

AN ALMOST UNSUNG HERO

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Introduction

You likely have heard of Oskar Shindler of the movie Shindler's List, but you may not have heard of another savior of Jews from the Nazi death camps. In this case it was 669 mostly Jewish children rescued from Czechoslovakia just before the German armies shut down that country in 1939. With aid of many others, this was accomplished under the leadership of a 29 year-old financier from England, who cancelled his planned vacation in the Alps, when he became aware of the peril facing children from the approaching Germans. His story was virtually hidden from the world until rediscovered 50 years later when he gave an old scrapbook to a woman who was preparing a story of the Holocaust.

After his story became public, he became the subject of dozens of books, articles, television shows and interviews, documentary and dramatized films. He received numerous awards from multiple countries in addition to an MBE and a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth. This modest man always considered his greatest award the surviving children and their over 6000 descendants. I had the honor of meeting him and spending an afternoon and evening with him. This man, called "Nicky" by his rescued children, their children, and their children's children, is Sir Nicholas George Winton. He lived a life of 106 years, dedicated to making the world a better and more just place through humanitarian works.

Rescue in Prague

By 1938 about 10,000 mainly Jewish children had been rescued to Great Britain from Germany and Austria. This program, called Kindertransport, was organized by Jewish and Christian agencies. However, this humanitarian movement did not include Czechoslovakia. By 1938 Germany has expanded to Austria and had annexed the Sudetenland, which was part of Czechoslovakia. They were close to taking over all of the country.

Nicholas Winton received a letter dated December 22, 1938, from Martin Blake, a friend who was to join him on a skiing trip. Martin asked him to meet him in Prague to help with a refugee program for children. Even though a stock broker, young Nicholas had a sense of adventure and strong social beliefs. Well aware of the threats of Hitler's plans and the advancing German armies, he did not hesitate to join his friend. Arriving in Prague on New Year's Eve, he met his friend Martin and Doreen Warriner, a powerhouse of a woman who headed the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC). Since Nazi agents were already in Prague looking for communists and anti-Nazis, the refugee workers realized that little time was left to organize a Czech-style Kindertransport. Almost immediately Nicholas started working with Doreen, who made him the Secretary of the Children's Committee for Czechoslovakia, dealing with the families that were desperately trying to get their children, if not themselves, out of the country.

They developed a complicated plan in which he enrolled friends in Prague and his mother, Barbara, back in England. Her task was to find out from the British Government if the children would be allowed in and under what conditions. The rather bold assumption on his part was that his mother would accept this assignment. This was typical of his tactic throughout his life. If he found someone to share an important task with him, he would assume they would not deny his request. Barbara was asked to find homes that would take the children, aged 17 and younger, if the British government would support such a rescue effort.

Getting a one week extension to his vacation, Nicky spent only three weeks in Prague getting the rescue project organized with Doreen and another volunteer,

Trevor Chadwick, a boy's school Latin teacher. Trevor was in charge of the Prague operation sending the children on to England, where Nicholas would be in charge of getting the arriving children settled. Nicholas on January 21, 1939, went back to his stock broker job. However, he spent all his other waking hours working with the British powers that be. Using his title as Secretary of Children's section of the BCRC he cajoled the British Home Office to agree to work with his group to find foster homes for the children. He found out the requirements for bringing in unaccompanied Czech children to the UK. These were a separate application with medical certificate, an entry visa, and a guarantee of L50 to pay for their eventual return home. Also, a foster parent or guardian would agree to take care of them until they were seventeen or until they were able to return home. L50 was a large sum at that time, so various charitable organizations promised to fund the cost.

On March 14, 1939, back in Prague, Doreen and Trevor put 20 children on a plane to England to be welcomed by Nicholas. Over the next 6 months 7 other transports were sent, this time all by train. In mid-March Germany invaded all of Czechoslovakia so the other transports had to be allowed by the Nazis with exit visas required for each child. At that time the Germans made it difficult, but did not block children to leave the country, as they did adults. Forged English entry documents were often used so that delays in sending the transports on would not occur.

Nicky in spite of his "day job" was devoting every other hour to find agencies to search for homes and for financial support for the foster homes. He and his mother went to Liverpool Street station to greet every arrival. They assisted in the formal handing over of the children to their waiting foster families. The transfers did not always work without a hitch. Some families were late; some never showed up. But overall the process worked and the children went off with the families. Nicky wrote numerous pleading articles for newspapers and magazines and appealed directly to YMCA, Boy Scouts, Salvation Army, Unitarians, Trade Unions and other groups. He even wrote to the USA Jewish Congress, the Senate and the President. The answer was that a refugee bill was in Congress, but it never was passed in time to save any of the Czech children.

Trevor, who had managed 5 transports, had to return to England but Doreen's and Nicholas' Prague organization managed three more trains in July and August. The 9th transport was prepared for September 1, 1939. There were 250 children loaded on that train, prepared to leave for Holland and then on to England. Hours before it was to depart, Germany invaded Poland and all the borders were closed. Two days later Britain declared war on Germany. The rescue group was devastated. Almost all those children waiting on the train were murdered after being sent to Nazi camps. Of the 8 transports successfully completed over the nine month period, there were 561 Jewish children, 52 Unitarian, 34 Catholic and 17 with no affiliation for a total of 669.

An English volunteer assistant to the rescue project was a Mr. Loewinsohn, who when war broke out, and no more trains were leaving, put together a scrapbook detailing the rescue project. He gathered all the voluminous data, lists of rescued children and their foster parents and correspondence from the project and presented this large scrapbook to Nicholas to help him remember what they all had accomplished. This book was given to Nicholas towards the end of 1939, but he paid slight attention to it. He simply put this book, along with other diaries and letters from the project, with his hundreds of other books. In late 1939 he soon was to move on to other humanitarian projects. One must ask what character traits prompted this young stock broker to take on the daunting task of rescuing the Czech children.

Nicholas' Education and Background

Nicholas George Winton was born on May 19, 1909 in London to Rudolf and Barbara Wertheim, an upper-middle - class, Jewish banking family, who lived in a large home with servants. His father was born in England, but went to Germany to find and marry his mother. His parents were not religious and were baptized as Christians with their other children to assimilate better into British life, rather than with any belief in the Christian faith. The family had also changed their name to Wortham during the First World War, and back to Wertheim, and finally to Winton in the late 1930s just before the Second World War. At age seven Nicholas started

prep-school at a University College School, and at 14, with his parents support, he entered a new private school called Stowe.

Stowe had a very progressive philosophy, stated by their headmaster as the development of young men “who would be acceptable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck.” The faculty stressed resourcefulness, moral courage and the ability to put others’ needs first. He did not shine academically, except in mathematics, but easily made friends with students and faculty. He tolerated the required officers training corps and became an award winning fencer. As his family was under some financial stresses, his father did not encourage Nicholas going to University, which Nicholas did not mind. He felt at seventeen he was ready to start banking training as a clerk. Influenced by the honorable and charismatic authority figures at Stowe, Nick had developed attributes of independence, confidence, and determination to follow his own instincts. His sense of social responsibility was to influence his future decisions and directions.

Nicholas’s banking training experiences both in England and on the Continent led to his career as a young stock broker. He made many friends during that ten year period within middle as well as upper classes. Although not active politically, through discussions with like-minded groups, he became a confirmed socialist. He and others were well aware of Hitler’s fascistic threats to freedom and stability in Europe, and they could not understand the British government accepting appeasement of German expansionism. He believed that his discussions with his friends in the Labor Party, leading up to late 1939, “primed” him for making the quick decision to rescue the children from Prague.

After the Prague Project

In September 1939 Nicky was still working with getting children settled who had arrived in England in the previous months. Although the war had started, he did not join the military. He did feel he had to work to defend his country. He said that “he would be willing to clear up the mess, but not take part in the slaughter.” He quit his stock broker job and joined the local St. John Ambulance brigade, where he proceeded to organize it. He decided to get more involved in March of 1940 and joined the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in France. His skills in

English, French and German were very useful. As the Germans were advancing in France, he was evacuated once to England, quickly returned, and was evacuated a second time. In late 1941 he felt he was not doing enough in the war effort so he joined the Royal Air Force. He finished his flight training but eventually was turned down as a pilot because he wore glasses. He took on a job as a Link flight trainer to French pilots who had escaped to England. As the war was pushing into Germany itself, Nicky was given the RAF job of setting up an RAF exhibit in Brussels, which eventually toured a number of European cities and ended up in Prague. In mid-1946 he returned to England and was released from the RAF as a Flight Lieutenant.

Looking for a humanitarian job in 1947 Nicky joined the International Refugee Organization of the United Nations where he organized another successful program to aid in the resettlement of refugee families from displacement camps. Soon, however, in consideration of his banking experience he was asked to be an assistant to the head of the IRO project liquidating Nazi loot collected from Germans, converting it to money, and returning 95 % of it to the surviving Jewish population. Traveling to Germany, France, Switzerland and America he made 43 journeys over an 8 month period. It was an important post that aided international efforts to assist with the reconstruction of Europe.

Marriage and Home Life

In April of 1948, when Nicky was 39, he met a Danish secretary to a Paris bank manager and quickly fell in love with her. Grete Gjelstrup was 28 and spoke good English, French and German. They shared many interests and were engaged after 5 months and married in October of the same year. During their marriage they had two sons and a daughter. In October of 1949 his position with IRO came to a close, and he and Grete took a long honeymoon in the United States. When they returned to England in 1950, needing to support his family, he took a position as an accountant and business manager at a small business.

One of their sons had Down's syndrome, which was poorly understood at that time. They were advised to place him in a home, but Nicholas and Grete kept him in their home. Realizing that other parents were faced with similar decisions, they

organized a local chapter of the National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children. They provided help to families in similar need in his area. In the next years he devoted his time to working with handicapped children's groups, eventually becoming member of the National Committee. He continued this work in spite of the fact that their son with Down's syndrome had died at a young age.

When Nicholas turned 62 in 1971, he decided to retire from employment so that he could devote full time to his charitable endeavors. That work for the next 20 years involved establishing Council supported nursing and retirement homes, called Abbyfield Homes, for those who could not afford such facilities. His organizational skills once again led to fulfilling a need that so many had previously ignored. To his surprise he received an MBE (Member of Order of British Empire) from Queen Elizabeth in 1983 for his years of charitable work in England. This was not related to his rescue work in 1939, recognition of which is now described.

Revelation of Prague Project

In February 1988 Nicky was contacted by someone in the BBC who found out the story of his part in the transport of children from Czechoslovakia. They asked him to appear on a show called "That's Life". Nicholas and Grete had given the scrapbook, prepared by Loewinsohn in 1939, to an historian preparing a conference on the Holocaust. The historian showed it to the host of the BBC program. They wanted Nicholas to be present to verify the contents of the scrapbook, including the list of all the children rescued and their foster families. At the highpoint of the TV show, the host picked a name from the list, Vera, and asked if she was in the audience. She stood up. They had her seated next to Nicholas. He knew nothing about this ambush, nor did Vera, who was a stranger to him. He was so ignorant of the plan that his wife Grete did not even come to the show with him, but was watching from home. Everyone, including the host, was in tears with the impact of such an emotional event.

They asked Nicholas, this time accompanied by Grete, to come back the next week. When the host reminded viewers of the story, she asked if anyone there had been rescued by Nicky, and five rows of people stood up. They were now adults in their 50s and 60s and did not know of the man who played such an important role

as their savior. Nicholas was equally unaware of what happened to the children after he finished the project in 1939. Those two television events changed Nicholas' and Grete's lives forever.

The story spread around the world and resulted in a host of awards and honors from many different countries too numerous to list. As the humble man he was, he wanted none of these, but they kept coming his way. In spite of carrying on with his nursing and extra care-homes projects, he did travel extensively at the invitation of his "new found children". Since Nicky's children and their descendants were scattered all over the world, he made trips to many countries to meet them. He often visited the Czech Republic, once receiving their highest National award. He attended a conference of his American children in New York City and made trips to other United States cities.

Although he received thanks from the President of Israel, he could not receive, nor did he want to receive, the Righteous Gentile award from Israel because he was a Jew, regardless of his family's earlier baptisms. Monetary contributions were always turned over to his humanitarian projects. He finally found a permanent home for his scrapbook in a Museum in Israel. In 2003 Nicky became Sir Nicholas Winton, receiving knighthood from Queen Elizabeth "for Services to Humanity". This second honor from the Queen was for his work in rescuing the 669 children from Czechoslovakia.

In July of 2006 he received a letter of gratitude from President George W. Bush. In addition the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 583 in 2007 recognizing the remarkable example set by Sir Nicholas Winton. "It commended Sir Nicholas and those British and Czechoslovakian citizens who worked with him for their remarkable persistence and selfless courage in saving the lives of 669 Czechoslovak Jewish children in the months before the outbreak of World War II, and urges men and women everywhere to recognize in Winton's remarkable humanitarian effort the difference that one devoted principled individual can make in changing and improving the lives of others."

One Rescued Child: Hanus Grosz

Two parents of the Jewish family named Grosz were rushing in 1939 from their village of Brno to Prague, determined to put their two young sons on the train that eventually would get their boys safely to England. They realized they might never see them again, but they feared that they would be sent with their parents to a camp controlled by the newly invading Nazi forces of Germany. These boys, Hanus(15) and his younger brother made their way with hundreds of other mainly Jewish boys and girls on a train across Holland and landing in England where foster parents had volunteered to take them. Hanus and his brother lived on a farm in Wales. When he was of age he joined the Royal Air Force as a radio operator and bomber gunner as part of the Czech Squadron.

After the war he returned to Czechoslovakia as an English teacher, and found that his whole family had been murdered by the Germans. Soon he had to flee again because the Communists were rounding up anyone who had served with the British forces. Returning to Wales he obtained a medical degree and met a Danish nurse, Kirsten, who became his wife. After a number of other travels he ended up in Indianapolis where he became a prominent psychiatrist at the Indiana University School of Medicine and the Institute of Psychiatric Research. His two sons and a daughter were raised here in Indianapolis.

He had no knowledge of the man who saved him until the 1990s at one of Nicky's reunions with his refugee children where he finally met him. After that meeting they became good friends and exchanged visits back and forth in England and Florida. Dr. Grosz was a colleague of this author at the Indiana University School of Medicine. He and his wife became very close friends of the author and his wife, travelling and attending many operas together. We joined them on one of their Florida vacations. That is when we met Nicky Winton and spent an afternoon and evening with him, sharing an early-bird lobster dinner with him at a Sarasota restaurant. He was a humble and delightful man with a bright sense of humor.

Back in Indianapolis Dr. Grosz hosted the director and showing of the Emmy Award film "Nicholas Winton: The Power of Good" at the Indianapolis Jewish Community Center. Also, a year before his own death, Dr. Grosz hosted the

director and Academy Award documentary film, “Into the Arms of Strangers” at the Indiana History Center. The Grosz’s connection with Nicky did not end there, as their daughter, Anita, moved to England and had lunch each week with Nicky until he was hospitalized shortly before his death. He died July 1, 2015 at the age of 106. Anita was involved in organizing the U.S. Kindertransport Children. She and her mother published a book of pictures of quilts sewn together by United States survivors and their children. This book was dedicated to the parents who *saved their children by letting them go*.

Nicky’s Philosophy

People often asked Nicky the secret to his long life. He would say First, “pick the right parents”, giving genetics their due. Second, keep physically active and do a little more exercise each day than you think you are able to”. Third, “have a zest for life and for making a difference in the present and the future”. In response to people constantly telling him that not knowing the past will lead to making repeated mistakes, he quoted Hegel in saying that “We learn from history that we do not learn from history.” He preferred to look forward and solve the problems of the *Now*, and not dwell on the *Past*.

His voyage through religion from Jewish to Christian to Agnostic led him to believe in the common ethics of all religions: decency, kindness, respect and honor for others, and not dwell on those aspects of religion that divide us. He always emphasized that the 669 children he saved *were Children, not necessarily nor entirely Jewish children*. He was interested in those in most peril at that time, which happened to be the majority of Jewish children. He was modest and unassuming, but also had some negative traits according to his daughter. He had a stubbornness believing that his views of how to get things done were to be followed. His focus on his own schemes gave the impression that others were tramped over if they did not pitch in. His motto, “If it is not impossible there must be a way to do it” was not easy for everyone to accept. When friends saw him coming, they knew if they could not escape, that Nicky would get them involved in one of his humanitarian projects.

In a letter Nicky sent to his mother in 1939 he wrote: *“There is a difference between passive goodness and active goodness. The latter is, in my opinion, the giving of one’s time and energy in the alleviation of pain and suffering. It entails going out, finding and helping those who are suffering and in danger, and not merely leading an exemplary life in a purely passive way of doing no wrong.”*

At one time Winton was presented with a gold ring inscribed with a quote from the Talmud. “Save One Soul – Save the World”. Considering the over 6000 descendants of the 669 children he saved, that ring was well deserved indeed.

THE END

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