

Life in a Jar: The Performative Efficacy of the Embodied Historical Archive

By

Susan C. Bubna

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Chairperson Rebecca Rovit

John Gronbeck-Tedesco

Leslie Bennett

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The Thesis Committee for Susan C. Bubna
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Rebecca Rovit

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Abstract:

During the World War II Nazi occupation of Poland, a young Catholic social worker Irena Sendler became a prominent leader in Warsaw's *Zegota*, a Polish Resistance organization. Sendler rescued 2500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto, saving them from execution in German killing centers like Treblinka. Over fifty years later, her relatively unknown story became a performance *Life in a Jar*, researched and developed by three American high school students Elizabeth Cambers, Sabrina Coons, and Megan Stewart and their social studies teacher Norman Conard. Through a series of unusual circumstances, the performance *Life in a Jar* catapulted Sendler, Conard and these students from a small rural community to national and international acclaim. *Life in a Jar* moved significantly beyond a series of singular performances for Kansas and National History Day competitions and became an ongoing pedagogical forum influencing Holocaust and contemporary genocide education.

Since its first performances *Life in a Jar* has demonstrated relevancy and efficacy for the performative embodiment of an historical trauma or event. Audience reception of the performance has substantially exceeded its technical expertise as an amateur performance with uncomplicated dialogue and a simple stage set, a story animated by young, non-professionally trained actors. In this thesis, the elements that coalesced to create the power of the performance will be examined through the matrix of several theories of trauma and of Holocaust representations. I will demonstrate how *Life in a Jar* provides contemporary audiences with an important opportunity to mourn past genocide and to serve as a template for recognition and resistance of conditions that lead to genocide. *Life in a Jar* provides a vision for performative embodiment of the historical archive as a persuasive pedagogical instrument.

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Introduction

The 1943 dictum was posted on every street in Warsaw: **Death Penalty For Those Who Provide Refuge, Food or Aid to Jews!** Irena Sendler was thirty three when the Nazis arrested her for ignoring the decree. Sendler, a Catholic social worker, was a prominent leader in Żegota, a Polish resistance organization. She had secreted 2500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto, saving them from deportation to Nazi death camps like Treblinka. Because of this she was charged with crimes against the Third Reich, who first began their military occupation of Poland in 1939. Sendler was then imprisoned in Warsaw's Pawiak Prison, which loomed like an impenetrable fortress at the city's north end, housing diverse prisoners deemed political enemies by the Nazis. There were prostitutes, gypsies, Poles and Jews, most prisoners surviving no more than thirty days before dying in front of a German firing squad.

Sendler and her work with Żegota stood in resolute defiance of the racial utopia envisioned by the Nazis. Hitler's goal was to build an eastern empire that would enable its agricultural superiority in Europe, lifting it from its post World War I defeat and the subsequent poverty. Hitler's vision for this Aryan colonization relied on decimating Poland, especially Warsaw which constituted a primary resistance to Nazi occupied Europe. By 1938, the Nazis envisioned an eastern Europe ruled by an Aryan Master Race that would claim all Jewish property and assets (Snyder 280).

Initially the schema for Nazi domination of Europe meant separating European Jewry into ghettos and then a hypothetical deportation to Madagascar, pending some Final Solution (Snyder 156). By 1942, the Final Solution had evolved into an extermination of European Jewry: "[It was] a small taste of the paradise to come, the garden of Eden that Hitler desired. It was a post-apocalyptic vision of exaltation after war...the resurgence of one race after the extermination of others" (Snyder 206). Before Hitler's defeat in 1945, two out of every three

Jews in Europe had been killed by the Nazis. Over one million children were murdered, including handicapped and gypsy children¹. Sendler deliberately placed herself into this milieu of death and annihilation. Because of her decision to rescue Jewish children, her own impending execution was non-negotiable.

On January 20, 1944, the day Sendler was to die, reluctantly and clandestinely a Nazi officer at Pawiak released her in exchange for a bribe offered by Zegota (Mayer 298). Sendler's indistinct figure hobbled away from the brutal prison; her swollen legs had been fractured during frequent torture sessions designed to make her confess the names of other Zegota members. She never capitulated to her captors. As she stumbled along the hard road that led to freedom, her heart must have raced against her crippled gait. "Move faster, out of sight. What if the German officer changed his mind?" During her tenuous escape, Irena Sendler could not have imagined that over fifty years later young feet would retrace her halting steps from Pawiak Prison.

The year was now 1999. The same limbs that had carried Sendler away from certain destruction as a prisoner now tethered her frail, elderly body to a chair in a Warsaw nursing home. As she spent her final days in obscurity and poor health, three young high school students from a small rural town in Kansas created *Life in a Jar*, a performance that told Sendler's little known story. Through a series of remarkable circumstances, the performance of Sendler catapulted her and the young women to international renown; *Life in a Jar* moved well beyond a series of singular performances and became an ongoing pedagogical forum known as "The Irena Sendler Project."

Who were these three young women and their history teacher Norman Conard who guided the text creation and ensuing performance of *Life in a Jar*?" Elizabeth Cambers, Sabrina Coons and Megan Stewart began researching the Holocaust for the Kansas and National History Day competitions. Encouraged by Conard in their Holocaust research, the students had

discovered a brief article about Sendler, listing her among “Other Schindlers” (Mayer 8). When the students asked Conard about her, he thought it was a typographical error because her name was unfamiliar. The teens persisted and discovered through the singular website that had information about Sendler, the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, that she was an actual person.

Although Sendler had rescued a greater number of Jews than famed Industrialist Oskar Schindler, information about her was negligible. As the Nazis began liquidating the Warsaw Ghetto by neighborhoods in 1943, transporting Jewish citizens to death camps, Sendler convinced Jewish parents to relinquish their children so that she could take them to safety outside of the Ghetto. The children were issued false identities and placed with Gentile families, convents and orphanages. Sendler recorded each child’s Jewish name on paper and then hid the lists in glass jars, which she buried in a friend’s garden at night². After the war, Sendler’s hope was to reunite the children with their Jewish families, insuring restoration to authentic identities and communities.

Believing Sendler was deceased, the three Kansas teens recreated her life through what they gleaned from the historical archive. They reanimated Sendler’s life by delving into archival sources: Holocaust websites, books, articles and microfilm from the National Archives. They interviewed World War II veterans and Holocaust survivors in the Kansas City area, watched documentaries and wrote dozens of letters to individuals cited in academic sources. They wrestled with the archival material, discussing what to select for text and dialogue to embody Sendler. Even though they could have told Sendler’s story through other modes of presentation including a website, a research paper, or a documentary film, they felt that performance most effectively represented the power of her narrative (Interview 2011).

In this thesis I will examine the unique phenomenon of *Life in a Jar*, a performance that

garnered top awards at regional and Kansas History Day competitions and attained high scores at National History Day in Washington, D.C.. Since those first performances, *Life in a Jar* has demonstrated relevancy for the performative embodiment of an historical trauma or event. The young women embodied Sendler and her story in a non-professional performance. For over a decade, audience reception of the performance has far exceeded its technical expertise as an amateur performance with its uncomplicated dialogue, animated by non-professional actors and a simple stage set. *Life in a Jar* has been performed all over the world and has demonstrated enduring influence as a pedagogical resource and model. Multiple elementary and secondary schools in North America and Europe have included lessons from *Life in a Jar* in a project-based learning paradigm, the “Irena Sendler Project.” More than twenty colleges and universities have also incorporated the Irena Sendler Project materials into their curricula (Sendler website).

What are the dynamics that coalesced to create such a powerful representation of a World War II Polish woman by three young women from Midwestern, rural America? What are the elements of *Life in a Jar* that have contributed to its efficacy as a performative embodiment of both a traumatic historical event and a person? How has an amateur performance so significantly shaped both academic and sociopolitical arenas and continues to re-imagine the Holocaust for contemporary audiences? I will demonstrate how *Life in a Jar* provides audiences with an important pedagogical opportunity to mourn the extraordinary evil of genocide and to serve as a template for recognizing and resisting conditions of genocide or, as Lawrence Langer states, for re-imagining atrocity that ultimately results in practical action against genocide (Langer Alarm 8). *Life in a Jar* provides a vision for art that results in significant and effective pedagogy and positive social change; theatre becomes a persuasive instrument in educating audiences about Holocaust history.

Although Holocaust history and its study is a complicated and often conflicted endeavor,

especially when considering artistic representations of genocide. Michael Rothberg examines the subject by delineating it into two broad categories, that of Realist and Antirealist (Rothberg 3). He then negotiates the division between the two categories by defining a third, which he names *traumatic realism*. *Traumatic realism* constitutes the interdisciplinary dynamic which I believe best elucidates the efficacy for the performance *Life in a Jar*. The Realist position advocates epistemologically that the Holocaust is a “knowable” event, that representations of the archival material can be expressed through a mimetic, familiar universe. This realm belongs primarily to historians and social scientists.

Historian Inga Clendinnen states that the dimension of genocide, specifically the Holocaust, which presents the greatest threat to an audience, that is the human capacity for inordinate evil, is what causes re-representations and a perpetual revisiting of the event (Clendinnen 181). Clendinnen’s Realist position emphasizes documentation of the historical past through archives, the written record. As a source of understanding culture, the historical archive remains significant because the tragedy of the Holocaust and dynamics of genocide continue to haunt contemporary culture. Ethnic hatred and domination, acting like historical and existential rhizomes, repeat themselves in the recent genocides of Bosnia, Rwanda and Ethiopia. Historical writing enables greater understanding of culture and the catastrophic events that threaten to disrupt the transmission and understanding of cultural knowledge and disassemble cultural continuity³. Viewed from the Realist paradigm, *Life in a Jar* relies on archival material and documentation to create a chronological order for its performance text.

Counterpoint to this is the Antirealist position which views traditional, mimetic representations as inadequate to capture the horror of the Holocaust. In essence, the artists, theorists, and theorists that comprise the Antirealists believe that there is a catastrophic rupture between extraordinary trauma and ordinary life that defies expression or understanding (Rothberg 5).

Lawrence Langer supports the writings of Holocaust survivors and authors Charlotte Delbo and Elie Wiesel who believed that the Holocaust exists beyond traditional historical, cultural and autobiographical narratives. In her *None of Us Will Return*, Delbo reminds the reader that her Auschwitz internment lies beyond the reader or audience's comprehension of her experience and degree of suffering at Auschwitz and her life afterward. In the conflictedness of her experience, however, she implored, both as author and death camp prisoner, "Il faut donner a voir"—"one must be made to see" (Delbo 11). The attempt to grasp the incomprehensible remains an exceptional challenge to all representations of the Holocaust, including the *Life in a Jar* performance.

Rothberg suggests that an interdisciplinary approach which incorporates aspects of both Realist and Antirealist positions, though these are often contradictory, may yield the most beneficial social dynamics. By preserving the tension between the two broad approaches, new concepts are engendered about the relationship between culture and genocide, which he cites as *traumatic realism* (Rothberg 100). Rothberg believes that there is an intrinsic duality in approaching genocide: 1) working through the psychic and social ramifications and 2) the issue of knowledge transmission (Rothberg 12)⁴. *Traumatic realism* is predicated on the representation of an historical event of extreme nature and of creating meaning for those attempting to understand the event. It creates access to a previously unknowable object and then instructs the audience how to approach that object⁵. As *traumatic realism* navigates between the Realist/Anti-Realist positions in representing genocide, it supplies a matrix of how the ordinary and extraordinary elements of the Holocaust interact and coexist. *Traumatic realism* focuses on the intersection of the everyday and the extreme elements in genocide (Rothberg 9).

Since *Life in a Jar* is posited between the two approaches, representing mimesis based on historical archive and also performative embodiment, which is then transmuted by what Diana

Taylor refers to as repertoire, it will be analyzed as an example of Rothberg's *traumatic realism*. Taylor defines repertoire as "...enact[ing] embodied memory....all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge." The acts include performances, gestures, orature, dance, and singing (Taylor 20). Though the story of *Life in a Jar* follows a chronological sequence which is derived from the archive, the performance of Sendler gains power through its nature as repertoire. Through their physical presence, the teens ghost or stand in phenomenologically for the woman who rescued children. Sendler's representatives are young women who traditionally possess the least power in society; they materialize, visually and aurally for their audience another young woman who temporarily subverted the Nazi war-machine.

In addition to adopting *traumatic realism* as an approach to Holocaust Studies and as a valuable analysis for *Life in a Jar*, there are other theories which provide templates for artistic and performative representations of trauma that help to explain the ongoing dynamism of *Life in a Jar*. In *Trauma Culture*, Ann Kaplan states that sociopolitical theories develop relevancy depending on the intellectual climate of the particular time period (Kaplan 35). Following World War II, Deconstructionism focused on language primarily as signifier in the creation of meaning. Kaplan believes that such theory masked underlying emotion and obscured the physical or "body."

Kaplan cites the advent of Lacanian theory with its departure from linguistic signifiers and emphasis on the unconscious and affect as a significant factor in identifying trauma as an explanation for contemporary societal behavior. Trauma's pervasive presence in Western culture is linked to modernity⁶. However, Kaplan warns us that, with the prevalent validation of trauma, contemporary culture risks "collapsing everything into trauma," thereby mitigating that which is extraordinary trauma, such as genocide. Like Taylor, Kaplan views the performative

aspect of memory, especially what she refers to as the visual, as comparable and, in some aspects, superior to that of language (Kaplan 89). These concepts are integral to how the Kansas *Life in a Jar* performers utilize their performance to engage historical trauma and the memory of Sendler's narrative. In addition to this, I will cite Carol Martin's view on document- ary theatre, which relates to the process of creating the written text for *Life in a Jar*.

In Chapter One of the thesis, I will examine Sendler's life in greater depth, relying primarily on Jack Mayer's sole biography of her life, and how she became a leader of Zegota⁷. I will also consider the background story of the three Kansas students Cambers, Coons and Stewart and their teacher Conard in creating *Life in a Jar*. What significance did the relationship between Sendler and the teens play in the subsequent ascendancy of the performance and its reception by both national and international audiences? When the girls discovered that Sendler was still living, they visited her five times before her death on May 12, 2008. I will discuss how the relationship between Sendler and the young women affected the efficacy of *Life in a Jar* and its dual nature as both archive and performative embodiment; a conjunction where the documented narrative is shaped through the non-reproducible but significant elements of relationship contained in the repertoire.

Chapter Two delves further into the elements that have created an impetus and relevancy for the performance. How does *Life in a Jar* actualize *traumatic realism*, belonging to both archive and performative embodiment, incorporating dimensions of both Realist/Antirealist paradigms? *Life In a Jar* also contains effectual ironies and a complexity of circumstances in the relationships between Sendler and the young women Cambers, Coons and Stewart and their teacher Conard. that enhance the narrative for the audience, as living witnesses to the historical event of the Holocaust. I believe it is the existence of these ironies and circumstances that challenge expectations about sociopolitical and cultural realities and that reanimate imagination

and consideration of genocide. The element of irony lends a particular gravitas to the performance (e.g. children bringing back to life a rescuer of children) even as the embodiment is sublimely influenced by Taylor's concept of the repertoire.

Lawrence Langer emphasizes the need for new discourses about genocide so that people may be moved to practical action: "Well intentioned intervention after the fact is no substitute for strong action to prevent the occurrence atrocities from occurring" (Langer Alarm 54). Langer's perspective has important application to artistic and performative representations such as *Life in a Jar*. In Chapter Three, the challenges of transforming performance into an effective pedagogical forum with ongoing cultural implications are delineated. The evolution of *Life in a Jar* from performance to burgeoning pedagogical project is traced, along with a discussion derived from interviews with Norman Conard and Megan Stewart Felt, particularly about guarding the authenticity of Sendler's story from commodification and from contemporary "reality show" entertainment.

I invited "Life in a Jar" to perform for a local community in March 2012. The venue was a high school auditorium in the small farming town of Garnett, Kansas just north of where I live. I advertised in local newspapers, via radio advertisements and posters; and the performance was mentioned on "The Irena Sendler Project" website. A few inquiries about the performance came from two larger Kansas metropolitan areas; one city was two hours away. Several hundred people came to watch the performance. I took the opportunity to distribute a voluntary demographics card and have included that information in Chapter Three of the thesis.

Chapter One: Repairing the World—The Irena Sendler Project
A Rescuer of the least and the forgotten ones, the children of the Warsaw Ghetto

“One death is a tragedy; a million lives is a statistic” - Joseph Stalin⁸

The singularity of personal loss creates overwhelming grief but the destruction of countless people, especially when removed by geographical distance, often remains an abstraction to human imagination. At the beginning of World War II, stories of the German execution of European Jewry filtered through to individuals in the United States government. The American response to the crisis was tepid for a number of reasons. Predominantly due to an incredulity that such a horrifying genocide could occur in an enlightened Western world. European Resistance organizations, including Sendler’s Żegota, gave reports to London and Washington, D.C. of mass executions of Jews. As Snyder documents, “Poles and Jews alike had believed, wrongly, that publicizing the deportations would bring them to a halt...Britain and the United States did not act” (291).

In retrospect, Langer points to a protracted inability to comprehend what was happening: “A world governed by the ‘planned randomization of meanings’—it takes some reflection to realize how sinister yet precise this unsettling expression is—one where nothing makes sense” (Langer, *Preempt*, 178). In relation to genocide, Langer does not excuse sociopolitical inaction but his words serve as an important guide for examining future occurrences. He questions the assumption of contemporary Western history as inevitable progress and acknowledges the necessity of shared values about the meaning of life and the moral will to apply those values. *Life in a Jar* embodies a woman who understood the destructive nature of the Holocaust and who was moved to action during the historical event. Her story continues to effect pedagogical insight into genocide.

With the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich in the 1930s, massive sociopolitical changes occurred in Germany. Hitler believed that the neighboring Polish people were inferior and planned to annex their country and exterminate their national leadership, which held implications for Europe's largest Jewish population who resided in Poland. As one general maintained: " 'Germans are the masters, and Poles are the slaves'" (Snyder 121). In 1939 twenty nine year old Irena Sendler was a Catholic social worker in the capital city of Warsaw when she learned that her office would have to restrict benefits to her Jewish clients. The new policy which was supported by the National Democratic movement caused undue suffering for many of Sendler's clients.

Sendler refused to acquiesce to the policies but her unequivocal stubbornness was a familiar trait. When she in high school, she was periodically in trouble with faculty and classmates for defending Jewish students from excessive prejudice. She had been raised by parents whose ethics were defined, in part, by protecting people treated unjustly (Mayer 87). Sendler's biographer Jack Mayer gives a vivid example of her deep-seated convictions and courage, even as a young girl:

Irena witnessed Rachela [the only Jewish girl in her class] being attacked by two strong girls in the park beside their school. Without thinking, she dropped her lunch sack and leaped onto the bigger girl's back....The other girl pulled Irena onto the ground, where the two girls pummeled her....After this incident, some students became openly hostile to Irena, calling her 'Jew slave' and 'Rachela's secret sister.' (Mayer 88)

As a high school senior, Sendler wrote a mature and insightful sociopolitical treatise, defending Poland's ethnic diversity against Roman Dmowski who, as spokesperson for the Nationalist Democratic Party, called for ethnic cleansing of non-Polish minorities, Germans and

Jews: “[They] were to be assimilated and ‘turned into Poles or deported ’” (Mayer 89). Prior to Sendler’s admission to the Law Faculty of Warsaw University, the University had implemented anti-Semitic legislation passed by the Polish Parliament, the *numerous clausus* quota which restricted the number of Jewish students at the facility. The atmosphere was volatile: “On one occasion [students] threw a Jewish girl through a second story window. Though she was seriously injured the University did nothing” (Mayer 90).

A University decree stated that Jewish students were required to sit on “...separate benches in lecture halls—the so-called ‘ghetto bench’ or ‘Jewish bench’” (Mayer 90). Sendler felt particularly frustrated at the rampant reminders of racial prejudice and intolerance. On one occasion, she entered the lecture hall and instead of sitting in the Aryan section, she willfully turned left and sat in the front row of the “Jewish bench.” The consequences were swift and severe; she was suspended from the University. Even though she had just started her academic career in the early 1930s, Sendler knew that there would be profound ramifications for her actions. She believed she had no choice. Later she would describe what she did as a necessary compunction: “I had to do it. It was a need of my heart” (Mayer 91). She was readmitted to Warsaw University one year later.

Sendler came from a family of political activists with deep-seated convictions. Her parents had vigorously supported the Polish Socialist Party, and so did Sendler. A grandfather and great-grandfather had been “patriots for Polish independence.” Her father who was a physician gave his impoverished Jewish patients free medicine that he confiscated from the local sanitarium. He told his daughter that at times the law and compassion stood in opposition; it was his belief that “decency trumped the law.”

After Sendler regained admission to Warsaw University, she completed a Master’s degree in Social Work, a profession to which Sendler “felt well suited” (Mayer 94). Sendler

remained in Warsaw to serve the poor and sick populations there, though she had important personal reasons for leaving. Warsaw's Department of Assistance to Mother and Child hired Sendler, a great irony in retrospect. Sendler's impassioned desire to defend the weak and the innocent would later become the core of her mission to the Jewish children of the Warsaw Ghetto. Her earlier experiences and the testing of her belief system as a young woman would define her difficult and uncompromising choices as an adult. Her personal suffering forged the strength of her character, the woman who would later be known as the "Rescuer of children." Sendler had been working for the Department of Assistance just prior to the German invasion of Poland. Heavy bombardment of Warsaw began in September of 1939 and lasted for one month. Ultimately Warsaw surrendered to the Nazis, and Hitler declared victory over Poland on October 5, 1939. Thus began the imposition of German regulations on the Polish people. Posted throughout Warsaw, the ordinances rapidly instituted a segregation of Jewish citizens from sociopolitical and economic life. One day a decree read that all Poles were guaranteed their full rights as citizens under German rule; the very next day a new decree stated that all Jewish landlords were stripped of their property, and Jewish merchants were restricted to streets inhabited by other Jews (Mayer 90).

Besides the stifling arbitrariness of the new restrictions on its Jewish citizens, Warsaw was plunged into destitution with bread lines, food rationing and minimal public services. *Nowy Kurier Warszawski*, a German propagandist paper, replaced daily Polish newspapers and featured grossly false stories "about the sinful and criminal ways of the Jews, their filth and propensity for disease, their violation of the norms of behavior" (Mayer 98). As Langer observed, how was it possible to fight against the irrationality of a brutal racial ideology, except to the Nazis their dogma was not irrational but rather a calculated culmination of Malthusian and utopian goals⁹.

On October 18, 1939 came the decree that provoked Sendler to organize *Zegota*, the

Polish Resistance entity; it was the revocation of all social welfare benefits or services for Warsaw's Jewish citizens (Mayer 94). The edict illuminated Hitler's plan to destroy Poland, particularly the educated *intelligentsia*, largely comprised of Jews: "As Hitler put it, 'only a nation whose upper levels are destroyed can be pushed into the ranks of slavery'" (Snyder 126). In response to the decree, Sendler found a Polish artist who falsified documents for Jews fleeing the country. The false Gentile identities allowed Jewish families still remaining in Warsaw to receive food, money and welfare services. Sendler and a small circle of trustworthy colleagues and friends began to circumvent the Nazis' dictums.

Rumors circulated that a closed Jewish section of the city would be constructed in the spring of 1940 which would eventually become the Warsaw Ghetto. The Germans accused the Jewish citizens of creating and spreading a typhus epidemic. They built quarantine walls to promote Jewish-Gentile segregation. During this time, Sendler visited Dr. Majkowski, the director of the Zakladow Sanitarium's Sanitary Epidemiological Station, at his request. He offered "Epidemic Control Unit" identity passes to Sendler which provided her entrance into the Ghetto of quarantined Jews. According to Mayer, the doctor told Sendler: "Twenty thousand people are going to be quarantined without food for three weeks unless something is done... Dobraczynski [Sendler's boss] speaks highly of you. He says you have thought about this already in some detail. He says you can do the impossible" (Mayer 117). The Polish Resistance *Zegota* solidified its mission with Irena Sendler as a key leader.

As the Nazis relentlessly tightened restrictions on the Jews living within the newly bricked perimeter of the Ghetto, Sendler intensified efforts to bring resources to the imprisoned population. She visited the Ghetto daily. She used the Epidemic Control passes to transport supplies, food and other contraband past the Nazi soldiers, who scrupulously guarded the multiple gates into the Ghetto. Mayer documents that she often masqueraded as a nurse: "She

was so thin and small that she could enter wearing five layers of clothing and leave four behind for her clients” (Mayer 122).

Then in November 1940, a new German law posed the greatest threat to Sendler’s clandestine work. All social workers were prohibited from entering the Ghetto for any reason, which meant the end to all social welfare benefits for an already grossly impoverished population. Was it possible that the Germans knew about *Zegota’s* activities in the Ghetto? Sendler remained undeterred in her mission to Warsaw’s Jewish population. In 1940, during the first winter in the Ghetto, Sendler became familiar with many of the families existing within its walls¹⁰. She became particularly disturbed as children she knew simply disappeared, particularly the orphans living on the streets. She planned to rescue as many children as possible from the District (Mayer 125). She initiated *Zegota’s* plans to remove them covertly, issuing false identification for them and placing them with non-Jewish families outside of the Ghetto.

Sendler often secreted the abandoned children through the Warsaw courthouse, which straddled the Ghetto on one street and “Aryan” Warsaw on another and through a network of underground tunnels and sewers. By the spring of 1941 she and other *Zegota* workers were taking three to four orphans a week from the Ghetto. They created other surreptitious ways of transporting the orphans from the District, hiding them in trash bags or sedating them and then hiding them in morgue wagons loaded with corpses. Sendler continued to locate orphanages, convents and Gentile families who would care for the children.

As World War II progressed, Germany found itself in an escalating conflict with the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States. In Hitler’s world view, the sole reason for this was a global Jewish conspiracy that had unified the nations against the Nazis. By December of 1941, the Third Reich’s military response changed from relocating European Jewry to annihilating them. Because Europe’s largest population of Jews was located in Poland, the

Warsaw Ghetto had become essential to the Nazi's plan of genocide (Snyder 214).

New events augmented urgency for Sendler and the *Zegota* workers. Underground Polish newspapers reported "well substantiated rumors of death camps." One of the killing centers Treblinka was constructed just sixty miles northeast of Warsaw. In 1942, the Ghetto became a continual stream of deadly deportations with the children suffering as much as adults on the transports to Treblinka: "Some parents explained to their very small children, born in the Ghetto, what could be seen through windows or cracks in the door. The very youngest had never seen fields or forests before. Nor would they again" (Snyder 266).

In the midst of hastening deportations and *Zegota*'s increasing rescues a different misfortune struck the Resistance. A nineteen year old courier Helena was arrested with a Jewish child and several forged papers. Helena was tortured and executed; Sendler wondered if any of *Zegota*'s activities were divulged. She had kept lists of the children's Jewish names with their corresponding false identities, hoping after the war to restore the children to their authentic Jewish identities. Understanding that this information could be compromised, Sendler placed the lists in glass jars and buried them in a friend's garden. As she buried the jars in the dark, enveloping earth, how could she know that decades later three Kansas high school students would name their performance about her rescue work *Life in a Jar*, reenacting her extraordinary mission to save life and preserve community?

As deportations continued and often came without warning, Sendler knew that she needed to rescue not only orphans but also children who had families. She had to persuade parents about the realities of deportation and the death camps in order for them to relinquish their children. Sendler later remarked that the "Jewish mothers, fathers, and grandparents, they...they are the heroes"¹¹. There were parents who believed that "resettlement" in an Eastern labor camp, which was a German euphemism for the death camps, would offer them better circumstances

than the Ghetto. Many struggled to grasp the murderous intentions of the Nazi occupiers. Deportations proceeded unabatedly, and Sendler was burdened with thoughts of not saving more of the Jewish children: “Those she could not save weighed heavily on her heart, like souls on a scale” (Mayer 173). After the war, she remained haunted by the countless children left behind.

Then came the ultimate decree in October 1943: “**Death Penalty!** For those who provide refuge, food or aid to such Jews” (Mayer 198). As the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto drew to an end, there was a remnant of its population that had evaded deportation for months. They armed themselves with black market weapons and hid in the subterranean network beneath Warsaw’s streets, resisting the Nazis for over a week. The Nazis’ response to the Uprising was total decimation of the Ghetto in April 1943. Mayer movingly describes the finality of the catastrophe: “No bombs, no gunfire, no ambulance sirens, no more sounds of life or death. No more children appeared for *Zegota* to hide” (Mayer 218).

Sendler’s purpose and mission ended with the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. The following October she was arrested and imprisoned in Pawiak, awaiting execution for her resistance work against the Third Reich. Despite her escape from the prison, her story remained buried beneath the ensuing years. No story told, just silence, an unknown woman with a newly formed Communist government in Poland that eschewed post-war stories like Sendler’s and memorialization of wartime “heroes” (Interview 2011). Sendler’s interred jars waited, untouched, until their fragile contents were brought to light for another generation to see. *Life in a Jar: A Performative Embodiment of Sendler’s Narrative*

A half century after Sendler’s tenuous escape from Pawiak Prison, the Holocaust became the 1999 research project of the three teenagers in the United States, Elizabeth Cambers, Sabrina Coons, and Megan Stewart. Separated from Sendler’s life and narrative by an expanse of time, different continents, divergent languages, and dissimilar living circumstances, the three students

were inexplicably drawn to this obscure “Rescuer of children.” As different as they were from Sendler, they were also different from one another, brought together only by the History Day Project for Mr. Conard’s Social Studies class at Uniontown High School. Stewart and Cambers were both freshmen and as opposite in nature “as moonlight from sunlight” (Mayer 1). Stewart grew up in a close knit farming family and was very involved in school and church; a litany of freshmen year activities included band, golf, cheerleading, the Kansas Association of Youth and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Stewart was an excellent student and exuded an air of competence and dynamism.

In contrast, Cambers was abandoned by both parents as a young child and raised by her grandparents. One of her high school teachers noted that Cambers had a chip on her shoulder “the size of Kansas” (Mayer 5). The one thing that Cambers did exceptionally well was playing the alto saxophone; she was first chair in the Uniontown concert and football bands. Her music provided her with a retreat from life’s difficulties; art became her respite. Despite their obvious differences, Cambers was glad to be paired with Stewart for the History Day project. She lacked the confidence which came so easily to Stewart. Without Stewart’s contribution to the Project, Cambers thought her own effort would result in failure¹².

Sabrina Coons was a junior, having just arrived at Uniontown High from Oklahoma in 1999. Her father served in the military and moving was part of her growing up. She attended several larger schools but had never gone to a school the size of Uniontown with only 120 students in grades 7-12. Coons was the second youngest of six children; their family was poor and one of her siblings was black: “She had learned enough about Bourbon County to know that being poor was no big deal—being ‘colored’ was” (Mayer 21). She had signed up for Conard’s class and, at his request, she joined Stewart and Cambers on the Irena Sendler History Day Project.

Having placed the three girls together, Conard guided their project. During his twenty years of teaching social studies at Uniontown High School, Conard used innovative, project-based teaching methods with his students, many of whom achieved national and state level awards for their History Day projects¹³. He himself had grown up near the rural community of Chetopa, Kansas and was undoubtedly sensitive to the social dynamics in a small school and town. Conard had a motto that hung over the blackboard in the front of his room: “ ‘Who changes one person, changes the world whole.’—The Jewish Talmud” (Mayer 7). This was an integral part of Conard’s character and pedagogical perspective. He was the educator who would imbue the Kansas students with their own sense of empowerment as historians and ultimately as performers of *Life in a Jar*.

At the beginning, the improbable trio uncovered only minimal information about Sendler. The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which is an organization that honors Gentiles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, was the sole source of the terse biography (Mayer 12). The students learned that Sendler had been recognized in 1965 by Yad Vashem, a center for Holocaust information, and Israel’s official memorial for those Jews who perished during the Holocaust. Twenty years later a tree was planted at Yad Vashem in Sendler’s honor. This was one of the few acknowledgments of her World War II resistance work.

Cambers, Coons and Stewart constructed Sendler’s story as a performance. Creating the performance text for *Life in a Jar* proved a daunting task for the girls since none of them had any theatre training or background. The text evolved through “...trial and error, arguments and compromise” (Mayer 31). The girls struggled with transitions between scenes. What worked in the text with the written script became a “tangle of details on the stage” (Mayer 32). The text creation, selective process and revisions became a more collaborative process though debates continued about what constituted the most effective stage sets and scenes for the performance.

Some of the decisions about scenery were delimited by the need to transport the props; they required easy assembly and being lightweight for both the original competitions and the subsequent performances that would take the *Life in a Jar* cast throughout North America and onto a global stage.

The *Life in a Jar* scenery was simple, like impressionistic snapshots suspended in time and space, physical images of Sendler's memories. They divided the stage space into two essential locations. One side was the Ghetto, while the other was Sendler's apartment located just outside the Ghetto. The remaining background was designed as a triptych: "an apartment block in the Warsaw Ghetto; a woman leading a child by the hand through an archway; and the apple tree under which the jars were buried" (Mayer 32). The teens agreed that the culminating scene of the performance was Sendler convincing Mrs. Rosner, a Jewish mother, to relinquish her child so that Sendler could take the child to safety¹⁴.

The *Life in a Jar* plot is uncomplicated and haunting in its simplicity. The straightforward dialogue stands in juxtaposition to the overwhelming trauma that surrounded Sendler, other Resistance workers and the Jewish people trapped in the Ghetto. The story is introduced and narrated by a young actor who portrays one of the Jewish orphans. Her recitation weaves through the scenes between: Sendler and fellow worker Marie; Sendler and the Rosners; Sendler and a blackmailer; and Sendler and several characters who hide orphans. *Life in a Jar* is an effective performative embodiment of Sendler, a story performed by children displaying the abuse perpetrated by adults. It is the simultaneous representation of hope and innocence while also the prodigious trauma of genocide that engulfed Sendler and others during the Holocaust. *Life in a Jar* materializes the conjunction of genocide's ordinary and extraordinary elements, disparate dimensions of the humble and the profane, and a significant representation of *traumatic realism*.

As Cambers, Coons and Stewart created their performance, the teens were engaging in what Carol Martin defines as documentary theatre that which performs history and creates a community between the performers and a live audience, a physical place where “past events regain significance” (Martin 9). All the students’ modes of selection, organization, editing, and presentation are what Martin views as the creative dimension of documentary theatre: “How events are remembered, written, archived and performed help determine the history they become” (Martin 9). *Life in a Jar* was the creation of a performance about the expunging of identity in order to restore identity, the burying of names so that individual and communal history could later be authenticated through the revelation of hidden documentation and of an obscured historical narrative. The Kansas students would become Sendler’s narrative through performance and through their embodiment of the historical archive.

Even though *Life in a Jar* is a performative embodiment of an historical event, it distills meaning from the past in a manner that is distinct from the archive. Taylor cites the traditional divergence between history and performance as a false dichotomy, the archive as stable and performance as “un-history” : “How can ‘performance,’ often thought of as ephemeral practice or as taking place only in the here and now, give evidence of past behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes?” (Taylor Performance 68) Her question is important when analyzing the ongoing and vital influence of *Life in a Jar*. Taylor proposes that performances can re-represent historical events in a way that engenders solutions to contemporary issues. Performance, and its corollary of repertoire, bring into the present past attitudes, beliefs and lessons that may create solutions for similar, contemporary issues (Taylor Performance 72).

A Confluence of Relationships Enhances Performative Embodiment

It was now February 2000 and several months before the first performance of *Life in a Jar* for Kansas History Day. The young women wanted to know everything about the humble

Polish woman that they already held tenderly in their hearts. Cambers was curious about Sendler's burial site, a grave representing a small gesture of memorialization to Sendler. Sending an email inquiry to The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, the teens received a surprising response; Sendler was alive and residing in Warsaw. The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous told the girls that Sendler was very advanced in years and in poor health. The organization encouraged the young women to write to her, as did Conard, but not to expect an answer.

The Kansas students composed their letter to Sendler, detailing their performance about her historical narrative. They admired her mission to the Jewish people and her great courage in the face of a ruthless military regime in Poland. Extolling her bravery, they wrote: "Your story is one of great inspiration to our classmates....You are one of the great women of the past century, as far as we are concerned" (Mayer 236). Cambers, Coons and Stewart hoped to deepen their bond with the woman who had become their mentor. They sent her a picture of themselves, along with their letter which was peppered with personal questions for Sendler. They waited for a reply but weeks and then months passed. In April an envelope finally arrived. It included documents from Yad Vashem, honoring Irena Sendler. The girls poured over the papers, noticing that Sendler's awards were only from Israel; none were from Poland: "'It's weird,' said Liz. 'In Poland Irena Sendler has been like a secret for sixty years'" (Mayer 239).

The last document they examined was written in Polish. It was unintelligible to both the students and Conard so he contacted a Polish student Krzysztof Zyskowski who studied at the University of Kansas. Two weeks later Zyskowski sent a translation of the document, identifying it as a correspondence from Irena Sendler: "It was a pleasure to learn about this hero of Poland. Why don't I know her?" wondered Zyskowski (Mayer 240). It was the same question that moved like an undercurrent through the girls' thoughts as they were creating the text and performance of Sendler's narrative.

Sendler's letter to Cambers, Coons, and Stewart revealed more details about the extraordinary woman that the girls would bring to life in their performance. In a few pages she expressed her deep respect for all people and her admiration for what the Kansas students were doing. She wondered what had motivated them to tell her story and anticipated reading the performance text: "I am curious if you are an exception or more young people in your country are interested in the Holocaust. I think that your work is unique and worth disseminating," she wrote to them (Mayer 240). After Sendler read the *Life in a Jar* text, she marveled at its accuracy, particularly the scenes that the girls selected to encapsulate Sendler's narrative. She focused on the scene with Mrs. Rosner; "Your intuition and your wiseness described this scene exactly/literally what it looked like."

For Sendler, the *Life in a Jar* performance signified another opportunity for a new generation to learn about genocide's atrocities. The relationship between these women took on new meaning with their written exchange, even as the initial salutation of her letter warmly embraced the girls, calling them "my dear and beloved girls, very close to my heart." A prolific correspondence ensued between Sendler and the teens¹⁵. The flourishing emotional aspect of their relationship, which was documented through their letters, would significantly shape the performative embodiment of Sendler's historical narrative. The relational bond would live in the performance as an essential aspect of the repertoire and add substantial efficacy to the performance.

Life in a Jar won first place at the Kansas History Day competition and advanced to the national competition in Washington, D.C. in May 2000. There it received high scores but did not garner any awards, though something more significant was about to unfold for *Life in a Jar* and its cast. Because of their performance at National History Day, the young women were invited to perform *Life in a Jar* at other venues. One of their first subsequent performances took place at

the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous in New York City. The girls performed for board members, staff and several Holocaust survivors. Following the performance, one of the survivors stood and addressed the girls:

There are many ways to tell the truth. When I heard about you and what you are doing, I thought, ‘What can these children from Kansas possibly teach me—a Holocaust survivor?’ Your play is a reminder of what happened to me—to my family. For this I am very sad. I suppose it is good to weep and remember what happened to us. But we all have different reasons for weeping and not all our tears are the same. You tell a simple story—a dramatic story—that tells a simple and dramatic truth. Sometimes simple stories are the most powerful—like fairy tales—except this one is true (Mayer 246).

The moving words of the survivor demonstrated a powerful connection between the performers and their audience. After the New York performance, *Life in a Jar* resonated with ever increasing numbers of audiences.

From 1999 to the present there have been over 1500 media stories about Irena Sendler and the Kansas students’ work with her. The teens have been featured on *The Today Show*, *CNN*, *C-Span*, and *National Public Radio*. Articles about them have appeared in many print sources including *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Chicago Tribune*. Most recently, the Irena Sendler story appeared in a magazine in China that is similar to *Reader’s Digest*; the reception by the Chinese people was overwhelmingly enthusiastic (Interview 2012). Through its live performances and through audiences accessing *Life in a Jar* via its website, community building continues to grow exponentially between the *Life in a Jar* cast and those who are involved with them as audience and as participants or students in “The Irena Sendler Project.”

Through a set of unusual events¹⁶, the Kansas teens and Conard had the privilege of

traveling to Warsaw in May 2001 to meet Sendler; it would be one of five trips there. For the first time in many years the Polish organization “Children of the Holocaust” held a meeting between Resistance workers and the children whom they rescued. Sendler organized interviews between the Kansas students and child survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto. As a result of the positive publicity, the Polish press corps elevated the Americans’ visit to one of international importance (Mayer 263). Though there had been prior and extensive communication between the Kansas teenagers, Conard and Sendler, the relationship deepened when they met in person. The physical presence in one another’s company resonated profoundly at an emotional level and added to the influence of repertoire on the performance. The relationship with Sendler created additional dimensions for the young women’s embodiment of their mentor and her story and created new communities between the Americans and their friends from Poland.

The following year in 2002, the original *Life in a Jar* cast and new student actors who had joined the performance crossed the Atlantic Ocean to visit Sendler once more. The teenagers and their chaperones visited Treblinka; they retraced Sendler’s steps through the Warsaw Ghetto even though much of the original ghetto lay buried beneath the sidewalks of the city. The group also made their way to Pawiak Prison. As the Americans sat in a reconstructed prison cell, a letter from Sendler was read to them by their tour guide. Sendler’s memories of Pawiak were so painful that she could not speak personally about them to the group; she needed the reprieve of a written account, a way to translate the horror of her experience without being overwhelmed by it:

I find it very difficult to talk about my experiences at Pawiak...Prisoners like me, suspected of Underground activity, were either executed or died during torture....There must have been 10 to 15 women selected to die with me that day.... I had no doubt that I would be shot that morning. Death would be a relief—less to fear than one more beating.

I had not divulged any names or any details about our network or the children's lists.

(Mayer 296)

As she described the horror of Pawiak Prison, the students absorbed the words and import of Sendler's letter. Her past and their present merged as they sat in Pawiak Prison so far from home.

The youth were being transformed by their experience of what had touched Sendler's life during the war. Imagination was marked by what they would carry from Warsaw in their senses, emotions and cognition. Their physicality in *Life in a Jar* would signal and inform their audiences of all that was part of their growing relationship with Sendler. This is what Taylor defines as the repertoire, the enactment of embodied memory, all that is generally conceived of "as ephemeral and non-reproducible knowledge" (Taylor 20). The performance of *Life in a Jar* would continue to draw upon the additional elements and experiences of repertoire between the students and Sendler.

Chapter Two: Elements That Create Performative Efficacy

How has the simple, non-professional performance *Life in a Jar* maintained vitality for over a decade and presently influences national and international academic and sociopolitical arenas? Twelve years later significant communities have been created through an effective identification with Sendler and a bridging of social space through the girls' performative embodiment of her. Sendler, Conard and Cambers, Coons and Stewart could not have anticipated the profound ramifications that would follow their first performances in 2000

The Representation of Traumatic Realism

As previously mentioned, Holocaust history and its study is a complex and often conflicted endeavor. A multitude of divergent positions, opinions and powerful feelings surround and frame representations of the Holocaust with implications for contemporary society and for the understanding of contemporary genocide. I have suggested that Michael Rothberg presents a paradigm for examining the Holocaust and its representation, initially bifurcating the process into a Realist/Antirealist model. *Life in a Jar* is posited between the two positions with aspects of each position integral to the performance.

The Realist position maintains that knowledge of the Holocaust can be translated through a familiar, mimetic universe and belongs primarily to the realm of social scientists and historians. (Rothberg 4). Realism depends on the historical archive; the particulars of the archive are what create or represent identity and community. However historical events do not possess intrinsic meaning; it is the creation of texts that make the event intelligible to a culture or audience as *Life in a Jar* accomplishes through its performative embodiment of Sendler and the historical archive surrounding her story.

In *Representing the Holocaust*, Inga Clendinnen proposes that professional historical writing enables historical events to be viewed and understood consistently through writing's

matrix of rationality and objective reasoning. Historians are the primary professionals in understanding human nature and “thereby extending the role of reason and humanity in human affairs” (Clendinnen 182). This role of reason through writing demonstrates what Clendinnen sees as the struggle of humanity against sociopolitical paradigms of power; it is the “struggle of memory against forgetting” (Clendinnen 183). She asserts that professional historical writing, compared to artistic representations of historical events, is engaged in the processes of: interaction, selection and revision. The outcome of employing these is a “disciplined, critical remembering” (Clendinnen 183).

In contrast to Rothberg’s category of Realism is Antirealism; it is primarily supported by artists and theorists. Antirealism views the Holocaust as an experience that exists beyond traditional representations. Its extraordinarily traumatic nature situates it outside of rational narratives. There is an irrevocable rupture between ordinary life and exceptional trauma, therefore the Holocaust is transmuted into an unknowable, sublime event (Rothberg 5). Holocaust survivors cannot transcend the hold that the Nazis’ genocide exerts on their lives through historical writing.

Lea Hamaoui has written about the role of art and its relationship to historical testimony. She reminds us of the words’ impotency to express the terror of genocide: “One by one words—all the words of the human language—wilt and grow too weak to bear a meaning” (Hamaoui 243). The performative nature of *Life in a Jar* places it as a phenomenological and artistic representation of genocide. Even without dialogue, the physical presence of the adolescent actors renders for the audience the Jewish children who either escaped or perished during the Holocaust¹⁷.

Lawrence Langer understands the limitations of language in expressing genocidal trauma and has advocated for artistic representations of the Holocaust, particularly the poetry,

perform-ance text, and memoirs of Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo. Delbo testifies to the purpose-less suffering she experienced in Auschwitz, an insuperable breach of understanding for others who are not survivors (Delbo Who Will Carry 283). Chronological prose or professional, historical writing cannot captivate or convey the trauma of her Auschwitz internment.

Act III, scene 1 of Delbo's play *Who Will Carry the Word?* illustrates the grotesque and inane suffering of genocide, what Rothberg sees as the expression of *traumatic realism*. A young prisoner breaks rank as the female prisoners are marching to work in the fields outside of Auschwitz. The girl bends to gather a few dandelions; the prisoners would collect them and eat them in soup to prevent scurvy, hiding them from the guards. As an Antirealist text and representation, Delbo's writing juxtaposes the fragile young woman and the small yellow flower with the sudden, brutal punishment from her captors:

She didn't look around carefully enough; the dog jumped her and put his fangs in her throat. She let out a single, brief cry. The dog dragged her by the throat. It even dropped her for a second by the road because it was tired, then took her up in its mouth again. It dragged her like that to the swamp. She panted for many hours, at long intervals. Then someone said, 'She's not breathing anymore.' Suddenly everything was motionless and silent in the swamp." (Delbo, Who Will, 311)

It is not possible for rational, historical writing to confer meaning on this useless suffering portrayed in Delbo's play.

The horror of the Holocaust is at odds with ordinary existence and remains incomprehensible to those who have lived outside of it. Despite the inadequacy to transmit knowledge about her suffering through her representations, Delbo implored others to

acknowledge the trauma. Testimony must still be given about the Holocaust and the barbarism of genocide; Delbo's artistic representations serve as a form of that testimony. She carried her images from Auschwitz in spite of her desire to remain silent. Through artistic representation, Delbo created a communal experience between herself and the audience which is drawn into the irredeemable suffering of the death camp. Though the audience cannot fully understand Delbo's anguish and her ambivalence toward representing the Holocaust, her art re-imagines the trauma of genocide for another generation.

Rothberg regards the tension between the two poles of Realism and Antirealism as a positive dynamic in studying and representing the Holocaust. An interdisciplinary approach engenders new concepts about the relationship between culture and genocide, which holds implications for the historical and sociopolitical dimensions of contemporary culture. Rothberg cites Delbo's artistic representations as a form of *traumatic realism* (Rothberg 29). Rothberg believes trauma is not intrinsic to an event but is created through the disparity between the circumstances that are familiar and those that are radically singular. The ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide coexist not as an exclusionary dynamic (i.e. the binary of Realist/Antirealist) but rather as the intersection and synchronism of divergent elements.

Life in a Jar exhibits these same elements of *traumatic realism*. Like Delbo's art, the performance of Sendler's story represents the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide. *Life in a Jar* and "The Irena Sendler Project" simultaneously create the aspects of traumatic realism that present a new paradigmatic perspective on genocide: 1) engendering access to the historical event and, through a pedagogical methodology, 2) teaching how to apprehend the event once it is made accessible (Rothberg 103).

Rothberg's *traumatic realism* parallels Carol Martin's discourse about documentary theatre which creates a contemporary community between the performers and a live audience, a

physical representation where “past events gain significance” (Martin 9). Selecting from the archive, which seems factual and objective but already exists as discriminatory, requires scrutinizing biases and personal perspectives in order “not to propagandize through performance” (Martin 11). Documentary theatre relies on the duality of the historical archive and of artistic representations which are both present in the *Life in a Jar*. Like Rothberg, Martin validates aspects of both the Realist /Antirealist divide.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor recapitulates the idea that history is a constructed chronicle; some events are elucidated while others are obscured by those telling the story. The episodic nature of history predisposes its narrative as tethered to political ideology (Taylor 70). Taylor balances the function of writing with the elements of performance, embodiment and the repertoire in the representation of historical narrative. The role of writing has been significant in the transmission of culture and history but Taylor sees those stories as frequently guarded by a privileged elite: “Histories were burned and rewritten to suit memorializing the needs of those in power” (Taylor 16). As a performance, *Life in a Jar* supercedes writing and allows narrative by those and about those who have not wielded socio-political or military power.

In the transmission of history through artistic representation, Taylor also differentiates between theatricality or traditional Western theatre and performance. Theatricality relies on artifice as a controlled and constructed event. It is necessarily tethered to a prevailing sociopolitical ideology, which is often “the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown, found ‘object’”¹⁸ reflecting the familiar hegemonic structures of Western culture (Taylor 13). In contrast, performance which carries elements of the repertoire transfers historical knowledge, memory and identity through embodiment, the physical presence of live participants. An essential meaning of historical events and persons is archived as performance texts but finds

effective representation through embodiment for contemporary culture or audience. According to Taylor's definitions, *Life in a Jar* exists as performance rather than as traditional Western theatre.

The *Life in a Jar* performers transfer knowledge but are simultaneously repositories of their own personal histories. Each of the girls, Cambers, Coons and Stewart lost their mothers at a young age. Camber's mother had abandoned her when she was only five years old. She remembered vividly the day her mother stood up from the dining room table, got in a car and drove away (Mayer 3). Elizabeth never saw her again. Sabrina's mother died unexpectedly during the second year of *Life in a Jar* performances. Megan's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001 and died in 2006. These young women embodied their own traumatic loss even as they represented Sendler, a surrogate mother figure who had rescued children from traumatic abuse and loss.

Taylor's concept that historical narrative is essentially influenced by the repertoire is foundational to understanding the ongoing dynamism of *Life in a Jar*. The performative embodiment of Sendler incorporates uncensored codes of representation that lend to its efficacy. The girls' friendship with Sendler's impassioned the performance. The performance became more animated as they drew closer to Sendler. They heard her voice, listened to her thoughts, and felt her physical embrace and sensed Sendler's affection for them. She assured the young women of the accuracy of their archival research even as the artistic representation carried a power beyond words and written texts.

Life in a Jar dwells between Rothberg's Realist and Antirealist positions and bridges archive and performance. *Life in a Jar* is not unique in that position but it has been particularly effective with recent Holocaust education initiatives. In the performative embodiment of Sendler's narrative, there exists a continual and complex interplay between the text, which is

derived from the archive and performance, which is enlivened by the repertoire. *Life in a Jar* exceeds the binaries of: Realist/ Antirealist and archive/performance. The archival records and documents which are constituted by written words are given life through performance; and although performance materializes and then disappears, its ephemerality necessarily reflects the constative nature of the written words. Taylor acknowledges that such a symbiosis is possible; she proposes that the archive and the repertoire work together as important sources of historical knowledge, “both exceeding the limitations of the other” (Taylor 21).

The performative embodiment of *Life in a Jar* resulted in Jack Mayer’s biography of Sendler precisely because of this relationship between archive and performance. Mayer follows the liaison between Sendler and the Kansas teens and records how printed words from the first news article in 1999 inextricably bound their lives together. Sendler once wrote to the girls, “We decided to look for something more than these atrocities, and this search for the truth and some faint tiny trace lead you to me” (Letters). A trace inspired a performance which then inspired a book that documented that very performance.

By its words, the book *Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project* calls into existence all the previous, real-life “performances” that Sendler used to confound her Nazi “audiences.” The Nazis had forged a brutal racial ideology for Germany and for European Jewry. Through a kind of “performance,” Sendler and *Zegota* subverted the Nazi dogma, which amounted to the systematic expunging of Jewish identity, community and even the right to live. Sendler disguised herself as different characters, including that of a nurse and a carpenter. The gates of the Warsaw Ghetto were often the proscenium for her “acts.” Because Nazi soldiers guarded the Ghetto’s entry points, stakes no less than actual life and death depended on the efficacy of Sendler’s “performances.” Any attempt to rescue Jews meant immediate death by gunfire. Fear and courage, despair and determination mingled in Sendler’s body and mind.

Her “performances” encouraged others to perform. Mayer describes how one orphan was: “thin enough to escape under the coat of a man leaving the ghetto on a work brigade. He slipped his bare feet into the man’s boots and held on to his belt; the man’s coat, when closed, made the skeletal boy invisible” (Mayer 145). Sendler cast young Jewish boys as Aryan girls; they were transformed through forged baptismal certificates and gendered clothing. It was the conferring of a new character simultaneously through written words, the texts of false documents and Sendler’s lists of the children’s real names, and through performance. The Nazis visited the convents and orphanages that hid the children. Disguised, the Jewish children were unrecognized by the soldiers. The guards knew the Jewish boys by circumcision; and the costumed “girls” were not asked to “drop their pants.” These character transformations rescued the children from certain death.

Not only did Mayer’s book recognize these “performative” acts by Sendler and Zegota but it coincidentally memorialized the anonymous people who died behind the shadowed walls of the Warsaw Ghetto, those who were burned in the death camps or whose lifeless bodies floated in the subterranean escape routes below the Nazi occupied streets of Warsaw. Though only fleetingly, the victims are acknowledged through the pages of his book. Mayer’s book, like the performance of *Life in a Jar*, reflects aspects of Rothberg’s *traumatic realism*, the ordinary juxtaposed with the extreme trauma of genocide. What could be more ordinary than a city’s streets and its network of sewers except when they were transformed into conduits of clandestine escape or dank mortuaries? The sewers were designed to channel human waste but instead human bodies glutted the murky passageways, smothering hope in the dim light and the putrid stench. Through writing the victims are remembered; and we, as members of contemporary culture, are given another opportunity to mourn the devastation of the Holocaust.

As a creative process, the performance of *Life in a Jar* embodies and portrays Sendler’s

narrative, moving against the deconstruction or forgetting of an historical event. The Kansas teens concomitantly embody Sendler's history and their own and, in doing so, engender community with their physical presence before a live audience. Through the community that is formed, artistic representations bridge contradictory elements that are intrinsic to historical events. As Rebecca Rovit has proposed about the power of art under duress, it: "conveys feelings of alienation, uprootedness and loss of control. At the same time, art assuages feelings of futility in the artist and others" (Rovit 477) Performance may be ephemeral in its embodiment but it endures as audiences derive meaning from it and, therefore, become a community of living witnesses to the historical event.

While *Life in a Jar* brings Sendler's story to audiences, it continues to create a community of living witnesses to the historical narrative. The importance of the performance then becomes the communal identification with the narrative. Through performative embodiment, Delbo's imperative is fulfilled as another generation is made "to see" the past. The audience sees, hears and experiences young women in the present who embody another young woman from the past. Sendler's mission of rescue and restoration of lives, identity and community is demonstrated and actualized through the embodied archive. Rovit has written about the role of art as a beneficial sociopolitical influence on an audience: "Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to identify with and help a specific individual and prepares us to take responsibility for future occurrences" (Rovit 23). Accordingly, *Life in a Jar* continues to promote action and to inform imagination on both a performative and a pedagogical level.

The Presence of Irony in Performance

Lawrence Langer has written that the Holocaust defies the optimism of modern Western thought which embraces history as continual progress. Rather the Holocaust demonstrates the

human capacity for exceptional evil. Langer defines it as a failure of the entire human enterprise. Against this knowledge stands the simple performance of *Life in a Jar*. Another important component of its efficacy is the presence of irony. Along with other disparities in the performance, irony disquiets the audience and flags their departure from comfortable thought and expectations of normalcy. The physical presence of teenaged girls, moving in front of a primitive stage set, challenges probable standards of theatricality, especially related to spatial and visual dimensions. The theme of *Life in a Jar* is profound and deeply disturbing, yet it is brought to life by children, society's most vulnerable members. Children are embodying tremendous trauma even as their voices reanimate for the audience the voices of Jewish children who died in the Ghetto or in death camps. In doing so, they are simultaneously referring back to an historical event from a future time. The teens become a signifier of hope, a representation of Sendler's desire for restoration and her belief that future circumstances would improve from the desperate conditions of World War II and the Holocaust.

The winsomeness of youth invites the audience into the historical narrative of the Holocaust in a manner that makes the subject more approachable. Confronting the gravity of genocide is facilitated initially because youth tell the tale. As Langer encourages, whatever brings the Holocaust to light for another generation remains an imperative: "find ways of making the inconceivable conceivable, until it invades our consciousness without meeting protest or dismay" (Langer Alarmed 52). Innocent beings recreate the horror of a traumatic historical event and, in doing so, captivate a sense of awareness for the audience, create access to the event and help guide the pedagogy of contemporary genocide.

The simple and unpretentious portrayal of Sendler stands in stark contrast to the tightly orchestrated military complex of the Third Reich, with its abusive power and the destruction that washed over Europe like a relentless wave of bloodshed. The loosely designed and

unobtrusivestage set of *Life in a Jar* invokes a sense of protected childhood by its likeness to a fort made with sofa pillows and draped sheets. The orphan in the performance sings a song on her knees and in the background a metal sign glints, warning the audience; it reads “Warsaw Ghetto.” The sign is framed by an area of black space that appears measureless, like a portent; otherwise the entrance to the Ghetto is unremarkable. The uncomplicated, childlike scenery renders a devastating historical event more easily accessible. Less threatening, it is not the precise stage set of a professional play. In *Life in a Jar* there is continual interplay between the simplicity of what is visible and what it intimates about the dreadful depths of genocide revealed through the children’s dialogue.

There are other ironies that live within the performance and are represented through additional forms of documentation and archival sources, such as Mayer’s book and the Irena Sendler website. The obscurity of Sendler’s narrative and her anonymity ultimately led to revelation. Sendler could not have envisioned that her many journeys through Warsaw’s sewers, the hiding places she used for herself and her rescued children, and the disguises she wore, would someday contribute to her nomination for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Sendler’s sublimation of self-interest yielded life for others in a way that would travel through the decades after her, engendering her story through a performative testimony and an ensuing book and re-imagining the Holocaust for contemporary audiences.

Implied in the narrative of *Life in a Jar* are the countless people who perished in the German death camps; as Sendler said about the Jewish Holocaust: “It was the attempt to obliterate an entire nation” (Mayer 240) Ironically, the Nazis’ highly organized attempt to annihilate European Jewry led to a restoration for the Jews— the 1948 birth of the nation of Israel. The militaristic endeavor to expunge Jewish identity and community conferred a global recognition of a new homeland for the Jewish people. The inception of the nation did not

ameliorate or justify the inordinate trauma of the millions who suffered and died in the Holocaust; it was simply an actualization of Sendler's hopes—an end to the war and a restoration of community and identity for the rescued Jewish children.

Life in a Jar incorporates the presence of archetypal imagery or, in Schechnerian terms, restored behavior which addresses the existential issues that recur through each generation¹⁹. What was authentic, the real names of the Jewish children documenting their lineage, was placed in pellucid jars and buried in a garden. The jars were interred beneath an apple tree, hidden at the foot of the symbol of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree in the garden carries the archetypal image of Cain's flight after murdering his brother. Already living in brokenness, outside of Eden, Cain's irrational jealousy and hatred caused him to kill innocence. It is familiar behavior which repeats itself throughout history and provokes the perennial question—from where does the impulse for traumatic abuse and inordinate evil emanate? Despite the moral relativity that predominates contemporary thinking and navigates cultural and sociopolitical behavior, humanity continues to recognize the universal abuse that circumscribes genocide.

Another important element that lends efficacy to Sendler's story is the presence of her moral compass. She took action and risked her own life to secure people's safety, well-being and liberty. One cannot speak about or recognize others' suffering unless that suffering stands comparable to an "other," that which is not suffering. Like Sendler, Delbo was a Gentile Resistance worker.²⁰ An excerpt from Delbo's poetry challenges her reader to weigh choices and to either engage suffering or remain comfortable and complacent to others' suffering :

You who are passing by
well dressed in all your muscles
How can we forgive you

that are all dead

You are walking by and drinking in cafes

you are happy she loves you

or moody worried about money

how how

will you ever be forgiven

by those who died

so that you may walk by

dressed all in your muscles. (Delbo, Auschwitz, 229).

Delbo's injunction to "see" necessitates moving away from complacency and toward preventing one group from amassing political power over another. Such a wresting of power is frequently justified through a belief system of superiority which historically has resulted in genocide. Despite the spectrum of different values in contemporary society, the arts can engage the audience in initiatives for valuable social change. Artistic representations of traumatic abuse and genocidal conditions may effectively provoke the consideration of what should define individual and collective humanity.

Safeguarding life requires some transcendence of differing worldviews and movement toward a basis for understanding and agreement about the significance of life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who participated in Operation Valkyrie, a 1944 failed assassination attempt against Hitler. Bonhoeffer proposed a template for civil behavior: "The right to live is a matter of the essence and not of any values....The distinction between life that is worth living and life that is not worth living, must sooner or later destroy life itself" (Bonhoeffer 118). Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and executed by hanging at Flossenburg prison on April 9,

1945. His death came eleven days before the Allies liberated the Nazi death camps. Even though Bonhoeffer was executed, his words still carry meaning for present day culture. Without an agreement to respect life, genocide becomes a viable option for whomever holds political power.

Just as Irena Sendler was motivated by a strong sense of right and wrong in her resolve to rescue Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto, Cambers, Coons and Stewart were inspired and compelled by Sendler's example. They were further motivated in their own sense of mission, taking *Life in a Jar* to contemporary audiences. In a 2008 revised script of the performance, one of the characters Marie speaks to Sendler but also to the audience. Both her spoken words and the stage directions reveal the impetus behind the *Life in a Jar* performance:

Marie: 'But now, the Germans are talking about total liquidation (emphasize total).

The difference between life and death is such a thin line. The Jewish people have a Hebrew phrase, *Tikkun Olam* (important to pronounce correctly). It means to repair the world. Irena, you are repairing the world.' (Say the entire phrase very slowly

and deliberately. You want to imprint this phrase in their minds. Both sentences are important. Don't rush because this is our statement, our mission) (Script) The element of mission imbues the performance with strength and passion; communicating the respect for life adds efficacy to *Life in a Jar*.

The *Life in a Jar* performance celebrates the importance of the individual. Every rescued child was worthwhile to Sendler, risking her own life for each one. During the performance the audience sees Sendler on stage, her solitary figure engaging others but also moving alone from her apartment to the streets of the Ghetto. As one person, her life made a difference, ensuring that others had the opportunity to live. Each of the Kansas girls Cambers, Coons and Stewart

have made a difference in bringing the unique and extraordinary narrative about Sendler to national and international audiences.

When the Kansas students were initially researching Sendler for Conard's Kansas History Day project of "unsung heroes," Liz balked at the lack of information about Sendler: "she's like, an unknown? It's a little sketchy" (Mayer 9). But Conard encouraged her in a way that would subsequently be manifested through their performance: "That's the point, Liz,' [Norm] said. 'Unsung heroes. Anyone can change the world, even you'" (Mayer 9). This precept of the inviolability of an individual's worth stands in clear contrast to Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels: "Our starting point is not the individual, and we do not subscribe to the view that one should feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty or clothe the naked...our objectives are entirely different; we must have a healthy people in order to prevail in the world" (Deadly Medicine).

As an influential person, Sendler was defined by the very principle that Goebbels eschewed, caring for society's least fortunate members, "but wisdom is proved right by her children" (St. Luke 7:35).²¹ After more than half a century, Sendler has been honored for her work; Goebbels has provided a template for genocidal terror. Part of the efficacy of *Life in a Jar* is the representation of the individual's resistance to and, in some measure, defiance of a systematic abuse of power. The audience belongs to a community of witnesses to the event but is also comprised of a gathering of individuals who each experience the Irena Sendler's story in a personal way. The performance challenges each member of the communal audience to consider individual responsibility in deleterious sociopolitical behavior that leads to genocide.

The representation of the individual adds efficacy to Sendler's narrative, as does safeguarding the story's authenticity. The accuracy of the performance text in relation to the actual events, scene depictions and dialogue was confirmed by Sendler. In addition, Jack Mayer's book, which relies on primary sources, serves to document the history of the Kansas

girls and Sendler. Hollywood movie moguls have repeatedly contacted Conard and Stewart-Felt, who currently serve as directors for the Lowell Milken Education Center in Fort Scott, Kansas. The Hollywood film makers have attempted to secure the rights of the story from the Irena Sendler Project. In a September 2012 interview, Conard and Felt spoke about the importance and challenge in protecting the authenticity of Sendler's narrative and abstaining from the commodification of *Life in a Jar*.

Sendler's primary concern was continuing the mission of "respect for all people," not of self promotion or creating a fan base, while the entertainment industry often functions antithetically to Sendler's principles. The *Life in a Jar* performers augmented authenticity through their personal relationship with Sendler, experiencing the kind of person she was and learning from her forthright conversations about her priorities. In one of her many letters to the Kansas teenagers, she wrote about her 2007 nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize: "...my emotion is being shadowed by the fact that my coworkers have all passed on, and these honors fall to me. I can't find words to thank you, for my own country and the world to know of the bravery of the rescuers. Before the day you had written *Life in a Jar*, the world did not know our story; your performance and work is continuing the effort I started over fifty years ago. You are my dearly beloved ones" (Sendler website).

Any representation of Sendler must be integral to who she was, not to packaged "sound bites" and overly sentimental or hyper-sexualized story lines that often characterize contemporary Hollywood productions. Holocaust survivor Elie Wesel views what he terms "cheap and semi-plastic melodramas" as contributing little to genuine understanding of the genocide. He states it this way: "a little history, a heavy dose of sentimentality and suspense, a dash of theological ruminations about the silence of God" as quoted in Clendinnen (174). To Date, Conard and Felt have not released Sendler's story to any Hollywood studio.

Guarding the authenticity of *Life in a Jar* has been challenging in other ways. Stewart-Felt attests to websites that have carried incorrect information about Sendler, including one that presented the “fact” that she was a Nazi. After attempting to correct the information, Felt admitted that the effort was futile. The website still carries inaccuracies about Sendler. Felt believes that students and audience members who want to know what is authentic about Sendler will study primary and multiple sources, including Mayer’s book (Interview 2012). *Life in a Jar* remains influential as documentary theatre which attests to an authenticity that promotes both a powerful narrative and the creation of meaning from the embodied historical archive.

Chapter Three: The Evolution of an Effective Pedagogical Forum

Lawrence Langer identifies one of the essential challenges for Holocaust education: “Illuminating human behavior under these [Holocaust] circumstances, trying to teach about a self constantly in danger of annihilation is a major test for Holocaust educators” (Langer Preempt 189). Holocaust texts and representations must render genocide approachable in a manner that makes its extraordinary trauma intelligible to a culture or an audience. Langer explains the need for educators to balance the historical archive with the accounts of the victims’ personal sufferings.²² It is the intersection of these seemingly incongruent elements that again constitutes Rothberg’s *traumatic realism* and is reflected in the artistic representations of Delbo and of the *Life in a Jar* performers.

One of the primary purposes of Holocaust education is to inform culture about genocide and to promote initiatives that influence civil behavior in relation to genocide. Pedagogical paradigms are based on the representations of genocide. Informing precedes understanding and action. As the leading pedagogue for *Life in a Jar*, Norman Conard simultaneously guided the performance and developed the educational model that promoted the pedagogical influence of *Life in a Jar*. In 1992 education reformer and philanthropist Lowell Milken awarded Conard the prestigious Milken Education Award, which recognizes outstanding teachers nationwide. Since then the two men have collaborated on numerous educational projects. In 2007 Conard retired from twenty years of teaching at Uniontown High School to direct the Lowell Milken Center which is located in Fort Scott, Kansas.

The Lowell Milken Center uses a Project-Based Learning paradigm, which Conard employed with his high school students.²³ The purpose of Project-Based Learning is to discover and celebrate “unsung” heroes such as Sendler: “heroic role models whose actions teach respect and understanding among all people and embody the Hebrew phrase *tikkum olam*—‘repair the

world” (Lowell Milken website 2). The ongoing success of Conard’s high school students with Project-Based Learning translated effectively to the Milken Center. Milken and Conard envisioned the Center’s pedagogy at a national level but since its inception in 2007 the Center has burgeoned to both a national and an international educational forum, involving over 5300 schools and 625,000 students worldwide (Distinguished Kansan 1).

Conard’s pedagogical use of Project-Based Learning yielded *Life in a Jar* and “The Irena Sendler Project” which primarily constitutes Sendler’s legacy. Without the direction of Norman Conard, Sendler’s story may not have come to fruition. Irena Sendler deeply respected him and often referred to him as Professor Conard. While Conard’s leadership and pedagogy has been an important component in the influence of *Life in a Jar*, his mastery as an educator was recognized long before the Project, which includes multiple awards: 1992 Kansas Teacher of the Year, 1994 National Secondary Social Studies Outstanding Teacher, 2001 USA Today All-American Teacher, the 2004 Governor’s Award and a 2007 induction into the National Teachers Hall of Fame (Lowell Milken website 1).

Though Conard is a highly distinguished and effective educator, like Sendler he is a person of humility, delighting in the learning process and empowering others in pedagogical endeavors. The Kansas women expressed concern to Conard about the nature of their performance, particularly that they would perform part of the Polish historical archive during World War II (Mayer 242). They thought it was presumptuous to tell another country’s history. Conard responded with observations about history that equipped the girls to better understand their performance as an embodied archive:

‘It’s a question historians face every day,’ Mr. C. said. ‘Who gets to write history?

Whose stories get told and, just as important, whose don’t? Which memories get

disturbed, and which are forgotten? What is saved and what is lost forever? History is not only facts, it's interpretation—it's written by the people who tell it. You guys are making history—telling Irena's story when no one else would, not even Irena herself.

(Mayer 242)

Following the girls' National History Day performance, Cathy Gorn, the director of the event, lauded them as not just students of history but also as "agents of history." *Life in a Jar* significantly surpassed Gorn's expectations for the level of the event's competition, demonstrating the efficacy of the embodied historical archive early in their performances (Mayer 248).

The initial educational impact of *Life in a Jar* and "The Irena Sendler Project" was simple and unassuming. After the Kansas and National History Day competitions, *Life in a Jar* received invitations to various venues to perform Sendler's story. Initially *Life in a Jar* had only an email address, which American college and universities used to contact them, requesting parts of the fifty letter collection between Sendler and the girls. In 2004 a website ensued. Presently copies of the letters are being used by institutions of higher learning. Elementary and secondary schools have contacted the website, requesting materials that they incorporate into classroom lessons about ethics and civic conduct. Mayer's book has been integrated into school curricula (Interview 2011).

Since those earlier days, the educational ramifications of *Life in a Jar* and "The Irena Sendler Project" have become extensive. "The Irena Sendler Project" encompasses all the activities of its pedagogical forum, including the actual performance. Though the performance text is shared regularly with secondary and elementary schools, it is permitted on a discretionary basis. There have been several instances of significant alteration of the performance's original

intent and text. A study guide accompanies the *Life in a Jar* performance text, enhancing the educational perspective and understanding of the Holocaust and aiding in recognition of the performance's original intent (Interview 2012).²⁴

After thirteen years, *Life in a Jar* has performed over three hundred times both nationally and internationally, with a predominance of performances in the United States, Canada, and Poland and with hundreds of schools involved in varying capacities with "The Irena Sendler Project." More than sixty schools in Poland have developed Holocaust/*Life in a Jar* projects modeled on "The Irena Sendler Project." Several hundred U.S. schools have completed similar projects. As of February 2010 over 2000 schools have viewed the *Life in a Jar* DVD (Produced by the Milken Family Foundation) and the teacher study guide, and more than 200,000 people have either seen the play or the DVD of the play (Mayer 360). The Center encourages student research into the histories of "unsung heroes" like Sendler and to learn from each "hero's" sense of mission and purpose. More than a dozen educational projects are underway in the United States and half a dozen internationally; they are modeled on "The Irena Sendler Project" (Mayer 360).

Conard identifies the "talk-back" session following each performance as one of the most important aspects of the *Life in a Jar* performance. Conard and the cast gather at the front of the stage to tender questions and comments from the audience and to encourage dialogue. The physical presence of the embodied archive is literally before the audience, creating accessibility visually, aurally, and emotionally. There is a synergy with the audience, as the performers break the fourth wall and present themselves to the audience, engaging them with their own voices and bodies as part of the repertoire of the performance. They are dispelling the illusion of performance and reinforcing its evanescent nature by speaking as themselves. Simultaneously, they create meaning for the audience who is a community of living witnesses.

In 2003, the Kansas students nominated Sendler for the *Jan Karski Award for Valor and Compassion*. During World War II, Karski brought evidence of the Warsaw Ghetto's liquidation to the Allies (Mayer 335). Sendler won the award and shortly after, Poland's President Kwasniewski conferred on Sendler *The Order of the White Eagle*, the country's highest honor. A cascade of other awards and honors from the international community followed the first two in a profound incongruity for the woman who shunned any form of recognition or self-aggrandizement (Mayer 337).

An annual *Irena Sendler Award* was created in 2007 by Conard and the others involved with *Life in a Jar*. The recipients were to be both an American and Polish teacher each year whose "innovative and inspirational teaching of the Holocaust also reflects Irena Sendler's respect for all people," as defined by Conard (Mayer 346). The 2010 Polish recipient Marzanna Pogorzelska visited the Lowell Milken Education Center in the summer of 2012. She told Conard and Stewart-Felt that *Life in a Jar* and "The Irena Sendler Project" have helped change education in Poland. Pogorzelska educates teachers and students about the Holocaust at a university outside of Warsaw (Interview 2012).

The history of Poland's relationship to its Jewish citizens has been a tumultuous and inconsistent one. Though there was Polish Resistance during World War II, there were also grotesque incidences of anti-Semitism during and after the war. The Kansas students' first visit to Poland coincided with the 60th anniversary of a World War II massacre of 200-1000 Jews in Jedwabne, Poland. The victims were locked in a barn and then burned to death by their Polish Gentile neighbors (Mayer 261).²⁵ Polish author Jan Gross wrote a book documenting the horrific event. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* produced a national sense of shame about the massacre and the reality of anti-Semitism among the Polish people. For years following the war, Poland's Communist government avoided any discussion of

wartime resistance or rescue of Jews; Sendler's story was abandoned accordingly.

Because Gross's book precipitated a national crisis in Poland, accompanied by an official excavation of the massacre site, the country was eager for a modicum of national redemption from the ignominy of the brutal mass murder. The coincidental arrival of the Americans and their *Life in a Jar* performance became front page headlines in Polish newspapers. Hidden for so many years, Sendler's narrative was revealed at the same time pieces of burned bones were exhumed in Poland, conflating the two events. As the American performers and their director Conard checked into their Warsaw hotel, they were inundated with messages from Polish officials and other groups, including news and communication entities, requesting interviews. It was difficult for the Kansas teens to comprehend the scale of what was happening to them, and they could not foresee the journey that lay before them (Mayer 265).

The initial trip to Poland in 2001 set in motion educational dynamics that continue to the present time. The students embodied the narrative of a woman who was dismissed from Warsaw University because of her deeply held beliefs that all people are worthy of respect and dignity. Even after the war ended, Sendler was considered an enemy of the State. For years she lived under the constant threat of legal action against her or imprisonment; her son and daughter were prohibited from attending college. Sendler was the impetus for a future pedagogical forum that would reach and remind contemporary audiences that genocide must be recognized and action taken to implement alternative ways of dealing with conflict.

When Conard was selected to be the Director of the Lowell Milken Education Center—Repair the World Foundation in Fort Scott, Megan Stewart-Felt, who still plays Sendler in the *Life in a Jar* performances, became the Program Director for the Center, which is non-profit and whose mission continues to promote: “teaching respect and understanding among all people regardless of race, religion, or creed” (Mayer 360). The members of the original *Life in a Jar*

cast, Cambers, Coons and Stewart-Felt have all become educators. They have internalized the life and love of their mentor Irena Sendler, whose aspirations have given meaning to many more people than just those she rescued so many decades ago. As an outstanding and creative pedagogue, Megan Stewart-Felt is the mother of a little girl. Sabrina Coons-Murphy is a history teacher with children of her own, a little boy and girl. Elizabeth Cambers-Hutton has balanced the roles of preschool teacher and of mother to her own little girl, having been changed by her experience with *Life in a Jar*.

Life in a Jar was performed in the rural Kansas community of Garnett in March of 2012. The community is ethnically homogenous and a large portion of its 3000+ population is involved in agriculture and farming. There is an small but flourishing Amish community just north of Garnett. Several hundred people attended the event, and a voluntary demographics card was provided to the audience asking basic background information, including each audience member's reason for attending the Holocaust event. Eighty five cards were disseminated and eighty three cards were returned. The statistics are included below. In a community without diversity of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, the statistics demonstrate a continuing interest in the Holocaust. Verbal and written gestures of appreciation were expressed for bringing the performance to Garnett.

The performance was sponsored by the Garnett Chamber Players Community Theatre and initiated by the TYA program of the Chamber Players.

1) What is your age?

10-18 (15)

19-25 (0)

26-40 (8)

40-60 (29)

60 + (29)

2) What is your gender?

Female (60)

Male (23)

3) How many miles did you travel for the performance?

1-10 (31)

11-20 (11)

21-30 (19)

31-60 (17)

60+ (8)

4) How did you find out about the performance?

Newspaper (28)

Website (5)

Poster (5)

Radio (0)

Friend/family (41)

Co-worker (1)

Other (12)

5) How many theatre events do you attend per year?

0-1 (30)

2-4 (38)

5 or more (13)

6) What is your primary reason for attending this performance?

Educational (32)

Historical interest (54)

Personal (15)

Other (5)

Several of the cards had multiple answers for questions 4 and 6. It is difficult to draw exact conclusions from the information. However, in a rural community that is removed from racial conflict, the Holocaust remains a significant historical event. The primary sources for information about the performance came from newspapers and personal contacts. Several respondents included comments on their cards: *“I have read about Irena and wanted to take the opportunity to see the play. Also, I brought three of our daughters to see the play because I want them to realize that the Holocaust really happened and that people risked their lives to save others. Irena is a good example of selflessly helping people. Thanks for coming to our area!”* *“I am a Uniontown graduate and visited Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany.”* *“I have*

spoken to the Milken Center in Fort Scott to set up a partnership.” “I loved the book and the movie.” “I’ve been wanting to see this since the Kansas City Star article in 2002. My sister saw it in Camdenton, Missouri in December 2011 and told me about it.” “I have followed their story for years.” “I am a teacher from Erie, Kansas, and we are going to have Norm and Megan bring the Irena Sendler Project to our high school.”

Conclusion: Life Outside the Jar

Janusz Korczak was a Polish doctor and educator who managed a famous orphanage in Warsaw which housed over two hundred children. He planned the orphanage as a progressive entity, functioning as an egalitarian community. With the Nazi occupation of Warsaw the orphanage became part of the Ghetto. Dr. Korczak had authored several books espousing his theory of moral education for children: “How to Love a Child” and “The Child’s Right to Respect.” Like Sendler, he was a person motivated by deep moral convictions. Sendler sought out Korczak for his advice at one point in her Resistance work. She would later watch helplessly in August 1942 as the Nazis arrested Korczak and marched him and all his orphans to one of the trains departing for Treblinka. Before he entered the train, he was offered reprieve by one of the German soldiers. Korczak refused to leave his children for the sake of his own life and instead perished with them.

At their earlier meeting, the doctor expressed words to Sendler that Mayer later recorded in his book:

The Hebrew Talmud and Kabbalah speak of thirty six righteous people for whose sake God keeps the world alive, even in the most barbarous of times. None of the thirty six knows that they are one of the righteous. As a matter of fact, if someone claims to be one of the righteous they are almost certainly not, for they lack humility. So in our blessed ignorance we are all encouraged to act as if we are one of them. Perhaps you are one (Mayer 141).

Sendler and Korczak may have been two of the “righteous” ones though their lives took dramatically different paths. Clearly they were two people who loved children and sought to

protect them during the traumatic horrors that characterized the Holocaust. They were moved not merely by an intellectual or cognitive assent. Their actions to preserve life were derived from deeply held beliefs that anchored their behavior in extreme circumstances. Sendler's family taught those values by example; what she did as the "Rescuer of children" was already an intrinsic part of her character. Her practical action in defying the Nazi genocide was integral to her long before the advent of World War II.

As Langer espouses, it remains the impetus of artistic representations of the Holocaust to render its traumatic suffering in contemporary terms. As the event of the Holocaust recedes in history, its representation remains an important endeavor for examining not only the human capacity for inordinate cruelty but also for exemplifying the human capacity for good. Story-telling persists as an essential aspect of society and as a significant basis for community. As the performative embodiment of the historical archive, *Life in a Jar* keeps the events of Sendler's narrative present in the collective awareness and memory of contemporary audiences. Engaging individual and communal imagination is critical in fostering attitudes of respect and equal worth for all people.

Life in a Jar and "The Irena Sendler Project" co-join the artistic representation and the pedagogical forum through the embodied historical archive. As a demonstration of *traumatic realism*, the performance of *Life in a Jar* enjoins the ordinary and extraordinary dimensions of the Holocaust. The performative embodiment remains efficacious and influential in many different ways beyond the sphere of the actual performance. The pedagogical model fosters the cultural and relational perspectives that contribute to new perspectives for students involved in the study and research of the Holocaust. *Life in a Jar* provides opportunities for students to explore perspectives different from their own and to engage human imagination which ultimately leads to informed thinking and to behavior that extends respect to others.

The multitude of *Life in a Jar* performances constitutes an ongoing memorialization of Sendler and her story which bear aspects of both ephemerality and permanence. The physicality of the performance's story ends with the final act on stage but permanence exists through the representation of the historical archive embodied in the teens and the meaning that is created for the audience as a result of each performance. Each new performance intersects the ordinary and the extraordinary elements of genocide; and through the performative embodiment of the historical archive, children represent simultaneously traumatizing and revitalizing aspects of Sendler's story. There is also meaning in the creation of significant communities through the interaction of performers with one another; the performers with Sendler; and the performers with the audience.

Sendler's hope to restore the Jewish children their authentic identities and communities was not actualized after the war. She uncovered the buried jars with the lists of the children's real names and families. A portion of the thin thread of genealogy had deteriorated in one of the jars that had broken in the damp soil. Sendler shared with the Kansas students the experience of unearthing the lists in the spring of 1945, letters on paper that symbolized actual human beings. It was a moment of great ambivalence for her. She felt exuberant bringing the names into the light of day. At the same time, she compared exhuming each identity with uncovering painful memories: "As long as the jars were buried we didn't have to admit to ourselves that all the children's parents were dead. I think memory is like that—we bury it to keep from hurting, but always it needs to be dug up. Jaga and I, we hoped nothing more would disturb the children's broken lives" (Mayer 311).

After the recovery of the lists, Sendler reconnected as many of the children as possible with family members. It proved a daunting task; most parents had been killed, and Sendler had difficulty locating even distant relatives. She persevered for a year and then contacted the

president of the Central Committee of Polish Jews Adolf Berman to assist with the arduous process. Moving to Israel to live with other Polish survivors on a kibbutz, Berman took many of the lists with him. Sendler lost contact with him after that. The loss remained a source of great disappointment for her. She regarded it as a personal failure.

Despite Sendler's sense of failure, the performative embodiment of her narrative continues to reach and deepen the imagination of contemporary audiences and students. *Life in a Jar* provides an opportunity to be a living witness to genocide, to mourn what it represents and to promote practical action against further genocide. To continue to represent the Holocaust and to educate people about the historical event implies the ever-present possibility of genocide and acknowledges the contemporary reality of genocide. The representation and renegotiation of Holocaust memory remains as pertinent as ever since the global community has not advanced beyond the realm of atrocity and genocide.

As a recent example of ongoing sociopolitical conflict, Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan created a statue of Adolf Hitler entitled "Him," as part of an art installation at the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw in November 2012. The statue is made of wax and depicts Hitler as a boy, dressed in a gray suit, kneeling in prayer. The figure is located in a courtyard of the former Warsaw Ghetto. The statue has generated a great deal of controversy. Poland's chief Rabbi Michael Shudrich condemns the art and its location as insensitive to: "...those who suffered because of what Hitler created, to Holocaust survivors, to non-Jewish survivors, to those who didn't survive" (South China Morning Post).

During World War II, Russia's leader Joseph Stalin killed millions of his own countrymen in order to establish a dictatorship in Russia. As part of his ideology, he believed that: "Education is a weapon whose effect depends on who holds it in his hands and at whom it is aimed."²⁶ The imperative then becomes having pedagogues like Lowell Milken, Norman Conard

and Megan Stewart-Felt who envision education not as a weapon but as a process that teaches respect for all people and embraces cultural and racial differences in an understanding manner. Project-Based Learning gives opportunities to study and research subjects in greater depth. *Life in a Jar* and “The Irena Sendler Project” demonstrates a fruition of that pedagogical paradigm. As *Life in a Jar* continues in its influence nationally and internationally, it also exemplifies the power and efficacy of performance as an embodiment of the historical archive.

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Endnotes

¹ From the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: *The Holocaust Encyclopedia-Children of the Holocaust*.

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005142>. Children were especially vulnerable to the Nazis' barbarism. Over 1.5 million children were killed as a result of Nazi racial ideology including more than a million Jewish children, thousands of German children with disabilities and Russian and Polish children. The younger children were usually the first transported to the killing centers, along with the elderly; the Nazis regarded them as "useless eaters" because they could not be used as productive laborers. Children were also used for medical experiments and research which often resulted in their deaths. (See *Deadly Medicine, Creating the Master Race* at the National Archives at Kansas City, March 16 - June 10, 2010). Hundreds of Russian and Polish children were kidnapped by the Nazis and taken to Germany if they possessed Aryan externalities, defined by blond hair, fair skin and blue eyes. As a possession of the Third Reich, these children were then adopted by "suitable" German families in order to perpetuate the blood line of the Aryan Master Race.

² Irena Sendler and her friend Jadwiga (Jaga) Piotrowska buried the jars that contained the rescued children's real names in Jaga's garden at night when no one could see them. In the spring of 1944, the two women dug up the jars. Sendler said that they used their hands and spoons to unearth the jars: "I remember how the dirt smelled, so rich and full of the promise of peace."

³ In Clendinnen's *Reading the Holocaust*, she purports that historical writing is better suited to represent the Holocaust to readers/audiences than art. Clendinnen terms "secular 'professional'

historical writing” as open to the objective processes of: interaction, selection and revision. She categorizes art as absolute in its representation and antithetical to these processes (182).

⁴ Rothberg changes the historical approach to understanding genocide, specifically the Holocaust. The chronological events of the Shoah are important but the focus needs to move from the events themselves to their transmission and psychological and social aftermath. His emphasis of Holocaust representations that demonstrate the coexistence of the ordinary and extraordinary define the theory *traumatic realism*. He cites Charlotte Delbo’s work as an effective example of *traumatic realism*.

⁵ Rothberg gives an example of elements that constitute *traumatic realism* in a story that he read in Ruth Kluger’s Holocaust memoirs. A mother and daughter imprisoned at a death camp befriended two other women. They were separated by a barbed wire fence but spoke with them as much as possible. The mother had an extra pair of wool socks that she was going to throw over the fence to share with the others. The daughter wanted to throw them, thinking she would be more successful in the attempt. The mother refused her daughter’s offer, threw the socks and failed in her effort. The socks were stuck on the top of the fence: “Futile gestures. The next day the Hungarian women were gone, the camp stood ghostly empty, in the barbed wire our socks still hung” (Rothberg 134). Here is the juncture of the ordinary and the extraordinary with trauma engendered not in the objects but the in the disparity between the familiar and the uncommon.

⁶ Heinrich Himmler stated: “Everyday problems do not interest us” (Rothberg 107). Rothberg believes that this ideology contributed to an “age of extremes.” Focus on the Holocaust exists partly due to the unique power and destruction of twentieth century military technology used by

the Third Reich. The question remains- what other group of people in history have had centuries of persecution , like the Jewish people, that has followed them through several diasporas and continues globally today?

⁷ In February 2004, Jack Mayer, a pediatrician and Sendler's biographer, read an article about Sendler and the Kansas students. This began his interest in *Life in a Jar* and the Irena Sendler Project. Mayer worked with Eva Garcelon, a Polish translator who assisted Mayer with primary sources and texts and with understanding Polish customs and culture (Mayer 377). Mayer accompanied the students on their second trip to Warsaw in 2005. He met Professor Jacek Leociak, co-author of *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (Yale University Press, July 2009). Leociak served as the group's tour guide through Warsaw.

⁸ Website: http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/138332.Joseph_Stalin.

⁹ Theologian and philosopher Thomas Malthus espoused principles that were read by Charles Darwin. Darwin predicated his theory of evolution on Malthusian concepts of economics and overpopulation. (see <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/malthus.html>>). Both Hitler and twentieth century eugenics proponents premised ideology on Darwinian principles. (See also Ben Stein's 2008 movie/DVD *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*).

¹⁰ Told to him by Sendler, Mayer recounts several poignant stories about people in the Warsaw Ghetto. The sudden disappearance of people familiar to Sendler solidified her resolve to rescue orphans and later children with families. Sendler relates a particular story about family with six children, who took the children for walks each day in the Ghetto in two strollers: "They sang old

Yiddish songs, and their voices were beautiful....After some months she noticed that the mother and father were accompanied by only four children, then three; eventually one stroller disappeared, as did the family's shoes and their coats. Finally only the mother and father were left. They still managed to sing but the mother was skeletal and weak, and the father had to push her in the stroller. Then she too was gone, and there was no more singing" (Mayer 124).

¹¹ The excerpt is from original letters housed at the Lowell Milken Center in Fort Scot, Kansas. The letters are correspondence between Sendler and Conard, Cambers, Coons and Stewart, which number over fifty.

¹² When they began working on the Irena Sendler project, the three original students were an unlikely trio. They were essentially changed through their involvement with *Life in a Jar* and all that ensued from the first performance at the 2000 Kansas History Day competition. When Sabrina Coons left for college, she shared with Cambers and Stewart her desire to be accepted by them when they first met. Greater than the acceptance, the women have developed a valuable life-long friendship. Their differences became insignificant as they worked as a team on a meaningful pedagogical project (Mayer 340).

¹³ The eight steps of Project-Based Learning is explained at <http://www.lovellmilkencenter.org/start-project.taf>. They are: 1) determine if a student is working as an individual or in a group 2) pick a mode for the project: performance, documentary, exhibit, website or essay 3) select a topic, which allows for both primary and secondary resources 4) Collect background information 5) develop a thesis 6) analyze the data and begin an outline of the project 7) research 8) develop project, script, essay or outline. The Lowell Milken Center uses PBL for their celebration of "unsung heroes;" they continue to collaborate with

many schools with the PBL paradigm.

¹⁴ From a performance text that was revised from the original text on 8/8/2011.

¹⁵ From the Sendler letters housed at the Lowell Milken Center

¹⁶ *Life in a Jar* performed at the Kansas City Westridge Middle School in the Shawnee Mission school district. An audience member John Schuchart, a businessman who had volunteered as a teacher for a year, took the cast and Conard to lunch after the performance. When he asked the group about the future plans for the performance, Stewart told him they were already fundraising to visit Sendler. Schuchart financed their first trip to Poland (Mayer 258).

¹⁷ The artistic representation of *Life in a Jar* juxtaposes the physical presence of youth with the gravitas of the historical event of the Holocaust. Typically youth represents the aspect of human personality that is least prejudiced and most tolerant of differences. They are carrying one of the most corrupted visions of humanity, that of wanton destruction and abusive genocide.

¹⁸ Taylor's "found brown object," that which is "other" and specific to Sendler's narrative is the Jewish child. The Nazis' pursuit of the Master Race, reflected in their Aryan template of blond hair, fair skin and blue eyes is the epitome of Taylor's "white protagonist."

¹⁹ Richard Schechner defines his concept of restored behavior as living behavior that is viewed as "strips of behavior," that are not tethered to originating causes, whether political, social or psychological. The causes are the catalysts that create the behaviors (35). From a performance perspective, the restored behavior moves patterns of behavior from the past into the present; they

are familiar because they repeat themselves through each generation. Originality is derived singularly from the context of the restored behavior.

²⁰ Like Sendler, Charlotte Delbo was a Gentile Resistance activist. She had been a French theatre director prior to the Nazi occupation of France. She and her husband George Dudach became part of the French Resistance in 1941. They distributed anti-Nazi literature from their apartment. Discovered and arrested in March 1942, George was executed in May of the same year. Delbo was taken as a prisoner, primarily to the death camp of Auschwitz but was also at Ravensbruck. She survived the Holocaust and wrote narrative, poetry and a performance piece about her Holocaust experiences.

²¹ This is an excerpt from the gospel of Luke, a physician who recorded an account of Jesus Christ. The context of what Christ was saying was directed to those who criticized John the Baptist for his austere habits and simultaneously criticized Christ for the opposite. At other points in the New Testament, Christ is criticized by the Pharisees, a Jewish religious elite who rejected Christ's claims as Messiah. Tension exists between the letter of the Mosaic law, as represented by a self righteous condescension toward others, and the spirit of the law, which is an agape love for others. See also *Revelation* by Flannery O'Connor.

²² Langer defines Delbo's artistic representations as a language that uses chronology and duration. Chronology perpetuates social form and sees history as a progressive function of time. Duration is ever present, experiencing events not in a linear fashion but continual, like Delbo's memories of Auschwitz. The events of the Holocaust represent a rupture of culture and time that is irreconcilable to the concept of chronology (Langer Alarmed Vision 55). Durational

language is similar to poetry in its form.

²³ See footnote #13

²⁴ There is a study guide that accompanies a *Life in a Jar DVD* for schools requesting the performance text. There is an explanation of the Irena Sendler Project and the Lowell Milken Center. There are also discussion questions for pre- and post viewing to facilitate thinking about what constitutes an unsung hero. Conard stated that the non-professional context of the performance makes it more attainable for students if they consider performing the play.

²⁵ The original *Rzeczpospolita* article by Kczynski can be accessed in the original Polish at http://www.rzeczpospolita.pl/PL-iso?gazeta/wydanie-000505/publicystyka/publi_cystic_a_l.html. On July 10, 1941 in Jedwabne, the Nazis gave orders for the razing of the small town and locking the town's Jewish citizens in a barn and burning them to death. The orders were implemented by local Poles. For years, the deed was attributed to the Germans as the ones that did the burning. An introduction by Morlan Rogers to the article online) states that Professor Jan Gross of New York University had uncovered documents from an obscure Polish archive that attested to the Polish culpability in the Jedwabne incident.

²⁶ Same website as #8