

Real Life Stories *Sir Nicolas Winton*

Early days

Nicolas Winton was born in Hampstead, London, May 19th 1909, of parents who were of German Jewish origin. In early days the family name was changed from Wertheim to Winton.

When he left school Nicolas enrolled in night school while helping at the Midland Bank. Later he went to Germany, then in 1931 to France and in time back to England where he worked as a stockbroker in the London stock exchange. Certainly nothing very exciting.



When planning his Christmas vacation in 1938 he decided to go to Switzerland for a skiing holiday. However, just prior to leaving England he received a phone call from his friend Martin Blake in Prague who asked him to cancel his skiing vacation and come there immediately. Martin was involved in a Jewish refugee work in Prague where he single handedly organized the aiding of Jewish children who were at risk from the Nazis. During the phone call Martin said: "I need your help, don't bother bringing your skis". Arriving in Prague Nicolas was put to work in refugee camps where the people lived in dreadful conditions.

On the nights of November 9-10th 1938, the Kristallnacht, the "night of the broken glass", broke out. That was when Nazis in Germany torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish homes, schools and businesses, and killed close to 100 Jews. In the aftermath of Kristallnacht, approximately 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps.

When news of the Kristallnacht reached Prague, Nicolas stepped up to the plate. He discovered that children of refugees and other peoples who were enemies of Hitler weren't being looked after. He wrote: "I decided to try to get permits to Britain for them". The situation was heartbreaking. Many of the refugees hadn't the price of a meal. Some of the mothers tried desperately to get money to buy food for themselves and their children. The parents desperately wanted to get their children to safety, even if they could not get visas for the whole family. To associates in Prague, Nicolas, as close as I can determine, wrote: "Since there is no organization in Prague to deal with refugee children, and nobody will let their children travel on their own, if you are ready to help, I am convinced that there is nothing that can't be done if it is fundamentally reasonable." It was a very noble idea but how was it to be done? Plans are easy but the execution of them can be very difficult if not impossible. However, Nicolas began the planning for such an evacuation and one of the first matters was receiving permission to transfer the children out of Germany, then on to Poland or Holland for them to embark on their route to the United Kingdom.

Other major obstacles had to be overcome:

- a) The entering of the children into the UK necessitated three things:
 - i) They had to be under seventeen years of age
 - ii) They had to have a place to stay
 - iii) There had to be fifty pounds deposited in a designated governmental place to purchase the tickets for the children to return to their homeland.
- b) The border from Germany into Holland was closed with border guards searching for all Jews, and those caught were sent back to Germany.
- c) Places had to be found for the children in Sweden and the U. K. America offered no help.
- d) Funds had to be found for the payment of getting the children back home.

Having received assurances from the British and Swedish governments the evacuation could begin. Soon news spread that Nicolas had a way to get the children to safety. Thousands of anxious parents, understanding the danger they and their children were in, gradually came to Nicolas and placed the future of their children into his hands.

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Because he wanted to save the lives of as many of the endangered children as possible, Nicolas returned to London and planned the transport of children to Great Britain. Working at his regular job on the Stock Exchange by day, he then devoted late afternoons and evenings to his rescue efforts, often working far into the night. He made up an organization, calling it: "The British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, Children's Section." The committee consisted of himself, his mother, his secretary, and a few volunteers.

Funds also had to be found for repatriation costs and to pay for the children's transportation when the children's parents could not cover the costs. He advertised in British newspapers, in churches and synagogues. He printed groups of children's photographs all over Britain. He felt certain that seeing the children's photos would convince potential sponsors and foster families to offer assistance. To find the homes, advertisements were put in the local papers asking for homes, but since there was no way children could be evacuated they had to wait until homes began to open. They had no idea what a huge task this would be for only one child was allowed per home.

On March 14, 1939, Nicolas had his first success when the first group of children left Prague for Britain by airplane. Nicolas managed to organize seven more transports that departed from Prague's Wilson Railway Station. The groups then crossed the English Channel by boat and finally ended their journey at London's Liverpool Street station. At the station British foster parents waited to collect their charges. Nicolas, who organized their rescue, was set on matching the right child to the right foster parents. The last trainload of children left on August 2, 1939, bringing the total of rescued children to 669.

The Tragic Last Group

On Friday, September 1, 1939, there was to be the biggest transport of children, 250 in all. As they gathered at the Wilson Station in Prague for the evacuation to England, news came through that Hitler had invaded Poland and all borders controlled by Germany were closed. In England, some 650 miles away at the Liverpool Street Station, 250 families waited to welcome the children into their homes. They waited in vain for the children did not arrive that day, nor any other day. The children were put on the train but in a matter of hours the train disappeared and none of the 250 children were ever seen again. They all died in the holocaust.

Recognition

The rescued children, many now grandparents, still refer to themselves as "Nicolas's children." Among those saved are the British film director Karel Reisz (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Isadora*, and *Sweet Dreams*); Canadian journalist and news correspondent for CBC, Joe Schlesinger (originally from Slovakia); Lord Alfred Dubs (a former Minister in the Blair Cabinet); Dagmar Símová (a cousin of the former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright); Hugo Marom (a famous aviation consultant, and one of the founders of the Israeli Air Force).

The world found out about his work in 1988 during an episode of the BBC television program, "That's Life", when he was invited as a member of the audience. At one point Nicolas's scrapbook was shown and his achievements explained. The host of the program, Esther Rantzen, asked whether any in the audience owed their lives to Nicolas, and if so, to stand. More than two dozen people surrounding Nicolas rose and applauded.

Nicolas has received many acknowledgements for his humanitarian pre-war deeds. He received a letter of thanks from the late Ezer Weizman, a former president of the State of Israel. He was made an Honorary Citizen of Prague. In 1993, Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, awarded him the MBE (Member of the British Empire); and on October 28, 1998, Václav Havel, then president of the Czech Republic, awarded him the Order of T.G. Masaryk at Hradcany Castle for his heroic achievement. On December 31, 2002, Nicolas received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II for his services to humanity.

Sir Nicholas Winton, still wears a ring given to him by some of the children he saved. It is inscribed with a line from the Talmud, the book of Jewish law. It reads: "Save one life, save the world."

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When our Lord was here he spoke concerning a woman: "She hath done what she could". Nicolas Winton was a man who did what he could and in doing such, saved the lives of 669 children from death in Nazi Germany. This is his story.

This is a compiling of material gathered from multiple sources but chiefly from Wikipedia and the Jewish Virtual Library. From that which I have gathered, Nicolas is still alive being 104 years of age and lives in Hampstead, England.