REMEMBERING A CATHOLIC HEROINE

By: Dr. Richard C. Lukas

Most people had never heard of the tiny, blue-eyed lady until she passed away at ninety-eight years of age in Warsaw on May 12, 2008. Those who were aware of her inspiring story knew that she was a moral giant.

Irena Sendler had been raised a Roman Catholic by a father who taught her to respond to the needs of the poor and oppressed. “When someone is drowning,” he said, “extend a helping hand.” He practiced what he preached. At the risk of his own life, he treated poor Jews and Poles in the town of Otwock for Typhus when other physicians refused to do so. He died of the disease in 1917.

When the Germans defeated and occupied Poland in 1939, they forbade Polish welfare assistance to Jews who were locked up in ghettos and separated from gentiles. In the Warsaw Ghetto, malnutrition, disease, lack of medical assistance and overcrowding took the grim toll of 5,000 lives every day. There weren’t enough gravediggers to keep up with the corpses.

Despite the fact that Poland was the only German-occupied country where aiding a Jew carried the death penalty, Sendler risked her life to help Jews.

She headed the Children’s Bureau of Zegota, the code name for the Rada Pomocy Zydom (Council for Aid to Jews), an underground organization that the Poles established exclusively to aid Jews. This group was provided with funds mostly from the Polish government, forced into exile in Great Britain by the German invasion.

Sendler witnessed the special hell the Nazis created for the

Jews. “The worst [hell] was the fate of the children, the most vulnerable human beings,” she said. Disguised as sanitation workers from the city of Warsaw, she and her close associate, Irena Schultz, entered the Warsaw Ghetto to rescue Jewish children from certain death.

There were four ways to exit the ghetto, all of them dangerous for the children and their rescuers. Two of them included escorting the children through a labyrinth of cellars of buildings on both sides of the ghetto and through the corridors of the Polish Court that straddled the ghetto and Warsaw itself. Another way was to get older children to a tram station near the ghetto, where a member of Zegota drove them to safety. The fourth method was by an ambulance, also driven by a Zegota operative, who took the children out of the ghetto in gunnysacks, body bags and even in coffins. Sometimes, children had to be drugged to stifle their sad cries.

Once outside the ghetto, countless numbers of altruistic Poles helped to make Sendler’s operation a success. “I couldn’t have done it alone,” Irena admitted, observing that it took ten Poles to save one Jewish child. Some people provided temporary safehouses, others more permanent homes for the children. When German suspicions were aroused about a family, Zegota had to move the Jewish child to another home. One Jewish boy had to be moved so often that he tearfully asked Irena, “How many mothers is it possible to have because I’m going to my thirty-second one.”

Sendler’s incredible operation resulted in saving approximately 2,500 Jewish children, few of whom even knew Irena’s name because she, like other Zegota members, used a nom de guerre. Sendler’s was “Jolanta.”

Sendler had written the names of her rescued children on narrow pieces of tissue paper. She kept them in a bundle near her bed at night, intending to throw it out the window to a garden below if the Gestapo paid an unexpected visit. But on

the night of October 20, 1943, the Gestapo suddenly burst into her apartment before she had the chance to throw the list of names out the window. She managed to throw the list to her friend, who was visiting her that evening. She had the wit to hide the incriminating information in her undergarments.

Imprisoned and beaten at the infamous Pawiak Prison, where hundreds of Poles had died, she refused to reveal anything to the Gestapo. Thanks to a well-placed bribe by Zegota, a Gestapo officer freed Irena on the way to her execution. She went underground, retrieved the list of names, and buried it in a bottle under an apple tree in a friend's garden. She dug up the list after the war and gave it to the Jewish Committee, which took charge of the children.

Because of the hostility of the postwar Communist regime toward any person or group which had been involved in the pro-western and anti-Communist Polish Underground, Sendler's story remained largely unknown until the 1980's and 1990's, when Poland became a democracy. Many belated honors came to her, including a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in 2007.

Irena Sendler deserves an historian and a filmmaker such as Spielberg to tell us her compelling story of sacrifice and courage. We desperately need her and other exemplars of good to teach all of us about goodness. Irena Sendler not only saved Jewish children but also humanity's soul.

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