

-TITLE-DENISE SIEKIERSKI
-I_DATE-
-SOURCE-CHRISTIAN RESCUERS PROJECT
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-
-IMAGE_QUALITY-
-DURATION-
-LANGUAGES-
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
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-NOTES-
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0.00.30 What is the name of the association (for which the interviewer works), what is its aim? I know you want to make a film about righteous. Please speak slowly, so I can understand every word.

0.01.00 25 years ago, I tried to do a similar project. No one wanted to hear about it -- the Jewish community had no interest in the righteous gentiles. How do you explain the change? (It is far enough in past now -- the time has come for forgiving, maybe. Shoah - the film - people had great interest in.)

0.02.00 (The idea of rescuer is important now. People are interested in knowing whole story of Holocaust -- not just the blackness, but also the small points of light.)

0.03.00 She was in a Jewish branch of the French resistance where the Vichy government was. She was a chief in the movement of the Jewish scouts. The movement provided homes for adolescents for children whose parents had sent them to France before beginning of war, but remained in Nazi occupied territory.

0.04.00 Afterward, the movement received children whose parents were in concentration camps in the southern part of France. Until '42 it was possible to live in Southern France without major problems.

0.05.00 Then the French police began to search and arrest all the Jewish population (first non-French, then also French). The group didn't want the police to take and deport children, so they began hiding them.

0.06.00 After a few weeks/months, they realized that they had formed a resistance group. In the beginning, they just wanted to save the children for whom they felt responsible, then it developed into a resistance group. It was at this point that the group became united with the rest of the French resistance.

0.07.00 At the age of 18 she was chief of scouting for this resistance group. Both girls and boys were members in this group. The units of young people were separated, but the chiefs worked together.

0.08.00 It was a pluralistic movement, not really representing any particular sect. As she puts it, they were just people fulfilling themselves as Jews.

0.09.00 In November 1942, the Germans occupied the northern part of France, then all of southern France. Operations became much more dangerous. Jews had to leave big towns and hide in small out of the way villages.

0.10.00 Their work involved looking for places to hide people, and after that to create false identities for them. Because their Jewish identification had a huge stamp on it, it was very easy to pick out the Jews.

0.11.00 Since they obviously could not leave towns with such identity, the workers had to create them new identities without a Jewish name, and of course without a stamp. She herself had false papers.

0.12.00 She never registered herself as a Jew, however. Since her maiden name was not Jewish, and her physical appearance did not correspond to the typical image of a Jew, some weeks before the stamping began to take place, she obtained "official" false papers.

0.13.00 Before the Germans entered Marseilles, she went to the police and told them she had lost all her identification papers.

0.14.00 The police gave her a receipt saying she had lost her papers. Two days later, she went crying to the police again, and they offered to make a new identity card for her, as well as the necessary papers to go to administrations and get other identifications.

0.15.00 They had six or seven id cards, and she obtained a complete assortment of official documents, without revealing her Jewish identity. When it came time for all people to go to the authorities to get a stamp, she went with the new documents, keeping the old ones.

0.16.00 She did not hide herself. In the beginning, the group had no experience, of course. The false papers they made were not great -- sufficient to travel in some areas, but not in the big towns.

0.17.00 The first step in the process was to look for a place to hide people. The second was to obtain false papers for them. Third, transport from where the Jews were to where their hiding place had to be secured. Finally, the scouts visited the Jews in hiding about once every month.

0.18.00 It was necessary to stay in touch with the Jews in hiding. It was especially difficult with young people, because they had to teach them to lie and to accept new identities. As scouts, all their lives they had been taught to tell the truth.

0.19.00 (Phone rings) The movement had to pay the pensions of those people in hiding. Gentiles kept them in some cases, in other cases they were in boarding schools (generally Christian)

0.20.00 There were a lot of cases where entire families, or just single Jews, were taken in by institutions or families without any monetary support.

0.21.00 They got money from the U.S. (American Jewish ???--- Committee) The money had to change hands many times, and became increasingly difficult to obtain.

0.22.00 Members of the resistance took the money through the frontier to Lyon where it was distributed to all resistance movements.

0.23.00 Denise was also an "agent de liaison" -- someone who carries stamps, arms, id cards etc. from one place to another.

0.24.00 She just recently got involved with helping the righteous of France (2 years ago). For a long time she did not want to think about the world at the time, about what happened. Because when you remember it, you relive it.

0.25.00 She had the opportunity of giving testimony for people who were beginning to write books on what happened in the Jewish resistance. She gave a testimony devoid of personal experience, feelings or reactions.

0.26.00 In the spring of 1984 she got a letter from a non-Jewish historian living in Marseilles who was preparing his PhD about the networks of resistance in Marseilles during WWII.

0.27.00 A Protestant pastor interviewed by that historian talked about Denise. She finds the incident difficult to talk about because the pastor was arrested by the Gestapo, tortured, interrogated, and then sent to Dachau. She felt responsible for his arrest because she did not realize that a Jewish man who came and asked for help was actually an agent of the Gestapo.

0.28.00 The Jewish man gave himself up to the Gestapo in order to be saved, so all of his documents were genuine - he was Jewish, but working for the Nazis. She gave him the address where the pastor was working.

0.29.00 The end result was that the pastor was taken by Gestapo. It was terrible for me knowing that she could escape. (Why didn't they take you?)

0.30.00 The movement warned the pastor to leave the same day they were informed about the Gestapo agent, but he did not. She had enough time to hide.

0.31.00 The Gestapo mistakenly arrested two non-Jewish girls who were just in front of locker where Gestapo came to make a requisition. The pastor turned himself in to free the other girls.

0.32.00

0.33.00 At any rate, this young historian began looking for her, but knew only her war name - her alias in the scouts.

0.34.00 Finally he discovered her real name and address. He wrote to her, telling her that for a long time she had been a mythic person for him. He asked her a lot of questions. In the beginning, she did not want to answer him.

0.35.00 After a while, they started writing to each other. She asked what his motivation for doing such a work was. He analyzed himself in his letters, and she realized she had an obligation to historical testimony. She realized then it was her responsibility not just to recount the facts, but to add her own personal experience and feelings to the account.

0.36.00 She told him about her childhood and upbringing so she could explain why she did what she had done during the war. It was the first time she could recount something personal about the experience. She finds it strange that she told him such intimate things when she hardly knew him at all.

0.37.00 A very strong friendship developed. It was something that was very important to her. Eventually they met in Marseilles and she finished giving her testimony to him.

0.38.00 She felt her testimony was not sufficient, but she helped him meet with other people who had worked with her during the resistance who could give him their testimony as well. She met up with two of her friends who had saved literally hundreds of Jews each.

0.39.00 Although she had remained friends with these people, and had visited them when she was in Marseilles, the subject of the war and their activities during that time had been taboo, until now. She thinks they would never have talked about it were it not for this young PhD historian and his thesis.

0.40.00 She asked these friends to share their experiences, and after much resistance, they agreed, on the condition that the three of them spoke together. She realized then that nobody had ever helped them or talked to them about it.

0.41.00 It was like an inner revelation/shock for her. She realized that this was a subject that was almost taboo. She wanted to thank her friends for what they had done, but didn't know how.

0.42.00 She found out what it was possible to do to thank the people who had helped Jews in the War. She went and spoke with the head of "Francais Representatifs des Institutions Juifs de France"(ph), who is responsible for the representation of all Jewish organizations in France. He told her that there was nothing to do in France to commemorate these people.

0.43.00 So she went to Jerusalem because she wanted to go to Yad Vashem to try and commemorate these people. She asked a friend of hers who was the official representative of the French resistance in Yad Vashem.

0.44.00 She wrote two testimonies, and asked him to transmit them, thinking it would be more powerful coming from someone known there.

0.45.00 She was present at the Israeli consulate in Marseilles when her friends they received a medal. She made a speech.

0.46.00 The pastor had already been recognized as a righteous in 1976.

0.47.00 The pastor showed up in Marseilles just to meet her, and for two weeks she was too afraid to call him. Finally the interviewer called him and passed the phone over to her.

0.48.00 They were invited to dinner at the pastor's home. She remembers it as one of the most terrible moments in her life. She couldn't say a word. The pastor said he understood how she felt.

0.49.00 He told her she should not feel guilty, that it was not her fault, that these things happen as they are supposed to happen, and she could not go on carrying around the guilt for the rest of her life.

0.50.00 She moved to Jerusalem 9 years ago. She had not been aware of the Avenue of the Righteous.

0.51.00 In France, there was no information concerning the group.

0.52.00 She is working for Dr. Pagniel (ph) with testimonies, but she is upset that there are not more people available/willing to help.

0.53.00 He wants to see the department get better, to help people more.

0.54.00 She recalls her efforts to get her French friends from the resistance out to Jerusalem so they could be given medals for their work during the war and to have the opportunity to plant a tree in recognition of that work. Eventually, they arrived with 30 Jews. A big ceremony was organized for them.

0.55.00 A friend of hers photographed the ceremony.

0.56.00 She then had the opportunity of writing a Jewish review of the ceremony (in French) for a publication that was then circulating in Israel.

0.57.00 She is currently trying to make people in France aware of the Avenue of the Righteous and is making speeches about the movement.

0.58.00 Most people in this association, as well as the founders, are righteous -- they are not Jewish. They want to know how many righteous there are in France, and what their names are.

0.59.00 She is working now on the righteous of France. The problem is that there is no list of these people. She and others have now compiled a list of 310 righteous people.

1.00.00 (Goes to retrieve list)

1.01.00 The list contains full names, whether the individuals are still living, the date they were given the medal (to become a righteous person), their most recent address, if a tree has been planted in recognition of their work or not.

1.02.00 If they do not come to Israel, there is no tree planted for them, but they all receive medals. The association in France is trying to find the individuals on this list.

1.03.00 The Foundation to Sustain Righteous Christians is trying to make Jewish people in France aware of what these people did, and to feel something for them. Most of the Jews in France now come from North Africa, and therefore have no direct interest in what went on during WWII.

1.04.00 Among the people who were in France during the war, many of them died or moved abroad, and people no longer know where they are. Many people do not want to talk or think about the Holocaust anymore, or they are too old to remember all the details necessary to give someone a medal. It is a real problem for the organization.

1.05.00 (Should the organization now establish a different -easier- criteria for establishing whether a person deserves the honor of a medal, given that many of the testimonies are now given by people that are too old to remember exact details of the events of that time?) Denise thinks that is a good idea.

1.06.00 They have so few people to work for them because there is very little money. Consequently, people do not know about the organization as much as they would like.

1.07.00 A Jewish man living in Paris recently wrote to the organization telling them he had read about her part in the Shoah ceremony in April.

1.08.00 She had made a speech at the end of the Shoah day begging people to write testimonies to them of any non-Jews who had saved/helped Jews during the war. In the Tribune Juif, a journalist recounted what she had said.

1.09.00 This gentleman from Paris read the review, and immediately sent her a copy of testimony he had made in 1980. He and his family had been saved by non-Jews and he wanted them to receive some recognition for their work.

1.10.00 For years he had no idea where to send this testimony. He tried to send the testimony to someone in Paris, but never received a response. For seven years, he did not know how to go about honoring his rescuers.

1.11.00 The first step in the process of awarding a medal is to verify the information given in a testimony, and to find out if the individuals have received anything for their work. The organization writes to the individual who sends in the testimony to let them know that the testimony was received and is being investigated further.

1.12.00 If something is lacking in the testimony, they also ask more questions. Then the file has to be presented to the "Commission des Justes" (ph), who decides whether this individual should be recognized as a member of the righteous.

1.13.00 The process takes a great deal of time and they receive so many testimonies.

1.14.00 The problem in France is that nothing has been done until now, and there is hardly any money to finance the work. On top of that, it is almost too late to honor these people, because so much time has passed, many are no longer living, or testimonies from the rescued are sketchy at best.

1.15.00 Once again, she speaks of the lack of the money for the organization. They cannot even give water to the people they honor, because they cannot afford glasses.

1.16.00 They have now organized a group of French-speaking volunteers to help in the medal ceremonies in France. (Phone rings). She talks about a report that appeared in the Jerusalem Post, which she considered to be the first serious piece of work on the righteous among the nations. This article also appeared in the Hebrew Press.

1.17.00 She wrote a letter to the editor of the Jerusalem Post (shows the original text), which they printed after some editing. (Reporter reads text)

1.18.00 (Reading text)

1.19.00 She then talks about how she became involved in this work. 2 or 3 months after her non-Jewish friends came to Israel, received their medals and planted their trees, she went to Dr. Rashem (ph)-leader of the Avenue of the Righteous-with the photographs and text that she had made of the ceremony.

1.20.00 While she was with Dr. Rashem (ph) Mena (ph) came in and saw that she was in the photographs as well. She asked for copies, as well as a copy of the review. One month later Denise returned with copies of the review and photos, and because Mena (ph) was in a bad mood, Denise asked what had happened.

1.21.00 Mena (ph) was upset because she had been scheduled to go to a conference in France during April of '86 with Dr. Pagniel (ph), and was unable to go now because the doctor had been called to serve that month in the army.

1.22.00 Two people were scheduled to receive medals and plant their trees in that month, and Mena (ph) asked Denise to help her, and to speak at the ceremony in her place, because she was worried that her French was not good enough. Mena (ph) gave Denise the files of the two people and told her she had a month to review them before she had to speak at the ceremony.

1.23.00 In the name of who/what shall I speak, Denise asked. In the name of Dr. Rashem (ph), she was told. This is how her work began. She was scared about making the speech.

1.24.00 She wanted to know where the people were, because she found it terribly difficult to speak/write about people you have never met! Before the ceremony she arranged to go to the people's hotel to get to know them a little better.

1.25.00 Denise also wanted to know how many people would be attending the ceremony, given that it is a different thing to speak to 2/3 people than 250. She was told approximately 4 people would be there, and was shocked to discover that a woman who had saved 100's of Jews in France, risking her life daily, was being honored by only 4 people!

1.26.00 Denise herself was honored in France with all kinds of decorations and medals, but the government of Israel after more than 40 years has only 4 people to honor this woman! Denise began inviting people to the ceremony herself, and didn't have time to interview the medal recipient as she was on the phone until the last minute.

1.27.00 They eventually got 20/25 people to attend. (Couldn't you put notices in the papers about these events) Yes, but the problem is that it only interests French speaking people, because of course the ceremonies are conducted in French.

1.28.00 (Who is this woman? -- presumably in the article the interviewer is reading) Marie-Rose Gineste from Montobanne (ph), near Toulouse in the southwest of France. (May we make a copy of this list?) Yes, if you want, but they have one in Paris.

1.29.00 (Discussion of who/when to make the photocopy of the list)

1.30.00 (Discussion of possibility of French/Polish rescuers meeting future medal recipients and attending the ceremony for them). Denise became conscious of the necessity of Zionism during the war, although she herself was not Zionist.

1.31.00 Many of her friends were Zionist, and at the end of the war she felt she had a duty to come to Israel to give some of her life and time to Israel in their place. She came to Israel in January 1948, before it was made a state.

1.32.00 She returned to France after 6 and a half years because of family problems and lived in a suburb of Paris for some years. She then went to Brazil and spent 18 years in San Poala. Thereafter, she returned to Israel.

1.33.00 (Story of a woman rescuer who was born Jewish). She cannot be recognized as a righteous if she is born Jewish. (How do you feel about that?) Well, this organization only honors non-Jews. There are other agencies who honor the deeds of Jews who resisted the Nazis and saved other Jews during the war.

1.34.00 Last week, 42 years after the fact, she received a decoration from the Israeli government. She got some medals from the French government, because her organization was recognized as a branch of the French resistance. The Israeli government did not want to recognize the resistance of Jews for a long time, because the slogan in Israel was that all Jews went to the gas chambers like sheep, there was no resistance whatsoever among them.

1.35.00 When she first arrived in Israel and tried to tell people about what she had done, none wanted to listen. The attitude was "be ashamed, and shut-up". It has taken over 40 years to get any kind of official recognition. In 1982, there was an auditorium in the garden of Yad Vashem (ph) dedicated to the Jewish resistance in France. It was inaugurated by both the President of the State of Israel and by Francois Mitterand, the President of France.

1.36.00 They are now recognizing individual Jewish resistance group members. (Goes to retrieve document she received last Wednesday)

- 1.37.00 She received the document received from the defense minister of Israel. Any Jew who fought against the Nazis received (or was supposed to receive) this same recognition. (Photographer wants to take still shots of her)
- 1.38.00 She says it would be more interesting for them to take pictures of the righteous, not of her. The interviewers assure her that they do both.
- 1.39.00 (Taking pictures) The letter she sent to the Jerusalem Post was published in international editions as well.
- 1.40.00 She wants the interviewers to make a copy of that as well. (More photographs)
- 1.41.00 The problem of the lack of money is not only specific to Israel. Dr. Rashem (ph) sends medals to the consulates in France.
- 1.42.00 The righteous live all over the country, and there is only one Israeli Embassy in Paris, and a General Consulate in Marseilles. On top of that, the award recipients are generally old, and so the consulate has to go to them, which costs money that they do not have.
- 1.43.00 (More photographs, talk about the photographer's recent exhibition in Tel Aviv)
- 1.44.00 (Idea of having a photo exhibit of many of the rescuers, as another way of helping people to learn about what the rescuers did.)
- 1.45.00 (Even without a lot of money, it seems that more can be done to acknowledge and recognize these people)
- 1.46.00 She works with Jacques (another volunteer) on all aspects of non-Jewish rescuers from France now, not just helping with the medal ceremonies. The committee who decides whether or not to award a medal is made up of volunteers - historians, judges. This committee meets once a month.
- 1.47.00 They review a certain number of files in each meeting (she does not know the figure). She says it is a problem that there is none from France on the committee, because they do not know exactly what happened in France during the war, and what the conditions of living were. Dr. Pagnel (ph) has to present and explain the file.
- 1.48.00 She doesn't believe that the Big-wigs in Israel are highly interested in France, because they do not receive much money from Jews in France. Most of the money they receive is from the States.

1.49.00 According to Denise, between 5,000 and 10,000 non-Jews risked] their lives during the war to save the lives of Jews, and 42 years after the war, they have only managed to recognize 310. - Apart from rescuers, there were many "ordinary" people who did not inform the authorities about rescuers hiding Jews -- did not actively help, but did turn a blind eye-

1.50.00 She talks about a meeting she attended in France last summer. The incomplete screening of "Shoah" was seen. They asked all people there who had been rescued in le chambon (ph) to give the organization a testimony, but it was not sufficient.

1.51.00 The idea of awarding a collective medal to the war population in the area surrounding le Chambon came from Pierre Sauvage. However, the committee has said they do not award collective medals.

1.52.00 Dr. Pagniel (ph) wants to have about 40 people recognized as righteous, and then to plant a small grove in the name of le chambon, including a plaque with the names of all the recipients of medals. This would be collective then.

1.53.00 Denise talks about insufficient testimony.

1.54.00 Question of insufficient money, insufficient time.

1.55.00 Recently they received a letter from the Israeli Consulate in France which said that there were approximately 7-10 medals to give to people all over France, and there was no money to distribute them.

1.56.00 She says they have to organize so that they have some offices in the principle Jewish communities of France.

1.57.00 She also wants to organize a committee in France to collect money and pay travel expenses of the consul/embassy staff who are presently expected to deliver these medals to the righteous. For security reasons these people have to travel by car with a guard and stay overnight in a hotel, all of which becomes very expensive.

1.58.00 Jacques, one of the other volunteers, went to France and collected money himself to give to the consul so he could distribute the medals. Denise thinks that is terrible, terrible that the Israeli consulate doesn't do it.

1.59.00 The medal is given in the name of the State of Israel, and yet the Israeli consul does not have the necessary money to award it.

2.00.00 (Thanks from the interviewers, discussion of the interview.)

2.01.00 She thinks the whole subject is very important. First, she doesn't want people to think the Jews are ungrateful. It is important to recognize the people who risked their lives to save Jews.

2.02.00 She also thinks it is important for the Israeli children to hear testimonies, and to be present at the ceremonies. It is a piece of living history, which gives them another view of what happened in Europe during the Shoah.
.END.