

# His Name is Ben



A short story by Tom Palmer for  
children aged 10 years and older

Illustrations by James Innerdale



There's a boy sitting by the lake down there, gazing into the water. Can you see him? Close to that large house on the edge of Epping Forest, in Loughton. The house is called Holmehurst. It's more of a mansion than a house. That's where the boy lives. For now.

His name is Ben.

Ben is with his friends. Moniek, Harry, the other Harry and John all live at Holmehurst. They're resting after a bicycle ride. The front wheels of their bicycles are still spinning, clicking, spinning.

Do you sometimes wonder what is going through someone's mind when they're sitting, silent, staring at the water?

Do you wonder who they are and what the story of their life is so far? And what will happen to them in the future?

This is Ben's story.



It is 1946. Ben is 16 years old. He is Jewish. He was born in Poland and spent his childhood there.

Why do you think Ben might now be living at Holmehurst, a house in Loughton near Epping Forest?

Ben is a refugee. His friends are refugees too. Ben spends his time with his friends.

They cycle. They play football and volleyball and table tennis. Ben loves sport. He always has. Now that he has food and sport and rest, he feels stronger every day.

A year ago, Ben was weak, close to death. But we need to go further back to understand why. Seven years.

In 1939, Ben was 9 years old. He was living a childhood maybe a bit like yours. A mum. A dad. Two sisters. Aunts. Uncles. Grandparents.

Sometimes the family all sat round the table, sharing a meal. They lived in a town called Piotrkow in Poland. They had a house with a garden. Ben had a bike. And pets. And friends.

He loved sport and was always one of the strongest children. He liked school, particularly reading. He had a good life. He was happy. Piotrkow was a good place to live. There were shops and libraries, sports fields and swimming pools.

Then things changed. The last days of August 1939 were warm and sunny. Ben was on holiday with his family at his grandparents.

On Friday 1 September 1939 they were coming home to celebrate Shabbat. That didn't happen. Because on that day the German army invaded Poland. They occupied Ben's country.

Once the German army had control of Poland, they took the pieces of Ben's life one by one. Because he was a Jew.

Jews must not walk on pavements, sit on benches, ride bicycles. Jews cannot go to school. Jews cannot live in their homes anymore. They have to move into a ghetto, live jammed together with thousands of others in terrible conditions.

Ben spent three years in the ghetto with his family. He was forced to work as a slave labourer in a glass factory.

Then even more important things were taken from Ben. In 1942 his mother and his sister, Lucia were taken to a forest along with 550 other people and murdered.

In 1944 he and his father were sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. His sister Mala was sent to a different concentration camp. Then Ben was sent without his father to Schlieben, another concentration camp. He had no idea what was happening to his father or sister now.

It is hard to imagine what that was like for Ben. Perhaps we can't. Perhaps what really matters is that we know. And that we remember him and his family.

At Schlieben Ben worked as a slave labourer again. The work was brutally hard. Food was scarce. He was treated very badly. Many children didn't survive. The thought that his father and sister Mala might still be alive kept Ben going.

In April 1945 Ben was moved for the last time to Theresienstadt, a camp in Czechoslovakia. He was now very weak. Once he arrived everything changed. There were explosions, louder each day. The Russian army was approaching from the east, the allies of Britain - the USA and others - from the west.

Then, one morning, the German army had gone. The Russian army had liberated those being held against their will in Theresienstadt. They were free!

The Red Cross – a charity that cares for the victims of war and for refugees – and the local people, fed and cared for Ben and the others. In the final days of the war thousands of Jews had been brought to Theresienstadt on cramped, overcrowded trains or forced on long exhausting marches that lasted for weeks.

Ben ate. Gradually his strength recovered. He rowed for hours along a nearby river. He ate again, and again.



Ben found a cousin at Theresienstadt who had also survived but was devastated to learn that his father had been murdered by the Nazis.

Ben and his cousin decided to attempt to return home to Piotrkow. Maybe someone else had survived? Maybe Mala? They could be reunited.

They travelled for days and on the way, they had to change trains. At the station, there were some Polish officers.



‘Go away,’ the officers said, threatening to kill them. ‘We don’t want Jews here.’

They finally reached Piotrkow but after trying unsuccessfully to find Ben’s sister, they returned to Theresienstadt, where there were now hundreds of boys and some girls like him. Wondering what to do next.

They had no home. Nowhere to go.

The war was over, but Ben thought he had lost everyone. Everything.

Ben was 15 years old. A refugee. What would happen to him now?

There have always been refugees. Refugees are people who have nowhere safe to go and have nothing. They need a safe country. A place where people will look after them. A place where there is no war or killing. Where they can build a new life.

Or try to.

In England – a country that Ben had been interested in since childhood – something was happening.

The Jewish community there had raised money to bring 1000 children from places like Theresienstadt to safety. To look after them.

Ben decided to join them. He was in the first group of 300 child survivors out of a total of 732 children who flew to Britain, away from the country where he was no longer welcome or safe.

So, Ben arrived in England to stay – for a while – by a lake called Windermere.

He thought he had no family left. But he had friends. And people there who could help them all start to recover.

He was even stronger now. Sport every day saw to that. Swimming. Football. Volleyball. Rowing.



He ate. He read books. He learned English. After three months, Ben and some of his friends left to move to a hostel near London in Loughton, Essex. A house called Holmehurst.

And this is where we first met him. The boy whose name is Ben. That is where he has been. We know now what has happened to him. We know why he is sitting by the lake in the huge gardens of Holmehurst. But we can only try and imagine what he is thinking about.

What now? What will happen to Ben and his friends in the future?

There were kind people at Holmehurst too. They fed Ben and Moniek, the two Harrys and John, and all the boys who went there. They taught them more English. They encouraged them to play even more sport – football, table tennis, cycling, volleyball, hiking. They went to the cinema. And they began to think about work, what jobs they might go on to do in their new lives.

Ben was stronger now. Stronger every day. And, now with education, his confidence was stronger. He could speak the language.

Ben went to school, then university. He knew that education was important. It was one of the first things that had been taken from him. That's why he wanted it so much. He desperately wanted to make up for those lost years.

And he wanted to be strong too. To show he was strong.

One day he was at the sports club. Men were lifting weights. Extremely heavy weights attached to the ends of metal bars. Ben wanted a go. Someone said he shouldn't. That he would not be able to. After what he had been through, he could not be that strong.

Ben lifted 180lbs. That's the average weight of a man today. People could not believe what this boy could lift.

Ben liked England. It had given him a new home. Food. Education. Now he would give something back.



In 1956 – when he was aged 26 – Ben was asked to represent his new country. The refugee who came to England ten years ago would now captain the British weightlifting team at two Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956 and Rome in 1960.

Can you imagine that? A boy – weak from war, half-starved – arrives in a new country and when he becomes a man ten years later, he is one of that country's strongest?

There is more to Ben's story. Ben and his friends.

As they grew older, they set up a charity, the '45 Aid Society. They would help other Holocaust survivors and make sure no one would forget what had happened. Can you imagine that? You've suffered the worst events a person can suffer. You've lost your family and your home. You are a refugee. And now you want to spend your life helping others and teaching people about what happened and to be tolerant and kind.

For his kindness and hard work Ben was knighted. He was now Sir Ben. Do you know what that means? To be knighted is the greatest honour a British citizen can receive. Your country is recognising and thanking you for the good work you have done.

It is the greatest honour, but there is one thing even more important.

Family. That is the most important thing.

Ben married and he and his wife had three sons who gave them nine grandchildren.

Can you imagine that too? From losing your own family you start your own. You can sit round the table with them in your home, like you used to sit round the table with your parents and grandparents. What might that feel like?

Stop for a moment and think about it.

When Ben – in his 90s now – sits with his family to eat in their home, there is another woman at the table along with his wife and sons and grandchildren.

She is in her 90s too.

Ben had searched for his sister. The one member of his family who might still be alive, whom might not have been one of the six million Jews that Nazi Germany and its collaborators murdered.



And then, one day, he found out that she had been sent to concentration camps too. She had been in the same camp where two girls from the Netherlands – Anne Frank and her sister, Margot – had been murdered. But somehow – like her brother – his sister had survived.

Ben's sister is the woman in her 90s at the table with Ben's family.

Her name is Mala.



### **A message from Tom Palmer**

Thank you for reading *His Name is Ben*. I just wanted to say that the events that are described here are not imaginary. They happened to Ben.

He and millions of others experienced these horrors and difficulties first-hand, but unlike millions of others, Ben survived to bear witness to these unimaginable crimes. The important thing is to know about them through reading stories and visiting museums.

Ben's life and legacy stand as a testament to the importance of education. We know that these things did happen in order to try to prevent them from happening again.

## **A message from Epping Forest District Museum**

We would like to thank Tom for offering to write Ben's story for us as part of our special exhibition *The Boys: Holocaust Survivors in the Epping Forest District*, and Ben and his family for agreeing to let him do this.

The exhibition was held at Epping Forest District Museum during 2021. The pupils of Wilbury Primary School who visited the exhibition and helped us edit the first draft found the story very moving but also very inspirational. We hope you do too.

We would also like to thank the 45 Aid Society for all their help in writing this story, and for the work they do in keeping the legacy of the boys alive.

The project was made possible with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and we would like to thank players of the National Lottery for supporting this.

If you'd like to find out more about Ben and his friends, visit the 45 Aid Society website <https://45aid.org/> and read Tom's book *After the War* <https://tompalmer.co.uk/after-the-war/>

For more information about the museum, visit [www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/museum](http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/museum)

## His Name is Ben

A short story about the incredible life of Sir Ben Helfgott, one of the Boys - the group of young Holocaust survivors who came to England in 1945.

### Comments from pupils of Wilbury Primary School, Edmonton, London

*'The story made me feel enthusiastic because it made me feel like there is so much hope in this world'*

*'The story made me feel brave and confident because Ben has been through so much, but he still accomplished his dream.'*



[www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/museum](http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/museum)