

Erich Pisk

Title: *This is My Life*

Author: Erich Pisk

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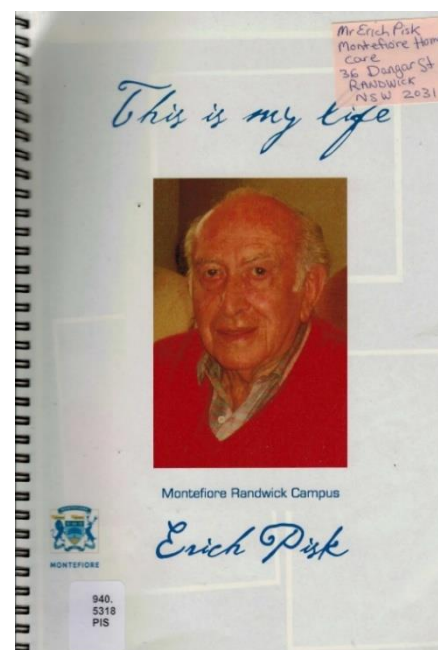
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, Sydney Jewish Museum, Monash University and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Austria: Vienna, Judenburg concentration camp; Latvia: Riga ghetto, Kaiserwald concentration camp; Poland: Stutthof; Germany: Buchenwald, Altenburg forced labour camp; Australia: Sydney, Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: *Kristallnacht*; ghetto; concentration camp; death march.



This is My Life is the 23-page manuscript of Viennese survivor, Erich Pisk who was interned in a concentration camp at just fourteen-years-of age following *Kristallnacht*. He was later incarcerated in the Riga ghetto and various camps. After the war, he settled in Melbourne and later moved to Sydney, where he began writing his story while a resident at the Montefiore Jewish Home.

Pages 1-7 provide an overview of his family history and upbringing in Vienna, followed by his arrest during *Kristallnacht* and imprisonment in a concentration camp near Judenburg. Pages 8-16 describe his internment in the Riga ghetto and various concentration camps, including Kaiserwald and Stutthof, liberation on a death march to Buchenwald and return to Vienna. Pages 17-23 recount his emigration to Melbourne in 1949, family and business. The memoir is supplemented by an additional 21 pages of family photographs, historical documents in German and English and a family tree.

Erich Pisk was born 22 October 1924 in Vienna to assimilated, middle-class parents, Frida Wallach and Samuel Pisk. His father was a successful milliner and businessman. Erich attended the local state school and grew up with many non-Jewish friends.

In March 1938, when Erich was thirteen, Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany. Shortly afterwards, a dear childhood friend who had joined the Hitler Youth came to Erich's home and abruptly ended their friendship, calling him a "dirty Jew." Shocked, Erich struck him in the nose. In retaliation, the boy reported him to authorities.

On *Kristallnacht*, fourteen-year-old Erich and his father were arrested by the Gestapo. Erich was detained, interrogated and beaten by the Gestapo before being sent to a concentration camp near Judenburg while his father was interned in a separate camp. Taking pity on the youth, the camp's commandant showed Erich leniency, making him

a 'house-servant' in the SS living quarters. Although spared from the harshest forced labour, Erich lived in appalling conditions – sleeping in a shed with minimal clothing and meagre rations. After eleven months of detention, he was released.

Soon after, in the winter of 1941, the entire family was arrested and their property confiscated. Interned for a week at a local school hall they were then deported in cattle wagons to the Riga ghetto. During transit, a prominent man, Mr. Bosel, was tied to the outside of a wagon where he froze to death. Upon arrival, their belongings were seized and they were housed in overcrowded, frigid conditions with minimal resources, sharing floor space with multiple families.

Erich and his father were soon forced into labour – his father at a factory and Erich cleaning trains. One day, a selection took place and Erich watched helplessly as his parents were loaded into sealed black trucks and driven away. He later learned they had been murdered in the Rumbula Forest. Traumatized and alone, Erich contracted pneumonia and was hospitalised. After recovering, he worked in a clothing factory under harsh conditions, enduring beatings and witnessing countless public hangings of fellow inmates.

In November 1943, the Riga ghetto was liquidated and Erich was transferred to the Kaiserwald concentration camp, where he worked as a roofer. In August 1944, as the Red Army advanced, he was sent to Stutthof. Soon after, he was transferred to Buchenwald and then to the forced labour camp Altenburg where he laboured for 14-hours a day in a munitions factory. The factory was the target of multiple allied bombing raids, resulting in many casualties among the prisoners.

In April 1945, the prisoners were forced on a death march to Buchenwald. For three days they received no food or water, while German women jeered at them and poured buckets of water over their heads. While resting in a forest, the prisoners awoke to find their SS guards had vanished. Soon after, they encountered a group of African-American soldiers, who generously offered them their own food rations. Tragically, the sudden intake proved too much for many starving prisoners, who became violently ill and died.

Erich and a small group of prisoners were transported to an American-occupied villa in Waldenburg to recover. They were later moved to a requisitioned villa in Langbernsdorf, where they were housed alongside other camp survivors. There, Erich met his future wife, Frida. After two months of recovery, he returned to Vienna and married Frida in May 1946. Later that year, he joined the Vienna police force. Their son, Harry, was born in 1949.

With the help of relatives who had emigrated to Australia via Shanghai, the family secured landing permits and sailed to Australia aboard the *Sorrento*, arriving in December 1949.

Erich and Frida remained happily married for 64 years until her death in 2010. Tragically, their son passed away from cancer six months later. Following these losses,

Erich moved into the Montefiore Jewish Home to be closer to his grandchildren and began writing his memoir for his family.

This Is My Life is a concise yet powerfully personal account of survival and loss during the Holocaust. Although brief, it includes much historical detail, including names of camps, locations, and individuals. Given the author's advanced years at the time of writing, and the trauma he endured, some sections are vague and offer limited insight into daily life in the ghettos or camps. The manuscript also contains occasional typographical errors and gaps in the narrative. The memoir was written as part of the Sydney Montefiore Life History Program with the assistance of Shirley Jacobson.