

Third Place Winner
Division I – 7-9th Grades
A Light in the Dark
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We remember the Holocaust as a dark part of history, full of death and torture. However, we forget that even in the darkest of times, the incredible acts of bravery and kindness can be the light people need. Irena Sendler is a strong example of this. Many Jews lost their lives, but thanks to Sendler, thousands more were saved. She did what was right, even if that caused her life to be endangered. Irena Sendler presented moral courage because she risked the safety of her and her family to save thousands of innocent lives.

The Holocaust was a dangerous and terrifying time for everyone, but Irena Sendler pushed past her fears to rescue others. Sendler was born on February 15, 1910 in Otwock, Poland. Her father was a doctor who, unlike others, helped sick impoverished Jews. The Jewish people were very pleased with her father's acts of kindness so they offered to pay for Irena's education.¹ While in school, Irena protested the discrimination against Jewish students. Because Irena stood up for the Jewish students, she was expelled for three years. In 1939, she joined Zegota, one of the many Polish underground movements. The purpose of the group was to help thousands of the people escape ghettos.

After joining Zegota, Sendler was able to gain a special permit to enter the Warsaw Ghetto due to her position in the Welfare department. With this permit, she could smuggle children out of the ghetto. While rescuing the children, she hid them in trash bags, luggage, toolboxes, coffins, ambulances, and anywhere they would have little chance of being found. Unlike many other rescuers, Sendler wrote down the new and old names of the children so that she could reunite them with parents or relatives after the war. Although many of their family members had already died, she was able to reunite some of them after the war. She was eventually suspected of assisting Jews in escape, which at the time was illegal. The guards at the Warsaw Ghetto arrested and tortured her, yet she was strong willed and would stay that way. Sendler never gave up the names of the children or the people she worked with. On the day of her execution, she was beaten and left unconscious. It was later revealed that her friends bribed the guard not to kill her. Even after the torture, Irena still went out of her way to rescue more Jews.² She stopped at nothing to free people from the horrible treatment that they went through because of the Nazis. She was never afraid to stand up for what is right, even if that meant she would be tortured and put on the brink of death. Her bravery was a key thing that let her and the people she had saved stay alive.

¹Mazzeo, Tilar J. *Irena's Children: The Extraordinary Story of the Woman Who Saved 2,500 Children from the Warsaw Ghetto*. New York: Gallery Books, 2016.

² Kile, J. "Irena Sendler." *Moral Heroes*. February 09, 2017. Accessed February 24, 2017.
<http://moralheroes.org/irena-sendler>.

Irena Sendler's impact on the world is exceptional for someone who saved thousands of lives. Her story went untold for years, even after the war. Four students heard her tale and made a play, her life's work then became known worldwide. She inspired mankind to understand the hardships she and many other people had to go through to survive the Holocaust. She was in the middle of one of the worst events in Jewish history, and yet she still cared for others. Irena Sendler once said, "I was brought up to believe that a person must be rescued when drowning, regardless of religion and nationality."³ As a result of her empathy and kindness, she was awarded with the Yad Vashem Righteous Among the Nations award in 1965, the Jan Karski Award for Valor and Courage in 2003, and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007⁴. Her actions have helped the world understand that through all hardships there are ways to survive if we work together.

Irena Sendler has made me look at life in a different way. Her actions proved that every life has meaning, despite your religion, race, opinions, and age. I have always been the type of person to offer a helping hand. But often when I did help others, I would expect a "thank you" or some other type of recognition. Now, all I want in return is for other people to spread the kindness. I now use my best judgment on others, not caring if they are full of hatred or grief. I help my mom teach her students whenever I can, and when I do, I do whatever is necessary to contribute to other students learning. Although I will never know what it will feel like to risk my life to save thousands, I will know the feeling of satisfaction after helping others.

Without people knowing about important historical figures, how would we be able to change the way we act in the world? Irena Sendler is one of many people who displayed moral courage throughout the Holocaust. Her spectacular acts of kindness are what make her stand out from others. Not only did she save thousands of children, she also always wished that she could accomplish more than what she had already managed to get done. Her positive attitude towards difficult situations and her bravery for going against the rules to help others makes her have moral courage.

³ Kile, J. "Irena Sendler." *Moral Heroes*. February 09, 2017

⁴ Atwood, Kathryn J. *Women Heroes of World War II: 26 Stories of Espionage, Sabotage, Resistance, and Rescue*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2013.