Curious George and the harrowing escape

Exhibit details story of kids book creators as they fled Europe during the Holocaust

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In summer 1940, a husband and wife team of artists bicycled across France with manuscripts in their baskets of a story of a curious little monkey named Fifi.

Fans of children’s literature know that monkey well, as he later became Curious George.

But most of George’s admirers around the world do not know that his creators, Margret and H.A. Rey, were German Jews, and hurriedly left their home in Paris as forces of the Third Reich advanced.

Their harrowing escape during World War II is the subject of a documentary and exhibit at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills.

Children’s book author Louise Borden of Cincinnati, Ohio, had heard bits and pieces of the Reys’ story and wondered why there wasn’t a more detailed account of their journey.

“I read that and thought, ‘Wow, that’s amazing,’” she said of the bicycle trip with the manuscript in the basket, covered by a winter coat to keep it from getting wet.

Her book, “The Journey that Saved Curious George: The True Wartime Escape of Margret and H.A. Rey” is the basis for the documentary, “Monkey Business: The Adventures of Curious George’s Creators,” which will be shown at the Holocaust center, 28123 Orchard Lake Road, at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, May 31.

An exhibit on Holocaust refugees at the museum displays the art of Allan Drummond, who did the illustrations for Borden’s book. In addition to telling the Reys’ story, the exhibit contains artifacts from other refugees, such as those of a woman who risked her life jumping from a train bound for a concentration camp. The exhibit runs through July 5.

“I always say to kids, ‘Imagine our world with no Curious George,’” Borden said. “He’s published in languages around the world. Little kids have stuffed Curious Georges all over the world.”
Mark Mulder, database and technology manager at the Holocaust center, says it’s important for the museum to tell the Reys’ story. “We need to tell not just about the people who died, but the people who lived. “We can be an inspiration to the victims of the Holocaust, too.”

The Reys traveled to ar
eas of France that were part of the Reys’ journey. Storytellers included reporters and other documents and relied especially on H.A. Reys’ detailed diary of the trip.

Long, harrowing journey
The Reys had returned to Paris after living in a small town in the French countryside. But they found that as they were returning, many people were leaving. They decided that they, too, were unsafe there. The Reys owned a car and the trains weren’t running. They went to a bicycle shop and bought a tandem model, the last bicycle in stock. But Margret, who was too young to ride it. So her husband, H.A., or Hans, took it back to the shop and convinced the owner to buy it back from him, and bought spare parts to help them build two bikes and their journey began. H.A. and Margret, 34, traveled by bicycle for days with little money, often asking strangers to take them in and let them sleep on their coats or in barns.

George to the rescue
They planned to travel to Lisbon, in Portugal, and then on to Brazil, and finally, to the United States where the father and sister lived.

In the French border town of Troyes, they got on a train to Lisbon, and an official, thinking they were coming from a country with valuable information, demanded to see what was in their satchels.

IF YOU'RE GOING
Tickets for the documentary, “Monkey Business,” are free for Holocaust center members and $10 for nonmembers. Reserve tickets by calling 248-553-2400, ext. 112, or sending an email to rsvp@holocaustcenter.org.

Moviemakers are encouraged to come early to visit the exhibit on refugees. The exhibit is free with museum admission or membership. It is recommended for children 12 and up.

Museum admission is $8 for adults, $6 for seniors over age 55, $4 for college students with identification, $6 for middle school and high school students. Group rates are also available.

Hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with the last admission at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

On Mondays, the museum is open from 9:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., with the last admission at 7:30 p.m.

On Fridays, the museum is open from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

For more information, visit www.holocaustcenter.org or call 248-553-2400.