

How Holocaust heroine rescued 2,500 children
It took four Kansas teens to bring the world her story
By Kirsten Scharnberg | Chicago Tribune national correspondent
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FT. SCOTT, Kan. -

The young Kansas women have become known as the "rescuers of the rescuer." What the four high school students did started out simply enough: collaborate on a National History Day project to write a short play about an event from the past. What they accomplished when it was all said and done has been stunning: discover, research and introduce to the world an unsung Polish heroine of the Holocaust, a woman who daringly saved some 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto yet remained virtually unknown to historians and the public for more than 60 years.

"It's a little mind-boggling," said Megan Stewart-Felt, 22, one of the students. "Some days I almost can't believe this wonderful journey we've been on."

That journey began eight years ago when Stewart-Felt and three schoolmates here in southern Kansas decided to look into the life of Irena Sendler, a Polish Catholic social worker they had seen briefly mentioned in a magazine article about heroes of the Holocaust who never became as renowned as Oskar Schindler, the man who inspired the movie "Schindler's List." The four students launched an Internet search but could find only sparse details on what Sendler may have done.

Fast forward to today.

With the help of a Jewish organization familiar with Sendler, the students tracked down the Polish woman, residing in a nursing home in Warsaw. They forged a deep friendship with her, made multiple trips to Poland to interview her and those she had saved, and accumulated the world's most extensive clearinghouse of research and artifacts of her life and her contribution to history.

They completed their 10-minute play for that year's National History Day project but then expanded it into a 35-minute drama that they still perform around the country and the world to standing-room-only audiences -- some 225 at most recent count -- who watch it and weep.

They started a foundation in Sendler's name to keep her story alive, and one of the students this year helped launch an education center based in Kansas that helps schools nationwide assist students in tackling similar research projects, including one in Illinois that has the potential to become equally well-known.

A peace prize nomination

And just this month, 97-year-old Sendler, a woman once virtually anonymous to the world, was in the news as a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, a fact that can almost entirely be attributed to four small-town students who were so inspired by her story that it has come to define their lives, even after they have graduated from high school and college, married and begun families of their own.

"Think of it," said Norm Conard, their former social studies teacher. "You have some rural Protestant kids from a tiny place in Kansas who decide to tackle the story of a Polish Catholic woman who saved thousands of Jews, despite the fact that they were raised in a place where there is virtually no one of Jewish ancestry. It makes absolutely no sense that Irena's story would end up getting told like this."

And yet it makes perfect sense.

Conard, who retired last year after teaching social studies at Uniontown High School for 20 years, had long taught his students a Hebrew expression: "Tikkun olam," which means "to repair the world." He asked them to do classroom projects that explored topics of diversity and that encouraged respect of all races and creeds. His classroom motto was, "He who changes one person, changes the world entire."

In 1999, Conard grouped four of his star pupils together for a History Day project and handed them a U.S. News & World Report article titled "The Other Schindlers."

"In the fall of 1999, we started trying to research Irena after seeing her mentioned in that article but couldn't find much of anything on her," said one of the former students, Sabrina Coons-Murphy, 24. The two other students assigned to the project were Jessica Shelton-Ripper, now 23, and Elizabeth Cambers, now 21.

The four girls queried The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, a group that provides financial assistance to those who helped save Jews during the Holocaust. The students' goal initially was to find out where Sendler was buried. But they received a stunning response from the foundation: Sendler was alive and in remarkably good health in Poland.

'Life in a Jar'

The students began corresponding with Sendler and finished their play about her life. They called it "Life in a Jar," because of one of the most dramatic facts about the Polish woman: She had buried detailed lists of the ancestry and whereabouts of each child she rescued in glass jars under an apple tree in a friend's Warsaw yard. (When Sendler was later caught by the Nazis, she refused to reveal the location of those jars even under torture and threat of execution.)

"Those jars were literally jars of life," Stewart-Felt said, explaining that Sendler placed the children she rescued in the homes of non-Jewish Poles, in Catholic convents and in orphanages.

Almost every letter Sendler sent the young Kansas women -- today there have been dozens translated from Polish to English -- began the same way: "My dear, beloved girls so close to my heart." Sendler wrote of all the ways she had spirited children out of the Warsaw ghetto after gaining entrance as a city social worker and persuading their soon-to-die parents to give them up. In some cases she would sedate crying infants and sneak them out of the ghetto in medical bags or carpenter's boxes.

The students soon sent Sendler a draft of their play. She critiqued it for them, requesting two minor changes, but said they had gotten virtually everything else right.

"I need to tell you," she wrote, "that you are uniquely wise, interesting and thinking girls full of sensitivity to troubling wars." Sendler explained that her parents had once taught her she was ethically bound to help a drowning person even if she could not swim herself.

Still performing the play

In early 2000, the students performed "Life in a Jar" for the first time. People in the small Kansas crowd were sobbing by the end. Since then, even as the young women graduated, married and began careers, they have continued to travel with the play, performing it in 20 states and three countries. A handful of other young men and women also have joined the show to round out the cast. The play has been translated into Polish and now is performed by schoolchildren in Poland as well.

This spring, "Life in a Jar" traveled to Canada at the request of Montreal resident Renata Zajdman, who at age 14 was rescued from the Warsaw ghetto by one of a small network of rescuers who reported to Sendler. Zajdman, today a close friend of Sendler's, was there the first time she met the Kansas students.

"The credit all goes to those kids in Kansas," said Zajdman, 78. "If it were not for them, Irena would still be living in poverty. The president of Poland would not be kissing her hand. No one would bother with her. The children of Kansas put her on the map."

The Nobel nomination seems to be only the beginning of the world's growing recognition of Sendler. Angelina Jolie reportedly is taking the role of Sendler in an upcoming movie.

A surrogate mother

In these final years of Sendler's life, a much quieter but perhaps no less moving story line of salvation has begun playing out for the Polish rescuer. As her story has become better-known, Sendler has been nicknamed the "mother of the children of the Holocaust," a title that holds particular significance for the four young women from Kansas, three of whom do not have mothers in their own lives. (Two of the women's mothers have died; one was raised by her grandparents.)

"She has become something of a surrogate mother for them," Conard said. "She is now the force that guides so much of what they do."

Today each of the women wears a small heart necklace given to them by Sendler. They e-mail and write her regularly and are planning a trip to visit her on her 100th birthday. And the most cherished item they own is a history-steeped glass jar from Poland.

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