



IRENA SENDLER



Irena Sendler was born in 1910, just outside of Warsaw, Poland. At the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Jews made up about 30% of the total population of Warsaw.

In 1939, Irena Sendler was a Senior Administrator in the Warsaw Social Welfare Department. The Welfare Department provided meals and financial aid for orphans, the elderly and the poor. After the Nazi invasion, Irena and other social workers, started to secretly provide clothing, medicine and financial aid to Jewish people. They registered the Jews under fake names to help hide what they were doing, as it was illegal to help the Jews.

In 1942, the Jewish population of Warsaw was placed into the newly formed Warsaw Ghetto. The Ghetto was walled off and sealed up - so no one could get in or out without special permission from the Nazi-controlled government. The Ghetto was extremely overcrowded and food was strictly rationed in very insufficient quantities.

As more and more people were moved into the Ghetto, more and more families were being forced to live in very cramped quarters, sometimes with many families sharing one apartment. This might mean 8 to 10 people living in one room, sharing resources and trying to survive.



Children begging in the Warsaw Ghetto
Yad Vashem



Children begging in the Warsaw Ghetto
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Rafael Scharf

An underground (secret) organization was formed called the *Zegota*. The purpose of the *Zegota* was to find places to hide Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. The organization was run by Jews and non-Jews, working together. The non-Jews and Jews communicated by sending Jewish children through the sewers from the Ghetto to the non-Jewish side of Warsaw to pass messages back and forth. When Irena learned of the *Zegota*, she felt compelled to join and help. In order to enter the Ghetto legally, Irena applied for, and was issued, a pass from the Epidemic Control Department, which was a group set up to help control diseases inside the Ghetto. She started to visit the Ghetto daily, bringing clothing, food and medicines. She was heartbroken at what she saw - children begging on the street for food, and mothers and fathers dying of typhus and starvation. Five thousand people died each month in the Warsaw Ghetto - from starvation and disease. Irena decided to do whatever she could to get the children out of the Warsaw Ghetto. Irena set a up a system where non-Jewish families and orphanages would take in Jewish children smuggled out of the Ghetto. Irena had to convince Jewish mothers and fathers to let her take their children. This was a heartbreaking decision for parents to make. What if they never saw their children again?

This was as emotionally difficult for Irena, as it was heartbreaking for the parents. It was also difficult and dangerous to find families to take the children. The Nazis rewarded people for turning in those who tried to help the Jews. Each time Irena asked someone to help, she was risking the entire operation.



Children on the street in the Warsaw Ghetto
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Guenther Schwarberg

Irena worked with a few trusted individuals to help bring supplies into the Ghetto and smuggle the children out. She was incredibly resourceful. Because she was a very thin, small woman, she would smuggle clothes in by wearing five outfits into the Ghetto and leaving through a different entrance wearing only one outfit. She and her friends would bring money and forged documents sewn into the their clothes and layered into the false bottoms of her nurse's bag. She would put dirty rags on top of the false bottom to keep the Nazi's, who were guarding the Ghetto, from looking too closely.

Irena recruited one person from each of the ten Welfare Departments in Warsaw to help her. With their help, she was able to obtain false identification papers for the children she rescued. Once parents agreed to give their children to Irena, they would be smuggled out of the Ghetto in a variety of ways: hidden in ambulances; hidden in body bags; underneath food in wagons; infants hidden in toolboxes.

Most of the children were sent to Christian orphanages and convents. Irena knew she could count on the nuns to help shelter the children. After she left the children in their new homes, she would write the child's real name (in code) on a piece of paper, along with their parents names and the name and address of the family or organization who sheltered the child. Then she placed the pieces of paper in jars and buried them beneath an apple tree in her neighbor's back yard. The jars contained the names of 2,500 children. She was the only person who knew where the jars were - she didn't tell any of the people working with her.

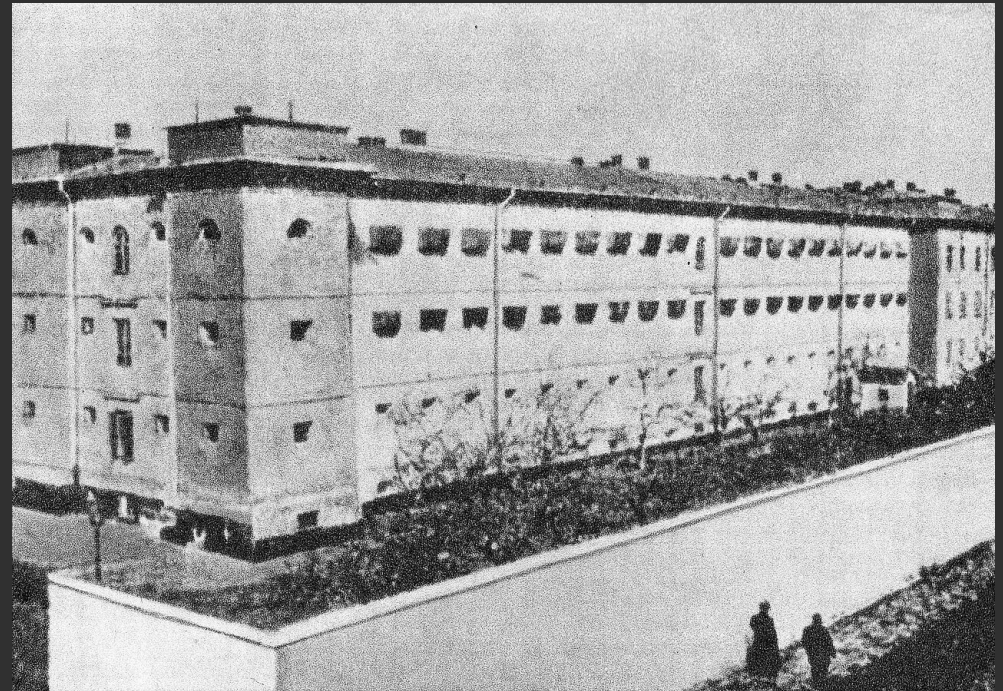


The house where Irena Sendler hid the glass jars under an apple tree
Warsaw City Tours

In the book, *Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project*, Irena recounted her experience smuggling a child out of the Ghetto: "When the door opened to Irena at Apartment 32 in the Warsaw Ghetto, 8 year old Guta was waiting. She stood very still...her legs so thin that her socks would not stay up. Her father said, 'Take her, quickly. Don't make us think about it any longer.' Irena took the child's hand and walked her out of the Ghetto past the guard she had paid off. On the non-Jewish side of the Ghetto wall, she and Guta waited for the train. When the train arrived, Irena picked up Guta, half as heavy as an 8 year old should be, and boarded. The two were able to get a seat and Guta sat on her lap, her face buried in Irena's shoulder. Guta spoke only Yiddish (a language used by Jews in eastern Europe, with words from Hebrew and German). Guta was shaking and sobbing on Irena's lap. Other train riders began to stare. Irena whispered in her ear in Yiddish, 'Be calm, little girl. Your name is Zofia. Don't forget - Zofia.' Guta lifted her head and looked at Irena, her eyes filled with tears and her weeping no longer muffled by Irena's coat and cried out something in Yiddish. On this train, it was a confession punishable by death. Passengers whispered. Without warning the train operator applied the brake in the middle of the street. He looked at Guta, then began to shout. 'Everybody out! Everybody out! There's something wrong with the train. It's not safe.' Irena was about to take Guta off the train when he came near and whispered, 'Not you. Please stay.' After the last of the passengers had fled, he closed the doors. 'Kneel down on the floor,' he said. He started the train again and after a long ride, he stopped and turned to Irena, 'This is a quiet neighborhood. You're safe now.'" (*Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project* by Jack Mayer).

On October 20, 1943, Irena was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo at the infamous Pawiak Prison. She was beaten and tortured every day but never gave the Nazis any information about the people she worked with, the names of the children or the names of those who had taken the children into their homes. On January 20, 1944, after 93 days in the Pawiak Prison, Irena was sentenced to die by firing squad. Before she was to be taken to the area where she would be shot, a guard, who had been paid off by the Zegota, shoved her through another door and drug her outside the building. He pushed her along the street and when they turned a corner, told her, "You are free. Get our of here as fast as you can."

Irena stumbled into a pharmacy and the pharmacist took one look at her and brought her into the back. She gave her some water, dabbed cologne on her arms (Irena had not bathed and had been wearing the same prison uniform for 93 days) and gave her some clothes to change into. The pharmacist, her name was Helena, also gave her some train money and a cane to help her walk. Irena was limping due to the pain from the torture and beatings. Irena spent the rest of the war in hiding.



Pawiak Prison, Warsaw
Yad Vashem

After the war, Irena dug up the jars from her neighbors yard and used the notes to track down the 2,500 children she had rescued. Most of their parents were murdered in the Holocaust but she was able to reunite many of them with their relatives who had survived. The children knew her only by her code name: Jolanta. She did not think of herself as a hero. In 1965, she was honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. The Righteous Among the Nations are non-Jewish people who took great risks to their own personal safety to save Jews during the Holocaust. Those who are honored as a Righteous Among the Nations receive a medal and a tree is planted in their honor at the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

Irena Sendler lived to be 98 years old. She is survived by her daughter, Janina and a granddaughter.



The tree planted in honor of Irena Sendler at the entrance to the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations
Yad Vashem, 2012

Essential Questions

1. Food was strictly rationed in the Ghetto. What does it mean to "ration food"?
2. Non-Jewish people faced great danger for helping Jewish people during the Holocaust. Why did some people save others at the risk of their own lives?
3. What does it mean to have "the courage to care"?
4. Irena chose to help children, what do you think her motivation was for this choice?
5. Irena didn't think she was a hero. Do you? What does the term "hero" mean to you?

Readings and Resources

Books:

- *Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project* by Jack Mayer. "This novel is based on a the true story of Irena Sendler, a Holocaust Hero, and the Kansas Teens who 'Rescued the Rescuer.'"
- *Children of the Holocaust* by Jenny MacKay. "To survive the Holocaust, children evaded the murderous Nazis by disguising their identity, hiding in secret places, or living on the run."
- *Heroes of the Holocaust* by Rebecca Love Fishkin. "This book tells the stories of those who defied and resisted the Nazis."
- *Irena's Children: A True Story of Courage* by Tillar Mazzeo, adapted by Mary Cronk Farrell. "The story of Irena Sendler. Irena took staggering risks to save 2,500 children from death and deportation in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II, adapted for a younger audience."

Online Learning:

- "Women of Valor: Stories of Women Who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust," Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous-women/sendler.asp>
- "Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project," <https://irenasendler.org/>.