

Irena Sendler: Voice for the Children

by Naomi Hageman, Duchesne Academy

9-10 Grade Category, Second Place

To have the ability to make a morally just decision in the face of evil is one of the strongest traits that someone can possess. This power, known as moral courage, is evident in the lives of all Holocaust rescuers. They risked their lives to do what they knew was right, and they never looked back. Their actions saved countless lives, and their moral courage enabled them to make great changes. Many people in the world have demonstrated moral courage in their lives, but the life of a Polish woman captivated me in a way that no story ever has. The story of Irena Sendlerowa (Sendler) is one that involves using great moral courage and life changing decisions to save the lives of numerous children.

Irena Sendler was born in Otwock, Poland in 1910. While growing up, Irena's father, a physician for poor Jews in the area, greatly influenced her. One of the most influential lessons her father taught was, "Religion, race, and nationality are immaterial. What counts is the distinction between good and bad" (*St. Anthony Messenger*, 31). This vital lesson provided the foundation for Sendler's mission in life and would soon help her make decisions that would save the lives of many innocent children in the midst of turmoil and chaos.

As World War II began to break out in Poland, the world of the Warsaw Ghetto became Irena Sendler's home and workplace. She served as a social worker aiding Jews and Christians in the Warsaw area. Soon after Sendler found she could no longer help them without risking her own life. Sendler's courage was astounding in the situation she faced. Knowing her actions put her own life in danger, she still did what she could to save the innocent people in the Warsaw Ghetto.

In December, 1942, the people of Poland established a group of workers devoted to the aid of the Jews. The code name for that group was Zegota. Soon after formation, Irena Sendler became the leader of Zegota's Children's Bureau. Sendler knew that her new position would be not be easy, but she possessed the necessary courage and strength. The task before her was daunting. In the years that followed, she would recall, "I became convinced of the necessity to organize efforts to escort children out the ghetto..." (*St. Anthony Messenger* 32). Later, Sendler would have to come to terms with just how hard this task would be to accomplish.

Smuggling children out of the Warsaw Ghetto was not an easy thing to do, but Sendler had many effective ways of making it happen. She placed children in body bags and coffins to get them transported out of the dangerous ghetto. She even trained dogs to walk alongside the trucks containing children so that when a child began to cry, the dog would bark to cover up the cries. Before a child was smuggled out of the ghetto, Sendler or one of her colleagues gave them a new name. She kept a record of each of these names and where the child would be staying. She kept this information on sheets of paper in a jar, which she then buried in her backyard. Sendler knew that what she was doing was right although she took a grave risk. After some time, she was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo. However, after her release, Sendler, still very determined, never stopped her life-saving work. She simply worked under a new code name.

The world we live in today is a place where violent acts are committed against humanity everyday. Taking a stance against these acts and doing something about them is a challenge that we as humans face. Having the moral courage to stand up and make a difference is a trait that I admire very much. Moral courage shows how strong people are when they can risk persecution in order to do something they believe is the right and just thing to do.

Irena Sendler's life is an inspirational story of helping marginalized children. I have recently had the opportunity to help children with disabilities through a local acting class. This class gives children with Down's syndrome and Autism a chance to learn and have fun in a safe environment. This experience at the Rose Theatre has opened my eyes to what challenges children with these disabilities face everyday. This is just a small experience compared with what Irena Sendler did, but it gives me a glimpse of what Irena might have been feeling when she helped the children in Poland. She once said, "When someone is drowning, you don't ask if they can swim, you jump in and help them." (www.usnews.com) This inspiring quote explains how Irena Sendler lived her life. She didn't care who the children were; all she cared about was giving them an equal chance at life. After working hands-on with children who are judged by their disabilities every day, I have gained a greater understanding of Sendler's words. I didn't look at the kids like they had a disability, but that they were children wanting a chance to learn like everyone else around them.

It takes strength, perseverance, and above all, courage to stand up for what is right in the face of violent persecution. Moral courage is said to be the power to stand up for an issue because of what you believe to be right and just, no matter what the consequences of the action are. Irena Sendler's moral courage helped her to save over 2,500 children in the Warsaw Ghetto. Sendler's actions went largely unknown until recently, but her impact on the children of Warsaw will never be forgotten.

Works Cited

Lukas, Richard C. "Irena Sendler: World War II's Polish Angel." *St. Anthony Messenger* Aug. 2008: 31-35. Print.

"Irena Sendler, a saintly smuggler - US News and World Report." *US News & World Report - Breaking News, World News, Business News, and America's Best Colleges - USNews.com*. 19 Oct. 2003. Web. 06 Feb. 2010.

<<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/031027/27sendler.peo.htm>>.