

50,419
Or
A Trilogy of Hope

Written by Emerson T. Knowles

For the Literary Club February 26, 2018

Honorably read by Fred McGavran, Dave Edmonson and Emerson Knowles

Gino Bartali

February 1944, Umbria, Italy

Gino wakes before the sun breaks the horizon. The world sleeps, a time that Gino cherished. He always felt a quiet hopefulness the early morning before a ride. For his races and legs of the Tour de France, it was always full of excitement as his nerves prepared for the challenge. Today, he prepares for a long ride. Although denied a good night's sleep in a pew at a church in Perugia, he sets to adjusting his bike – seat, peddles, handlebars must all be perfect. He embarks on his long training ride. Push peddle, push peddle he rides on. One of the few who has a pass to crisscross Italy as he pleases, a token accommodation to the Italians, a symbol that something in life should be normal, when all is not.

As he passes trucks full of tired men, they smile and many wave. He smiles back and returns the gesture. In his heart, he screams with disdain at these invaders with their guns and swastikas. As the solders watch the world famous cyclist pass, they see a ray of hope that one day they will go home and worry about who wins the next bike race, not be on the lookout for snipers or resistance. The cyclist sees a plague on his land that must be fought at every turn.

Approaching his next town, he stops on a bridge to give the illusion of adjusting his bike: his arrival must be perfectly timed with the arriving train. He rolls into the coffee shop at the terminal just before the train arrives. He, Italy's famous Tour de France winner, always attracts a huge crowd and creates quite a commotion. He signs autographs, receives with grace the free espressos and walks the platform area of Terontola Station creating quite the spectacle of Italians wanting to believe something is still normal in their occupied country.

The cacophony of passengers and admirers creates an uncontrolled sea of humanity making a mess of the coming and going train passengers. Perfect, the Nazi and Fascist guards are caught hopelessly in the tide of bodies. There is little chance of spotting the Jewish families transferring from one train to another on their way to safety south of the Gustav line. Transit was always the greatest risk – forged papers or not.

Mission complete, families are safely on their way south, and Gino rides on to finish his 100+ mile trek across Italy. As he completes his journey, he once again works to adjust his seat and handlebars. In the process, he quietly removes the forged ID papers hidden in his bike frame and passes them to an unseen agent of Elia Della Costa, the Archbishop of Florence. Another family ready to be saved, but it will have to wait another day. Terror will reign another night in Italy.

What world has Gino Bartali ridden into?

What does this 30-year old cyclist see as he cycles through the hills of Tuscany? He sees a country that is no longer his own, one driven by fear, deceit and compliance with an iron hand that challenges every bone in his body. He is an intensely independent competitor, harbors deep faith, never held back, liked to be left alone, and hated fascism. As Mussolini attempted to parade him around after his win at the 1938 Tour de France, they had to stop his public appearances as he was openly critical of the fascists. The leaders of Italy were now aligning themselves with the Germans and creating rules for the Jews. Under Pius XII, the Vatican fought back with its radio giving regular statements like “He who makes a

distinction between Jews and other men is being unfaithful to God and is in conflict with God's commands." Part of Italy heard his words, part followed the rules. Italy was now divided against itself. Once the last bastion of safety for fleeing minorities and Jews, the anti-Semitic atrocities that plagued Europe were arriving in Italy.

Between 1938 and 1943, the laws in Italy required lists to be made, jobs were lost, and foreign Jews went to camps. Italian Jews kept their homes and could stay there. But unlike the rest of Europe, where the camps for foreign Jews were prisons; the occupants went in and out of town, held religious services, were not deported, and lived more like refugees. It made it easy for many Italians to "look the other way" as their lives were not affected much, no one was being shot or tortured and we can return to normal when this is all over. The horrors of the camps are elsewhere, not here...

This all changed on September 8, 1943. As the Allies took Sicily and moved north, Mussolini was thrown from power and it looked like Italy would be spared the destruction of war until the Germans marched in, took Northern Italy, and the world changed. Italian Jews were now subject to extermination, and the process began. This changed everything. Close friends of Gino's, the Goldenbergs, were no longer waiting out the war to get back to work but fleeing from being killed. This transition from seeing the war as something to "wait out" to something to deal with today raced across Italy. Horror had come, and it was time to face it head on.

The nation was split in two, the south was liberated – the camps in the south had been liberated. The north was occupied territory, and the hunt was on. The final solution had swept blackness over the beautiful hills of Northern Italy. Aid offices were raided, families were swept from their homes, monks and priests were taken from churches and abbeys and shot. The collaborating fascists were the worst! They were hard to spot and could pick up the subtle accents that the uniformed Germans could not. The illusion of safety totally shattered.

Gino was the perfect courier for the forged documents. Everyone knew him, everyone – even the German’s understood his desire to ride 40,000 Kilometers a year. He rode in cycling shorts and jersey, what is there to search? He was all set with a story about bike adjustments if they ever attempted to inspect his bike, but they never did. He was never comfortable with the risks he took, but he never told his wife or family so if interrogated they would know nothing. If caught, he knows his fate and it would have been short, swift, and deadly.

Gino knew he was part of a larger program to save the lives of minorities and Jews but he had no idea of the scope. Under the direction of Cardinal Dalla Costa, an entire network was built with forgers, couriers, churches, convents, and monasteries. As the fall of 1943 dragged on, he learned the very real risks to all his people. Priests, Rabbis, and aid workers were rounded up and arrested, monks shot, whole families taken away and never seen again. At the same time, the “neutral” Pope Pius XII was a real thorn in the side of the Nazis calling for sanctuary, but even the Germans were afraid to arrest him.

The saving of the Jews was totally compartmentalized. No one knew anything outside their group or parish. Every priest in every location throughout Tuscany was given an order to take in ANYONE in need with no questions about origin or religion. If one group was discovered, arrested or shot, then another would take their place. All the time under the feared watchful eye of the Gestapo and fascist spies, only the documents for saving the endangered were kept, everything else destroyed so no search would bear fruit. The network was far more important than a record for history.

In the end, it is estimated that the network that Gino supported saved the lives of around 9,000 Jews. Over 80% of the Italian Jews survived the war through efforts like this one. Whole villages kept families in hiding where EVERYONE in the village knew, everyone understood the risks and no one said a word.

What kind of a man risks his life by taking forged documents from a place he wouldn’t normally go to deliver to a person he does not see to save a person he

does not know? Gino was born in 1914 as the third son to a farmer with a small plot just outside of Florence, Italy. From the time he was a small boy, he took his faith very seriously and was nicknamed “Gino the Pious” because he always prayed at meals and scolded his fellow riders when they used foul language.

As the third son, with no hope to inherit and work the farm, he started at age 13 working in a bike shop. He took to it immediately and starting racing that year, and by 21 he had turned professional. The next year, 1936, he was the Italian Champion. In 1938 he won the Tour De France.

He married his sweetheart Adriana Beni in 1940 celebrated by Cardinal Della Costa, blessed by Pope Pius XII. In return Gino gave the Pope a bicycle. Gino said later that one of his proudest moments was teaching the Pope how to ride it. Little did he know that a secret decree from that Pope to his Cardinals would lead him to be a courier in a noble cause that may have been the end of his life as well as Adriana and his family.

The decision between the love and safety of his family and living his principles to save those in need weighed on him greatly but he never backed down from his calling. His son recalls his mother, Adriana, having fits at all the long rides and never knowing why dad was training for a race that would never happen. Little did she know his silence was to help save her life if he were arrested. Little did she know that he was living his faith in the truest form.

He stood in a horrible time with a unique position. Everyone knew he was a champion cyclist who was driven and wanted to be ready when the Tour de France came back. He was the perfect courier. There is even a story that he complained loudly about not enough weight when working the hills so a German carpenter made him a box to tow full of rocks to help his training. The troops cheered him on towing his “box of rocks” that would sometimes hold a small child being moved from one town to another or a mass of secret identity papers in a hidden compartment. He even hid a family in his own basement and said nothing. He was relentless in his mission.

Gino was very humble and only became angry when people attempted to thank him for it. He felt he did so little, it was just not enough. 7,680 Jews were killed and he carried that burden like so many others. When pressed, he said the true heroes died, were tortured or imprisoned. I just did the Lord's work and what I loved most, riding my bicycle.

Because virtually every record was destroyed at the end of each day, the story of the network and lives saved faded into history until a researcher for a documentary film backed into the incredible impact of the Delasem, the Assisi, and other underground networks. Gino's name came up over and over again. When survivors and the media reached out to him, he shunned them until his son finely convinced him that the world needed to hear the story.

It is difficult to determine exactly how many lives Gino had a hand in saving. Three estimates from different sources, 500, 800 or 2,000. My work tends towards to 2,000. A man of extreme faith, torn between the safety of his family and to live the life he prays for, chose a path of ultimate risk to save the lives of so many he did know and would never know. His faith and his sense of duty from his faith was a non-negotiable drive for him. He is listed with 670 other Italians on Israel's "Righteous Among the Nations" in remembrance of the lives he saved.

Gino Bartali, despite his humility, is now the subject of documentaries and books. His grave marker shows nothing but his name, two dates and a dash. He was clear: the only metals that mater are not worn in this life.

Gino is a standard for the best of who we can be in the most terrible of times.

Irena Sendler

February 1941, Warsaw Poland

Irena walks with competent, purposeful but humble steps through the cobblestone streets. She passes darkened windows, curtains drawn, a cold damp wisp of air cuts through her woolen coat. The fog of her breath drifts away with each stride forward, her heels clatter, her eyes keep low to avoid notice. She passes the wall, silent on her side, abundant in life on the other, she presents her papers, entry is approved, disdainful eyes watch her walk into the ghetto, the gate closes behind her. The man in the uniform growls under his breath, “why vaccinate these people against typhus, a good epidemic would solve this problem”. He turns to look at the next entrant, bored, tired and cold.

What world has Irena Sendler walked into?

What does this 29-year old social worker see as she passes the guards, guns loaded ready to kill without remorse or hesitation? She leaves behind a city in fear, a city on edge, a city occupied by the worst of modern invaders. But still a city with enough food and fuel to survive, only by a string... but survive. She passes into a walled ghetto, now the starving home of 450,000 Jews, stuffed into 2.4% of the area of Warsaw is 30% of the population. An area about half the size of Madera, Ohio except has 45 times more people, almost 100 times the density, it averages 7 per room. Irena enters a world of hunger, disease and cold. One and five would die there, saving the Germans the trouble of extinguishing them. It touches her profoundly as she walks past the corpse of a child, lying in the street, nowhere to go, nowhere to be buried, a family so tired, so hungry they cannot even mourn their loss.

Compelled to act, she forms a crew of fellow social workers, drivers, workers and more to try to save the children. In the early years, she would help one then another, but it was a trickle. Even when you got them out, they needed papers... How does Yitzhak Goldberg become Stefan Wyszynski, a Polish Catholic? Forged papers, lots of forged papers! One by one the small army of

civilians grew. Dr. Dobraczynski, as the head of the Division for Abandoned Children at the Warsaw municipal welfare department, put his real signature on hundreds of false documents. Each signature was a death sentence if discovered, but he signed, signed and then signed more. As a young man, he was known as anti-Semitic but the horrors of war can change a man and daily he risked his life to save those destined for death. As the flow of children increased, Irena was pressed at finding enough families to take them all. She was never turned down by a family to harbor a child but there were just too many children. Every Polish family that took in a child took in a potential death sentence with it! As one surviving member of the underground reflected, “They were the true heroes, you can hide an ammo box for days buried in your back yard. You cannot bury a child until the raid is past. You live each day, caring with unquestioned love for a child that means death to everyone” that is a true hero.

As Irena and her team passed 500, then a thousand children smuggled to safety. They became masters at deception. A tool box with a hidden compartment holds a sedated infant, a trash truck carries a hidden box, caskets get extra occupants, experts at the sewers just like the movies, passageways beneath the old buildings lost to time... every way, anyway the regular flow of children continued. There were too many... It was time to get bigger. Several local priests had become experts at making new baptism records. You might get by with a baby with a forged birth certificate, but in a very Catholic country, everyone had church papers too... so the clergy became expert forgers too. The same death sentence that dangled over the social workers and their supportive doctor now hung over the heads of numerous priests – but they kept on forging.

It was getting too difficult to explain in neighborhood after neighborhood how your “cousins” child had come to stay, they needed a bigger plan. Convents had been accepting orphaned children from the war since the late 1930s, so they represented the perfect place to hide – would they? Will they put all the do at risk of certain death for a child? Over 200 convents scattered around the region took in children, hid them, taught them how to trick the German solders when questioned.

The Germans were easy to spot, they were noisy, wore uniforms and carried guns. A far more insidious problem were bands of Poles that either collaborated with the Germans or saw a great opportunity to blackmail the protectors of the children. Poland was the only occupied country where ANY kind of help for a Jew was punishable by death. Thus was born a rancid band of Ne'er-do-wells known as the Szmalcownik – roughly translated means “lard”. They blended in as they were Polish but the estimated 3-4,000 of them wreaked havoc on the work of those striving for safety. Between harassing the rescuers, demanding bribes, raising insecurity and turning in the dedicated they slowed down the success of saving the Jews significantly. They became such a problem that the Polish Underground, The Armia Krajowa, had to set up a special counter-intelligence group to do nothing but find and kill off these predators. Killing a few slowed it down, but much damage was done and it was one more layer of care that the Doctors, social workers, priests, nuns and families that rescued children must put up with... every minute of every day was a lesson in stress, extreme stress. Irena and her team, living in fear never stopped working, never stopped saving children.

In the summer of 1942, the urgency changed. The extermination camp Treblinka was complete, it could “process” 12 – 15 thousand in a 14-hour day – the chambers needed to pause, so the cremations could catch up overnight. This changed everything, from the start, Irena and her team had focused on orphan children. There were literally thousands of them. Now orphans were under order to be the first to go and families to follow right behind. A mother had the worst of all choices, give their child to Irena’s team to be hidden as Catholic orphans, or bring them to die with them at the camps. There is nothing so brutal. A number of families were saved but it was very difficult. The educated fled early leaving the common behind. How do you explain a Nun that only speaks Yiddish? The regular methods used in other parts of Europe were hard pressed in Poland where the Army had a “kill on sight” policy for Jews and their helpers.

As Irena and her team stepped up their speed, it added to their risks. There was no time to “prep” the children. You can explain to a 12-year old what was happening, a baby didn’t know, but to the very young it was traumatic, confusing and thrust them into a world of fear and horror. What words do I use? Will I get the prayer right? How do you sign the cross? How do you understand at four

years old when your mother “gives you away” that it is an act of love? Many of the children came to terms with that later in life when every member of their family was dead, but it was brutally cruel at the time. A sad reflection of the world they were born into.

For four years, Irena leads her group from the social services division to help silently save the children. People were arrested, some shot, but she did not slow down until a cold October night in 1943. The dreaded knock at the door found her home and she was hauled away to the infamous gestapo prison – Pawiak – where most never returned and those who did rarely fully recovered. She was tortured for days on end to find the names of those who helped the Jews, she never shared a name and was sentenced to be shot.

On the way to her execution, a guard bribed by the Polish underground let her run away. She was officially dead, so her papers meant nothing. She had to assume a new identity for the duration of the war. Irena, now Klara, recovered outside the city and continued her quest to protect the remaining families from the gestapo.

In the end, it is estimated that Irena’s work saved the lives of over 2,500 children who would have been gassed in Treblinka. Instead of dying with the exhaust of a modified Russian tank engine, they all lived. Just what drives someone to take such risks for people she does not even know?

Irena Stanisława Krzyzanowska was born February 15, 1910 to a promising Doctor who specialized in infectious diseases and a spirited young mother. Her father was quite a radical at the time, he supported democracy, equal rights for everyone, an eight-hour work day and an end to child labor; pretty passive stuff today, radical at the start of the 20th century when class driven feudal/imperial logic still reigned. When Irena was two, she contracted whooping cough and the family moved to a fashionable location in the country to facilitate her recovery and Dr. Krzyzanowska opened a practice specializing in tuberculosis. The wealthy in the area were slow to warm to him but he saw everyone. That was unheard of in

the Poland of 1912. Since 50% of the surrounding area was Jewish, and he was the only Doctor to see Jews, he was busy all the time. Irena grew up seeing all kinds of people and learning all sorts of things – different wasn't scary, it was wonderful. As she traveled the villages with her father she saw what true poverty and deprivation looked like, she saw a calling that never ended.

In 1916, a typhus epidemic swept through the area. The wealthy retreated to their stately homes and the poor living in crowded conditions with suspect water and a lack of good soap felt the brunt of it. Irena's father, true to his character, kept visiting the poor villages and helping the poor – Jewish or not – and in that fall he contracted the disease and died. She and her mother were left with little but the fortune of living in a house owned by a relative.

The same Jewish community that saw the goodness in her father's heart, helped them through and helped with Irena's education. Kindness across the lines of creed and culture may be a corner stone of what is written for faiths to follow, but it was a truly rare event in Poland of 1917.

Irena finished her studies well and after a winding road through Warsaw University with a brief start at law, then teaching and finally in 1932 a graduate certificate in Social Welfare. By the late 1930s, she had a well-placed job in Warsaw's municipal welfare services. She loved her job and thrived! It all changed on September 1st, 1939 at 6:00 AM when the air raid sirens awoke the city. It started a brutal saga that did not end for years, but Irena was determined to fight the horror, not succumb to it. A core of human decency prevailed in the face of death that most can only dream of.

She had been deeply moved by what she remembered from the lessons of her father. Care for everyone, look at character not lineage. Things we so take for granted today that were so powerful then. She lived by her father's example, he always said "you see a man drowning, you must try to save him even if you cannot swim." She used that quote until the day she died – at 98-years old in 2008.

The German's thought because her father died from typhus caught from a Jew that she was the perfect one to trust with daily passes – they could trust her,

she of course would hate Jews. She played the part to get her passes to the Ghetto, little did they know that her father's death in the service of others gave her strength, not reservation. The entrance passes gave her access with will; what a wonderful combination to save others. Nothing could undo her sense of rightness in caring for those who needed it most.

Irena is quite humble about what she did, she feels it was not enough. She could have saved more, she could have done more. She still cries at the memory of those she could not save. She, like so many others, was plagued by taking ownership of a guilt thrust upon her by the horror of war. As a past member of the resistance, she was shunned and suppressed by the new communist government and her story disappeared to the weight of time until 1999 when a Kansas high school student made her the subject of National History Day. They created a play called "Life in a Jar" remembering all the names of the children hidden in a jar so they would be safe from the Germans. A year later, the kids find out Irena is alive and traveled to Poland to meet her, the AP, CNN, USAToday, BBC, FOX, etc. picked up the story. She is now the subject of multiple books and movies. She is listed with 6,705 other Poles, on Israel's "Righteous Among the Nations" in remembrance of the lives he saved.

Irena is a standard for the best of who we can be, in the most terrible of times.

Sir. Nicholas Winton

December 1938, London, England

Nicholas scurries about his apartment, the well born 29-year old is excited about his holiday trip to Switzerland. He loves to ski, fence and travel. He is the reserved, exquisitely mannered gentlemen of his prep-school upbringing; the wonderfully modern product of a successful German Jewish banking family married to a traditional Christian one... His Jewish roots looked upon him with concern as he was baptized; his Christian roots had concerns about his German Jewish family. Nicholas did not care and did not ask. He had a good start in banking and was now a successful stock broker heading on vacation, he could have cared less about people's attitudes or politics. His phone rings, the friend he is supposed to meet must cancel, things are getting tough for Jews in Prague he needs to stay to help, will you please come. Nicholas decides to change his plans and go to Prague; see what adventure this will be?

Nicholas never remembered discussing politics with his family or for that matter with anyone. He lived a great life and was ready for adventure. Let those in power figure out the dreary stuff...

After his arrival in Prague, word gets out that there is a connected Englishman, fluent in French and German, who may be able to help. His hotel room is mobbed night and day, desperate families trying to flee, save their children, leave before the world closes in on them. He is baffled at the start, then memories return. Nicholas recalls the recent visitors to his parent's home, distant relatives and friends he hardly knew. No gifts, no luggage, desperate to find homes and work. He set himself apart from those issues; how could the German people follow this nut Hitler. Surely, they would see the light and stop. Nicholas, like many in England, thought this would just blow over. Now he was seeing it

first hand, this will not blow over; we have a race against time – escape the coming onslaught or die.

A pacifist, born to affluence and intent upon living the good life, becomes a first-rate forger, invents charity committees, becomes a volunteer ambulance driver in France, escapes through Dunkirk, joins the RAF, returns to war-torn Prague after the war only to move back into daily life never saying a word of what he did to anyone, not even his wife.

What world has Nicholas Winton just traveled into?

Nicholas was an affluent English stockbroker with no connections to government or movements. But, word of the establishment of the Refugee Children's Movement (RCM) from Britain had reached this area and the prospect of getting your children, under the age of 17, away from the impending war became paramount to many of the worried parents. The arrival of someone seemingly important from Britain created a focal point for their call to action. Nicholas had no idea what he was getting into but his friend had showed him the starving Jewish refugees from Germany and the Sudetenland. It moved Nicholas deeply. He saw firsthand the stupidity in the cowardly appeasement of the Munich Agreement. He had been shown a map of Hitler's plan, he knew that evil would soon be on the march. His fluency allowed him to communicate across Prague, but the Refugee Movement only applied to Germany and Austria – he was in Czechoslovakia.

Despite his claims of ignorance, the families kept coming and coming. The stories were brutal, the mother would wait in line all day for a visa to one country, a father to another, both turned down they would try another embassy the next day... only to knock on his hotel room door at night or in at dawn. He would interview families while shaving in the morning and in his shirt sleeves after dinner at night. He created such a commotion at the hotel he went to a small office to cover the demands. Nicholas was overwhelmed, he started to make detailed long

lists drawing from several relief efforts, he had nowhere to send them, but he had hope that an answer would come and when it did he would be ready!

Nicholas wrote country after country to see who would take the Czech children. One by one they declined but his home nation of Britain would accept the children if they had a foster family and 50 pounds to guarantee their return when the fear of hostilities ended. A bill was introduced in the U. S. Congress to assist with the children of Europe, but it died in committee.

He had so many Jewish families meeting him, giving him photos to forward to Britain, information for forms and permits that it brought on the interest of the German agents. Even though Germany was yet to occupy Prague, the agents were everywhere and they set a trap for Nicholas. In classic “Honey Pot” tactics, a delightfully beautiful German agent working undercover at the Swedish Red Cross befriended Nicholas. He was warned about her, cautioned by many in Prague but he kept on seeing her, dancing and having romance. When it came time for her to depart with 25-children for Sweden, the locals felt it would be the end of Nicholas, his program and the children. Delightfully, the children arrived safely, and she quietly disappeared in Sweden.

As the list of children grew into the thousands, Nicholas’s boss kept calling wanting his top salesman back and he kept putting him off, over and over. The logistics were overwhelming! First you had to get the right papers to get out through the Germans, then second you need to have the right papers to get them into Britain, third the right “vetted” family needs to be waiting with open arms and last the 50 pounds sterling needs to be on deposit for send them back later. This was a really challenging task from anywhere, just about impossible from Prague – especially after the German’s marched in on March 14th, 1939.

Nicholas returned to Britain with his combined lists and photos and began putting all the pieces together. He worked as a stock broker to keep some money coming in but the second the bell rang he was out the door to the office he created until the wee hours. He had never worked so hard in his life. He knew he needed

to act fast, he understood the desperation and that war was coming. He invented a new entity; “The British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia: Children’s Section” and he made himself the corresponding secretary, printed impressive stationary and cards. So, he and one helper created the image of a full-scale operation, with time it grew to four, but had the required image of a large scale and established organization to gain the necessary support.

As the stories of Synagogues burned to the ground in Germany made the papers with horrid articles about the treatment of the Jews, Nicholas put pictures in the papers of children to appeal to potential families while all the time raising money for the 50-pound return ticket. To save space and money with his advertising, he would publish 6 photos at a time. With wonder, his success rate exploded with showing six pictures at once. He discovered if you show a family one photo, sometimes they take the child, sometimes they don’t. If you ask a family what sex and age they would like and then show them six photos that fit their request, virtually every time a home was found. The process made him sick; displaying children like you would a dress rack. But having that choice, as cold as it made the process, opened hundreds of homes and that was his mission.

He hit a wall when he presented his lists, photos, prospective foster homes and 50-pound reserves to the British authorities. They accepted his work, but they have their pace and that included weeks of waiting – they saw no urgency. There was an order to things and this was just going to have to wait as there is “Peace in our Time” as Chamberlin had so clearly proclaimed.

But the pressure was immense, Nicholas knew the fear of the parents, he understood the danger that lay ahead so he used his best judgement – he and his one assistant forged the passports, travel documents and accompanying documentation. The fact he was an excellent typist, fluent in several languages and knew what “official documents” looked like made all the difference. He said later in life that he did not see it as treason or a crime; he was just “hurrying the process along”. With the bonus of when he produced his own paperwork, he did not need to raise the 50 pounds before he could begin bringing the children. I am

not so sure the British authorities at the time would have seen it his way, but history has a way of forgiving such things later in time.

The first train left Prague on June 29, 1939 with 241 children. The older children described a scene of unselfish love and brutal tears. The image would stay with Nicholas for the rest of his life. It was a terrible sight of crying parents and children. But it was also a powerful display of courage and love for the families that it was better to have their children live in England, than die in Czechoslovakia.

Many of the children were old enough to clearly remember the trip. They rode with tags around their necks, very much like a Paddington Bear, each with a number that matched their travel documents. As they passed through Germany, their train was boarded by guards with guns, fear reigned, and possessions were ransacked. It was not until they were in Holland where they were met by a team of ladies in traditional dress serving Hot Coco and sandwiches did they feel they were safe, then onto a ship to England.

Nicholas was confident that the forged paperwork would pass the Czechs and Germans as they didn't know what it looked like but the officers in Liverpool were another issue. There was always a race to get a proper set in hand before a boat arrived. An agent from his group always seemed to arrive just in time to "substitute" proper paperwork for the fake ones. One by one the children were picked up by their new foster parents, when a few were left the local police took care of them until the families arrived. In the end, every child had a new home.

They brought several small train loads of children through the summer but as they got the logistics down, trains, papers, timing, ships, funding they planned to expand into the fall. The raids and arrests in Prague were rising so they must act fast. There were eight trains planed in the fall of 1939, starting September 1st with 250 Children. That morning, Hitler invaded Europe, borders were closed, and the train never left the station. Although the names were on a list, none of the children were found after the war. The effort came to a complete stop. For Nicholas and

his team, there was nothing more to do. Of the 15,000 Jewish children accounted for before the war, a scant few survived the camps.

The creation of his “Committee” was at an end. Nicholas’s pacifism came to an end, it was time to wear a uniform.

Who was Nicholas Winton; this well-to-do stock broker, born to affluence and luxury, who found a calling in saving the lives of Children?

His efforts were would have been lost if it were not for the curious eyes of his wife Grete. In 1988, she found a scrap book with all the children’s names, photos and the lists he had made. The details of 669 children saved from death. They had married in 1948 – after the war – and she know nothing of what he had done.

From birth to 1939, he lived a wonderful life, grew up in a 20-room mansion, success in the finance industry, member of the British Olympic fencing team and living VERY well. From 1939 through 1948, he worked to save 669-children, served in uniform, worked with agencies after the war to help displaced families seeing the worst devastation and then in 1948 returned to the world of finance, married had a family and lived on – never saying a word. He was known as a very generous and caring man, active in Rotary and supported numerous causes such as raising millions of pounds to build a center for mentally challenged adults. He never stopped his quest to help those who could not help themselves.

Nicholas was not a man of great faith; he kicked the Rabbis out of his office that worried about Jewish children ending up with Christian families as he said he was to save lives, not souls. His parents were helpful to those in need but set no precedent for the service to others. Nicholas just felt called to do what he could to save children from a horrible fate – to do what is right!

A motto he lived by until the day he died was:

Anything that is not actually impossible can be done if one really sets one's mind to do it and is determined that it shall be done.

– Sir Nicholas Winton

This was what he did, as a British stock broker, having no idea how to save a child ended up saving 669.

Nicholas was quite humble and shunned recognition of the work he did, the image of the train on September 1st, 1939 sitting on the tracks, children destined to death left its mark, the lists of thousands he could not save left him with a never-ending sense of a job unfinished. In 1988, his wife Grete, told his story to several news outlets and none took interest until a London historian took it upon herself to find the children – now quite grown up. The list of the many very accomplished lives is astonishing. The meeting of savior and saved was televised in London in 1988 and brings tears to your eyes to watch. He is now the subject of numerous books, documentaries and has been “Knighthood” for his efforts so he is now Sir. Nicholas Winton. Nicholas died in 2015 at the age of 105. His legacy has inspired many to a life of service. He is listed with 21 other Brits on Israel’s “Righteous Among the Nations” in remembrance of the lives he saved.

Nicholas is a standard for the best of who we can be, in the most terrible of times.

I have no illusions that counties and people did horrible things to the most innocent. In writing these three short papers, I was amazed at the extraordinary number of untold stories of goodness lost to time. We focus on the atrocities to the detriment of the stories of the truly noble that fought it. They should be the role models of today! So tonight, we celebrate the goodness in our souls, and leave the darkness behind.

Mankind has shown from creation to this night
That from age to age there is a special bright light
For in the darkest of hours when life looks so bleak
Is the time when we shine to our absolute peak

Irena, 2,500...

Gino, 2,000...

Nicholas, 669...

To those who did, it was never enough... A legacy of a job unfinished, a failure in the face of war, they remained silent to their courageous deeds. To us, the finest of heroes. But to those who live today, they hold a special place in their hearts. Each breath is a gift from a stranger of so long ago. How many walk this earth today because three dedicated souls broke the rules and risked so much to save a life, how many children and grandchildren know the warmth of the morning sun? I asked a genealogist to guess. Let's raise a toast and share a smile for those that walk among us today, at the absolute minimum, 50,419.