**During the Nazi occupation of Poland, an underground organisation known as Zegota — or Rada Pomocy Żydom (Council for Aid to Jews) — managed to smuggle out some 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto, providing them with false identity documents and shelter, and thus rescuing them from certain death. The driving force and leading figure behind this clandestine operation was Irena Sendler, a 33-year-old social worker and head of the organisation's Children's Section, seen here pictured in nurse's uniform in 1944. After the war, although her achievement was acknowledged in small circles in Poland and Israel and by Holocaust historians, her story remained largely unknown in the wider world, the main reason being that it was suppressed by the Communist regime that ruled Poland until 1989. The Polish authorities actively persecuted Sendler, the secret police interrogating and imprisoning her in 1948-49 because of her connections with the wartime Armia Krajowa (Underground Home Army) and later forcing her into retirement due to her public declarations in support of Israel in the Israeli-Arab war of 1967. Her wartime work did not in fact gain international fame until 1999 when four American Protestant girls from a high school in Uniontown, Kansas, unearthed her story and wrote a play about her called *Life in a Jar* for a class project. The play became a big theatre hit, leading to numerous press articles, radio and television programmes, books and documentaries about her, most of them in the United States. Since then, Sendler's work has been universally recognised. Still living in Poland, she was honoured with numerous high rewards for her humanitarian efforts — among them the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest civilian decoration, and the Jan Karski Award — and was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in three consecutive years, 2006, 2007 and 2008. A public figure until her death in 2008, she is today seen as a symbol of heroism and self-sacrifice. Many have compared her achievement with that of German businessman Oskar Schindler, who is credited with saving 1,200 Jews by employing them in his enamel factory in Krakow, and — with an allusion to *Schindler's List* (the title of the 1993 movie that made him famous) — refer to her work as 'Sendler's List'.**

# IRENA SENDLER

## By Anna Mieszkowska

Irena's story, as told to Anna Mieszkowska, titled *Mother of the Holocaust Children* was published in English in 2011.

'My father, Stanislaw Krzyzanowski, was a physician and very much engaged in the independence movement, helping those who were persecuted for participating in the revolution in Russia in 1905. Whilst staying with his parents in Tarczyn, he became acquainted with Ksawery Grzybowski's daughter Janina and they married in 1908.

'The following year the young couple returned to Poland where my father worked as a doctor at the Holy Spirit Hospital in Warsaw. I was born there on February 15, 1910. One day I contracted whooping cough and as Dr Erbrich, who was a friend of the family, said that a change in the climate would help cure me, two days later we were settled in Otwock, a small spa town outside the capital.

'I married Mieczyslaw Sendler in 1931. He was a junior assistant at the University of Warsaw Faculty of Classical Philology. My first professional job in 1932 was in the Mother and Child Aid Section of the Citizens' Committee for Social Help. Apart from helping the unemployed — at the time many people were out of work in Poland — this was also a kind of training ground for the Free Polish University School of Social and Educational Work.

'The Mother and Child Aid Section had three offices and I was put in charge of the sub-section caring specifically for unemployed single mothers whose number was continually rising with the influx of girls from the countryside who moved to Warsaw in search of work. In the spring of 1935 the section was closed and I was given a post in Social and Health Care Centre VI which was responsible for poor people living in the Annopol Barracks. Later I worked in various sections of the Social Welfare Department where I also instructed new members of staff.

'On August 30, 1939, I escorted my husband to the station as he was leaving for the front. We stood on the platform among a crowd of others who were also departing or seeing their loved ones off.

'When at dawn, in the early morning of September 1, the first bombs fell on Warsaw, the president of the city, Stefan Starzynski, issued key instructions to the Social Welfare Department to organise special social care points throughout Warsaw to provide essential aid to refugees fleeing from the German invaders. I had to organise such points in three different places for, as one area was bombed, it had to be moved elsewhere.

'When the city capitulated on September 28, almost immediately I became involved in the conspiratorial activities of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). I carried out many tasks, including the delivery of money to professors at the University of Warsaw who now found themselves in a very difficult financial situation. I also went to the families of those who were imprisoned or had been executed and supplied medicines and essential sanitary items to people hiding in the forests.

'What help the social welfare department was able to provide was hopelessly inadequate in face of the most urgent needs. Polish POWs suffering from typhus were put in the former military Ujazdowski Hospital in Piekna Street but the food was quite insufficient for the malnourished soldiers who had languished in the terrible conditions of the German Stalags.

'Apart from delivering provisions, we also established contacts between the soldiers and their families, many of whom lived in other parts of the country. We helped in the writing of letters and brought them books and even gramophones and records. Among the several hundred conscripts there were two officers whom we helped to escape. This was a very risky operation as the hospital was under constant German supervision and observation.

'After a year in this office, I moved to another centre in Wola district, nearer to where my ailing mother lived. There my job was to decide which families were the poorest and in the greatest need of aid. It was from this working-class district that the Germans deported large numbers of youths to work in the Third Reich. In order to save these young people, we established a co-operative where they could be officially employed in shoemaking, carpentry, and tailors' workshops. In time, the Germans realised what we were doing so we helped youths in the greatest danger of deportation to acquire medical certificates, falsely stating that they were suffering from pulmonary diseases. Later, after being accused of helping ghetto Jews, I was transferred to another centre in Grochow which was far from my home and sick mother.

'On December 1, 1939, a regulation was introduced instructing all Jews to wear armbands with the Star of David. Likewise, their shops were to be marked with the Star of David. Gradually Jews' freedom of movement was restricted; houses and flats were confiscated; bank accounts blocked, and Jewish employees sacked from Polish institutions. Finally, Warsaw was divided into three districts: German, Polish, and Jewish.

'The city's inhabitants were now forced to move. Even Jews from other parts of the country were transported into the Warsaw Jewish district. When, on November 16, 1940, the Warsaw ghetto was finally closed, it contained over 400,000 people, over 130,000 of whom had been forcibly moved there.

'An order issued by Hans Frank on October 15, 1941 prohibited Jews from leaving the ghetto and all Poles from helping Jews. For Jews and Poles alike, the punishment for breaking this rule was death.

'In order to help the Jews, we had to gather information so that we knew which ones were in the greatest need, and we also had to forge hundreds of documents. The surnames of the

*Right:* **Set up by the Nazi authorities in 1940, the Warsaw Ghetto housed over 400,000 Jews. Utterly overcrowded, living conditions in the ghetto were abysmal, tens of thousands of adults and children alike succumbing to hunger, cold and disease. Thousands of emaciated children, many of them orphaned, roamed the streets, begging, desperately looking for food, or listlessly lying on the pavement.**

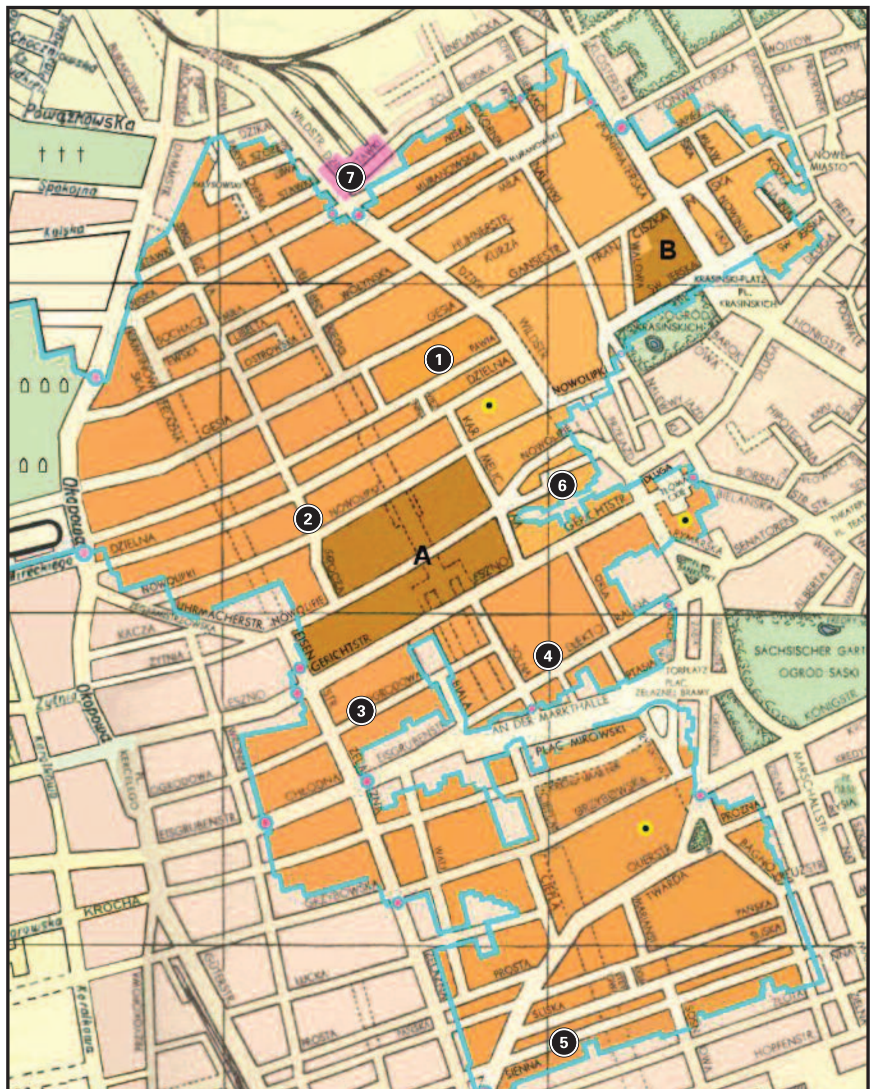
Jews we helped had to be changed into Polish ones. For myself and my friend Irena Schultz, I managed to acquire the work passes of a sanitary unit responsible for fighting infectious diseases. Later I was able to obtain such passes for my other couriers. Thus, up to the spring of 1943, we were able to enter the ghetto quite legally. The Germans were terrified of typhus, and in those atrocious unsanitary conditions with over-population and hunger, an epidemic was bound to break out. Not wishing to have physical contact with any potential carriers of this disease, they left it to the Poles to try and control the situation. Sometimes we would enter the ghetto several times a day. We had money from the social welfare department fund, food and medicines (including precious typhus vaccines) and disinfectants. We also smuggled in clothes by wearing several layers every time we came, which was not a problem for me as I was very slim.

'On entering the ghetto, I would put on a Star of David armband as a gesture of solidarity with the Jewish population. The other reasons were that it would not draw the attention of any Germans I encountered there and also not arouse the suspicion from Jews who didn't know me.

'From the very first days of the occupation, I combined my official work in the City of Warsaw Administration with my secret underground work. In December 1942 — after the first large-scale deportations from the ghetto — I joined Zegota, an underground social organisation formed to aid the Jewish population, and soon became the head of its Children's Section. My section specialised in helping children of various ages leave the ghetto and it also provided shelter for other children who had managed to escape individually. Depending on their age, sex and outward appearance, the children were either found Polish families to live with, or were sent to convents or secular child-care institutions. The older youths (often not without very considerable problems) joined the partisans. It was important to know whether the child spoke Polish. Each child needed new fictitious documents regarding his or her birth and here Catholic parishes helped.

'The cruel living conditions in the Jewish district quite literally decimated the inhabitants. There were now many homes where all the adults were dead and only neglected, helpless children remained. One way to help, of course, was to take the children out of the ghetto but we could not take them all at once. One first needed to organise temporary help, child-care and food. The ghetto streets were full of child beggars. We saw them on entering and after a couple of hours when we turned to leave, there would often be tiny corpses, covered with newspapers lying on the ground.

'The deaths of adults resulted in a rapid rise of child orphans. With my colleagues we also contacted families we knew had children. We would tell them we were able to save the children to get them beyond the wall. We had to honestly say that we could offer no guarantees. I spoke frankly; I said I could not even be certain I would safely leave the ghetto with a child that very day. Scenes from hell ensued. For instance, the father would agree to give us the child, but the mother would refuse. The grandmother, embracing the child most lovingly of all, tears streaming down her face, in between the sobs




**Childcare in the ghetto was organised by the Jewish Social Welfare Society, which ran a number of so-called 'youth circles' and child homes. The ones with which Irena's organisation was in closest contact, and from which they smuggled out many children, were those in Pawia Street [1], supervised by Rachela Rozenthal; No. 9. Smocza street [2], under Ala Golab-Grynberg; Ogrodowa Street [3], run by Josef Zysman; No. 24 Elektralna Street [4], led by Jan Izaak Kiernicel, and No. 16 Sienna Street [5], led by Ewa Rechtman. Many of the children were smuggled out through the courthouse [6], which had one entrance on Lezno Street in the ghetto and another on Ogrodowa Street on the 'Aryan' (non-Jewish) side.**

**On July 22, 1942, the Nazis began large-scale deportations from the ghetto, daily sending off some 5,000 to 6,000 persons by train to the Treblinka death camp, where all were murdered in the gas chambers. The central collection and departure point for the deportees was the so-called Umschlagplatz (reloading point) at the Warsaw-Gdansk Freight Train Station by Slawki Street, adjacent to the ghetto [7]. By September 21, some 265,000 people had been deported and exterminated. Although Irena and her co-workers had already smuggled out many children before the Germans launched this Gross-Aktion (Great Action), most of their rescue work occurred after it.**

would declare: "I'll never give up my granddaughter!" Sometimes I would leave such a family with their child. The next day I would return and frequently find that the entire family was already in the Umschlagplatz where Jews gathered for deportation to the Treblinka death camp.

'There were several ways to get infants out but in order for such an operation to stand any chance of success, one needed help from the Jewish police. We needed to know in advance which houses were selected to go first to the Umschlagplatz. It was difficult to get older children out of the ghetto individually. One needed to find a whole group of young boys and a policeman who, like others, had had enough of the ghetto's cruelties and wanted to leave it permanently. For a few days the boys had to be put up with highly trusted Polish families and then, once the underground resistance authorities had agreed to recruit them, one of us would lead the group out into the forest.

'It was a different matter with small children. We would usually take them out through the court in Leszno Street. This building had two entrances: one from the ghetto side, and the other from Ogrodowa Street on the German side. Some of the doors were left open and, thanks to the courage of the ushers, through this building one could get out of the ghetto with a child. Children were also driven out in fire engines, ambulances or by tram, the latter thanks to a friendly tram driver. Some children were taken in sacks, boxes, or baskets. Babies were put to sleep and hidden in crates with holes and they were driven out in the ambulance that delivered disinfectant to the ghetto.

'All needed documents. The children needed a baptism certificate whereas adults needed authentic Kennkarten (identification cards) because without these you could not get ration cards. We got in touch with the husband of one of the couriers who worked in the Public Records Office and in a very secret way he was able to issue authentic Kennkarten with the appropriate thumbprints. Next, once again by very secret means, a rescued individual would be registered as a resident by Mrs Stanislawa Bussoldowa, a midwife who was very dedicated to rescuing both children and adults, the administrator of House No. 5 in Kaluszynska Street, in the Praga district.

'There were considerable difficulties with hiding adults. Often they failed to appreciate how crucial it was to behave in the least-noticeable way in the homes of people who were risking their own lives to hide them. They sometimes did not understand that even leaning out of a window or stepping out onto the balcony was of great danger not only to themselves but also to their hosts.

'One of the basic principles of successfully hiding Jews was to frequently change locations. This was essential on account of observant neighbours, who would notice when a family suddenly started buying more food, especially bread.

'The first place of refuge was the most important. A young child had to be taught to live in new — and not necessarily immediately safe — circumstances. These were special, private family units managed by very

ADRIAN GRUCYK

**Today, a memorial marks the site of the Umschlagplatz. Designed by Architect Hanna Szmalenberg and sculptor Wladyslaw Klamerus, and unveiled on April 18, 1988 — the 45th anniversary of the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising — it has inscriptions in Polish, Hebrew and English: 'Along this path of suffering and death over 300,000 Jews were driven in 1942-1943 from the Warsaw Ghetto to the gas chambers of the Nazi extermination camps.'**

**The first hiding address of many of the saved children was the Father Boduen Orphanage at No. 75 Nowogrodzka Street. Set up in 1736 by the French missionary priest Gabriel Baudouin, it was Warsaw's oldest care institution for abandoned children. Under its courageous director, Maria Prokopowicz-Wierzbowska, the institute gave shelter to some 200 Jewish children. Every month, two of Sendler's co-workers — Irena Schultz and Helena Szeszko — would bring some eight Jewish orphans to the home. The information about a planned drop-off of a child was usually given by telephone, in a code including data about a child's appearance and the time of its arrival. The building still functions as a care institution for children to this day.**

trusted people. Children there were taught Polish, how to pray, sing Polish songs, and recite Polish poems. They were surrounded with the most affectionate care. They were washed, dressed in new clothes, and fed. Considerable trouble was taken to calm them down, to ease the pain of being separated from their loved ones.

'There was no fixed time a child had to spend there — it all depended on how long it would take for the child to adapt. When they were ready they were sent either to the Father Boduen Orphanage on Nowogrodzka Street, or to a convent somewhere in Poland, or to live with a trusted family.

'How the children fared varied greatly depending on whether or not the hosts had an appropriate attitude to the child's tragedy. Older children were more aware of their situation and therefore terrified of being identified. They had witnessed the cruelty of the ghetto and understood that Jews were killed. Having to constantly pretend in front of others frequently proved too much for them. Some children adapted with great difficulty and continued to wait for their mother, grandmother, or other close family member.

'Apart from various dramatic surprises that were part and parcel of life in the occupied capital, up to January 1943 the operation of rescuing the ghetto inhabitants had its regular rhythm. However, that month the Jews resisted with firearms for the very first time, and on April 19, during yet another attempt to conduct the final liquidation of the ghetto, Jewish soldiers and groups of Jewish civilians put up the organised and sometimes chaotic resistance that became known as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

'We immediately went into action. We waited at various manhole covers and I organised several more child-care points. I widened the exit routes, which were usually through the basements of adjoining houses. When it was no longer possible to help those inside the ghetto who had stayed to fight, we concentrated on helping those who had managed to escape. Unfortunately our aid could only be limited and quite inadequate and later, even with passes, we could not enter the ghetto. And when the ghetto fell, the search for Jews on the German side still continued. The greatest concern was the fate of the children.

'Even during the war, consideration was being given as to what would happen after the fighting ended as it was important that the children should not be lost to the Jewish community. For the sake of families eventually searching for their children, I kept a file so that their whereabouts could be traced, not only in Warsaw but also in the whole of Poland. This was very risky as any list with names, surnames, and addresses could get into the wrong hands. In brackets, next to the name "Marysia Kowalska" would be the name "Regina Lubliner" and the coded address to where the child had been sent. For safety's sake, I was the only person who kept and managed the files and before I went to bed I placed the tiny, tightly-rolled-up scroll in the centre of the table. If I heard knocking on my front door, I planned to throw the scroll out through the window into the bushes in the small garden. I practiced many times to do it swiftly in the eventuality of unwelcome visitors. And then that day came.

'October 20, 1943 — my name day — an elderly aunt of mine and Janina Grabowska, one of my best couriers, came to the flat at No. 6 Ludwiki Street where my mother and I lived. We talked till three in the morning so my aunt and the courier had to stay because the curfew began at eight in the evening.

'The frightful bang and pounding on the door first woke my mother. I was also fully awake and about to throw the small scroll out of the window when I realised that the house was totally surrounded by the Gestapo. I tossed the vital scroll to my courier and then went to open the door. They burst in, 11 of them. The search lasted three hours with the lifting of floorboards and pillows being ripped open. Throughout that time I did not once look at my friend, or at my mother, for fear of any of us giving anything away. Janina had managed to hide the scroll under her armpit and she was wearing my large dressing gown whose long sleeves covered everything.

'When the Gestapo officers ordered me to get dressed, incredibly as it might seem, I felt happy because I knew the list of children was not in their hands. I was in such a hurry to get out of my flat that I left the house in my slippers. Janina ran after me with my shoes and the Germans let me put them on.

'I walked down the long courtyard thinking only about how I had to stay composed, so that my face would not reveal to them any traces of fear, even though fear was clutching my throat. Yet in that time three miracles occurred. The first was that the Gestapo did not find the lists, and the second was that I had a large sum of money (the allowances for the escapees) and the Kennkarten and birth certificates, both real and false ones, all under my bed. However, it had collapsed during the search and the Germans were so preoccupied with ripping up pillows and throwing clothes out of the wardrobe that they took no notice of the broken bed.

'The third miracle was my successful destruction of an important list of children for whom I was due to deliver money the next day. This was in my jacket pocket and,

ADRIAN GRUCYK

**From the autumn of 1940, Irena lived with her ailing mother in an apartment (Flat 82) at No. 6 Ludwiki Street in Wola district. This is where she was arrested by the Gestapo on October 20, 1943. A tablet commemorating her was unveiled on the end wall in 2015.**

H. PIOTR

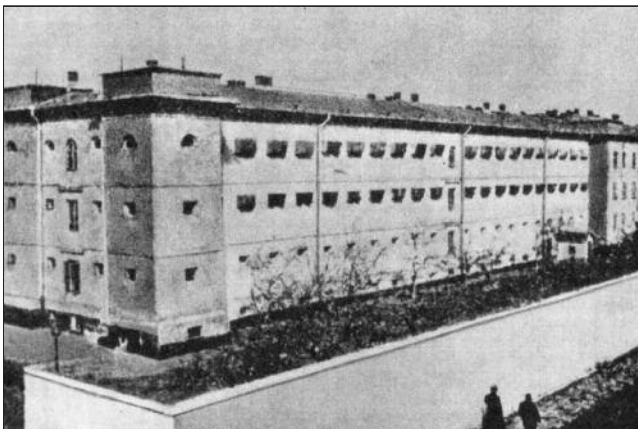
*Above left:* **After her arrest, she was taken to the Gestapo headquarters at No. 25 Szucha Avenue. Before the war the imposing building had housed the Polish Ministry of Religious Beliefs and Public Education but now it was the seat of SS-Obersturmbannführer Ludwig Hahn, the Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD (Commander of the Security Police and Security Service) in Warsaw** *(right)*. **The cellars were used as torture and killing chambers.** *Above right:* **Today the building accommodates the Ministry of National Education. However, since 1956, the basement houses a museum to its grim wartime past, the Mausoleum of Struggle and Martyrdom.**

as there was no doubt that I would be stripped naked and searched, I surreptitiously tore the card into tiny pieces and disposed of them through a slight opening in the car window. It was six in the morning, it was dark, and the Germans were so tired they were virtually snoozing. No one's suspicion was aroused.

'At the Gestapo headquarters in Szucha Avenue I saw I was not alone as other colleagues from social welfare centres had also been arrested. During the investigation I realised that one of our post boxes — as we called our contact points — had been discovered. It was in a laundry and the owner, who had been arrested for some unrelated matter, broke down under torture, and gave my name away. During interrogation I was asked to name the organisation I worked for and its leader. The Germans knew there was a secret organisation helping Jews but they did not know the details. They promised me that if I told them everything, I would be immediately released.

'In Pawiak Prison, they interrogated and tortured me for many days and nights but I was silent because I preferred to die rather than reveal our activity. The Gestapo interrogator wanted the names of my superiors as they did not realise they had arrested such an important member of the underground movement. I was shocked that they had informants' reports. They showed me a whole file with information about the times and places. They also showed me the files of people who had informed on me. After three months I received my sentence: I was to be shot.

'I received secret letters from Zegota telling me to stay calm because they were doing everything to save me. This was comforting; I also knew that other condemned inmates were also encouraged to feel that there was still a chance. Awareness that I was not alone, not abandoned by friends from the organisation, helped me survive the most difficult moments.



ADRIAN GRUCYK

*Left:* **After having been brutally interrogated by the Gestapo, Irena was transferred to Pawiak Prison on Dzielna Street, where she was to stay for three months, until January 20, 1944. Built in 1829-35, during the German occupation it was turned into a Gestapo prison, then became part of the Nazi concentration camp apparatus. Approximately 100,000 men and 200,000 women passed through the prison, mostly members of the Armia Krajowa, political prisoners, and civilians taken as hostages in street round-ups. An estimated 37,000 were executed and 60,000 sent to German death and concentration camps. On August 21, 1944, during the Warsaw Uprising (see *After the Battle* No. 143), the building was burned and blown up by the Germans.** *Right:* **Pawiak Prison was never rebuilt. Half of its gateway on Dzielna Street and three detention cells in the basement remained and these became a memorial site in 1965, the basement since then housing the Museum of Pawiak Prison.**

ADRIAN GRUCYK

ADRIAN GRUCYK

**One of the safe-houses (or 'emergency care homes' as Zegota called them) where smuggled-out children were initially kept was at No. 9 Lekarska Street, the home of Jadwiga Piotrowska, one of Irena's couriers and most-active helpers, who lived there together with her parents and sister. After her release from prison in January 1944, and again in August 1944 during the Warsaw Uprising, Irena put the coded lists with all the names and addresses of rescued children into a bottle and then buried it under an apple tree in the garden here. After the war, the lists were recovered, and enciphered, enabling the children to be traced — either to be re-united with their parents or relatives (if these had survived) or to be put in Jewish orphanages.**

'Then a period of mass executions began at Pawiak Prison. Every morning the cell doors opened and those called out never returned. On January 20, 1944, my name was called out with 30 or 40 others and we were taken to the headquarters in Szucha Avenue. I realised this was my final journey. And then something quite unbelievable happened. They read out the names, and every person called out was told to go to a room on the left, that is everyone except me. I was told to go to a room on the right. Quite unexpectedly a Gestapo man appeared, apparently to take me for further interrogation. He escorted me out of the headquarters toward the Polish parliament building in Wiejska Street where he said in Polish: "You're free! Get out of here at once!"

'The happiness and joy at my return and my reunion with mother cannot be described. An hour later one of my couriers arrived and said, "Sleep here tonight, but tomorrow you must go into hiding." A few days later Zegota gave me new documents for a new name: Klara Dabrowska.

'I discovered that my release had been as a result of the Gestapo officer being bribed. Everything was carefully planned. A rucksack stuffed with wads of money bills hidden beneath packets of macaroni and kasha had been left at the agreed spot. The money was picked up and the deal made. The man then entered Irena Sendler as "executed" in all the relevant documents but he paid dearly for this for when the ruse was uncovered, he and his colleagues who were also implicated, were sent to the Eastern Front as a punishment for betraying the Third Reich.'

For Irena Sendler she returned to a quite different world. By now, she and her mother had gone into hiding in the home of a friend, Stefan Wichlinska, at No. 2 Kaweczynska Street. She could no longer contact anyone in the Warsaw Civic Administration where she had worked and, although she could resume her underground activities, she was in hiding, just like the people she was trying to help. News of her execution was officially released and she even read about her own death on advertising columns in the street. In addition, the street megaphones announced it. It was not until a few weeks later that the truth came out. The underground authorities themselves forbade her to sleep in her flat.

On March 30, 1944, Irena's mother took a turn for the worse but she pleaded with her daughter: 'Promise me you won't attend my funeral, the Gestapo will be looking for you'. Irena kept her promise but the Gestapo attended, asking questions about her but were told that the daughter of the deceased was in Pawiak Prison. 'She was, and has now disappeared', growled one of the furious German officers.

Irena: 'After the death of my mother I was alone so I devoted all my energies to work for Zegota and for a secret PPS cell. My tasks included delivering money to the families of activists who had been arrested. I also transported medicine to those hiding in the forests. Despite my changed name, I had no fixed abode. For my own safety and theirs, I never stayed at a friend's home for more than a few days at a time.

'In July, the atmosphere in the city was becoming increasingly tense. After my escape from prison, I put the lists with children's names into a jar which I buried in the garden of No. 9 Lekarska Street, where my courier and friend lived, so that she would be able to give it to the right people if I died.'

After liberation, the lists were deciphered and submitted to Adolf Berman who was chairman of the Central Committee of Polish Jewry. Jewish children were traced and removed from their foster parents as their original families were reclaiming them. However, children with no surviving relatives were also taken away and temporarily put into Jewish orphanages, after which a large

JADWIGA RYTLOVA

**On December 15, 1965, the Yad Vashem institute in Jerusalem, dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust victims, granted Irena the Righteous Among the Nations Medal, an award reserved for non-Jews who have helped to rescue Jews during the war. Despite numerous invitations from the Israeli government, the tree honouring her name that comes with the award was not planted in the Avenue of the Righteous until 1983 as for many years the Communist authorities refused to issue Irena a passport. Here she is re-united with some of the children she had saved, many by now mothers and grandmothers.**

*Left:* **Irena planting her tree, which has since flourished** ***(right)*****. In all, she and the Zegota organisation are credited with saving an estimated 2,500 Jewish children: some 500 were accommodated via the Social Welfare Department in monastic institutions; 200 in the Father Boduen Orphanage; 500 in institutions run by the Central Welfare Council (Rada Glowna Opiekuncza, RGO); about 100, aged 15-16, were sent to the forest to join the partisans; and over 1,200 were helped and cared for by foster families.**

BONIO

number of them were sent to Palestine. Irena believed that the vast majority of the 2,000 children featured on the Warsaw lists were found after the war. Unfortunately, all this did not happen without problems of a psychological nature.

'It was a harrowing experience for the small heroes. Mothers and relatives started reclaiming their children. Some of the reunions were beautiful and happy events. But others were very difficult. Some of the younger children did not remember their wartime past, and the foster parents also suffered because it was difficult for them to part with children they had looked after for several years. Knowing the fate of so many Jews, some foster parents had assumed that the adopted child's entire family was dead and for the children's own good they did not tell them where they had really come from. And then, all of a sudden, there was this surprise. Everything now had to be explained. And to tell a child the truth can be extremely difficult. Sometimes these complex problems resulted in legal proceedings.'

Irena's action in helping the Jews, something she participated in with such great devotion, never ended as it persisted due to continued contact with the rescued children, their children, and grandchildren. They would write to her from all parts of the world remembering that she was the last person that knew who they were before they left the ghetto.

On May 4, 2008 Irena Sendler had to be taken to hospital; eight days later she passed away aged 98. That very day a special ceremony was being held at a gymnasium in Warsaw to name the school after her. The funeral of the Mother of the Holocaust Children was held in Stare Powazki Cemetery on May 15 and, in accordance with her wishes, she was laid to rest in her family grave.

MARIUSZ KUBIK

**Irena meeting up with some of 'her' children in February 2005: (L-R) Julian Pyz, Elzbieta Ficowska, Krystyna Budnicka, Irena's daughter Janina Zgrzembska, Joanna and Margaret Sobolewska. The meeting, in her tiny room at the Care Home of the Brothers Hospitallers of St John of God in Sapierzynska Street, was organised by the Association of 'Children of the Holocaust' in Poland.**

ADRIAN GRUCYK

ADRIAN GRUCYK

*Above:* **Irena Sendler died on May 12, 2008, aged 98, and was buried in Warsaw's Powazki Cemetery.** *Right:* **In 2010, a plaque in her honour was unveiled on the façade of No. 2. Pawinskiego Street, the building that housed the Mother and Child Aid Section of the Citizens' Committee for Social Help, where she was employed from 1932 to 1935.**