Inspiring Individuals and Events

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Irena Sendler (née Krzyżanowska, in Poland commonly referred to as Irena Sendlerowa, 15 February 1910 – 12 May 2008) was a Polish Catholic social worker who served in the Polish Underground and the Żegota resistance organization in German-occupied Warsaw during World War II. Assisted by some two dozen other Żegota members, Sendler saved 2,500 Jewish children by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto, providing them false documents, and sheltering them in individual and group children’s homes outside the Ghetto. Yet Irena Sendler saw herself as anything but a heroine. “I only did what was normal. I could have done more,” she said. The article below is truly an inspiring tale of the inspiring deed of an inspiring individual.

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The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*

Gavriel Horan

Irena Sendler

She takes the crying baby into her arms, turns her back on the hysterical mother, and walks off into the night. If she’s caught, she and the baby will die.

“Promise me my child will live!” the mother cries desperately after her.

She turns for a moment. “I can’t promise that. But I can promise that if he stays with you, he will die.”

Irena Sendler is 97 years old. She has seen this image in her dreams countless times over the years, heard the children’s cries as they were pulled from their mothers’ grasp; each time it is another mother
screaming behind her. To the children, she seemed a merciless captor; in truth, she was the agent to save their lives.

Mrs. Sendler, code name “Jolanta,” smuggled 2,500 children out of the Warsaw Ghetto during the last three months before its liquidation. She found a home for each child. Each was given a new name and a new identity as a Christian. Others were saving Jewish children, too, but many of those children were saved only in body; tragically, they disappeared from the Jewish people. Irena did all she could to ensure that “her children” would have a future as part of their own people.

Mrs. Sendler listed the name and new identity of every rescued child on thin cigarette papers or tissue paper. She hid the list in glass jars and buried them under an apple tree in her friend’s backyard. Her hope was to reunite the children with their families after the war. Indeed, though most of their parents perished in the Warsaw Ghetto or in Treblinka, those children who had surviving relatives were returned to them after the war.

Yet Irena Sendler sees herself as anything but a heroine. “I only did what was normal. I could have done more,” she says. “This regret will follow me to my death.”

Though she received the Yad Vashem medal for the Righteous Among the Nations in 1965, Irena Sendler’s story was virtually unknown. But in 1999 the silence was broken by some unlikely candidates: four Protestant high-school girls in rural Kansas.** The girls were looking for a subject for the Kansas State National History Day competition. Their teacher, Norm Conard, gave them a short paragraph about Mrs. Sendler, from a 1994 U.S. News & World Report story, “The Other Schindlers.” Mr. Conard thought the figures were mistaken. After all, no one had ever heard of this woman; Schindler, who was so famous, had rescued 1,000 Jews. 250 children seemed more likely than 2,500.

Conard encouraged the girls to investigate and unearth the true story. With his help, the girls began to reconstruct the life of this courageous woman. Searching for her burial records, they discovered, to their surprise, that she was still alive, ninety years old and living in Warsaw. The girls compiled many details of Mrs. Sendler’s life, which they eventually made into a short play, “Life in a Jar.” The play has since been performed hundreds of times in the United States, Canada, and Poland, and has been broadcast over radio and television, publicizing the silent heroine to the world.
Irena Sendler was born in 1910 in Otwock, some 15 miles south-east of Warsaw. Her father, a physician and one of the first Polish Socialists, raised her to respect and love people regardless of their ethnicity or social status. Many of his patients were poor Jews. When a typhus epidemic broke out in 1917, he was the only doctor who stayed in the area. He contracted the disease. His dying words to seven-year-old Irena were, “If you see someone drowning, you must jump in and try to save them, even if you don’t know how to swim.”

Even before the war, Irena had strong loyalties towards Jews. In the 1930s, at Warsaw University, she stood up for her Jewish friends. Jews were forced to sit separately from “Aryan” students. One day, Irena went to sit on the Jewish side of the room. When the teacher told her to move, she answered, “I’m Jewish today.” She was expelled immediately. (Decades later, under Communist rule, she was considered a subversive; her son and daughter were refused entry into Warsaw University.)

In fall of 1939, Germany invaded Poland and began its campaign of mass destruction. Many Poles were quick to side with the Nazis. Although Jews had never been accepted by the Polish masses, many of them had fought alongside their Polish countrymen during the few days before the country was overrun. Now these loyalties meant nothing.

Mrs. Sendler was a senior administrator in the Warsaw Social Welfare Department, which was in charge of soup kitchens, located in every district of the city. They distributed meals and gave financial assistance and other services to the poor, elderly, and orphans. From 1939-1942, she was involved in acquiring forged documents, registering many Jews under Christian names so they could receive these services; she listed them all as typhus and tuberculosis victims, to avoid any investigations.

It wasn’t enough. Irena joined the Zegota, the Council for Aid to Jews, organized by the Polish underground resistance, operating out of London with the help of many British Jews. Obtaining a pass from the Warsaw Epidemic Control Department to enter the Warsaw Ghetto, she smuggled in food, medicine, and clothing.

Over 450,000 Jews had been forced into the small 16-block area that was the Warsaw Ghetto; 5,000 were dying each month. Irena felt that her efforts were helping only to prolong the suffering, but doing nothing to save lives. She decided that the most that could be done was to try to save the children. “When the war started, all of Poland was drowning in a sea of blood. But most of all, it affected the Jewish nation. And within that nation, it was the children who suffered most. That’s why we needed to give our hearts to them,” Sendler said on ABC News.
In 1942, Mrs. Sendler, “Jolanta,” was put in charge of the Children’s Division of Zegota. She and her team of twenty-five organized to smuggle out as many children as possible from the Ghetto. Ten members were to smuggle children out, ten were in charge of finding families to take the children, and five were in charge of obtaining false documents.

The hardest part was convincing parents to part with their children. Even the many secular Jewish parents shrank from the thought of surrendering their children into Catholic homes or convents, where they might be baptized or taught Christian prayers. Many chose to die with their children instead. Irena, herself a young mother, found it almost impossibly painful to have to persuade parents to part with their children, entrusting them to a non-Jewish stranger. The only thing that gave her strength to withstand this pain was the knowledge that there was no other hope for survival. Sometimes, she would finally convince the parents, only to be met with the grandparents’ adamant refusal. She would be forced to leave empty-handed, returning the next day to find that the entire family had been sent to Treblinka.

Many in the Ghetto thought that Treblinka was a relocation settlement. Actually, it was even worse than Auschwitz, which was a labor camp/death camp. Treblinka, on the other hand, contained little more than gas chambers and ovens. Fighting against time, “Jolanta,” entered the Ghetto several times a day, wearing on her arm a yellow Star of David to show her solidarity, desperately trying to convince parents to let her take their children. Many parents would ask her why they should trust her. “You shouldn’t trust me,” she would agree. “But there’s nothing else you can do.”

The second biggest challenge was finding Polish families. The penalty of death to every family found harboring a Jew was not always enforced, but some 700 people were killed because of it. Many of the children had to be hidden in orphanages and convents. Jolanta would write to them that she had bags of old clothes to donate; among the old clothes she would hide a child.

Then there was the smuggling of the children out of the Ghetto. Small children were sedated to keep them from crying, then hidden inside sacks, boxes, body bags, or coffins. Older children who could pretend to be ill were taken out in ambulances. Many were smuggled through sewers or underground tunnels, or taken through an old courthouse or church next to the Ghetto.
Outside the Ghetto walls, the children were given false names and documents. Mrs. Sendler claims that no one ever refused to take a child from her. But children often had to be relocated several times. She recalls carrying a little boy from one guardian family to the next, as he sobbed, “How many mothers can a person have? This is my third!”

The smuggling did not always go as planned. Fourteen-year-old Renada Zajdman was smuggled out, but then became separated from her rescuer. She survived on her own in warehouses for several months, until she was reconnected with members of Zegota.

The Church was actively involved in much of Mrs. Sendler’s work. However, she stresses that the goal was not to convert people to Catholicism, but rather to save lives. Each family had to promise to return the children to any surviving family members after the war. Unfortunately, this promise was not always kept. Mrs. Sendler spent years after the war, with the help of her lists, trying to track down missing children and reconnect family members.

Of the remaining orphans, some 400 were taken to Israel with Adolph Berman, a leader in Zegota. Many others chose to stay with their adopted parents. Despite Mrs. Sendler’s efforts to trace them, some 400 to 500 children are still missing; presumably they either did not survive or they are living somewhere in Poland or elsewhere, perhaps unaware of their Jewish identity.

For two years, Jolanta’s covert operations were successful. Then, in October 20, 1943, the Gestapo caught up with her. She was arrested, imprisoned in Warsaw’s notorious Pawiak prison, and tortured. Her feet and legs were broken. She still needs crutches and a wheelchair as a result of those injuries, and still carries the scars of those beatings. She refused to betray any of her co-conspirators or to reveal the whereabouts of any of the children.

Jolanta was sentenced to death by firing squad, a sentence that she accepted with pride. But unbeknown to her, Zegota had bribed one of the German guards, who helped her to escape at the last moment. He recorded her name on the list of those who had been executed. On the following day, the Germans loudly proclaimed the news of her death. She saw posters all over the city reporting it. The Gestapo eventually found out what had happened; they sent the guard to fight on the Russian front, a sentence they felt was worse than death. Irena spent the rest of the war in hiding much like the children she had saved. Relentlessly pursued by the Gestapo, she continued her rescue efforts in any way she could, but by then the Warsaw Ghetto had been liquidated.
Due to the Communist regime’s suppression of history and its anti-Semitism, few Poles were aware of Zegota’s work, despite the unveiling of a plaque honoring the organization, in 1995, near the former Warsaw Ghetto. Mrs. Sendler continued her life, simply and quietly, continuing to work as a social worker ... until the discovery by the Kansas teenagers catapulted her into the public arena.

Irena Sendler was awarded the Order of White Eagle, Poland’s highest distinction, in Warsaw, in 2003. She was also nominated to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. At a special session in Poland’s upper house of Parliament, President Lech Kaczynski announced the unanimous resolution to honor Mrs. Sendler for rescuing “the most defenseless victims of the Nazi ideology: the Jewish children.” He referred to her as a “great heroine who can be justly named for the Nobel Peace Prize. She deserves great respect from our whole nation.”

Today’s Warsaw still bears testimony to Mrs. Sendler’s lifesaving work. The corner store where children were hidden in the basement and the apple tree where the names of the children where buried still stand, all within sight of the German army barracks. Although the children had known her only as Jolanta, as her story became publicized, she began to receive calls from people who recognized her face from the photos: “I remember your face! You took me out of the Ghetto!”

In an interview with ABC News, Mrs. Sendler voiced some of her frustrations about how little anything has changed in the world: “After the Second World War it seemed that humanity understood something, and that nothing like that would happen again,” Sendler said. “Humanity has understood nothing. Religious, tribal, national wars continue. The world continues to be in a sea of blood.” But she added, “The world can be better, if there’s love, tolerance, and humility.”

Irena Sendler died on May 12, 2008. In April 2009 her story was aired in a television film, “The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler.”

Please see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_yvhOKK3cw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_yvhOKK3cw) for a short video on Irena.

Also see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw3F6CR6zq0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw3F6CR6zq0) for her obituary video.

See also: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDEjca8nYqq](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDEjca8nYqq)

** The four young students of Uniontown High School, in Kansas, Elizabeth Cambers, Megan Stewart, Sabrina Coons and Janice Underwood were the winners of the 2000 Kansas state National History Day competition by virtue of their writing the play ‘Life in a Jar’ about the heroic actions of Irena Sendler. The girls have since gained international recognition, along with their teacher, Norman Conard. The presentation, seen in many venues in the United States and popularized by National Public Radio, C-SPAN and CBS, has brought Irena Sendler’s story to a wider public. The students continue their prize-winning dramatic presentation ‘Life in a Jar’. They have established an e-mail address isendler@hotmail.com.

May we discover through pain and torment,
the strength to live with grace and humour.
May we discover through doubt and anguish,
the strength to live with dignity and holiness.
May we discover through suffering and fear,
the strength to move towards healing.
May it come to pass that we be restored to health and to vigour.
May Life grant us wellness of body, spirit, and mind.
And if this cannot be so, may we find in this transformation and passage moments of meaning, opportunities for love and the deep and gracious calm that comes when we allow ourselves to move on.

— Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro

Courtesy: Times of India 16.7.09.