How one young Catholic saved 2,500 kids

By Christina Capecchi

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Irena Sendler was 29 when Nazi tanks slithered into Warsaw, casting a shadow of fear over the town and slicing it apart with a walled-off ghetto for the Jewish residents.

There was no way she could sit back and watch. The social worker with the shy eyes and round baby face stood 4-foot-11-inches and possessed an unblinking courage. She had two guiding stars in life: her Catholic faith and her late father, a physician who had died of typhus contracted from low-income patients.

So Irena took action, pretending to be a nurse in order to gain access into the Warsaw ghetto and deliver food and medicine. The grimness of their fate became clearer with every passing day, as clusters were rounded up, marched to the freight yard and shipped an hour away to Treblinka death camp. The sight of the youngest among them, toddlers carrying their dolls, haunted Irena.

She enlisted her closest friends and colleagues, mostly young women, to form a secret network for the imprisoned Jews, sneaking aide in and smuggling children out. Parents were forced to make "heart-rending" calculations, and Irena could not guarantee that their children would survive if they fled through her network.

"I still have nightmares about it," she said in a 2011 PBS documentary, tapping her left index finger to her temple.

"You're going on a wonderful adventure," one Jewish mother explained to her son, with whom she was later reunited. "You're going to be a good boy."

"You're a big girl now," a father, who would later die, told his 10-year-old. "Tomorrow you must escape from the ghetto. I can no longer protect you."

Irena embraced the wartime orphans as she routed them to safe houses and then permanent homes. “We had to give them a lot of love and attention to help them adapt to their new lives.”

Beyond the sheer bravery required of the endeavor – perhaps a byproduct of Irena’s youth – it was an act of organizational might. She coordinated each stop with pinpoint precision.

The greatest help came from Irena’s Catholic connections. She called on priests, who created fake baptismal certificates for the Jewish children. They were taught Catholic prayers so they could demonstrate non-Jewish heritage under possible Nazi interrogation.

Despite the grave risk, some 200 Polish convents opened their doors to the kids.

The sights, sounds and smells of Mass comforted Piotr Zettinger, who was 4 when he left his parents in the ghetto. “For this hungry, bedraggled boy,” he told PBS, “taking part in these beautiful and uplifting ceremonies was quite wonderful.”

Miraculously, the system worked. All the Jewish kids placed in convents through Irena’s network survived the war. In total, Irena saved the lives of about 2,500 children.

She lived to be 98 and never considered herself a hero. “It was simple,” she said. “I remember what my father had taught me: ‘When someone is drowning, give him your hand.’”

The Holy Father issues the same challenge again and again, beginning with his inaugural homily when he called us to be “protectors of one another.” We can do so, Pope Francis said, by being “constantly attentive to God.”

This month would mark Irena’s 105th birthday. Our worlds may be vastly different, but we can honor her memory by treating our neighbors with the same compassion.

It is simple.

Christina Capecchi is a freelance writer from Inver Grove Heights, Minn. Read more

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