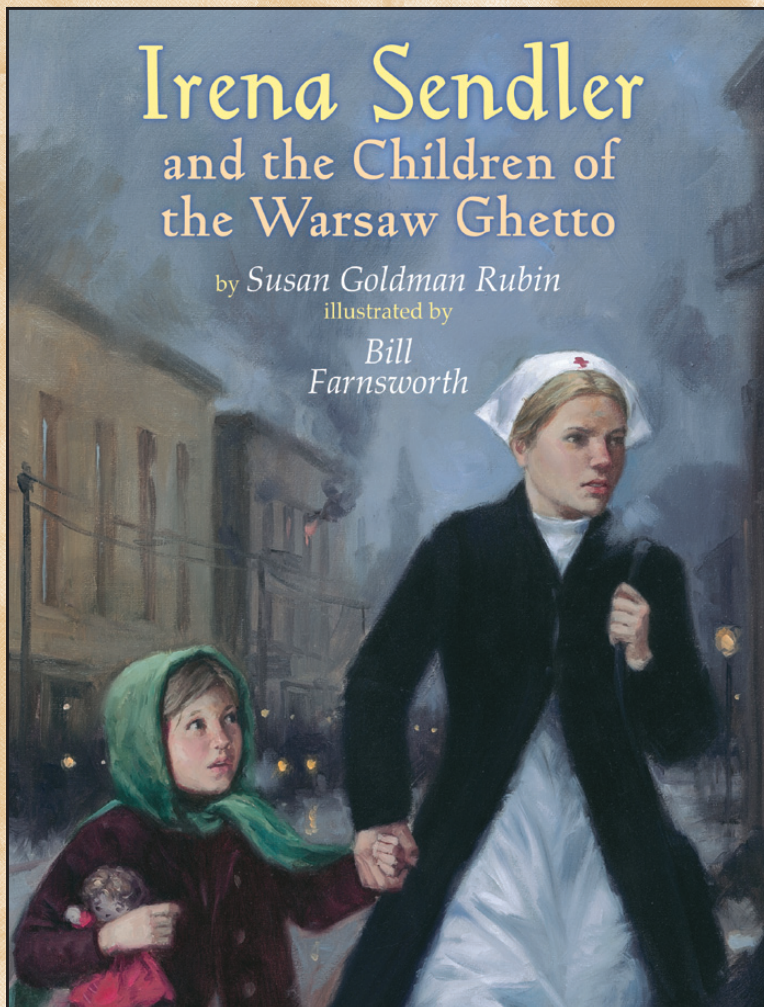


Holiday House Educators' Guide



★ "A moving tribute to a courageous woman."
—*Booklist* (starred review)

★ "Arresting oil paintings pair with vivid prose [in this] haunting and unflinching portrait of human valiance."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Themes

- Anti-Semitism
- Survival
- Hope
- Fear
- Courage
- Identity

Grades 3 up

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Irena Sendler and the Children of the Warsaw Ghetto

by Susan Goldman Rubin
illustrated by Bill Farnsworth

About the Book

Irena Sendler was a diminutive Polish social worker who helped spirit nearly four hundred children out of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II.

Irena Sendler was a young Catholic social worker in Warsaw when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939. Realizing that the fate of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto was death, Sendler joined an underground organization called the Council for Aid to Jews. Operating under the code name of "Sister Jolanta," Irena arranged for nearly four hundred children to be smuggled out of the ghetto. Older children left through the sewers or with "work brigades," and younger ones were taken out in ambulances and toolboxes. They were all placed in safe houses or orphanages. Their names were changed to protect them; but Irena kept a list of their real identities, which she safely buried in two bottles beneath an apple tree. This is her story.

Pre-Reading Activity

Ask students to read about anti-Semitism at the following website:
www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005175.
Then have them write a short summary called "What is anti-Semitism?"
Lead a class discussion about why it is so important to read books about the Holocaust
and to know about people who risked their lives to help the Jews.

Thematic Connections

Classroom Discussion

Anti-Semitism—Ask students to discuss how the "ghetto benches" at the University of Warsaw were an act of anti-Semitism. As a student, Irena sat with Jews on a ghetto bench to demonstrate "solidarity." How did this very act foreshadow her work to save Jewish children during the Holocaust? Note the illustration on pages 4–5. What distinguishes the Jewish students? How are these symbols an act of anti-Semitism?

Survival—Irena Sendler joined the Council for Aid to Jews and was given command of the Department of Help for Jewish Children. Explain how this underground organization carried out its work. Many of the children that Sendler rescued grew up not knowing that they were Jewish. Why was this important for their survival? Irena was arrested and her life was threatened after the Gestapo was informed of her underground activities. Discuss how her work was more important to her than her own survival.

Hope—Irena is standing outside a lighted doorway in the illustration on page 8. What is on the other side of that door? Study each illustration in the book. Note how often a single light is used in an otherwise dark and somber setting. Discuss how the light represents hope for the Jewish children. What is the significance of the light that shines on Irena's list of names on page 24? Discuss the illustration on pages 30–31. Note the green grass and the hint of spring. How does this symbolize hope?

Fear—Many of the people in the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw died at Treblinka, a Nazi death camp. How did the fear of the death camps give families the courage to hand their children over to Zegota, the code name for the Council for Aid to Jews. Discuss how the cover art communicates fear. Study the illustrations throughout the book and discuss the artist's use of dark colors.

Courage—Irena showed courage throughout her life. Explain the risk and the courage it took for her to give false documents to the children and defy the orders of the Nazis. Discuss the courage of the Christian Poles who operated safe houses for hidden Jews. Irena Sendler said that she helped rescue Jewish children because "my heart told me to" (p. 35). Debate whether courage is a matter of the heart.

Identity—Discuss the meaning of the illustration on pages 22–23. Explain the purpose of Sendler's list of names, which she hid in two bottles and buried under an apple tree. Ask the class to discuss why it was important for the children to reconnect with their heritage, even though it was unlikely that they could ever be reunited with their families. What is the irony that in the end Irena Sendler had to change her own identity and live in safe houses for awhile?

Curriculum Connections

Language Arts—One of the many awards and honors that Irena Sendler received before her death was the Order of the Smile. Find out what this award represents. Then write the tribute that might have been delivered to her on the day that she received this award.

Irena Sendler didn't see herself a hero. She said, "A hero is someone doing extraordinary things. What I did was not extraordinary. It was a normal thing to do" (p. 37). She felt that the Jewish children and their mothers were the real heroes. Write a letter that Piotr Zettinger or Elzbieta Ficowska might write hailing Sendler a hero.

Social Studies—Ask students to look in the index of the book and pick a topic for further research. Such topics may include: Warsaw Ghetto, Warsaw Uprising, Polish Socialist Party, resistance movement, Zegota, and safe houses. Have them prepare a five-minute presentation to be delivered to someone who knows nothing about the topic. Suggest that they use black-and-white photos from the Internet to augment their presentation.

Ask students to define *oral history*. Why is oral history so important to understanding events such as the Holocaust? Instruct students to visit the oral history section of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at the following website: www.ushmm.org/research/collections/oralhistory/. Then have them write a reaction to the personal stories of the Holocaust survivors. How were the experiences of the survivors different? How were they similar? How did listening to them make the horror of the Holocaust seem more real?

Science/Health—The poor living conditions in the Jewish ghetto caused a typhus epidemic. Find out the signs, symptoms, and treatment of typhus. What other diseases plagued the Jewish ghetto? What did the Germans think the Warsaw Disease Control Department could do about a typhus epidemic when the living conditions were so poor? Discuss the term *biological warfare*. Might the Germans have been guilty of biological warfare since they caused the poor living conditions?

Art—Irena's story didn't become known until 1989 when the Communist regime collapsed and Poland became a democratic republic. Design a full-page tribute to Irena Sendler that Elzbieta Ficowska, Piotr Zettinger, Teresa Tucholska, and other children she rescued might have placed in a Warsaw newspaper on her name day in 1989. In planning the design, consider symbols for peace, caring, hope, courage, love, sacrifice, and honor.

Drama—Irena Sendler died at the age of 98 on May 12, 2008. She once said that the world could only become a better place if we learned and practiced "love, tolerance and humility." Ask students to find a poem or an excerpt from a work of fiction that represents love, tolerance, or humility and read it aloud in class as a tribute to Irena Sendler.

Vocabulary/Use of Language

The vocabulary in the book isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them by taking clues from the context. Such words may include: *refugees* (p. 3), *resistance* (p. 4), *brigade* (p. 10), *couriers* (p. 18), *blackmailers* (p. 21), *retaliated* (p. 25), *havens* (p. 25), *livid* (p. 26), and *emigrate* (p. 35).

Web Links

The Irena Sendler Project

www.irenasendler.org/default.asp

The Story of the Life in a Jar project

The U.S. Holocaust Museum

www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?Moduleid=10005188

An article about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Jewish Virtual Library

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Zegota.html

A brief article about Zegota

About the Author and Illustrator



Susan Goldman Rubin is the author of *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin*, a Sydney Taylor Award Honor Book, a National Jewish Book Award finalist, and a *Booklist* Top Ten Art Book for Youth. Her other books include *The Anne Frank Case: Simon Wiesenthal's Search for the Truth* and *The Flag with Fifty-six Stars: A Gift from the Survivors of Mauthausen*, both illustrated by Bill Farnsworth, as well as a collaboration with Ela Weissberger, *The Cat with the Yellow Star: Coming of Age in Terezin*. She lives in Malibu, California. For more about Susan, visit her online at www.susangoldmanrubin.com.



Bill Farnsworth has illustrated numerous books for children, including several by Susan Goldman Rubin as well as *A Hero and the Holocaust: The Story of Janusz Korczak and His Children* and *A Hero for Civil Rights*, both by David A. Adler. In addition to his work with children's books, Bill is a fine artist who has created many paintings for magazines, advertisements, and commissioned portraits and landscapes. He lives in Florida. For more about him, visit www.billfarnsworth.com.

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