

Impact Statement

Ella Grail, Grade 10

***Under Your Wing*, 2025**

Gouache on paper, 16 x 20 inches

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Unsung Hero: Meva Mikusz

Meva Mikusz was only 15 years old when she risked her life to rescue a toddler during the Holocaust. What first stood out to me about her was that she was a year younger than I am now. It's incredibly inspiring to see that despite her age she had the courage to save someone else's life. Getting caught would have meant getting killed, yet she still chose to act. She continued to show immense resilience throughout the next three years, and although she was a child herself, Meva raised Inka through the hardships of World War II. Meva showed substantial courage, resilience, and empathy, and is someone I aspire to be like. It's so important to know that you are never too young to be someone's hero, and Meva's story has shown me that.

As I continued researching Meva and her heroic acts, my admiration grew. She had the intelligence and bravery to assemble and carry out a plan to rescue Inka, a young girl during the Holocaust. Inka's family had been sent to the Czortkow Ghetto and managed to get a letter out to Meva and her family, begging them to save Inka before she got sent to a concentration camp. Meva was able to sneak into the ghetto wearing a Star of David and sneak Inka out past the ghetto's guards. What stuck with me most is how Meva stayed by Inka's side, raising her for three years after the rescue. She spent her time teaching Inka to read, write and play piano; however, she also had to endure the struggle of keeping her a secret as the war progressed. During the siege of Czortkow, Meva's family hid in a cramped basement, surviving on nothing but potatoes and warm goat's milk. Each day was filled with fear and hunger. In order to prevent her from being caught, little Inka couldn't even look out the window or leave her room. Their time together clearly impacted Inka. When she had the opportunity to live with her mother again after the Czortkow Ghetto closed, Inka didn't want to leave Meva's side. Meva and Inka had become family. As for the rescue, I can only imagine the terror Meva must have felt. That sense of danger and the bravery behind it inspired my painting. I chose to convey the sense of danger and impending doom she must have felt by depicting her escape with Inka by placing soldiers nearby. Meva and Inka were both just children, and in my composition, I tried to reflect a sense of innocence that would truly depict their age to the viewer. Through their embrace, I showed how their love for each other was able to help them through the hardships they dealt with.

Possibly the most important aspect of my artwork is Meva's seagull wings. Her real name was Maria, but her nickname, Meva, meant "seagull" in Polish. I wanted to

incorporate this into my work with seagulls and seagull wings. I thought the most fitting way to do this was by depicting a painting of seagulls on the wall behind her flying out, representing the journey she went through to save Inka and the barriers she broke. I also included her own set of seagull wings painted behind her, acting as angel wings and illustrating how she rescued Inka and took her under her wing. I made the artistic choice to have the wings continue even past the constraints of the wall. This further shows how, in order to do the right thing, Meva defied authority and what seemed possible. I decided that gouache was a fitting medium for this painting due to its versatility and wide range of techniques it allows, as Meva also showed a vast array of strengths and heroic traits. The most important takeaway I received from this project is that anyone can be someone's hero. Even if you're young, you can take risks and do the right thing. This is such an important message to share, especially with children and teenagers. I wanted to spread Meva's story within my community, and I decided that the group best suited to hearing her message were students the same age Meva was when she rescued Inka. I shared my art and Meva's experience with two freshman English classes who were currently working on a Holocaust unit. I chose these classes specifically because their knowledge of the Holocaust would allow them to truly understand the scale of what Meva did, and because it would give them an example of someone their own age being a hero and saving lives. I brought in my artwork and presented a slideshow I created about Meva Mikusz. I also planned a writing activity about Meva Mikusz and heroism in their own lives. This was an incredible experience, and after reading through their written responses I realized how deeply Meva's journey impacted them. One student said that "It's a choice to be strong, not a chance." This, along with the other responses, truly shows how powerful Meva's actions are. I plan on continuing to share my artwork and Meva's experience by displaying it at my school and looking for other gallery opportunities, as well as posting it on the school's social media and my own accounts to increase its visibility within my community. I hope that my efforts to spread Meva Mikusz's story can inspire others to be brave and show compassion just as much as it has inspired me.

References:

Grail, Ella. "Meva Mikusz Community Impact." *Google Drive*, Google, drive.google.com/drive/folders/1VYgqwZDBkUtKXB1MY2sfei5zl_FneN6N?usp=drive_link.