

The Star-Ledger

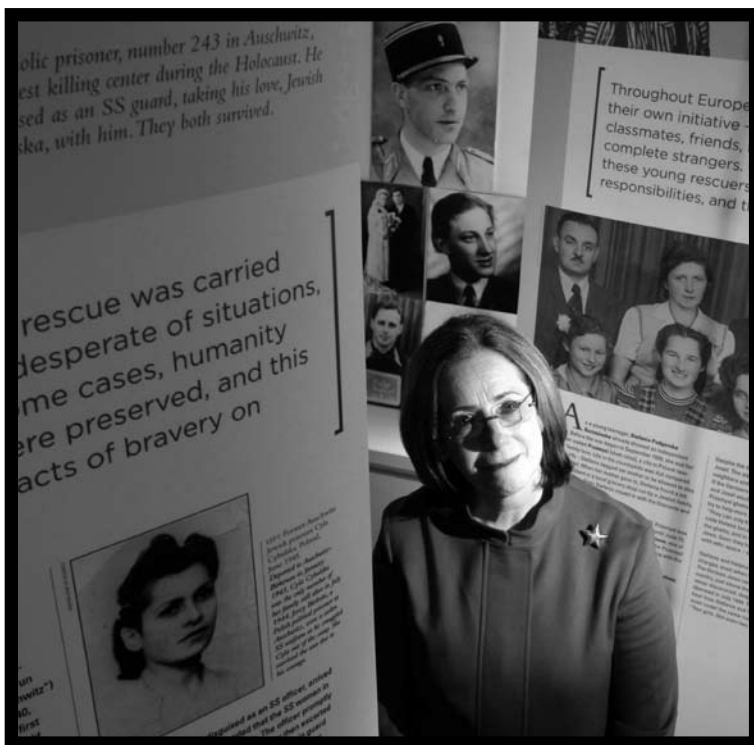
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THE NEWSPAPER FOR NEW JERSEY

I am New Jersey

Meet people who make New Jersey special, in each section of today's Star-Ledger

She makes sure the humble heroes of the Holocaust are given their due



JOHN MUNSON/THE STAR-LEDGER

STANLEE STAHL

Righteous work

BY JEFF DIAMANT
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Stanlee Stahl, a feisty tornado of a woman with piercing blue eyes and a strong dislike for the word “no,” is at this moment trying to overcome the innumerable obstacles of international phone service to convey a message to a man in Serbia.

“I understand that. I understand that,” she shouts into the phone in her 19th-floor Manhattan office that looks out on the Hudson River. “I understand. I will have to call Western Union, but Peter, it’s not going to happen probably until Friday. I have no control over Western Union. I will do my best. You will get the money.”

Stahl persists because she is trying to transfer money to a married couple in Belgrade who helped hide Jews from Nazis 64 years ago. The couple do not speak English, and Stahl is using their son’s friend, who does, as an intermediary.

She is executive vice president of a unique charitable organization called the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which gives money to needy non-Jews around the world who, more than six decades ago, helped protect Jews during the Holocaust.

The job has placed her on a historic mission, says Stahl, who is Jewish and whose uncle, an American serviceman, died in the Battle of Monte Cassino in 1944.

“The mission resonates,” said Stahl, a longtime South Orange resident. “It’s more than a job. I’m

not working. This is passion. There’s not a day when I get up where I don’t want to go to work. You have to want to get up at 5 to 5 to get on the 6 a.m. train and get here at 20 to 7 so you can call Poland, or Israel, which is seven hours different.”

No one doubts Stanlee Stahl’s passion. At 63, she works 12-hour days, not including her commutes on NJ Transit. Two years ago, she began competing in triathlons. Earlier in life, she worked for food banks in New Jersey, developing a program that helped fight hunger. And she is an avid knitter.

Day to day, she is the leading force at the Manhattan-based foundation, a mini-welfare service that provides regular stipends, mailed three or four times a year, to 1,150 poor non-Jews around the world who were recognized by Israel as having placed their lives — and their families’ lives as well — at great risk by shielding Jews from Nazis.

“The Jewish community does not forget,” Stahl said. “Our mission is, we’re repaying a debt of gratitude. Most of our donors are not (Holocaust) survivors. They were born in America and realize we need to say thank you.”

- 1 **Born:** June 26, 1945, Passaic
- 2 **Education:** Passaic High School, 1963. Miami University in Ohio, bachelor’s in political science and history, 1967. George Washington University, master’s in public administration, 1971. New York University, master’s in philosophy, 1989.
- 3 **Family:** Married George Ackerman in April 1981. They have a son, David, 24.
- 4 **Hobbies:** Triathlons, knitting, reading mysteries and reading about the Holocaust.
- 5 **Career:** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1967 to 1971, 1973 to 1989. Community Food Bank of New Jersey, 1989 to 1991. Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, 1992 to present.
- 6 **Quote:** “I’m the kind of person who gets involved and interested in what I do. I can sit there and talk about hunger in New Jersey and the need for people to care outside their nuclear families.”

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THE NEWSPAPER FOR NEW JERSEY

Righteous work continued

HUNDREDS OF STORIES

Stahl knows the stories of hundreds of rescuers — all of them incredible, she says: A Nazi's wife in Berlin who hid Jews in defiance of her husband. An Olympic rower in Denmark who rowed Jews in a canoe to neutral Sweden. A male non-Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz who escaped with a Jewish woman he loved.

Her detailed recountings are so enthusiastic it sounds as if she were there 65 years ago, or as if she's bragging about a favorite aunt or uncle.

"I just saw Frieda in July," she said of Frieda Adam, now in her 90s and living in Germany. "She was a German woman who met a Jewish girl at work, Erna Puterman, and when Jews were banished they came to be friends."

Erna had a brother who was deaf, and when their mother was picked up and deported to Auschwitz, Frieda took Erna and her brother in.

"She said, 'As long as there's food for my children, there'll be food for you.' She hid Erna and her brother in her apartment in Berlin for the duration of the war. Her husband was a Nazi and a follower of Adolf Hitler and at one point found out that his wife was hiding Jews, and he started blackmailing her, so she moved the two Jews to another place.

The rescuers hid Jews in basements, barns and boats, or helped smooth the path to escape in other ways.

Jerzy Bielecki, a Pole, helped Cyla Cubulska, a Polish Jewish woman he loved deeply, escape from Auschwitz. Knud Christiansen, the Dane Olympic rower, not only secured the release of Jewish friends from German occupiers, but also hid Jews in his home and, later, rowed hundreds across the Oresund, the body of water separating Denmark and Sweden. He now lives in Manhattan.

His daughter said the work of Stahl and her foundation have been critical to her father.

"We love her. The things she did for our father have made all the difference," said Marianne Marstrand.

Besides a stipend, the foundation also arranged for Christiansen, who has lived in a small apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side, to be given a lifetime membership to the nearby Jewish Community Center, where, among other things, he can use the rowing machine.

"This was the one wish he had," said Marstrand.

"He always wanted to be a member, and he asked if they could help him with a membership. Stanlee wrote to them or called, and he has a lifetime membership. He enjoys it so much."

Maria Kershenbaum brought food to two Jewish men who lived for two years in an underground gravelike hideout in her parents' barn that was disguised by a plank covered with manure.

All three receive stipends. Kershenbaum — who later married one of the men she helped save, Moses Kershenbaum — lives in Red Bank.

"I like her (Stahl) very much," said Kershenbaum, 79, who uses a wheelchair. "She's a very good-hearted person. I am a senior citizen and I am disabled, and whatever money comes, helps."

TO AID THE RIGHTEOUS

Since 1963, Israeli law has recognized non-Jewish Holocaust rescuers with the title "Righteous among the Nations," bestowed by the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

The authority, better known to Jews as *Yad Vashem*, gives recipients a medal and certificate of honor, and if they live in Israel, as fewer than three dozen do, they receive a government pension.

The idea of actually paying stipends to the Righteous among the Nations so they wouldn't have to live in poverty, originated with a California rabbi named Harold Schulweis, who first shopped it around in the 1960s. The following decade he found a backer, the Anti-Defamation League, under which the organization was called the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers.

After an amicable split in 1996, the foundation took on its current name, and Stahl, who began working for the organization in 1992 was named executive vice president. "It transformed her life," Schulweis said of Stahl, in an interview from Encino, Calif., where he is rabbi of Temple Valley Beth Shalom.

"It became a cause, a personal cause, and not just an employment vocation," he said. "She's very important to the organization. It has become something that is on the agenda of the Jewish conscience and consciousness."

At its height, the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous helped 1,750 people in 30 countries. But the war ended 63 years ago and, like Holocaust survivors and World War II veterans, the rescuers are dying. There are now about 1,179 in 25 countries receiving the foundation's stipends. Most stipends are \$100 or \$150 a month, depending on the country.

The foundation says it sends about \$1.3 million to rescuers around the world each year. It is funded through private donations.

"Some people think, 'Oh, you're giving only \$100 a month? That's very little. That doesn't do anything.' The reality is, when you look at the pensions for these rescuers, mostly in Eastern European countries, what we are giving makes a difference. I can show you a pension statement from Albania that's \$99 a month, and then we give her \$100 a month."

Checking pension statements from recipients' home countries — at last check, 594 live in Poland and 267 in Ukraine — takes up large chunks of Stahl's days. The documents are necessary for her to verify that a recipient is still alive.

No one receives a stipend without sending her a pension statement or other proof of continued existence. "Here I am, sitting on the banks of the Hudson River," Stahl mused. "Do I know if someone is alive or died in Gdansk?"

THE ACCIDENTAL ADVOCATE

Raised in Passaic and educated at Miami University in Ohio, Stahl probably would never have wound up at the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous had not a thief broken into her car in 1987 and stolen a briefcase with essential notes for her dissertation for her public health program at New York University.

"It was the worst night of my life," she said earlier this month. "I sat at the police station crying."

Even without a Ph.D., she managed to compile an impressive career at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, rising to executive assistant to the regional director — essentially chief of staff — in the New York regional office.

In the late 1980s, she worked for the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, developing its Extra Helping program and persuading executives to donate or prepare extra food from their company cafeterias.

"She's always been driven by mission," said George Ackerman, her husband. "She worked for the federal government and believed in what she was doing. Then she worked for the food bank. She's always been driven to do things that are good for humanity."

He noted, too, her foray into triathlons. Two years ago, a friend persuaded Stahl to train for the New York Metro triathlon in Sandy Hook.

It included a half-mile swim, 12-mile bicycle ride and 5-kilometer run, and she finished in 2 hours 6 minutes in 2007, despite having torn tissue in her knee shortly before.

"I finished," she said. "A lot of people passed me, but I was not the last person." She improved her time this year, finishing in two hours flat.

Triathlons are not her only newfound interest. Five years ago, she learned to knit and now does so on her morning train commute.

She is part of a "Jewish Fiberholics group" on ravelry.com, a website for knitting and crocheting. She knits with global purpose, having learned online that she could knit helmet liners for U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan and hats for Israeli soldiers.

"Knitting is very therapeutic," she said. "There's a beginning, a middle and an end. You can have a project that's good for commuting, and you don't have to think about what you're doing."

The main mission of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous will expire when its last heroes expire, probably in about 25 years. But Stahl has built an educational archive about rescuers that she hopes will live on, a component she says is usually dwarfed by other information about the Holocaust, if not ignored entirely.

"This is, in many respects, a silent chapter" in the annals of Holocaust history, she said.

"Most people don't think about rescuers during the Holocaust. Most people think about the people who perished. And you always need to remember the 6 million and the millions of others of non-Jews who perished, but there were those quiet heroes, and they had to be quiet because if they told people they were saving Jews, they would be denounced. They and the Jews would be killed."

Each year, the foundation oversees a Summer Institute for Teachers at Columbia University. In January, it runs an advanced program for teachers, and every other year it takes about 14 teachers on an educational trip to Poland and Germany.

She's eligible to retire in a year and a half, but people like Stahl don't retire easily.

"I would be crazy sitting home," she said. "What would I do?"