

Life in A Jar- The Irene Sendler Story

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Four of Milken Educator [Norm Conard's \(KS '92\)](#) students discovered an unsung heroine of the Holocaust and spread her story around the world.

In 1942, as Jews throughout Europe were being rounded up and transported en masse to Nazi concentration camps to face an unthinkable fate, one woman took courageous action and risked her own life to save thousands of others.

Her name was Irena Sendler. Though she herself was not Jewish, she feared for the lives of Jews around her, particularly the children. As head of the children's section in the Polish underground movement known as Zegota, she was unable to sit by and not do anything. So she went into the Warsaw Ghetto and persuaded Jewish parents and grandparents to place their children in her care, saying that they were certain to die in the Ghetto or in the Nazi death camps unless they could be spirited away to safety.

Smuggling the children past Nazi guards through a variety of means – hiding them in body bags or under loads of goods – Ms. Sendler took them into the homes of Polish families, where they were adopted and raised with false identities. Ms. Sendler made lists of these children and placed the lists in a jar that she buried in a garden, hoping she could someday dig up the jar, locate the children and inform them of their past.



The four girls from Kansas who discovered Irena's story (Photo by Karen Conard)



Irena Sendler as a young woman (Photo courtesy of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous)

From 1942 to 1943, Ms. Sendler managed to smuggle 400 children out of the Warsaw Ghetto before she was captured by the Nazis and severely punished for her actions. Even under extreme torture, she refused to reveal where the lists of the smuggled Jewish children were hidden. Eventually, a member of the Polish underground bribed a guard to

release her, and she entered into hiding. Even then, she continued to work with Zegota to rescue another 2,100 children.

It's a remarkable story, and considering all the remarkable stories from the Holocaust that have surfaced over the past several years, it's hard to believe that this one went largely unnoticed. And it might have stayed that way, were it not for four high school students from Uniontown, Kansas.

Changing the World

It began as a class assignment from their teacher, Milken Educator [Norm Conard \(KS '92\)](#): create a year-long project for the National History Day Competition that would, among other things, extend the boundaries of the classroom to families in the community, contribute to the learning of history, and meet the classroom motto, "He who changes one person, changes the entire world."

As the four girls – Elizabeth Cambers, Megan Stewart, Sabrina Coons and Janice Underwood – began doing their research, they discovered an article in *U.S. News and World Report* about Ms. Sendler, and were surprised by the number of children she had saved.

"I thought it might have been a typographical error," said Mr. Conard, "since I had not heard of this woman nor her story."

The girls wrote a play based on her life called "Life in a Jar," which they entered into the National History Day Competition and began performing in front of numerous community organizations. What happened next is a story in itself.

The play was extremely well-received every time it was performed. Though Uniontown is a small community with little ethnic diversity and no Jewish residents, the response to the play was so extraordinary that the town designated an "Irena Sendler Day."

Assuming that Ms. Sendler was no longer living, the four students began a search for her final resting place. They were surprised to learn that she was still alive, living in poverty in Warsaw, Poland. They contacted Ms. Sendler, telling her of their project and the response it was getting. She wrote back letters written in Polish, which were translated with the help of a Polish student at a local Kansas college.



A guide takes the four girls from Kansas on a tour of a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw (Photo by Karen Conard)



91 year-old Irena Sendler in her Warsaw apartment (Photo by Karen Conard)

"Your performance and work is continuing the effort I started over fifty years ago," wrote Ms. Sendler. "You are my dearly beloved girls."

The girls decided to raise money on behalf of Ms. Sendler and other rescuers. They began taking a jar to each performance to collect donations. They contacted an organization in New York City called the [Jewish Foundation for the Righteous](#), which helped the girls send the money they had raised to a Polish bank in Warsaw.



The girls from Kansas speak to the Polish media (Photo by Karen Conard)

At the same time, they began receiving national attention for the story they had "rediscovered," appearing on C-SPAN, National Public Radio, CBS, and numerous newspaper articles. They were invited to perform their play in Washington, D.C. and before the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous in New York City. Mr. Conard was contacted for the book and film rights to his students' story.

A True Heroine

One day in January 2001, the girls performed their play before a large school district in Kansas City, about 100 miles from Uniontown. In the audience was John Shuchart, a Jewish educator and businessman who was so moved by the performance that he asked to have lunch with Mr. Conard and his students that day. Hearing that Ms. Sendler was still alive, Mr. Shuchart told the girls he would raise the money to send them to Warsaw to meet her in person and bring back her story. Because she is 91 and in poor health, he urged the girls to travel as soon as possible.

Mr. Shuchart raised the money in 24 hours, and on May 22, 2001, Mr. Conard, his wife, the four students and several of their parents traveled to Warsaw, Poland, where they met Ms. Sendler in person.

It was an emotional moment. When the 91 year-old woman pushed her walker across her apartment to greet them, what the four young girls saw was a heroine of immense stature. But with the modesty one often finds in truly heroic people, Ms. Sendler characterized herself and her life as merely ordinary.

The girls still perform their play in front of local churches, civic groups and clubs, with performances booked until the summer of 2002. They continue to conduct research on Ms. Sendler's story and correspond regularly with Ms. Sendler and the people she rescued.



Elizabeth Cambers (left) and Janice Underwood (right), holding hands with Irena Sendler in the heroine's Warsaw apartment (Photo by Karen Conard)

They have established an e-mail address – isendler@hotmail.com - which receives daily messages from across the nation. Three more students have joined the group to help with all the email and research. They have donated their correspondence with Ms. Sendler to various universities, historical societies, and to the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous in Chicago and New York City. A local college professor has been using their letters from Ms. Sendler in his World History class.

The story of Irena Sendler has had a profound effect not only on those who have heard the story, but on the storytellers as well. The girls regularly write on their homework papers notes such as, "I'm changing the world" and "Irena's story must be told."

"I've traveled with the girls to numerous performances and watched the great emotion that pours out of the audience during their presentation," said Mr. Conard. "They have literally taken our class motto – 'He who changes one person, changes the entire world.' – and brought it to life."