

Stars of the Night



The COURAGEOUS CHILDREN of the CZECH KINDERTRANSPORT

232296

CAREN STELSON
Illustrations by
SELINA ALKO

von 1/4 liter Milch, 2 Dotter
& ein Kaffelöffel
tes Mehl, etwas
Zucker, eine Spü

Author's Acknowledgments

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Stars of the Night

The
**Courageous
Children**

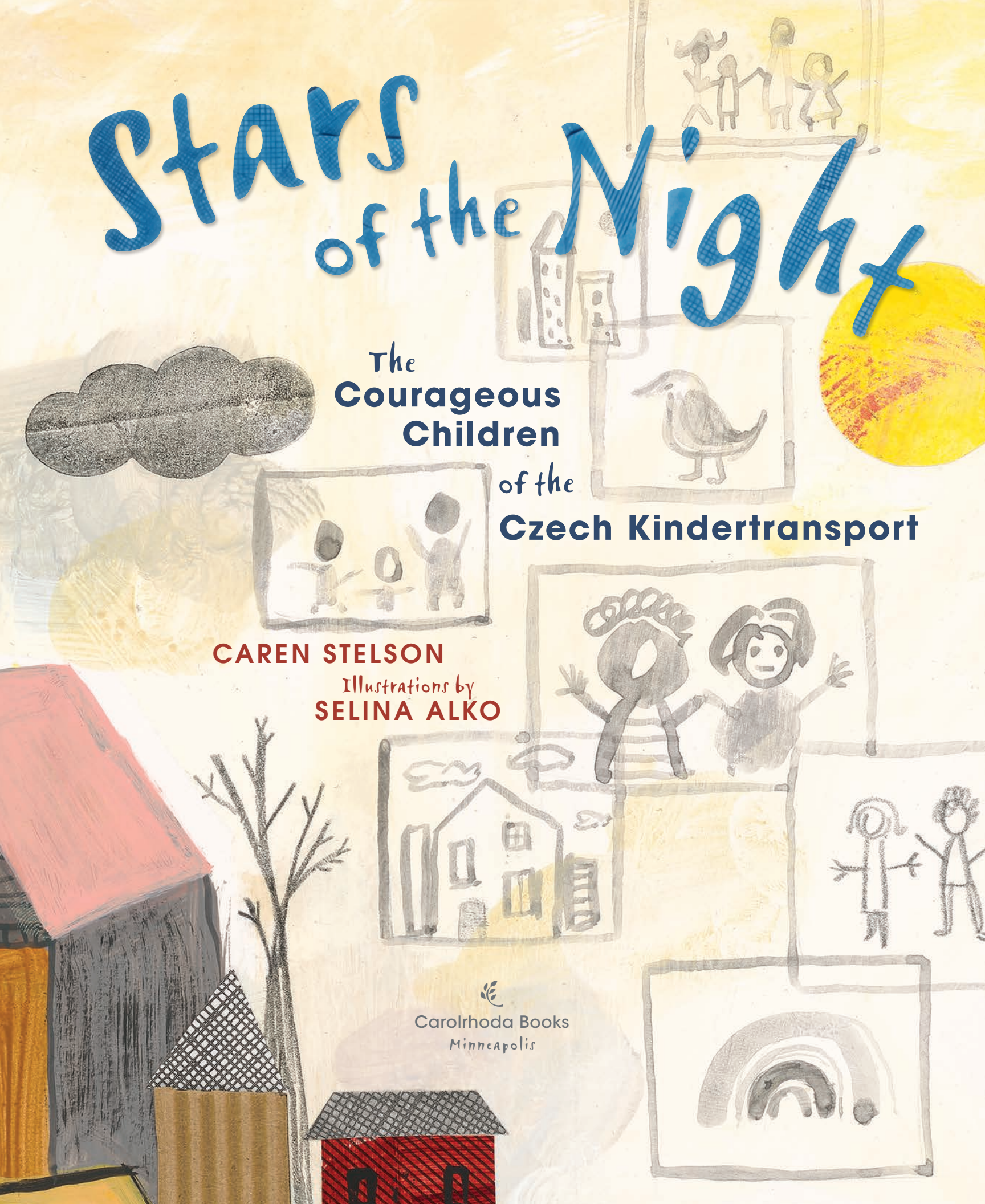
of the
Czech Kindertransport

CAREN STELSON

Illustrations by
SELINA ALKO



Carolrhoda Books
Minneapolis



of thin, thin things, and sat down on the table
for company. In came a pair of huge, huge hips
led, and still she reeled. And still she wished for
waist! And still she reeled. And still she wished for
and sat down on a pair of huge, huge hips
wished for a pair of huge, huge hips
sitting at her side. In came a pair of huge, huge hips
of broad, broad shoulders. In came a pair of huge, huge hips
pany. In came a pair of huge, huge hips
nd still she wished for a pair of huge, huge hips
sat, and still she wished for a pair of huge, huge hips

him

NICHOLAS
WINTON

Mr. William
Jewell - Leipzig
Hamburg 3
Germany



THE KINDERTRANSPORT MOVEMENT

The story told in *Stars of the Night* took place just before World War II (1939–1945) broke out in Europe. During the war, the German Nazi government of Adolf Hitler murdered six million Jewish people, which is known as the Holocaust. That number includes the parents of most of the children who were sent away on the Kindertransport. To fully appreciate Nicholas Winton's heroic efforts to save 669 Czechoslovakian children from the Nazis, it is helpful to understand the larger Kindertransport movement. Even before Winton began his work in Prague, humanitarian workers in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands had begun working with refugee organizations in Britain to secure safe homes for Jewish children. In the course of nine months, from December 1938 to the outbreak of World War II, Kindertransport volunteers brought nearly ten thousand children, mostly Jewish, to Britain. Although they could not have known it at the time, the children who boarded the Kindertransports were on a journey that would save their lives.

TIMELINE

1933 Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party come to power in Germany. Their goal is to take absolute control of the government as well as all aspects of the German society and culture. Germany had been defeated in World War I. Hitler is able to leverage the anger in the country to begin a campaign of racial hatred. The Nazis promote the unfounded notion that a race they call Aryan is superior to all others. Non-Aryans include Jewish people as well as Roma and Sinti and Black people. The government begins discriminating against Jews, removing them from positions in public offices, the arts, and education.

1935 On September 15, the Nuremberg Laws pass, stripping Jews in Germany of citizenship and other fundamental rights. These laws legalize discrimination against Jews and others deemed "undesirable."

1938 On March 12–13, Germany invades and annexes Austria, a German-speaking country, as part of the Nazi's Third Reich, or empire. Following the invasion, violence against Jews living in Austria increases.

On September 29–30, leaders of Britain, France, and Italy sign the Munich Agreement. This allows Hitler to take over the German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland.

On November 9–10, Nazis coordinate attacks on Jewish communities throughout Germany, Austria, and areas of the Sudetenland. The attacks become known as Kristallnacht, or the "Night of the Broken Glass," because of the shards of glass that litter the streets. Jewish-owned storefronts and buildings are targeted and smashed. In addition, Jewish homes, hospitals, and schools are vandalized, and synagogues are burned to the ground. More than thirty thousand Jewish men are arrested and brought to concentration camps.

Kristallnacht is a turning point. Jews from Germany and the Sudetenland stream into refugee camps outside of Prague, Czechoslovakia, swelling their numbers to 250,000. Soon afterward, the British Parliament agrees to allow unaccompanied children under the age of seventeen from Germany and German-annexed territories to enter the country. To enter, each child has to have a guaranteed foster placement and financial payment for their return home.

On December 1, Operation Kindertransport begins when the first train departs from Berlin, Germany, with 196 children on board from a Jewish orphanage burned during Kristallnacht. The children reach Harwich, England, the next day.



In late December, Nicholas Winton gets involved. Born in London to parents from German Jewish families, Nicholas, or Nicky, was schooled in Britain and trained in banking. At twenty-nine-years old, Winton is working as a London stockbroker and plans to travel to Switzerland to ski. Shortly before the trip, his friend



Winton holds a Czech child in January 1939.

Martin Blake calls and says, "I have a most interesting assignment and I need your help. Don't bother bringing your skis."

Winton meets Blake in Prague. Blake is working with Trevor Chadwick and Doreen Warriner to help adult refugees from Nazi-occupied regions to safety. Winton quickly realizes that no one is focusing on the children. He writes, "I found out that the children of refugees and other groups of people weren't being looked after. . . . The parents desperately wanted at least to get their children to safety. . . . Everybody in Prague said, 'Look, there is no organization in Prague to deal with refugee children, nobody will let the children go on their own, but if you want to have a go, have a go.'"

During his time in Prague, Winton creates his own unofficial "British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, Children's Section" and appoints himself the head.

1939 Winton returns to Britain on January 21 and continues his work. With the help of a small group of others, including his mother, Winton begins raising money and identifying foster British homes, forging documents when necessary. The number of applicants grows, reaching five thousand requests.

On March 14, the first of Winton's transports leaves Prague with twenty children on board.

On March 15, Hitler's German army invades the western half of Czechoslovakia. Czech Jewish parents become desperate to get their children to safety.

From April through August, Winton's team brings groups of children from Czechoslovakia to Britain on seven additional transports. This brings the total number of transports to eight, with a total of 669 children brought to Britain.

On September 1, the ninth Winton train is preparing to leave Prague with 250 children on board when Hitler's army invades Poland. Borders controlled by Germany are closed, and the train cannot leave. This marks the beginning of World War II in Europe. The German army continues to invade other European countries.

After the war begins, Winton does not stay in touch with the children he rescued. He serves in the Royal Air Force and returns home to a lifetime of humanitarian projects.

1945 On March 25, Prague is bombed by the United States, damaging or destroying certain sections of the city.

The war finally ends in Europe on May 7.

1948 On October 31, Winton marries Grete Gjelstrup. In the years that follow, they have three children and raise them in Maidenhead, England. Winton never mentions his role in the Kindertransport to Grete or his children.

1988 Grete finds a scrapbook in the attic. Inside is a list of children's names, photos, letters from parents, and other documents—everything from Nicholas Winton's Czech Kindertransport.

Later that same year, Winton is invited to be a guest on a popular British television show,

That's Life! Unbeknownst to Winton, the audience is made up of people who had come to Britain as children as part of the Czech Kindertransport. At last, they have a chance to meet him and thank him for saving their lives.

Winton's "children," as they called themselves, never stop thanking him for saving their lives. On one occasion, they give Winton a ring engraved with words from the Talmud, translated into English: "Save one life. Save the world." Today more than six thousand children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of "Winton's children" live all over the world.

1998 Czech president Václav Havel formally recognizes Winton for his humanity and courage.



Sir Nicholas Winton at Buckingham Palace after being knighted for his services to humanity

2003 On March 11, Winton is knighted by Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom.

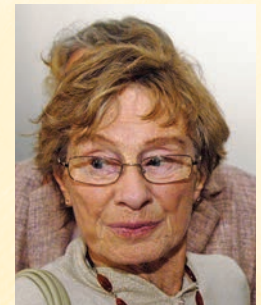
2015 On July 1, Nicholas Winton dies peacefully at the age of 106.

WINTON'S CHILDREN

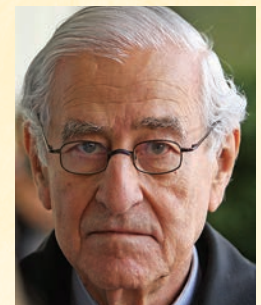
Throughout *Stars of the Night*, five children consistently wear orange, red, dark blue, light blue, or green. These children represent sisters Eva and Vera Diamantova (orange and red, respectively), brothers Josef and Ernest Schlesinger (dark blue and light blue, respectively), and Renata Polgar (green). While they were not all in the same place at the same time in real life, they are all real people Nicholas Winton saved and help to show the collective experiences of those rescued.

On July 20, 1939, Vera Diamantova, aged ten, and Eva Diamantova, aged fifteen, hugged their parents goodbye for the last time and boarded the Czech Kindertransport. It took them from Prague through Germany and the Netherlands, to the town of Hook of Holland. They then traveled by boat across the English Channel to Britain, eventually reaching Liverpool Street Station in London. Before Vera left, her father gave her a diary to capture her thoughts and experiences. That diary and others became the material for Vera's memoir, *Pearls of Childhood*. In it, Vera wrote the words her mother shared with her before they embarked on their journey: "There will be times when you'll feel lonely and homesick. Let the stars of the night and the sun of the day be the messenger of our thoughts and love." Those words helped guide Vera and Eva—and also guided the writing of this story. Although their parents did not survive the war, the sisters never forgot their mother's words of hope and connection. As an adult, Vera made Britain her home and later became a writer and interpreter under her married name, Vera Gissing, while her sister, Eva Hayman, moved to New Zealand and became a nurse. Eva died in 2013, and Vera died in 2022.

Josef Schlesinger was eleven years old and his younger brother, Ernest, was nine when they left their home in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, and boarded a Winton Kindertransport. Josef remembers the night their ship crossed the English Channel. The children softly sang the Czech national anthem, "Kde domov můj?" This translates into English as "Where is my



Vera Gissing



Josef Schlesinger

home?" Josef's experience in his British home was a struggle, and like most children, Josef and Ernest learned their parents did not survive the Holocaust. Fifty years later, when Josef met Nicholas Winton, Josef felt he had found a father figure he needed all along. As adults, the brothers moved to Canada. Josef became a well-known journalist. Ernest spent his career in social work. Josef died in February 2019, and Ernest died in March 2021.

Renata Polgar remembered a happy childhood in her hometown of Brno, the second-largest city in Czechoslovakia. Her parents grew worried after the events of Kristallnacht and sought a way for their only child to escape to safety. Her mother connected with a family in Britain who offered to care for her daughter. At first, Renata was excited. She would be part of the Daniels family, with a "little brother," a kitten, and a garden to make her feel at home. When the day came to travel to Prague and climb aboard a Winton Kindertransport, Renata cried. She was only eight years old, facing a journey by herself to an unknown country to meet a family she did not know. Fortunately for Renata, her seven years living with the Daniels family were full of fond memories. And out of the 669 children saved by Nicholas Winton, Renata was one of five children whose parents both survived the Holocaust. (Twenty had one parent survive.) After the war, Renata married, changed her last name to Laxova, and eventually immigrated to the United States, becoming a well-known pediatric genetic scientist. She would always remember Nicholas Winton's life philosophy, "If it's not impossible, then there must a way to do it." She died in November 2020.

STARS IN ANOTHER NIGHT: YAD VASHEM'S CHILDREN'S MEMORIAL

Although ten thousand children were saved by the Kindertransport movement, many more Jewish children did not have the opportunity to board a train to safety. Instead, they and their parents were ordered to board trains to concentration camps. Of the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, one and a half million were children. The Children's Memorial, part of the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem, Israel, honors these youngest victims. Flickering candle flames reflected in mirrors covering the memorial's interior give the impression of an infinite blanket of stars across the night sky. *Stars of the Night* is a tribute to these children too.



The Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem

NICHOLAS WINTON'S STORY LIVES ON

Nicholas Winton's Kindertransport story is not only a story of history but also one that can inspire us to action today. In many parts of the world, children are refugees caught in dangerous situations or immigrants struggling to make a home in a new country. May Nicholas Winton's courage and forethought inspire all of us to make a difference in children's lives. To save one life *can* help save the world.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Several years ago, my older brother Bill sent me a video clip in an email. "This might interest you," he wrote. I opened the attachment. Scenes from the now-famous BBC video of Nicholas Winton and his heroic efforts to save 669 Czechoslovakian children from Nazi persecution flashed in front of me. Until that moment, I had not heard of Nicholas Winton, nor did I know much about the Kindertransport movement. Watching bewildered children say goodbye to crying parents at a train station—I couldn't help it—tears welled up. I played the video again. And again. And again.

I began to read everything I could about Nicholas Winton, the Kindertransport movement, and the children on those trains. One morning, I woke up early and sat at my writing desk. *Stars of the Night* poured out, as if I had stepped into that time and had become a Kinder myself.

Why was I so drawn to this story?

I am from a Jewish family. We have unspoken stories about family members I have never met who died in the Holocaust. When I was younger, I read stories of the Holocaust and wondered what would have happened to me if I had been born in Europe during World War II. Which train would I have been sent on? A train to England and safety? Or a train to a dark and unknown end? After writing *Stars of the Night*, I hug my own children and grandchildren a little tighter and look for new ways to help give children, wherever they are, a ticket to life.

—Caren Stelson

ILLUSTRATOR'S NOTE

I grew up in British Columbia, Canada, in the 1970s and 1980s, an artistic child of Jewish immigrants. Although I went to a public school, my happy place was spending summers at a progressive Jewish sleepaway camp where we were schooled in the history of anti-Semitism and played capture the flag. I honed my creative skills at camp, painting peaceful murals of community and togetherness. Now as an adult, I love illustrating (and sometimes writing) children's books with social justice themes and have been doing so for more than twenty years.

When I heard about Nicholas Winton, I jumped at the chance to illustrate his story. In this case, my research meant revisiting that painful time during World War II when my Jewish ancestors in Eastern Europe were facing imminent persecution. Learning that some families were given the chance to save their children felt somewhat hopeful, and I appreciated the incredibly organized and anonymous nature of Winton's benevolent work. I began illustrating this story during the COVID-19 pandemic when children all around me (including my own) were suffering from being forced to stay at home, separated from the vital socialization that happens at school with their peers. To add more weight to the situation, as I was working on the final art, Russia had invaded Ukraine and war was raging overseas, forcing millions to flee their homes. The clear parallels around me served to emphasize the importance of getting this hopeful true story out into the world.

—Selina Alko



SOURCE NOTES

With the exception of the “stars of the night” quotation, the dialogue in the main text is based on children’s accounts of the Czech Kindertransport but is not quoted directly.

“There will be times . . . our thoughts and love.”: Vera Gissing, *Pearls of Childhood* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988), 35.

“I have a most interesting . . . bother bringing your skis.”: “The Story,” Nicholas Winton, *the Power of Good*, last updated May 28, 2009, <http://www.powerofgood.net/story.php>.

“I found out that . . . have a go.”: “The Story.”

“If it’s not impossible . . . way to do it.”: “Holocaust Stories: In their Honor featuring Renata Laxova,” YouTube video, 45:18, posted by Holocaust Education Resource Center, April 8, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yKlJnK23_E 22:58/45:18.

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Find the complete bibliography of sources consulted at <https://www.carenstelson.com>.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

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CAREN STELSON is the author of *A Bowl Full of Peace: A True Story* and *Sachiko: A Nagasaki Bomb Survivor's Story*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award and received the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, a Sibert Honor,

and numerous other recognitions. Caren has a deep interest in the human cost of World War II and the stories of trauma, resilience, and hope that emerge from that dark time. The more she learns about war, the more she is committed to working for peace for children everywhere. As part of this commitment, a portion of her royalties from *Stars of the Night* will support the nonprofit organization Save the Children. Caren and her husband, Kim, live in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They have two adult children, Aaron and Beth, and two grandchildren, Reid and Lucy.

www.carenstelson.com



Growing up Jewish in Vancouver, Canada, **SELINA ALKO** was acutely aware of her family's ancestry in Eastern Europe and the tragedies of World War II. The award-winning illustrator jumped at the chance to visualize the story of the Kindertransport as a

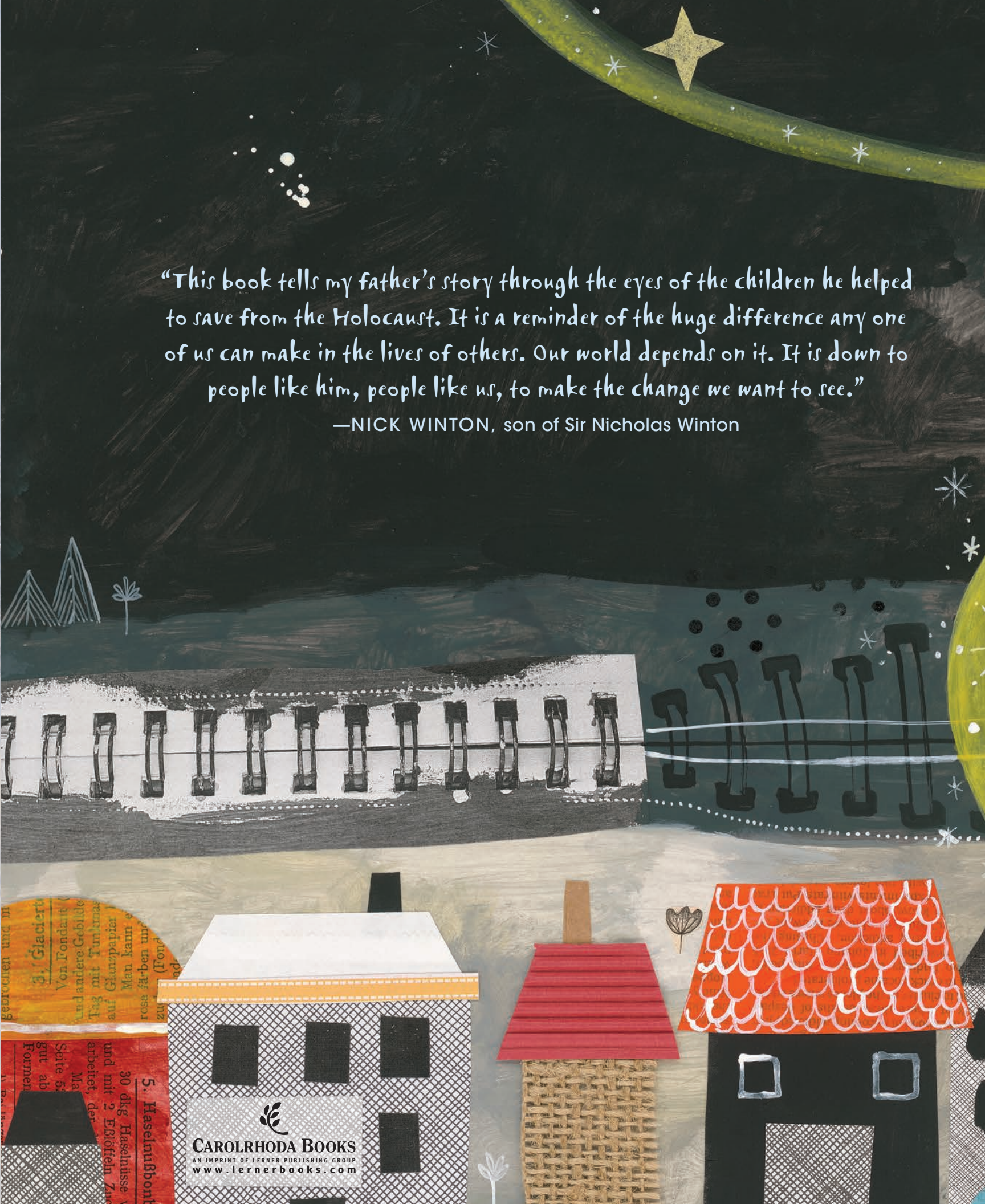
way to connect with her own history and bring the important story of Nicholas Winton to life. Selina's other nonfiction picture books include *The Case for Loving: The Fight for Interracial Marriage*, *Joni: The Lyrical Life of Joni Mitchell*, and *I Is for Immigrants*.

www.selinaalko.com

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"This book tells my father's story through the eyes of the children he helped to save from the Holocaust. It is a reminder of the huge difference any one of us can make in the lives of others. Our world depends on it. It is down to people like him, people like us, to make the change we want to see."

—NICK WINTON, son of Sir Nicholas Winton