

John Hajdu MBE



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Learning from genocide -
for a better future

John Hajdu is a survivor of the Holocaust in Hungary and lived under the subsequent socialist regime in Budapest. Having lived in the UK since 1957, John's experiences of life after the Holocaust and as a refugee tell of the turmoil of post-World War Two Europe.



'Arriving in this country wearing clothes donated to me in Vienna, not knowing anybody, I had to start all over again, making my way in a new world and speaking very little English. I am proud of what I have achieved.'

John Hajdu (pronounced Hai-doo) was born in Budapest on 29 April 1937. The son of Gyorgy Hajdu and Livia Farago, John's early life was typical of a well-to-do, middle class Jewish family living in a predominantly Jewish area of Budapest.

In 1941 Hungary entered the war allied to Nazi Germany. From the beginning of the 1940s, life for Hungary's Jewish population became more restricted, and more virulent antisemitism took hold. John's father was taken to a forced labour camp for Jewish men in 1943 and John remembers travelling with his mother and bartering family belongings in return for food from local people to give to him.

John's mother was left to raise him by herself. On 5 April 1944 an order was announced forcing all Jews to wear a yellow star as a mark of identification. By June, John and his mother were forced to move into a designated 'yellow star' house where they were joined by his aunt Iby and Uncle Rezso. Only one member of the family was allowed out of the house for a maximum of two hours per day to buy food.

Throughout 1944 the situation for Hungary's Jews worsened, with hundreds of thousands deported and killed. Members of the Hungarian Arrow Cross party, supporting the Nazi regime, began searching for Jews and organising deportations of men and women to forced labour and concentration camps. In October 1944 John's mother was taken away, first made to work on fortifications in the village of Kophaza, before being marched to Mauthausen concentration camp, in Austria.

Remarkably, as the rounding up of people began around his home, John's aunt Iby grabbed him and rushed to hide in a non-Jewish neighbour's flat and so escaped deportation – an act that John feels unquestionably saved his life.

Despite managing to hide for around a month, more stringent searches and orders from the Arrow Cross party forced John and Iby to move into the Budapest Ghetto. Sharing a flat with 20-25 people at a time, a lack of food and ever more severe violence made the ghetto a desperate place to live in. As Russian troops advanced, the Nazis planned to detonate mines to destroy the ghetto and its occupants, however John and Iby were freed just in time on 17 January 1945.

With no idea where his parents were and after discovering that strangers had moved into the family home, John and Livia had nowhere to go. After pleading their case, the occupants reluctantly 'allowed' them to stay in the 'maid's' room on a temporary basis.

John's father was eventually freed from a labour camp by Russian soldiers and was able to return to Budapest. With conditions so bad in the city, the family decided to move to Nagyvarad (now Oradea) in Romania, where John's father began a relationship with a local woman. Much to the family's surprise Livia arrived, having been freed from Mauthausen and tracing her family to Romania. In the circumstances, Livia decided in John's best interests it would be better to return to Budapest, where she found a job and somewhere to live, while John went to school.

As the new socialist regime took hold, John was unable to get a place at any university and instead, thanks to a family friend, secured a place at the Railway Technical College in 1951. Graduating four years later, John began work as a labourer for a bridge building company and then as a technical assistant on the state railways – a career he knew was not right for him, but he had no other options.

Violent protests broke out in October against the ruling Communist government, and Soviet troops occupied Hungary after the failed revolution. John, his mother and his friend Peter soon decided that with nothing left to lose they had to try to escape to freedom. In November 1956 they left home with a few items of clothing, a little food and John's teddy (which he still has), travelling by train towards the Austrian border. Eventually after a long train journey, walking 40 kilometres and traversing an icy river in the dark of night, the group crossed over into Austria. John was once again separated from his mother, as she was taken to Vienna and he travelled to a refugee camp near Innsbruck. He recalls arriving as a refugee: 'It's a very strange feeling to wear other people's clothes. When you are a foreigner in a foreign country...with nothing, no money, no background... you are then reliant on the charity of the locals.'



Whilst John was relieved to have escaped from Hungary, it was clear to him that they needed to move on once again in order to rebuild their lives. He decided that England was the place to go and thanks to six days of determined queuing at the British Embassy in Vienna, permission was given to John and Livia to travel onwards as refugees on a 'Red Cross train'.

On 6 February 1957 John and Livia arrived in the UK where, after staying in two different refugee camps, they settled in London. John remembers the difficulties of moving to a new country but also recalls his determination to learn and work hard. Thanks to support from the Hungarian Jewish Refugees Committee and the World University Service, John learnt his trade in hotels and catering.


John's life in the UK has been rich and rewarding, having had a successful career in the hotel business and a happy personal life, marrying his wife Maureen in 1972 with whom he has two children and three grandchildren. For John, coming to the UK represented a chance of a new start and he is proud of his contributions to society as a local magistrate, advisor to Haringey Borough Police Commander and the Metropolitan Police, Chairman for the last 16 years of his local 750-strong residents' association and Vice Chairman of the North London branch of the University of the Third Age.

Find out more...

The Holocaust: hmd.org.uk/holocaust

John has written a personal memoir entitled *Life in Two Countries* which you can read online: hmd.org.uk/john

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Learning lessons from the past to create a safer, better future