

Marzanna Pogorzelska

**Information on the workshops entitled *Irena Sendler discovered once again*
– *how to teach about her and the other Righteous***

The main goal of the workshop was to analyze the well-known image of Irena Sendler, deconstruct some of its elements and formulate conclusions regarding the teaching about her and other Righteous.

During the first part of the workshop, the participants (further 'Ps'), divided into groups, discussed Sendler's public/general image, including such features of the image as a) character traits, b) represented values, c) important facts from her biography, including especially activity during the occupation and after the war. At this stage, the Ps received a set of information from the school websites named after Irena Sendler, regarding their patron. Based on the received materials and their own experience, the Ps drew attention to references to such traits as love for another person and children, modesty, heroism/courage, goodness, dedication, tolerance, respect for others, humility, service to others that prevailed in Sendler's common image. Among the elements of the biography, in turn, the presence of such permanent elements as individual agency (saving approximately 2,500 children and leading them out personally from the Warsaw Ghetto), work in social care, persecution of the communist security apparatus, loss of her son as a result of imprisonment, transition to "forced", early retirement. As a complement to this set of features and elements of the biography, I presented to the Ps selected quotes from the information posted on the websites of schools named after Irena Sendler, and pointing to the sacralization of her characters by, for example, referring to the patron's descriptions of traits that are that of the saints, especially saintly women (love, modesty, goodness, sacrifice) or placing her among a specific, religion-related circle of figures. Then, the leaders were asked to reflect on the possible

consequences of the present, "traditional" representation of the heroine. The Ps pointed to the danger of presenting Sendler unilaterally as an unattainable ideal and inscribing it into a model of narrowly understood patriotism. The next part of the course was a discussion about the characteristics and elements of Sendler's biography, which in the general narrative are marginalized, overlooked, or presented in an untrue way. In this phase of the workshop, based on the publication of A. Bikont (*Sendlerowa. W ukryciu*) and the Ps' knowledge I verified with the Ps each previously mentioned features of the figure and elements of her biography. With regard to biographical themes, attention was paid to the inflated number of children saved, the specificity of Sendler's activity in the rescue operation, consisting mainly of securing organizational issues, post-war party affiliation, and complicated personal life. Among the neglected features, and being the important qualities of the figure discussed, the Ps mentioned her leftist views, decisiveness, unacceptance, and rebellion against world injustice, sharp views and vivid hatred of anti-Semitism (also after the war), determination, charisma, organizational sense, and ability to cooperate. A separate subject of the discussion was the context, marginalized in Sendler's public, which consisted not only in functioning in hostile German but also in a largely Polish environment. At this point, I summarized the Ps' reflections by referring to the discursive hang-ups proposed by L. M. Nijakowski in Polish historical politics. The first one of them, referred to as "a story without dark scars" is "hiding and rejecting events in which Poles were the torturers and perpetrators of crimes"¹. The next hang-up is the religious dimension of historical policy, in which Catholicism is placed "among the characteristics defining Poles"². The last, also referring to the presentation of Sendler's figure, is a discursive hang-up named by Nijakowski the cult of romantic heroes, consisting in the appreciation of the national uprisings "even if they were doomed to fail", lacking recognition for those distinguished by a "positivist daily bustle (...)"³. In one of the groups, I additionally presented the possible reasons for avoiding certain threads in learning about Sendler, especially those that can

¹ M. Nijakowski, *Polska polityka pamięci. Esej socjologiczny*, Warsaw 2008, p. 201.

² Ibidem, p. 197.

³ Ibidem, p. 220.

cause feelings of guilt and shame (loneliness of the rescuers among their own group). I referred to the study by M. Bilewicz who described the strategies regulating negative emotions: situation selection (focus on *other* aspects of history, overestimation of positive actions, avoidance of the informant), modification of the situation (undermining the credibility of the source, censorship, concealment), focusing attention (emphasizing the marginal character of the actions and perpetrators of crimes, rivalry of suffering, competition for the status of a victim, conspiracy theories), cognitive transformations (belittling the facts, dehumanization of victims), and modulation of expression (suppression of opinions that cause guilt and shame) ⁴.

The final part of the classes consisted in formulating conclusions regarding the ways of teaching about Sendler and other Righteous. At this stage, attention was paid, among others, to: a) the necessity to base teaching on reliable, fact-based knowledge, b) show the whole complexity and contradiction of the character, c) expose features that had a major impact on rescuing: social involvement, hatred for anti-Semitism, determination, the ability to organize help and cooperation, d) appreciation of the "positivistic bustle", and not only heroic acts of heroes, e) consideration of the entire context of events, e.g. loneliness of the rescuers among "their own", issues of political views and affiliation in post-war reality, difficult choices, f) up-to-datedness of anti-Semitic and xenophobic attitudes in the context of teaching about the Righteous, g) "using" Sendler and the Righteous to teach active acceptance and help for excluded groups (e.g. refugees, minorities, other disfavored groups in a given community).

⁴ M. Bilewicz, *(Nie)pamięć zbiorowa Polaków jako skuteczna regulacja emocji*, "Teksty Drugie", 2016 (6), pp. 52-67, DOI: 10.1813/td.2016.6.4).