

# *Irena's Children: A True Story of Courage*

Tilar J. Mazzeo

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. In the preface to the book, the author reveals that many of the people she wished to interview for her research told her: "I don't like to talk about those years with anyone who didn't live them" (page xii). Why did those people prefer not to discuss that time with anyone who didn't live then? Do you agree that this is advisable? Why, or why not? The book then opens with a reference to a Yiddish folktale. What does the book ultimately seem to suggest about storytelling and the written word?
2. Also in the preface, the author speaks of her choice to show the complexity of Irena's character, stating that she thought it would be dishonoring Sendler to portray her as a saint (page xii). Why do you believe Mazzeo made this choice? How does Mazzeo's portrayal of heroism compare to, or differ from, traditional portrayals of heroism you have encountered, particularly within the genres of historical fiction and nonfiction?
3. Irena's father taught her that "people are either good or bad" (page 18). Do you agree with this statement? Why, or why not? What did her father mean by this, and what did he think a person should not be judged by? What does the book ultimately seem to suggest about human nature and about how a person should be judged?
4. Why does Dr. Radlińska inspire so many of the people she meets? What causes is she committed to? What does she teach her students about "the commitment of a small group of well-intentioned people" (page 29)? Do you agree with her? Where do we find her concept in action elsewhere in the book?
5. In Chapter 8, the author says that Ala Gołąb-Grynberg "struggled between the instinct of a mother and that of a nurse and a social worker" (pages 126–27). What does she mean by this? Which of the roles ultimately took priority? Do you believe that this was the right choice? Explain. How are other people in the book forced to choose or prioritize among their different roles, and how do they reach their decisions?
6. Consider the treatment of religious faith in the book. How important is faith to the people characterized in the book? How important is it to Irena? Why are so many people angry that the children being rescued from the Warsaw ghetto are often baptized? Do you agree that the baptism was necessary? Why, or why not?
7. Evaluate the theme of identity. How is identity defined in the book? Is identity portrayed as something that goes unchanged, or is it flexible? How do issues of identity create—or otherwise help to resolve—conflicts? What issues of identity arise in the book and how do the characters react to them?
8. Does the book ultimately suggest whether there is a fixed or universal code of ethics and morality and a fixed notion of what is "good" and what is "bad"? Explain. Consider also how complicity is treated in the book. Who is complicit, and why do these people choose to be complicit? Do their motives in some way justify their actions? Why, or why not? Likewise, many of the people portrayed in the book betray one another. What is at the root of these betrayals? Discuss.

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9. Evaluate the theme of hope. In what do the characters find hope? Is hope ultimately depicted as a positive and helpful force or a negative and frivolous force? Explain. For instance, why do so many people go to the Hotel Polski? What ultimately happens to them as a result of their decision? What does this indicate about the power of hope? What other examples of hope are found in the book?

10. Why are the lists that Irena keeps so important? What is their purpose? In addition to why they are important for the children she saves and their families, how do these lists come to influence Irena's own fate?

11. The author tells us that, at the end of her mother's life, Irena came to the realization that "she had been a terrible daughter" (page 233). Why does Irena think this? Do you agree that she was a bad daughter? Why, or why not?

12. After the "liberation of Poland" (page 254), how did the people who lived during that time cope with their tragic history? How does Rachela Rosenthal cope, for instance, with the tragedies she faced?

13. The author tells us that Irena did not wish to be thought of as a heroine. Why does Irena say this? Why does she believe that her acts were not heroic? Do you believe that Irena's actions were heroic, or do you agree with her that what she did was simply "normal" (page 263)? Does Mazzeo's book ultimately suggest how we should define heroism? Explain.

14. Why do you think the author chose to append a coda? What information does she reveal in it? How does she say that the story of Irena presented in the book varies from a fairy tale or a movie version of the story? What happens to Irena after the Germans withdraw from Poland? How is Irena's life influenced by the events that took place during that time period?

15. In the Afterword, the author states that she considers *Irena's Children* a work of nonfiction. What were some of the obstacles the author faced in writing about this topic and presenting it as a work of nonfiction? What does this tell us about the way we talk about and write about history? Can we ever achieve an accurate portrayal of historical events? Explain.

## **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Irena Sendler has been called "the female Oskar Schindler." View Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*. What do Irena Sendler and Oskar Schindler have in common? Alternatively, what sets them apart? How does the visual portrayal of the events in the film compare to Mazzeo's written account of this time?

2. Use *Irena's Children* as a starting place to discuss the subjects of racism and persecution. What role does complicity play in the perpetuation of them? Within this context, discuss why Irena Sendler's story is relevant today and what we can learn from her story.

3. Compare *Irena's Children* to a fictional account of the events of World War II. How does Mazzeo's book compare, for instance, to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*? Does one genre—fiction or

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nonfiction—seem to be more effective than the other in treating this subject? Explain. Discuss how Mazzeo's book challenges conventions of historical nonfiction.

4. Have you ever stood up for a cause at the risk of your own well-being? Discuss. What causes have you or would you be willing to stand up for as Irena did? What would you be willing to risk for your cause? Do you think you would have made the same decisions that Irena did? Explain why or why not. Discuss an event that affected your family for more than one generation.