



Impact Statement

Sitong Xiong, Grade 8

The Light Through the Darkness, 2026

Pyrography, colored pencil on wood, 12 x 18 inches

Miller Middle School, San Jose, CA

Unsung Hero: Irena Sendler

After looking through various people's stories, I came across that of Irena and immediately knew she was the one. This incredible woman saved children during World War II sometimes by hiding them in ambulances, suitcases, and trunks and other times by lugging them in body bags through sewers and secret passages. Every attempt put her life at risk, as German guards were always watching closely. What intrigued me the most was not that she saved over 2,500 children, but that she did all this not for fame or glory, but simply because she knew it was the right thing to do.

After lots of research, I decided on the components of Irena's story that I wanted to incorporate. My artwork included the 2 buried jars with the real names and addresses of all the people she saved in the hope of reuniting them with their families after the war. All the darkness of war was dispelled by Irena's beautiful smile watching happy Jewish children playing and enjoying life because of what she did for them.

Then I made multiple rough drafts to piece all the parts together: war scenes in the background, tree roots with the buried jars on the right, happy kids playing on the left, and a strong streak of light shining on all of them. To connect the kids with the tree roots, I drew Irena smiling with one of her hands acting like a bridge, protecting and guiding a girl walking from her past (what's in the jar and the roots) to her new life (worry free and nonviolent!). Then I researched contemporary buildings and clothing in Poland of that time.

For a unique and symbolic medium, I wood burned my piece. The wood symbolizes the tree where identities were hidden, the permanent burn represents how Irena permanently changed people's lives, and transforming a natural material by fire embodies how Irena allowed identity to be endured. Since I never wood-burned before, the process was really challenging. I spent a lot of time practicing line control and shading. Mistakes also couldn't be undone, so I had to compensate for the mistakes I made and be really patient and careful. Although the process was really challenging, it showed me how perseverance can make something beautiful, just like Irena's actions did.

Her inspiring story encourages people to take initiative, persist, and do something good in the world. Even during dark times like the Holocaust, Irena became the light, which is why I gave this artwork the name "The Light Through the Darkness". This title is really powerful as it reminds us that anyone can be the light through the darkness. Even a tiny act of kindness like

helping someone carry groceries counts! Also, Irena didn't come from power and was just a nurse. What we can take from Irena is that even ordinary people have the ability to make a significant impact, and that anyone can make the world a better place.