

Women Immigrants from  
Post-War Austria

Immigrantinnen aus dem  
Nachkriegsösterreich

Destination UK

Marion Trestler

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+ 

Anglo-Austrian  
SOCIETY



base-level  
Creating space // Raum schaffen

| Content                                       |  |
|---|--|
| 7-8 . . . Introduction                        | 76-79 . . . Margarethe Lang<br><i>London</i>               |
| Einleitung                                    |  |
| 9-25 . . . Jill Lewis: The Early Years        | 80-83 . . . Erika Slowman<br><i>Hertford</i>               |
| Jill Lewis: Die frühen Jahre                  |  |
| 26 . . . Jill Lewis: Biography                | 84-87 . . . Erna Robinson<br><i>Ilford</i>                 |
| 27 . . . Marion Trestler: Biography           | 88-91 . . . Eva Maria Mansell<br><i>South Croydon</i>      |
| 28 . . . Acknowledgments                      |  |
| 30-33 . . . Agnes Jodrell                     | 92-95 . . . Ida Katherina Upham<br><i>Surbiton, London</i> |
| <i>Whaley Bridge</i>                          |  |
| 34-37 . . . Tina Watts                        | 96-99 . . . Inge Clayton<br><i>London</i>                  |
| <i>Wimbledon</i>                              |  |
| 38-41 . . . Anna Kaunang                      | 100-103 . . . Josefine Macalister<br><i>Lincoln</i>        |
| <i>Wimbledon</i>                              |  |
| 42-45 . . . Berta Tehver                      | 104-107 . . . Marianne<br><i>London</i>                    |
| <i>Cardiff</i>                                |  |
| 46-49 . . . Stefanie Sprake                   | 108-111 . . . Ottolie Bertasius<br><i>London</i>           |
| <i>Cardiff</i>                                |  |
| 50-53 . . . Christine Chamberlain             | 112-115 . . . Paula Seaton<br><i>Pontypridd</i>            |
| <i>Royton</i>                                 |  |
| 54-59 . . . Elisabeth Hulse and Maria Ritchie | 116-119 . . . Stefanie Hooper<br><i>Pontypridd</i>         |
| <i>Whaley Bridge</i>                          |  |
| 60-63 . . . Paula Gardner                     | 120-123 . . . Susanne Bittner<br><i>London</i>             |
| <i>Whaley Bridge</i>                          |  |
| 64-67 . . . Emma Nicklen                      | 124-127 . . . Theresa Novotny<br><i>Royton</i>             |
| <i>London</i>                                 |  |
| 68-71 . . . Erika Brophy                      | 128-131 . . . Trude Green<br><i>Lincoln</i>                |
| <i>Epsom Downs</i>                            |  |
| 72-75 . . . Erika Lang                        | 132-135 . . . Trude Klobikovsky<br><i>London</i>           |
| <i>London</i>                                 |  |



## Introduction

*Destination UK* is a unique and timely chronicle highlighting the life stories of Austrian women who emigrated to Britain after the Second World War. *Destination UK* addresses important issues still relevant today concerning women's contribution to society. Over several years and many interviews, I gained insight into these extraordinary stories through the voices of women who have transformed their lives.

In the aftermath of the Second World War – in the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s – a considerable number of women migrated from Austria to Great Britain in search of a new life.

Many came as war brides, and some 2200 arrived between 1948 and 1950 through the 'Blue Danube Scheme' for the cotton industry. In the 1950s, more arrived to take up jobs in households and hospitals; in the late 1950s and 1960s, the majority came to work as au pairs or mothers helps.

What were their reasons? What drove them? Was it love or work, or were they escaping? Were they just adventurous, was it curiosity, or a thirst to learn a new language and to experience a different culture? Why did so many leave their lives, families, livelihoods, and friends behind? How did their motivations change between 1945 and 1960?

What were their family situations, their social and economic circumstances? And why did Great Britain want them so badly?

Over a period of three years, I travelled throughout Great Britain to meet the interviewees. I wanted to collect their experiences before they were lost forever. My intent has been to paint an authentic portrait of each woman in pictures and words, and to create a tribute to each of them whilst preserving a part of contemporary history in the form of a book.

Both in Great Britain and in Austria, there is currently very little knowledge of this chapter of post-war history, and this project aims to shed light on this part of Austrian and British contemporary history.

## Einleitung

Destination UK ist eine einzigartige und zeitgemäße Chronik der Lebensgeschichten österreichischer Frauen, die nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg nach Großbritannien auswanderten. *Destination UK* greift heute noch wichtige Fragen über den von Frauen geleisteten Beitrag zur Gesellschaft auf. Über mehrere Jahre und durch viele Interviews gewann ich Einblick in die außergewöhnlichen Leben dieser Frauen.

Nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg – in den späten 1940er, 1950er und frühen 1960er Jahren – migrierte eine beachtliche Anzahl Frauen auf der Suche nach einem neuen Leben von Österreich nach Großbritannien.

Viele von ihnen waren Kriegsbräute, und rund 2200 kamen zwischen 1948 und 1950 durch das *Blue Danube Scheme*, um in der englischen Baumwollindustrie zu arbeiten. In den 1950ern folgten dann weitere, um als Haushaltshilfe oder Krankenschwester zu arbeiten; in den späten 1950ern und 1960ern kamen die meisten als Au-pairs oder *mothers helps*.

Was waren ihre Beweggründe? Was hat sie angetrieben? War es die Liebe, die Arbeit oder wollten sie entkommen? Waren sie einfach abenteuerlustig und neugierig, drängte es sie, eine neue Sprache zu lernen und eine andere Kultur zu erfahren? Warum ließen so viele ihr altes Leben, ihre Familie, ihre Existenz und ihre Freunde zurück? Wie waren die Verhältnisse zu Hause in ihren Familien, wie waren die sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Bedingungen? Und warum brauchte Großbritannien diese Frauen so dringend?

Über einen Zeitraum von drei Jahren bereiste ich Großbritannien, um diese Österreicherinnen zu besuchen und zu interviewen. Ich wollte ihre Erfahrungen aufzeichnen, bevor sie für immer verloren gingen. Meine Intention ist es, in Bildern und Worten ein authentisches Porträt jeder dieser Frauen zu schaffen und jeder von ihnen Anerkennung zu zollen. Gleichzeitig sollte dieses Stück Zeitgeschichte in Buchform festgehalten werden.

Ziel der Publikation ist es, dieses nahezu unbekannte Kapitel österreichischer und britischer Nachkriegsgeschichte ans Licht zu bringen.

Agnes Jodrell  
Tina Watts  
Anna Kaunang  
Berta Tehver  
Stefanie Sprake  
Christine Chamberlain  
Elisabeth Hulse and Maria Ritchie  
Paula Gardner  
Emma Nicklen  
Erika Brophy  
Erika Lang  
Margarethe Lang  
Erika Slowman  
Erna Robinson  
Eva Maria Mansell  
Ida Katherina Upham  
Inge Clayton  
Josefine Macalister  
Marianne  
Ottilie Bertasius  
Paula Seaton  
Stefanie Hooper  
Susanne Bittner  
Theresa Novotny  
Trude Green  
Trude Klobikovsky



# Agnes Jodrell

## Whaley Bridge

Agnes Jodrell was born on 21 January 1930 in Carinthia to a single mother as the youngest of four children. They spoke Slovenian at home until the war broke out, but German thereafter. She finished school at 14 and then went to live with her sister in Ferlach. Her brother-in-law had been killed in the war, and Agnes looked after her nieces and nephews whilst her sister went to work.

In 1948, when she was 18, she saw an advert in the papers: 'Young women wanted to work in England in the textile industry for two years'. Encouraged by her sister, she applied for the job in March and by July had already arrived in Whaley Bridge.

Agnes worked in the Goyt Mill on the looms until they closed down – with the exception of the time spent looking after her young daughter. Agnes had met her husband soon after her arrival and got married in 1950 in Whaley Bridge. The couple bought a 200-year-old cottage with a third of an acre of land, where she lived till a few years ago.

Agnes became a widow at the age of 54 when her husband suddenly died of a heart attack.

Agnes Jodrell, geboren am 21. Jänner 1930 am Faaker See in Kärnten, war das jüngste von vier Kindern. Bis Anfang des Krieges wurde zu Hause slowenisch gesprochen. Mit 14 Jahren schloss Agnes die Schule ab und zog zu ihrer Schwester nach Ferlach. Der Mann ihrer Schwester war im Krieg gefallen, und so kümmerte sich Agnes um die Kinder, während ihre Schwester arbeiten ging.

1948 sah Agnes eine Anzeige in der Zeitung, in der junge Frauen für die Textilindustrie in England gesucht wurden. Ermutigt durch ihre Schwester bewarb sie sich im März und bereits im Juli war sie in Whaley Bridge. Sie arbeitete in der Goyt Mill, bis die Spinnerei zugesperrt wurde, ausgenommen während der Zeit, als ihre Tochter noch klein war.

Agnes hatte ihren Mann schon bald nach ihrer Ankunft kennengelernt und 1950 heirateten sie in Whaley Bridge. Das Paar kaufte ein 200 Jahre altes Cottage mit einem sehr großen Garten, wo Agnes bis vor wenigen Jahren wohnte. Ihr Mann starb früh an einem Herzinfarkt und so war Agnes bereits mit 54 Jahren Witwe.

## Words by Agnes Jodrell

We were happy, you know, very, very poor. Very poor family, they all were poor in them days, weren't they, especially in the country, in small villages. I used to go barefoot to school, you know. The shoes were saved for Sunday, for going to church. Oh yes, very basic and the food as well, it was only what we grew in the garden mainly, wasn't it. You grew your own food, you used to have your own potatoes and maize you know, beans and cabbages. And plenty fruits, didn't we, I mean there were trees with apples and plums and cherries, plenty of it.

...

I was eight years old and of course after that you was not allowed to speak *Slowenisch* [Slovenian] – not in public, all right at home. My grandmother, she wasn't going to change, was she, old people would not change. I do remember her being told you have to speak German now, this is *Deutschland*, but old people refused it, didn't they.

...

I did see Hitler, I have seen Hitler. Now it must have been during the war. He came to Villach on the train to go into Yugoslavia. And all the schoolchildren went to the station in Villach, we had to wave and shout and he was stood in the train, he didn't get out of the train but he was stood like by the window, waving back to us.

...

And then in 1948 I saw this advert in the paper: 'Young women between the age of 18 and 40 – go to England to work in textile for two years. Everything would be paid for, the fare, accommodation would be found.' And I put my name down. Just like that – actually I didn't really, I wasn't that adventurous but it was my sister. Oh, she said, if I was free I would go. She pushed me really, why don't you, won't you try it you

know. Nothing to lose really was there, no job here, no money. And even if you had money you couldn't buy anything in them days, there was nothing, nothing in the shops. So that's how I did it. I signed on and I was here within three months, and do you know they even paid for the passport because they knew we didn't have any money. They paid for the medical; you had to be healthy to come to England. It was about March when I applied and I was here in July. And I didn't know where I was coming to.

...

We were about 30 of us, in Villach we met up, you know from different parts of Austria. It was an organisation here, they were called 'The Blue Danube'. I got on the train, and it was a train that took the British soldiers back to England, on holiday, on leave. It was full of soldiers; we had a compartment for ourselves. We set off at lunchtime and we travelled all day and all night and all day to Holland. We arrived in Hook in Holland and they put us in a sort of camp. We stayed there overnight and we sailed early morning from there to Harwich. The first time I have ever been on a boat. Just outside Preston there was a place called Inskip. And that was again an old army camp; it had all barbed wire around it.

We were getting a bit worried, oh we went in a camp but we were well looked after, we all slept in a dormitory, we had a bed and food. And they even gave us some money as well to spend. Something like five shilling, it was. You know, to buy essentials there. We stayed there about a week. And then they took us up to where we were living. And that was a lovely house, in Whaley Bridge, a big house that the mill had bought especially for us. It was beautiful, all furnished new. There were six of us in the bedroom, so the bedrooms, six single beds.

...

The first impression that hit me on walking out of the station, the view you could see the chimneys. They

were big chimneys, you know, and the stone houses there as coming away from the station and a dark stone, wasn't it, and things were a bit black then, weren't they, after the war. You know, a bit smoky. You know that coming down out of the station looking at the big chimneys. And then coming in this mill, working here, there was a thousand looms clattering away, horrendous, the noise. People used to lip read, you know, if you wanted to have a conversation, from far away, I mean couldn't hear anybody. I had to go up to the ear and shout if I wanted to talk to somebody. It was a shock to walk in there and hear that noise. And we got paid, which was something that we had not had before, you see, we had not had any pay when we'd been in Austria, none of them, none had any jobs.

...

We had one lady and a man that were teaching us. We had in the beginning a separate room with some looms in, just to start with. And then slowly you work, you are right on your own, you had two looms, then you had four, then you had six and you had a dozen.

...

You had to mind all twelve looms at the same time, so you were up and down. It was hard work; they were only semi-automatic in those days. I worked till I had my daughter and I stayed at home with her till she was eight. You know, and then I thought I had to do something and I came back to the mill. So I worked another 16 years and after that the mill closed down. So I worked here until they closed down. They started building these houses then.

...

Actually us coming to Whaley Bridge, as a foreigner, it was something Whaley Bridge had never seen before. So it was quite, well, I think they expected us to have two heads or something. Very, very good, very friendly! I had never ever felt out, you know, everybody was really welcoming. Really no complaints at

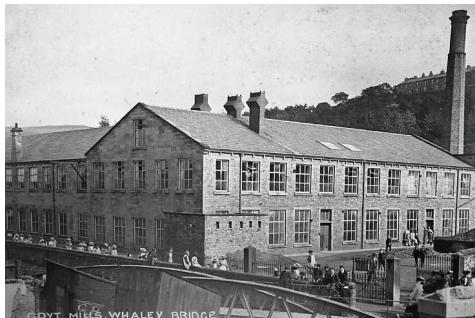
all, none of us. We were accepted and made welcome straight away.

We lived up there and we used to walk past his house after work. And he be standing, looking, you know, watching us going back. And he must have asked one of the English girls, 'What's her name?', you know. And one day, 'Hello Agnes', there you go, honestly. Well from then on, you know, I was married within two years.

No regrets, none at all, I wouldn't change it for anything, you know.

I settled into everything. I was only 18. I can't really think, say it was hard. I mean even work and the people were friendly.

Do you know I don't think I was ever homesick, no, I don't recall.



1



2



13

1 Goyt Mill, Whaley Bridge    2 Agnes' Certificate of Registration  
3 Agnes as a teenager



# Erika Lang

London

Erika was born on 24 July 1934 in Vienna. During the first years of her life she lived with her parents, aunt and uncle at her paternal grandmother's in Leopoldstadt, a mainly Jewish district of Vienna. Her parents separated in 1941 and life became difficult for Erika.

During the war, her mother was called up to work in a factory and young Erika was left alone at home for most of the time, eventually being placed in foster care. Following her parents' divorce in 1944, she lived with her mother until she left school and began a bookkeeping apprenticeship. She started to work in her father's jewelry shop and moved in with him. However, Erika was treated badly by her stepmother, and so she asked to join her mother in England where her mother had gone to work.

Erika arrived on 30 October 1952, and began to work as a student nurse the following day. Early in 1954, Erika discovered she was pregnant and was threatened with deportation. The intervention of the Austrian Embassy meant that her son Peter was born in Great Britain on 1 August 1954. Peter's father had emigrated to Canada, not knowing Erika was expecting his child, and he never found out.

Peter was placed in foster care at first, but when mother and daughter started to work at a factory and found a bedsit together nearby, Peter was able to come to live with his mother and grandmother. When Peter started school, Erika became a waitress in a restaurant in Soho. She very quickly became the manager, and then went on to work for a large fur trading company where she was in charge of accounts and export. Later, Erika moved to a fashion company, where she still works at 75.

She and her mother applied for British citizenship to enable Peter to join the police or the forces. In doing so, she lost her Austrian citizenship – she is still fighting to get it back, but to date without success.

Erika kam am 24. Juli 1934 in Wien zur Welt. Die ersten Lebensjahre verbrachte sie mit ihren Eltern Eduard und Margarethe Lang und mit Tante und Onkel bei der Großmutter väterlicherseits im zweiten Wiener Gemeindebezirk, der Leopoldstadt. Die Eltern trennten sich 1941 und das Leben wurde für Erika schwierig. Ihre Mutter wurde kriegsdienstverpflichtet und Erika war oft allein zu Hause, bis sie schließlich für einige Zeit zu Pflegeeltern kam. Nach der Scheidung ihrer Eltern 1944 lebte sie bis zum Abschluss der Hauptschule bei ihrer Mutter. Erika begann eine Lehre als Buchhalterin und wechselte später in das Juweliergeschäft ihres Vaters, bei dem sie dann auch wohnte. Ihre Stiefmutter behandelte sie schlecht, daher wollte Erika zu ihrer Mutter, die in England lebte. Sie kam am 30. Oktober 1952 in Großbritannien an und bereits am nächsten Tag begann sie im Krankenhaus zu arbeiten.

Anfang Februar 1954 erfuhr Erika, dass sie schwanger war, und wurde beinahe ausgewiesen. Die österreichische Botschaft intervenierte und Eriks Sohn Peter wurde am 1. August 1954 in Großbritannien geboren. Peters Vater war zu dieser Zeit bereits nach Kanada emigriert und wusste nicht, dass Erika ein Kind von ihm erwartete; er hat es auch nie erfahren.

Der kleine Peter kam vorerst zu Pflegeeltern. Erika und ihre Mutter fanden jedoch eine Arbeitsstelle in einer Fabrik und bekamen in der Nähe eine Unterkunft, und so konnten sie das Kind zu sich nehmen.

Als Peter in die Schule kam, fing Erika in einem Restaurant in Soho als Kellnerin zu arbeiten an. Sie avancierte schnell zur Geschäftsführerin. Später wechselte sie zu einer Pelzhandelskette und übernahm schon bald eine leitende Funktion. Danach fand sie eine Stelle als Leiterin der Buchhaltung in einer Modefirma. Auch mit 75 Jahren geht Erika noch immer ins Büro.

Erika und ihre Mutter beantragten die britische Staatsbürgerschaft, um Peter zu ermöglichen, Polizist oder Soldat zu werden. Dadurch verlor Erika die österreichische Staatsbürgerschaft und trotz aller Bemühungen gelang es ihr noch nicht, diese zurückzuerhalten.



## Words by Erika Lang

I lived with my mummy and my daddy, we had a small cabinet in the flat of my grandmother, and my aunt and her husband Karl, they lived there as well. The place where we lived it was by the Reichsbrücke, it was called Radingerhof. It was a very modern council estate, it had running water, it had toilets inside, which, you know, before the war there were not all that many flats in Vienna which had these facilities.

...

It was quite a shock because in 1939 we had to move out from there because my father's mother was Jewish and since the council flat was in her name we lost the flat, we could no longer live there.

...

It was the 30th of October, the weather was quite bad. I arrived in England and I sat on the train, and I looked out of the window and I saw those dirty houses. And they had their washing hanging out. I said to myself, what a poor country, what have I got myself into.

...

So I came to England. People didn't understand me, I didn't understand them but within one month I was quite fluent and I had no problem. I found work in a children's hospital in Letchworth where I worked for six weeks. My English, as I said, was almost nonexistent, I have never worked in a hospital in my life, I was called nurse.

...

We took the early workmen train and we went to Kings Cross. We walked from Kings Cross to Oxford Street and then we would go and see how I would spend my salary. I was very, very particular what I wore. So life was, you know, quite enjoyable.

...

I was impressed with the cinemas, I loved the cinemas, I used to go a lot to the cinemas, I used to get on the one and sixpence seats and I think I used to see every film there was to be seen.

...

I worked very hard, I was the kind of person, I could be dead tired, come off duty, I'd go and have a bath, I'd put on my glad rags and I was out, I couldn't stay in.

...

Dancing was fantastic! Really and truly it was fantastic, and after I was in England a few months I used to come quite often to town, to London, and I used to go to the Trocadero, which was a fantastic place. I remember I went to the Trocadero with a see-through blouse without a bra.

...

I had intended to have Peter adopted as soon as I gave birth to him. As soon as I gave birth I couldn't give him up. I just couldn't.

...

Mum was very good because when I told her I was pregnant, she said to me, 'Erika, we will do it together, whatever you decide.' We worked together all the years and she helped me to bring up my son. And she did everything for me, she did my cooking, my ironing, made my bed, hoovering, dusting, cooking, the lot. I had to do nothing.

...

I am a member of the Anglo-Austrian Society, I am a member of Austria Club London, I am a member of the Robert Stoltz Society. I am a grandmother but my grandson is 30 years old and he lives in Perth in Australia, so I am not much of a

grandmother. And I have a very, very hectic social life. I go out regularly, I have got a boyfriend who I see quite often, I've got some close friends, I go to exercise classes and I do a lot of things and I am quite busy.

Whenever I came back from Austria I was very, very homesick. I really missed Austria.

Well, all I feel is that I am Erika Lang, I don't feel anything apart, I am still Austrian, I do not think I am not Austrian, but on the other hand I, I am very fond of England.

Röm.-kath.  
Pfarramt Donaufeld  
Wien II/27, Erzherzog Karl-Platz 12

Wien, am 19. August 1952

Pfarramtliche Bestätigung.

Der gesuchte Pfarrer bestätigt, daß Fr. Erika Lang, geboren am 24.7. 1894 in Wien, römisch-katholisch, seines Wohnsitz in Wien II, Lassallestraße 14/3, in der hierigen Pfarre den Religionsunterricht immer besucht hat und in religiöser Sicht bestens empfohlen werden kann.



F. P. Paulus S. J.  
Parochie

2

4



3

- 1 Erika (third from left) with patients at the London Chest Hospital
- 2 Reference by the Catholic priest
- 3 Erika with her son Peter, 1954
- 4 Erika in her first fur coat

17

To Christoph, Cornelius and Lucian

'No regrets, none at all, I wouldn't change  
it for anything, you know.'

Agnes Jodrell