

# It's Her Story: Irena Sendler — A Graphic Novel

## EDUCATOR GUIDE



**Irena Sendler** was a humanitarian and social worker in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II. Her job allowed her to pass through the armed gates of the Warsaw ghetto, bringing limited aid to the 450,000 Jewish people who were forcibly moved there. In secret, Irena built a network of people to smuggle 2,500 children out of the ghetto, saving their lives. And in a hidden jar, she kept their family names.

It's Her Story: Irena Sendler  
Written by Margaret Littman  
Illustrated by Sara Luna  
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Ages 7 to 10  
48 pages  
Hardcover, 6.2 x 8.6 inches

## DISCUSSION

Ask these questions to the class as a whole or have students discuss in small groups.

1. Irena and her friends were able to stay safe and do their work because they had each other. They were like a team. Who is on your “team”? Think about your friends and family. How do you help each other and work together?
2. Irena and her friends gave the rescued children fake names to help them hide. She made sure to tell the children their birth names once it was safe to do so.
  - Do you use a nickname or other name that is different from your given name? Do you sometimes use one name and sometimes use another?
  - Is your name important to you? Why or why not?
  - In what ways is a person's name not important?
3. Irena says on page 44 that she is not a hero because she did not do anything out of the ordinary.
  - Was what she did ordinary?
  - Is she a hero?
4.
  - What are the traits and qualifications of a hero?



## EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONNECTION

1. Introduce the activity by telling students that parts of this story are very sad, and it's OK to feel sadness when you learn about something sad. When you let yourself be sad, you will feel more ready later to be calm, hopeful, or happy.
2. Lead students in brainstorming things they do when they need to sit with their sadness. The grid [on the right] has some ideas.
3. Sometimes, when you are feeling sad, people try to help by saying “Don't cry!” or “It's all right!” What's something you can say to that person if you feel like being sad for a little while longer?

### When I need to feel sad I can...

Cry	Kick a soccer ball around	Talk about my feelings
Listen to music	Look at photos	Write about my feelings
Make a plan to help others	Be alone	Draw



## PERFORMING ARTS CONNECTION

Irena Sendler was practically unknown until, in 1999, three teenagers from rural Kansas researched, wrote, and performed a play about her called *Life in A Jar* for a history competition. In a quite amazing series of events, the students then located Sendler in Warsaw, fundraised to visit her, and forged personal, cultural, and political networks that inspired an international movement honoring Sendler's actions.

The play has been performed hundreds of times and has inspired books, films, and more. The history students, now adults, maintain a close relationship with Irena's family and some child survivors. In a letter to one of the students, Irena wrote, Before the day you had written *Life in a Jar*, the world did not know our story; your performance and work is continuing the effort I started over fifty years ago. A survivor described the students' work as rescuers of Irena's story.



1. Share the above information with your students.
2. In groups of three to five, have students write a short performance about one of the key events listed below. To help develop the play's dialogue and actions, have each team:
  - a. determine the people present in the scene
  - b. brainstorm what each of the characters is thinking, feeling, saying, and doing
  - c. brainstorm details about the setting

As an option, students who are reluctant to perform may act as set designers.

3. Have each group perform for the class.

### Key events:

- Students in Uniontown, Kansas, decide on Irena as a topic for National History Day. She is so little known that they only find one mention of her on the Internet.
- The students perform their original play, *Life in a Jar*, causing a sensation in their small town.
- The students learn that they haven't been able to find where Irena is buried because she is still alive! They write her, and she writes back.
- The students (along with their teacher and some parents) travel to Poland to meet 91-year-old Irena.
- The local press, then national and international, cover the story.
- *Life in a Jar* is performed hundreds of times in the US, Poland, and Canada. Audience members include some of the child survivors themselves.

