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BAY AREA PHILANTHROPIST COMMEMORATES LIFE OF IRENA SENDLEROWA WITH NEW AWARD

Head of Jewish Culture Festival to be First Recipient

SAN FRANCISCO – Irena Sendlerowa, a “Righteous Gentile” who saved twice as many Jews as Oskar Schindler during World War II, is being commemorated with a new award to be given to a non-Jewish Pole who has worked to preserve Jewish heritage in Poland. The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture will present the first annual Irena Sendlerowa Memorial Award later this month to Janusz Makuch, the director of the annual Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow.

Sendlerowa, who died May 12th in Warsaw at 98, courageously saved over 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. Even when captured and tortured by the Nazis, she refused to give up the identities of the children she had rescued. Sendlerowa’s heroic actions went largely unnoticed until nine years ago when several Kansas school girls wrote a play about her. Last year she was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

“Irena was a true hero to the Jewish community of Poland, and we want to do something to commemorate her incredible life in a meaningful way,” said Tad Taube, Honorary Polish Consul and head of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture. “We hope that honoring people like Janusz who have worked so diligently preserving Jewish heritage and promoting today’s cultural renewal will be a fitting tribute.”

Sendlerowa’s passing comes at a time of Jewish renewal in Poland. The Jewish community is vibrant with synagogues, community centers and educational programs being built all across the country, and many Poles are connecting with Jewish roots they didn’t 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, organized and celebrated in large part by non-Jews.

Janusz Makuch, the non-Jewish co-founder and executive director of the annual summer Festival in Krakow, exemplifies the spirit of this award. Makuch felt that as Jewish life and culture died out in Poland, “due to the twin evils of Nazism and Communism, Polish culture died with it.” Realizing the symbiotic relationship between Polish and Jewish cultures, Makuch organized the first Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow in 1988, with its program focused on a scholarly conference on the encounter between the Jewish and Polish cultures. In the 1990s, the Festival became an annual event that today draws more than 20,000 people from all over the world to enjoy eight days of music, theater, art exhibits, lectures and workshops, led mostly by Jewish performers and educators from Europe, Israel and the United States.

“Righteous Gentiles like Irena laid the groundwork for what is happening today in Poland,” said Taube. “We think this award is a fitting memorial for her trailblazing heroism. And few are more exemplary candidates than Janusz Makuch to be the award’s first recipient.”

Nominations for the award were reviewed by a panel made up of foundation staff and grantees involved with the Polish Jewish community. The award will be presented annually at the beginning of the Krakow festival.