



October 2023

Irena's Vow

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Recommended Citation

Coman, Sherry (2023) "Irena's Vow," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 2, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.27.02.10>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss2/10>

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Irena's Vow

Abstract

This is a film review of *Irena's Vow* (2023), directed by Louise Archambault.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***Irena's Vow* (2023), dir. Louise Archambault**

“Whatever the religion, whatever the culture, whatever the background of who you are, your language, there’s something that transcends all that...”¹ --Louise Archambault

“Courage is a whisper from above.”² --Irena Gut Opdyke

Ten years ago in 2013, Québécois filmmaker Louise Archambault brought her film *Gabrielle* to the Toronto International Film Festival. It told the story of a young woman with intellectual disabilities whose capacity for independence and autonomy is ignited when she falls in love with a man in the choir they sing in. In the film’s story, protagonist Gabrielle learns how to become independent even as she is surrounded by barriers and boundaries imposed upon her. Singing in a choir with others is the means by which she finds the path to her freedom. Ten years later in Archambault’s most recent film *Irena’s Vow*, which premiered at TIFF 2023, she is once again dealing with themes of independence and captivity, of isolation and community.

Irena's Vow is a film adaptation of a play by the same name, written by Dan Gordon, which opened on Broadway in 2009. It tells the story of Irene Gut Opdyke, a Polish Catholic woman who in the Second World War was compelled to work for Nazi leaders.³ She became the supervisor of a group of tailors working in a laundry, all of whom were Jewish. When she was eventually promoted to become the housekeeper for a Nazi commandant, she smuggled all twelve people out to hide in the cellar of his house. It's not a spoiler to say that all survived thanks to her extraordinary courage: Irene Gut wrote about it in her own memoir, published in 2001.⁴

In the stage play, Gordon roots Irena's motives in her faith. "God offered me a choice," Irena says. "Between a moral and an immoral life. Between complicity and redemption. Between death and life. I did not ask for it but God put into my hands the lives of twelve people,"⁵ we hear actress Tovah Feldshuh say as she portrays Irena in the theatrical version, captured in a documentary also released in 2009. In an ABC Primetime interview from 2010, Irena refers to God and her own faith as an implicit part of her own motivations. However, Irena's faith is never mentioned in the film, even though Gordon also wrote the 2023 screenplay. Instead, the writer and filmmaker seem more focused on the narrative details than on character, recounting the events of this remarkable woman's continued and enduring courage.

At the time of the film's story, the town where the principal events take place, Tarnopol, was in Ukraine. The film was shot nearby, in Poland. At the TIFF premiere, Archambault described shooting on location there, just as the war in Ukraine was beginning in 2022. In Irena's actual story, much of her own time under occupation was in Ukraine. Thus the film's story and the film's production circle in and out of the arena of war, both then and now. Archambault described how Ukrainian refugees, fleeing the war with Russia, walked through the town even as they were filming. And yet, Irena's conditions, her hardships and also her accomplishments are actually even

greater than the film has scope to reveal: she helped other Jewish people, besides the twelve members of the laundry; she passed as a Jewish woman to avoid being discovered as a fugitive; and she was given safe passage out of Poland and Europe, in part through the efforts of the very people she saved.

The film is faithful to the story's Jewish characters. Although we don't get to know them closely, we see them through Irena's eyes: their dreams, their memories and longings. While a German party of Gestapo sing Christmas songs upstairs, deep in an underground bunker, the Jewish group mark Hanukah with the careful recitation of songs and prayers. The Jewish identity of this gathering is in its collective character which seems to form a perfect union with Irena's presence. When one couple becomes pregnant and the room decides in favor of abortion, Irena talks them out of it — saying Hitler cannot have another baby. Born after the end of the war, that baby became Roman Haller, who would later describe Irena as a mother figure, and “someone who gave birth to me.”

As Irena, Sophie Néllisse beautifully embodies the robust heart of Irena, conveying a delicate balance of naïveté, courage and just enough vulnerability for us to be always worried that she won't survive. A critical moment in the film's story, in all its versions, comes when Irena is forced to witness the execution of a Christian family and the Jewish people they had hidden. This traumatic event inspires the vow of the play and film's title, in which Irena commits to protecting whomever she can whatever the cost. (In the image above, she is walking away from that terrible scene.) While others might flee from danger, Irena's response is to enter into it further. Archambault never strays far from her side. The large, bright eyes of Néllisse register that combination of fear and defiance. It is reminiscent of her performance in her own breakthrough film, *Monsieur*

Lazhar (2011). When three of the hiding women, including the pregnant one, are inevitably discovered, the Commandant makes the decision to spare their lives, while taking Irena as a mistress in compensation. In the 2010 ABC Primetime interview, Irena says it was a small price to pay for their survival.

At the film's TIFF premiere, a row of seats was reserved for guests, but especially poignant were the twelve seats with name tags that were eventually filled by holocaust survivors who had been specially invited. In addition, the cast and key creatives for the film, as well as Irena Gut Opdyke's daughter Jeannie, and Roman Haller himself, were also present. The combination of people made for an emotional and vivid event, after which a Q and A helped to celebrate Irena's courage and bring forward the movie's themes.

In the film, Irena is lining up to receive Holy Communion in her local church when the Nazis first burst in, forcing everyone into labor. In essence, the eucharistic meal has been interrupted, and the community of the gathered cannot partake of it. Instead, Irena becomes one who feeds others, nourishing them with her compassionate love.

¹ Louise Archambault, "Irena's Vow 'Director Louise Archambault & Stars Sophie Nélisse And Dougray Scott On The Relevancy Of Irena's Story Today – TIFF Studio," *Deadline.com*, September 13, 2023. <https://deadline.com/video/louise-archambault-sophie-nelisse-dougray-scott-irenas-vow-interview-toronto/>

² "Irena's Vow Documentary trailer," published April, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz5_vLh4fUw

³ Although her name is "Irene" in her own memoir, the play and film refer to her as "Irena."

⁴ Opdyke, Irene Gut, *In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer*. New York: Anchor, 2001.

⁵ "Courage is a Whisper from Above," ABC Primetime segment originally aired April 6, 2010. Reproduced as "Irene Gut Opdyke - Rescuer and Hero," published on YouTube by Jeannie Smith. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn2g6cNcbPo>).