



# Polish Profiles

## Irena Sendler- Life in a Jar

By: *Kaya Mirecka Ploss*, Ph.D., Executive Director  
Jan Karski Institute, Baltimore, MD

In 1940 the German forces were occupying Poland and established the Warsaw Ghetto. The Ghetto walls enclosed 16 square blocks, where over 450,000 Jews were forced to live. The place was dirty and overcrowded. Sickness and epidemics were rampant. Out of fear for the health and safety of their own troops, the Germans allowed members of the Contagious Disease Department in Warsaw to treat Jews inside the ghetto.

The Polish underground organization Żegota, established especially to help Jews, provided Irena Sendler with forged identification papers. Her new identity was that of a social worker by the name of Jolanta. On her first visit to the Warsaw Ghetto the sight of children begging for food was a shattering experience. Irena's mind was made up. She would try to save the children.

Irena gave a report at a secret meeting of Żegota, where it was decided that Irena and ten others Żegota members would be assigned to a group called "Save the Jewish Children." So began her mission that led to the saving of hundreds of lives.

There were many ways of smuggling the children out of the Ghetto. Children were carried in sacks, suitcases, trucks, garbage cans and even coffins. Some were brought out through the underground sewer pipes. The easiest way to smuggle out the children was when an ambulance entered the Ghetto, as a child could be hidden under the stretcher or the driver could claim that he was transporting diseased people, hoping that the Germans out of fear of contagion would not open the ambulance door and find that the ambulance was packed with children. Older children would be taught how to pretend to be sick. Some children, the smallest ones, sometimes had to be sedated to prevent them from crying.

Irena Sendler documented the identities of the children who were smuggled out by writing their names on strips of paper and placing them in glass jars, which she later buried for safekeeping. She also wrote down the place where each child was sent. There were many scraps of papers in jars on which she had to write, "name unknown". Most of the children were placed in Catholic convents.

Irena Sendler had buried 2,500 names in her jars when the Gestapo arrested her. She was held at Pawiak prison where she was severely beaten and tortured, and both of her legs were broken. Finally she was sentenced to death. But in the meantime members of the Żegota organization bribed some German soldiers who helped her to escape.

After the war Irena dug up the jars and began searching for the children, mostly to reunite them with living parents.

Irena Sendler, now ninety- six years old, lives in Warsaw in a nursing home run by nuns. Many of the children that she rescued are scattered all over the world. Some, who live in Poland, visit her often. One of the rescued children nominated Irena Sendler for the Jan Karski Award. It was presented to her in 2003. The former First Lady of Poland, Mrs. Jolanta Kwaśniewska attended the ceremony in Washington and accepted the Jan Karski Award on behalf of Irena Sendler.

But it was Norm Conard, a history teacher from Uniontown High School in Kansas, who linked this aging heroine in a Warsaw nursing home to a young generation of students living thousands of miles away in America. He assigned to three of his students a research project on Irena Sendler. They visited Mrs. Sendler in Poland and wrote a play about her, called Life in a Jar, which they have performed more than 100 times. They also reminded the world of Irena Sendler. The three students and their teacher at my invitations were present at the ceremony where Irena Sendler received the Jan Karski Award.

Not long ago the Polish government and the government of Israel nominated Irena Sendler to the Nobel Peace Prize. Also a movie is being considered in Hollywood based on a book by Anna Mieszkowska about Irena Sendler. □



## Alles Gute in Amerika!

*Justyna Ball*

In 1986, you paid 67 cents for a dozen eggs, a postage stamp was 24 cents, a gallon of gas 89 cents, and Harvard tuition was only \$10,000. We did not know that yet. We were living in Zell by the Mosel River surrounded by the greens of the vineyards broken only by the white church tower. Spic and span German houses were freshly painted every now and then. And every time after the Mosel's water level rose, it turned the streets of this small picturesque tourist town into another famous tourist attraction... Venice. Only with kayaks instead of gondolas. The nearest train station was Bullay, and we sometimes took trips from there to Coblenz where we shopped at Aldi, an inexpensive grocery chain.

In Zell, we lived in an apartment above the inn, which came in handy when I became pregnant and had cravings for "brot und shmalz" (or bread and lard) and einetopf (an all-in-one hearty soup with chunks of meat).

The "in" movie was "Top Gun," and Huey Louie & the News topped the charts. I was watching "Falcon Crest" and "Dynasty" in German, and we exchanged correspondence with Stephen, minister of a Methodist Church. He answered our worries about finding a job in West Brookfield by writing that the gas station offered a job for \$3.25 an hour. We thought that was great, and that we would make it. "If you cannot hold down your first job, there is public assistance to help until you are fully employed. Say 'public assistance' and not 'welfare.' There is prejudice against people 'on welfare,'" he wrote. I guess what he meant was, "come and get a job, don't try to use the system, we don't want any more welfare (ab)users."

Later on, he was amongst the group who welcomed us at the airport. He played the lyre singing, "This land is your land" all the way from Hartford, CT to West Brookfield, MA. He and his family came to visit us. I remember that they looked odd to me as the mother and three children were wearing capes including the baby. It was November, and the baby was not wearing shoes or socks. Later on, when I saw pictures of the pilgrims, they reminded me of this Methodist preacher and his family.

Stephen's wife took Karolina in for a day when I was in the hospital when Francis was born, but somehow Karolina made it to this old lady Ginny's house, a heavy smoker. Later on, Karolina ended up with Sally, and all in the course of one day! Sally had geese and a pony, and was fun. She had two children (ages 8 and 9) and wanted another one, so I guess Karolina was it. She gave her a bubble bath, dressed her up in her daughter's clothes, and returned her later scrubbed and fed with a smile and bunch of balloons. Sally took the first pictures of newborn baby Francis. Sally's husband, Mike helped Jacek buy our first car, a Buick Skylark. We paid \$500 for it, and in the spring we drove it to Niagara Falls. Mike's parents were from Armenia.

Sally made us a pot roast, and Priscilla surprised us with go<sup>3</sup>bki, the Blisses gave us \$20 and a Christmas tree. (I won't mention our closest friends; they deserve a whole article.)

I couldn't recall being hungry back in Germany either. In Reidenhausen, where we moved to from Zell, two elderly German sisters supplied us with fresh produce. They were awfully friendly or maybe they had a crush on my husband, Jacek. Either way, he always brought home eggs, butter,

vegetables, and cakes. Herr Massman, a rich local contractor, gave us stuff to send to Poland and offered Jacek a job so we had \$400 saved when we arrived in the United States. Massman restored an old farm tractor and delivered it to a needy farmer in Poland.

"Oma" and "Opa," with whom we lived, loved Karolina, and their own grandchildren lived far away. That love was converted into countless lollipops our daughter brought back home from every visit (that's why I call our American landlord who's a dentist, a Godsend, as we couldn't afford another Oma & Opa in the US). The whistling sound of their lungs, from a lifetime commitment to smoking, sometimes kept us awake at night in our downstairs apartment. The war did not kill them, but lung cancer probably did.

Oma and Opa (Helmut & Erna Lettgen) spoke only German with three-year-old Karolina answering them in Polish, they had quite a conversation. When Opa said, "sagmal, shue" and pointed to Karolina's shoe, the kid quickly answered "not shue ... but," and she went on and on correcting Opa. If the lollipops were meant to bribe her, it did not work. The kid strongly fought germanization on her own.

There were other Poles awaiting immigration to the US, and Germans visited us often. When the conversation stomped upon the sensitive subject of war, the Germans recalled fighting it somewhere in... Russia, and we all accepted it. I wasn't brought up to hate anybody. My grandparents' house was built by German POWs, and my family stayed in touch with them.

Last week near Naples, a 5-year-old daughter of Polish immigrants, was accidentally shot by an Italian construction worker, Alessandro R. He had an argument with two of her father's friends over the lack of space at the bar where they all went after work to have a beer. After the quarrel, two Polish workers went to the apartment of the little girl's father to take a shower as there was no plumbing in their own apartment. Meantime, the Italian went home to get a gun. Guns in Italy are illegal. A little girl stood in the door by her mother's side when the Italian arrived and gave two shots, and one reached her. The chief of police contacted Alessandro's family and they convinced him to turn himself in.

The Italian press dedicated lots of space to this horrible tragedy. The grieving parents are hardworking people, nice, quiet, and well-liked, but when the bullet struck and the father, carrying his dying daughter, walked around screaming for help, nobody answered. They are returning to Poland where they going to bury their daughter.

Emotions ran high. At the spur of the moment, some blame the entire Italian nation for the act (of murder) of one drunken mason forgetting that the entire neighborhood accepted this and many other Polish families. Forgetting how Italians welcomed Karol Wojty'a even after realizing that the new pope is not an Italian!

The German press can be, just like the American press, unjust, to say the least. My experience with German people was different than my grandparents', but it was my grandparents who taught me tolerance. They had every reason to hate the Germans, but they remained sober and fair and objective in their opinions. I cannot blame "Germans" after the landlord's 5-year-old son in Zell gave me chicken pox, which at my age developed into a terrible experience. Oma Lettgen had a picture sitting on a motorcycle wearing a Wehrmacht uniform.

Amongst old letters, I found hers and Franz Massman's letters to us wishing us:

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## Disclaimer Notice:

The Views of our columnists and letter writers do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff of the News of Polonia.

## Calendar of Events

**May 19, Sat** Krakusy Dance Ensemble is sponsoring a "Warszawska Majówka" Ball at the Our Lady of the Bright Mount church hall 3424 W. Adams Blvd. - Los Angeles.

**20, Sun** - 12:30 Monthly Polish American Congress Meeting at the Pope John Paul Center - 3999 Rose Drive - Yorba Linda.

**Jun 3, Sun** - "Proud to Be Polish" - Pope John Paul Center in Yorba Linda

**24, Sun** 1:00 - Polish American Congress Annual Meeting - Election of officers. Polish Retirement Home (Szaratka) 3400 W. Adams Blvd. (east of the church).

**July 25 to 31**, Polish Club of Laguna Woods invites you to join them on their trip to Alaska. Reservations Info: call Ron (949-770-9133)

**Sep 28 - 30**, The 2007 Paderewski Celebration, in Paso Robles, information: 213-821-1356 or polmusic@usc.edu.

Please send your information for the calendar to Bish Petryka: zbykoopet@aol.com ☆