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Irena's Jars Of Secrets



Synopsis

Irena Sendler, born in 1910 to a Polish Catholic family, was raised to respect all people, regardless of their race or religion. As an adult she became a social worker, and after the Germans occupied Poland during World War II, Irena knew she had to help the Jews who were packed into the Warsaw Ghetto. She began by smuggling food, clothing, and medicine into the ghetto, then turned to smuggling children out of the ghetto. Using false papers and creative means of escape, Irena risked her own life to rescue Jewish children and hide them safely in orphanages, convents, and foster homes. Hoping to reunite the families after the war, Irena kept secret lists of the children's identities, which were buried in jars under an apple tree. Motivated by her humanity and armed with compassion and a belief in human dignity, Irena Sendler proved to the world that an ordinary person can accomplish extraordinary deeds.

Book Information

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Age Range: 6 - 11 years

Grade Level: 1 - 6

Customer Reviews

Irena's Jars of Secrets is the second picture book to come out this year on Polish heroine Irena Sendler, a young social worker who rescued over 2,500 Jewish children from under the noses of the Nazi guards in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II (earlier this year I reviewed Irena Sendler and the Children of the Warsaw Ghetto, by Susan Goldman Rubin). Both are well-written, worthwhile books, although they cover much of the same territory. Irena's father, a Polish doctor,

taught his daughter that if she ever saw someone drowning, she must jump in, even if she didn't know how to swim. Irena took his teachings to heart, and when the Polish Jews were forced into the Warsaw ghetto, dying of starvation and disease, she knew she must do something to help. Dressed as a nurse, she smuggled in food, medicine, and clothes, but that wasn't enough. Soon she joined the Żegota, a Polish organization established to help the Jews, and started smuggling children out of the ghetto however she could--finding families that would take them in. She kept careful records of the names of the children and where they went, so that they could be reunited with their parents after the war. These important notes were hidden in small jars and buried under the apple tree in a friend's garden. Irena's work was terribly dangerous, and she was eventually arrested by the Gestapo and sentenced to death. Żegota members managed to rescue her through a bribe, and she continued to work for the resistance until the war ended. Although Irena was able to retrieve her precious records, very few of the children were able to be reunited with their parents, most of whom had perished in death camps or the ghetto. Still, relatives were able to be found for some of the children.

I've always been interested in the Holocaust and have read widely on the subject as well as watched numerous documentaries, docu-dramas, and movies about the Shoah. It is a dark topic which requires appropriate material in introducing the subject to the younger generation, and luckily for younger readers, there are many age-appropriate materials available these days. Irena Sendler was a young Catholic social worker in Warsaw, Poland when the Nazis invaded her country in Sep, 1939. When she was young, Irena had been taught by her dying father that "if she ever saw someone drowning, she must jump in and try to save that person, even if she could not swim." This philosophy led to Irena risking her very life in order to save persecuted Jews in Warsaw, especially Jewish children who were completely helpless in the face of a great evil in the form of Nazi Germany and their plan of exterminating the Jewish race, what came to be known as the Final Solution. Irena's position as a social worker enabled her to get in and out of the Warsaw Ghetto, the infamous area where thousands of Jews were confined. It was basically a prison where many Jews were cramped into close living quarters, and many suffered from starvation and disease. Under the guise of providing medical assistance, Irena made plans to smuggle out as many Jewish children as she could out of the ghetto and to the Aryan side of Warsaw. Irena was aided in her efforts by Żegota, an underground organization. Together with like-minded people, Irena was able to save at least 2,500 Jewish children who would otherwise have most certainly met an untimely death at the hands of the Nazis.

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