

SURVIVORS ON THE BRINK

Rescuing elderly survivors from poverty, degradation, and misery is the mission of the Survivor Mitzvah Project.

By Buzzy Gordon



Zane Buzby, co-founder of the Survivor Mitzvah Project, poses with survivor Eva Semyonova Kalgina in Belarus.

It has become a cliché to say that a driven person is a “man (or woman) on a mission.” In the case of Hollywood insider Zane Buzby, however, this phrase is not only appropriate; it is an understatement. She is a woman on hundreds of missions – to rescue hundreds of elderly survivors of the Nazi death machines from lives of abject poverty, degradation, and misery that needlessly

prolong the suffering of the most unfortunate and neglected members of the Jewish people.

“I call them the unluckiest generation,” says Buzby. “These are people who as children or young adults barely survived the murderous SS and their bloodthirsty collaborators among the anti-Semites of Lithuania, the Ukraine, and countless towns and

villages in Eastern Europe. During the war, they lost their parents and entire families; after the war, many fell victim to Stalinist depredations, including famine, forced resettlement and cruel prison sentences in the harsh Gulag. Chernobyl brought more forced evacuations and illness. Nearly all of the oldest survivors have buried not only spouses but children. So many of them have barely known more than a moment’s happiness in their whole lives.”

The words gush out of Buzby’s mouth in torrents. She is in a hurry to get things done for the organization she co-founded (along with Chic Wolk) just three years ago – the Survivor Mitzvah Project (SMP).

What does the unpaid executive director of SMP do? I met her on a Friday night speaking at a synagogue, in order to raise awareness. On weekdays, she and her assistant – Buzby pays her salary out of her own pocket – do the administrative and clerical work: compiling data bases, logging donations, and arranging complicated money transfers to countries with arcane banking procedures and inefficient postal systems.

The evenings are just as busy – with a labor of love. Buzby, with the aid of several volunteer translators, corresponds personally with each and every one of the scores of survivors whose lives she is touching in seven countries (so far): Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine,

Russia, Moldova and Slovakia.

“Most of these survivors live in crushing isolation,” says Buzby, who learned of their existence during a “roots” trip she took in 2001. “Many have never received a personal letter in their whole lives.”

Buzby, whose mother lives in Mission Viejo, adds, “We don’t just send money. We ask them to write and tell us all about their lives, especially the happy times they recall from before the war.”

Clearly moved by the heartfelt expressions of love and gratitude that permeate the handwritten letters that arrive in Los Angeles, Buzby has compiled a book of these letters. She reads excerpts from them during her public speaking appearances.

Buzby is in a big hurry for two reasons: “Time is running out for these survivors,” she emphasizes. “For the most part, they are in their 80s and 90s and cannot afford basic medicines; decent, nutritious food; or firewood for heat in the winter.”

She is also in a rush to get as much as possible done before she has to go back to her “day job” as a producer-director of television and new media. “When my next project goes into production, I will no longer be able to devote all of my time to the Survivor Mitzvah Project,” Buzby notes.

In the meantime, it’s up to Buzby and several volunteers to carry the load and keep overhead to zero.

“I am proud of the fact that 100 percent of every donation, every single penny, goes into the hands of an elderly survivor,” says Buzby. “I have one special donor who covers all postage and office supplies, so these expenses are not deducted from charitable contributions. Still, we do not have enough funds to help all those on our list who desperately need aid. We are urgently seeking donations from individuals and foundations.”

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Buzby adds, “I would like nothing more than to hand all of this over to a large organization that has the infrastructure to do the job. People always ask me, ‘Why isn’t the Joint helping you, why isn’t the Federation helping SMP?’ Well, that’s a really good question; I wish I had an answer. Both organizations have been approached. I hope they do contact me and help. It would be a wonderful and meaningful use of the millions of dollars they collect.”

Buzby is especially frustrated by the lack of response by the governments and organizations charged with overseeing reparations payments. “There is no one to advocate for these individual survivors scattered all over Eastern Europe, so their claims do not get processed,” she says. “These people have fallen through the cracks.”

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, which is not involved at all in caring for survivors, appreciates the work done by SMP.

“The Survivor Mitzvah Project is a wonderful initiative that provides badly-needed funds to survivors in Eastern Europe in acute need of help,” Efraim Zuroff, director of the SWC in Jerusalem told Orange County Jewish Life. “The money helps destitute survivors obtain medicines and other aids that help make their final years much more bearable. Kudos to Zane Buzby and Prof. Dovid Katz, who deserve tremendous credit for stepping in and filling a need that was not being fulfilled effectively by any Jewish organization.”

What Can You Do?

1 Make a Donation. The Survivor Mitzvah Project is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All donations are tax deductible. You can donate online at www.survivormitzvah.org or mail a check to:

The Survivor Mitzvah Project
2658 Griffith Park Blvd. Ste. #299
Los Angeles, CA 90039

Everyone who donates gets a document listing the name or names of the person(s) he or she has helped. Gifts made in honor of (or in memory of) others are also acknowledged in a special way, along with information about the survivor(s) the donation has helped.

Donors who contribute \$1,000 receive a copy of the 180-page book of letters and biographies of survivors. (Once again, this book was funded privately, so that all donations go to survivors.)

2 Help get the word out. Go to the website <http://www.survivormitzvah.org> and invite Zane Buzby to speak at your synagogue.

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