

Children's saviour receives a knighthood

Nicholas Winton, 93, has been awarded a knighthood it was announced in the Queen's New Year Honours List, writes Angela Spindler-Brown.

Sir Nicholas saved the lives of many Jewish children from Nazi-ruled Germany and occupied Czechoslovakia before the beginning of World War Two. From Prague he smuggled nearly 700 children and found for them foster families in the UK.

Getting children from Prague was only half the battle. In London he had to persuade the Home Office to issue visas and fund foster families and a £50 guarantee (more than £1,000 in today's money) for each child, plus payment for transport.

His heroic work earned him the nickname 'Britain's Schindler,' a reference to the German, Oskar Schindler, who saved more than 1,000 Jews.

It was Winton's wife Greta, who died three years ago, who discovered his involvement in the secret operation. She found an old leather briefcase in the attic containing lists of children and letters from their parents.

There are now more than 5,000 'Winton children' descended from the 669 youngsters he helped to escape Prague for Britain in 1939.

Sir Nicholas said when his knighthood was announced: "I am surprised to have been recognised for something I did 65 years ago. To be honest, I am finding it all a little difficult and am somewhat embarrassed by all the fuss.

"The chief people who will be delighted by this are the 'children' – mostly grandparents themselves now. I have had calls today from many of them in this country and one in Prague."

At the outbreak of the war, as a 30-year-old clerk at the London Stock Exchange, he visited Prague and helped in the refugee camps, having already assisted children of German Jews and left-wing politicians to leave for Britain.

Concerned at the plight of the children, he set up an office in the hotel U Sroubku (Evropa today) and parents went to him to register their children. In nine months, 669 children escaped on eight trains from Prague to London.



Sir Nicholas Winton with two of his grandchildren. He has been hailed as a British Schindler but modestly disclaims his heroic efforts in saving the lives of nearly 700 children. He insists there was no risk to himself although in one account he admits he was followed by the Gestapo. Because he could speak German he told them to "b..... off"

A ninth train holding 250 children was to leave on September 3, 1939, the day Britain declared war on Germany. But it never left the station and the children were never seen again.

Sir Nicholas recently said: "We had 250 families waiting at Liverpool Street that day in vain. If the train had been a day earlier, it would have come through. Not a single one of those children was heard of again, which is an awful feeling."

Almost none of the parents of the rescued children survived the Nazi onslaught, which killed more than 15,000 Czech children.

Vera Gissing, one of the children saved by Sir Nicholas, and who wrote an autobiography called *Pearls of Childhood*, said recently: "I owe him my life and those of my children and grandchildren."

Sir Nicholas went to Prague to the premier of a documentary film about his life and work called *Power of Good*, directed by Matej Minac. An American documentary about his work in saving German children from Hitler, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, was awarded an Oscar in 2001.

Esther Rantzen who first interviewed Sir Nicholas on British television in the early 1990s, has made an hour-long documentary about the kindertransports he organised and other charitable work, which was shown on ITV on Holocaust Memorial Day, January 24.