



Hallmark Hall of Fame: 236th Presentation
THE COURAGEOUS HEART OF IRENA SENDLER

Bonus Material

Section I: Behind Irena Sendler's story & The Irena Sendler Project

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Section I
Behind Irena Sendler's Story & The Irena Sendler Project

Standing less than five feet tall, Irena Sendler is remembered as the “Little Giant” by the aging survivors she rescued as children from the Warsaw ghetto during World War II. Her heroism as a leader of the Polish underground who saved 2,500 Jewish infants, adolescents and teens is chronicled in the Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*.

Sendler was a social worker raised by Catholic parents who taught her to respect all people and try to help anyone in need, regardless of their religion, social status or nationality. When her father was dying of typhus, he told his 7-year-old daughter that if she saw someone drowning she should try to rescue that person, even if she could not swim. “A requirement dictated by the heart,” Irena Sendler said later.

When Nazis walled up Polish Jews to keep them cornered for shipment in rail cars to death camps, they were also subjecting them to starvation and disease. Sendler's outrage at such cruelty overcame fears for her own safety and inspired her to act. Disguised as an infection control nurse, she sometimes entered the ghetto three times a day to persuade parents to let her smuggle their children out using false identities. Sendler carefully recorded each child's Jewish name, Polish name and address on scraps of tissue paper she would hide in glass jars to be buried so birth parents could find them after the war. By 1943 Sendler was in charge of 24 women and one man in Zegota's (Polish underground) children's division.

Despite her nurse's disguise, expertly forged ghetto transit papers and meticulous skill at smuggling children out in toolboxes, suitcases, old sewer pipes—even coffins—Sendler was caught. She was arrested and tortured for three months at Pawiak Prison, having her legs and feet broken. She was to be executed, but before it could be carried out, Zegota had spies bribe a guard to help the badly injured Sendler escape from the Gestapo. Amazingly, she continued working with the Polish underground while moving around Warsaw to secret hiding places, including the zoo.

After the war, Sendler was shunned into obscurity. Because Poland's postwar Communist regime had branded her a Fascist for saving Jews, her story was nearly forgotten. And, although honored by the Israeli government's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial with a “Righteous Among the Nations” award in 1965, she was forbidden to travel to accept it. Communism was eventually overthrown in 1989, but Sendler continued to live what one child survivor described as “the life of a mouse” because of lingering anti-Semitism. Her historic legacy eventually was celebrated because of one woman's search for her true identity.

In 1989 a Los Angeles newspaper printed a letter to the editor from a Holocaust survivor who claimed she'd been carried out of the Warsaw ghetto as an infant and raised under a false name by a Polish family. She appealed to anyone in similar circumstances to contact her. Within a week, she received 60 calls from Jews in America who shared similar histories of growing up under false identities with Christian families in Poland, Czechoslovakia, France, Yugoslavia and Belgium. In May 1991 nearly 2,000 child survivors attended the “First International Gathering of Hidden Children” held in New York City. A month later, in Warsaw, the 19 Poles who had returned from the New York conference joined 26 others in founding the “Association of the Children of the Holocaust.”

This dwindling community of aging Polish child survivors now numbers around 700, with chapters in four cities. The association's former chairwoman and co-founder, Ezbieta Ficowska, was barely five months old in 1942 when she was smuggled with Irena Sendler's help out of the ghetto in a carpenter's box. Ficowska's parents tucked a silver spoon under their only child's tiny body in hopes it would help them find her. Her father was subsequently shot at the Warsaw train station for refusing to board a car bound for the Treblinka concentration camp. Her mother died in a forest with 1,800 slave laborers in November 1943 during a mass German execution known in Poland as “The Harvest.”

Renata Skotnicka Zajdman of Montreal found out in her 60s that Irena Sendler was one of eight rescuers who helped her escape from the ghetto (see Section II for more from Renata). Sendler, she said, “became like my second mother” after she met her and Ficowska (“like my second sister”) at the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising commemoration held in 1993. “When I met her, Irena’s bravery and sacrifice were just coming to light,” said Zajdman, who was 11 when she escaped from the ghetto only to be arrested and shipped to German factories as a slave laborer. “In the war, the less you knew the better. It was too dangerous to learn too much in case you were caught and tortured and then betrayed others,” Zajdman said. “After the war, those who’d helped Jews were outcasts. After the war, nobody wanted to remember what had happened, nobody wanted to talk about it. It was a conspiracy of silence.”

“Irena was physically a tiny woman, but she became a ‘little giant’ to us,” said Zajdman “She risked everything to keep us alive, but she was so modest she always gave credit to others and worried to the end that she hadn’t done enough.”

An award-winning National History Day project researched by four students at a small Kansas high school became the catalyst for Sendler’s worldwide acclaim in the last decade of her 98 years. Uniontown High School history teacher Norman Conard is, in the words of a former student, “a newspaper and magazine pack rat.” In 1999 a snippet Conard had tossed into a box full of clippings he kept to inspire his students to dig deeper into history caught the imagination of Megan Stewart, Elizabeth Cambers, Sabrina Coons and, eventually, Jessica Shelton.

“We knew we wanted to do a project on the Holocaust, so he pulled out this little clipping from a March 1994 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* headlined ‘The Other Schindlers,’ a reference to the film *Schindler’s List* that had just come out,” recalled Megan Stewart-Felt. “It said, ‘Irena Sendler saved 2,500 children from the Warsaw ghetto in 1942-43.’ That was all. Mr. Conard thought it might be a typographical error because he hadn’t heard of this woman or the story.”

The curious students investigated and were baffled. “Why hadn’t we heard of Irena Sendler? Oskar Schindler saved 1,100 Jews and had a Web site and hit movie about his life. She was practically anonymous, except for a brief mention on one Web site.” Prodded by Conard and guided by their class motto, “He who changes one person changes the entire world,” the students crafted a 10-minute play based on what little they could find regarding Sendler’s feat. Their LIFE IN A JAR presentation won the Kansas contest and was a National History Day finalist. Uniontown, which had little diversity and no Jewish students enrolled in the school district, embraced the girls’ play and sponsored an Irena Sendler Day to honor the playwrights and their subject.

Curious about their heroine's final resting place, the girls carefully searched the Internet for information about Sendler’s gravesite. Much to their surprise, they discovered Irena was alive and living with relatives in Warsaw. “The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which was providing a small amount of money to her as a rescuer, gave us her address when we convinced them we wanted to pay our respects,” Stewart-Felt said. The young women immediately wrote letters to her and sent them off in a packet containing a copy of their script, pictures of themselves and information about Uniontown and Kansas.

“Six weeks had gone by when Elizabeth came running down the hall at school shouting ‘WE GOT A LETTER! WE GOT A LETTER!’ Unfortunately, it was in Polish!” laughed Stewart-Felt. A college student translated the letter, which began, “To my dear and beloved girls very close to my heart...”

Thus was born a relationship grounded in love and respect that would influence all who have been, or will be, touched by LIFE IN A JAR and The Irena Sendler Project, now in its 10th year. The project’s offshoot, the Lowell Milken Center in Fort Scott, KS, near Uniontown, was created to inspire and

mentor teachers and students to discover and celebrate other unsung heroes. Its goal is to foster in-depth education projects that further respect and understanding of all races, religions and creeds. Norman Conard, whose box of newspaper and magazine clippings provided his students with their first clue about Irena Sendler, is the Milken Center's director.

"The project and LIFE IN A JAR completely changed my life," said Stewart-Felt. "I thought I wanted to be a pharmacist because my mother had breast cancer, and I wanted to be there for families of sick people. After getting to know Irena, who was very much a grandmother figure to me, and portraying her life in our play, I switched my major and graduated with a [college] degree in business administration," she said. Stewart-Felt is now the Milken Center's program director.

Like its four authors, LIFE IN A JAR also has grown up. In the past decade the playwrights have expanded their creation based on their extensive visits with Sendler and ongoing research about her life, the Warsaw ghetto, Gentile rescuers and the Holocaust.

LIFE IN A JAR is now 45 minutes in length and has been performed by a traveling cast from Kansas 270 times in the United States, Canada and Poland. More dates are scheduled into 2010. Stewart-Felt and Jessica Shelton-Ripper still are with the troupe. The other co-founders, Elizabeth Cambers-Hutton and Sabrina Coons-Murphy, remain affiliated with the Irena Sendler Project while juggling their roles as new mothers.

"When we first typed Irena's name into the computer, we came up with one mention of her life," Stewart-Felt said. "Today there are more than 120,000 Web sites about Irena Sendler's deeds. Because of LIFE IN A JAR, we were able to send money to help make her last years more comfortable in a Catholic care home. We visited her five times in Poland and exchanged dozens of meaningful letters with her."

Proceeds from the play also funded translation of the flurry of letters between Uniontown and Warsaw. In one letter, Sendler wrote:

"... Before the day you had written LIFE IN A JAR the world did not know our story; your performance and work is continuing the effort I started over fifty years ago. You are my dearly beloved ones."

The last time the now-grown-up Uniontown girls saw Sendler was May 3, 2008. "We were each wearing the silver necklace with a heart pendant she had given us. She told us that no matter where we are or where we go, we will always have a piece of her heart. We all told her we loved her. She died nine days later."

Until her death on May 12, 2008, Sendler suffered from painful, crippling wounds she received while imprisoned. The Polish parliament finally recognized Sendler as a national hero in 2007. That same year, the presidents of Poland and Israel endorsed Sendler's nomination by her countrymen, Nobel laureates Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska, for a Nobel Peace Prize.

For more information on Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project, visit www.irenasendler.org

Section II
A Tribute to Irena Sendler
from Renata Zajdman, one of the 2,500 children Irena helped save

Renata Zajdman was 11 years old when she was rescued by Irena Sendler and now lives in Montreal. Having been an active supporter of The Irena Sendler Project, Zajdman gave this emotional tribute to Irena Sendler as part of a special premiere screening of the Hallmark Hall of Fame movie *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler* on April 15, 2009, in Fort Scott, Kansas. The premiere honored the students who created and helped grow The Irena Sendler project and the teacher who inspired them.

Within the horror of the Holocaust are countless stories of Jewish children being maimed in concentration camps, starved, sent to gas chambers and murdered in other unspeakably brutal ways. When people did nothing, Jews died. When people acted, Jews were saved. Irena Sendler was one such person who acted at the risk of her own life, helping to hide thousands of Jewish children from the Germans. She was motivated by her humanity, and she is proof that an ordinary person can accomplish extraordinary deeds.

Irena worked in a climate where violence was rewarded and decency punished, where murder was legal and rescue was a crime. In an age with no prevailing moral standards, she created her own standards and said “no” to evil in the most powerful way. People like Irena Sendler rarely consider themselves heroes because the only weapons they use are compassion and valor. I think there are no greater and more courageous heroes than The Righteous who passed the most difficult test, the test of human dignity. It is difficult to calculate how many people are alive today because of the actions of Irena Sendler and her team. The Talmud says “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.”

Often I speak to groups about my experiences during the Holocaust. I call this my “open heart surgery.” I am driven by a sense of duty, and I want to preserve the lessons in humanity that Irena Sendler inspired. She proved equal to the greatest moral challenge of her time. Her goodness during a time of evil affects how I view the world today.

Irena Sendler and Zegota saved my life. They saved me not because I was good or smart or rich or pretty, they saved me because I needed to be saved. Because of them, I live and have children and grandchildren. My wish for them is that they will commemorate, not war, but peace.

— Renata Zajdman