Irena Sendler was born in 1910 to a Catholic family residing in the town of Otwock in Poland. When World War II broke out on September 1, 1939, Irena Sendler was a twenty-nine-year-old social worker at the welfare department of the Warsaw municipality. She carried on performing her duties even after the city’s occupation by the Germans, and took care of hundreds of people in the city who had been made poor and homeless by the war. Irena used her position to help the Jews, however, this became impossible once the Warsaw Ghetto closed its gates in November 1940.

Roughly 400,000 Jews were squeezed into the small area occupied by the Ghetto. The crowded living conditions along with the lack of basic sanitation, food, and medicine led to a very high death rate among the Ghetto population. Despite the great risks involved, Irena obtained a permit from her department to visit the Ghetto and inspect the sanitation conditions therein. Once she had infiltrated the Ghetto, she made contact with Jewish relief organizations and began helping them smuggle Jews out of the Ghetto and find places for them to hide in the “Aryan” part of the city.

In the fall of 1942, the *Żegota* (“The Council to Aid Jews”) was established following the deportation of 280,000 Jews from the Ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp. This organization, staffed by both Jewish and non-Jewish operatives, worked to save the Jews from the Nazi onslaught. Irena became a prominent activist in the council, helping Jews who had survived the Great Action find hiding places and even providing them with food and medical supplies. The rescue operations undertaken by Irena and her fellow council members were daring and complex. Babies and small children were sedated and smuggled out in bags, baskets, suitcases, and even vegetable crates on the back of the Ghetto hospital’s provisions truck. Older children were extricated in various disguises or via the sewer system that also served the Jewish Resistance and the smugglers. The Ghetto ambulances carried both children and adults out of the Ghetto on stretchers under the pretense that they had contracted typhoid, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases that the Germans were squeamish about.

In September 1943, approximately four months after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Ghetto’s subsequent demolition, Irena was appointed as head of the Jewish Children’s Aid Department at the *Żegota*. Under the pseudonym “Jolanta,” Irena used her connections with orphanages and other institutions caring for abandoned children to send them Jewish children equipped with forged documents, all while taking great risks. Many of the children were sent to the Rodzina Marii orphanage in Warsaw and religious institutions in the Lublin, Chomotow, and Turkowice regions. For Jewish children to fit into a Polish environment, they had to be “prepped,” which meant forgetting their Jewish birth names, identities, and families, adopting a Christian name and becoming fluent in Polish, and, most importantly, learning Christian prayers and rituals and taking on a new Christian identity. Sometimes, the institutions themselves set certain conditions and “in many instances the children were baptized and ‘made’ Catholic.” Irena made sure to keep precise records of the children sent to these institutions so that they could be located after the war and returned to their families. By doing so, Irena saved the lives of many hundreds of children; their exact number is unknown.

It is important to remember that the danger was not limited to the German invaders: there was no shortage of Polish people motivated by financial reward and/or by their own anti-Semitism to inform on the rescued Jews and their Polish rescuers alike. Therefore, the survivors often had to be moved from place to place, from house to house, from apartment to convent, or from town to village and back again. Every such transfer involved more people and increased the risk of exposure, snitching, and betrayal, as well as the danger that one of the conspirators will get caught and give the others away.

After a month of intense activity, on October 20, 1943, Irena was detained. Prior to her arrest, she had managed to hide incriminating evidence, such as the coded addresses of some of the children’s whereabouts, as well as evidence of large sums of money paid to some of the hosts. She was sentenced to death, but was eventually released in February 1944, after members of the resistance managed to bribe her way out. The arrest did nothing to deter her and, immediately after her release, she resumed her clandestine activity, even though she knew the authorities had her in their sights. She continued her activism on behalf of the Jews even when the need to remain underground prevented her, among other things, from attending her mother’s funeral.

Over the years, she received numerous recognitions for her heroic conduct during the Holocaust. After the war, Irena worked for the Ministry of Health in Poland. On October 19, 1965, Yad Vashem recognized Irena as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, and a tree was planted in her honor at the entrance to the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem.