To Save a Child

She takes the crying baby into her arms, turns her back on the hysterical mother, and walks off into the night. If she's caught, she and the baby will die.

"Promise me my child will live!" the mother cries desperately after her.

She turns for a moment. "I can't promise that. But I can promise that if he stays with you, he will die." (Horan).

Such a scene was too familiar for Irena Sendler as she rushed twixt the shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto. Since, and even before the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the young Irena had dedicated her life to reaching out to those who could not act for themselves – a decision that has made her one of the greatest unsung heroes of the Holocaust.

Interestingly, Irena herself was Christian - and possessed every opportunity to flee and avoid unjust persecution in her native Poland. However, her passionate empathy towards Jewish Poles and other victims of long-standing social injustice moved her to remain and become a harbinger of hope during the German occupation of Poland. Irena’s stance in this intimidating battle against genocide began with her position as senior administrator in the Warsaw Social Welfare Department, in which she acquired forged documents that filed Jews under Christian names to protect their identities and offer them public service. But Irena recognized that as the ghetto community she served grew denser and conditions dwindled, the Department’s limited efforts were only helping to prolong the suffering, rather that save lives (Horan). Thus, she joined Zegota, the Council for Aid to Jews, and in 1942 headed the Children’s Division under the code name “Jolanta” (Horan). Her mission, from that point on, was to rescue the most important and most endangered victims of the Holocaust – the children of the Ghetto.
Despite the significance of their mission, Irena and her team were faced with a range of impossible obstacles. As Irena went from home to home, pleading with parents to release their children to her so she could smuggle them outside the Ghetto walls and into the safety of a Christian home, many families refused to separate – only to disappear into the hands of Nazi officers the following day (Horan). Other times, smuggling missions went awry when children, hiding in laundry bags, crates, or even coffins, were separated from their rescuers. Even more difficult was finding Polish families to take in the children, which entitled risking the death penalty of harboring a Jew. At one point, Irena herself was captured and sentenced to death by the Gestapo; fortunately, she herself was secretly rescued by the Zegota, but was forced to continue her work in hiding (“Heroes of the Holocaust”).

Time and time again, Irena was bombarded by reasons to extinguish the fire burning within her. But because she found fuel in the light of the future for “her children,” Irena and her team managed to save 2,500 children from the morbid darkness of the Warsaw Ghetto. Some of these children reconnected with their living family after the war – thanks to Irena’s careful documentation of each child her team rescued – and continue to praise her life-saving efforts, as the most grateful beneficiaries of it (“Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project”).

Irena Sendler’s remarkably risky yet astoundingly successful operation serves as inspiration to counteract social injustice in itself – but the element that makes her actions extraordinary is embodied in the words that seven-year-old Irena received from her father as he lay on his death bed: “If you see someone drowning, you must jump in and try to save them, even if you don’t know how to swim” (Horan).
Irena embraced these words to their greatest extent, literally placing her life at stake in the name of justice, morality, and human compassion. But what I glean from her story in light of this advice is that sometimes, even simple actions in the most mundane life situations possess the power to change perspectives…even to indirectly rescue a life.

Irena’s story furthermore empowers my existing fervor for remodeling visions of what our world is, and its potential to change for the better. We, as students of an emerging generation, can take steps to forge this environment and mindset of coexistence and acceptance within our own schools – and once we learn to push aside prejudice and live every day with respect for our classmates, we will be able to step onto the worldly stage as educated, perceptive, cultured global citizens with the capability to influence others to embrace the same accepting approach to their fellow man. In my high school, I am working with a group of students (known as the Student Advisory Committee) to reform the type of language we use on school grounds so as to create a more positive learning and social environment for students. We work with teachers and students to identify and eliminate derogatory and abusive speech (including: racial slurs, threats, sexual references and harassment, demeaning comments, and abused “swear” words in multiple languages). By encouraging students to call out and monitor one another when such language is used, hanging posters preaching the importance of integrity, and prompting teachers to reinforce traditional discipline and explain how these terms can unintentionally lead to battered self-esteem, reputations, and relationships, we’ve seen an unbelievable change in how students address their peers and teachers. There are significantly fewer reports of violence; students interact with students they normally would have blatantly avoided; they want to come to school because they know won’t have to worry about being bombarded by piercing, disgusting insults. As we acknowledge and control our own behavior, our attitudes towards our classmates
have been altered: we have opened to each other and felt the gentle force of tolerant respect unify us as a student body. And we want to keep that unity alive. Our actions are a tiny ripple in a whirlpool of raging conflict and discrimination, but if we are to have any hope of transforming the attitudes of our world, we must first initiate transformation within our own. In fact, it was in a similar setting that a young Irena began to manifest her own beliefs regarding social segregation and prejudice:

Even before the war, Irena had strong loyalties towards Jews. In the 1930s, at Warsaw University, she stood up for her Jewish friends. Jews were forced to sit separately from "Aryan" students. One day, Irena went to sit on the Jewish side of the room. When the teacher told her to move, she answered, "I'm Jewish today." She was expelled immediately (Horan).

The road to ending genocide once and for all is a long and arduous one. Genocide is a complex, multifaceted struggle for which there is no simple solution. Yet, once we harness the essential virtue in the heart of the common man, when we learn to behave without jaundiced eye and conjure more culturally receptive attitudes, when we spread knowledge of the modern-day barbarity that continues to plague humanity when we fight back…perhaps then will we catch a glimpse of what a world liberated from the shackles of bigotry and persecution looks like. Not a single life is indispensable; what you choose to do with yours will affect thousands of others you may never encounter, but will forever be a part of. Let us make the choices that will help to preserve every life we touch. Let yourself be a harbinger of acceptance and morality, a true admirer of the beauty of diversity, and a just crusader in the universal war against genocide…

…because if not you, then who?
Works Cited

