

Remarks by Ms. Barbara Winton

UN Holocaust memorial day talk – Theme: The Holocaust and Human Dignity

Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. President of the General Assembly, Excellencies, Holocaust survivors, Veterans of the Second World War and your families, Ladies and Gentlemen...

My father, Nicholas Winton, died on July 1st last year aged 106. Through his life he kept mementos, and one such was a scrapbook – full of articles, letters, reports and photos relating to a rescue he had organised in 1939 – which brought children endangered by the Nazi invasion of the Czech lands to foster families in Britain. At the back of this book was a list of those children and the names & addresses of the families who took them in.

In the early 1980s he decided to find an organisation that would be interested in housing the scrapbook and after some fruitless attempts, in 1987 he eventually made contact with an historian Elisabeth Maxwell who took the scrapbook and passed it on the BBC.

He was called one day by *That's Life!*, a weekly TV show watched live by nearly half the UK population, who told him they wanted to do an item on the scrapbook and invited him to come and watch it from the audience. The clip you are about to see shows what happened then, and the following week when he was invited back for a second time.

VIDEO CLIP

These rescued children, who in 1988 were now adults in their 50s and 60s, had discovered for the first time how they had come to be brought to safety when the rest of their families – parents, siblings, grandparents all perished in the Holocaust.

My father also made a discovery about the impact of his actions 50 years earlier: How that rescue undertaken when he was 29, with the assistance of other similarly motivated and determined individuals, had led to many 100's of lives lived, new families created and many thousands now alive because of that impulse and its successful accomplishment.

Those rescuers saw what was happening in Czechoslovakia with the influx of Sudeten and German refugees into the centre of the country after the Munich Agreement in September 1938, when the Czech Sudetenland was handed over to Hitler. Unlike the British government of the day, they understood that there would not be “peace in our time” and that the stories of violence and brutality towards Hitler’s enemies and victims were an indication of worse to come. They believed that something had to be done, that no-one else was doing it and rather than waiting for governments or organisations to act, they independently decided to try and help those in danger, even in the face of resistance from those agencies who believed that either the “authorities” should be doing this or no-one should.

Having arrived in Prague at the end of 1938 at the call of a close friend, Nicholas saw for himself the appalling conditions Sudeten refugees were living in and the desperation and fear they and other Czechs – Jews, politicians, anyone from groups on Hitler’s wanted list - were suffering. His response was not to wring his hands but to spring into action. Within days the plan was conceived, then commenced – to take endangered children to Britain. The next weeks and months saw feverish activity. Assisted by some dedicated volunteers, lists were made and trains were organised. The British government was petitioned and the Gestapo in Prague mollified. Money and foster families were found and over the following seven months, eight transports brought 669 children to safety.

In 1938 the British Government had already agreed to accept endangered children from Germany and Austria through an operation known as the Kindertransport, which saved the lives of 10,000 mainly Jewish children. Nicholas' intervention saw children from Czechoslovakia added to this agreement.

What is important in this story in my opinion is not that Nicholas Winton, Trevor Chadwick, Doreen Warriner, Beatrice Wellington and the many others who put themselves out and into danger in many cases, were moved to help but that they were not deterred from their aim by those who informed them it was impossible. They used all the skills at their disposal to do what they believed was right. None considered they were doing anything heroic, it was just the right thing to do.

The children who came as refugees to the UK in 1939 went on to contribute massively to the countries where they later chose to live. Some made their home in America. Among those are a Princeton physicist whose research led to technology used to power space probes such as the Voyager and Cassini spacecraft, a pioneering pediatric geneticist at the University of Wisconsin, an International Monetary Fund administrator in Washington, a psychiatrist in Indiana, a school principal in Boston, a teacher here in New York and many others who have made great contributions to society and led exemplary lives in their communities.

My father could not have foreseen in 1939 the impact that his actions then would continue to have 77 years later. Those he rescued were given the chance of a life of dignity and in turn they have used their lives to give hope and dignity to others.

Thank you.

Barbara Winton January 27,2016