“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.”

Stanlee 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 7 a.m., 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.”

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’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.”
HUNDREDS OF STORIES

Maria Kershenbaum brought food to two Jewish men who lived for two years in an underground gravelite 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.

“Knitting is very therapeutic,” she said. “There’s a beginning, a middle and an end.”

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

“Some people think, ‘Oh, you’re giving only $100 a month? That’s very little. That’s not very much to 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, $54 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 muses. “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. She then 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.”

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