Escape From the Holocaust

A Reading A–Z Level Y Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,594

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
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Glossary

anguished *(adj.)* filled with grief or pain (p. 4)

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. 8)

descendants *(n.)* the offspring of a particular person or group that lived in the past (p. 17)

generation *(n.)* all the people or other animals who are born and live at about the same time (p. 17)

Holocaust *(n.)* the systematic killing of people, especially Jews, by the Nazis during World War II (p. 15)

inferior *(adj.)* lower in quality or rank (p. 7)

Jewish *(adj.)* of or relating to the race, culture, or religion of Jews (p. 4)

perished *(v.)* died, especially in a sudden, violent, or unexpected way (p. 17)

permits *(n.)* documents that give people official permission to do something (p. 12)

refugees *(n.)* people who flee war, famine, persecution, or natural disaster, often with no definite place to go (p. 9)

reunion *(n.)* a gathering of people brought together again after a period of separation (p. 16)

spirited *(v.)* smuggled or carried off secretly (p. 17)

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Focus Question

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

Words to Know

anguished	Jewish
concentration camps	perished
descendants	permits
generation	refugees
Holocaust	reunion
inferior	spirited

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Correlation

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Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40

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

In His Own Words

After his secret came out, Winton spoke often about why he worked to save the Czech children. He claimed that he did nothing special or heroic.

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

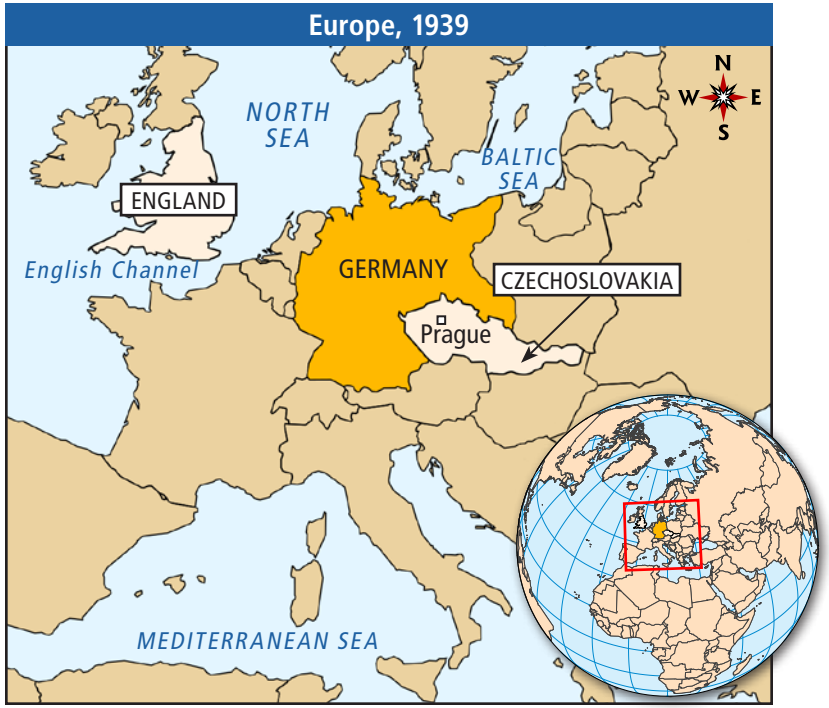
To thank Winton for his actions, some of the people he saved gave him a ring. It includes a line from a book of Jewish laws. It reads: "Save one life, save the world."

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

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

Winton greeted the group himself in London with open arms. The trip came a few months after he celebrated his 100th birthday.

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



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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 her parents sent her away from Czechoslovakia in hopes of saving her life. It was July 1939, just before her eleventh birthday. Along with dozens of other **Jewish** 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.

"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."

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

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

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. 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. One day she found a dusty leather briefcase in the attic. She opened it to find a worn old scrapbook filled with pictures of the children. 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 present to thank him.

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.

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

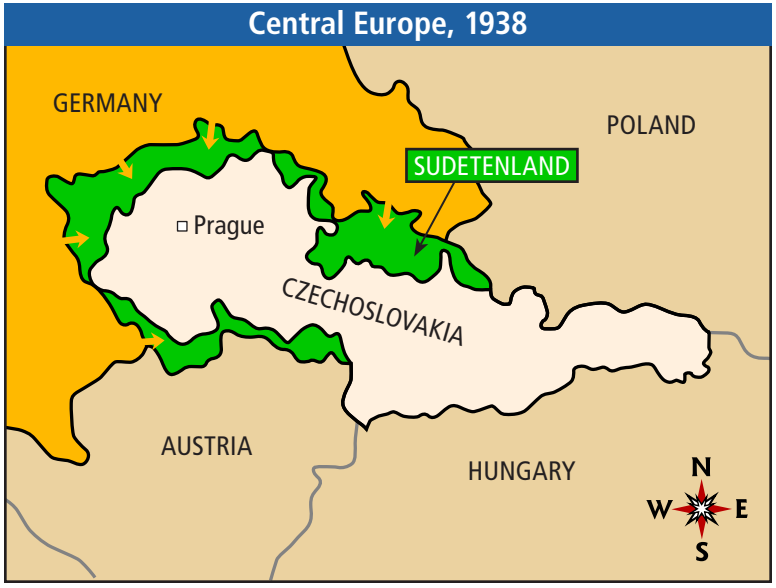
Then the children boarded a train bound for England. As the train pulled away from the station, Gissing says she tried to keep her eyes focused on her parents' faces. She didn't know then that she would never see her parents again. She didn't know that her parents—along with most of the other parents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

The British Banker Comes to Prague

In 1938, Nicholas Winton was a twenty-nine-year-old banker working in London. Just before Winton was to leave England for a ski holiday in the Alps, his friend asked Winton to join him instead in Prague, the capital city of Czechoslovakia. His friend was working there with groups that were helping thousands of Jewish families. These Jews had fled their homes after Germany took over a part of northern Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland.

"The last thing I thought was that I was going to work," Winton once said.



Germany took over the borderlands of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland) in 1938.

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**. 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 horrible crimes in all of human history.

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.

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

Hitler and His Plans

The takeover of the 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.

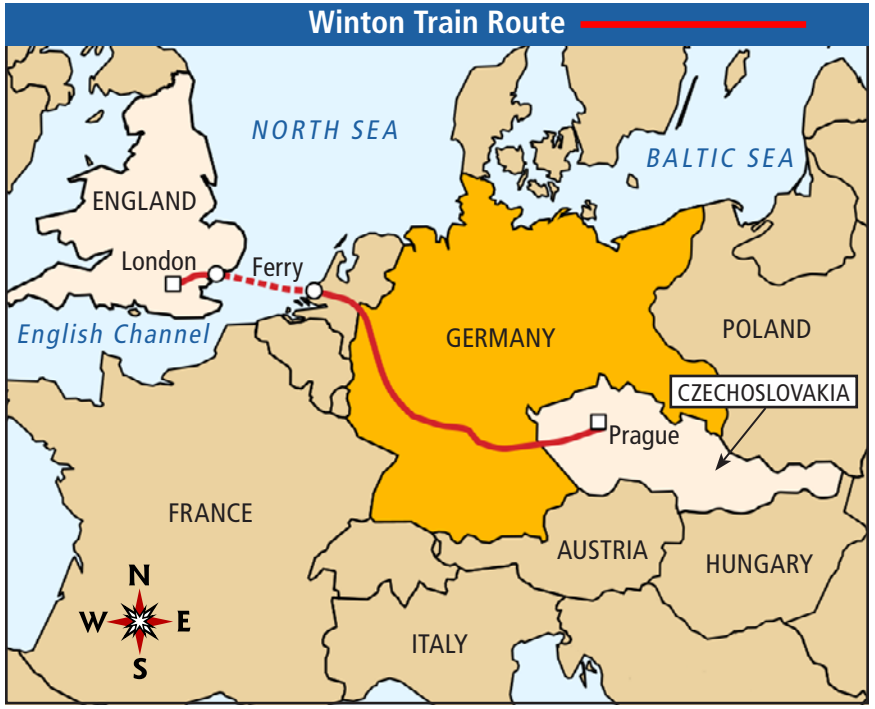
After the war, Hitler helped form the Nazi Party, a group that wanted to restore Germany's power in the world. In time, Hitler and the Nazis became so powerful that he was named Germany's leader. He took control of the government and then started to build up the military. He also planned to take back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

Hitler shouts to a crowd in Austria in 1938.

In 1936, Hitler began by taking back land that had been given to France. Two years later, Hitler took control of Austria, then the Sudetenland. Next, Hitler ordered the army to gather up Jews born in Poland or Russia and remove them from Germany.

The Jews 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.

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



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. 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. The children ended their journey in the arms of their new families at a London train station. There, a smiling Winton looked on.

In all, 669 children were carried away to safety. Most went to live with families. Many others went to live at a Czech boarding school in Wales.

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 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 U.S. dollars. In 2014, that translates to more than $3,400 U.S. dollars.

These events so frightened Jews across Europe that many decided to leave their homes to try to escape the danger. In Prague, Jewish **refugees** were living in camps set up in the city.

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. Yet Winton noticed that the focus was on old or sick people. No one was doing much to help the Jewish children of Czechoslovakia, so Winton decided that he would.

A school in Czechoslovakia houses refugee families from the Sudetenland.

"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."

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.

Winton's Appeal to the World

Winton's plan was to find safe homes for the children with families outside of Czechoslovakia. Czech families came to him by the hundreds seeking 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 said no; their laws would not let children come without their parents. In the end, only Sweden and Great Britain agreed to help.

A German Jewish girl arrives in England in 1938.