation in 1944. Pages 146-59 recount their return to Brussels and emigration to Melbourne in 1950. Pages 160-204 describe the author's family life and broadcasting career in Australia, as well as her time in Malaysia and Paris.

Sonia Korn-Grimani was born 7 August 1931 in Wuppertal-Elberfeld, Germany, to Polish-Jewish immigrants Jacob L. Korn and Chawa Kupferwasser. She had an older brother, Heini, and her father ran a successful textile business.

In 1935, following the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws her father was stripped of his German citizenship and his business was crippled, plunging the family into financial hardship. As antisemitic restrictions worsened, the family became increasingly isolated as they were barred from most public spaces and rejected by former friends. In 1938, the children were expelled from their state school and began attending a makeshift Jewish school. After being attacked by stone-throwing Hitler Youth, they were confined indoors.

In October 1938, during the campaign to deport Polish Jews, Chawa was arrested by the Gestapo but was miraculously released. Soon after, during *Kristallnacht*, the Korns escaped direct violence but Sonia's friend and his parents were murdered and Chawa urgently sought their escape.

In May 1939 Chawa arranged for her husband to be secretly transported to Brussels by the resistance. Afterwards, she succeeded in having the children smuggled into Brussels and followed three weeks later.

In Brussels the Korn family lived hand-to-mouth, with the aid of Belgian friends and Jewish charities, while Chawa supplemented their income by illegally selling handbags and homemade soaps. Despite the financial hardship, life regained some normalcy and Sonia was able to attend school.

On 10 May 1940, Germany invaded Belgium and the Korns fled Brussels in a rented truck, hoping to reach safety in France. Enroute, they encountered heavy air raids and unimaginable scenes of destruction. After two and half weeks in flight, they encountered German soldiers near Amiens and decided to return to Brussels.

Under Nazi occupation, antisemitic measures were again reinstituted. In 1942, as deportations to the camps began, the family secured false papers and went into hiding with the help of the Belgian resistance, moving between five apartments over several months.

After nearly being caught in a round-up in autumn 1942, eleven-year-old Sonia and thirteen-year-old Heini were placed in hiding at the resistance-run Le Joli Coin orphanage in the town of Ottignies, alongside twenty-one other hidden Jewish children. Their parents remained in hiding in Brussels.

Run by the strict Madame J., life in the orphanage was marked by severe privation and harsh regimentation. Each day, after being woken in the early hours and fed a breakfast of watery gruel and a slice of bread, the children were marched to the local church to sing Mass. Madame J. then forced them to perform difficult manual chores, such as peeling potatoes in a rat-infested cellar, whilst she hoarded food sent by the underground. Facilities were minimal and hygiene was virtually non-existent; during a lice infestation the children's heads were shaved.

Despite these harsh conditions, Sonia found solace in the music and liturgy of the Catholic Mass – singing in a talented ensemble known as the "Orphan Choir". Thankfully, their performances drew the attention of local villagers, nuns, and the parish priest, who began feeding the starving children in secret.

In September 1944, Ottignies was liberated by American forces. Sonia and Heini soon reunited with their parents and returned to Brussels where they re-enrolled in school. Sonia began studying at the local music academy.

In 1947, under pressure from Belgian authorities, the family relocated to Paris where Sonia dreamed of pursuing studies in art and music. Struggling to secure permanent residency, they moved between Brussels and Paris with the aid of friends and Jewish charities. After their only surviving family emigrated to Australia in 1949, Sonia's father secured landing permits in April 1950 and the Korns followed them, with passage aboard the *SS Napoli*.

Initially struggling in Melbourne, and living in immigrant housing for a year and half, Sonia vowed to return to Paris. Despite these challenges, she enrolled in the Melbourne Conservatory, while taking on jobs as an interpreter and broadcaster, and became the youngest broadcaster on Australia radio. Sonia's musical talent soon gained national and international recognition. She later married John Grimani and had two children, Renée-Katia and Anthony. After relocating to Malaysia for five years where Sonia worked as a translator for the Malaysian Queen, she finally realised her dream of settling in Paris.

Sonia's Song is a lucid and poignant memoir of the author's wartime experiences in Nazi Germany and occupied Belgium, told through a series of vivid vignettes. Written in a novelistic and condensed style, the narrative often avoids dates and at times the timeline is vague. Despite ambiguities, the memoir renders key episodes with emotional clarity and narrative depth – powerfully capturing the personal traumas of a Jewish child confronted with war, dislocation and alienation. The author also reflects on the lasting impact of the Holocaust on her family and personal relationships as well as her spiritual journey and evolving cultural identity. Originally written in German, the memoir was translated and published by LIT Verlag Münster in 2004.