

Irene Sendler

Known as "Rescuer of Jewish Children in the Warsaw Ghetto During WWII"



When Hitler and his Nazis built the Warsaw Ghetto and herded 500,000 Polish Jews behind its walls to await liquidation, many Polish gentiles turned their backs or applauded. Not Irena Sendler. An unfamiliar name to most people, but this remarkable woman defied the Nazis and saved 2,500 Jewish children by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto. As a health worker, she sneaked the children out between 1942 and 1943 to safe hiding places and found non-Jewish families to adopt them.

The old woman, gentle and courageous, lived in a modest existence in her Warsaw apartment - an unsung heroine. Her achievement went largely unnoticed for many years.

Irena Sendler was born in 1910 in Otwock, a town some 15 miles southeast of Warsaw. She was greatly influenced by her father who was one of the first Polish Socialists. As a doctor his patients were mostly poor Jews.

In 1939 Germany invaded Poland, and the brutality of the Nazis accelerated with murder, violence and terror.

At the time, Irena was a Senior Administrator in the *Warsaw Social Welfare Department*, which operated the canteens in every district of the city. Previously, the canteens provided meals, financial aid, and other services for orphans, the elderly, the poor and the destitute. Now, through Irena, the canteens also provided clothing, medicine and money for the Jews. They were registered under fictitious Christian names, and to prevent inspections, the Jewish families were reported as being afflicted with such highly infectious diseases as typhus and tuberculosis.

But in 1942, the Nazis herded hundreds of thousands of Jews into a 16-block area that came to be known as the Warsaw Ghetto. The Ghetto was sealed and the Jewish families ended up behind its walls, only to await certain death.

Irena Sendler was so appalled by the conditions that she joined *Zegota*, the Council for *Aid to Jews*, organized by the Polish underground resistance movement, as one of its first recruits and directed the efforts to rescue Jewish children.

To be able to enter the Ghetto legally, Irena managed to be issued a pass from Warsaw's *Epidemic Control Department* and she visited the Ghetto daily, reestablished contacts and brought food, medicines and clothing. But 5,000 people were dying a month from starvation and disease in the Ghetto, and she decided to help the Jewish children to get out.

For Irena Sendler, a young mother herself, persuading parents to part with their children was in itself a horrendous task. Finding families willing to shelter the children, and thereby willing to risk their life if the Nazis ever found out, was also not easy.

Irena Sendler, who wore a star armband as a sign of her solidarity to Jews, began smuggling children out in an ambulance. She recruited at least one person from each of the ten centers of the Social Welfare Department.

With their help, she issued hundreds of false documents with forged signatures. Irena Sendler successfully smuggled almost 2,500 Jewish children to safety and gave them temporary new identities.

Some children were taken out in gunnysacks or body bags. Some were buried inside loads of goods. A mechanic took a baby out in his toolbox. Some kids were carried out in potato sacks, others were placed in coffins, some entered a church in the Ghetto which had two entrances. One entrance opened into the Ghetto, the other opened

Irene Sendler

Known as "Rescuer of Jewish Children in the Warsaw Ghetto During WWII"

into the Aryan side of Warsaw. They entered the church as Jews and exited as Christians. "Can you guarantee they will live?" Irena later recalled the distraught parents asking. But she could only guarantee they would die if they stayed. "In my dreams," she said, "I still hear the cries when they left their parents."

Irena Sendler accomplished her incredible deeds with the active assistance of the church. "I sent most of the children to religious establishments," she recalled. "I knew I could count on the Sisters." Irena also had a remarkable record of cooperation when placing the youngsters: "No one ever refused to take a child from me," she said.

The children were given false identities and placed in homes, orphanages and convents. Irena Sendler carefully noted, in coded form, the children's original names and their new identities. She kept the only record of their true identities in jars buried beneath an apple tree in a neighbor's back yard, across the street from German barracks, hoping she could someday dig up the jars, locate the children, and inform them of their past.

In all, the jars contained the names of 2,500 children ...

But the Nazis became aware of Irena's activities, and on October 20, 1943 she was arrested, imprisoned and tortured by the Gestapo who broke her feet and legs. She ended up in the *Pawiak Prison*, but no one could break her spirit. Though she was the only one who knew the names and addresses of the families sheltering the Jewish children, she withstood the torture, refusing to betray either her associates or any of the Jewish children in hiding.

Sentenced to death, Irena was saved at the last minute when *Zegota* members bribed one of the Germans to halt the execution. She escaped from prison but for the rest of the war she was pursued by the Gestapo.

After the war she dug up the jars and used the notes to track down the 2,500 children she placed with adoptive families and to reunite them with relatives scattered across Europe. But most lost their families during the Holocaust in Nazi death camps.

The children had known her only by her code name Jolanta. But years later, after she was honored for her wartime work, her picture appeared in a newspaper. "A man, a painter, telephoned me," said Sendler, "I remember your face", he said, "It was you who took me out of the ghetto." "I had many calls like that!"

Irena Sendler did not think of herself as a hero. She claimed no credit for her actions. "I could have done more," she said. "This regret will follow me to my death."

She has been honored by international Jewish organizations and in 1991 she was made an honorary citizen of Israel.

Irena Sendler was awarded Poland's highest distinction, the Order of White Eagle in Warsaw, Monday Nov. 10, 2003.

This lovely, courageous woman was one of the most dedicated and active workers in aiding Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Her courage enabled not only the survival of 2,500 Jewish children but also of the generations of their descendants.

She passed away on May 12, 2008, at the age of 98.

... Gleaned From Jewish Virtual Library