



Story of a refugee and his teddy bear

By Geoffrey Davies

The name John Hajdu will be familiar to many given his work in the community. Over 22 years chairing the Muswell Hill and Fortis Green Association, he helped to rescue the Langton clock in the Broadway, discover the Grove Lodge Muswell Hill path, install commemorative plaques to the famous of the area and develop the 'pocket garden' opposite what is now the Village Green pub.

And now approaching 89, he and his teddy bear have become familiar to an even wider audience as he visits schools to tell his story as a refugee and is featured in two exhibitions at the Imperial War Museum.

As well as the permanent display about the Holocaust, John features in *Childhood in War*, a new, free exhibition about how children have experienced conflict from 1914 to the present day.

"The exhibition is very much hands-on and ideal for children with things like jigsaws," says John. "I asked that they include a section on Hungary to show the breadth

of the story." His personal story is told in the Holocaust gallery. Born in Hungary in 1937, John's father was sent to a forced labour camp in 1943 and his mother Livia to Mauthausen, a Nazi concentration camp.

Even as she was being deported, his aunt took the seven-year-old John to safety at the flat of a non-Jewish neighbour, saving his life. Despite the horrors of the camp, Livia survived and was reunited with John.

Following the Russian invasion of Hungary in October 1956, the 19-year-old John and his mother decided to leave the following month, with two



John's teddy bear



Travelling companions: John Hajdu and his childhood teddy bear.

small holdalls, including the teddy bear. The last stage of their escape to Austria was a 20-mile walk at night avoiding tanks and searchlights and passing an unmanned watchtower.

Since retiring from his hospitality business, John has been working with the Holocaust Educational Trust and lectures at many schools including Fortismere and to other non-Jewish schools at Finchley Reform Synagogue. "I really enjoy lecturing, especially the questions children ask," he says. "Amongst the best are: 'Do I have nightmares from my experiences in the ghetto?' And, 'Has the experience made me stronger?'"

John was awarded an MBE in 2020 for his work in Holocaust education and commemoration. He and his wife Maureen met the King and Queen in January this year in connection with his work for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.

Childhood in War is at the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth SE1 and runs to the end of February 2027.



John aged seven in 1944 wearing the yellow star enforced on all Jewish people

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