

A LOVE STORY FEATURING IRENA SENDLER

“Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

Irena Sendler (Sendlerowa) died May 12, 2008. She was 98 years old. Her heroism dates back to 1939 when she received permission from the Nazis to work in the Warsaw ghetto. She had an ulterior motive for doing so. Being German, she knew the Nazis' plans to kill the Jews and determined to save as many lives as possible. For the next four years she successfully smuggled out 2,500 infants and children. Some she placed in the bottom of a large tool box, and larger children were placed in a burlap sack in the back of her truck. Her dog was trained to bark each time she was stopped by Nazi guards. The soldiers wanted nothing to do with the dog, and its barking covered the noise of babies that might be crying.

On October 20, 1943, she was finally caught and taken to the notorious Gestapo headquarters in central Warsaw. Even though they broke her arms, legs and feet she refused to reveal any names. She later said: "I still carry the marks on my body of what those 'German supermen' did to me then. I was sentenced to death". But her colleagues managed to foil the plan by bribing a Polish-speaking German officer. On the drive to her execution site the officer knocked her unconscious, stopped the car, and left her bleeding by the roadside. The following day, unaware the execution had not taken place, the German authorities put up posters all over the city announcing she had been shot.

After the war, she was at first persecuted by the communist authorities for being related to the "capitalist and bourgeois" Polish government in exile, and also for her association with anti-Nazi resistance groups. She was imprisoned, miscarried her second child, and her children were denied the right to study at Polish universities. In 1965, Sendler was recognized by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, which was confirmed in 1983 by the Israeli Supreme Court. She also was awarded the Commanders Cross by the Israeli Institute. It was only that year that the Polish communist government allowed her to travel abroad, to receive the award.

In 2003, pope John Paul II sent a personal letter to Sendler, praising her wartime efforts. On October 10, 2003, she received the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest civilian decoration and the Jan Karski Award "For Courage and Heart." It was awarded by the American Center of Polish Culture in Washington, D.C.. On 14 March 2007 Sendler was also honored by Poland's Senate. At age 97, she was unable to leave her nursing home to receive the honor, but sent a statement through Elzbieta Ficowska, whom Sendler had saved as an infant. Polish President Lech Kaczynski stated that she "can justly be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize" (though nominations are supposed to be kept secret).

In 2007, considerable publicity accompanied Sendler's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. While failed nominees for the award have not been officially announced by the Nobel organization for 50 years, the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo made public her nomination. This focused the spotlight on Sendler and her wartime contributions. The 2007 award, however, was presented to Al Gore, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Irena kept a record of the names of all the children she smuggled out of that Warsaw ghetto in a glass jar which she buried under a tree in her back yard. After the war, she tried to locate any parents who may have survived so she might reunite the child with its family. Most, of course, did not survive, so the vast majority of the surviving children were placed in foster homes or adopted. This story inspired a history teacher and a group of High School students in S.E. Kansas to produce a play called "Life in a Jar". As of Aug. 2008 there have been 250 performances of the play in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. The cast made six trips to Poland to visit Irena. The last trip was in May, 2008, just a week before her death. She said to them that by bringing this story to light "You have changed Poland, you have changed the United States, you have changed the world . . . I love you very much." The High School History teacher behind this play is Norman Conard - a former student at the Ozark Christian College. In June, 2007 he was inducted into the National Teacher's Hall of Fame.