

Upstanders: Sir Nicholas Winton



In December 1938, at the age of 29, Winton cancelled a planned skiing holiday after being urged by a friend, Martin Blake, to go to Prague, in Czechoslovakia, where thousands of Jewish refugees were living in appalling conditions in camps. Winton travelled to Czechoslovakia and quickly realised that something had to be done to rescue the children who were caught up in the situation. Winton created an office in his hotel room in Wenceslas Square and asked the British government to allow Czech children to come to Britain alongside the German and Austrian children the government were allowing to the UK in a programme called the *Kindertransport*. The government agreed to Winton's request for Czech children but on the condition that each child was matched to a host family who would care for the children until they were 18, and each child had to have a guarantee of £50 paid by their family.

Winton, alongside a few volunteers – including his mother – worked very hard to arrange everything the children needed, including finding host families and raising funds to cover the travel expenses of the children. He was able to arrange for 669 children to come to the UK over the next few months, the majority of whom were Jewish. The last train of children was scheduled to leave on 1 September 1939. It was cancelled because war broke out; Winton believed that 'none of the 250 children on board was heard of again', which was an awful feeling for him. Although many of the children hoped to be reunited with their parents and families after the war, the majority of them discovered that their parents had been murdered in the Holocaust. It was Winton's actions, and those of his colleagues, who compiled lists of the children and travelled with them on the trains, that saved their lives.

Winton did not hide what he had done, but it was not well-known publicly because Winton did not think he had done anything extraordinary. Years later, Winton was trying to donate his papers, identifying the children, and matching them up to families, to an archive or museum. Shortly afterwards, he was invited to appear on *That's Life!* a television show where, to his surprise, he was reunited with some of the children he had helped. For most of the children, it was the first time they found out who had rescued them, and felt it was a real honour and privilege to come face to face with their rescuer.