

# Irena Sendler. A nurse example of love of freedom

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### Abstract

This article summarizes the life of Polish nurse, Irena Sendler, who during the Second World War helped in the escape of over 2500 Jewish children, held in the Warsaw ghetto. In spite of having been arrested by the Gestapo, she never revealed the names or whereabouts of the children she saved. Irena reminds us that nursing is the art of protecting the lives of others

**Key words:** nursing; holocaust; rescue work.

## Irena Sendler. Una enfermera ejemplo de amor a la libertad

### Resumen

En este artículo se resume la vida de la enfermera polaca Irena Sendler, quien durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, ayudó a escapar a más de 2 500 niños judíos recluidos en el gueto de Varsovia. Aunque fue arrestada por la Gestapo, nunca reveló los nombres ni el paradero de los niños a quienes salvó. Irena nos recuerda que la enfermería es un arte para proteger la vida de los demás.

**Palabras clave:** enfermería; holocausto; trabajo de rescate.

## Irena Sendler. Uma enfermeira exemplo de amor à liberdade

### Resumo

Este artigo faz um resumo da vida da enfermeira polaca Irena Sendler, quem durante a segunda guerra mundial, ajudou a escapar a mais de 2 500 meninos judeus enclausurados no gueto de Varsóvia. Apesar de ter sido presa pela Gestapo, nunca revelou os nomes nem o paradeiro dos meninos a quem salvou. Irena nos recorda que a enfermagem é uma arte para proteger a vida dos demais.

**Palavras chave:** enfermagem; holocausto; trabalho de resgate.

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Toward 1910, while the world debated on revolutionary thought and conquest of wars, Poland engendered one of the most important women in the history of humanity, whose feats could be qualified as heroic. We are referring to *Irena Sendler*, a nurse known as the “Angel of the Warsaw Ghetto”<sup>1</sup> for having saved the lives of over 2500 Jewish children during the Second World War. Her story took place under anonymity after 40 years of communist regime in her country and came to light in the fall of 1999. Now, without the hope of being rescued from oblivion, a group of North American students found this treasure that they allowed to shine. Since then, through the theatrical representations of “Life in a Jar”,<sup>2</sup> which toured North America and Europe, this great woman’s life began to be told.

Irena grew up in a family that instilled values in her and taught her to love others: “I did nothing special, I merely did what I should, nothing more. The reason I rescued the children originates from my home, during my childhood. I was educated in the belief that people need to be helped from the heart, without regard to their religion or nationality”.<sup>3</sup>

She was an activist; she never agreed with the politics governing her country. Ever since her youth, she was concerned with democratic participation; she saw her world through the great Polish writers and greedily devoured those words, which reflected the pain and suffering of her people; thus, ratifying her inconformity with the injustice governing the world, and with her homeland submerged in a war for territorial control.

When Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Irena was working in the Department of Social Welfare in Warsaw.<sup>4</sup> She was in charge of providing nutrition to impoverished children in this city, in which camps proliferated concentrating over 400,000 Jews, mostly children, women, and elderly. Thousands died every month due to hunger, infectious disease, or were murdered in the extermination camps.<sup>5</sup>

The horror of the annihilation of the human species in its most abrupt form led to the creation

of Zegota, a clandestine society in favor of Jews.<sup>6</sup> Irena joined them, under the *nom de guerre* of Jolanda and managed to enter the ghettos to rescue lives in amid death; she offered help to the families, and to avoid problems during inspections she registered them with fictitious catholic names or as carriers of contagious diseases.<sup>7</sup> Pain was felt there: “...The color of the ghetto is the color of the paper covering the corpses lying on the streets before they are taken away”.<sup>8</sup> Jolanda needed a strategy that would allow her to get the Jewish children out of the ghetto and, thus, avoid their seemingly inevitable sad demise. With the conviction that she had to struggle for those who needed her care, she gathered some collaborators and set out to rescue a great number of people.

This was how she contacted each of the captive Jewish families and offered them to rescue their children, guaranteeing only that they would not die in the ghetto. Irena was able to deliver more than 2500 children from captivity in trash bags, luggage, tool boxes, coffins, and ambulances; the smallest of these children was six-month old Elzbieta Ficowska who was taken to freedom in a wooden box with holes, next to a load of bricks and under the effects of sedatives so she would not be discovered. Today, she leads the Association of the Children of the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup>

When the children managed to leave the ghetto, they were baptized with Christian names, which Irena wrote one-by-one on strips of paper that she hid in jars which she would then bury under an apple tree in a neighboring garden. She hoped that, over time, the children could again meet with their past and, thus, diminish some of their pain.<sup>10</sup>

But the Third Reich struck with increased severity against Poland, and during one of these incursions deprived Irena of her freedom, subjected her to torture, and sentenced her to death: “they broke her feet and legs, but no one could break her will”.<sup>11</sup> She was willing to go to her grave with the secret. On the very day she was destined to die, she was miraculously set free. Although sentenced to live clandestinely, Irena was finally able to open the jar with the names of the children saved; locating many of them, who thanked the

opportunity she offered them of surviving and having a family with which to grow: “My Jewish mother gave me life and my Polish mother saved it. But when I say mother, I am talking about the mother who reared me, but I do not forget the one who brought me into this world.”<sup>12</sup> Other children rescued by Irena have commented that they owe their lives to Ms. Sendler, who was “the light in the terrible darkness of the ghetto”, and that their lives were a testimony of the victory of good over evil.<sup>13</sup>

Irena always modestly accepted the praise and honors granted: “each child saved with my help and that of my collaborators is the justification of my existence and not a title for glory”,<sup>14</sup> “we are not a species of heroes. On the contrary, I still have pangs of conscience for having done too little”.<sup>15</sup>

The title of Righteous among the Nations, of Honorable Citizen of Israel, the civilian award “Order of the White Eagle”, the nomination to the Nobel Prize, biographical books, theater productions, and her life taken to the silver screen with “The courageous Heart of Irena Sendler”<sup>16</sup>, are nothing more than recognition given to her prestigious and invaluable humanitarian work. Her example will remain over time in millions of people who are touched upon recognizing in her a courageous nurse, with an unshakable will and a fervent desire to serve others: “Human beings are fundamentally sacred. Human dignity implies accepting the human obligation of serving with love, of existing for the sake of others”.<sup>17</sup>

Irena passed away at 93 years of age in her beloved Warsaw on 12 May 2008, a date in which the world celebrates the Day of the Nursing Professional, because it is the anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, considered the mother of modern nursing.

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