

The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler

31.01.2011 | Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

*Based on the authorized biography, *Mother of the Children of the Holocaust: The Irena Sendler Story*, by Anna Mieszkowska, this movie, directed by John Kent Harrison, is a must-view for all historians and those interested in the Holocaust movie genre.*



Irena Sendler, a Polish-Catholic social worker (played by Anna Paquin) in the Jewish Warsaw Ghetto, is deeply disturbed by the deplorable conditions due to the Nazi occupation of Poland. Her passion and compassion are evident as she hatches an ingenious plan to rescue Jewish children out of the Ghetto, under the noses of Nazi soldiers. The description “courageous heart,” is a very apt one. I was moved by the comment of Irena to her mother when the latter tried to warn Irena not to risk her life for saving the Jews. Irena replied to her mother, by quoting her dad who was a doctor and friend of the Jews: “I remember that father said: ‘If you see a man drowning, you must still try to save him, even if you cannot swim.’”

True to her word, Irena was most successful in organizing an underground network to rescue over 2,500 Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto. However, at first it was quite a challenge for Irena to convince the Jewish parents and a rabbi that she was doing the right thing. One of the fears was that the Jewish children would lose their Jewish faith and become Christians. Irena tried to assure them that that was not her motive or plan. The movie succeeded in emphasizing the deep agony it caused both the Jewish parents and children to be separated from each other—some of them likely knowing they would never see one another again. It is amazing that not one rescued child was ever betrayed or discovered by the Nazis. The children were given false identification documents and placed in convents and with Polish families. Irena was meticulous in keeping hidden records of each child’s Jewish name and where they found refuge; hoping that the children would be reunited with their Jewish parents after World War II.

Eventually, the Gestapo found out about Sendler, arrested and tortured her by beating and breaking her feet. As she was taken to be executed by a firing squared, the underground Zegota were able to rescue her.

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At the end of the movie, it was touching to listen to the real Irena Sendler, in a 2005 interview, exhorting viewers to remember the Jewish parents who gave up their children and never saw them again; and to remember also the many Polish parents who provided a home and refuge for the Jewish children; and later many had to give them up after the war, which was hard for them too.

The movie also stated that in 2007, Irena Sendler was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She died in Warsaw in 2008 at 98 years-of-age.