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Documentary, exhibit in Farmington Hills tell story of Curious George's creators during Holocaust

By Anne Runkle, The Oakland Press

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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.



Author Louise Borden did extensive research on Margret and H.A. Rey, the creators of Curious George, and their little-known experiences as German Jews who escaped from occupied France during World War II. Her book is the basis for a documentary to be shown at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. *Photo courtesy of Louise Borden*

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,” he said. “They are victims of the Holocaust, too.”

Borden traveled to areas of France that were part of the Reys’ journey. She read hundreds of letters and other documents and relied especially on H.A. Rey’s 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.

They didn’t own 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 Rey had trouble with it. So her husband, H.A., or Hans, took it back to the store, convinced the owner to buy it back from him, and bought spare parts. He used them to build two bikes and their journey began.

Hans, 42, and Margret, 34, traveled by bicycle for days with little money, often asking strangers to take them in at night, and sleeping on their coats or in barns.

GEORGE TO THE RESCUE

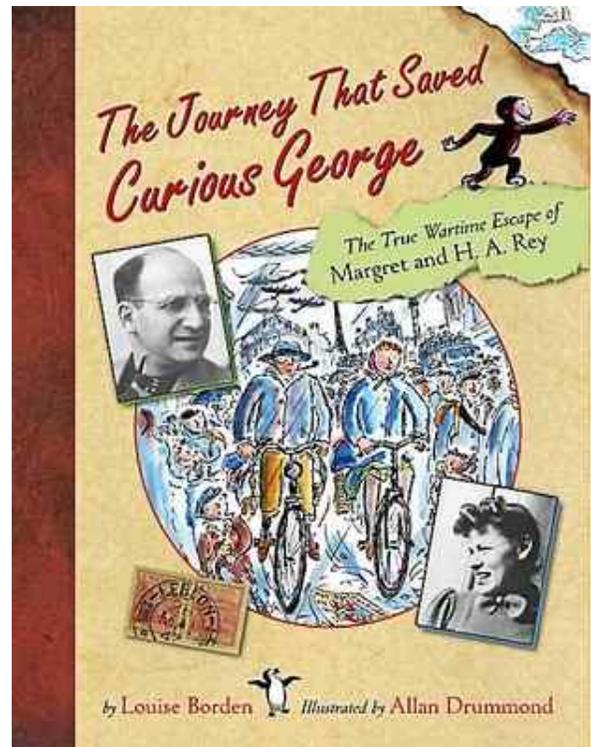
They planned to travel to Lisbon, Portugal, and then on to Brazil, and finally, to the United States, where Margret’s sister lived.

In the French border town of Hendaye, they got on a train to Lisbon, and an official, thinking they could be spies leaving the country with valuable information, demanded to see what was in their satchels.

Seeing that their paperwork was clearly material for children’s books, he released them.

The Reys had become citizens of Brazil when they lived there in the 1930s, and their passports did not identify them as Jews, Borden said. But the Reys had German accents, and that could well have raised a red flag, she said.

It was the second time the little monkey had come between his creators and government interrogators.



Louise Borden’s book about Margret and H.A. Rey is the basis for a documentary coming soon to the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. *Photo courtesy of Louise Borden*

While they lived in the French countryside, their German accents drew the attention of the local police, who thought they could be German spies. H.A. Rey led the police to their studio, where officers saw drawings of Fifi and other characters and were convinced that the couple were artists and authors.

ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

They arrived in New York about four months after their journey began. A year later, their first book, “Curious George” was published, with more to follow.

“It’s kind of the true American experience,” Borden said.

They never had any children, but they gave generously to environmental and child-centered causes, Borden said.

Their story as Holocaust refugees wasn’t widely known as their fame and popularity grew.

“There weren’t books about the Holocaust then. It wasn’t taught in schools,” Borden said.

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.

Moviegoers 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 age 12 and up.

Museum admission is \$8 for adults, \$6 for seniors over age 55, \$6 for college students with identification, \$5 for middle 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 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; last admission is at 2 p.m.

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