

November 19, Ordinary 33A (Judges 4:1-7)

Irena Sendler, who smuggled hundreds of children out of the Warsaw Ghetto, was a modern-day Deborah.

by [Dorothy Sanders Wells](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue

In 1939, Irena Sendler was in a unique position to render aid to the suffering as a trained and licensed social worker in Warsaw. At the height of the Nazi regime and the persecution of Jews, 29-year-old Sendler—a Catholic and the daughter of a physician who died while serving poor Jewish residents in Otwock during the typhus epidemic of 1917—cared for the neighbors around her. Her vocation allowed her access to the ghetto into which Jews were being corralled, to inspect the harsh conditions. Once inside, she recognized that the survival of many of her neighbors depended on getting them out.

Sendler knew that she could not accomplish the necessary work alone, so she quietly aligned herself with other Polish neighbors who worked to rescue Jews. Members of the Council for Aid to Jews offered vital help in gathering needed resources for people trapped in the ghetto. Drivers helped her access the ghetto and carry needed supplies. Sendler began helping to smuggle Jews out of the ghetto and shepherd them to hiding places.

As more and more Jews were being deported to the death camps, Sendler knew that getting a few supplies in and a few people out of the ghetto would not be enough. She realized the particular danger that young children in the ghetto faced, so she began pleading with parents to allow her to take their children out of the ghetto and try to help them reach safety. Sendler hid children in tool bags, under tarps, in wagons, and any other way she could to smuggle them out of the ghetto. Calling on her network of contacts in orphanages and homes for abandoned children, Sendler utilized every possible resource to save the lives of Warsaw's Jewish children.

Prayerful that families might one day be reunited, Sendler took time before leading children out of the ghetto to help families gather notes and small photos, sealing those items into jars that could be buried or otherwise hidden so that in good time the young children would know their identities and be able to locate families. Many of the Jews from Warsaw did not survive the camps; too often the reunions for which Sendler hoped and prayed never happened.

Between 1939 and 1945, as Sendler continued her tireless advocacy for Jewish people, she endured threats and beatings and at one point was sentenced to death and imprisoned. Miraculously, some of her allies were able to secure her release. Sendler has been credited with saving more than 2,500 Jewish lives. She is remembered at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial, as one of the Righteous among the Nations—a person who, at great personal sacrifice, fought to save the lives of Jewish people.

A reflection on Sendler's life and work calls us all to honestly and prayerfully discern our own gifts for serving our neighbors in God's world. As her gift of being a social worker was sorely needed in Warsaw among poor, sick people isolated in a ghetto, so the tools we have been given are instruments of healing and grace for a neighbor.

But Sendler's greatest gift may have been her ability to work with collaborators to smuggle out children and take them to places of safety. Her own courage no doubt empowered her collaborators to act with courage themselves—and to value their neighbors' lives as their own.

Sendler's work calls to mind the judge and prophetess Deborah. The period of the book of Judges is recounted as a time during which God has raised up judges not only to settle disputes between the people called Israel but also to deliver the Israelites from their enemies. As such, Deborah is also called to be a military strategist, and at a time during which the people called Israel are threatened by King Jabin of Canaan, Deborah solicits the support of an Israelite named Barak to lead 10,000 soldiers into battle at Mount Tabor. Barak responds that he will go if Deborah will accompany him; she agrees. Barak and his soldiers defeat King Jabin's army, and the king's general meets his end at the hand of Jael, the wife of a presumed ally.

Defeat of the adversary requires more than Deborah's wisdom and skill as a judge; it also requires the collaboration of Barak, Jael, and a host of soldiers—along with their own sense that the work before them is the work God intends. Like Deborah, Irena

Sendler exemplified obedience to God and love of neighbor in a world surely in need of her witness.