

# *One Life: Anthony Hopkins in a drama of the Kindertransport, the 1938-39 rescue of children from Nazi-controlled territory*

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The ruling elite in every major country is encouraging the growth of ultra-right and openly fascist parties, which promote nationalism, anti-immigrant chauvinism and militarism. These movements and their leading figures, from Trump to Milei, Meloni to Netanyahu, are the deadly enemies of the working class.

For filmmaking to portray the barbarism of fascism in all its aspects therefore retains its burning relevance and necessity.

*One Life* by veteran British television director James Hawes, from a screenplay by Lucinda Coxon, Nick Drake and Barbara Winton, is a moving story about the criminality of Nazi Germany—and those who resisted it. Based on Barbara Winton’s biography of the same title, the historical drama about the rescue of child refugees from Czechoslovakia immediately prior to the outbreak of World War II features Anthony Hopkins as Nicholas Winton (Barbara’s father, 1909-2015). Winton saved 669 predominantly Jewish children from the clutches of the Nazis. The operation later became known as the *Kindertransport* (“children’s transport” in German).

Winton’s parents were German Jews who emigrated to London in the early 1900s, changing their name from Wertheim and converting to Christianity. A 2019 article in the *Jewish Historical Studies* observed, “More than any other person, the well-known Nicholas Winton has been identified with the Czech *Kindertransport*. Winton received worldwide recognition as the organizer of the children’s transports from Prague and has been the subject of many publications and films. Half a century after the actual events, Winton has become an icon.”

*One Life* cuts back and forth between the early days of World War II and the late 1980s.

Intriguingly, the film opens, in fact, with a scene set in the latter time period of supporters and families of Tamil migrants gathered outside a London refugee detention center to protest the government’s plan to deport them. While the protesters explain, “We came here because in our country our lives are in danger. We came to keep our children safe,” a television newsreader intones, “A Home Office spokesman described Britain’s humanitarian record as outstanding.”

Portions of Hawes’ work take place in 1938, when Nicky Winton (Johnny Flynn plays the young Winton), a London stockbroker, travels to Czechoslovakia as a volunteer to help the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC).

While in Prague, he is appalled by the desperate and impoverished conditions of families, with no food or shelter, who have fled the rise of the Hitlerite forces in Germany and Austria and are now threatened by a Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Despite the later claims of Britain’s “outstanding” record, *One Life* establishes that UK bureaucrats in 1938 were largely indifferent to the fate of the children in Czechoslovakia. As this piece of dialogue reveals.

- What about the British government trains?
- The *Kindertransport*?
- It’s only for children leaving Germany and Austria.
- Not from Czechoslovakia.
- Unfortunately, His Majesty’s government refuses to believe these people are in danger.

Eventually, the British government agrees to admit the children, but on onerous terms: “A separate visa application for each child. An individual sponsor who must promise to pay for all the child’s needs. And a fee of 50 pounds [\$5,446 today] to pay for their eventual return.”

Nicky writes to a British newspaper:

“Dear sir, I have just returned from Prague, where I was assessing the fate of refugees in the city. Among the many unfortunate souls, I found about 2,000 children living in damp, overcrowded camps. Overcrowded, insanitary camps. There are families just like this, just like yours, living in conditions you cannot imagine. The threat of war hangs over them. What they have done for you is to stand against Nazi expansionism. All they ask, in return, is a temporary refuge for their children. From whatever horror is yet to come.”

He also appealed to US president Franklin D. Roosevelt (“Fat lot of good he was. I never heard back from him”).

At one point, the young Winton explains: “I consider myself a

European, an agnostic, and a Socialist.”

A monumental effort is undertaken, with the help of Nicky’s energetic mother (Helena Bonham Carter), colleagues and friends from the UK and Prague, which includes pasting the children’s photos on the visas, raising large sums of money and convincing British families to foster the children. The team collected or forged the children’s travel documents, and placed advertisements in newspapers to find them foster homes.

On March 14, 1939, the day before Nazi Germany invaded the Czech regions of Bohemia and Moravia, the first of eight trains containing the more than 600 children headed to Britain. A ninth train was scheduled to depart on September 3, but was halted. Germany had invaded Poland two days earlier, officially starting the war, and the borders were now closed. None of the approximately 250 children on that train are known to have survived. The movie includes a horrifying scene of children being dragged off the trains by German soldiers.

Fifty years later, Nicky (Hopkins) lives a modest life in England with his Danish-born wife Grete (Lena Olin), tormented by thoughts of the thousands he simply could not save. Guilt-ridden, he is told that 15,000 children were sent to concentration camps in Czechoslovakia but less than 200 survived.

In 1988, Winton is invited to go on the BBC television series *That’s Life!*, hosted by television presenter Esther Rantzen (Samantha Spiro), to “check the historical accuracy” of the *Kindertransport* story, he is told. He has no idea why he is placed in the middle of the front row or that he will be seated next to Vera Gissing (Henrietta Garden), one of the children he saved. Gissing too is surprised, and overwhelmed with emotion, when their identities are revealed on the show. The following week, the studio is packed with other rescued children and their families. (The shows can be seen here.)

Winton was nicknamed “the British Schindler” after German industrialist Oskar Schindler, who saved some 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust. More than 6,000 children and grandchildren of the Czech *Kindertransport* owe their lives in part to Nicholas Winton.

*One Life* conscientiously dramatizes an extraordinary story. The veteran Hopkins makes an outstanding contribution to the film. He inhabits the character with tremendous skill, personifying quiet emotionalism and modesty. Although he does much to carry the movie, Bonham Carter, Olin and Flynn as the young Nicky, as well as the rest of the cast, form a riveting ensemble. Cinematographer Zac Nicholson adds texture and ambience to the well-known story and Volker Bertelmann’s score offers additional emotion.

In an interview with *Movieweb*, director Hawes was asked about the “message” he wanted audience members to take away from *One Life*. The filmmaker replied that there were, in fact, “two messages.” First, he argued, Winton “would be appalled that we haven’t learned the lessons from the Second World War and that so much ... it’s so similar now. We should look at ourselves and ask, why is that the case?”

Second, Hawes asserted that Winton would insist that all children be treated “the same. It’s not about race or creed, or ethnicity, or social status. They should all be treated the same, given the same chances, and given the chance to live, and to

survive, and not die in the wars that we grownups impose on them.”

All of this is to the filmmakers’ credit, but a word has to be said about their limited point of view. In another interview (with *Original-Cin*), Hawes argued that “Nicky’s lesson is simple. You don’t have to solve everything but do your bit. Do the decent thing. He talked about this idea of active goodness, which is it’s not enough to say I’m being good. Do whatever little bit you can.

“It can be very local, it can be a small gesture, but just do something. ... It’s about giving that little bit you can and not expecting you to take in 20 refugees, but just seeing how you can be aware and share in the discussion.”

This is absolutely *not* how anti-immigrant chauvinism, much less fascism, must be fought. In fact, through no fault of Winton and other humanitarians, whose actions were courageous and heroic, they were only able to save a tiny fraction of the European Jewish population. The threat and crimes of fascism, including the Zionist variety, will be eliminated only when their source, the capitalist system, is done away with and not before.

Responding, in the late 1920s, to sentiments similar to Hawes’, left-wing poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht sardonically observed in “A Bed for the Night” that he had “heard” of a man in New York City who obtained beds for the homeless every night. The poem continues:

*It won’t change the world  
It won’t improve relations among men  
It will not shorten the age of exploitation  
But a few men have a bed for the night  
For a night the wind is kept from them  
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway.  
Don’t put down the book on reading this, man.  
A few people have a bed for the night  
For a night the wind is kept from them  
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway  
But it won’t change the world  
It won’t improve relations among men  
It will not shorten the age of exploitation.*



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