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IN PERSON

Out of Overwhelming Evil, Goodness

Lending a Hand to Gentiles Who Risked Their Lives for Jews During the Holocaust

By GEORGE JAMES

Stanlee Stahl has learned about the power of evil in the world. That is all the more reason she finds it so important to seek out goodness.

The 59-year-old Ms. Stahl, a native of Passaic who lives in South Orange, is executive vice president of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous – the righteous being gentiles, mostly Christians, who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust, when many other people looked away.

These days, she spends her time trying to provide financial support to those rescuers who are old and in need of help. But she also sees her mission as keeping their stories alive as a way of calling attention to the good that a human being can do when evil seems overwhelming and hope seems lost.

“I think I am blessed,” said Ms. Stahl as she sat at the computer in her office in Manhattan, calling up photographs of rescuers. “I get to meet men and women who are just like us, ordinary men and women, who, when the situation required, did extraordinary acts – acts of kindness, acts of courage, acts of self-sacrifice.”

One such person appeared on her computer screen: Irena Sendler. As a health worker for a Polish organization, Ms. Sendler had access to the Warsaw Ghetto – and she was also part of the Polish underground. And once inside, she confided to parents that she would try to rescue their children.

Ms. Sendler arranged to smuggle out children – from infants to pre-teenagers – in potato sacks and coffins or through the door of a Catholic church that opened to the Christian side.

A Polish Catholic, she saved 2,500 children – and then the Nazis caught on.



Angel Franco / The New York Times

Stanlee Stahl seeks out and offers help to “ordinary men and women, who, when the situation required, did extraordinary acts.”

She was tortured by the Gestapo and only escaped a death sentence because a soldier accepted a bribe and looked the other way. And so, she herself went into hiding.

Today Ms. Sendler is 95 and lives in a nursing home in Warsaw.

“She says she did it because you don’t treat people that way, and she did it because that’s how her parents raised her,” Ms. Stahl said.

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous was founded in 1986 by a California rabbi, Harold Schulweis. At first it was an affiliate of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, but in 1996, in what Ms. Stahl called “an amicable separation,” it became an independent organization.

Today it provides financial assistance – more than \$1.3 million raised annually

through donations – to 1,600 rescuers in need in 28 countries, including the United States. The greatest number are in Poland and Ukraine. The legitimacy of the rescuers is verified by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Israel.

To help handle this effort, Ms. Stahl has a staff of three: a director of education and two program associates, plus volunteers.

A major part of the Foundation’s mission, Ms. Stahl says, is to preserve the legacy of rescuers. To that end, she created a program that educates middle and high school teachers about the Holocaust.

Next Sunday, as part of the program, Ms. Stahl will give the opening address to 32 teachers from 11 states and Croatia,

Lithuania and Poland who will attend the foundation's annual five-day seminar at Columbia University, coming into contact with Holocaust scholars and survivors.

Once the teachers complete the course – 2,100 have so far – they are eligible to apply for the foundation's European study program in Germany and Poland. Accompanied by Holocaust scholars, they visit concentration camps, ghetto sites and Jewish communities over two weeks and meet with local historians, survivors and rescuers.

Next Sunday is also Ms. Stahl's 60th birthday, what she calls "the big one," but she says cheerily: "It's the start of my program, so I'll be able to be with these terrific teachers." There will be time later to observe her birthday with her husband, George Ackerman, a management consultant, and their 20-year-old son, David.

Harvey Schulweis, the chairman of the foundation and a cousin of Rabbi Schulweis, said the education program was just one of her accomplishments and an example of her capacity to organize and administer.

As Mr. Schulweis put it, "She has basically put this organization on the map."

Ms. Stahl joined the organization as its first full-time director in 1992, after 20 years with the Department of Health and Human Services in the New York office, where she rose to chief of staff. Her responsibilities included preparing briefing materials for the White House and managing policy groups and interdepartmental task forces.

After leaving government service, Ms. Stahl worked for two years at the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, the largest of its kind in the state, where she established a program called Extra Helping, which picked up prepared food from corporate cafeterias, caterers, airlines and other vendors for distribution to the needy.

"I didn't go to restaurants, I went to corporations," she recalled. "I told them: 'You feed 2,000 people a day. Make 2,100 meals and put 100 in disposable tins I provide and freeze immediately.'"

Kathleen DiChiara, the founder and director of the Community Food Bank, said her agency had tried to distribute prepared food before Ms. Stahl's arrival, but it was on a much smaller scale. "Stanlee was extremely bright, highly organized and had genuine compassion for those we serve," Ms. DiChiara said.

Ms. Stahl was named Stanlee after her mother's brother, Stanley, an American soldier who died in the battle for Rome shortly before she was born. Her experience because of it, she says, was reminiscent of Johnny Cash's "Boy Named Sue."

"I never knew it was a boy's name until I went to kindergarten and they made fun of me," she said. "When I was 18, I received a letter from the Selective Service notifying me that I hadn't registered for the draft. And when I went to college, they initially put me in a boy's dorm. Now, the name is special."

At Miami University of Ohio, where she earned her bachelor's degree in 1967, she had dual majors — in American

history and political science. She earned a master's degree in government and public administration from George Washington University in 1971 and a master's in philosophy from New York University in 1989 with an emphasis on health policy and health-services delivery.

She traces her social conscience to her parents. Her father, A. Duey Stahl, owned a shoe store in Passaic, and her mother, Pearl, was national director for 30 years of the Magen David Adom, the Israeli equivalent of the Red Cross.

Ms. Stahl herself worked for the agency in Tel Aviv in 1972. "When I grew up in Passaic, my family was happy to be in America and thought one had a responsibility beyond oneself to the greater community," she said.

And yet, in her work and her visits with the rescuers in the countries she visits, Ms. Stahl wonders what she would have done in their shoes. "I don't think any of us would know until tested," she said.

Of 600 million in Europe, only a fraction of them saved Jews. "There is no balance," Ms. Stahl said.

Yet overriding that bleakness is her sense of hope when she visits rescuers and sees photographs of the people they saved and the photos of the sons and daughters that followed and of the grandchildren, photos of all the bar and bat mitzvahs and weddings and births — all emanating from one solitary life that was saved.

"You bless that they were there," Ms. Stahl said, "and you think of all the people alive today because they did what they did."