



Irena's Children: Young Reader's Edition; A True Story of Courage

Written by Tilar J. Mazzeo. Adapted by Mary Cronk Farrell.

Margaret Mc Elderry Books. 2016, 257 pp.

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Irena's Children relates the story of the horrific events that took place when the Nazis set out to eliminate the Jewish population of Poland, particularly in the city of Warsaw. "At the start of the war, there were an estimated 3.4 million Jews in Poland. Historians say fewer than 11,000 of the Warsaw Jews survived" (p. 229). The book focuses on the courage of Irena Sendler who, with a network of trusted colleagues, saved approximately 2500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto. With tremendous bravery and personal sacrifice, Irena and her network toiled throughout the war to find hiding places for Jewish children from the ghetto who would have otherwise been murdered. They smuggled children and babies out of the ghetto in coffins, toolboxes, and through the sewer system. At one time, Irena was arrested by the SS and tortured. Her legs and feet were broken, and terrible wounds were inflicted all over her body. She escaped, however, and returned to helping "her" children. In time of great conflict, Irena Sendler disrupted the status quo--ignoring the horrors of Warsaw--and worked toward the freedom and safety of Warsaw children.

In our current, disturbing world, there is a tendency to avoid this kind of account. This is a time, however, when we need to be informed not only about our present political and social landscape, but also about historical accounts that help us understand the potential dangers of current events. *Irena's Children* is such a book. Yes, it is disturbing to read about how the Nazis persecuted and murdered Jews prior to and during World War II; this is not pleasant reading, but the account of Irena's courage in the midst of terrible inhumanity is an inspiration.

Young people reading about the Holocaust will find this book makes an important contribution to their understanding of the period. Farrell's adaptation of the adult edition of the book provides important background for young readers and emphasizes the contribution of teens who were in Irena's network. You could pair this with other books about World War II: *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad* by M.T. Anderson (2015) or *Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys (2015).

Reading *Irena's Children* may open discussion about events in history and today where personal courage can make a difference. Tilar Mazzeo has written a number of informational narratives for adults. She is an Associate Professor of English at Colby College, in Waterville, Maine, but she is a storyteller first and foremost. More can be read about Mazzeo and this work at www.writerscast.com/tilar-j-mazzeo-irenas-children-a-true-story-of-courage/

Marilyn Carpenter, Eastern Washington University, Spokane, WA