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POLISH RESCUER OF JEWISH CHILDREN FROM THE WARSAW GHETTO RECEIVES IRENA SENDLER MEMORIAL AWARD

Award Commemorates “Righteous Gentile” Sendler and Honors
Poles Who Preserve Jewish Heritage in Poland



SAN FRANCISCO — Magdalena (Magda) Grodzka-Guzkowska (nee Rusinek), a Polish Resistance fighter and rescuer of Jewish children in World War II, is the 2011 recipient of the Irena Sendler Memorial Award. The award is granted annually to a non-Jewish Pole who has worked to preserve Jewish heritage and foster Jewish cultural renewal in Poland. It was created in 2008 by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture in memory of the late Irena Sendler, a “Righteous Gentile” who courageously saved over 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. This year’s award was announced on May 12, the third anniversary of Sendler’s passing.

Magda Rusinek, born January 7, 1925, was 15 years old when she joined the Polish Anti-Nazi Underground. In 1943, working secretly with a network of other brave Poles led by Irena Sendler, she began assisting with the rescue of Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. Magda helped smuggle children out of the Ghetto, cared for them and escorted them to places of refuge with Polish families or in convents. Before bringing the children to their hiding places, she taught them Christian religious customs in an effort to disguise their Jewish identity.

Magda recalls that she taught them “little prayers that every child knows in Polish. I would wake them up during the night to say the prayer, and then I had to teach them how to behave in a Christian Church.”

Every aspect of the work was extremely dangerous. The Germans had decreed that assisting Jews would be punishable by death. Although she was placing her own life at serious risk, Magda nevertheless persisted, displaying enormous dedication and courage.

One child she saved was five-year-old Wlodzio Berg. In spring 1943, his parents managed to smuggle him out of the ghetto and bring him to an elderly Polish couple. Someone denounced the family, so a new hiding place had to be found. Magda Rusinek was the one who brought him to a safe place, an empty apartment. She smuggled food to him every day, as well as crayons for drawing. Eventually he was brought to a convent in Otwock and renamed William Donat. After the war, Donat was reunited with his parents who had survived several concentration camps. The family moved to New York City where William grew up and had a successful career in book publishing.

Mary Skinner, a filmmaker who recently released a powerful documentary about the work of Rusinek, Sendler and the other young women during the war (“Irena Sendler: In the Name of Their Mothers”) was instrumental in reuniting that rescued child with his angel of mercy. Ms. Skinner recalled her meeting with Magda Rusinek, who is featured in the film: “Magda was just a teenager during the war. Her father was missing. Her mother had died in her arms. Furious, she made her own oath to ‘do all I can to destroy Hitler.’ There was no risk she wouldn’t take. She was sure she wouldn’t live through the war. But as tough as she was, she couldn’t help falling in love with a little Jewish boy she had been asked to watch over. Sixty-five years later, when I told her that William Donat was still alive, she said it was the happiest day of her life.”

When Donat discovered that his rescuer Magda Rusinek was alive, he petitioned Yad Vashem to recognize her as Righteous Among the Nations, which it did in 2009.

Late in her life, Magda discovered that she herself was Jewish. Now a respected member of Warsaw’s Jewish community, she has pledged to leave her home and property to the community after her death. In her Polish memoir *Lucky*, Magda writes: “I know that life is worth living if you help at least one family, one child. I have had that joy, that luck.”

In announcing the award, Tad Taube, Chairman of the Taube Foundation, said: “Magda exemplifies all that this award was meant to honor. Her selfless bravery as she worked alongside Irena Sendler enabled thousands of Jewish children to survive. Who can count the descendants directly attributable to her heroism?”

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Nominations for the award were reviewed by a panel made up of Foundation advisory board members and leaders of the Jewish community in Poland. For more information about the award program or to schedule interviews, please email:

info@taubephilanthropies.org.

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