Irena Sendler – The Essence of a Polish Heroine

By: Diane L. Mechlinski

The name, Irena Sendler, is unfamiliar to most people; however, this remarkable woman defied the Nazis and saved 2,500 Jewish children from death by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto. Today, the 93-year-old woman, white-haired, gentle and courageous, lives a modest existence in a Warsaw nursing home – literally an unsung heroine.

Sendler was born in 1910 in Otwock, Poland, a town approximately 15 miles southeast of Warsaw. During her youth, she was greatly influenced by her father, Stanislaw Krzyzanowski, who was one of the first Polish Socialists. As a doctor, Krzyzanowski's patients were mostly poor Jews.

In 1939, Germany invaded Poland, bringing with them the brutality of the Nazis, accelerated with murder, violence and terror. At the time, Sendler was employed by the Social Welfare Department of the city of Warsaw as a senior administrator health worker. The department was involved in operating canteens for orphans, poor people and the destitute in every district of the city, providing meals, financial aid, and other services. Jews, whose bank accounts, real estate and property had been quickly confiscated by the Germans, found themselves among the ranks of the poor, yet by German law, were denied all forms of assistance. With Sendler's help, the canteens also provided Jewish families who were in great need, with clothing, medicine and money. To avoid inspections, these families were registered under fictitious Christian names and reported as patients suffering highly contagious diseases such as typhus or tuberculosis.

When Hitler and his Nazis built the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940, herding 500,000 Polish Jews behind its walls to await execution, many Polish gentiles turned their backs or applauded. Not Irena Sendler. She wore a "star" armband as a sign of her solidarity with Jews and recruited at least one person from each of the ten centers of the Social Welfare Department. With their help, she was able to issue hundreds of false documents with forged signatures, successfully smuggling 2,500 Jewish children to safety, giving them temporary new identities.

In 1942, the Nazis herded hundreds of thousands of Jews into a 16-block area that became known as the Warsaw Ghetto. The ghetto was sealed and the Jewish families within ended up behind its walls, only to await the certainty of death. Sendler, then 32, was so appalled by the conditions in which these Jews were living that she joined the Council for Aid to Jews, codenamed Zegota, which had been organized by the Polish underground. Having already been very involved in helping Jews before the Germans set up the Jewish ghetto, she became the director of the children's section of Zegota, using the codename, Jolanta, and was one of the first recruits to rescue Jews, who at that time, were dying from starvation and diseases by about 5,000 individuals per month.

To be able to enter the ghetto legally, Sendler managed to get a pass from the Warsaw Epidemic Control Department for herself and her co-conspirator, Irena Schultz. They visited the ghetto daily, reestablishing contacts and bringing food, medicines and clothing. It was then she decided to help get the Jewish children out.

For Sendler, a young mother herself at that time, persuading parents to separate from their children was a horrendous task. Finding families willing to shelter the children, thereby willing to risk their own life if the Nazis found out, was also not easy. Some of the parents asked her if she could guarantee that their children would live, but as Sendler recalled, she replied to them that the only thing she could guarantee was that they would die if they stayed. To this day, Sendler claims to hear the children crying as they left their parents.

She began smuggling the children in an ambulance, pretending they were victims of typhus. Other children were buried inside loads of goods. A mechanic took a baby out in his toolbox. Some children were carried out in potato sacks, while others were placed in coffins. Some entered a church in the ghetto which had two entrances. One entrance opened into the ghetto, the other opened into the Aryan side of Warsaw, which was the Christian side. They entered the church as Jews and exited as Christians.

This task grew more and more difficult as time went on. The Germans sealed the various avenues – underground passages, holes in the ghetto wall, and so forth – that were used in the process. Some guards could be bribed, and children could, and sometimes were, thrown over the ghetto wall.

It was easier to escape the ghetto than to survive the Aryan side. The rescue of a child required the help of at least ten people. As a rule, the children were first placed in a temporary shelter, then a foster home after they had somewhat recovered from their period of destitution. There was also a need to wait for them to receive false identity papers from the Polish Underground that were good enough to pass German inspection. Each child had to be provided with a fictitious birth and baptismal certificate and a family history of parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, etc., which the children, if old enough, had to commit to memory.

Sendler sent most of the children to religious establishments. Knowing she could count on the Sisters when placing the children, Sendler claims that the active assistance of the church helped her accomplish her incredible deeds.

Sendler kept record, in coded form, of the children and their true identities. She kept the only record of their true identities in jars buried beneath an apple tree in a neighbor's backyard, across the street from German barracks, hoping she could someday dig up the jars, locate the children and inform them of their past. In all, the jars contained the names of 2,500 children.

Unfortunately, the Nazis finally became aware of Sendler's activities, and on October 20, 1943, she was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo, ending up in the *Pawiak Prison*, where she spent three months and was sentenced to death. She was the only one who knew the names and addresses of the families sheltering the Jewish children. Withstanding torture by the Gestapo, who broke her feet and legs, she refused to betray any of her associates or the children in hiding.

While she awaited execution, Sendler was saved at the last minute when Zegota members bribed one of the Germans to halt the execution. The German soldier took her to an "additional interrogation." Once they were outside he shouted in Polish, "Run!" The next day, Sendler found her name on the list of the executed Poles. She continued working under a false identity.

After the war ended, Sendler dug up the jars and used the notes to find the 2,500 children she placed with adoptive families. She reunited them with their relatives who were scattered across Europe,. However, most of them unfortunately had lost their families in Nazi concentration camps.

The children only knew her by her codename, Jolanta. Years later, when her picture appeared in a newspaper after she was honored for her humanitarian deeds during the war, she received many phone calls from those "children" who were now adults, recognizing her face and knowing it was she who had helped get them out of the ghetto.

Sendler never thought of herself as a hero. She claimed no credit for her actions. Instead, she has said she always felt she could have done more.

After the war, Sendler worked for Social Welfare, helping create houses for elderly people, orphanages and an emergency service for children.

In 1965, the Yad Vashem organization in Jerusalem awarded her with the title, "Righteous Among the Nations." She was made an honorary citizen of Israel in 1991.

On October 23, 2003, Sendler was honored by a $20,000 Jan Karski Freedom Award for Valor and Compassion by Freedom House and The American Center of Polish Culture. On November 10 of that same year, she was awarded Poland's highest distinction, the Order of White Eagle, in Warsaw.

Her courage enabled not only the survival of 2,500 Jewish children but also of the generations of their descendants.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have consulted regarding Sendler's candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Polish Jews Forum, which consists of Jewish and non-Jewish citizens of Poland, Israel and the United States, has expressed its complete and enthusiastic support for her candidacy as well, claiming Sendler to be a true hero – rescuing the most vulnerable of an oppressed minority from the horror of totalitarian mass murder. That is clearly the essence of charity and humanity.

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