

The Real St. Nick Saved 669 Children From Hitler

With the Christmas season ahead, plastic statues of the man they call Santa Claus will adorn front lawns all over the world. Grown men will dress up like him, and children will sit on his lap, sharing their Christmas wishes.

That Saint Nick is a fairy tale. He doesn't come down chimneys, and word has it he's probably diabetic and lactose-intolerant—so don't leave him milk and cookies.

However, there is genuine, living Saint Nick who is a hero among men. He is a 104-year-old Englishman, where he is known as the British Schindler. Born Jewish and later converting to Christianity along with his family (today we would call them Messianic Jews, not converts), Sir Nicholas Winton lived all over Europe working in the banking industry.

To Serve or to Ski?

In 1938, at the invitation of a friend from the British Embassy in Prague, he passed up a skiing trip to Switzerland to work in a refugee camp in Czechoslovakia for Jews who had fled Nazi Germany. This was just before Christmas, only a few weeks after the infamous *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass—state-sponsored terrorism against the Jews of Germany), a night many consider the beginning of the Holocaust.

He knew it was only a matter of time before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, and he was deeply concerned for the welfare of these Jewish children. He started an organization whose goal was to get the children to Great Britain before Hitler invaded—and not just the German refugees, but Jewish Czech children as well. Great Britain had just passed a law that would allow Jewish minors entrance, provided they had a family to live with and 50 pounds as a deposit for their eventual

return to Europe.

Would You Take in a Jewish Refugee?

Winton found families for 669 children and oversaw a massive exodus from Czechoslovakia through Holland to Great Britain. Holland had just closed its borders to Jewish refugees, fearing a massive influx now that Hitler was clearly targeting them in Germany. Despite the coming humanitarian disaster, the Netherlands closed its doors to its doomed Jewish German neighbors. This presented a problem for St. Nick, but with the guarantees from Britain, the Dutch government conceded and allowed him to take the kids to the ferry at the Hook of Holland, where they sailed for England.

Winton continued, with the help of his mother, to look for homes for the other Jewish children. Sadly, the last group scheduled to be evacuated, 250 Jewish children, were not so fortunate as the earlier arrivals. Hitler invaded Poland on the very day they were scheduled to leave, starting World War II. The children never made it out, and most perished in the Holocaust. In addition, a good many of the parents of the rescued children died in Auschwitz. One survivor said the children became each other's family, as none of them ever saw their parents again.

Honored After 50 Years

Winton never made his heroics public and was never formally recognized for his actions until he was nearly 80. For nearly 50 years, no one remembered this champion until his wife, in 1988, found a scrapbook listing the names of all the children he saved. Not even the children he rescued knew it was Nicholas Winton who arranged their salvation.

Later in 1988, Winton appeared on the BBC's *That's Life*, having no idea what was about to happen. The host surprised Winton when she spoke of a woman he saved, Vera Gessing—who was sitting next to him. He was moved to tears. Later, the

host asked, "Is there anyone in our audience tonight who owes their life to Nicholas Winton? If so, would you stand up please?" About 20 people stood, all of whom had been sitting close to him the entire show. This was the first time that he came in contact with any of his "children."

"If it hadn't been for Nicholas Winton, I would have perished with [my parents]," said Joe Schlesinger, a veteran reporter for the Canadian Broadcasting Company and one of "Nicky's Children," as they call themselves. Schlesinger went on to tell how Winton compiled lists of children, raised funds and battled bureaucracies to save the youngsters—all by himself. But the most difficult part was finding willing British families to take the refugee children in.

Much like World Vision or Compassion International, Winton understood that a picture is worth a thousand words. He made fliers, attached pictures of the precious children and distributed them in England.

"The number of children I could help depended entirely on the number of guarantors [families] I could get," Winton said during a CNN interview on his 104th birthday.

Reminiscent of Oscar Schindler's words at the end of *Schindler's List*, when he breaks down weeping because there were more he could have saved, Nicholas Winton shared, "It is very gratifying to know that what I did was successful, but if other countries had participated, we could have saved many more."

So this Christmas, instead of telling your children about a fictitious man who makes lists of who's naughty or nice, tell them the true story about a selfless man whose wife found a list of 669 children's names 49 years after he saved them.

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