



*Zane Buzby with Holocaust Survivors: sisters Basya & Fanya Kreyn / Belarus 2007*

## **Do a mitzvah and save a life**

**Project provides funds and letters for Holocaust survivors.**

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The photographs are heart wrenching: elderly men and women, living in near-squalid conditions. Some are dressed in all their winter clothes, even though they are indoors, because they don't have any heat. Some are in apartments so small, they sleep on a couch, crowded next to their only table; some are crippled or blind, unable to shop for themselves. Some tell their whole story in the sadness of their faces.

These are forgotten victims – survivors of the Holocaust, living in eastern Europe, who have no one to help them. They lost their families, their belongings and their money in the war, and survive on meagre donations; some of them barely surviving at all.

This was the picture that Hollywood director Zane Buzby saw on a trip in 2001, tracing her family's history in Lithuania and Belarus.

"I would come to little huts that looked like they should be abandoned," she said in an interview from her home in Los Angeles. "I thought no one lived there, but then, in back, I'd see a 90-year-old digging out potatoes to eat from the backyard; trying to get them out before the ground froze.

"I thought, oh my God, these people have nothing – no food, no eyeglasses, no teeth, no one to help them."

After her trip, the actress-turned-director returned home with the images emblazoned in her mind.

"I came back and went back to directing sitcoms and I wondered what's going to happen to them," she said. "I decided I had to do something. I strongly believe in 'If not me, who? If not now, when?'"

Enlisting the help of her partner, TV producer Conan Berkeley, and several volunteers, Buzby launched the Survivor Mitzvah Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising money to send directly to needy Holocaust survivors in Europe. But starting to raise funds for these people was only one side of the project, on one side of the ocean. She needed someone who could identify people in Europe in need. She turned to Prof. David Katz, an Oxford University professor, and academic director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, whom she had met on her trip in 2001. On his yearly expeditions to Europe, he passes through small villages and locates Holocaust survivors in need, then sends the names and contacts to Buzby.

In the beginning, Buzby just sent money, not speaking Russian or Yiddish.

"I would just draw a Jewish star with a heart around it, put money in the envelope and send it," she laughed. "Then I would carry little index cards with me with things I wanted to write to them. I would look for people who spoke Yiddish or English who could translate, little pieces at a time."

Now, Buzby has people writing letters, and the response from survivors has been "overwhelming," she said. "For many of these people, they've never even gotten a letter before, especially a letter from America ... the fact that there's also help in the letter - it's amazing to them."

Even though many people believe there are organizations around to help Holocaust survivors, they don't have contact with these individuals.

"The money doesn't filter down," she said. "Sometimes they might get a food parcel, but it's not like there's Meals on Wheels. There are no welfare programs where they are.... If they get sick, they have no money to pay medications. They might just die in the hospital - and these people want to live."

"It's dangerous to think the big organizations are doing this. We must say, 'If not now, when? If not we, who?'"

Besides sending letters and money, Buzby was interested in the stories of these survivors, so she asked them to write to her, whatever they felt comfortable sharing. The result is dozens of letters now posted on the project's website. Some are heartbreaking requests for help.

"I ask you to help me, since I am in a difficult financial situation, in my old age, unable to see at all from one eye and the other one requires medical attention. That requires a great expense, which I am not able to cover. If you can find the possibility of helping me, I would be very grateful," writes Moisei Preisas from Lithuania, enclosing pages from his autobiography.

Riva S. writes: "I truly thank you that you do not forget me and that you take care of me. If only you knew how important this care and support is to me - that this is important for a lone person of such an age. I am getting by on only a few medications that, as you know, are very expensive. Naturally, my health is getting worse; I can no longer go out onto the street. However, I am comfortable at home. The air is nice. The street is small, and there are few cars. I often open the window to get some air. I always thank God for having given me these conditions."

The letters have been bound into a book that is given out to anyone donating \$1,000 or more.

While Buzby has been getting response from her website and a few articles written about the project, the money disappears quickly, going directly to the survivors as soon as it comes in. She laments that the situation has become so desperate.

"Old people are disposable. [The countries they live in are] just waiting for this generation to die," she said. "It's so easy to help these people."

Buzby's goal is to raise \$6 million in honor of the Jews killed in the Holocaust.

"For me, [around] Yom Hashoah, this is a great thing, but we have plenty of time in the future for monuments and ceremonies, there's little time now to help the living."

For more information on the project or how to donate, visit [www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org) or call 1-800-905-6160.

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