

Persecution and Flight of Czech Jews

After the Munich Agreement was signed in September 1938, Czech Jews sought to escape the imminent Nazi invasion. An unlikely source of aid emerged when a 29-year-old British businessman named Nicholas Winton (May 19, 1909 – July 1, 2015) was persuaded to come to Prague instead of skiing in Switzerland as he had originally planned. After arriving around December 31, 1938, he learned of the predicament of those under threat by Hitler and reportedly asked, "Who is helping the children?"

Winton organized a rescue operation he named the "Children's Section" of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, an organization already there helping Sudeten politicians under threat. With a handful of colleagues that included his mother Barbara, he helped at least 669 Czech children – mostly all Jewish – to escape. Many Czech parents believed the safest option for their children was to send them alone on trains to England in one of the "kindertransports" arranged by Winton which started on March 14, 1939. The last transport with about 250 children was scheduled to leave Prague on September 1, 1939, but was cancelled due to the outbreak of the war that same day and subsequent closing of borders. Children were not allowed to board the train and were sent home. Some, though few, found other escape routes. Many were eventually sent to Theresienstadt ghetto and on to Auschwitz.



This cover postmarked July 15, 1939 in Prague, was mailed by a representative from Winton's "British Committee" to Nelly Polgarova in Brno, Czechoslovakia (Brünn, in German). Nelly was in communication with the Committee as she prepared to send her only child, an eight-year-old girl named Renata to England. Renata was on the last of eight successful transports, arriving with 67 other children in England on August 2, 1939. A British Quaker family fostered Renata for seven years during and after the war. Renata and her foster brother Harry remained lifelong friends. The journey was traumatic for the children, many of whom expected to see their parents when they arrived in England. Most never saw their parents again. Renata was one of the only Jewish children from Brno who was reunited with both of her parents after the war.