



Irena Sendler

Born: February 15, 1910
Occupation: Social Worker, Humanitarian

Died: May 12, 2008 (age 98)
Religion: Roman Catholic

Her Inspirational Story:

Irena was born the daughter of a physician, Dr. Stanislaw Krzyanowski. When she was but 7 years old, her father died (1917) from typhus that was contracted treating patients his colleagues refused to treat.

During the German occupation of Poland, Irena lived in Warsaw and began aiding Jews. She and her helpers created over 3,000 false documents to help Jewish families – a very risky undertaking that could result in death of all household members if found to be hiding Jews. Irena joined the organized Zegota resistance and was nominated in December, 1942, to head the children’s section.

She became an employee of the Social Welfare Department, and gained access to a specialized permit to enter the Warsaw Ghetto to check for signs of typhus. The Warsaw Ghetto spanning but 16-blocks in size was a place the Nazis herded hundreds of thousands of Jews. Statistically, around 5,000 people were dying each month from starvation and disease, in addition to Nazi genocide.

Irena would enter the Ghetto under the false name “Jolanta” wearing the Star of David for solidarity and smuggle infants and children out in boxes, suitcases and sewers – sometimes disguising the children as packages, including gunnysacks and body bags. Some were buried inside loads of goods, potato sacks, and even coffins. The children would be given Christian names and placed with Polish families, the

Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary, or Roman Catholic convents such as the Little Sister Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary Conceived Immaculate.

In the hope of one day reuniting the children with their parents, Irena carefully noted, in coded form, the children's original names and new identities. She kept the only record of the children's true identities in glass jars, which she buried beneath an apple tree in a neighbor's backyard, across the street from German barracks. The jars contained the names of over 2,500 children.

She was discovered and arrested on October 20, 1943. At the hands of the Gestapo, she was severely tortured and broke both of her arms and legs, yet she never gave up the names of the children. She was sentenced to death, but saved at the last moment by a fellow Zegota who bribed a guard to secure her freedom. Her torture left her crippled for life.

After the war, Irena returned to dig up the jars and reunite the families. Tragically, most of the children lost their families to Nazi death camps.

Irena Sendler was an unknown hero until 1999 when 3 Kansas teens from Uniontown High School began researching her life for a school project. The 3 teens assumed she was deceased and began searching for her burial site. However, they found Irena alive, 90-years-old, and living with relatives in a small apartment in Warsaw. In May, 2001, they visited Irena and began a friendship. The girls also created a play called, "Life in a Jar," which has been performed over 200 times in the U.S., Canada and Poland.

Irena died on May 12, 2008, at the age of 98. In a letter read by Elzbieta Ficowska, who was 6 months old when she was saved by this heroine, Irena said, "Every child saved with my help is the justification of my existence on this Earth, and not a title to glory."

In 2007, Irena Sendler was nominated to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. However, the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Al Gore for efforts related to man-made climate change. Certainly provides something to think about ...

