



Irena's Children: The Extraordinary Story of the Woman Who Saved 2,500 Children from the Warsaw Ghetto

By Tilar J. Mazzeo

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A New York Post Best Book of 2016

One of Kirkus Reviews' Ten Most Anticipated Nonfiction Books of Fall 2016

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Widow Clicquot* comes an extraordinary and gripping account of Irena Sendler—the “female Oskar Schindler”—who took staggering risks to save 2,500 children from death and deportation in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II.

In 1942, one young social worker, Irena Sendler, was granted access to the Warsaw ghetto as a public health specialist. While there, she reached out to the trapped Jewish families, going from door to door and asking the parents to trust her with their young children. She started smuggling them out of the walled district, convincing her friends and neighbors to hide them. Driven to extreme measures and with the help of a network of local tradesmen, ghetto residents, and her star-crossed lover in the Jewish resistance, Irena ultimately smuggled thousands of children past the Nazis. She made dangerous trips through the city’s sewers, hid children in coffins, snuck them under overcoats at checkpoints, and slipped them through secret passages in abandoned buildings.

But Irena did something even more astonishing at immense personal risk: she kept secret lists buried in bottles under an old apple tree in a friend’s back garden. On them were the names and true identities of those Jewish children, recorded with the hope that their relatives could find them after the war. She could not have known that more than ninety percent of their families would perish.

In *Irena’s Children*, Tilar Mazzeo tells the incredible story of this courageous and brave woman who risked her life to save innocent children from the Holocaust—a truly heroic tale of survival, resilience, and redemption.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Irena's Children*

"[An] incredible account." (*The New York Times Book Review*)

"Irena Sendler's rescue of thousands of Jewish children from murderous German hands is one of the most remarkable tales of righteous courage, resourcefulness, and wile to come out of the Holocaust, and Tilar Mazzeo's eloquent telling of that story is remarkable as well. By plumbing Sendler's memoirs and testimonies and interviewing the now-elderly children she saved, Mazzeo has put together an almost granular record of the cruel madness of the Warsaw Ghetto and the astonishing feats of deception it took to help a small portion of its doomed residents survive. Even if you have read volumes on the Holocaust, you will find this book harrowing, surprising, and riveting." (Joseph Berger, longtime reporter for The New York Times and author of *Displaced Persons: Growing Up American After the Holocaust*)

"An important, often harrowing, and until now little known story of the Holocaust: how thousands of children were rescued from the Warsaw ghetto by a Polish woman of extraordinary daring and moral courage." (Joseph Kanon, author of *Leaving Berlin*)

"Mazzeo chronicles a ray of hope in desperate times in this compelling biography of a brave woman who refused to give up." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"*Irena's Children* weaves a fascinating narrative of a devastated city, Nazi depravity, and the extraordinary moral and physical courage of those who chose to fight inhumanity with compassion. This is a book that stays with you long after you've turned the last page." (Chaya Deitsch, author of *Here and There: Leaving Hasidism, Keeping My Family*)

"This account of tremendous bravery is recommended for teens and adults who are drawn to inspirational stories." (*Library Journal, starred review*)

"While this is not the first biography of Sendler, its succinctness and overall readability will introduce many readers to a truly brave and otherwise remarkable woman who initiated and spearheaded 'a vast collective effort of decency.'" (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Mazzeo's portrait of Sendler... is harrowing; some passages are admittedly difficult to get through, but it feels so important that we do." (*Goop*)

"Ms. Mazzeo, author of the bestselling *The Widow Clicquot*, draws from interviews with Sendler's daughter and children she saved to offer new details on Sendler's early life and her remarkable undertaking during World War II." (*The Wall Street Journal*)

About the Author

Tilar J. Mazzeo is the *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* bestselling author of books that include *The Widow Clicquot*, *The Secret of Chanel No. 5*, and *Hotel on the Place Vendôme*. She also writes on food and wine for the mainstream press, and her work has appeared in venues such as *Food & Wine* and in her

Back-Lane Wineries guidebook series (Ten Speed Press). Her course on creative nonfiction (Great Courses), featured as in-flight viewing content on Virgin America airlines, is widely distributed and has made her a nationally prominent teacher of writing in nonfiction genres. The Clara C. Piper Associate Professor of English at Colby College, she divides her time among coastal Maine, New York City, and Saanichton, British Columbia, where she lives with her husband and stepchildren.

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Irena's Children

Prologue

Warsaw, October 21, 1943

Aleja Szucha. Irena Sendler knew her destination. The door slammed shut up front, and the black prison car lurched into motion. She had been given only minutes to dress, and her fair, bobbed hair was bed tousled.

Janka Grabowska had run down the front path with her shoes and thrust them at her at the last moment, braving the violent caprices of the soldiers. Irena hadn't thought to lace them. She was focusing on just one thing: staying calm and keeping her face blank, placid. No sad faces. That was the wisdom Jewish mothers gave to their children when they left them for the last time in the care of strangers. Irena wasn't Jewish, but it was still true that sad faces were dangerous.

They must not think I have any reason to be frightened. They must not think I am frightened. Irena repeated that thought silently. It would only make what was coming harder if they suspected what she was hiding.

But Irena was frightened. Very frightened. In the autumn of 1943 in Nazi-occupied Poland, there were no words more terrifying than "Szucha Avenue." There may have been no words more terrifying anywhere in wartime Europe. It was the address of the Gestapo headquarters in Warsaw. The brutalism of its exterior seemed cruelly suited to the Germans' purpose. From inside the squat complex of buildings, the corridors echoed with the screams of those being questioned. Those who survived remembered afterward the rank scent of fear and urine. Twice a day, just before noon and in the early evening, black vans punctually returned from the holding cells at Pawiak Prison to collect the bruised and broken bodies.

Irena guessed that it was just after six o'clock in the morning now. Maybe six thirty already. Soon the late October sun would be rising over Warsaw. But Irena had been awake for hours. So had everyone in the apartment building. Janka, her trusted liaison and a dear friend, had joined a small family celebration for the feast of Saint Irena that night. After gorging on cold cuts and slices of cake, Irena's frail mother and her visiting aunt retreated to the bedroom. But Janka had already missed the curfew and would have to spend the night. So the younger women camped out in the living room and sat up late, talking and drinking tea and cordials.

After midnight, Irena and Janka dozed at last, and by three a.m. the girls were sleeping soundly on makeshift cots. But in the back room, Irena's mother, Janina, was restless. How Janina had enjoyed hearing the carefree murmur of the girls' voices! She knew from her daughter's taut jawline that Irena was taking chances, and she had a mother's heavy worry. Pain made it hard to sleep, and so Janina let the thoughts carry her. Then, in the darkness, came a sound that she knew was wrong. The heavy thudding of boots echoed from a stairwell somewhere. Irena! Irena! Janina hissed in an urgent whisper that penetrated Irena's dreams. Bolting awake, Irena heard only the anxiety in her mother's tone and knew in an instant what it meant. Those few moments

to clear her head were the difference between life and death for all of them.

What came next was the racket of eleven Gestapo agents pounding at the apartment door, demanding entry. The fear brought a strange, metallic taste to Irena's mouth, and underneath her rib cage the terror came and went in shocks that felt electric. For hours the Germans spewed threats and abuse, gutted the pillows, and tore apart the corners and cupboards. They pulled up floorboards and broke furniture.

Somehow they still didn't find the lists of the children.

The lists now were all that mattered. They were just thin and flimsy scraps of cigarette paper, little more than rolled bits of tissue, part of Irena's private filing system. But written on them in a code of her own invention were the names and addresses of some of the thousands of Jewish children whom Irena and her friends had saved from the horrors of Nazi persecution—children they were still hiding and supporting in secret locations all across the city and beyond Warsaw. At the last possible instant, before the door flew open, giving way to the bludgeons and pounding, Irena tossed the lists on the kitchen table over to Janka, who with brazen aplomb stuffed them into her generous brassiere, deep under her armpit. If they searched Janka, God knew, it would be all over. It would be even worse if they searched Janka's apartment, where there were Jews hiding. Irena could hardly believe it when the Germans themselves covered up the worst bit of incriminating evidence: she watched, mesmerized, as a small bag with forged identity papers and wads of illegal cash was buried under the debris of smashed furniture. She wanted nothing more than to fall to her knees in that moment. And when she understood that the Gestapo wasn't arresting Janka or her mother but only her, she was positively giddy. But she knew that the laughter rising inside her was tinged dangerously with hysteria. Dress, she told herself. Dress and leave here quickly. She threw on the well-worn skirt she had folded over the back of the kitchen chair only hours earlier and buttoned her sweater as fast as she could to speed her departure before the agents had a chance to reconsider, and walked out of the apartment into the cold autumn morning barefoot. She hadn't even noticed until Janka came running.

Now, though, she had time to think about her own dilemma as the car swayed at each street corner. Sooner or later there was no question that they would kill her. Irena understood that already. This was how her story ended. People did not return from Aleja Szucha or from the ghetto prison at Pawiak, where arrestees were locked up in between their bone-crushing interrogations. They did not return from the camps like Auschwitz or Ravensbrück, where the innocent "survivors" of the Gestapo were deported. And Irena Sendler was not innocent.

The sedan cranked hard to the right as it headed southeast across the still-sleeping city. The most direct route would take them toward Warsaw's broad prewar avenues, first skirting west and then south of the wasteland that had once been the Jewish ghetto. During the first years of the Nazi occupation, Irena had been in and out of the ghetto three or four times a day sometimes, each time risking arrest or summary execution, trying to help to save some of their old school friends, their Jewish professors . . . and thousands of small children. Now, in late 1943, there was only ruin and rubble. It was a killing ground, an endless graveyard. The ghetto had been leveled after the Jewish uprising that spring, and her friend Ala Grynberg had disappeared inside that inferno. Word in the underground whispered that Ala was still alive, in the forced-labor camp at Poniatowa, one of a group of young militants secretly planning their escape from the prison. Irena hoped that, when this barbaric war was over, Ala would make it back to collect her small daughter, Rami, from the orphanage where Irena had her hidden.

The prison car passed a few blocks north of what had once been the Polish Free University. The institution was another war casualty. Irena had completed her degree in social work across town, at the University of Warsaw, but she had been a frequent presence on the Polish Free University campus in the 1930s, and it was

there, thanks to Professor Helena Radlińska, that her resistance cell had been formed. They had been, almost to the last one, Dr. Radlińska's girls in the days before the occupation. Now they were part of a well-organized and daring network, and the professor had been the inspiration for that too. It was a network of urgent interest to her captors. Irena was in her early thirties now, but her girlish, waifish looks were deceiving. The Gestapo had just captured one of the most important figures in the Polish underground. Irena could only hope that the Germans did not know it.

Crammed in beside her, a soldier, in his tall leather boots and with a tangling whip and truncheon, let down his guard. It was the end of their nighttime shift of terror. Irena sat on the lap of another young recruit, and she guessed that the boy wasn't more than eighteen or nineteen. They even seemed, she thought, to be dozing. Irena's face was calm but her mind was racing. There was so much to consider and so little time left to her.

Janka knew exactly how important these lists were—and how dangerous. If the lists were discovered, it would set in motion a chain of executions. The Gestapo would hunt down the Jewish children. They would murder the Polish men and women who had agreed to care for them and hide them. Zofia and Stanisław. Władysław and Izabela. Maria Palester. Maria Kukulska. Jaga. And they would kill Irena's mother, even though the frail, bedridden woman could only guess at the extent of her daughter's shadowy activities. The Germans followed a strict policy of collective punishment. Entire families were shot for the transgressions of a single member. Irena couldn't help but feel that she had once again been a bad daughter. She had always been, she knew, more like her impetuously idealist father.

If the lists were lost or Janka destroyed them as a safety measure, there was another agonizing dilemma. When Irena died, there would be no one to reconstruct them. Irena was the general in this citizens' army and the only one who knew the details recorded on them. She had promised mothers and fathers who went to Treblinka that she would tell their children who had loved them. When she was dead, there would be no one able to keep that promise.

There was one other question, too, that shook her: Who would tell Adam Celnikier? Adam. Her Adam. Her husband, Mietek Sendler, was somewhere in a German prisoner-of-war camp, and it would take weeks or perhaps months for word of her execution to reach him. It would eventually if he was still living. But she and Mietek separated before the war, and it was Adam she loved—Adam, whom even now friends were hiding under a false name and new identity. One of Warsaw's few surviving Jews, Adam was among the hunted, and his life was in constant danger.

The engine of the Gestapo sedan reverberated through the silent morning streets of Warsaw. With each turn, the soldiers roused slightly. Irena had to prepare herself now for what came next. She had to prepare herself to give away nothing, no matter what torture was inflicted. Too many lives depended on it. Irena had risked her life to keep the children hidden. Now she was more determined than ever to die with her secrets. What if she was not strong enough to do it? If the pain were great enough, would she even betray Adam in his secret hiding place? She wondered now what she could bear. When they broke her bones with cudgels and pipes in the days to come, that thought would haunt her.

It was a cold morning, and fear was also chilling her. The car rolled now smoothly eastward along the broad avenue, picking up speed on the final stretch of her journey. Soon they would reach Aleja Szucha and her last destination. There they would strip and search and beat and question her. There would be threats and intimidation. There would be lashes and agony and cruel torments that were at that moment still unimaginable. Colder things were coming. Irena slipped her hands into her coat pockets to warm them for a few moments.

Her heart froze the instant her fingers touched something light and thin and crisp. Cigarette paper. Irena suddenly remembered that there was one part of the list that she had forgotten. On it was an address. It would betray the life of someone she had meant to check in on that morning. It was there between her fingers.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Rufus George:

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