Escape From the Holocaust

A Reading A–Z Level Z2 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,290

Connections

Writing

Imagine being one of the children saved by Nicholas Winton. Write a journal entry about your experience of leaving home and starting a new life in England. Include information from the book.

Social Studies

Research another hero of World War II. In an essay, describe what this person accomplished and compare those efforts to the efforts of Nicholas Winton.

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Escape From the Holocaust:

How Nicholas Winton Saved 669 Children

Written by
Jennifer Dobner

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Escape From the Holocaust

Written by Jennifer Dobner

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Focus Question

Who is Nicholas Winton, and why is he considered a hero?

Words to Know

anguished	Jewish
atrocious	keepsakes
concentration camps	prohibited
Hebrew	refugees
Holocaust	regime
humanitarian	spirited

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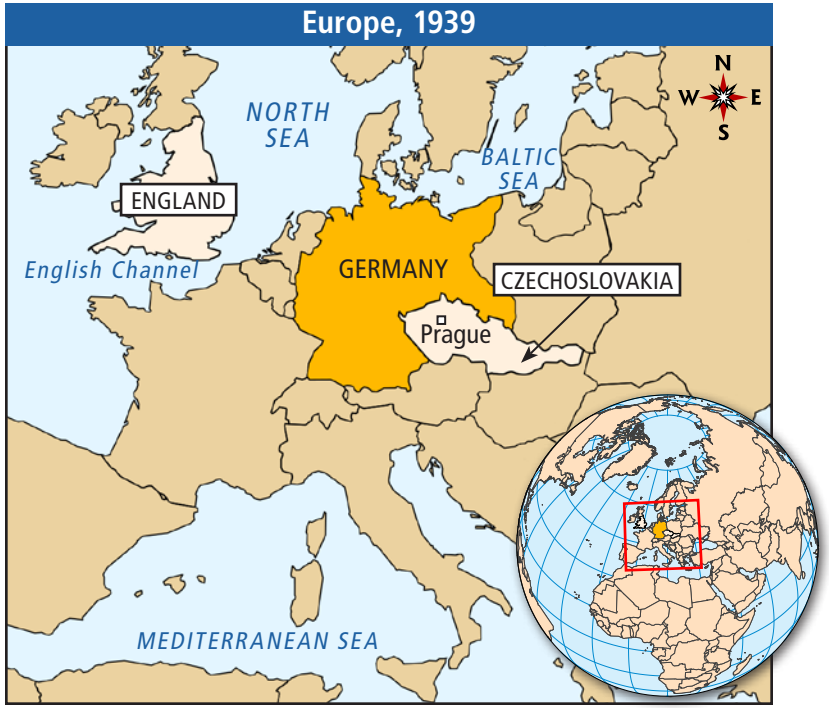
Correlation

LEVEL Z2	
Fountas & Pinnell	Y–Z
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+



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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 commandeered 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.

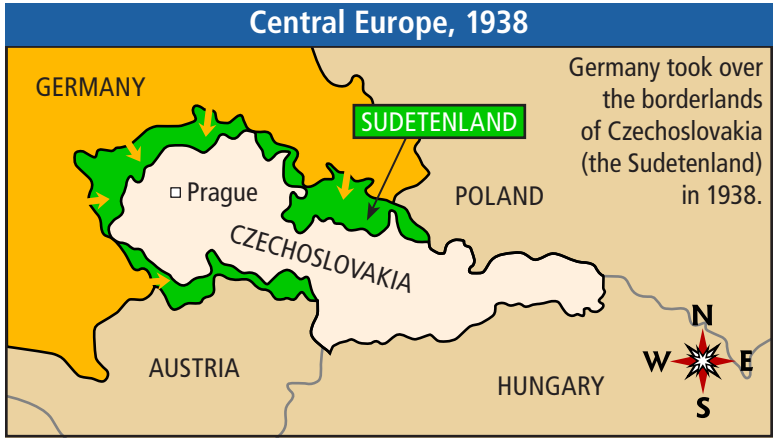
Gissing also remembers the day her parents sent her away on a train with dozens of other Prague children. It was shortly before her eleventh birthday, and she was dressed in her best clothes, a numbered tag hanging around her neck. At Prague's main railroad station, the steam from the engines rose and encircled the families gathered on the platform. Parents embraced 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.

One by one, the children boarded a train bound for England. As the train departed, Gissing says she tried to keep her eyes focused on her parents' faces, not knowing then that she would never see them again. She could not have anticipated that they—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 from everyone 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: a ski vacation in the Alps with his good friend Martin Blake.

However, the friends never made it to the Alps. Just prior to Winton's departure, Blake invited Winton to join him instead in Prague, the capital city of Czechoslovakia. There, Blake was involved in **humanitarian** efforts to provide food and other forms of help to thousands of displaced Jewish families from 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 once said. "The last thing I thought was that I was going to work."

Hitler and His Plans

The takeover of the Sudetenland turned out to be part of a sinister plot by Germany's leader, Adolf Hitler. Once an army soldier, Hitler was bitterly angry that Germany had lost World War I in 1918, and he blamed that loss and subsequent economic depression in part on the Jews, whom he believed were an inferior race.

After the war, Hitler helped form the German Worker's Party, which eventually became the Nazi Party, a group that sought to restore Germany's power in the world. A passionate speaker who could excite and incite a crowd, Hitler soon became a popular leader. In time, Hitler and the Nazis became so powerful that he was named Germany's chancellor. He seized control of the government, banned all other political parties, and started to expand the military. He also created a secret plan to reclaim territory Germany had been forced to surrender as part of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of 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 motion and by 1940 had reclaimed land that had been given to France. Two years earlier, Hitler had taken control of Austria, the country where he had been born. In both cases, leaders of other European countries objected, but no one intervened to thwart Hitler's plans.

Next, Hitler set his sights on acquiring the Sudetenland, an area along the border of Germany and Czechoslovakia where many German-speaking people lived. In 1938, Hitler met with the leaders of France, Great Britain, and Italy—three countries that were allies of the Czechs—to discuss his plan. Rather than get involved in another war, those leaders agreed to Hitler's demands and signed the Munich Agreement, ceding the Sudetenland to German rule.

Many European citizens distrusted Hitler and believed that he intended to take over even more of Europe. Jews were particularly frightened because under Hitler, Germany had passed many laws against them: Jews could no longer work as lawyers, doctors, or journalists, for example, or use public hospitals or attend public schools after age 14.

Other laws **prohibited** Jews from marrying anyone who was not also a Jew. All these regulations stemmed from Hitler's belief that Germany could only become a great nation again if it were "cleansed" of what he considered inferior races.

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 Nazis 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.

Hitler began to take more aggressive steps to achieve his goal. He 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, loaded onto trucks or wagons, driven to the border, and left there. Being forcibly deported, however, was not the worst that could happen. 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 terrified Jews across Europe that many decided to leave their homes to escape Nazi persecution. In Prague, Jewish **refugees** were living in squalid camps set up in the city as short-term shelters.

Winton visited 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. It didn't seem as though anything was being done 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 establish headquarters 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 place their children out of Hitler's reach.

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 transport thousands of Jewish children to safety in Great Britain. Winton thought a similar program could help save thousands of Czech children.

Word of the "Englishman of Wenceslas Square" spread quickly. Desperate Czech families flocked to the hotel by the hundreds seeking Winton's assistance. Winton hired two assistants to work with the families and returned to England to find places for the children to live and raise money for the rescue effort.

A school in Czechoslovakia houses refugee families from the Sudetenland.

In London, Winton began a letter-writing campaign to the governments of countries around the world, requesting that they take the children. Many countries refused; their laws would not permit children to come without parents. Only Sweden and Great Britain agreed to help.

Yet England had its own 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 to cover later costs of returning children home to Czechoslovakia when it was safe. At fifty pounds per child, such a fee represented a small fortune. Winton collected what he could from donors and made up the rest himself.

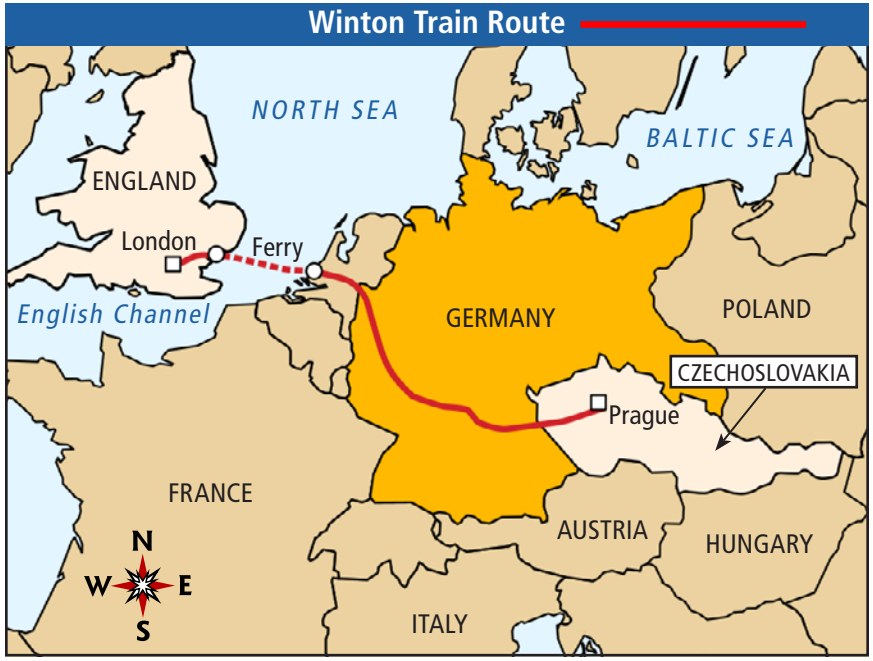
To find families for the children, Winton placed ads in newspapers across Great Britain and talked with religious organizations. He posted or sent pictures of the children all over the country, hoping that once families saw the human side of this terrible situation, they would be moved to help.

At the same time, Winton tried to work with contacts within the German and British governments to obtain the necessary paperwork that would allow children to travel through Europe and enter England. When things 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 U.S. dollars. In 2014, that translates to more than $3,400 U.S. dollars.



Seven trainloads of children traveled from Prague to London in 1939. On the coast of Holland, the children boarded a ferry to cross the English Channel. After crossing the channel, they boarded a second train for London.

Winton's Trains

Winton's hard work finally paid off on March 14, 1939, 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 shuttled 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 in homes with families, while others went to live at a Czech boarding school in Wales.

Winton had plans for an eighth train to leave Prague on September 3, 1939, carrying 250 more children. On that day, however, 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 and cost millions of lives. 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 eliminated. Millions of people were forced into concentration camps to work until they grew so weak that they died. But even that wasn't enough for this brutal **regime**. When the Nazis decided that people died too slowly in the camps, they began killing them instead.

Hitler's attempt to destroy the Jewish population 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 during the war, including more than a million children. Millions of non-Jews were also murdered. The Holocaust is considered 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 sought other ways to help. He worked for the Red Cross relief organization and later joined the Royal Air Force and became a pilot.

After the war, Winton resumed his old life—he went back to banking, then got married and had a family. He never spoke of the children he had worked so hard to save until 1988, when his wife, Grete, accidentally discovered her husband's secret—a dusty leather briefcase hidden in the attic containing 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 volunteered to be wartime guardians. The scrapbook also contained letters and other papers describing in great detail the work Winton had done.

Grete urged her husband to tell his story, and soon a newspaper published an article 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.

A noted author, Vera Gissing, was at that emotional reunion. 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."

The impact of Winton's war efforts extend well beyond that generation of war children. As many as 5,000 people are now descendants of the 669 children who rode Winton's trains to safety in 1939.

Some of Winton's children arrive in London to meet their rescuer on the 70th anniversary of their evacuation.

Although those young Czech refugees are now old, many still call themselves "Winton's Children." Some made their own remarkable contributions to the world as research scientists, religious leaders, and filmmakers.

Winton's work has earned him much recognition and many honors from the governments of both Great Britain and the Czech Republic. In 2002, he was made a knight by Queen Elizabeth II, an award reserved for people who have demonstrated acts of bravery, service, or success. In 2014, he received the Czech Republic's highest honor, the Order of the White Lion. Winton even had a distant planet named for him by two Czech astronomers.

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 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 railroad trip repeated the journey that Winton's Children made between Prague and London. The train followed the same route; 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 he 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

After his secret was revealed, Winton spoke often about his decision to save the Czech children. He claimed that he did nothing special or heroic, which is why he never talked about it.

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

Sir Nicholas Winton died on July 1, 2015, on the 76th anniversary of a train journey that carried the largest number of children from Prague—241. He was 106 years old.

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)

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)

humanitarian *(adj.)* of or related to a person or group that helps people, especially by eliminating pain and suffering (p. 7)

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)

prohibited *(v.)* forbade something by law or rule (p. 10)

refugees *(n.)* people who flee war, famine, persecution, or natural disaster, often with no definite place to go (p. 11)

regime *(n.)* a rigid and controlling form of government (p. 17)

spirited *(v.)* smuggled or carried off secretly (p. 19)