

JEWISH NEWS

A Publication of the Jewish Federation of Madison

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Save the Date for Interfaith Advocacy Day!

The annual People of Faith United for Justice Advocacy Day will be held on April 4, 2017, at the First United Methodist Church in Madison.

This day-long gathering is a great way to learn about and advocate for legislative issues important to Wisconsin's Jewish community. All participants will meet with their state legislators to discuss priority issues and weigh in on the proposed state budget.

People of Faith United for Justice Advocacy Day is sponsored by the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, the Jewish Federation of Madison, the Jewish Community Relations Council Milwaukee Jewish Federation, the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, Lutheran Office for Public Policy, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice, the Wisconsin Council of Churches and the Madison Urban Ministry.

Please register online at: www.wichurches.org under "Events".

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My Life with Sir Nicholas Winton

Renata Laxova, Professor Emerita at the UW-Madison participated in a two-day celebration in memory of Sir Nicholas Winton. Sir Nicholas, who died in 2015, organized eight Kindertransports from Czechoslovakia in 1939, saving the lives of hundreds of Jewish Czech children, Dr. Laxova among them. Here are some of her recollections, inspired by the recent event.

By DR. RENATA LAXOVA

I never actually met or spoke with him and our only direct contact lasted some thirty seconds out of his one hundred and six years of life! I had just summoned up all my courage and kissed his hand, when the journalists and photographers waved me away, indicating that he was needed for interviews and pictures.

The place was the Czech embassy in London. The date was September 4, 2009, and Sir Nicky had celebrated his one-hundredth birthday in May of that year. It was also the 70th anniversary of Hitler's invasion of Poland, and of the beginning of World War II in Europe. The occasion was a commemoration of Sir Nicholas's 1939 rescue, via Kindertransports, of hundreds of Czech children at risk under the Nazis. Vintage (refurbished) passenger cars, pulled by a series of steam locomotives, had arrived on platform #10 of London's Liverpool Street station, after a four-day journey from Prague's central station. The four steam engines were, respectively, of Czech/Hungarian, German, Dutch and British provenance. Each locomotive in turn carried the name *The Winton Train*, destination Prague-London, and a wreath of white flowers on its face.

Despite the time elapsed—seven decades since the beginning of WWII in Europe and ten decades since the birth of Sir Nicholas Winton himself—the world had made his acquaintance only recently, in 1988, and learned then that in 1939 he had almost single-handedly rescued 669 children, most of them Jewish, aged from three to seventeen years, from Hitler-occupied Czechoslovakia. When asked why, for fifty years, he had never mentioned or shared with anyone, not even his wife, the story of his work in the spring of 1939, he denied that the omission was deliberate. "I didn't keep it a secret; I just didn't talk about it," he said. War had been declared on September 3, 1939, putting an end to all officially permitted travel across Europe, ending any possibility of further transports. Sir Nicholas then returned home to Britain and joined the Royal Air

Force.

For the remainder of his life, however, a single event forever occupied his mind. Having successfully organized the safe arrival in London of eight Kindertransports, totaling 669 children, he had arranged another—the ninth and largest train, carrying 250 children—which was waiting, prepared for departure, at the Prague main railway station on September 1, 1939, the day that Hitler invaded Poland. The train was never permitted to leave; it is thought to have remained on the platform and all the children—its occupants—are believed to have perished in the Holocaust. The wreaths of white flowers on the 2009 locomotives were in memory and honor of those 250 children, and of the rest of the 1,500,000 children murdered during the



Dr. Renata Laxova

Holocaust.

I happened to be one of the children from Nicky's last Kindertransport to arrive in Britain safely, (among only five with two surviving parents). It is my strong conviction that not only I, but also both my parents, owed our lives to Sir Nicholas. My inclusion in the transport enabled my parents to agree to separate and hide, without having to worry about

me, their only child. My father escaped from camps, to join the partisans; my mother assumed an unmarried, non-Jewish stranger's identity (with papers and birth certificate) for the duration of the Nazi terror.




After the war we returned to Czechoslovakia but in February 1948, a communist-orchestrated coup by the

(Continued on page 4)

MADISON JEWISH COMMUNITY
YOM HASHOAH PROGRAM
FROM THE HOLOCAUST TO CIVIL RIGHTS

Debbie Simon Konkol, Joanne Simon Weinberg, and Chris Simon Halverson will tell the incredible story of their family's journey to learn their story. Hear how they retraced the steps of their grandmother Alice Simon, who was murdered by the Nazis, and the story of their father Rev. Dr. Carl R. Simon, a Presbyterian minister, and how his family history affected his life and inspired him to become a civil rights activist including marching in Selma.

SUNDAY, APRIL 23, 2017
6:30PM SERVICE
7:15PM PROGRAM
BETH ISRAEL CENTER
1406 MOUND STREET

Sir Nicholas Winton Continued from page 1

government resulted in a takeover and for the next forty years, we became one of the satellite countries of the USSR. Czechoslovakia, potentially one of the most promising, cultured, freedom-loving, industrialized and internationally oriented countries in Central Europe, lost its freedom as well as its independence and high standard of living.

Twenty years later, in August 1968, the country was invaded again by forces of the Warsaw pact, led by the Soviet Union. The sight of the occupying tanks and machine guns, entering the country from every direction, and of soldiers milling around in every available space, were so frightening to me and so reminiscent of the Nazi invasion of March 1939, that I became instantly aware that we could no longer continue to raise our 13- and 11-year old children under their cruel presence. In 1968 we once again escaped to England.

One evening during the three months we spent as guests at the home of Professor Penrose, a well-known, distinguished medical geneticist from University College London, he invited me to come to his study, as there was someone he wanted me to meet. As we entered the study, I saw three people, a woman and two men, all younger than the professor but older than I, perhaps in their fifties. "This is Renata," he said, using only my first name. The woman stood up, approached and embraced me warmly. "I am so pleased to meet you," she said. "You have an unusual name. The age is right, so I was convinced that it was you! I am glad you are here and that you have done well!" I had no idea who she was and what she was talking about. Within minutes, however, twenty-

nine years melted away and, once more, I became a little girl on a train.

During his activities in 1939, as self appointed "chair" of the British Committee for Refugees from Prague, Children's Section, Sir Nicholas had spent a great deal of time at home in Britain, as well as in Prague, looking for British families, institutions, schools, religious groups, and others, who would be willing to care for refugee children. Initially he distributed individual photographs, received as part of the application process. Later, in order to save time and space and increase efficiency, he decided to distribute postcards, with six pictures of children (three at the top, three at the bottom) to any interested groups or individuals. My picture, with five others, happened to appear in a newsletter published by Quakers. Uncle Harry Daniels, my future foster father, was a Quaker and saw my picture. I assume that he decided that he and his family would take care of me. He must have contacted the British Committee for Children in Prague, received my home address, and that was how he, his family and my parents began to communicate. Two or three months later, I arrived at their home, in a suburb of Manchester.

For me, a mystery had been solved. Until that evening in London, neither my parents nor I had known how the Daniels family had found my name or my photograph, nor did we know that the distribution of photographs in Quaker or other newsletters had, of course, been the brilliant idea of Sir Nicky. We did not even know of his existence. My mother always spoke of "The British Committee," never any one person, as she studied and discussed the myriad letters and instruc-

tions she received in preparation for my departure.

The three visitors at Professor Penrose's home, 29 years later, were also Quakers and, to my immense surprise, it had been they who had published the newsletter, remembered my picture and my "unusual" name.

Another twenty years elapsed. It was in 1988, as Sir Nicky's prewar achievements in Prague became public, reunions in Britain, Israel and Czechoslovakia were organized, movies and DVDs created, when I finally realized that his indirect presence had influenced my entire life—my departure and arrival in England, the survival of my parents, my acquaintance and work with Professor Penrose in Britain.

The encounter described at the beginning of this essay, the thirty-second opportunity finally to meet Sir Nicky in person at age 100 in 2009, has ushered in a series of completely new experiences, as well as a thrilling new life for me. I have participated in meetings with many middle- and high-school children and college students, as well as their parents, teachers and other leaders. I have visited several Holocaust Museums in the Midwest; above all and most importantly, I have been honored to make the acquaintance of many new friends and families.

My new life culminated in May of 2016, almost a year after Sir Nicky's death, when I was invited to London for a reunion with his rescued children and a celebration of the anniversary of his birth. The request came from Barbara, the daughter whom I had met previously, when she toured the United States signing her book about Sir Nicky, *If It's Not Impossible...* and from his son, Nick. I accepted with pleasure and excited anticipation.

Never have I felt so close to the presence of Sir Nicky and, even though he had left us a year before, he was everywhere. Several photographs with his characteristic smile were exhibited and accompanied by his wise, witty, sometimes humorous but always thoughtful

expressions, most of which have now become world famous quotations. "If something isn't actually impossible, there has to be a way of doing it."

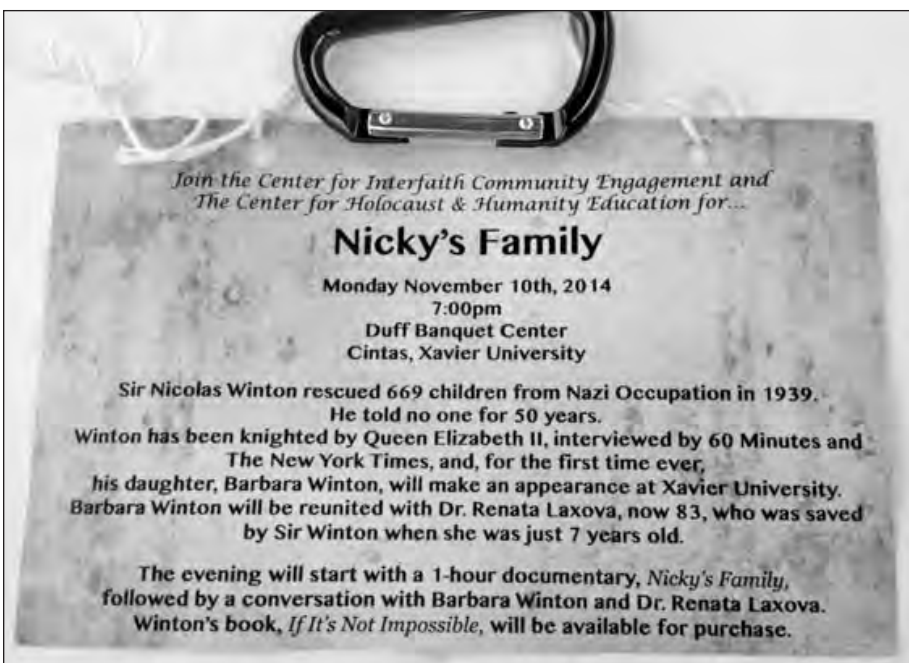
At the memorial service, Sir Nicky's personality was also reflected in the stories of four Kindertransport children. One of the most memorable was described by a then 12-year-old. She was on the train with several other girls, waiting for departure. Suddenly a woman, presumably the mother, entered the carriage with a baby in her arms, whom she placed tenderly onto the lap of this young girl. She also gave her a bottle of milk and, with tears in her eyes, she left, asking the girls to take care of her baby. As the train departed, the bottle broke; the milk was lost. One of the girls had chocolate in her backpack, a precious gift from her parents. Together, they melted the chocolate and used it to feed the baby. The baby survived, but in ensuing years, she neither met, nor knew anything about her little "nurse" – not until seventy years later, when they both travelled on the 2009 anniversary train from Prague to London, and discovered each other. Their amazement knew no bounds as they recognized the circumstances of their original encounter!

The concluding concert, in memory of Sir Nicholas Winton, took place in the evening of May 20, 2016, at St. John's, Smith Square. To my surprise, I found that the concert was to be organized, directed and conducted by yet another dear friend, Alexander (Sandy) Baillie. We had met him as a teenager, a gifted cellist and musician, during the time that we lived in St. Albans, UK. He is of the generation of my children and our families knew one another well. Sandy had met Sir Nicky after we had emigrated to the United States, but I knew that he and Sir Nicky had become friends and found it fitting that he was in charge of the concert.

As a result, Max Bruch's beautiful Kol Nidre and Bedrich Smetana's Moldau have become inseparable accompaniments to my memories and gratitude to Sir Nicholas Winton.



This is a replica of the number worn by Dr. Laxova for her kindertransport in 1939. The reverse of tag below describes the event of 2014.



Madison JEWISH NEWS

Please note: Madison Jewish News will now be published 10 times per year. Upcoming issues will be combined for the months of June/July and December/January. There will be only one issue for each of those combined months.

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