

A Curriculum Guide for

***Irena's Children: Young Readers Edition***

By Tilar J. Mazzeo

Adapted for young readers by Mary Cronk Farrell

**About the Book**

Irena Sendler was a young Polish woman living in Warsaw during World War II with an incredible story of survival and selflessness. And she's been long forgotten by history.

Until now.

This young readers edition of *Irena's Children* tells Irena's unbelievable story, set during one of the worst times in modern history. With guts of steel and unfaltering bravery, Irena smuggled thousands of children out of the walled Jewish ghetto in toolboxes and coffins, snuck them under overcoats at checkpoints, and slipped them through the dank sewers and into secret passages that led to abandoned buildings, where she convinced her friends and underground resistance network to hide them.

In this heroic tale of survival and resilience in the face of impossible odds, Tilar Mazzeo and adapter Mary Cronk Farrell share the true story of this bold and brave woman, overlooked by history, who risked her life to save innocent children from the horrors of the Holocaust.

**Prereading Activity**

Have students look up and record definitions of the following:

- Yiddish
- Partisan
- National Socialist German Workers' Party (NAZI)
- Air-raid siren
- Segregation
- Warsaw Ghetto
- Berlin Wall
- Anti-Semitism
- Socialist
- Radical activism
- Jewish question
- Deportation
- Glasnost

**Discussion Questions**

1. As the author asks in the introduction, referring to Irena: “If you had been alive during the dark days of the Second World War, would you have been one of the people who joined her?” Why or why not? Do you think that Irena and her friends were just “brave and average” or was there something special about them?
2. Name some of the different ways that people in the book participated in resistance acts. What kind of resistance work would you have been likely to participate in? Could you have been one of the teen assassins? A member of the underground press?
3. Why did Irena’s story take so long to be told? Why is it important to understand and celebrate the “average” people who take action during dark times in history? Can you think of other citizen activists, historical or contemporary? Do you think there are many others whose stories have been quietly buried?
4. Throughout history, people have commonly blamed others for bad things that happen, which often resulted in discrimination, violence, and sometimes genocide. How does the history of the Jewish people coincide with this statement? What new information did you learn about Jewish culture from reading this book? Referring to current events, are there still groups of people who experience hate and discrimination, like Jews did during the time of the Holocaust?
5. Were some of the acts committed by the Nazis that were described in the book difficult to read about? Which ones? Do you think that every single Nazi was evil? Why did the author choose not to portray any sympathetic Nazis? Does it help, as the author says, to recognize Irena’s bravery by comparing it to the Nazis’ brutality?
6. Discuss how Irena’s job as a social worker meant that she might be more open to helping the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. Provide examples from the book of how her position enabled her to smuggle children out to safety.
7. After the invasion, why did the Nazis choose to immediately round up and kill teachers, priests, politicians, journalists, and other community leaders? What evidence does the book provide as to why they chose to close schools and burn down libraries? Why do you think they believed that reading, writing, thinking, and teaching were dangerous?
8. Not all of the Polish people were sympathetic to the Jews. Give examples of some ways in which they betrayed the Jews, either out of anti-Semitism or to save themselves.
9. When the Jews were first moved into the ghetto, many of them felt they would be safer there. Why did they think that? Why did some others, like Maria Palester and Vera Gran, decide to “hide in the open” and remain friendly with some Germans throughout the occupation? Do you

see them as determined survivors or sellouts? What do you think their neighbors and friends thought of them?

10. From almost the moment that the ghetto walls were erected, people began escaping from it. Name some of the ways they escaped. Would you have tried to escape? How would you have done it?

11. Discuss some of the money issues during this time. Was it true that bribes could “solve all sorts of problems”? Did the fact that some rich Jews were “ghetto aristocrats” and lived in the “better” parts of the ghetto make things easier for them? How did Irena’s efforts increase after she was given funding by the official resistance? Why do you think people are more willing to do things for money that they would not otherwise do?

12. Name some of the different ways that parents tried to send their children out of the ghetto, to safety. Why is it that parents were willing to be parted from their children to make them safe? Discuss how this transpires in modern-day America, with the arrival of Mexican and Central American children unaccompanied by their parents.

13. Name some of the immoral or dishonest things that Irena and others did in order to save the children. Is it ever right to do the wrong thing, in your opinion?

14. In April 1943, ghetto residents decided to strike back, attacking with bombs and guns. Why do you think it took so long for an uprising to occur? Might they have been successful if they had tried this when their numbers were greater? In your opinion, is it better to fight in the open than to work in secret as Irena and her friends did?

15. Discuss this statement from the book: “The war made all sorts of decent people fainthearted.” How can friendships be beneficial, but also perilous, in times of war? Was Irena ever betrayed by any of her friends? How would you know whether to trust your friends or not?

16. Have you read other books about the Holocaust or seen movies or TV shows about this period in history? Were they true stories or fiction? How did the tone of this book compare with other depictions?

17. What is your impression of Irena Sendler? Are you surprised by her bravery? How do you think she will be remembered in Jewish history?

### **Extension Activities**

1. Create a time line, using the book’s events as a guide, of the progression of events in the Warsaw Ghetto. You can use an online/digital tool or create a physical representation.

2. Imagine that it's 1990, and you are a journalist. Your newspaper is preparing an article about the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, and you are going to interview Irena Sendler. Prepare a list of twelve questions you would ask her.

3. Collect photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto from a variety of sources. Caption them, and create a digital presentation to share with your class.

4. People in wartime often find that art and music can lift them out of the horrors they are experiencing. Research and write a report on ways that this transpired during World War II, both in the Warsaw Ghetto and in the concentration camps.

5. Research and write a detailed report on one of these other people from the book:

- Dr. Korczak and his orphanage
- Entertainer Vera Gran
- Nurse Ala Golab-Grynberg

6. Choose a significant scene from the book that involves some action taken by Irena, and rewrite the scene from Irena's point of view using first-person narration.

7. Read a book, either fiction or nonfiction, written about a child in the Warsaw Ghetto. Compare and contrast their experience with those depicted in *Irena's Children*.

This curriculum guide particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RI.7–12.1) (RI.7.3, 4, 6, 8, 9) (RI.8.2, 4, 7) (RI.9–12.3) (RI.9–10.6, 7) (W.7–12.2, 3, 4, 6, 9) (SL.7 – 12.1, 4, 5) (L.7–12.4) (RH.6–8.1, 2, 4, 6, 7) (RH.9–10.1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9) (RH.11–12.1, 2, 3, 6, 9) (WHST.6–12.2, 4, 6, 9)

*Guide prepared in 2016 by Bobbie Combs, a consultant at We Love Children's Books*

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