

# THE CIRCLE OF FORGIVENESS

Philosophers say that by saving one life, you save the world. In the case of Polish Catholic Irena Gut Opdyke, the central figure in the inspiring Broadway drama, *Irena's Vow*, her courage and compassion saved 12 Jewish lives and in doing so changed the world forever.

Irena Gut Opdyke was honored at Yad Vashem—the living memorial to the Holocaust—as a Righteous Among the Nations, a title given to gentiles who risked their lives by aiding and saving Jews. Established in 1953 in Israel, as the world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem safeguards the memory of the past and imparts its meaning for future generations. Today there are over 22,000 Righteous Among the Nations, gentiles who have been recognized and honored for their heroic actions. To find out more, go to [www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/about\\_the\\_righteous.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/about_the_righteous.html).

## FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Use the books, websites, and films listed below for these study and activity suggestions.

- Listen to the online stories of survivors and interview survivors in your area. If possible, invite a survivor to speak to your group.
- Develop ways to institute a Circle of Forgiveness in your own community.
- Work in groups to visit one or more websites and find and share 10 facts you never knew about the Holocaust and Holocaust rescuers.
- Develop a list of questions your group would have wanted to ask Irena if they had met her.
- Research what happened to Major Rugemer after the war and how his relationship with the group hiding in the basement epitomized the Circle of Forgiveness.
- Find out about the children of survivors, where they lived, how the war affected their parents' later life, and what achievements they accomplished which may never have benefited mankind if their parents had not survived.

## BOOKS

- Diane Ackerman, *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*, 2008.  
John Bierman, *Righteous Gentile: The Story of Raoul Wallenberg, Missing Hero of the Holocaust*, 1996.  
Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, 1995.  
Sir Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, 2004.  
Marek Halter, *Stories of Deliverance: Speaking with Men and Women Who Rescued Jews from the Holocaust*, 1998.  
Thomas Keneally, *Searching for Schindler: A Memoir*, 2008.  
Irena Gut Opdyke, *In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer*, 1999.

## WEBSITES

**The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous**  
([www.jfr.org](http://www.jfr.org))

The lives and legacy of more than 1,400 non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, with information about seminars and educational opportunities about the Righteous Among the Nations.

**Museum of Tolerance**  
([www.museumoftolerance.com](http://www.museumoftolerance.com))

The Simon Wiesenthal Center's website with ways to encourage tolerance.

**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

- **Holocaust Encyclopedia: Rescue**  
([www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/index.php?ModuleId=10005185](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/index.php?ModuleId=10005185))  
Information about Holocaust rescuers and their miraculous achievements.

## HANDOUT 3 REPRODUCIBLE MASTER



Photo by Carol Rosegg

- **For Students**  
([www.ushmm.org/education/forstudents](http://www.ushmm.org/education/forstudents))  
Background on Holocaust topics including anti-Semitism, Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust, and the Nazi rise to power.
- **Holocaust Personal Histories**  
([www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/phistories](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/phistories))  
Links to video testimony from survivors, resistance fighters, liberators and others.

### Yad Vashem: The Righteous Among the Nations

- **Featured Stories**  
([www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/featured\\_stories.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/featured_stories.html))  
True stories of rescues taking place in 30 countries by nurses, churches, diplomats, Muslims, rescue networks, policemen, soldiers, and even among prisoners at Auschwitz.
- **Honoring the Righteous**  
([www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/honoring\\_the\\_righteous.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/honoring_the_righteous.html))  
How some of these reluctant righteous heroes have been honored.

## FILMS

**Defiance** Jewish brothers in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe escape to the forests where they hide about 1,000 Jews, 2009.

**Desperate Hours** Documents little-known stories of how Muslims, Jews, and Christians worked together in Turkey to save 20,000 European Jews from the Nazis, 2003.

**Forgiving Dr. Mengele** Eva Mozes Kor, who survived Josef Mengele's cruel twin experiments in Auschwitz, shocks fellow survivors when she decides to forgive the perpetrators as a way of healing, 2006.

**Hidden Heroes** The story of ordinary people willing to risk their lives and the lives of their families to shelter and save Dutch Jews from the Nazi terror, 2002.

**Schindler's List** Steven Spielberg's biographical film about the life of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who turns his factory into a refuge for the Jews who work there and saves more than 1,000 Polish Jews from almost certain death, 1993.

**Shoah** Claude Lanzman's classic documentary based on interviews with survivors, witnesses, and ex-Nazis gives a chilling portrait of the events of Nazi genocide and shows that anti-Semitism did not end with the defeat of the Nazis, 1985.

**Sister Rose's Passion** Celebrates Sister Rose Thering, a Dominican nun who dedicated her life to eradicating anti-Semitism, 2004.

**The Pianist** Roman Polanski's biographical film about the life of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a gifted Polish-Jewish pianist whose life is spared when a Nazi captain, moved by his playing, helps him survive, 2002.

For more information about the production of *Irena's Vow*, go to [www.irenasvow.com](http://www.irenasvow.com).

# IRENA'S VOW

## Dear Program Leaders and Educators,

*Irena's Vow*, a powerful new Broadway drama, is the extraordinary true story of one of the most courageous unsung heroes of World War II.

Irena Gut was an 18-year-old Polish girl when the Nazi army invaded her homeland and began preparations for the massacre of millions of Jews. Forced to work as the housekeeper—and become the mistress—of a German major, Irena still found the courage and compassion to act when 12 Jewish co-workers turned to her for aid, risking her life to hide them in the German major's cellar for more than two years.

Irena herself tells this story in *Irena's Vow*, talking to a group of school children as she returns in memory to those terrible, testing times when a simple act of charity meant a choice between life and death. As portrayed by four-time Tony nominee Tovah Feldshuh, Irena is mesmerizing, inspiring, heroic—transforming all those around her, including her audience, with the fire of faith and an indomitable human spirit.

Playwright Dan Gordon based this unforgettable drama on the hundreds of talks the real Irena gave to young people over the last decades of her life. And with your help, those lessons can still reach young people today.

This study guide, made possible by the producers of *Irena's Vow* and developed by the curriculum specialists at Young Minds Inspired (YMI), provides you with discussion questions and other resources that you can use to enrich the experience of seeing *Irena's Vow* with your students, members of your youth group, and with adult groups at your church or synagogue.

In addition, special discount tickets are available exclusively to groups for many performances of *Irena's Vow* throughout its run at the historic Walter Kerr Theatre on 218 W. 48th Street between Broadway and 8th Avenue. To purchase discount tickets, please call 212-957-1222, or send an inquiry by e-mail to [theatregroups@rothproductions.com](mailto:theatregroups@rothproductions.com). Please ask for special talk-backs featuring members of the cast and creative team for groups 50 or larger.

We hope that you will share this study guide with other group leaders and teachers in your community. Although the materials are copyrighted, you have permission to reproduce the materials for educational purposes.

The real Irena often said that she felt a duty to tell her story. She recognized that today's youth are the last generation who will ever learn about the horrors and the heroism of the Holocaust from a person who actually lived through those unimaginably dark times. With her story, she hoped to redeem history and help raise a generation who would ensure that it can never repeat itself.

We invite you to continue Irena's mission by taking your group to see *Irena's Vow*. Don't miss this rare opportunity to experience a landmark Broadway production that has touched every audience and been hailed by all for its power to lift the spirit and restore faith in the human heart. For more information about the production of *Irena's Vow*, go to [www.irenasvow.com](http://www.irenasvow.com).

Sincerely,

*Roberta Nusim*

Roberta Nusim, Publisher

## USING THE STUDY GUIDE

- Photocopy the three handouts included in this guide and distribute copies to all members of your group.
- **Handout 1** provides background on the life of Irena Gut Opdyke, both during World War II and in later life, when she was honored by the state of Israel as one of the Righteous Among the Nations and by the Vatican as a hero of the Catholic faith. Use this handout to prepare students/group members for their trip to see *Irena's Vow*.
- **Handout 2** provides discussion questions for use after your group has seen the play. Encourage students/group members to review this handout beforehand to enrich their experience in the theater, and schedule time afterward to explore these questions and the varied perspectives they open on the issue of moral choice.
- **Handout 3** provides a list of books, websites, and films for learning more about Irena Gut Opdyke and the period dramatized in *Irena's Vow*, as well as a variety of suggested study topics. Use this handout as a follow-up to your class/group trip to the theater, or as the starting point for a deeper investigation into the themes and lessons of the play.

Please Note: *Irena's Vow* presents historical facts in a realistic manner and is recommended for audiences age 13 and older.

To purchase discount tickets, please call 212-957-1222, or send an inquiry by e-mail to [theatregroups@rothproductions.com](mailto:theatregroups@rothproductions.com).

Ticket prices are as follows:  
Student Groups (Mezzanine rows A-J) \$45.00  
Regular Groups (Orchestra) \$69.00

See *Irena's Vow*, a new play by Dan Gordon starring four-time Tony nominee Tovah Feldshuh, at the historic Walter Kerr Theatre on 218 W. 48th Street between Broadway and 8th Avenue. For tickets, call 212-957-1222 or e-mail [theatregroups@rothproductions.com](mailto:theatregroups@rothproductions.com).



# IRENA GUT OPDYKE

## THE POWER TO LOVE AND FORGIVE

HANDOUT 1  
REPRODUCIBLE MASTER

**I**rena Gut Opdyke (May 5, 1918 - May 17, 2003) was born into a Catholic family in the town of Kozenice in central Poland. During the German occupation of western Poland, and the Russian occupation in the east, while still a teen, Irena joined a Polish underground unit. She was spotted by Russian troops, beaten, raped and forced to work in a Russian medical unit since she had studied nursing. She escaped, only to be captured by the Germans and forced to work in a munitions plant.

Her duties brought her into contact with 11 Jewish laundry workers with whom she became friends. One day Irena, who spoke fluent German, overheard the local head of the Gestapo, Sturmbannführer Rokita, advising SS Officer Rugemer to get new non-Jewish workers, because within a few weeks all Jews in the town were going to be killed. Irena herself silently witnessed a German officer ripping an infant out of its mother's hands and brutally killing it and then its mother. Had Irena protested, she would have been killed. Then and there, Irena made a vow to herself, that if she ever had an opportunity to save a human life, she would do whatever it took to do it. That was "*Irena's Vow*."

SS Officer Eduard Rugemer, who was impressed by her, arranged Irena's transfer to lighter duties in an army mess hall, and then to his villa as a housekeeper. It was here, in the basement of the home of the highest ranking German officer in Tarnopol, Poland, that she hid the 11 Jews from the munitions factory and a twelfth person who joined later, providing them with food and clothing at daily risk to her own life. When Rugemer discovered the hidden Jews, he made a bargain with Irena—she could become his mistress in exchange for his silence. Irena hid them for two years and saved all their lives. Irena never told the Jews what she gave up to protect them.

At a displaced persons camp after the war, Irena Gut first met her future husband, a UN staffer named William Opdyke, who was interviewing survivors there. Irena told him her story and he suggested she come to

America. Years later, they met by chance in New York City and six weeks later, they were married. They settled in southern California, where she became an interior decorator.

Irena did not talk about the war, even to her daughter Jeannie, until she was 54 years old and received a call as part of a survey on how many people doubted that the Holocaust ever happened. After that night, her years of silence ended as she realized that keeping quiet about what she had experienced could cause history to repeat itself. She began telling her story to anyone who would listen—especially to school children.

Years later, Irena was reunited with many of the people that she helped, including Fanka Silberman and Roman Haller. Irena remained close with Roman and his family; she even attended his son's Bar Mitzvah.

Irena lived by two commandments—to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. One of the amazing outcomes of her story is the fate of the German major Rugemer. After the war, he was shunned by his wife, ostracized by his community as a Jewish sympathizer, and forced to become homeless. Lazar and Ida Haller, whom Irena hid in the basement, found him, took him to their home, and their child Roman, who was conceived in the Rugemer basement, grew up calling him "grandfather" until the day he died.

In 1982, Irena Gut Opdyke was named by the Israeli Holocaust Commission as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, a title given to gentiles who risked their lives aiding and saving Jews during the Holocaust. She was also presented with the Israel Medal of Honor, Israel's highest tribute. The Vatican has given her a special commendation.

The day before she died at age eighty-five, she told her daughter how grateful she was for her life, and how she cherished every day. There was no regret, and no bitterness ... just gratitude.

# IRENA'S VOW

HANDOUT 2  
REPRODUCIBLE MASTER

*Irena's Vow*, now on Broadway, is the riveting, life-affirming, and true story of one of the most courageous unsung heroes of World War II. For over two years during the German occupation of Poland, Irena Gut, a Polish Catholic, risked her own life to hide 12 Jewish refugees in the basement of a German major's home where she was the housekeeper. *Irena's Vow* is an extraordinary story of Irena's choice and the 12 lives that would ultimately be saved—or lost—by her decision.

## FOR DISCUSSION

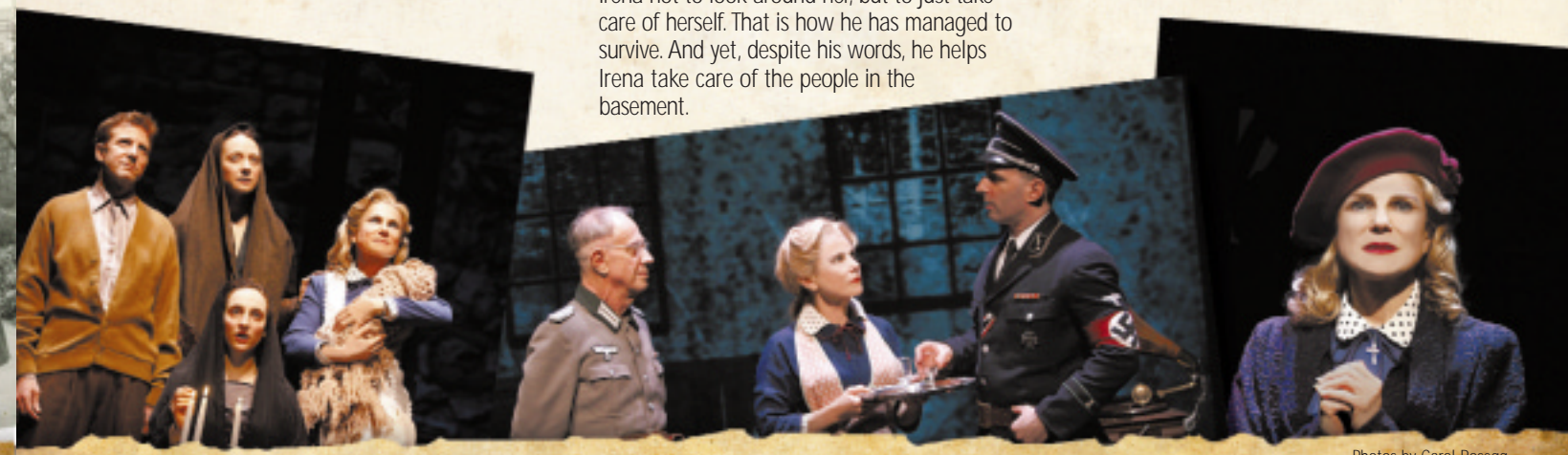
1. Imagine that you are 18 years old, have no family, and you're faced with the decision of whether to hide 12 strangers at the risk of losing your own life. What factors would you think about to help you arrive at your decision? After considering those factors, what decision do you think you would make?
2. The Jews hiding in the basement had to make their own heart-wrenching moral decisions. Should they allow another Jewish man, who was high on the Nazi's wanted list, into their hiding place? The Nazis were sure to be extra vigilant in their search for him, and therefore, having him hide with them might jeopardize the lives of all of those in the basement. Break into teams and debate the decision, coming up with arguments to defend your choice.
3. Irena had to decide whether to become the mistress of a German officer in order to safeguard the Jewish people hiding in his basement. How far would you go to protect other people's lives?
4. Irena talks about the "circle of forgiveness" to explain how good endings can come about as the result of bad actions. Cite examples in your own life where this concept became a reality. Discuss specific ways you yourself can make this idea of "paying it forward" work in our world today.
5. Literary scholar Lawrence Langer describes the circumstances faced by victims of the Holocaust as "choiceless choices." He believes, "In ordinary life, we can choose between good and bad, or between the lesser of two evils." During the Holocaust, Jews faced making decisions "not between life and death, but between one abnormal response or another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing." Discuss how this quote applies to Irena Gut. Think of examples in the world today where this situation still applies.
6. Irena says that everyone has choices in life. She made a choice to risk her own life and to suffer terrible personal consequences in her attempt to save others. What personal attributes do you think it takes for someone to make those choices? What personal qualities would you yourself need to have to be able to rise to the occasion in a similar situation? Do you think you possess those qualities?
7. The 12 Jewish men and women hiding in the officer's basement said that it was not enough to "be alive. You have to be able to live." What do you think this meant for those living in the basement? What do you think it means for people today who are living in deplorable conditions and under heinous regimes? What do you think it means in your own life?
8. In *Irena's Vow*, former innkeeper Schultz tells Irena not to look around her, but to just take care of herself. That is how he has managed to survive. And yet, despite his words, he helps Irena take care of the people in the basement. If you were in Schultz's position, would you have helped Irena, who was just his acquaintance? Would you have kept Irena's secret when you could have benefited by informing authorities? What could have made you abandon those in the basement?
9. What relevance does the story of Irena Gut have in today's society? What parallel 21st-century examples can you cite?
10. Irena's real-life daughter, Janina (Jeannie) Opdyke Smith, says her mother taught her that "the greatest power we have as human beings is the power to love and forgive, and that's the greatest weapon we have over hate and evil." Describe ways you could enact this philosophy in your own life.
11. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., there is a wall featuring the words of well-known people, including Presidents George Washington, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton, expressing values about freedom, justice, equality, and compassion. If you could leave a statement designed to inspire people from all over the world, what would it say?
12. Since World War II, people have asked, "How did we allow the Holocaust to happen?" Answer this question by discussing how you think the Holocaust did not have to happen. What could have been done to prevent it?



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