

Irena Sandler: The Heroine You Never Heard Of

How many of you have ever heard of Irena Sandler?

She was a Catholic social worker who rescued 2,500 Jewish children in the Warsaw Ghetto from certain extinction during World War II. Her story was essentially unknown until the 1980s, when it was discovered by three Kansas high school students as part of a history project. **Their efforts and Irena's story was finally written in 2011 in a book by Jack Mayer called *Life in a Jar*.**

I heard the story last summer while on a trip through Eastern Europe. I was touring Warsaw and one of our stops was the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto. All that remains of the ghetto are a couple of monuments. In describing the reason for the monument, our tour guide mentioned the name of Irena Sandler. Our guide then told us that the Nazis wiped the rest of the ghetto from the map during World War II.

In 1940, after the German occupation of Poland, the Nazis walled off an area with a largely Jewish population and then used it as a place to contain Jews - an area that became known as the Warsaw Ghetto. The Jewish population in Warsaw at the time of World War II was **380,000, or 30 percent of Warsaw's population.**

What became the Warsaw Ghetto represented 2.5 percent of Warsaw, geographically. This led to massive overcrowding. Travel in and out of the ghetto was severely restricted. Food shortages and disease were rampant. To put this in perspective, Germans received an average of 2,613 calories per day; Jews received only 184.

The title of the book came from a play the three Kansas students - all females - wrote about **Irena Sandler's efforts. Irena used jars to store the names of the 2,500 Jewish children she and her network saved by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto. Each child's birth name and Jewish parents' names were recorded on paper, along with their new Polish name and "adopted" family. The papers were sealed in jars and buried in the yard where Irena lived.**

The plan was that once the war was over, the jars would be retrieved, and parents and children would be reunited. Irena and the birth parents knew that, for most, this would never happen, as the parents were shipped to Treblinka, a prison camp, where over 800,000 perished.

What drives someone like Irena to get involved in such a situation and make a difference? Part of it is nurture. Her father was a physician who died of typhus at an early age. He reached out to the sick, so much so that he often knowingly put himself in danger to help others. It was a drive that ultimately cost him his life.

The book recounts pivotal bits of advice Irena’s father told her. He taught her that “people are the same - there are only good people and bad people.” He said, “If you see someone drowning, you need to rescue them even if you can’t swim.” Irena said, “If I can’t swim, won’t we both drown?” Her father replied, “You must do something.”

Given her upbringing and actions during World War II, Irena displayed numerous leadership traits as she worked in the face of death every day.

Many of these traits and skills are transferable to the business world, including:

- A strong moral compass - The interaction with her father about always doing something influenced her behavior. She also spoke up when she saw wrongs committed. In one instance, as a result of doing so, she was suspended from her university for three years.
- Risk-taker - In 1932, she took a job as a social worker, helping people in need of food, money, shelter and clothing. She learned how the system worked and how to bend the rules to best assist those in need.
- Uses her position to benefit others - She realized the people most in need were living in the Polish Ghetto. Daily, she legally entered the ghetto but smuggled in food and money for the needy. When it became apparent that those in ghetto would never get **out alive, Irena devised ways to get 2,500 children to “safety.”**
- Network-builder - With such a surreptitious mission, Irena had to possess the qualities necessary to bring on the right people. She had to know who to trust and who not to trust. Fake paperwork was created, funds were obtained and a variety of methods were used to get children out of the ghetto, including taking them through sewers, on ambulances and even placing sedated babies on wagons with corpses. The families taking these children ran the risk of being discovered, so Irena had to appeal to them in a way that they would acquiesce.
- Courage under pressure - Each day she went into the ghetto, she did so knowing she might get caught. Eventually she was sent to Pawiak prison for 100 days, where she was beaten daily. On the day she was to be executed, her colleagues bribed a guard and she escaped.
- Humble - She never sought, but rather avoided, any public recognition for her efforts.
- Modest - Her biggest regret was she had not been able to save more children.

- Optimism - She believed what she was doing would someday make a difference. In a corporate setting, we would say a person like that had vision.

The end of World War II meant freedom and liberation for some countries and its peoples. For Poland, however it meant Communism. Poland was under Communist control from the end of World War II until 1989. Recognizing war heroes or people that took actions **against “the state” during World War II was not part of the Communist agenda.**

More than 50 years had passed by the time the girls from Kansas uncovered this story. Fortunately, Irena Sandler lived until 2008, when she passed away at the age of 98. So, she was able to share her personal story, which provided a new insight into a major historical event and left lasting lessons about character that are applicable today in the business world.

About the Author

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