In 1910 Irena was born in Warsaw, but grew up in the town of Otwock, Poland. Irena's father was a doctor. He died in the typhus epidemic of 1917 when he contracted the disease while caring for poor Jewish people in Otwock. Irena was an only child and a Catholic.

As early as 1939, when the Germans invaded Warsaw, Irena began helping Jews by offering them food and shelter. When the Warsaw Ghetto was erected in 1940, Irena could no longer help isolated Jews. The Ghetto was an area the size of New York's Central Park and 450,000 Jewish people were forced into this area.

Irena along with her underground network rescued 2,500 Jewish children in Poland during World War II. Irena used her papers as a Polish social worker and papers from one of the workers of the Contagious Disease Department (who was a member of the underground Zegota, a Polish underground group to assist Jewish people) to enter the Warsaw Ghetto. After she joined Zegota, she was in charge of their children's division.

Irena and ten who went with her into the ghetto used many, many methods to smuggle children out. There were five main means of escape: 1 - using an ambulance a child could be taken out hidden under the stretcher. 2 - escape through the courthouse. 3 - a child could be taken out using the sewer pipes or other secret underground passages. 4 - A trolley could carry out children hiding in a sack, in a trunk, a suitcase or something similar. 5 - if a child could pretend to be sick or was actually very ill, it could be legally removed using the ambulance. Irena did use a dog on occasion, but very few times out of the many rescues. Also, the number of babies saved was small in relation to the total number of children rescued.

There was a church next to the ghetto, but the entrance leading to it was "sealed" by the Germans. If a child could speak good Polish and rattle off some Christian prayers it could be smuggled in through the "sealed" entrance and later taken to the Aryan side. This was very dangerous since Germans often used a rouse to trick the Poles and then arrest people. Irena documented on thin strips of paper she buried in jars under an apple tree in a neighbor's yard the names of the children, as well as where each child was taken in the first phase of its escape. Irena and her network made sure that each family hiding a child realized the child must be returned to Jewish relatives after the war.

Irena (code name Jolanta) was arrested on October 20, 1943. She was placed in the notorious Piawiak prison, where she was constantly questioned and tortured. During the questioning she had her legs and feet fractured. She received a death sentence. She was to be shot. Unbeknown to her, Zegota had bribed the German executioner who helped her escape. On the following day the Germans loudly proclaimed her execution. Posters were put up all over the city with the news that she was shot. Irena read the posters herself.

During the remaining years of the war, she lived hidden, just like the children she rescued, but continued her work of saving children. Irena was the only one who knew where the children were to be found. When the war was finally over, she dug up the bottles and began the job of finding the children and trying to find a living parent. Almost all the parents of the children Irena saved died at the Treblinka death camp as the children would surely have suffered the same fate if they remained with their parents.
'Life in a Jar' started as a National History Day project in September of 1999. Four students in Kansas (Megan Stewart, Liz Cambers, Sabrina Coons and Jessica Shelton) began looking for information about Irena Sendler. Mr. Conard had given them a clipping he had found in a 1994 issue of U.S. News and World Report. The mention of Irena was in a story called "Other Schindlers." Only one web site on the Internet mentioned Irena, it was not until the students visited Poland in 2001 that Irena's story became known to the world. At last count there were over 80,000 web sites on the Internet mentioning Irena. The students of the 'Life in a Jar' project have gathered over 4,000 pages of primary material and research on the life of Irena Sendler and work of Zegota.

Irena's story became known to the world through the Life in a Jar project. The author of the Polish book which features Irena's life story says, "Everybody I talked to in working on this book, said that international and Polish interest in Irena Sendler's activities was begun and provoked by the activities of the Kansas girls and popularization in the American media."

When Irena first heard about the project in Kansas, "I was stunned and fascinated; very, very surprised; interested." In one of Irena's first letters to the girls, she wrote, "My emotion is being shadowed by the fact that no one from the circle of my faithful coworkers, who constantly risked their lives, could live long enough to enjoy all the honors that now are falling upon me.... I can't find the words to thank you, my dear girls.... Before the day you have written the play "Life in a Jar" -- nobody in my own country and in the whole world cared about my person and my work during the war ..."

She had a son and a daughter. Her daughter, Janka, still lives in Warsaw, Poland, and her son Adam passed away in 1999 (interestingly enough, the day the Life in a Jar project started on September 23rd). Adam's daughter, Irena's granddaughter Agniesa, is the same age as the girls who started the Life in a Jar project. Irena Sendler was announced as the 2003 winner of the Jan Karski award for Valor and Courage. Irena Sendler died at the age of 98.

There is another short article of this amazing woman that you may enjoy reading at http://www.holocaustforgotten.com/sendler.htm