Nicholas Winton, Man and Myth: A Czech Perspective

Jana Burešová

Nicholas Winton, whose Kindertransports from Czechoslovakia to Britain in 1939 saved 669 predominantly Jewish children at risk, has become a myth in his own time. To his ‘children’, however, who had longed to know his identity, Winton the man has become a respected paternal figure, for whom no honour would be sufficient. Diverse celebrations and projects commemorating the Kindertransports bear witness to their enduring esteem, and that of others around the world, but it is the Czech perspective that is central to this paper, linking past and present.

Whilst acknowledging that Nicholas Winton did not work in isolation, from a contemporary Czech perspective it was the young British bachelor stockbroker who became the key rescuer of 669 predominantly Jewish children at risk in rump Czechoslovakia in 1939, following the ceding of the Sudetenland to Germany under the Munich Agreement of 29 September 1938. A few children were sent to London by aeroplane when Trevor Chadwick and Doreen Warriner worked in Prague with the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC), but the majority departed without their parents in eight transports directly from Prague’s Wilson Station (thus were not part of the wider Kindertransport movement operating from Germany and Austria). The first group of children left on 14 March 1939, just hours before Germany seized what remained of Czechoslovakia.

It subsequently became increasingly difficult for Jewish or politically active anti-Fascists such as Communists and Social Democrats, to escape with their families, but subject to various formalities, the Gestapo still allowed children to leave Czechoslovakia. The last stanza of Tom Berman’s poem, ‘The Leather Suitcase’, encapsulated the situation:

Leather suitcase
from a far-off country,
Czechoslovakia,
Containing all the love
Parents could pack
For a five year-old
off on a journey
The last Kindertransport of 68 children left Prague on 2 August 1939; it included the nine year-old future Lady Milena Grenfell-Baines (née Fleischmann) and her three year-old sister Eva. Little did Milena realize how closely she would become involved with her fellow-travellers and, in time, with Nicholas Winton.

Winton’s early links with Czechoslovakia ostensibly terminated with the last Kindertransport, his task completed and his role modestly set aside. Of his own admission politically left of centre, and sympathetic to the country’s plight, he had nonetheless become involved by chance at the urgent request of a friend, Martin Blake, in December 1938. ‘It was his telephone call that changed my life when he said come to Prague,’ Winton stated in an interview in April 2006. Abandoning a planned skiing trip, Winton joined Blake for two and a half weeks until January 1939, and ‘saw the result of people fleeing from the Sudetenland, the camps and poor conditions in a very cold winter.’ Agencies such as the BCRC were assisting refugees, but desperately needed someone to co-ordinate escape arrangements specifically for children. Winton resolutely undertook the task, commencing it in his room at the Šroubek (later Europa) Hotel.

On returning to London, Winton established what he named the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, Children’s Section, working in his words ‘as a committee of one.’ ‘Events never interfered with normal business life at all […] the stock exchange closes early’ and his rescue efforts ‘did not encroach on ordinary life at all’ he asserted, maintaining also that the Home Office ‘was very slow’ to act rather than antagonistic towards his work. Nevertheless, it was a huge task. Helped by his mother, Barbara, and a volunteer secretary in London, and Trevor Chadwick who prepared lists of potential escapee children at the BCRC in Prague, Winton strove to find temporary foster parents willing to take a child and pay the £50.00 guarantee in advance. This was stipulated by the British government so that refugee children would not be a burden to the state should their foster parents unexpectedly be unable to care for them.

It is widely regarded as a tremendous achievement, but given that Nicholas Winton then had no special connection either with Czechoslovakia in particular or with children in general, and was brought up as a baptized Christian, what had motivated him? Asked whether his German-Jewish background (the original family name was Wertheimer) had influenced his decision to help, he replied that it