The Women's Eye

http://thewomenseye.com/2011/06/01/mary-skinner-world-war-l-documentary-irena-sendler/

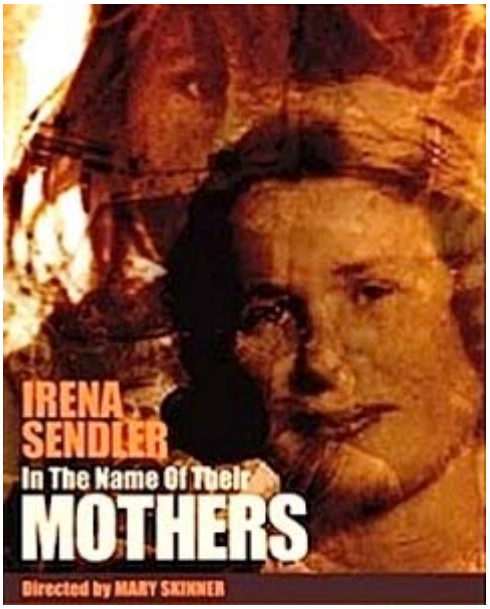
Interview: Mary Skinner's Special Film "Irena Sendler–In The Name Of Their Mothers"

1 June 2011

Mary Skinner is a former marketing executive turned documentarian. She's recently released the remarkable film: *Irena Sendler, In the Name of their Mothers*, the story of a group of young Polish women who outwitted the Nazis to save thousands of Jewish children from certain death during WWII.

"It was sad to me that few people outside of Poland knew anything about these people." Mary Skinner

The story is told through the perspective of 95-year-old Irena Sendler, her co-conspirators, and several of the children they saved. Mary was always struck by the story and the "moxie" of the women.



She alerted us to her documentary as it was about to be broadcast on PBS in May, writing that it was an inspiring story of feminine moral courage that she hoped people would view. We wanted to know more about this powerful and moving film. Mary filled us in on the details of her journey to make it...
EYE: What drew you to this inspiring story of Irena Sendler? Why did you choose this project?

A group of Polish and Jewish children taken during the war/c.1943--Courtesy 2B Productions
MARY: First, I wanted to create a historical documentary about World War II that emphasized the civilian experience — the courage of women, and the effect on children, where virtually all of the historic visuals would be of women and children struggling to endure the violence and depravity of war.

When I first began working on this project, there were so many WWII films being done about men in battle, about military strategies, and the American and Allied victories. I thought, "who is speaking for the millions of civilians – millions of women and children – who endured the war with as much courage as those soldiers – who was telling their stories?"

Mary's mother when captured by the Germans in Warsaw, 1941--Courtesy 2B Productions

EYE: I understand that your mother was part of the inspiration.

MARY: I wanted to do a documentary that portrayed the kinds of Poles my mother Klotylda Jozwiak remembered. She died in 2006 after an illness, and it was sad to me that hardly anyone in America knew anything about what she and her family had gone through.

"They shared a value system that was worth considering."

Try to imagine what the citizens of Warsaw endured between 1939 and 1945. This was a city the size of Philadelphia where almost twice the number of men Americans lost in World War II — 750,000 Polish Jews and Polish Catholics – perished in just over five years.

We know a little about the Jewish mothers and children who died in the Warsaw Ghetto, but few people outside of Poland knew anything about the Polish Catholics in the Polish Resistence who defended and protected Jews during the war at great risk to their own lives and the lives of their family members. They shared a value system that was worth considering.


Irena Sendler after escaping Pawiak Prison/1944--Courtesy 2B Productions

EYE: How did you begin to find women who would tell their stories?

MARY: I was familiar with this generation of Poles through my mother, and I began to look for women who were emblematic of them, who would be willing to share their stories on camera.

In 2003, I read about Irena Sendler and I wrote to various Polish organizations for help trying to connect with her.

Through the American Center for Polish Culture I was introduced to her. I went to Poland for several months in 2004 to get to know her and to record her story.

EYE: You were the daughter of a war orphan. How close is this story to you?

MARY: My mother was from a Polish Catholic family in Warsaw. All of them perished during the war. Her father was killed right before the Germans invaded in 1939. Within a few months, her sister was caught in a roundup and sent for forced labor – they never saw her again. A few months later, her teenage brother was taken.

Polish mother and child during bombing of Warsaw/1939 by Julian Bryan--Courtesy USHMM
Then my mother, who was just a teenager, was caught in a street roundup in 1941 and sent to a concentration camp for smuggling food. The camp was part of the complex at Buchenwald in Arnstadt.

"We grew up as Navy kids, not knowing much about my mother's past."

It was a horrible place; you can see footage of it on the web, recorded by American war photographers as they liberated that area. My mother was there for almost four years. She never saw anyone else in her family again.

She never returned to Poland. After the war, she earned a scholarship to study in the U..S. and met and married my father, who was an officer in the Navy. We grew up as Navy kids, not knowing much about my mother's past.

EYE: How was your mother affected by this horrendous experience?

Polish prisoners at Pawiak, 1943--Permission Pawiak Museum, Warsaw

MARY: My mother suffered nightmares, flashbacks and psychotic breakdowns all her life, and especially as her own children grew older.

When we were little, I remember my mother was incredibly beautiful, happy, hopeful and creative. She was the perfect mother in those years, as she re-experienced happy times from her own childhood in Poland.

At 12 in Poland, my mother lost her mother and her childhood ended. At 12, here in America, I lost my mother and my childhood ended. That's the legacy of violence and war. It doesn't stop with the generation that lives through it.

"I felt obliged to speak out against war, hatred, bigotry, intolerance, and anti-Semitism."

EYE: Did you blame yourself somehow for her condition?

MARY: I was one of those kids who thought there was something I could have done to prevent my mother's grief and terror. Maybe if I hadn't wanted to grow up so fast; maybe if I had been better behaved; maybe if we could have found her better doctors...but this all happened during a time in America when no one knew much about the experiences of WWII refugees. Poland was a Communist country, frozen behind the Iron Curtain. People were ashamed to talk about these things. We were supposed to keep it all a secret.

Then later, I met others who had had similar experiences, and I felt obliged to speak out against war, hatred, bigotry, intolerance and anti-Semitism. Through my mother, I had experienced the inevitably tragic consequence of these tendencies. They are devastating and they persist for generations, long after wars end.

"My mother had a hard time talking about the war."

EYE: How did Sendler and her co-workers learn to organize resistance organizations?

Girls hidden in Turkowice/1943--Courtesy 2B Productions

MARY: After decades of being forced to run schools and social programs underground between 1795 and 1919, Polish women were able to play a much more public role when Poland regained its independence after World War I.

They were members of Parliament, professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, writers and performers. These women were mentors and role models for people like Irena Sendler, and my mother remembered them too.

My mother had a hard time talking about the war, but the stories she did like to tell were of those women. She took solace in her memories of them and that's what she chose to share with her children.

EYE: How did you hear about these children that were saved?

MARY: I remember her saying that in 1939, right after the Germans invaded, in Warsaw they started to see trainloads of blonde, blue-eyed children being taken through Warsaw from Eastern Poland for "Germanization" to camps in Germany.

Everyone in Warsaw knew about a certain group of women who used to wait on the train platforms for these trains full of children. When the trains pulled in, the women tried to convince German guards to accept bribes in exchange for some of the children.

Jewish girls hidden with Polish orphans in a convent/1944

Later, I learned that Irena Sendler was one of them. From the beginning of the war they were working to save children, and very soon after that event, they would begin to focus all their efforts on Jewish children.

EYE: How did they get these children to safe homes?

MARY: Sendler organized a group of Polish Catholic women who smuggled Jewish children out of the Ghetto to safe homes and convents all over Poland.

They concealed their true identity to protect them from the Nazis and taught them to speak in Polish and say Catholic prayers, hiding them in with foster families and in German controlled convents and orphanages.

Sendler was captured by the Gestapo in 1943, tortured and sentenced to death when she refused to reveal the names of her co-conspirators. She escaped on the day she was to be executed.

The Germans never discovered anything about this group. Over 2500 Jewish children survived the war thanks to their operation. My documentary tells this story through the last long interview Irena gave before she died in 2008 at age 98.

EYE: How long did it take you to make it? For a long time I understand few people had heard of this amazing rescue of over all these children...

MARY: I began working on the film in late 2003 and completed the Polish version in 2010. In 2011 we finished the version that premiered on PBS in May. They'll continue to broadcast it for the next three years. You can see the trailer here.

I was an independent filmmaker and I had to keep stopping the work along the way in order to raise funding for it. I put a lot of my own money into it, and I also had to work at other freelance jobs.

PAM: What was Irena's reaction to the film when she saw it?

"She wanted young people to learn about it and to be wary of it happening ever again."

MARY: Unfortunately, Irena Sendler died in May of 2008 before she had a chance to see the final version. I think she was pleased that we were bringing attention to the tragedy of the Holocaust in

Poland. She wanted young people to learn about it and to be wary of it happening ever again. She was already 95 when I began spending time with her.

Irena Sendler/2005--Courtesy 2B Productions

At first she didn't want to be interviewed by me. She was very kind to me, but she didn't want me to make a film about her. She didn't think of herself as a hero.

After I spent many weeks in Warsaw going to visit her and talking with her, she finally agreed to let us film her. But only one time. She had a million physical ailments, but her mind was still very sharp.

"...I was either going to lose my mind or I was going to do what I was truly called to do."

EYE: You were a corporate marketing exec and then became a documentarian. What made you change to this new career?

MARY: After 9/11 and years of doing what I felt I "should" do – pursue a corporate career and acquire the trappings of success – I was overwhelmed with the feeling that it was time to do what I "can" do – which is to tell stories that move and inspire people. I'm a meaning maker; I always have been.

I had studied theater in college — storytelling was my passion. But I didn't feel I had the right to do it professionally. I hit middle age and I realized that I was either going to lose my mind or I was going to do what I was truly called to do. If the door was going to be closed, well then, what did I have to do to open it. And that's how it started...

I gave up my corporate life with all of its benefits, moved to New York, and began studying and working with historical documentary filmmakers. Fortunately a lot of the skills I had acquired in the corporate world served me very well when it came to independent producing.

Mary and Bieta, one of the "hidden children" rescued as an infant, 2005--Courtesy 2B Productions

EYE: Are you ready to take on another project and what might that be?

MARY: I recorded so much more material for this project then I could ever hope to include in a one-hour show. But the stories I heard were so interesting. I hope we will be able to create more for teachers and community groups who have a desire to learn more about the Polish Resistance. Beyond that I would love to do another documentary and already have some new ideas in mind.

EYE: Thanks for letting us know about your fascinating documentary and Irena Sendler. We hope many people get to see it. If you want more information, check with your local PBS station for upcoming broadcasts or go to the film's website.