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FORMER POLISH PRESIDENT ALEXANDER KWASNIEWSKI RECEIVES THIRD ANNUAL IRENA SENDLER MEMORIAL AWARD

Award Commemorates “Righteous Gentile” Sendler and Honors Rescuers of Jewish Heritage in Poland



SAN FRANCISCO — The Honorable Alexander Kwasniewski, President of Poland from 1995-2005, has been named the 2010 recipient of the Irena Sendler Memorial Award by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture in San Francisco.

The award is granted to a non-Jewish Pole who has worked to preserve Jewish heritage in and foster Jewish cultural renewal in Poland. The award was created 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. The award was announced on anniversary of Sendler’s passing (May 12, 2008) and will be presented in a ceremony in Warsaw on June 30.

In 1995, Aleksander Kwasniewski was elected President of Poland under the slogan, “Let’s choose the future.” During his two terms of leadership, he was a major force behind the passage of the new Polish Constitution and brought Poland into NATO.

Among his many initiatives aimed at rapprochement between Poles and Jews, one of the most significant has been his support of the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Under Kwasniewski's direction, the Museum was granted the land in front of the Warsaw Ghetto memorial and the funds to launch its construction, now fully underway and scheduled to open in 2012. He also set in motion the process of restoring Polish citizenship to

persons, mostly Jews, deprived of it during the political turmoils of 1968 and throughout the era of Communist rule.

In 2001, Kwasniewski issued a formal apology for the atrocities of the Holocaust during a memorial ceremony in Jedwabne, Poland. Throughout his presidency he advocated for a strong and supportive relationship with Israel and often noted and credited the contributions of Polish Jews to the worlds of music, literature, science and politics.

In a speech at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 2005, President Kwasniewski said, "Efforts are currently being made in Poland to preserve the material heritage of the vibrant world of Polish Jews for future generations, and to commemorate their history for the benefit of all visitors to our country. A Museum of the History of Polish Jews . . . is being built with the support of public and private funding on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto. We can rest assured that it will be a unique world-class institution, a remarkable site of remembrance and meditation. . . . We in Poland are now happy to witness a growing interest in Jewish culture, especially among the younger generation. This allows us to look to the future with optimism. Poland will always be among those nations which, mindful of our history, are building the future of the world on the foundations of dialogue and respect among peoples."

The Honorable Aleksander Kwasniewski was the first president of Poland to publicly apologize for the country's responsibility in atrocities committed against Jews during World War II. His bold and historic leadership signaled a new chapter in Poland's political maturation as a democratic nation," states Tad Taube, Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland and chairman of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture. "Not only did he endeavor reconciliation with Poland's Holocaust past, he set unprecedented forward-looking policy in establishing federal government support for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews."

The Jewish community in Poland has come back to life in the 21 years since the fall of Communism in 1989, with synagogues and community centers being built all across the country and many Poles connecting with Jewish roots they did not know they possessed. Jewish culture is embraced by Jews and non-Jews alike; this is evidenced in the great popularity of the Jewish Cultural Festival in Krakow, celebrated in large part by non-Jews.

This award was founded in 2008 to commemorate Irena Sendler, who passed away on May 12, 2008 in Warsaw at the age of 98. Sendler, who saved twice as many Jews as Oskar Schindler during World War II, refused to give up the identities of the children she had rescued, even when captured and tortured by the Nazis. Sendler's heroic actions went largely unnoticed until ten years ago when several Kansas schoolgirls wrote a play about her. In 2007 she was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

“Irena was a true hero to the Jewish community of Poland, and we believe that honoring her legacy with this award is very meaningful,” said Taube. “We hope that honoring people like President Kwasniewski who have done so much to preserve and protect Jewish history and culture in Poland is a fitting tribute.”

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, email: info@taubephilanthropies.org

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