

# Teachers' Notes

## The Children of Willesden Lane

by

### Mona Golabek and Lee Cohen

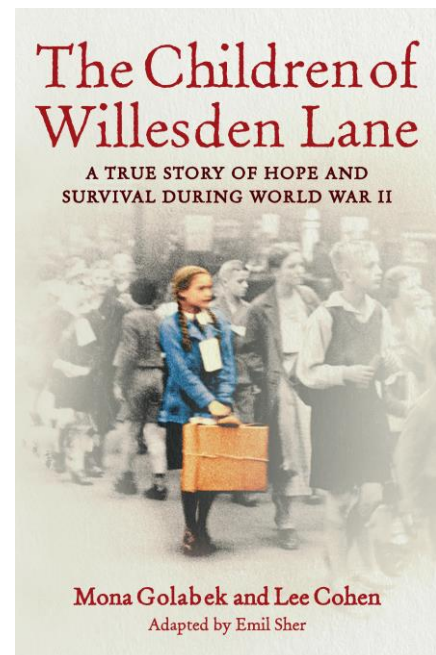
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Recommended for ages 10-14 years

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Much of this guide has been adapted from the excellent Teachers Resource created by Facing History and Ourselves, in collaboration with, and with the sponsorship of, the Milken Family Foundation, and the Citywide Reading Guide for the book designed by the Southern Poverty Law Center. A&U thanks Mona Golabek for the provision of links to these and other resources.

Introduction .....	2
Synopsis .....	2
Authors' motivation .....	2
Use in the curriculum .....	3
A Conversation with Mona Golabek .....	3
Historical background .....	6
Timeline of the Holocaust .....	6
Vienna, Austria .....	6
Kristallnacht .....	7
The Kindertransport .....	7
Discussion questions for the classroom ...	8
Further resources .....	9
About the writers .....	11



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## INTRODUCTION

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### SYNOPSIS

Based on the experiences of her mother, Mona Golabek describes the inspirational story of fourteen-year-old Lisa Jura's escape from Nazi-controlled Austria to England on the famed Kindertransport.

Jewish and a musical prodigy, Lisa has a wonderful life in Vienna. But when the Nazis start closing in on the city, life changes irreversibly. Although he has three daughters, Lisa's father is only able to secure one place on the Kindertransport. The family sends Lisa to London so that she may pursue her dream of a career as a concert pianist. Separated from her beloved family, Lisa bravely endures the trip and a posting as a servant outside London before finding her way to the Willesden Lane hostel.

Here, her music inspires the other children, and they, in turn, cheer her on in her efforts to make good on her promise to her family to realise her musical potential. Through hard work and sheer pluck, Lisa wins a scholarship to study piano at the Royal Academy. As she supports herself and studies, she makes a new life for herself and dreams of reconnecting with the family she was forced to leave behind.

A story of courage, survival, and the power of music to uplift the human spirit, this compelling tribute will both educate and inspire young readers.

*The Children of Willesden Lane* humanises and adds rich detail to a story many have heard but know little of: the Kindertransport.

Told in third-person past tense, the story also cleverly blends the big picture of anti-Jewish programs in pre-war Vienna and British stoicism during the Blitz with the more intimate and personal observations of a child torn away from her family and forced to learn to live in a foreign country.

### AUTHORS' MOTIVATION:

'When I was a little kid, [my mother] taught me the piano, and it was the most extraordinary experience. They weren't really piano lessons; they were lessons about life. We'd be working on a Beethoven sonata, and out of nowhere she would say, "Mona, did I ever tell you about the time that Johnny 'King Kong' read poetry to me at night-time when the bombs came down?" Then we'd go into a Chopin nocturne. And then out of nowhere she'd say, "What about when Aaron whistled the Grieg piano concerto to me at night-time to comfort me?" And I thought, Who were these amazing characters?

'One day when I was in my thirties, I was engaged to play the Grieg piano concerto with the Seattle Symphony. I thought, Wow, this is the piece the kids would whistle when they would see my mother walking on Willesden Lane. This is the piece that tells the story of her life. I knew I had to tell her story. I believed in my heart that if I could get it published, I could have the opportunity to inspire so many through the powerful messages in the story.'

— Mona Golabek

'Mona and I wrote the book for all audiences, but have been pleased to see that it has been embraced by young people across America and subsequently, worldwide. The response from young audiences has been powerful. In Lisa Jura, our real-life heroine, they have found a role model. "If Lisa can do it, I can do it," so many have expressed.'

— Lee Cohen

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## USE IN THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

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*The Children of Willesden Lane* can be taught as a stand-alone non-fiction memoir in the English classroom, or as part of a Literature Circle on the topic of the Holocaust or intolerance, or resilience and survival.

It is an excellent resource for the Music classroom, being particularly concerned with 'the power of the arts, especially music, to embolden the human spirit in the face of adversity' (Mona Golabek, the Hold On to Your Music Foundation).

Mona Golabek also emphasises the value of her story for 'awareness and understanding of the ethical implications of world events', thus connecting with Humanities and Social Sciences as well as the General Capabilities of Ethical Understanding, Personal and Social Capability, Critical and Creative Thinking and Intercultural Understanding.

It is suitable for upper Primary and early Secondary classrooms. In upper Primary classrooms, it may require more resources for understanding the background of the story and more support for reading the whole book.

The US teachers' resources cited in Further Resources, below, are comprehensive and excellent and can certainly be adapted to Australian or New Zealand classrooms.

**Note:** teachers need to be sensitive to the possibility that some of their students may have lost family in the Holocaust or have suffered similar loss of family and exile due to more recent wars or genocide.

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## A CONVERSATION WITH MONA GOLABEK

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### **Why did you want to tell your mother's story?**

When I was a little kid, she taught me the piano, and it was the most extraordinary experience. They weren't really piano lessons; they were lessons about life. We'd be working on a Beethoven sonata, and out of nowhere she would say, "Mona, did I ever tell you about the time that Johnny 'King Kong' read poetry to me at night-time when the bombs came down?" Then we'd go into a Chopin nocturne. And then out of nowhere she'd say, "What about when Aaron whistled the Grieg piano concerto to me at night-time to comfort me?" And I thought, Who were these amazing characters?

One day when I was in my thirties, I was engaged to play the Grieg piano concerto with the Seattle Symphony. I thought, Wow, this is the piece the kids would whistle when they would see my mother walking on Willesden Lane. This is the piece that tells the story of her life. I knew I had to tell her story. I believed in my heart that if I could get it published, I could have the opportunity to inspire so many through the powerful messages in the story.

### **Is it possible to put into words how music contributed to your mother's survival?**

She would tell me how my grandmother, the woman for whom I'm named, gave her a gift at the Westbahnhof train station in Vienna, when she was put on the Kindertransport and sent away from Vienna so that her life would be saved. My grandmother looked at my mother and said, "You must promise me...that you will hold on to your music. Let it be your best friend." It was that phrase at the train station that guided her through this dark period. Ultimately, she ended up at this Jewish hostel in the northern part of London, and she told me how her music became a beacon of hope and inspiration for these thirty kids. The music reminded them of what they had left behind and of what they had lost.

**What happened to your mother after she immigrated to America? Did she play concerts?**

My mother played some concerts, but she put her whole passion and soul into my sister, Renée, and me. And she taught piano—to many hundreds of students.

**How do you think your mother's experiences—in the Kindertransport, living at Willesden Lane, and losing her parents—affected her in life?**

Those experiences made her very strong, yet very sensitive to other people's pains and losses. They fuelled her determination to make something of her life, so that she would forever honour her parents and their memory.

**What did your father, Michel Golabek, do during the war? What did he do when he came to America?**

My father, who was born in Poland, fought in the French Resistance during the war. He was one of the most highly decorated Jewish Resistance officers, receiving the Croix de Guerre from General Charles de Gaulle. When he came to America, he got odd jobs to survive. Eventually he saved money and bought a men's sportswear factory. He became successful and bought real estate, also.

**What was it like for you not having grandparents, and knowing how they suffered?**

It is hard to miss what you have never known. But sometimes, while I was growing up, I envied other kids who had wonderful grandparents. I imagined what Malka, my grandmother, would have been like. Mostly, I felt so sad for my mother and father and for the losses they suffered at such a young age.

**How old were you when your mother started telling you about her experiences in the Kindertransport?**

I was seven years old. It was like a fairy tale, in a strange way. She told me the stories during my piano lessons with her. She would always tell me how each piece of music tells a story, and how that was what saved her life.

**You and your sister, Renée, performed at the sixtieth reunion of Kindertransport children in London in 1999. What was that like?**

That was an amazing experience. About one thousand people showed up for that event. What was most touching was that my niece Sarah, who I think was nine years old at the time, said to the audience in a little squeaky voice, "I make a pledge to you that I will tell my children, so you will never be forgotten." This is what it's all about: Who's going to tell the stories when they're gone?

**Did your mother stay in touch with other children from the hostel later in life?**

Yes. She wrote to many of the Kinder; sometimes they spoke on the phone. Through the years, they saw each other on occasion. When I made my London debut, many of the kids from the hostel sat in the first row and cheered Lisa's daughter, who had come back to England to complete the dream!

**Did you get to meet any of the children from the hostel?**

Yes, I met Aaron, Gina, Günter, and Hans. I knew Ricky, Gina and Günter's son. We were the children of the refugees, and we heard the stories from our parents.

**What did Sonia and Rosie and Leo and Esther do in the United States?**

Everyone lived near each other in Los Angeles. The families supported each other through the years. Leo worked with my father in the factory. Rosie and Leo's daughter, Esther, grew up and became a cantor. Sonia had two children and lived across the street from my mother.

**Did you ever get to meet Mrs. Cohen or Mr. Hardesty or Mrs. Canfield?**

No, they died before I could meet them. But I met Hans, the son of Mrs. Cohen, when I returned to perform in London for the reunion of the Kindertransport. It was amazing. Hans, Renée, and I walked down Willesden Lane as he shared memories about the hostel and our mother.

**Is your mother still alive?**

No. I lost my mother in 1996. But I have to believe that somewhere she has heard the words of thousands of students across America who write to share their stories, poems, artwork, films.

**You established *Hold On to Your Music* to tell your mother's story to teachers and students. How much do students across the country know about what happened during the Holocaust?**

Many of the students who read the book are not familiar with the Holocaust. However, each student responds powerfully to the universal themes of "man's inhumanity to man" and the horrors of the Holocaust. They relate it to world events today and to the struggles in their own lives. All the students respond to Lisa's struggle to survive through incredible losses, holding on to her music to give her strength through one of the darkest periods in history.

**Many children of survivors comment that they try so hard to achieve so much because they feel they have to "make up" for all the relatives who died in the Holocaust. Do you find that to be true about yourself?**

Absolutely! I think that is so true. All of us feel this incredible weight on our shoulders—to make something of our lives, to stand up and make a difference somehow, to take away the pain our parents held in their hearts.



*Mona Golabek*

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## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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### TIMELINE OF THE HOLOCAUST

- 1933** The Nazi Party wins power in Germany after gaining the most votes in parliamentary elections. Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor, or prime minister, of Germany.
- 1935** The Nuremberg Laws, which deprive Jews of citizenship and other fundamental rights, are enacted.
- 1938** German troops annex Austria.  
On the night of November 9–10, Nazis attack Jews in Germany and Austria. The night is known as Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass).  
On December 1, the first Kindertransport departs from Berlin, Germany; ten days later, one departs from Vienna, Austria.
- 1939** In March, Germany takes over Czechoslovakia.  
On September 1, Germany invades Poland.  
On September 3, Britain declares war on Germany.
- 1940** Nazis begin sending German Jews to Poland and forcing others into ghettos.  
Germany conquers the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. The last Kindertransport leaves the Netherlands as the Dutch surrender.  
The German air force begins the massive bombing of Britain known as the Blitz.
- 1941** Germany attacks the Soviet Union.  
The first death camp, at Chelmno in Poland, begins operations.  
After the Japanese—allies of Germany—bomb Pearl Harbor, the United States declares war on Japan, and days later, Germany declares war on the United States.
- 1942** Five more death camps begin operations: Majdanek, Sobibór, Treblinka, Belżec, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Allied radio broadcasts acknowledge that the Germans are systematically killing the Jews of Europe.
- 1945** The Germans surrender in May (after Hitler's suicide in April), and the Japanese formally surrender in September.  
By the time the Holocaust is over, one-third of the world's Jews have been murdered.

### VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Vienna was an important centre of Jewish culture and education. Many Viennese Jews were well integrated into urban society and culture and made up significant percentages of the city's doctors and lawyers, businessmen and bankers, artists and journalists.

In March 1938, Nazi Germany incorporated the Austrian Republic in what became known as the Anschluss, or "annexation." Once in power, the Nazis quickly applied German anti-Jewish legislation to exclude Jews from the economic, cultural, and social life of the former Austria. Officials closed Jewish community offices and sent the board members to the Dachau concentration camp. By the summer of 1939, hundreds of Jewish-owned factories and thousands of businesses had been closed or confiscated by the government.

## **KRISTALLNACHT: A TURNING POINT**

In the fall of 1938, many Europeans and Americans discovered how desperate the situation was for Jews in Greater Germany. In October, Hitler announced plans to expel all Jews who were technically citizens of another country. Those who held Russian passports were the first to go.

Fearing that the seventy thousand Polish Jews in Greater Germany would be next, the Polish government required each to have a special stamp on their passport. Yet when Polish Jews tried to secure the stamp, they were turned away.

The crisis came to a head when Poland announced that it would not issue stamps after October 31. On October 26, the Nazis responded by expelling all Polish Jews. When Poland refused to accept them, thousands ended up in refugee camps along the border. Among them were the parents of Herschel Grynszpan (pronounced GREEN-shpan), a seventeen-year-old living in France.

Angry and frustrated by his inability to help his family, Grynszpan marched into the German embassy in Paris on November 7 and shot a Nazi official. When the man died two days later, the Nazis decided to avenge his death.

That night they looted and then destroyed thousands of Jewish homes and businesses in Germany and Austria. They set fire to 191 synagogues, killed more than ninety Jews, and sent thirty thousand others to concentration camps—prison camps for civilians. The night of November 9–10 came to be known as Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass.”

The German press described the riots as the “spontaneous reaction” of the German people to the murder of an official by a Jew. It was, in fact, carefully planned. A set of instructions issued by the government included a list of which buildings would be allowed to burn. Two days after the violence, the government fined the Jewish community one billion marks for “property damaged in the rioting.”

## **THE KINDERTRANSPORT**

People around the world were outraged by the events of Kristallnacht, but only a few were willing to offer Jewish refugees a safe haven. Among them were a number of Jews and Christians in Britain and Nazi-occupied Europe. These men and women decided to focus their efforts on children under the age of seventeen, because they feared the British (and other Europeans) would see adults as competitors for jobs, housing, and social services.

To counter the argument that the children would be a burden on taxpayers, they promised government officials that private citizens and organizations would pay for each child’s care, education, and eventual return home. A call went out over BBC Radio imploring British citizens to provide private homes or hostels for the refugee children. When shelters had been found, Britain permitted unaccompanied refugee children to enter the country. Once World War II began, the British banned all further immigration from Nazi-occupied countries.

The first Kindertransport, or children’s transport, from Germany arrived in England on December 2, 1938. The last transport from Germany left on September 1, 1939, just hours before World War II began.

In all, the operation saved nearly 10,000 children, about 7,500 of whom were Jewish. Statistics reveal the importance of the effort. Over 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered in the ghettos and death camps of Nazi-occupied Europe. Their deaths were part of what has become known as the Holocaust, a Greek word that means “complete destruction by fire.” Between 1933 and 1945, Adolf Hitler and his followers murdered about one-third of all the Jews in the world. Young and old alike were killed solely because of their ancestry. The vast majority of children on the Kindertransports were to be the only survivors in their families.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

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1. What is the difference between an immigrant and a refugee? Was Lisa an immigrant or a refugee? What challenges do refugees face in the world today? Draw on your own experience or on those of people you know or have read about.
2. Why do you think the authors chose to begin the book with an account of a streetcar ride to a piano lesson? What does the ride reveal about Lisa and her life in Vienna in 1938?
3. How does music shape Lisa's identity?
4. Based on the author's descriptions of Lisa, what adjectives would you use to describe her? What adjectives might she use to describe herself?
5. What changes and events in Vienna disturb Lisa most? How do those changes affect Lisa and her family?
6. In what sense is Kristallnacht a 'wake-up call' for Lisa's family and other Austrian Jews?
7. A baby in a basket is left on the train. How do the children respond? Find other examples of courage shown by Lisa and the other children.
8. Lisa cherished the photograph of her mother that she brought to England. If you had to leave your home and were allowed to only take a few items of importance with you, what do you think you would take? What is the significance of the item or items you chose? Write a paragraph describing each item and what it means to you.
9. What does Lisa seem to like best about her new placement at Willesden Lane? Why does she find it comforting to stay there?
10. List the changes that Lisa experiences in the book. Which do you think were the most difficult for her to accept? Which were the most difficult for her parents to accept? How have you coped with difficult changes in your own life?
11. What inspired Lisa to work so hard on her music? How did Lisa inspire the other residents of Willesden Lane? What other examples of inspiration have you encountered in this story? Who or what inspires you?
12. What does the word *resilience* mean? Identify examples of resilience during the Blitz.
13. Why does Lisa return to Willesden Lane rather than celebrate the end of the war with her classmates at the academy? What does that decision reveal about her relationship with the other children at Willesden Lane?
14. What challenges did Lisa face as she prepared for her debut?
15. What did Lisa, Gina and Günter mean when they told Mrs Cohen that they would always be the children of Willesden Lane? How did their years on Willesden Lane help shape their identity?
16. Who was your favourite character? How did that character inspire you?

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

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### ABOUT THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

In the United States, *The Children of Willesden Lane* has inspired a collection of rich educational materials to expand students' knowledge of Holocaust history and their understanding of cultural differences, human perseverance, and tolerance through the music and story of Lisa Jura.

### Hold On To Your Music Foundation

Find out more about the children of Willesden Lane, the Kindertransport, and World War II with an expanded study guide, free musical selections, and classroom videos.

<https://holdontoyourmusic.org/>

### The Milken Family Foundation

The Milken Family Foundation has been an enthusiastic supporter of Mona Golabek and her mission to inspire young people. For links to videos, a curriculum guide, and a complete listing of links to music selections from *The Children of Willesden Lane*:

<http://mff.org/initiatives/children-of-willesden-lane-resources>

They also provide a link to the 44-page teachers' resource developed in conjunction with Facing History and Ourselves:

<http://www.mff.org/assets/Uploads/COWLStudyGuide.pdf>

### Annenberg Learner

This website offers multimedia resources to teach *The Children of Willesden Lane*.

<http://www.learner.org/series/cowl/>

### Facing history and ourselves

Educational website dedicated to making the connection between history and the moral choices people confront in their own lives—featuring detailed *The Children of Willesden Lane* study guides and musical selections.

It is necessary to become a member of the site. However, there are multiple excellent resources available on it, including:

Access to the Facing History and Ourselves teachers' resources

<https://www.facinghistory.org/books-borrowing/teacher-s-resource-children-willesden-lane>

Video and hard copy examples of US teachers' classroom units and the work of students

<https://www.facinghistory.org/children-willesden-lane/watch-classroom-videos-children-willesden-lane>

Videos exploring Lisa's music

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/teaching-children-willesden-lane-exploring-lisas-music>

### OTHER HOLOCAUST STORIES FOR YOUNG READERS

Allen & Unwin provide detailed teachers notes for the first three of the books listed below. Find the book at [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com) and click on the Teachers Notes link at the bottom of the page.

***Hana's Suitcase Anniversary Edition* by Karen Levine. Allen & Unwin 2014.**

When Hana's suitcase arrives from Germany at the small Holocaust education centre in Japan, all the children who visit want to know about Hana. When Fumiko Ishioka, the centre's curator, decides to find the answers, she embarks on a journey of discovery. This revised edition of the international bestseller includes over 60 pages of new material.

***The Diary of Laura's Twin* by Kathy Kacer. Allen & Unwin 2009**

A mysterious diary links modern-day Laura to Sara, a Jewish girl fighting to stay alive in the Warsaw Ghetto. A compelling and moving coming-of-age novel that draws upon history to resonate with the present day.

***Hiding Edith* by Kathy Kacer. Allen & Unwin 2011**

The remarkable true story of Edith Schwalb, kept safe due to the courage of an entire village in France during the Nazi invasion in WWII.

***To Hope and Back* by Kathy Kacer. Allen & Unwin 2012**

Based on the true story of the last refugee ship to leave Germany in 1939, the 'St. Louis', this powerful book tells the story of two of its passengers, Lisa and Sol, who were children on board the ship. They were among the lucky ones to survive.

**OTHER HOLOCAUST RESOURCES**

**USC Shoah Foundation I Witness Platform**

This Information Quest activity provides important historical context for *The Children of Willesden Lane* and offers first-person video accounts of the experience on the Kindertransport.

<http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>

**Australian Jewish Museums of the Holocaust**

Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne VIC <http://www.jhc.org.au/>

Sydney Jewish Museum

<http://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/> and <http://www.holocaust.com.au/>

Adelaide Jewish Museum (on-line only) <http://adelaidejmuseum.org/>

Holocaust Institute of Western Australia <http://holocaustinstituteofwa.org.au/>

**A&U NOVELS ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL**

**Through My Eyes series, edited by Lyn White**

*Shahana* by Rosanne Hawke, 2013

*Amina* by J.L. Powers, 2013

*Naveed* by John Heffernan, 2014

*Emilio* by Sophie Masson, 2014

*Malini* by Robert Hillman, 2014

*Zafir* by Prue Mason, 2015

**Novels by Deborah Ellis**

*Parvana*, 2002

*Parvana's Journey*, 2002

*Looking for X*, 2003

*Shauzia*, 2003

*A Company of Fools*, 2004

*The Heaven Shop*, 2005

*Diego, Run!*, 2007

*Diego's Pride*, 2008

*No Safe Place*, 2011

*The Best Day of My Life*, 2012

*Parvana's Promise*, 2012

*Cat at the Wall*, 2015

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

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### MONA GOLABEK

Mona Golabek is a Grammy-nominated recording artist, internationally celebrated concert pianist, and star of the one-woman show *The Pianist of Willesden Lane*. She lives in Los Angeles, USA.

Mona began learning piano from her mother, Lisa Jura, a concert pianist and teacher, when she was four years old. Lisa told many vivid tales of her childhood in pre-war Vienna and her journey on the Kindertransport to the hostel for refugee children at 243 Willesden Lane in London. As she grew up and became an accomplished concert pianist herself, these stories stayed with Mona and they led her to write, with Lee Cohen, *The Children of Willesden Lane*. In a further tribute to her mother, in 2003 Mona founded the Hold On To Your Music Foundation, which 'seeks to expand awareness and understanding of the ethical implications of world events such as the Holocaust, and the power of the arts, especially music, to embolden the human spirit in the face of adversity.' The Foundation disseminates educational materials based on *The Children of Willesden Lane* and has recently launched 'The Community of Willesden Lane: Beyond the Children of Willesden Lane and into Your Classroom', where teachers can upload and share students' projects on the book. <http://willesdenlane.mashplant.com/>

The name of the Foundation is taken from the last words Lisa's mother said to her, before entrusting Lisa to the Kindertransport: 'Hold on to your music. It will be your best friend.'

### LEE COHEN

Lee Cohen is a journalist, screenwriter and poet. He has written extensively for children's television and is the author of numerous picture books, including *Find the Magic*, *The Surprise Party*, *Happy With Me* and the spoken-word recording, *The Mother Goose Suite*, narrated by Meryl Streep. He lives in California, USA.