



The Long Path to Irena Sendler - Mother of the Holocaust Children¹

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“All real life is encounter.” This saying by Martin Buber is not only a challenge to us as social workers. Yesterday afternoon, while meeting with Irena Sendler, this remarkable 95 year old woman in her small but cozy and comfortable room in the frost-bitten capital of Poland, I understood Buber’s words more than ever before. But let me go back a little.

Irena Sendler in her room in a Catholic Convent in Warsaw

During one of the planning meetings for the upcoming 50th Jubilee and the 18th World Congress of IFSW 2006 in Munich, Germany, we were discussing possible highlights for this big event. We were also discussing outstanding personalities, professional models in the development of social work. This was the first time, that our Secretary General, Tom Johannesen, mentioned Irena Sendler and the story of the „Schindler that nobody knew” and that had surfaced in Kansas/USA. I had not heard of her and I have to admit that I was a bit sceptical - not about Irena Sendler herself and the courageous acts that distinguish her and others from mainstream followers of criminal regimes in trying times. But I had lived in the Midwest for several years and I could hardly believe that teenagers and their teacher in rural Kansas would bring such overwhelming publicity to one of the most remarkable – but almost repressed and forgotten! – rescue operations during the Holocaust, saving 2,500 children from the heavily guarded Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw, Poland.

With great interest, I read fascinating reports in the internet, and I suggest to all of my colleagues to read them carefully and be prepared for further documentation. And as it turned out, I was not the only sceptical one in the process of this overdue discovery:

„...In the fall of 1999, Mr. Conard encouraged four students to work on a year long National History Day project which would among other things; extend the boundaries of the classroom

¹ The title of a Polish biography (Anna Mieszkowska: Matka Dzieci Holocaustu, Warszawa , MUZA 2005) on Irena Sendler (published also in German: Anna Mieszkowska: Die Mutter der Holocaust-Kinder, München, DVA 2006) who was also introduced as “the Schindler that nobody knew”. I visited her on behalf of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) at the end of January 2006 in Warszawa, Poland.

to families in the community, contribute to history learning, teach respect and tolerance, and meet our classroom motto, 'He who changes one person, changes the world entire.'

Three ninth grade girls, Megan Stuart, Elizabeth Chambers, and Jessica Shelton, and an eleventh grade girl, Sabrina Coons, accepted the challenge and dedicated to enter their project in the National History Day program. Mr. Conard showed them a short clipping from a March 1994 issue of News and World Report, which said, 'Irena Sendler saved 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942-43'. He told the girls the article might be a typographical error, since he had not heard of this woman or story..." (Internet: <http://www.irenasendler.org>: The Project – See also: www.dzieciholocaustu.org: Concerning Irena Sendlerowa).

So I contacted one of my former professors at Kansas University who himself had been a child in the Warsaw Ghetto and who had earlier told me his own story of suffering and surviving not only the Warsaw Ghetto, but Majdanek, Budzyn, Auschwitz and the Death Marches at the end of WW II (Wieler, Zeller 1995: Emigrierte Sozialarbeit). I asked him what he knew about this new discovery. His prompt answer:

"Dear Joachim, it was good to hear from you.

Thank you for your interest in the Irena Sendler saga. The best way to find out all about her work is: 1. Check out the internet... 2. go to Google and enter: 'Life In a Jar'. If you need any further help e-mail me or contact Norm Conard and the students.

I am delighted that IFSW is considering honoring her and presenting her work at next year's meeting in Muenchen. I support this wholeheartedly. I have seen the "Life in a Jar" presentation and was most impressed with it, even though it's quite simply performed. But it had tremendous impact. The audience loved it. It is hard to believe that it took 60 years for her story to come to the world's attention. It is even harder to believe that it took a group of Christian Junior High School students in a rural area of Kansas (with virtually no Jewish population) to discover this. I was in the Warsaw Ghetto for six months prior to its total destruction and I never heard about Irena Sendler – the fact is that I never heard about her organization – Zegota. ... – Warm regards, Lou".

This brought me into contact with Norm Conard and the project in Kansas, with the Association of 'The Children of the Holocaust' in Poland, the Polish Association of Social Workers and with the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation in Freiburg, Germany. I found out that Irena Sendler has been bestowed with the highest honor in Poland, the Order of the White Eagle and that she is an honorary citizen of Israel and that she had received other honors. A Polish biography has been written about Irena Sendler recently (Anna Mieszkowska: *Matka Dzieci Holocaustu – Historia Ireny Sendlerowej*, Muza Warszawa, 2004). English and German versions will follow very soon. I will not write too much in the context of this first rather short visit. But before her detailed biography appears, I want to recite a few facts from the mentioned website, not necessarily in the same order:

Irena was born on February 15, 1910, and grew up in the town of Otwock in Poland. Her grandfather led a rebellion against the Czars. Her father was a doctor...and died in the typhus epidemic of 1917 while caring for poor Jewish people in Otwock. Irena was an only child. She had a son and a daughter. Irena Sendlerowa is a Polish Catholic woman who rescued 2,500 Jewish children in Poland during World War II. She talked Jewish parents and

grandparents out of their children, rightly saying that all were going to die in the Ghetto or in death camps, taking the children past the Nazi guards ...and then adopting them into the homes of Polish families or hiding them in convents and orphanages. She made lists of the children's real names and put the lists in jars, then buried the jars in the garden, so that someday she could dig up the jars and find the children to tell them about their true identity. As early as 1939, when the Germans invaded Warsaw, Irena began helping Jews by offering them food and shelter. When the Warsaw Ghetto was erected in 1940, Irena could no longer help isolated Jews. The Ghetto enclosed 16 square blocks of the city and 450,000 Jewish people were forced into this area. Irena used her papers as a Polish social worker and papers of the workers of the Contagious Disease Department (as part of the underground Zegota) to enter the Warsaw Ghetto. To show her solidarity with the Polish people, she put on the mandatory Star of David armband on her right arm when entering the Ghetto. She was not only very active in saving Jewish children but also in resistance against the Germans.

Irena first rescued the orphan children from inside the Ghetto. She used the old courthouse at the edge of the Warsaw Ghetto (still standing) as one of the main routes of smuggling children out...Irena and the ten who went with her into the Ghetto, used many, many methods to smuggle children out. There were five main means of escape: 1- using an ambulance a child could be taken out hidden under a stretcher. 2- escape through the courthouse. 3- a child could be taken out using the sewer pipes or other secret underground passages. 4 - a trolley could carry out children hiding in a sack, in a trunk, a suitcase or something similar. 5- if a child could pretend to be sick or was actually ill, it could be legally removed using the ambulance.

Irena (code name Jolanta) was arrested on October 20, 1943 ...and placed in the notorious Pawiak prison, where she was constantly questioned and tortured. During the questioning she had her legs and feet broken. She received a death sentence. She was to be shot. Unknown to her, Zegota had bribed the German executioner who helped her escape.

During the remaining years of the war, she lived hidden, just like the children she rescued. Irena was the only one who knew where the children were to be found. When the war was finally over, she dug up the bottles and began the job of finding the children and trying to find a living parent. Almost all the parents of the children Irena saved, died at Treblinka death camp (www.irenasendler.org).

We know now that the end of the war was not the end of the ordeal. During the struggles between the Polish government in exile and at home on one hand and the communist regime throughout Europe on the other, Irena Sendler was again persecuted for having cooperated with Zegota and the Polish government in exile. She was again sentenced to death but saved by a Jewish woman. Her life and her courageous deeds had to be hidden or at least kept at very low profile until the threat of serious repercussion finally diminished during the past few years.

After establishing contacts and finding out some of the above facts, IFSW gave me the „green light” to travel to Poland for a visit with Irena Sendler. My mission was to find out if she would like to be honored as a very special social worker of the International Federation of Social Workers. The official announcement and celebration has tentatively been set for this summer in Munich. Finally, after negotiations concerning time, locality, health and translation etc., I took the train from Weimar via Berlin to Warsaw during one of the coldest nights this

winter. In contrast, the visit with Irena Sendler was one of the warmest and most pleasant personal as well as professional encounters I have ever experienced.

A co-worker of the Association “The Children of the Holocaust” in Poland, Mrs. Ewa Chalasinska, offered to translate for us and took me to small home for the elderly which is part of a Catholic Convent near the Old Town of Warsaw. It is very quiet there and a medical center as part of the convent is very convenient in terms of health care.

Mrs. Sendler met with us when others take their afternoon nap. She greeted us in her small but very comfortable room and a young woman who takes care of her much of the time stayed with us and participated in the interaction. Mrs. Sendler sat in an armchair next to the window with a view of a garden and part of the convent. In spite of her advanced age and her position tucked in her chair, she appeared to me to be very lively and agile, with an extremely friendly and open face – and particularly sparkling eyes! Her hair is rather short and very light. A black head band, fitting with her black dress, made her look elegant and rather youthful. When she spoke in a firm steady voice, she always paused often so that everything could be fully and clearly translated. She was prepared for our visit, she was very present and after the usual introductions and warming up, she asked rather direct questions. I will highlight some of them:

„To be sure”, Mrs. Sendler began our exchange regarding our central theme, „I am the only person still alive of that rescuing group but I want everyone to know that, while I was coordinating our efforts, we were about twenty to twenty five people. I did not do it alone.”

She wanted to know: Why do we (the International Federation of Social Workers) want her as an honorary social worker or member? My answer can be taken from some of the above comments: We would like not only for her to be remembered for what she did but we also would like to have her as a sort of professional role model. As advocates for our clients who are in difficult situations we need to support them and we may have to take sides, and that will sometimes take us to our limits. *„Your example, Mrs. Sendler, will hopefully help us not only to make the wisest and most life-saving decisions but to stand the test when external pressure comes on. You have demonstrated that it can be done under very extreme pressure. You have set a most admirable example for us.”*

„So, what do you and the international organisation want me to do concretely and in the future?” My answer: „I think that you have done such important deeds in the past and in your long life that we do not want to burden you with additional tasks and chores, so to speak. But if you would join us with your great example in our daily efforts, that will help us to make wise decisions and be congruent with our social work values.”

„Yes, but tell me something about your values and the work of IFSW.” I could not possibly rattle off everything that is summed up in our official definition of social work, the ethical paper and the various policy papers etc. I did not know how much she knew about our organization. So I handed her some information about IFSW, the upcoming congress and began to give her some general information from the website of IFSW:

“The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is a global organisation striving for social justice, human rights and social development through the development of social work, best practices and international cooperation between social workers and their professional organisations.” And *“The International Federation of Social Workers recognises that social*

work originates variously from humanitarian, religious and democratic ideals and philosophies; and that it has universal application to meet human needs arising from personal-societal interactions, and to develop human potential...” (www.ifsw.org)

Soon, I had the feeling that she was not so interested in my general proclamations. She told me that she *“sometimes wondered why there is so much fuss about ‘heroic acts’. It is something that came rather naturally as a result of my early upbringing and education. When you know that something is basically at stake, like real life, you do everything to save it. You don’t talk about it and discuss it. You do it. – Once a journalist asked me if I would have saved only Jewish children. I found this to be a strange question. How do you feel about that?”* „Well”, I replied, *„I feel the same way – very strange! But I have not been in such an extreme situation. Yet, I wonder how someone can distinguish between children or even adults.”* I also added my sincerely felt apology for the brutality that was inflicted on her by people from Germany, people of my parents’ generation. Irena Sendler slowly nodded her head.

Then we went into social work connections during the time before and during the German occupation of Poland. I asked: *„Did you know and have you by any chance had any connections with Helena Radlinska, the director of the first school of social work in Poland?”* – *„Oh yes, I have. But I did not go to that school. When I was employed in an organisation that helped unemployed people, the school of social work sent us students for practical experience. Mrs. Radlinska was Jewish and later was hidden in a nunnery by the Ursuline Sisters. Helena Radlinska was not only the founder and director of the first school of social work but she more or less created a new profession of social work in Poland.”* So we quickly found connections with Alice Salomon and other pioneers of social work in Europe and worldwide.

Towards the end of our visit, I asked her again (and at this time also for the camera), if she would accept our invitation to be honored by our International Federation of Social Workers. Without hesitation and with a whole-hearted and beaming smile she said: *„TAK!”* – which is YES in Polish. She asked me to come close to her. She gave me a tight squeeze with still amazingly strong arms. She kissed me on the forehead and I had to restrain myself not to reciprocate with a very spontaneous crushing bear hug.

When I took the subway back to my longstanding friends in Ursynow in the southern outskirts of Warszawa, I felt so elated and happy that I almost levitated and continued my flight on a magic carpet. It is probably no co-incidence that on the same evening, there was a fascinating TV-documentary on Irena Sendler and the group of young people including their teacher who are doing their very best to give Irena Sendler her own voice again and the recognition that she truly deserves.

Of course, this was my only short and very touching encounter with her. Some of the more notorious and significant historical questions still remain unanswered and will challenge us in the long run. They will hopefully keep us moving in the unending quest to face our past so that we do not have to repeat it.

Why has it taken so long and why is it still so difficult to face historical facts without being afraid of losing face or condemning one’s country? I am not certain if I should say this again, certainly not as a justification of what happened more than 60 years ago. But as a German – with my rather heavy historical rucksack which I bear whether I want it or not! – I apologized

to Irena Sendler for the pain and general suffering that the German war machinery plus its machinists and indifferent followers have inflicted on her. My Polish friends added from their side that it remains an important question why she was sentenced to death during the communist takeover and why the rescue operation altogether was kept so quiet even in Poland for such a long time. It is a good sign that the Irena Sendler saga has finally surfaced, but why was it impossible for so many years? And more importantly: What can we learn from the experience?

Another recurring question is: How can we, as social workers, get more involved in prevention and in really and truly „intelligent designs” and not primarily play the role of fire fighting, a function that we know so well? Why do we usually learn more about wars and warriors than peace and peacekeepers?

This was an extremely moving encounter with a real pacifist who has saved so many lives. But she has also suffered severely for her strong convictions. Through her entire life and particularly during the most trying times she remained true to herself and to mankind. And she still has one of the brightest and most encouraging smiles that I have ever seen. I am very grateful that I found and met with Irena Sendler. She gave me her blessings and I pass them on to our international organisation and to all social workers in the world.

Irena Sendler is a not only a professional role model for every social worker but a courageous and loving woman that everyone should know!

Warsaw and Krakow, January 2006, Joachim Wieler (these reflections were jotted down, on the Holocaust Day – the liberation of Auschwitz – very timely!)

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