

# THE SURVIVOR MITZVAH PROJECT: HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS A FORGOTTEN SEGMENT OF SOCIETY

By Pam Vetter  
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*Pictured: Zane Buzby sits between the Kreyn sisters, who are Holocaust survivors from Belarus. The sisters hold pictures of each other as young girls.*

Holocaust Remembrance Day is May 2nd this year, but remembering once a year is not enough.

In helping the world remember, Los Angeles Television Director Zane Buzby is transforming a wish to help Jewish Holocaust survivors into action.

Buzby is the Executive Director of The Survivor Mitzvah Project ([www.SurvivorMitzvah.org](http://www.SurvivorMitzvah.org)), which is the only organization that gives financial aid directly to Jewish Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe.

Buzby will be speaking at Creative Arts Temple in Sherman Oaks, California, on March 14th. Her message is a powerful one that grew out of a giving heart.

In 2001, when Buzby was on hiatus from directing a television show, she went to Eastern Europe to film the towns where her grandmothers were born. In Lithuania, while waiting for her visa to Belarus, she met Dr. Dovid Katz, of Vilnius University, who told her about the forgotten Jewish Holocaust survivors he had discovered on various expeditions. He gave her a list of eight names and asked her to visit them and bring them food, money and medical supplies.

"Visiting the survivors was like looking back 100 years in time. They were living in huts," Buzby remembered. "They needed the most basic human necessities such as heat, shelter, food and medicine. They were carrying water in buckets; the conditions

were shocking. No one knows they exist. There's no one to help them."

When Buzby returned to the Los Angeles world of television, she couldn't forget the Holocaust survivors she met in Eastern Europe.

I started sending money in envelopes. They wrote back to me saying it was a gift from destiny or that they cried all day, so grateful because they never received letters from anyone. It made a difference knowing someone cared," Buzby explained. "The list grew to 250 and today we've helped more than 850 survivors. But, there are thousands of people like them and we still need more money to help. We give these people about a dollar a day and while that doesn't seem like much, \$30-40 a month helps them a lot."

Buzby created The Survivor Mitzvah Project to spread the word and gain donations. "Mitzvah" means "good deed" in Hebrew and The Survivor Mitzvah Project is making a huge difference in the lives of elderly Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe.

"When people find out that Holocaust survivors exist, they want to help. The survivors range from age 68, if they were children during the Holocaust, to age 97. One of our survivors recently died at 103. We don't need monuments. Instead, we need action and donations to help these people now. In five, ten, or fifteen years, it will be too late," Buzby said. "These people are destitute now. They do not have medications, heating for the winter, or adequate food. And while our donations have increased over the years, we still need more, as our list of needy survivors continues to grow. No other organization provides direct financial aid to Holocaust survivors."

From the beginning, it seemed obvious to Buzby to help.

"Some of these survivors have been waiting years for help, putting in claims 15 years ago, but they've gotten nothing. People are surprised to find out this problem exists and it can only be resolved through financial aid. The Survivor Mitzvah Project has grown through grassroots efforts, articles, and speaking engagements," Buzby noted. "The Jewish community has to take care of the Jewish people, otherwise, we're back to 1939 when no one cared. Some of these people are in their late 90s, born before World War I. During the Holocaust they evacuated into Russia. We have people who spent 18 years living in Siberia. When they returned, their government didn't help them."

What impressed Buzby in visiting survivors was that they're still contributing, active members of society. "They write

poetry, they read books. I visited a 96-year-old woman late at night and I was nervous about knocking on her door, but she was awake and busy writing an opera in Yiddish.



*Zane Buzby hugs 96-year-old Holocaust survivor Dora Pilanskeine in Lithuania."*

"In Los Angeles, people throw \$10 away every single day. But, that money could change a survivor's life dramatically. I learned of an elderly man in Belarus who asked for a 3x magnifier so he could read. There are no goods available to these people. So, I found a 5x magnifier online for \$38. I went to Belarus and gave it to him. He didn't know how to use it. I told him to keep it for a few days and try. When he got it to work, he said he could see for the first time in twelve years. As the saying goes, 'If not me, who? And if not now, when?' We can't let these people die without any help. I have faith in humanity and this is a cause that we can take up as a collective community," said Buzby.

In visiting the website [www.SurvivorMitzvah.org](http://www.SurvivorMitzvah.org), visitors are moved by the pictures and hand-written letters that have been translated. Many of the letters contain a powerful vision of what the survivors endured.

A survivor from Lithuania writes: "Those who did not save themselves were all shot. And were all put in one grave. All together, children, men, women and elders. Everybody was undressed, naked, and shot. Then the hole was covered with lime. Those who witnessed this told us that after that, for three days, the earth in this grave was raising up and down and there was moaning coming out of the grave... As soon as the war started in 1941, I escaped deep into Russia. That's how I survived that war."

From a survivor in the Ukraine: "On Aug. 12, 1941, we had to flee from the Nazis because they were moving very fast towards us. Our father gathered all of us (there were 4 sisters, three of them have already died and I am left alone). We had to cross the Dnieper River, the Don, and the Volga—three big rivers. All

those who did not move with us died. From my village, on Sept 16, 1941, in one day, 1,785 were shot. We had a big Jewish region and in total in this region the Nazis killed 15,000 people. In the village of Bobrovny Kut, and other villages, the Nazis threw live people into the wells. In our region there were 34 shtetls [villages]. And that kind of fate met all those who could not leave like us on foot trying to save themselves from the Nazis. Every year on the day of the anniversary of the people who died, we gather to give our respects to the memory of our relatives and those who were close to us. In that mass grave, there lie 3 of my aunts, two cousins (males) and 3 female cousins."

A survivor from Belarus: "On the way my oldest sister was lost. Our train had stopped at the station and my sister ran to get some water. Suddenly a bombardment began, the train immediately began to move... and my sister was left behind. There was no hope that she remained alive after the bombardment. We left convinced that one of my mother's children had already been taken by the war. We were already en route for six months; the train would move for an hour and stand for a week. So once we stopped at one of the stations. Mama, as she told us, got off on the platform. On the opposite track a military train was slowly passing in the other direction. The wagons were flashing by and for some reason mama looked very attentively into the windows of each one. A mother's heart. You can't fool it. And suddenly there was a childish cry: 'Mama, Mama!' It was my sister Fanya calling out from the passing wagon. Soldiers' hands grabbed the child and practically threw her from the train. My mother cried out so loudly that I still remember her cry to this day."

The survivors are senior citizens who have been forgotten, but they remain grateful for any help. In fact, after receiving financial aid, survivors often write letters of gratitude.

One survivor from Belarus wrote: "I will of course be very grateful to you for your help, since our life is very difficult, my pension allows me to buy only bread and milk and to pay for the communal services, and I am already an old and ill person. My legs almost don't work; I practically crawl around the apartment. Again thank you very much for the greetings and letter."

Not only did Buzby recognize problems that survivors still face, she took action and did something to change the world with The Survivor Mitzvah Project.

"The ability to change someone's life is absolutely amazing," Buzby added.

The letters and photos received from Holocaust survivors are being organized into a self-published book which is available through the website.

Zane Buzby will be speaking on Friday, March 14, at 7:30 pm at Creative Arts Temple at Temple B'nai Hayim, 4302 Van Nuys Blvd., Sherman Oaks. For more information visit [www.CreativeArtsTemple.org](http://www.CreativeArtsTemple.org).

Donations are important as time is running out. 100% of every dollar taken in goes directly into the hands of an elderly Holocaust survivor in Eastern Europe. For more information about The Survivor Mitzvah Project or to make donations online, visit the website at [www.SurvivorMitzvah.org](http://www.SurvivorMitzvah.org) or call 800-905-6160.

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