

About Irena Sendler

15 February marks the 110th anniversary of the birth of Irena Sendler, one of the Righteous Among the Nations, a social and charity activist, member of the PPS and „Żegota,” who led many Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto.

The war was the most difficult lesson for humanity, when for such elementary norms as compassion for victims, aid for the needy or respect – regardless of their origin, nationality, or creed – the dignity of the other person, there was not enough space. All the rules of coexistence were deformed, the hierarchy of values was definitively lost, and the order of the „old world” had fallen apart. The sense of fear that existed determined all behaviours and attitudes. People had to face choices between alternatives, each carrying a decision that exceeded the scope of feeling and imagination. Continuous disintegration and atomisation of the society led to a breakdown of pre-war bonds. All activities of the pauperised, poor, and humiliated population focused on survival, which resulted in the numbing of sensitivity to the external. The tragedy was made worse by indifference to the suffering of others. In a situation of constant, everyday danger, the vast majority of Poles was unable to act for the sake of an individual, not to mention the collective which – according to the fascist “new order” – was excluded and doomed to extermination. The Holocaust revealed the true face of a human being.

If we were to assess the courage of some and the indifference of others with the same measure, who would be the first in line? Is it the minority ready to sacrifice their lives, or is it the silent majority – on the other side? Looking from the perspective of the time that passed away, probably the former – the Righteous Among the Nations. Irena Sendler, aka “Jolanta” defined the state of affairs at the time very clearly, saying: “Human nature commanded us not to remain passive in the face of the greatest barbarism towards our Jewish fellow citizens” [Sendlerowa, 2007, pp. 97 – 98]

Irena Sendler was born twice. The first one was recorded in the memory of loved ones as well as church and partitionist administration files. For the second time – during the war. She had

already been sentenced earlier. Most probably the sentence was passed by her fellow countryman. A Pole. He denounced her. Maybe he knew that her life in occupied Warsaw was taking place on two levels – the official one: employee of the Social Welfare Department of the Management Board of the city of Warsaw and the unofficial one: underground activities? Maybe because he knew that she was helping someone? Or because of regret that she was able to wage civilian resistance? Whatever the reasons, their effect was one: on 18 October, 1943, the Gestapo began its implementation. She was arrested in the middle of the night, then imprisoned and tortured in Pawiak for weeks. Neither the one who reported nor those who received it could know who she was or what role played in the underground world. [AŻIH, 301/6313] Probably everything was “only” in the sphere of ‘suspicions’. Perhaps because during the search of her apartment neither the list of children whom she had been helping, nor the funds intended for them, nor the fake Kennkarten fell into the hands of the Germans. She was aware of the threat if her previous actions were to be revealed. „I was silent,” she said years later. „I would have rather died than exposed our activities. What did my life mean compared to the lives of so many people I could have exposed to death?” [Miskowska, 2018, p. 180]

From mid-October 1943, round-ups increased in Warsaw. And there was terror. Murders were the norm. [Domańska, 1988, p. 37] Everyone was in danger of death, especially prisoners – outlaws. Each day could be their last. At the Pawiak prison, the „procedure” was simple. Gestapo men would enter the cell: “We stood in a row and they pointed which ones were to step forward.” [Miskowska, 2018, p. 186] On Saturday, 13 October, such an order was issued to „Jolanta”. The prisoners from Pawiak were transported to the Gestapo headquarters in Szucha Alley: „I was aware that this was my last path.” [I. Sendlerowa, 2007, pp. 105 – 106] She was expecting to be shot. But her life was bought out by „Żegota” [A. Bikont, 2017, pp. 225 – 227]. She was reborn. As Klara Dąbrowska, she helped Jewish children with equal dedication, risk, and devotion.

She lived in two worlds. From the very beginning. Even before the ghetto became a closed district, during the “Grossaktion”, when the Uprising was taking place in the ghetto, or later when the Germans formed KL Warschau concentration camp on its ruins. Until the very end – Warsaw’s liberation from German occupation. She had always known many people from the Jewish community and was just as well-known herself. Therefore, she had to be present in the

centre of the ghetto life, individually and voluntarily, before the walls were erected. When they were erected, thanks to the support of the head of Warsaw's Sanitary Unit, she was also present in the „closed district”. She submitted reports to the Nazi overseers on the so-called “sanitary actions,” and in them „shocking pictures of tuberculosis and other infectious diseases,;: „It gave hope,” she reported, „that the German controllers would bypass these addresses.” [I. Sendlerowa, 2007, pp. 96 – 97. Also: AŻIH, 301/6466]

She also had to be present in “Żegota”. “The Children’s Department, led by Irena Sendler („Jolanta”), tried to solve the difficult problem of orphans or Jewish children separated from their parents – as it was written in the “Report on activities of the Council for Aid to Jews by the Government Plenipotentiary for the Country for the period of December 1942 – October 1943” – placing them individually with Polish families or collectively in various shelters, hospitals, orphanages, monasteries, care and educational institutions.,,[W. Bartoszewski, 2007, p. 27. Also: Report ..., 2007, 70] Irena Sendlerowa was present „on both sides of the wall”. In the ghetto: “I put on an armband with the Star of David”. To express solidarity with the oppressed people. She provided food, money, and documents. She led children out of the ghetto. On the Aryan side – for the need of the hour – she participated in falsifying documentation, co-creating biographies of fictional characters, or forging signatures. [R. Sakowska, 1993, pp. 94-103; R.C. Lukas, 2018, 206] There was one truth in these two worlds: selfless help.

Maybe because she was the daughter of a doctor and socialist, she would say: “I grew up among these people. I was familiar with the customs and misery of Jewish homes.” [Sendlerowa, 2007, pp. 97-98] Maybe under the influence of the daily reproduced image of the Warsaw ghetto: “Barely moving skeletons in rags lying under the walls of buildings, skeletons of mothers with skeletons of children in their arms, powerless shadows of human figures. Resignation and hopelessness appeared on the sad faces of these children” [M. Kalwary, 2014] Maybe it was a response to the call of ghetto doctors who „wrote with pain about hundreds of small children affected by various plagues and diseases, wrapped in rags, ragged creatures that the world has not seen before?” Maybe it was a reaction to Janusz Korczak’s „death march” with children to the Umschlagplatz? [R. Sakowska, 1993, p. 95] Perhaps because she saw with her own eyes how the Gestapo officer in Pawiak Square „shoots the little one straight in the back,;? [A. Miskowska,

2018, 184 – 185] Was it the reason why she constantly brought aid? Or was it enough to just be human?

During the war, there were people who had such a driving force, thanks to which others had a chance to survive. To be human again. Irena Sendler was such a figure. She would always emphasise that only thanks to working with “Żegota” people, cooperation with Polish families, churches, or convents – it was possible to help the most needy, abandoned, and defenceless. The children. How many of them survived? As „many” as five hundred or „only” two and a half thousand? [T. Prekerowa, 1982, pp. 213-217. Also: K. Dzieciołowska, 2018] Considering only numbers, one could conclude that many survived. Or that only few managed to survive. However, there was a human life behind every digit. [H. Grubowska, 2014, pp. 21-62]

Time did not relieve Jolanta’s children from the power of fear – both at the individual and collective level. For those who remained silent for decades and sometimes all their lives, the medicine was opening up. In a sense, the memory of the tragic past had become their joint, collective soul, a substitute for other sources of bonds destroyed in the times of the Holocaust. It is a kind of therapy – a bridge connecting the generation of those who survived the Holocaust with those who wish to learn the truth about the not-so-past past: their own, their loved ones and strangers, all coming from one nation. Paraphrasing the title of Hanna Krall’s book, it is worth to shield the flame, but not from God but for the last of the Children of the Holocaust. And listen to their voice.

The Senate resolution of 2007 says: „Serving the values that motivated Irena Sendler and other people to save the lives of others while risking their own lives is still a role model.” [Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej, 2007, p. 850] The preservation of the memory of the heroic deeds of these people is another step towards filling the „anniversary” niche. And a hint that it is not necessarily becoming to put figures from the circles of the “cursed soldiers” in the pantheon of Polish national heroes, when so many others have remained anonymous. Fortunately, some – the rescuers and the rescued – come out of the shadows. And they regain their identity.

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