

Nicholas Winton: Fighter for Good over Evil

At a moment when American presidential politics is saturated with disingenuous rhetoric and vacuous platitudes it is not only a relief but a real pleasure and indeed an inspiring honor to read the story told by his daughter in her book *If it's Not Impossible* of Sir Nicolas Winton, a wonderful and righteous human being, who died on July 1, 2015 at the age of 106.

Winton was a remarkable figure whose story of individual heroism was not known publicly for 50 years after it took place. Winton was a modest man, never boasting of his accomplishment. It was not until 1988 that his wife discovered, in the attic of their house, the scrapbook, full of names, lists, photographs, and letters, relating to his activities in 1939. His heroism was then revealed to the world.

Winton was born in London in 1909 of German immigrants from Bavaria who converted religion from Judaism to Christianity, and changed the family name from Wertheim. Though he had been baptized, Winton, a political leftist, regarded himself as an agnostic, neither Jewish nor Christian, as well as an Englishman.

He was a young 29 year-old stockbroker with banking experience when he decided in December 1938 not to go on a scheduled skiing trip in Switzerland but to visit a friend named Martin Blake in Prague who was helping refugees fleeing from the Nazis. The visit changed his life as he began aware of the influx of Czech Sudeten refugees into central Czechoslovakia as a result of the Nazi advances.

Winton immediately began thinking of rescuing as many of the

endangered children in Prague who were threatened by Nazi Germany. He could not accept the position of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, expressed on September 27, 1938, that the Nazi threat to Central Europe was merely "a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing." That position became absurd even to Chamberlain when German troops marched into the whole of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939.

Winton was a political leftist, active for a time in British Labour Party circles. He was friendly with the Welsh fiery, charismatic Aneurin Bevan, who later founded the National Health Service, and with whom he shared the understanding of the danger of Hitler and the Nazis.

Already, organizations, Jewish and Christian, had begun the refugee children's movement, attempting to rescue refugees from Germany and Austria. About 10,000 children were rescued in what became known as the *Kindertransport* project. Winton without any organizational help and with little support devoted his efforts to save the Czech children.

Britain in November 1938, soon after *Kristallnacht*, had passed a law allowing the entry of refugee children under the age of 17, provided they had a place to stay and had deposited £50 as a bond that would pay for their return home. Winton was therefore able to bring children to Britain. He wrote to various political leaders and groups in the United States, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Governor of New York to get the U.S. to accept refugee children but had no success because none were willing to help. If U.S. had agreed to take the children, Winton could have saved at least 2,000 more children.

Winton, aware of the Nazi threat, acted in strong and self-confident fashion. He collected a list of children of refugee families in Prague. He wrote newspaper appeals, forged some British Home Office permits for entry, sought out foster

parents for the children, bribed Czech officials, and solved all problems he faced. Above all, he persuaded the Home Office to agree to evacuations of Czech children by trains from Prague to London.

A plane load of 20 children from Prague to England had been organized by the Barbican Mission that was interesting in converting Jewish children to Christianity, and left in January 1939. Winton did not care for this religious objective, but organized and masterminded the series of trains that took the children to safety in England. The first train left Prague on March 14, 1939, a day before the Nazi invasion. In eight trainloads he rescued 669 children: 561 were Jewish, 52 Unitarian, 34 Catholic, and 22 others. Among the children was one who is the film director Karel Reisz and another, the British Labour Member of Parliament, Alf Dubs. The Nazis murdered almost all the parents of the children.

It was unfortunate and a bitter disappointment for Winton that the ninth trainload, that would have carried 250 children, the largest number of any load, was unable to depart on the due day of September 1, 1939. Germany invaded Poland on that day and all trains were cancelled and the borders were closed. Nearly all of those children were murdered in Nazi camps.

After the story of his exploits was revealed, Winton was given a number of honors, but he refused to be labeled the British "Oskar Schindler" who saved 1,200 Jews working in his munitions factory. He explained that unlike Schindler his own life had never been in danger. Nevertheless, he is considered a hero in the Czech Republic where his heroism and ethical behavior were long recognized. Among the awards and honors in that country two are particularly interesting: a statue of him with two children at the Prague railroad station; and a minor planet, an asteroid discovered by research in a Czech Observatory was named Winton.

During World War II, Winton became a volunteer for the local

ambulance service, then an ambulance driver with the Royal Air Force, and, since he had learned to fly, then a flight trainer for the RAF. After the war, he worked for the UN International Committee for Refugees and the International Bank in Paris.

Winton can be eulogized for his heroic deeds but even more he can be taken as a model of living and acting ethically in the world. He can be admired for making a difference by his selfless action and by helping those in distress. He did not rely on governmental agencies to achieve remarkable success.

On July 3, 2006 President George W. Bush, as a result of intervention by the Czech Representative in Philadelphia wrote a gracious letter to Winton. He thanked Winton for his work on the *Kindertransport*, for his heroism, courage, and compassion in the face of such cruelty and injustice. Bush was right. Winton's story of bravery and sacrifice remains an inspiration at this time of Islamist terrorism and reminds us of the power of good to overcome evil. The powers in Washington, D.C. should take note.

The period of Winton's heroism lasted only a short time. Winton acted because he understood a war with Nazis was imminent while Neville Chamberlain was blind and was passive in his policy of appeasement of Hitler and mistakenly spoke of "peace in our time." The crucial question is whether the Obama administration really recognizes a similar danger today from Islamist terrorism.