REMARKS AT THE 100TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION
OF THE BIRTH OF IRENA SENDLER
Ambassador Lee Feinstein
February 15, 2010
Teatr Kamienica, Warsaw

Szanowni Państwo,

It is a privilege to be here today to honor the extraordinary life of Irena Sendler.

I'd like to thank the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and 2B Productions. The U.S. embassy is honored to support your efforts.

For decades after the war, Irena Sendler's courage and compassion were an inspiration for Poles familiar with her story.

Only in recent years, however, has the rest of the world learned of Irena's bravery, compassion, and modesty, all of which are documented in this remarkable film by Mary Skinner.

The film tells the story of how Irena Sendler and her colleagues from Zegota, the Council to Aid Jews, risked their own lives and put their own families at risk to rescue more than 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto.

It tells the story of the dangers faced by Irena and her compatriots, both Catholic and Jewish.

And it allows Irena to tell her own story about the atrocities she witnessed and the dangers she and her compatriots faced to smuggle children out of the ghetto and hide them until the end of the war.

I am pleased to welcome the creator of this film, Mary Skinner.

Mary is an American filmmaker and the daughter of a Warsaw war orphan.

We are very pleased you would make the trip to join us in wintry Warsaw to share this film with us.

Projects such as these take on new urgency with each passing day.

The time is not distant when there will be no survivors – and no Righteous – left to give first-hand accounts of what they witnessed and what they saw.

As that time draws closer, projects that document the heroism of Irena Sendler – and thousands of others like her who risked all to rescue Jews, Roma and Sinti, gays and lesbians, and other groups singled out for extermination – are all the more essential.

In his video statement marking the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, President Obama pointed to the example of the Righteous as a symbol of hope in one of humanity's darkest hours.

In that same spirit, the President honored five Polish Righteous and two survivors at the U.S. Capitol in April last year.

But it is not enough to remember and to honor the Righteous. Their heroism in the face of utmost darkness, depravity, and evil calls each of us to a higher purpose.

As President Obama said, we must do more than bear witness, we bear the burden of resisting anti-Semitism, bigotry, and ignorance in all its forms; of refusing to become bystanders to evil.

Poles, like Americans, understand this. Our two countries have long been bound together by shared values and common purpose.

Poles, like Americans, know that they themselves are not truly free as long as others are mired in oppression and poverty.

Today, Poland is a leading member of NATO – an alliance built on a commitment to defend human rights, to promote democratic values, to help others secure the blessings of liberty.

Today, Polish youth volunteer in far-off places like Rwanda helping to build schools and to install irrigation systems.

Poles work in their own communities – and on the international stage – to raise awareness and urge action against human rights abuses in Iran and Darfur.

Closer to home, Polish NGOs work to promote democratic change in Ukraine and Belarus.

Each in their own way, they are upholding and passing on the legacy of the Righteous. I suspect they will also be the first to tell you that there is more to do, that we cannot rest.

Irena Sendler's heroic story teaches us that individuals, alone and working together, can make a difference.

May we have the courage to embrace her legacy. May we honor her memory by allowing her heroism and bravery to serve as an example in our own lives.