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ARCHIVIST JAN JAGIELSKI RECEIVES SECOND ANNUAL IRENA SENDLER MEMORIAL AWARD

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



SAN FRANCISCO – Jan Jagielski, a Polish archivist who has spent his professional career working to document and preserve Jewish monuments in Poland, although he himself is not Jewish, has been named the 2009 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 Poland, 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 the first anniversary of Sendler’s passing and

will be presented at the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow on July 1, 2009.

Jagielski, chief archivist at the newly renamed Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, was the first to initiate in the pre-1989 Communist era a project to document and ultimately preserve what remained of Jewish monuments in Poland. A non-Jewish Pole by origin, a chemical engineer by profession, his only motivation was his pain at seeing a part of his country’s heritage go to ruin and oblivion. Acting alone and only in his personal capacity at first, he photographed neglected cemeteries and ruined synagogues and started to collect documentation on their former appearance and importance.

Since the fall of Communism in 1989, Jagielski has co-produced, with the City of Warsaw, excellent guidebooks to Warsaw’s prewar Jewish history. Today, he leads a new major conservation program at Warsaw’s Jewish Historical Institute. Jan Jagielski remains one of Poland’s top authorities on Jewish monuments and is a role model for all those who work to salvage and redeem the glory of Poland’s Jewish legacy.

“The symbiotic relationship between Jewish culture and Polish culture cannot be overstated,” said Tad Taube, Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland and chairman of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture. “Jan Jagielski understands the importance of preserving Jewish history in Poland against the backdrop of today’s vibrant Jewish renaissance.”

The Jewish community in Poland has come back to life in the 20 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 last year to commemorate Irena Sendler, who passed 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 Jan Jagielski who continue to work diligently for the preservation of Jewish history and culture in Poland is a fitting tribute.”

Nominations for the award were reviewed by a panel made up of foundation staff and grantees involved with the Polish Jewish community.

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