

How to tell a story that touches the heart



1

The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler takes the audience on a journey with a remarkably brave woman during a dark period in world history. The Hallmark Hall of Fame movie is based on a true story about a nurse and mother who lived in Warsaw when the German army invaded and occupied Poland in 1939.

The Germans imprisoned some 400,000 Jewish people in the Warsaw ghetto, which was surrounded by a brick wall. Irena Sendler found ways to bring clothing, medicine and food to starving people behind the wall. In July of 1942, she became the heart and soul of an underground effort that rescued more than 25,000 children from the ghetto before they could be sent to the Treblinka death camp in Eastern Poland.

She began by convincing parents that their children were

in danger. She then smuggled them out of the ghetto, frequently through an underground sewer, and placed them with Polish families who either volunteered or were paid.

The 95-minute film was produced by Jeff Most and directed by John Kent Harrison, who also co-authored the script. The cinematographer was Jerzy Zielinski, ASC, who was born and raised in Poland. His parents and his father-in-law were Holocaust survivors who were imprisoned in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Zielinski had his first meeting with Harrison in Poland in January 2008. "John didn't want to make another epic Holocaust movie," he explains. "He wanted to get inside of Irena's head and tell an objective story about her and the children."

They began three weeks of pre-production planning in Riga, Latvia in September. The 800-year-old city is on the coast of the Baltic Sea. "Riga doesn't look exactly the same as Warsaw did during the 1940s, but the architecture, cobblestone streets and abandoned buildings where we filmed ghetto scenes were close enough," Zielinski says. "A few sets were built in empty buildings."

Anna Paquin, who was cast in the leading role, and two other actresses came from the United States. The rest of the cast came from England and Poland. Local people, including children, were cast as extras. The production team, including Zielinski's crew, came from the United States, Canada, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany and Poland. "Everyone was inspired to work together as a family," he says.

Panavision in Warsaw provided two cameras with Platinum Panaflex and Millennium XL bodies, and Zielinski used a set of Primo primes plus, an 11:1 Primo zoom, and a 400mm Nikkor telephoto lens. Heliograf, another Polish company, provided the lighting package, including two Mole-Richardson beam projectors which they bought for this project.

Zielinski decided to limit his palette to KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 film, which he "pushed" a stop. That gave him the freedom to shoot in virtually any light, while creating a slightly edgy look that visually punctuates the mood.

There was a 33-day production schedule, beginning in late November. It was cold, with constant rainfall, occasional snow, and around 20 hours of underexposure every day. Zielinski observes that the darkness and harsh weather worked for the story. He and the director used camera movement and composition to tell the story from the subjective perspectives of the main characters and to keep the war in the background.

"That affected both staging and our decision to use film noir style lighting," Zielinski explains. "In the beginning, I had to remind myself to use soft light, but not to make it beautiful. It's kind of a monochromatic, gray look with hard, black shadows."

Front-end lab work was done at Technicolor in London.

Sendler was arrested by the Gestapo in October 1943. They tortured her, including breaking her feet and legs, but she refused to reveal names of other members of the underground. She was sentenced to death, but a Gestapo officer was bribed to set her free on the way to her planned execution. The Underground hid her until the war ended. The heroic nurse died in 2008 at the age of 98.