

Twentieth Anniversary of the Avenue of the Righteous Commemoration Remarks
Evanston Civic Center
Sunday, 20 May 2007
Chuck Meyers, President of the Avenue

Twenty-one years ago, the City of Evanston held out its hand and its heart and said “we do.” Then Haven School principal now Mayor Lorraine Morton recognized an idea writ large – that there be a site to pay homage to individuals, communities and nations that acted auspiciously during the darkest times; that there be a solemn place where persons could stand in silence and respect and wonder about our human potential and, by doing so, reorient our moral compass to true north. Twenty years ago, eight Righteous Christians were recognized for their goodness and courage on this site. Eight stories intoned their names – Helena, Ignazy and Cezary Chorazyczewski, Marisia Szul, Peter and Adriana Termaat, Myndert and Janny Blom, Peter Vlcko, King Christian X of Denmark and the Danish people, Paula Huelle and the Unknown Righteous. Today, we stand together to remember them and the others who have joined them over the years. Today, history is in our midst.

I cannot recall them all for you but I do want to remind you of one. Twenty years ago, I said “there were days like this in Germany – dark and threatening days in Berlin, in 1942 and 1943. The wind swirled around a tobacco store owned by Frau Paula Huelle. It swirled around the steps of the building where she protected the children of three families of Jewish and mixed parentage. On these days as on all days, Paula Huelle risked her life and her fortune. In exchange for tobacco and currency, Paula Huelle bought safety for her charges. She bribed a local official who warned her of impending actions by the Gestapo, and as a precaution against future dangers, purchased a summer home some distance from Berlin. When registrations began, Paula Huelle spirited her hidden children to the country and used her dwindling resources to save them. Many years later, Paula Huelle was discovered alone in a home in East Berlin. Efforts were initiated in 1970 by a woman who she saved to bring her to the United States. Paula Huelle was with us that day. She lived in the Lutheran Home for the Elderly in Arlington Heights, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Chicago. She spoke little English so we translated a portion of my remarks into German. Paula Huelle was “ein Lichtstrahl in ein dunklen zeit” – a ray of light in a dark time.” I finished my comments and turned to Paula Huelle. Tears were flowing down her face.

Paula Huelle died in 1992 yet her spirit resides here, down the years an example of the habit of caring that so few had cultivated at a time when neighbors disappeared in the night. In a world torn by strife and dissention, Paula Huelle remembered that goodness is a burden born regularly.

Some five hundred miles away in an isolated village called le Chambon sur Lignon, Magda Trocme, the wife of Pastor Andre Trocme, opened her door to beleaguered Jews. That simple act of lovingkindness was a beacon for some 3,000 people. With inspiration provided by Pastor Trocme, the Chambonais defied their captors and opened their doors.

Not far away, 17 year old Marie Catherine Rossi, now Kate Lipner, sheltered the children of the Spruch family in her apartment and attic.

In Holland, Peter Termaat and Jacob Balder, members of a 13 person Dutch resistance unit, transported a Jewish couple from Gelderland to Amsterdam. They continued their work without ever knowing the names of the young people they helped. And in October, the Danish people mounted the most spectacular single movement of persecuted people in wartime Europe. Virtually the entire Jewish population of Denmark was ferried to Sweden on small boats. People of conscience doing what they did normally.

Today is about memory and legacy - the memory of those whom we have honored and the legacy of their efforts. The historical clouds of the Holocaust may have dimmed but our time still augers poorly for humankind. As we speak, people are dying in Darfur. What would Raoul Wallenberg tell us to do? Or Zofia Kuklo or Chiune Sugihara. How would they pose the ethical questions that bind us together? How would they say "now it is your turn.? How would they participate?

As an interdenominational organization, Avenue of the Righteous has dedicated itself to recognizing individuals whose conscience burned brightly when others failed. But now they are leaving us. While the Avenue is a repository and places like the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Educational Center are collecting materials for public display, now it is our turn to tell their stories; to learn from their goodness and to find small and large places in our lives to adapt their inspiration and make it ours.

So walk the Avenue and read each plaque carefully. And go home and tell your children and your their children's children. Each name is a reminder of our human potential; of what can be done when we summon the simple words "come in, come in."; of what it means to care.

Many hands organized this event. Co-founders Rabbi Harold Kudan and Ruth Goldboss are here today to celebrate. But their colleague, Maureen Roin is not. Maureen's memory is imprinted on everything we do and say. She passed away at the beginning of last year. Maureen was the engine of this organization. Officially, she was our Secretary but in reality she was our heart. Maureen did everything. She identified potential Righteous, called Mordecai Paldiel, the Director of the Department of the Righteous to share ideas and information, communicated with those we honored, clipped articles, sent cards and opened her home on innumerable occasions for meetings. An entire bedroom housed our materials. It was if the wonder of the Righteous had found its way into Maureen. We honor you today Maureen. We miss you.