

# Los Angeles Times

## Fund helps Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe

By Paloma Esquivel  
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The letters are simple, full of gratitude and overflowing with history.

"Zane, I received your letter of May 21 on June 13," wrote Sonia, an 89-year-old Ukrainian Holocaust survivor. "I also received the gelt [money] - thank you very much to everyone."

She continued, "During the war, our family was evacuated to far Siberia. We lived through cruel deprivations; hungry, naked and barefoot we returned home after Kiev was liberated. My father died while in the evacuation, my brother perished at the front. Much time passed before life somehow straightened itself out."

The letter, among hundreds of others, is a thank-you note, from a beneficiary of the Survivor Mitzvah Project, a charity founded by actress and director Zane Buzby that distributes money to impoverished Eastern European survivors of the Holocaust. On Friday, designated Holocaust Remembrance Day, Buzby talked about her life in Hollywood and her new work.

Buzby was born in New York City to Jewish parents who were first-generation Americans. She came to Los Angeles in 1978 as the singer in a rock 'n' roll band and was quickly cast in a role as Jade East, a wild-haired, pill-popping groupie, in "Cheech and Chong's Up in Smoke." Then came a series of comedies, such as "National Lampoon's Class Reunion" and "This Is Spinal Tap." In the 1980s, she took up directing television sitcoms.

The project started seven years ago when Buzby went to Eastern Europe to visit her grandmother's hometown, which she thought was in Lithuania but turned out to be in Belarus. As she rearranged her plans and waited for a new visa, she met a language professor who gave her a list of eight Holocaust survivors living in Belarus and asked her to visit them.

"They're lonely, they're forgotten," he told her.

At the first home, she found a man digging for potatoes in the field behind his small house. He hoped he could get them all dug up before winter set in.

“That’s all they eat,” Buzby said. “No nutrition.”

Back home, she couldn’t stop thinking about winter. “How are they going to make it?” she thought.

Her first gift was simple. She took eight \$20 bills, folded each inside some heart-shaped paper and mailed them to the people she’d met.

The project grew quickly, funded mostly by Buzby’s own money and a few friends. The project, which hopes to secure nonprofit status in a few months, has distributed about \$350,000 so far through two nonprofit groups, Mazon and Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

Buzby asked recipients to write letters, to make sure the money was getting into the right hands. She asked them to tell her about their survival. When she received the letters, most of which were in Russian, she would locate Russian-speaking repairmen working in her neighborhood and ask them to translate.

“I received your letter from Nov. 2, 2004, and everything was delivered intact. I am very grateful to you for your help,” wrote a Ukrainian woman named Anna. She continued: “On Aug. 12, 1941, we had to flee from the Nazis because they were moving very fast toward 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 Dneiper 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.”

The letters, many of which can be read at the organization’s website, [www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org), show how survivors struggle with difficulties beyond the sometimes desperate poverty suffered by many in Eastern Europe, Buzby said. “We’re talking about people whose entire communities were destroyed. Everything was taken from them. There is no aunt, no grandmother, no sister to ask for help.”

Buzby spoke at her office, where the walls are decorated with head shots and black and white stills from the movies she has made. But there is also binder after binder of letters from Holocaust survivors. Some survivors send pictures, some send simple notes. All are reminders of history, which of course is the message of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

On Thursday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa were at the Museum of Tolerance to dedicate a new exhibit commemorating the life and the work of Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal. The exhibit recreates Simon Wiesenthal's office in Vienna.

Also on Thursday, members of Alpha Epsilon Pi, a predominantly Jewish fraternity at Cal State Northridge, dressed in black and marched about campus with signs reading "Never Forget."

When one student asked what the signs meant, fraternity member Adam Devor replied that it was in memory of the Holocaust.

"The Holocaust of what?" the student asked. "That's exactly why we had the march," Devor said.

And on Sunday a remembrance ceremony will be held at the Los Angeles Holocaust Monument. Among those planning to attend is Zane Buzby.