

Dorit Oliver-Wolff BEM



HOLOCAUST
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DAY TRUST

Learning from genocide -
for a better future

Dorit Oliver-Wolff BEM was just five years old when war came to her home country of Yugoslavia. She spent the following years moving from one hiding place to another, and narrowly escaped imprisonment on a number of occasions. After recovering from her experiences during the Holocaust she moved to Germany and became a star.



'It is not that I want to remember, but that I cannot forget. Everyday little things like throwing away a piece of mouldy bread remind you of the horrors you have experienced.'

Content Warning: This life story contains references to sexual violence. If you would like any support or further information please see this page: hmd.org.uk/sensitive-content

Born in the former Yugoslav town of Novi Sad in 1936, Dorit Oliver-Wolff had an unconventional but happy early life. Her mother worked in the Royal Court as a dance teacher and aged just four years old Dorit performed for the future King of Yugoslavia.

When war came to Yugoslavia in April 1941, Dorit's family fled the bombing of the city for the woods where they hid in trenches dug by partisan soldiers. Dorit's mother was born in Hungary which had not yet been occupied by the Germans, so Dorit, her mother and grandmother fled to the safety of Budapest. It was here that Dorit first discovered she was Jewish. One day, out of the blue, Dorit was spat at and called a 'Büdös zsidó' which translates as stinking Jew. At the age of six, Dorit did not understand the connection between being Jewish and being 'stinking'.

For the next four years, they were constantly on the move, creating new identities as they went. Dorit's mother refused to wear the Star of David and concealed the fact they were Jewish. She purchased three large crosses for them to wear, however, whilst in the privacy of their hiding place, Dorit's grandmother continued to welcome the sabbath using matches instead of the traditional candles. The family had no access to ration coupons, so Dorit and her grandmother scavenged for food in the bins of hotels and schools. At times, they hid in buildings run by the Yugoslav, Swedish and Swiss consulates which had diplomatic protection. However, even these ceased to be safe. Dorit's mother made a game of their different identities, her favourite was dressing as a Red Cross nurse accompanied by Dorit wearing a bandage.

At one point, Dorit was hidden with a non-Jewish family. The elderly woman caring for her was gentle, showing interest in Dorit's drawings and offering her biscuits. However, one night, soldiers barged into the flat, and the woman who had shown such kindness to Dorit suddenly turned on her and she was taken to a processing centre for people destined for concentration camps. Dorit's mother arranged a daring escape plan for her daughter to be smuggled out in a laundry basket. The plan worked and they were reunited.

On another occasion, Dorit and her mother were arrested by the Gestapo, accused of spying for the communists. Her mother was left in a separate room awaiting questioning. Dorit sat with the interrogating officer as he read her mother's file. Dorit struck up a conversation, asking if he had daughters. He did, they were the same age as her. Dorit then asked if the guard was going to hurt her mummy. This prompted him to release Dorit and her mother. He gave them strict instructions to leave the city on the first train.

As the Red Army approached Hungary, Dorit and her mother, now reunited with her grandmother, aunt and cousin took up hiding in a derelict cellar where they would remain for nine months. The bombing was almost constant, and the place would shake from the explosions. The adults in the cellar would sneak out at night looking for food.

One day the bombing stopped, and there was a frightening silence. Bricks were slowly removed from the wall of the cellar one by one. A face appeared; it was a Russian soldier in rags. The cellar slowly filled with ragged soldiers. Dorit hid with her mother and grandmother under the bed. The soldiers raped the women in the cellar and beat any man who tried to protect them. Dorit and her family could do nothing but hide. Later more soldiers came, better dressed and they moved the earlier soldiers on. Dorit's mother adopted a new disguise looking older, with a supposed hunchback. One Russian soldier who arrived in the cellar turned out to be Dorit's uncle. It seemed so miraculous that he had managed to find them.

Dorit and her mother returned to Novi Sad in search of their remaining family. They discovered their house had been ransacked and was now full of squatters. Dorit's mother accompanied by soldiers from the Yugoslav army went door to door, demanding her possessions. One item returned to the family was a Steinway Piano which Dorit believes saved her life. Dorit's hair had fallen out, she weighed just three and a half stone and suffered from pneumonia. A lung specialist had given her just six months to live.

Dorit took up playing the piano. One day her efforts were rewarded and as she played, people outside began clapping. They had been watching her perform. Perhaps their interest stemmed from curiosity or pity, but they recognised the family from before the war. People started to leave small amounts of food on the doorstep for Dorit - eggs, flour, sugar, and other essentials. Dorit slowly returned to health.

They waited and hoped for their family members to return to Novi Sad, but no one came. Dorit later learned her father had been worked to death hacking stones for the Germans. She does not know the exact day he died, and as such she remembers him on his birthday. He was a talented architect and jazz pianist. Dorit's paternal grandfather, a solicitor and active Zionist, had been forced to witness the deaths of his three teenage sons. He was tied to a tree and made to watch as they froze to death in the Danube, where he had been forced to carve holes in the ice. He never recovered from the trauma of the experience.

In 1948, Dorit moved to the newly formed State of Israel. She remembers the joy and disbelief that everyone around her was also Jewish. Embracing her identity, she chose to adopt the Israeli name, Dorit. She later went on to live in Germany where her dream of being a star came true. She rose to become one of the top ten recording artists in the country. On one occasion, she found herself performing at a special gala night for German officers. As she stood there, singing in Hebrew, she felt such a sense of triumph. In her mind, she thought, '*you may have taken away all my family, but you made me a star.*'

In 1962, Dorit settled in England, where she married Frank with whom she had a son, Mark. In recent years, Dorit has dedicated her time to Holocaust education, speaking in schools, and writing her book: *From Yellow Star to Pop Star*. She says '*it is not that I want to remember, but that I cannot forget. Everyday little things like throwing away a piece of mouldy bread remind you of the horrors you have experienced.*' In October 2020, she received a British Empire Medal from the Lord Lieutenant of East Sussex in a special ceremony. Dorit is passionate about ensuring that the Holocaust is never forgotten and strives to bring light to the darkness.

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