

Escape From the Holocaust

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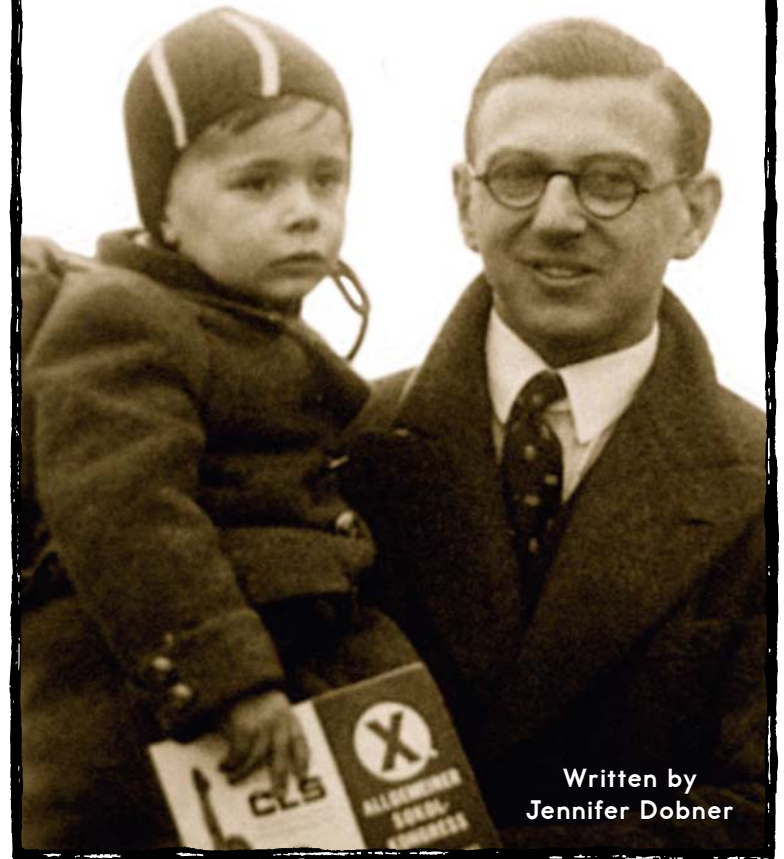


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Escape From the Holocaust: How Nicholas Winton Saved 669 Children



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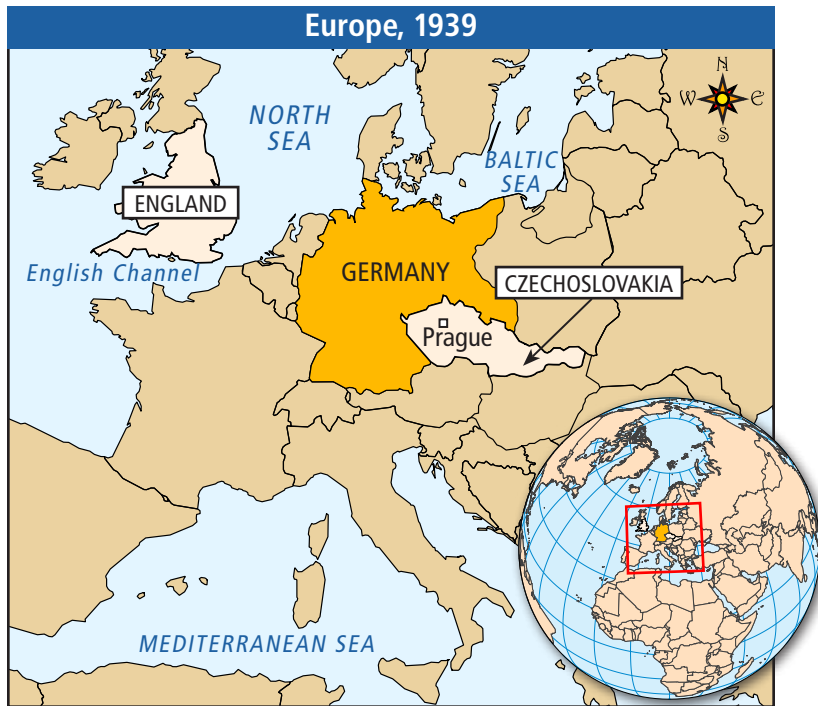


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German soldiers invade Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1939. The Czech people watch in silence.

A Girl Leaves Home

Vera Gissing remembers the day the German army invaded Czechoslovakia. It was March 15, 1939, and she was a young **Jewish** girl who awoke to the sounds of tanks and German soldiers marching through Prague’s streets. Soldiers even took over rooms in her family’s home and ordered the family to speak only German. When Gissing’s father refused, she watched a soldier spit in his face.

It was bad, and it was only the beginning.



The Eberstark girls, Elli (middle), Alice (top left) and Josi (top right), never saw their parents again after leaving on the train from Prague.

Gissing also remembers the day her parents sent her away in hopes of saving her life. It was shortly before her eleventh birthday. Along with dozens of other children, she was dressed in her best clothes, a numbered tag hanging around her neck. At Prague's main train station, the steam from the engines rose around the families. Parents hugged and kissed their children, whispering words of love and hope.

"I'll never forget the **anguished** expression on my parents' faces that morning," said Gissing in 2002, recalling that day sixty-three years earlier.



A German Jewish girl arrives in England in 1938.

Then the children boarded a train bound for England. As the train pulled away from the station, Gissing says she tried to keep her eyes focused on her parents' faces. She didn't know then that she would never see her parents again. She didn't know that hers—along with most of the other parents at the station—would soon be sent away to die.

She also knew nothing of the stranger from Great Britain who opened his heart to save her and then kept his actions secret for nearly fifty years.



The British Banker Comes to Prague

In 1938, Nicholas Winton was a twenty-nine-year-old banker working in London who had big plans for his Christmas holiday. He was going on a ski vacation in the Alps with his good friend Martin Blake.

The pair never made it to the Alps. Just before Winton was to leave England, Blake asked Winton to join him instead in Prague, the capital city of Czechoslovakia. Blake was in Prague working with organizations that were giving food and other forms of help to thousands of Jewish families. These Jews had fled their homes after Germany took over a part of northern Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland.

“I only went to Prague because we’d discussed a good deal, if not daily, what was happening in Europe,” Winton has said. “The last thing I thought was that I was going to work.”

Hitler and His Plans

The takeover of Sudetenland turned out to be part of a secret plan by Germany’s leader, Adolf Hitler. Once an army soldier, Hitler was angry that Germany had lost World War I in 1918. He blamed the failure in part on the Jews, whom he believed were an **inferior** race.

After the war, Hitler helped form the Nazi Party, a group that wanted to restore Germany’s power in the world. An emotional speaker who could excite a crowd, Hitler became a popular leader. In time, Hitler and the Nazis became so powerful that he was named Germany’s leader. He took control of the government and then started to build up the military. He also created a secret plan to take back the land Germany had been forced to give away after losing World War I.



Hitler shouts to a crowd in Austria in 1938.



German troops enter the Sudetenland. While some welcomed the Germans with a salute, others fled the area in fear.

In 1936, Hitler set his plan in action, taking back land that had been given to France. Two years later, Hitler took control of Austria, the country where he had been born. In both cases, leaders of other European countries objected, but no one moved to stop Hitler.

Next, Hitler wanted the Sudetenland, an area along the border of Germany and Czechoslovakia where many German-speaking people lived. To get it, Hitler met with the leaders of France, Great Britain, and Italy in 1938. All three countries were friends—or allies—of the Czechs and had promised to protect the country. They didn't like Hitler's actions, but they also feared another war, so they gave in to his demands.

Many distrusted Hitler and believed that he planned to take over even more of Europe. Jews were frightened because under Hitler, Germany had passed many laws against them. Jews could no longer work as lawyers, doctors, or journalists, for example. They could not use public hospitals or go to public schools after age fourteen. Other laws stopped Jews from marrying anyone who was not also a Jew.

The Story of the Stars

Many of the photos of Jews from World War II show men, women, and children wearing six-pointed stars on their clothing. Often made from two interlocking triangles, the six-pointed star is also known as the Star of David. It has been used as a symbol of Judaism for thousands of years.

During World War II, the Germans decided that all Jews should wear the stars so that they could be easily identified by non-Jews. The stars were meant as a badge of shame and something to encourage discrimination against Jewish people.

The rule applied to all Jews over the age of six who lived in any country controlled by Germany.





A wagon removes a Jewish family from Krakow, Poland. The family wears armbands identifying them as Jews.

Next, Hitler ordered the army to gather up Jews born in Poland or Russia and remove them from Germany. The Jews were forced out of their homes with only the belongings they could carry. They were loaded onto trucks or wagons, driven to the border, and left there. Soon after, the army arrested 30,000 German Jews and placed them in Nazi **concentration camps**. The camps were a kind of prison where enemies of Hitler were sent to live and work as punishment.

These events so frightened Jews across Europe that many decided to leave their homes to try to escape the danger.



A school in Czechoslovakia houses refugee families from the Sudetenland.

In Prague, Jewish **refugees** were living in camps set up in the city as short-term shelters. Winton went into the camps and saw that they were cold, dirty, and jammed with thousands of people. Some aid groups were trying to help Jews find new homes, but Winton noticed that the focus was on old or sick people. No one was doing anything for the Jewish children of Czechoslovakia, so Winton decided that he would try to save them.

“The situation was bad,” Winton said in a 2002 film about his life. “These refugees felt and we felt that the days were numbered before the Germans would arrive in [the rest of] Czechoslovakia. But how could they save themselves? What could they do? Where should they go? They were stuck.”

Winton's Appeal to the World

Winton's first step was to set himself up at a hotel on Prague's Wenceslas Square. Each day, he sat at a table in the dining room, meeting with the parents who wanted to get their children to safety.

Winton's plan was to find safe homes for the children with families outside of Czechoslovakia. A program in Germany and Austria called the "Kindertransport" was using trains to take thousands of Jewish children to safety. Winton thought if he could copy the program, he could save thousands of Czech children as well.

Word of the "Englishman of Wenceslas Square" spread quickly. Czech families came to the hotel by the hundreds seeking Winton's help. After hiring two helpers to work with the families, Winton returned to England. He needed to find places for the children to live and raise money for their travel.

In London, Winton began writing letters to the governments of countries around the world, asking them to take the children. Many countries refused; their laws would not let children come without their parents. In the end, only Sweden and Great Britain agreed to help.

Yet England had strict rules about bringing the children into the country. Besides finding a family to take each child, the British government said Winton must pay a fee. The money would pay the costs of bringing the children home when they could return to Czechoslovakia. At fifty pounds per child, such a fee back then was a small fortune.

To find families for the children, Winton placed ads in newspapers across Great Britain and talked with churches. He printed or sent pictures of the children all over the country. He hoped that once families saw the children's faces, they would want to help.

At the same time, Winton was working to get the German and British governments to let the children enter England. When the governments moved too slowly, sometimes Winton and a small team of helpers created fake permits.

"We just speeded the process up a little," Winton said.

Word Wise

The pound is Great Britain's form of money, or currency. Fifty pounds was considered "a small fortune" in 1939 because back then, fifty pounds was worth a lot. In 1939, what cost 50 pounds would have cost more than \$200 in the United States. In 2011, that translates to more than \$3,200.



Seven trainloads of children traveled from Prague to London in 1939. At the Hook of Holland, the children boarded a ferry to cross the English Channel. At Harwich, they boarded a second train for London.

Winton's Trains

Winton's hard work finally paid off on March 14, 1939. That's when the first fifteen children left Prague for Great Britain by airplane.

Over the next six months, seven trains full of children left Prague's Wilson Railway Station. The trains took the children to Holland and the coast, where they boarded a boat to cross the English Channel. They ended their journey in the arms of their new families at a London train station, where a smiling Winton looked on.



Winton in 1939 with one of the children he rescued from Czechoslovakia.

In all, 669 children were carried away to safety. Some carried **keepsakes** from home and letters of thanks from their parents to their new British families. Most of the children went to live with families. Many others went to live at a Czech boarding school in Wales.

Winton had plans for an eighth train. It was set to leave Prague on September 3, 1939, carrying 250 more children. But on that day, Hitler's army invaded Poland and closed all German-controlled borders. The train disappeared, and the children were never seen again.

What followed was a horrible military struggle that lasted nearly six years. It drew in nations from around the world and became known as World War II.



A barbed-wire fence separates male and female prisoners at a German concentration camp. A guard keeps watch at right.

As part of his war effort, Hitler decided in 1941 that all Jews must be killed. Millions were forced into concentration camps to work until they grew so weak that they died. Once the Nazis decided that people died too slowly in the camps, they began killing them instead.

Hitler's attempt to destroy all Jews is known as the **Holocaust**. Some Jews also call it "Shoah," a **Hebrew** word that means a "whirlwind of destruction." In all, six million Jews were murdered in the camps, including more than a million children. Millions of non-Jews were also murdered there. The Holocaust is one of the most **atrocious** crimes in all of human history.

A Secret Discovered

The war brought a sudden end to Winton's rescue mission, so he looked for other ways to help. First he worked for the Red Cross relief organization, and later he joined the Royal Air Force and became a pilot.

After the war, Winton went back to banking, got married, and had a family. He never spoke of the children he had worked so hard to save. Then in 1988, his wife, Grete, discovered her husband's secret by accident. She found a dusty leather briefcase in the attic one day and opened it to find a worn old scrapbook filled with pictures of the children. Beside each photo was the child's name, information about the child's family in Czechoslovakia, and the address of the British family who had taken in the child. The scrapbook also contained letters and other papers describing the work Winton had done.

Grete got her husband to tell his story, and soon a newspaper ran a story about Winton. That same year, a British television show called *That's Life* did a program about him. As a surprise, more than two dozen of the children whom Winton had rescued were in the audience to thank him.

Vera Gissing was at that emotional reunion. An author, she has since written a biography of Winton and a book about her own experience as a child who lived through the war.

“He rescued the greater part of the Jewish children of my **generation** in Czechoslovakia,” Gissing has said. “Very few of us met our parents again: They **perished** in concentration camps. Had we not been **spirited** away, we would have been murdered alongside them.”

As many as 5,000 people are now descendants of the 669 children who rode Winton’s trains to safety in 1939. Although those children are now old, many still call themselves “Winton’s Children.”



Some of Winton’s Children pose beside the statue of him at Prague’s main train station, 2009. Two of the Eberstark girls (see p. 5), Alice in green and Josi in white, are present.

A Modern-Day Knight

In 2002, Nicholas Winton got down on his knees to receive one of his country’s highest honors: knighthood.

Once an honor and title reserved for soldiers, in modern times knighthood recognizes achievements of many kinds, including those by artists, athletes, politicians, humanitarians, inventors, scientists, and others.

The knighting ceremony is performed by the monarch or another member of Great Britain’s Royal Family. During the ceremony, recipients kneel before the monarch and are tapped on each shoulder with a sword. Recipients are also given a medal and a title. If they are citizens of Great Britain, men are given the title of *sir* and women the title of *dame*.

Winton’s work has earned him many honors from the governments of both Great Britain and The Czech Republic. In 2002, he was made a knight by Queen Elizabeth II of England, an award given to people for acts of bravery, service, or success.





Winton stands beside the train that repeated the last leg of the historic Prague-to-London trip.

In 2009, to mark the seventieth anniversary of Winton's last train, a trip repeated the journey that Winton's Children made between Prague and London. The train followed the same path; on board were many of those Winton had saved.

Winton greeted the group himself at London's Liverpool Street station with open arms. The trip came a few months after Winton celebrated his 100th birthday.

In Her Own Words

From childhood, Vera Gissing considered Winton her savior—she just didn't know who he was. Yet for many years, Winton felt he hadn't done anything that special or important. Not until Winton met Gissing and some of the others he'd saved did he begin to grasp all that he had made possible.

In 2002, Gissing co-authored *Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation*. In it, she writes:

"If, as war clouds were gathering, my parents had lacked the courage and strength to send us, their only children, to unknown people in a foreign country, if British families had not been found to take us in, all the hopes, efforts and willingness to help would have been fruitless—had it not been for Nicholas Winton. It is thanks to him that I am now sitting in my garden watching my grandchildren playing, listening to their laughter and to my daughter's voice calling us in for tea. Such an everyday family scene, yet one that I can never take for granted."



Gissing shows Winton a copy of *The Lottery of Life*, which she translated from Czech to English. The book is about his rescue mission.



Winton laughs with the grandson of a girl he saved 70 years earlier.

In His Own Words

Since his secret was revealed, Winton has spoken often about his decision to save the Czech children. He claims that he did nothing special or heroic. He says that's why he never talked about it.

"I just saw what was going on and did what I could to help," he has said.

To thank Winton for his actions, some of the people he saved gave him a ring. It's inscribed with a line from a book of Jewish laws known as the Talmud. It reads: "Save one life, save the world."

Glossary

- anguished** (*adj.*) filled with grief or pain (p. 5)
- atrocious** (*adj.*) extremely bad, evil, or cruel (p. 17)
- concentration camps** (*n.*) camps where people are held against their will, usually in harsh conditions, because they are members of an ethnic, minority, or political group (p. 11)
- generation** (*n.*) all the people or other animals who are born and live at about the same time (p. 19)
- Hebrew** (*adj.*) of or relating to the ancestors of modern Jews who lived in the area around Jerusalem (p. 17)
- Holocaust** (*n.*) the systematic killing of people, especially Jews, by the Nazis during World War II (p. 17)
- inferior** (*adj.*) lower in quality or rank (p. 8)
- Jewish** (*adj.*) of or relating to the race, culture, or religion of Jews (p. 4)
- keepsakes** (*n.*) things given or kept to remember an event, person, or place (p. 16)
- perished** (*v.*) died, especially in a sudden, violent, or unexpected way (p. 19)
- refugees** (*n.*) people who flee war, famine, persecution, or natural disaster, often with no definite place to go (p. 12)
- spirited** (*v.*) smuggled or carried off secretly (p. 19)