

## IRENA SENDLER: IN THE NAME OF THEIR MOTHERS

*Reviewed by Lidia Thompson & Marcus Siu*



*Courtesy of Cinequest 2011*

As a Polish Catholic social worker, Irena Sendler along with a group of young women in Nazi-occupied Poland managed to rescue 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. They smuggled them under garbage, in suitcases, in boxes, through the canals, as well as other inconceivable passageways that would rescue them from being deported to the concentration camps, saving their lives from the Nazis. Their unspeakable act of heroism and bravery was kept quiet for decades during the communist era. The documentary “Irena Sendler: In the Name of Their Mothers”, directed and co-produced by American filmmaker Mary Skinner, brings this miraculous and profound story of human goodness to life.

Extensive archive footage and interviews with survivor, Sendler, her co-workers and the children she had rescued, is indeed, an unforgettable experience.

In 1939, when World War II began, over 3 million Jews lived in Poland with 400,000 residing in Warsaw, making up one third of its population. In 1940, the Warsaw Ghetto was established and was the largest of all the ghettos in Nazi-occupied Europe. The conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto were unbearable and worsening each day. In 1941, the average food rations for Jews were limited to 186 calories, compared to 1,669 calories for Poles and 2,614 calories for Germans. People in the Ghetto were starving and dying on the streets, while hundreds of orphans begged for a piece of bread. The situation was traumatic for everyone, but especially for defenseless children.

Irena Sendler was 29 when the Nazis invaded Poland. She served as a social worker in the Polish Underground and later with the Żegota Resistance Organization. As an employee of the Warsaw Social Welfare Department, she had a special permit to enter the Warsaw Ghetto to check for signs of Typhus; something the Nazis feared would spread beyond the Ghetto. During these visits she and her co-workers intercepted approximately 2,500 Jewish children and smuggled them to safety, rescuing them from their certain death in concentration camps. Their risk of helping Jews in any way was extremely dangerous; if they were discovered by the Nazi's.

"Nothing was more dangerous than as hiding a Jew" quotes, Polish Resistance Activist, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, "because if you are hiding a box of ammunition, you don't need to feed it every day, you don't have to care for it if it becomes ill, and the neighbors don't need to know about it". Not only did Sendler and those young women smuggle Jewish children out of the Ghetto, but they also provided them with false documents sheltering them in Polish families, and then were sent off to safer places like the catholic convents outside Warsaw. In addition, Sendler maintained the identities of those young survivors. She buried a jar keeping track of their original Jewish names along with their newly created Polish names, so when the war ended they could be reunited with their parents, if they were still alive. In 1943, Sendler was arrested by the Gestapo, severely tortured, and sentenced to death, but in the last minute was rescued by the Polish Resistance. She survived World War II, but during the communist regime she was prosecuted because of her connections with the Polish Resistance. Her story was unknown for many years.

In 1999, Kansas students produced a play based on research into Irena Sendler's life story entitled "*Life in a Jar*". This drama has now been performed over 285 times across the United States, Canada and in Poland. It has since been adapted to television as "*The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*" and over 1,500 media stories.

Mary Skinner, director of the documentary, acknowledged on the official film website, "*I grew up with stories about the courage and compassion of Polish heroines like Irena Sendler. I heard about them from my Polish mother. She was barely a teenager in 1941, when she was rounded up in Warsaw and sent to a concentration camp for smuggling food. Her father had been killed, her mother was dying, and her brother and sister had already been taken. No one else in her family survived the war.*"

*But my mother never forgot the ordinary women like Irena Sendler – the ‘angels of mercy’ in Warsaw who detested war, but would go to the devil for a war-wounded child like her. Right before my mother died, I felt I needed to find those women, to tell their stories, to remember them.”*

<http://www.irenasendlerfilm.com/>

Director: Mary Skinner; Producers: Mary Skinner, Betsy Bayha, Piotr Piwowarczyk, Richard Wormser, Jan Legnitto, Paul Mitchell, Richard Adams; Cinematographers: Andrzej Wolf, Slawomir Grunberg; Editors: Marta Wohl, Anna Ksiesopolska; Music: Tom Disher; Countries: USA, United Kingdom; Language: English, German, and Polish, (w/ English subtitles); Length: 60 min.; Genre: Documentary

**Preceded by the short film: Living For 32; Director: Kevin Breslin; 40 min.; USA; The inspirational story of a survivor of the tragic Virginia Tech shooting massacre and his courageous journey of renewal and hope.**

***Irena Sendler: In the Name of Their Mothers plays Sunday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at 2pm at the San Jose Repertory, and Wednesday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at 9pm at the Camera 12.***

**Buy tickets: [http://www.cinequest.org/event\\_view.php?eid=1510](http://www.cinequest.org/event_view.php?eid=1510)**

