

# in my hands:

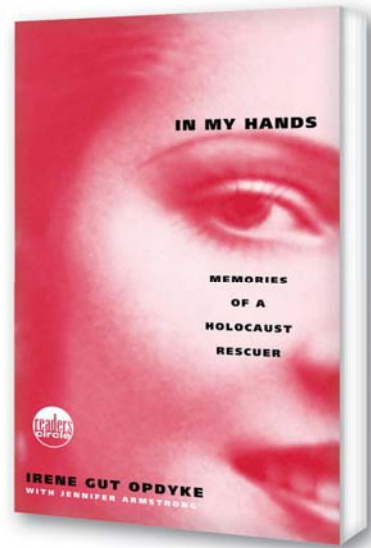
memories of a  
holocaust rescuer

## Irene Gut Opdyke

with Jennifer Armstrong

An ALA-YALSA Top Ten  
Best Book for Young Adults

Grades 9 up  
Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-553-49411-2



### ABOUT THE BOOK

In the fall of 1939 the Nazis invaded Irene Gut's beloved Poland, ending her training as a nurse and thrusting the sixteen-year-old Catholic girl into a world of degradation that somehow gave her the strength to accomplish what amounted to miracles. Forced into the service of the German army, young Irene was able, due in part to her Aryan good looks, to use her position as a servant in an officers' club to steal food and supplies (and even information overheard at the officers' tables) for the Jews in the ghetto. She smuggled Jews out of the work camps, ultimately hiding a dozen people in the home of a Nazi major for whom she was housekeeper. An important addition to the literature of human survival and heroism, *In My Hands* is further proof of why, in spite of everything, we must believe in the goodness of people.

★ "The narrative pours out in a hurried rush. . . It effectively captures the bedlam and turmoil that is war, where every decision could be one's last." —*Booklist*, Starred

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When Germany invades Poland, Irene is separated from her family and loses her country. She says, "In the war, everything was unnatural and unreal." (p. 1) What is life like during wartime? How does Irene react to her new circumstances? How does she manage to adapt to her new reality?
2. Irene asks "Was that girl me? In the war . . . we wore masks and spoke lines that were not our own." (p. 1) Discuss the different masks that Irene wears during the war. How much do you think her flair for acting contributes to her survival? What role does she finally define for herself?
3. "I did not ask myself, Should I do this? But, How will I do this? Every step of my childhood had brought me to this cross-road; I must take the right path, or I would no longer be myself." (p. 126) How does Irene grow into her role as a rescuer? What is her first small step? How does she gradually increase the risks she takes? What skills does she acquire that help her succeed? How does her telling her story now relate to her resistance during the war?
4. Discuss how being female affects Irene throughout the war. She often refers to herself as "only a girl." (p. 108, and 110) What are some other advantages and disadvantages of her being "only a girl"? How do you think she views this status in the end?
5. Major Rügemer agrees that he will not turn the Jews hidden in his basement over to the Gestapo if Irene will become his mistress. She describes this relationship as "worse than rape." (p. 191) In what ways is it worse? Does she believe she has any choice? What does she imagine the people she is hiding would want her to do?
6. Irene faces the threats of torture and imprisonment in Siberia. She is raped by a Russian soldier, blackmailed by a German officer, and separated for years from her family. She knows that the fate of her Jewish friends is in her hands. What does she risk to help? What is her biggest sacrifice?
7. Irene often says that she had no choice but to act as she did and that God put her in the right place to act. But in her epilogue she tells us, "God gave me this free will for my treasure. I can say this now. I understand this now. The war was a series of choices made by many people." (p. 235) Were Irene's actions predestined or the result of her free will? How is free will an important idea in understanding the Holocaust?
8. On the first page of Irene's story, an image of a bird represents a horrible scene she witnessed during the war: "There was a bird flushed up from the wheat fields, disappearing in a blur of wings against the sun, and then a gunshot and it fell to the earth. But it was not a bird. It was not a bird, and it was not in the wheat field, but you can't understand what it was yet." (p. 1) What does she need to make the reader understand? Why do you think she begins and ends her story with a reference to this incident?

Prepared by Karen Iker, who has a master's degree in American literature.