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Irena Sendler (1910–2008)

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Biography

Irena Sendlerowa (Krzyżanowska) was born in 1910 in Warsaw, Poland, to Stanislaw Krzyżanowska and Janina Karolina Grzybowska. Her grandfather led a rebellion against the czars. Her father—noted as one of the primary Polish socialists—died after contracting typhus when Irena was a young child. He worked as a doctor and primarily served impoverished individuals and families. Many sources say Irena drew a great deal of inspiration from her father’s selfless aspirations to help others in need. In fact, Sendler once wrote, “I was raised to believe that the question of religion, nation, belonging to any race is of no importance—it’s a human being that matters!” (Pikuci, 2020).

As a teenager, Irena attended the University of Warsaw, during which time she further developed her passion for the helping profession. Having been raised alongside many Jewish families, she expressed strong opinions about the economic and social inequality this population faced and was appalled at the poor conditions of ghettos. She joined variety of socialist and communist organizations, which ultimately shaped her views in a more radical way.

Irena married three times. Her first marriage to Mieczyslaw Sendler lasted for 13 years before they divorced in 1947. She then married a long-time friend, Stefan Zgrzembki, and had three children—daughter Janka and sons Adam and Andrzej (who unfortunately died during infancy). After Zgrzembki abandoned the family, Irena remarried her first husband. However, their second marriage did not last, and they divorced once again.

Irena became a social worker and a nurse. She was not known as one of the international leaders of social work. However, in recent years she has been widely acknowledged for her work assisting others by saving the lives of hundreds of children. Some reports suggesting almost 2,500 children.

Irena was 29 years old when World War II broke out. She was working as a social worker and senior social administrator in the Warsaw Social Welfare Department. In 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and the brutality of the Nazis was unleashed. In 1942, the Nazis created the Warsaw Ghetto, where hundreds of thousands of Jews were confined into a 16-block area. The Ghetto was isolated, and as the number of confined Jews increased, their living conditions

rapidly declined. Lack of adequate medical care and nutrition was killing many Jews, and Irena Sendler was determined to help.

Sendler and her co-workers were able to get a pass issued by Warsaw Epidemic Control to enter the ghetto legally to create hygienic conditions to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Sendler used this pass to assist families in the ghetto, and she established trust and provided some relief. Sendler and her colleagues worked primarily in the city's canteens, which aided individuals and families in need. They used their positions in the canteens to assist the Jewish population, providing them with medicine, clothing, and more. Irene Sendler eventually joined as the director of the Zegota, the Council for Aid to Jews, and wore a star arm band to show solidarity with the Jews.

Through some rather unconventional methods, Irena secured entry into the ghetto multiple times, providing her with opportunities to develop relationships and smuggle in various items. She then created a team of 10 people from different areas of the Social Welfare Department, which eventually helped her sneak nearly 2,500 children out of the ghetto. She often spoke of the bravery of mothers who gave up their children to keep them alive.

Many methods were used to take the children out of the ghetto, including hiding them under a stretcher in an ambulance; sneaking them out through an adjacent courthouse; traveling with them through sewage pipes or underground tunnels; hiding the child in a sack or suitcase and taking it on a train; and having the child fake illness, which would prompt a legal departure on an ambulance. The children were given false identities and placed in homes, orphanages, and convents. Sendler wrote careful notes in code to match the children's original names and their new identities. She kept the record of their identities in jars buried in a neighbor's yard, hoping that she could dig up the jars, find the children, and return them to their parents. The jars contained the names of 2,500 children.

In 1943, Sendler was arrested for her participation in the smuggling of Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto. She faced imprisonment and torture and was eventually sentenced to death. Despite all this, she never gave up the names or locations of the children she had saved. After the Zegota paid off the Gestapo, the torture ceased and Sendler was released. She then tracked down all 2,500 children and attempted to reunite them with their families. Sadly, many of the family members had died.

After the war, Sendler continued working in the Social Welfare Department. She was involved in social work and social work education. Active in the League of Women and in the Warsaw National Council, Sendler also chaired the Widows and Orphans Committee and the Health Committee. She was a part of the National League to Fight Racism and was an active member of the Friends of Children Association and the Society of Secular Schools. In 1947, Sendler joined the Polish Workers Party, where she worked in the Social-Professional Department and the Social Profession Department of the Polish Workers Party Central Committee. She was also active in the ministries of Education and Health. In 1950 she became the director of the Social Welfare Department of the Union of Invalids. She held this position until she retired in the 1960s.

In recent years, Sendler received the following awards and recognition: Order of the White Eagle (2003); Jan Karski Prize (2003); Blessing by Pope John Paul II; Polonis Restitutna (Order of Poland Restored); Krzyz Komaniaiazda z Gwiazda Orderu Odrodzenia Polski (Commander with a star); Order of Smile (2007, given by Children), and Honorary citizenship of Israel (Wieler, 2008). She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

Among the most notable of her recognitions, in 2006 the International Federation of Social Workers awarded Irena Sendler the Most Distinguished Social Worker award. The award was accepted on her behalf by the president of the Association of Children of the Holocaust, Elzbieta Ficowska, one of the youngest children saved by Sendler and her colleagues. She read the following from a letter of acceptance (Wieler, 2008):

I have dedicated my entire life to social work and to the survival of the most needed. With the acceptance of this award I need to let you know that without the help of many co-workers and other helpful people I would have not been able to accomplish as much as I did. The concrete action of a social worker requires professionalism, devotion, tenacity and much heart. Through helpful actions one feels much empathy and on the other hand much joy and satisfaction. (p. 838)

Sendler had deep connections to social education and practice. She worked with Helena Radlinska—the founder and director of the first school of social work—by providing placements for her students. She knew Alice Salomon and other leaders of social work in Europe and worldwide. Irena’s selfless work, without thinking about the consequences, correlates nicely with the ethical principles of the NASW Code of Ethics. Her dedication to the dignity and worth of a person truly exemplifies the transformative nature of social work.

Resources

Bülow, L. (n.d.) *The Holocaust*. <http://www.auschwitz.dk/sendler.htm>

Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project. (n.d.). <https://irenasendler.org/facts-about-irena/>

Picuki. (n.d.). *The courageous heart of Irena Sendler*.
<https://www.picuki.com/media/2244585986742660086>

Vashem, Y. (2020). *Irena Sendler*. <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous-women/sendler.asp>

Wieler, J. (2008). Brief note: Remembering Irena Sendler. *International Social Work*; 51, 835–840 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0020872808095254>

Additional Videos

The Irena Sendler Project: Life in a Jar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHod5WVDWEA>

Irena Sendler: The Polish woman who saved 2,500 Jewish children:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vg4deegQxH4>

The Irena Sendler Project, Megan Felt, TEDxOverlandPark:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRFcrvVRb3o>



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