

## The Story: "The Power of Good"

15 min.  
"60 minutes"  
clip on  
YouTube  
called:  
Saving the  
Children

In December 1938, Nicholas Winton, a 29-year-old London stockbroker, was about to leave for a skiing holiday in Switzerland, when he received a phone call from his friend Martin Blake asking him to cancel his holiday and immediately come to Prague: "I have a most interesting assignment and I need your help. Don't bother bringing your skis." When Winton arrived, he was asked to help in the camps, in which thousands of refugees were living in appalling conditions.

### MUNICH AGREEMENT

THE MUNICH CONFERENCE WAS HELD SEPTEMBER 29-30, 1938, FOLLOWING HITLER'S DEMAND TO ANNEX THE SUDETENLAND, A REGION IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA POPULATED LARGELY BY ETHNIC GERMANS. THE RESULTING CRISIS LED BRITAIN AND FRANCE, WHO HAD ADOPTED A POLICY OF APPEASEMENT, TO PRESSURE CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO ACCEDE TO HITLER'S DEMANDS. NO CZECH REPRESENTATIVE WAS PRESENT AT THE CONFERENCE, AND THE AGREEMENT LED TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CZECH STATE. FOLLOWING THE CONFERENCE, WINSTON CHURCHILL WARNED: "DO NOT SUPPOSE THAT THIS IS THE END. THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE RECKONING."

In October 1938, after the ill-fated Munich Agreement between Germany and the Western European powers, the Nazis annexed a large part of western Czechoslovakia, the *Sudetenland*. Winton was convinced that the German occupation of the rest of the country would soon follow. To him and many others, the outbreak of war seemed inevitable. The news of *Kristallnacht*, the bloody pogrom (violent attack) against German and Austrian Jews on the nights of November 9 and 10, 1938, had reached Prague. Winton decided to take steps.

"I found out that the children of refugees and other groups of people who were enemies of Hitler weren't being looked after. I decided to try to get permits to Britain for them. I found out that the conditions which were laid down for bringing in a child were chiefly that you had a family that was willing and able to look after the child, and £50, which was quite a large sum of money in those days, which was to be deposited at the Home Office. 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 at least to get their children to safety when they couldn't manage to get visas for the whole family. I began to realize what suffering there is when armies start to march."

In terms of his mission, Winton was not thinking in small numbers, but of thousands of children. He was ready to start a mass evacuation.

"Everybody in Prague said, 'Look, there is no organization in Prague to deal with refugee children, nobody will let the children go on their own, but if you

want to have a go, have a go.' And I think there is nothing that can't be done if it is fundamentally reasonable."

### OPERATION KINDERTRANSPORT

ON DECEMBER 2, 1938, JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN AGENCIES BEGAN RESCUING GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN JEWISH CHILDREN ON KINDERTRANSPORTEN (CHILDREN'S TRANSPORTS). THE "REFUGEE CHILDREN'S MOVEMENT," A GROUP UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE CENTRAL BRITISH FUND FOR GERMAN JEWRY OR CBF (WHICH LATER BECAME THE WORLD JEWISH RELIEF ORGANIZATION), URGED CONCERNED CHRISTIANS AND JEWS TO SUPPORT "OPERATION KINDERTRANSPORT." AN EXTENSIVE FUND-RAISING EFFORT WAS ORGANIZED AND THE BRITISH PUBLIC RESPONDED GENEROUSLY, RAISING HALF A MILLION BRITISH POUNDS IN SIX MONTHS. A LARGE PORTION OF THIS MONEY WAS USED TO CARE FOR THE CHILDREN WHO WERE RESCUED. BETWEEN DECEMBER 1938 AND MAY 1940, ALMOST 10,000 CHILDREN (INFANTS TO TEENAGERS) WERE RESCUED AND GIVEN SHELTER AT FARMS, HOSTELS, CAMPS, AND IN PRIVATE HOMES IN BRITAIN. HOWEVER, THIS EFFORT DID NOT INCLUDE THE CHILDREN OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA; AND THIS IS WHY THE WORK OF NICHOLAS WINTON WAS SO VITAL.

Independently of Operation *Kindertransport* (see above), Nicholas Winton set up his own rescue operation. At first, Winton's office was a dining room table at his hotel in Wenceslas Square in Prague. Anxious parents, who gradually came to understand the danger they and their children were in, came to Winton and placed the future of their children into his hands. Soon, an office was set up on Vorsilka Street, under the charge of Trevor Chadwick. Thousands of parents heard about this unique endeavor and hundreds of them lined up in front of the new office, drawing the attention of the *Gestapo*. Winton's office distributed questionnaires and registered the children. Winton appointed Trevor Chadwick and Bill Barazetti to look after the Prague end when he returned to England. Many further requests for help came from Slovakia, a region east of Prague.

Winton contacted the governments of nations he thought could take in the children. Only Sweden and his own government said yes. Great Britain promised to accept children under the age of 18 as long as he found homes and guarantors who could deposit £50 for each child to pay for their return home.

Because he wanted to save the lives of as many of the endangered children as possible, Winton returned to London and planned the transport of children to Great Britain. He worked at his regular job on the Stock Exchange by day, and 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.

Winton had to find funds to use for repatriation costs, and a foster home for each child. He also had to raise money to pay for the transports when the children's parents could not cover the costs. He advertised in British newspapers, and 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. Finding sponsors was only one of the endless problems in obtaining the necessary documents from German and British authorities.

"Officials at the Home Office worked very slowly with the entry visas. We went to them urgently asking for permits, only to be told languidly, 'Why rush, old boy? Nothing will happen in Europe.' This was a few months before the war broke out. So we forged the Home Office entry permits."

On March 14, 1939, Winton had his first success: the first transport of children left Prague for Britain by airplane. Winton 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. Winton, 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. It is impossible to imagine the emotions of parents sending their children to safety, knowing they may never be reunited, and impossible to imagine the fears of the children leaving the lives they knew and their loved ones for the unknown.

On September 1, 1939 the biggest transport of children was to take place, but on that day Hitler invaded Poland, and all borders controlled by Germany were closed. This put an end to Winton's rescue efforts. Winton has said many times that the vision that haunts him most to this day is the picture of hundreds of children waiting eagerly at Wilson Station in Prague for that last aborted transport.

"Within hours of the announcement, the train disappeared. None of the 250 children aboard was seen again. We had 250 families waiting at Liverpool Street that day in vain. If the train had been a day earlier, it would have come through. Not a single one of those children was heard of again, which is an awful feeling."

The significance of Winton's mission is verified by the fate of that last trainload of children. Moreover, most of the parents and siblings of the children Winton saved perished in the Holocaust.

After the war, Nicholas Winton didn't tell anyone, not even his wife Grete about his wartime rescue efforts. In 1988, a half century later, Grete found a scrapbook from 1939 in their attic, with all the children's photos, a complete list of names, a few letters from parents of the children to Winton and other documents. She finally learned the whole story. Today the scrapbooks and other papers are held at *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, in Israel.

Grete shared the story with Dr. Elisabeth Maxwell, a Holocaust historian and the wife of newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell. Robert Maxwell arranged for his newspaper to publish articles on Winton's amazing deeds. Winton's extraordinary story led to his appearance on Esther Rantzen's BBC television program, *That's Life*. In the studio, emotions ran high as Winton's "children" introduced themselves and expressed their gratitude to him for saving their lives. Because the program was aired nationwide, many of the rescued children also wrote to him and thanked him. Letters came from all over the world, and new faces still appear at his door, introducing themselves by names that match the documents from 1939.

The rescued children, many now grandparents, still refer to themselves as "Winton'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), Lady Milena Grenfell-Baines (a patron of the arts whose father, Rudolf Fleischmann, saved Thomas Mann from the Nazis), Dagmar Šimová (a cousin of the former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright), Tom Schrecker, (a *Reader's Digest* manager), Hugo Marom (a famous aviation consultant, and one of the founders of the Israeli Air Force), and Vera Gissing (author of *Pearls of Childhood*) and coauthor of *Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation*.

Winton 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, Winton received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II for his services to humanity. Winton's story is also the subject of two films by Czech filmmaker Matej Mináč: *All My Loved Ones* and the award-winning *Nicholas Winton: The Power of Good*.

Today, Sir Nicholas Winton, age 97, resides at his home in Maidenhead, Great Britain. He 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."

## The Questions:

1. What was your personal reaction to the story of Nicholas Winton's project?
2. What in Nicholas Winton's life might have disposed him to take on this task of saving Jewish children from Czechoslovakia?
3. What personal risks do you think Nicholas Winton took?
4. Do you think he stood a chance to gain in any way from this project?
5. What was life like for Czech children in the 1930's?
6. What was the initial reaction of the Czechs to Hitler and the Nazi invasion of the Sudeten region?
7. What happened when Hitler demanded he keep the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia at the Munich Conference? How did other European countries react?
8. Nicholas Winton was very anxious to get the children out of Czechoslovakia as quickly as possible. What was the hurry?
9. When Nicholas Winton visited Prague in December 1938, what did he observe? What became his mission?
10. On March 15, 1939 Germany invaded Czechoslovakia. What challenge did Winton face at this time? What urgency did he feel?
11. What methods did he use to accomplish his goals?
12. How did the Committee deal with authorities in Prague?
13. What were the logistics of transporting the children to England?
14. What role did other nations play in the rescue effort?
15. What happened on September 1, 1939 and to the last scheduled transport and the 250 children ready to leave?
16. How were children that needed help located?
17. What were the hopes of Czech parents when they sent their children to England? What potential sacrifice were these parents making? What would these parents imagine would be their own future and that of their children as they put them on the train?
18. How did the children feel about leaving their families and being placed in foster homes?
19. What were their fears and hopes?
20. What memories do the children have of their train ride and what happened to them once they arrived in England?
21. How did children adjust to being raised in England?
22. What were some of the cultural differences they had to adapt to?
23. What was it like to be in Britain in wartime living with strangers?
24. What were the language issues?
25. How did foster families deal with the children's religious needs?
26. How did this experience affect the children's later lives?
27. Were the children more understanding and compassionate as adults than they might have been?
28. Did they seek to help others in the ways they were helped?
29. What occasions exist in the world today that call for brave leaders such as Nicholas Winton?
30. Could you be a "Winton," even on a small scale? How could this come about?

