

HOME

AROUND TOWN - JUNE 18, 2003

High schoolers' desire for truth leads to Holocaust play

By DANIEL STURM

"In your sensitive hearts you unconsciously felt that what is generally referred to in your country as the Holocaust is inadequately understood. You decided to seek out the truth. And a small, faint path led you to me," wrote Irena Sendler to four students from Uniontown, Kan.

"Life in a Jar." 4 p.m. Sunday, June 22, Congregation Shaarey Zedek, 1924 Coolidge Road, East Lansing. Free. (517) 351-3570.

As part of the National History Day program, the students from Uniontown High School dramatized the life of Ms. Sendler, a social worker who saved the lives of 2,500 Warsaw Ghetto children, by changing their identities and finding new homes for them. The children's real names were then buried in a jar in her backyard. The play, "Life in a Jar," will be performed at 4 p.m. June 22 at the Congregation Shaarey Zedek in East Lansing. When Hitler built the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940, herding 500,000 Polish Jews within its walls, to await liquidation, most people turned their backs, but not Sendler. The young social worker wangled for a permit to enter the ghetto and check for signs of typhus, something the Nazis feared could spread throughout the city.

Shocked by what she saw, Sendler joined Zegota, an underground organization dedicated to helping Jews, and took on the code name "Jolanta." Deportations to Auschwitz had already begun, and although it was impossible to save the adults, Sendler was able to smuggle children out in an ambulance. "Can you guarantee they will live?" Sendler recalls the distraught parents asking. But she could only guarantee they would die if they stayed. "In my dreams," she says, "I still hear the cries when they left their parents."

Sendler organized a network of families and convents who were ready to give sanctuary. "I would write, 'I have clothing for the convent.' A nun would come and pick up children."

Arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo, Sendler was tortured and sentenced to die. But underground friends bribed a guard to free her at the last minute, after listing her as "executed." Sendler continued her work while in hiding. When the war ended, she retrieved the glass bottles in which she'd hidden an index of names, and she began searching for their parents. Few had survived.

The Warsaw ghetto children knew Sendler only by her code name. But years

later, after she was honored for her wartime work, her picture appeared in a newspaper. A painter telephoned her and said he remembered her face. Since then, Sendler has had many similar calls.

In the fall of 1999, Uniontown social studies teacher Norman Conard encouraged two 9th-grade girls, Megan Stewart and Elizabeth Cambers, and an 11th girl, Sabrina Coons, to work on a year-long history project that would extend the boundaries of the classroom to families in the community, and would meet the classroom motto, "He who changes one person, changes the world entire." The Kansas high school students' discovery of the now 93-year-old Holocaust heroine made international media headline news. As of May 2003, the students have performed 95 presentations for numerous clubs and civic groups in the community, around the state of Kansas and all over the United States.

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