**The “Female Schindler”—Irena Sendler**

Irena was born to Polish parents. Her father was a physician in a small town near Warsaw, and most of the patients he attended to were poor Jews. While caring for the Jews he died during a typhus epidemic when Irena was seven. The Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, and at this time Irene was working as a senior administrator in the Warsaw’s social welfare department. Some of her responsibilities included providing food and financial aid to the city’s poor. Eventually the Nazis began to crackdown on the Jewish population. When this occurred she added the racially persecuted to the state’s assistance program, who were given fictitious Christian names in order to hide their true origin.

During the autumn of 1940, the Germans created the Warsaw Ghetto. By doing this the Germans placed 440,000 Jews, more than a third of the city’s population, into a 16-block neighborhood, around which a wall was built. This was a desperate time for the Jewish population for many were placed on rations, humiliated, and persecuted. As a result of this many Jews died of disease and starvation. It is believed that five thousand Jews died every month. The Nazis did this in order to detain the Jews before they were sent to their deaths at Treblinka an extermination camp.

During month of July 1942, the Nazis began Operation Reinhard, which saw 250,000 being sent to Treblinka. The Nazis had started the Final Solution. By what the Nazis were doing caused much concern to Irena and felt obligated to help the Jewish population. She joined the Zegota, an underground organization. This organization was created by the Polish government-in-exile to help the country’s Jewish population. Irena was made head of the city’s children section and around this time the extraordinary work of Irena Sendler was to begin. Irena began to save as many ghetto children from near-death situations as she could, even though, her efforts would place her in extreme danger.

One of the major problem she faced was the children were located in the ghetto. The effort of moving in and out of this area was heavily guarded by the Germans. Luckily, Irena was able to obtain an official pass from the city’s Contagious Diseases Department. With her efforts to try to stop the ghetto’s epidemics from spreading beyond its walls, the Germans permitted her daily visits.

When Irena visited the Jewish population she wore the Star of David (mandatory for all Jews) as an effort to gain the Jews confidence in her. Once she did this, the task of getting children out of the ghetto began. To accomplish this, however, she could not act alone; she had the assistance of others. Some of her friends were asked to get the children out, others assisted in finding homes outside of the ghetto, and the third group to obtain or forge hundreds of documents for the young children.

Even with so many German guards around, Irena was able to smuggle out the children in suitcases, ambulances, coffins, sewer pipes, rucksacks, and one occasion, even a tool box. The standard method of attempting to free children was to strap a child underneath the stretcher of a patient being placed in an outgoing ambulance. Other children were smuggled through an old courthouse and a church. Children that were small enough were sometimes placed in suitcases or boxes and wheeled out on porter’s trolleys. Older children were placed in coffins, body bags, and even potato sacks. She was given the codename “Jolanta.”

Most of the children were sent with their new identities to orphanages and convents or placed in private homes. They were taught to replace their Jewish prayers with Christian ones in case the hiding places were raided. Even though the penalty for harboring a Jew in Poland was death, Irena claimed: “No one ever refused to take a child for me.” Irena kept a careful record of the children she aided and rescued. She had a coded list of names written on tissue paper. Identical lists were hidden in two glass jars, buried under an apple tree near the German army barracks.

Eventually the Germans became aware of Irena’s activities and, in October 1943, she was arrested by the Gestapo. They took her to the Pawiak Prison ( later a concentration camp) in Warsaw. The Germans interrogated her, but she refused to expose the Zegota (underground network). For refusing to tell any information, the interrogator had her arms and legs broken. She was later sentenced to death and taken to a forest region in a semi-conscious state where she was to be shot by a firing squad. This never happened because the underground movement had successfully bribed the man overseeing the execution. Her body was dumped in the forest. Even though the underground was able to recover her, the Germans still printed posters proclaiming her death.

After this Irena spent the rest of the war in hiding. Once the war was over she handed over the tissue lists she had kept in the glass jars. This was the information that could link the lost children to their Jewish families; however, many children remained with their foster parents because so many children lost their biological parents in the Holocaust. Five hundred of the children were taken to Israel to begin a new life.

Overall, Irena Sendler saved 2,500 Jewish children and is referred to as the “Female Schindler.” Even though Irena saved this number of children, she wishes she could have done more. Irena married and had two children of her own. After the war her efforts went unpublished in postwar Communist Poland. When the children she rescued grew into adults, her achievements were discussed and she received greater attention. In 1983, Irena was decorated in Israel as “Righteous Among the Nations” –the highest honor bestowed by the Jewish people for a non-Jew. It was at this ceremony that Teresa Kerner, one of the girls she saved, now a doctor, told of how Irena had helped her move several times to safe houses and then given her a home for two years at the end of the war. In 2003, Irena was awarded Poland’s highest civilian decoration, and in 2007, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In May of 2008, Irena passed away at the age of 98. Her last years were spent in a wheelchair, thanks to the wounds she inflicted on her by the Gestapo in World War II. Just before she died, she commented, “After World War II, it seemed that humanity understood something, and nothing like that would happen again. Humanity has understood nothing. Religious, tribal, national wars continue. The world continues to be in a sea of blood.”

**The Female Schindler-Irena Sendler Questions:**

1. Explain how Irena Sendler was able to rescue 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto.
2. How did Irena and Oskar differ in their rescue of the Jewish population?
3. Explain why is it that Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist, saved fewer Jews than Irena, the social worker, but initially received more acclaim that she?