

Christian Coalition of Washington

December 2008

Whatever things are praiseworthy

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"It's not what the world holds for you; it's what you bring to it."

--Anne Shirley (*Anne of Green Gables*)

The most enduring feature throughout *TIME* magazine's 86-year history has been its annual "Man of the Year" (now "Person of the Year") cover story which recognizes an individual (or entity) that has had the biggest effect on the year's news. The distinction is supposed to go to the person who, for good or ill, has most affected the course of the year. Although *TIME* has missed it on occasion such as 2001 when it featured Rudy Giuliani instead of Osama bin Laden, who would dispute their call this year?

Barack Hussein Obama has probably replaced Oprah Winfrey as the most recognized face on the planet. In random interviews in Jerusalem several months ago (if the U-tube we saw was credible), virtually every person shown Obama's likeness quickly identified him while only two-in-ten could name Sen. John McCain, his chief political rival. Like a celebrity, Barack Obama *is* news—not necessarily what he says or does.

There were others on the list for recognition. Says *TIME* about runner-up Sarah Palin: "She was not just a governor, but the most popular governor in the country; not just a mom but a mother of five, with a family made for reality TV. And she wasn't just a running mate; she was a one-woman rescue team for the Republican ticket."

Tony Blair on the other hand, thinks French president Nicolas Sarkozy is noteworthy for his "...ideas and vitality in abundance, as he showed in such matters as his handling of the Georgia crisis and the global economic downturn." Steven Spielberg favors Chinese film director Zhang Yimou for his thematic and creative artistry in telling China's story to 2 billion TV viewers at the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympia Games.

Henry (Hank) Paulson, outgoing Secretary of the Treasury, also topped many lists for Person of the Year. Following his appointment in 2006, Paulson had let it be known that his top priority was to make certain that his department would have independence and clout. "Mission accomplished. Mission over-accomplished," says *TIME*.

Others considered were Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates, John McCain, Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, and even Tina Fey, the Sarah Palin impersonator on *Saturday Night Live*. But in our search each year, we consider different qualifiers. We are not interested in those who make news. We are interested in those who make a difference.

While following a story of a 98-year-old Polish woman who was recently in the running for a Nobel Peace Prize, we uncovered some surprises and some gems.

Irena Sendlerowa (Sendler), a Polish Catholic, lived in Nazi-occupied Warsaw during WWII and refused to stand by when she heard that Jews were being exterminated. Irena used her papers as a government social worker to gain entry into the Warsaw Ghetto, a 16 square block area where 450,000 Jews had been forced to huddle.

Working with ten close friends, Irena established many methods to smuggle more than 2,500 Jewish children out of the ghetto and place them in safe homes. Names and locations of the children were recorded on thin tissue and placed in bottles and buried under a tree in her backyard. It was Irena's plan to reunite the children with their parents after the war. Unfortunately, most of the Jewish parents from the ghetto died at the Treblinka death camp.

In 1943, Irena was betrayed by an informant and arrested and brutally beaten and tortured by the Gestapo. In a scenario reminiscent (in our mind) of Peter's prison break in Acts 12, Irena escaped with the help of a guard shortly before she was to be shot. During the rest of the war, she lived hidden just like the children she rescued.

After the war, the Communist government suppressed any recognition of the courageous anti-fascist partisans, because most of them were also anti-Communists. Irena's story was buried and largely forgotten—until 1999.

Norm Conard, a school teacher in rural Uniontown, Kansas, who was vaguely aware of the story, inspired four of his students who were looking for a National History Day project to do some investigative work. Megan Stewart, Liz Cambers, Sabrina Coons and Jessica Shelton searched the internet, turning up only one web site that referred to Irena Sendler. With Mr. Conard's help, the students began to reconstruct her amazing story, even creating a play about her rescue efforts called "Life in a Jar."¹ In 2000, the students searched for Irena's burial site, and, to their delight, discovered she was still alive and living with relatives in a small apartment in Warsaw.

When learning of the project, Irena said she was stunned and surprised. "My emotion," she said, "is being shadowed by the fact that no one from the circle of my faithful coworkers...could live long enough to enjoy all the honors that now are falling upon me..."

Irena Sendler became an international story in May, 2001 when teacher and students from Kansas paid a visit to Irena in Warsaw. Following a second student trip in 2003, Irena received a letter from Pope John Paul II and official recognition from the president of Poland. By March, 2005, over 100 schools in the U.S. and Poland had developed similar projects, and, in June, Warsaw celebrated "Irena Sendler Day." By 2006, her story could be traced to more than 80,000 web sites.

Last year, the four Uniontown High School grads labored to bring Irena's story to the attention of the Nobel Prize committee in Oslo. Unfortunately, Irena's heroics were not current enough to fall within award guidelines and the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize went instead to Albert Gore, Jr., for his efforts to save Earth from global warming.²

Megan, Liz, Sabrina and Jessica, now in their mid-twenties and married, are still actively involved in the traveling presentations of "Life in a Jar,"—some 270 performances to-date. Megan continues to play Irena Sendler, and several of the original students visited Irena a few days before she died on May 12, 2008.

Irena, we are sure, now knows a reward that no man can confer. But in the meantime, we are impressed with the indefatigable efforts of the Uniontown H.S. alums to look for "whatsoever things are praiseworthy..." (Phil 4:8), and are pleased to make them our *Persons of the Year for 2008*.

Shortly before she died, Irena wrote, "...I can't find the words to thank you, my dear girls...Before the day you have written the play "Life in a Jar," nobody in my own country and in the whole world cared about my person and my work during the war..."

They do now, Irena. They do now.

Rick Forcier

¹ [Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project](http://www.irenasendler.org), www.irenasendler.org

² Stephen Miller, *Irena Sendler 98, Saved 2,500 Children From Nazis*, *The Sun*, 5/13/2008