

JONATHAN ROMAIN

Honour Nicholas Winton by doing your bit to help those in need

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If anyone did not already know why Sir Nicholas Winton's name is mentioned with awe, they will if they watch *One Life*, the new film about him. The title is misleading because it refers not to his life but to the rabbinic saying, "The person who saves one life is as if he had saved an entire world". It became well known to us in 1994 when it featured in the film *Schindler's List*. The words were engraved on a gold ring that Jews saved from extermination camps by Oskar Schindler gave him as a token of appreciation.

This connection between the two men is not accidental, for Winton is often described as 'the British Schindler' for spiriting 669 children, largely Jewish, out of Prague just before World World II broke out, bringing them to safety in Britain. It is estimated that their descendants number around 4,000 individual worlds today.

But was he in the same league as Schindler? In some ways, the answer may be 'no'. Schindler saved many more from certain death, as did the Swedish businessman, Raoul Wallenberg, the British Intelligence Officer, Frank Foley, and the Portuguese and Japanese diplomats, Aristides de Sousa Mendes and Chiune Sugihara..

In addition, unlike these men, all acting in war-time Europe, Winton was never in personal danger, for after an initial visit to Prague, he then conducted operations from London.

But heroism can be backroom as well as frontline, while Winton surely ranks higher than most people who looked on, sighed and failed to act.

He often claimed that he did nothing special and just what any other person could have done. But the reality is that they did not do so, whereas he did. His light may not be the very brightest in the firmament, but it certainly shines out.

The same modest practicality that made Winton uncomfortable with the adulation he received, would also have caused him some dismay at the showing of this film.

Having got to know him well in his later years, I can hear his voice ring out: don't concentrate on what I did back then, think of what you can do now. Look around at who needs help today and do something about it.

There is a danger that celebrating the heroism of the past can be a way of averting our gaze from the present. The former should inspire the latter, not sap our attention from it.

If we want to honour Winton best, then we will not go home from the cinema but off to a foodbank, refugee shelter or other charitable endeavour and help the many worlds crying out for help in our time.

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