

ROBINSON

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That's Life!

1988

Nothing was the same again for my father after 27 February 1988. His search for a home for an old scrapbook of his, documenting the transportation of over 600 children from Czechoslovakia to Britain in 1939, had led him to the BBC studios of *That's Life!*, a popular Sunday-night show. The programme was going to highlight the story that night, and the producers had asked Nicky to come along to check the accuracy of the script and watch the item from among the studio audience. My parents had been given so little preparation for what was to come that Grete, thinking it might be rather dull, decided to stay at home. She could always watch it on TV and see it as clearly as he did from the audience. They really had no idea of what was in store.

You may remember *That's Life!*, a live weekly programme hosted by Esther Rantzen, covering consumer-type issues with humorous interludes, which regularly gained huge audiences of over eighteen million. Rantzen had got hold of the scrapbook through Dr Elisabeth Maxwell, a historian researching the history of her husband, a Czech Jew, and preparing a conference on the Holocaust for that summer, 'Remembering for the Future', to be held in Oxford in July 1988. And so, for the first time, this story fell right into the hands of someone really interested and knowledgeable.

She, in turn, had been shown it by my father who had, for some time, been trying to find someone who might find the historical

details interesting. Dr Maxwell was fascinated by the original documents and letters compiled in the scrapbook, and, in particular, the list at the back, comprising the names of all the rescued children, along with the names and addresses of those who had agreed to foster them in Britain in 1939.

Her Czech-Jewish husband happened to be Robert Maxwell, then owner of Mirror Group Newspapers, and so a long article on the subject of the children's rescue, titled 'The Lost Children', was splashed across three pages of the *Sunday Mirror* the same day as *That's Life!* featured the story. The article described how these endangered children had been saved by Nicholas Winton, who had organised trains to bring them to Britain and foster families to look after them. It asked where all these children, now adults, were today.

What happened that evening in the TV studio was a producer's delight – an ambush of an unsuspecting innocent. My father had been placed in the front row of the audience as the programme began. Esther Rantzen produced the scrapbook and explained its contents, telling the story about the evacuation of endangered, mainly Jewish, children from Czechoslovakia just before the outbreak of war, including the facts that nearly all of their families left behind were murdered by the Nazis and that the rescued children had never known how they had come to be saved. She flicked through the book, pointing out various letters and details, until she finally came to the list of all the rescued children, their names and the addresses of where they'd been sent taped into the back. Picking out one name on the list, Vera Diamant, she addressed a woman in the audience, introduced her as the Vera on the list and told her she was sitting next to the man who had saved her life.

It was a wonderful moment, one that Vera (now Vera Gissing) later frequently recalled, saying how much fulfilment it had brought her to meet her saviour at last. For my father, it was wonderful too, but also an unexpected emotional shock for which he had been totally unprepared. Normally an emotionally

restrained man, he could not hold back tears when Vera threw her arms around him and said, 'Thank you, thank you', all in front of the audience and cameras. The programme shows him trying to discreetly wipe away tears from behind his thick-lens glasses and force his face to remain calm. For the second 'child' introduced that night, Milena Grenfell-Baines, sitting on his other side, he managed to remain more composed, though still looking poleaxed by the shock of their – and his – emotions.

The programme makers were delighted, of course, to have produced such an emotional and intense TV moment – one that had so nearly been thwarted before the show began. Nicky had seen in the audience someone he knew, Rudi Wessely, and had asked Vera to move so Rudi could have her seat. Vera, having been placed there and forbidden to move by the show's producers, had refused and so their first encounter had not been so joyous. Esther Rantzen later admitted that the moment she introduced them was the only time



Vera Gissing meeting Nicky on *That's Life!*, February 1988

on TV when she had burst into tears and had to stop to recover. Her view was that 'If you get real positive emotions on TV, it reaches right into viewers' homes and hearts, and this did.' And if Nicky and Grete had been warned, then it would not have happened so spontaneously. 'Sometimes as a producer you don't ask the family.'

It took a long time for my parents to forgive Esther for this emotional shock and it became a sparring joke over the years between them whenever they met her. They were media virgins then, but, in the years that followed, they became more used to the tricks used by the media to get a good picture or response for the cameras.

So when Nicky was invited back to *That's Life!* for the following Sunday's show on 6 March, Grete accompanied him, to give him support for whatever was in store. She had been watching at home, horrified, when he had been ambushed, knowing how stressful such an unexpected and personal encounter would be, and all in the public gaze. Though this time they had an inkling of what might occur, they were still amazed when, after Esther had reminded viewers of the story, and had asked if any people in the audience who'd been rescued by Nicholas Winton could stand up, they saw about five rows of people getting to their feet.

It was a very dramatic moment for all concerned and one that has since been shown many times when the Czech children's rescue story has been depicted.

It turned out that Dr Maxwell, brilliantly, had thought to write to all the addresses in the list of the original foster parents of the children, found in the back of the scrapbook, to discover if they still housed people who had knowledge of the fostered children from 1939. The first *Mirror* article had also made an appeal to 'any of the young escapers' to get in touch. Amazingly, as she described later, she got positive replies from over 200 of the addresses.

This had allowed the *Sunday Mirror* and *That's Life!* to contact people who knew they had come from Czechoslovakia on a train

and been taken in by a foster family in 1939, but had no idea of how it had been organised. Some believed that it was the same organisation that had arranged the much larger German children's transport (known as the Kindertransport), which had rescued almost 10,000 endangered German and Austrian children before the war. Some of those contacted became the audience for the second *That's Life!*. They were middle-aged men and women who had, just days before, discovered an essential piece in the jigsaw of their early life.

So how was it that this brief but dramatic TV experience changed Nicky's life? Well, it was the moment when the story of the rescued children was made public; the moment that these 'children' – by now adults in their late fifties and sixties – began to discover how their escape from Czechoslovakia had been organised, and that man



The rescued 'children' stand up on *That's Life!*.
Nicky and Grete are seated front right.

was one of those responsible. Not only that, but he had documents, letters and photos, all miraculously intact from that time.

It was hard for Nicky and Grete to get to grips with what was happening. These 'children', now adults, began to call, write, and appear at on their doorstep, asking questions, wanting to see the documents, bringing their own treasured documents kept from that time to show him, and to look at the list of rescued children taped in the back of the scrapbook to check if their names were there.

Their emotions, long suppressed since childhood, were released when they came face to face with Nicky, realised that he personally had helped to save them, and that he was the only link that many of them had to their past – their families left behind in Czechoslovakia and nearly all murdered by the Nazis.

No one up to that point, looking at the scrapbook, had fully understood the emotions involved in the story. It had seemed a fascinating piece of old history, but, to this group of people, it was a vital link to their past and it seemed to rekindle long-repressed emotions from childhood – not just related to them leaving their families, but to being sent away by their parents and being that family's only survivor. Many had not thought about their past for some time until they'd been reminded by the *Sunday Mirror* and *That's Life!* or by a letter arriving from Elisabeth Maxwell. Others had continued to wonder about it, but had been unable to discover any details about how they had come to arrive in the UK and ended up where they did.

Someone Nicky already knew, who'd been through the escape operation, was Rudi Wessely, who had nearly inadvertently sabotaged the first *That's Life!* show; he'd been in the audience that day because he was also a rescued child from Czechoslovakia. He and Nicky had met in 1983 through their mutual work for Abbeyfield, a charity offering supported housing for the elderly. They had discovered their link when, during a break in a meeting, Nicky had

asked Rudi what his accent was, and Rudi had told him his story as far as he knew it. Nicky, replying that he'd had something to do with the Czech Kindertransport, had offered to check his list of rescued children to see if Rudi's name was there, and he'd phoned him the same evening to confirm it. However, at the time, both Rudi and Nicky were more interested in talking about Abbeyfield than the past that linked them.

Nicky, no doubt, had given Rudi's details to Elisabeth Maxwell as the only person he had ever met since the war who'd been on one of his transports. Over the years since, there have been regular letters, phone calls and visits to my parents (and then, since my mother's death in 1999, to my father alone) from those 'children' who had discovered their story and wanted to have it confirmed by looking at Nicky's list of names.

Now, with email, enquiries come that way too. Some make contact, are satisfied and that's it. Others remain in touch, become friends and visit on occasion or come regularly to chat, laugh, go out for meals, like a normal extended family. Because one thing that has happened is that Nicky has, for many, become an honorary father to those who lost their own father in that terrible time.

When the enquires began, my mother once again became the secretary she had been when she first met Nicky, but now on his behalf. She kept tabs on who phoned, wrote, visited, and could remind Nicky about them when they next made contact. She was brilliant at recalling stories, the ups and downs of lives lived, while also being the hostess who provided meals, teas, drinks for whoever came. Nicky was long used to inviting whoever he met wherever he had been to come back home for a meal, provided by Grete, and he continued to do this with his new-found 'children'. This was all in addition to their ongoing busy life.

But that was not to be the end of it. The network of 'children' who passed on to each other the story of their rescuer extended to other countries, including Czechoslovakia, Israel, the USA,

Canada, New Zealand and Hungary. Initially, it was all low-key – individuals discovering previously unknown parts of their history and wanting to talk, to ask questions, to help to fill the gaps in their memory.

For most of us, our early memory has holes, but often these are filled by family stories and photos – there are people we can ask. For the child refugees, the gaps had remained all their lives until the chance finally arrived to find a few answers: How had they got to Britain? What had happened to their families that had caused them to send their children ‘Into the Arms of Strangers’? Nicky was, for many, a link back to the families that they had lost.

This diverse group of people, from all over the world – now quite elderly themselves – call themselves Nicky’s ‘children’, and so do my brother and I, despite being younger than them all. Not only do these rescued ‘children’ appear but also their own children and grandchildren too, sometimes with their parent, but sometimes having only discovered the story after their parent, the rescued ‘child’, has died.

An abiding theme in most initial visits is the family – not just those who did not escape, but even more so those who came to be born after, who gave meaning to the lives of those who had lost everything that was most precious. Pictures are produced of their children, grandchildren, husbands, wives, to demonstrate to Nicky that new lives were made, which were rich, worthwhile and meaningful. Questions are asked; some he can answer and some he can’t. How did they come to be selected? Did he meet their parents? They hope his memory or the scrapbook can provide the facts so long missing for them. The pages of the scrapbook provide many helpful details of their rescue, and as they peruse it, the story of how Nicky and his colleagues carried out their rescue is revealed.

* The title of a 2001 Oscar-winning documentary about the whole Kindertransport movement.

Over the first few months after the initial publicity, the story of how Nicholas Winton had organised the rescue of 669 children from Czechoslovakia spread through the community of ex-refugees. Many had kept in contact through a network of links, from their school days at the Czech school in Wales during the war or through other survivor organisations. (There were ex-refugees, of course, who were not part of this loose network. They had forged new lives and didn't want to be reminded of such a painful part of their history.)

By the time of the conference 'Remembering for the Future', organised by Dr Maxwell for July 1988, over 150 people from all over the world had identified their names on the list in the scrapbook. The conference, primarily a scholarly event, commenced with a meeting of survivors, many of whom were from the Czech rescue. Dr Maxwell invited Nicky to attend the pre-conference meeting to enable the 'children' to meet their rescuer and offer thanks for what he had done for them fifty years before.

As many wanted to give thanks more tangibly, contributions were collected by Dr Maxwell, who purchased a gold ring inscribed with the words 'Save One Life – Save the World', a quotation from the Jewish Talmud, which was given to him there. The money raised had so much exceeded the cost of the ring that the rest was donated to Nicky's current charitable enterprise, an Abbeyfield extra-care home for the elderly, to purchase a piano for the residents.

Others met him the following year at the International Reunion of the Kindertransport, a fiftieth anniversary meeting organised by Bertha Leverton, a child refugee who came to Britain on the much larger officially organised Kindertransport from Germany and Austria in 1938 and 1939.

However, his first major trip abroad was to Israel in May 1989, to donate his scrapbook to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Yad Vashem describes itself as the world centre for documentation, research,