



## The Survivor Mitzvah Project

*A humanitarian effort dedicated to helping elderly and forgotten Holocaust Survivors in Eastern Europe*

### Mission Statement

The Survivor Mitzvah Project is dedicated to providing financial aid to those elderly and forgotten Jewish Holocaust Survivors scattered throughout Eastern Europe who are sick, impoverished, isolated and receive no direct financial aid from any other agency. Their families and communities destroyed by the Nazis, they struggle to survive in their few remaining years, lacking the means to buy even the most basic of human necessities: food, medicine, heat and shelter. Most live alone in harsh conditions. Our project, by bringing help quickly and directly to these survivors, helps ensure that they may live out their last years with some measure of comfort, support and dignity.



*100% of every donation goes directly into the hands of an elderly Holocaust Survivor.*

*"Who saves one life, saves the world entire."*



## The Survivor Mitzvah Project

The Survivor Mitzvah Project considers all Jewish Men, Women and Children who experienced the Holocaust "Survivors," whether they were in ghettos, concentration camps, partisan groups, the Russian army, the Gulag, slave labor camps, or whether they were hidden or fled to Russia to escape the killing squads. In every case the German war machine decimated lives and entire families and these survivors were left with nothing. Because the definition of "Survivor" used by the German government to determine reparation is narrow, many elderly people receive no compensation at all, even though they suffered tremendously under the Nazis and in post-war Soviet times. The Survivor Mitzvah Project seeks to help these people who receive no reparations from the German government. The Survivor Mitzvah Project complements rather than duplicates the fine work being done by major organizations and other charitable and humanitarian groups.

*"Who saves one life, saves the world entire." - Talmud*

# The Survivor Mitzvah Project

*Helping Elderly Holocaust Survivors in Eastern Europe and the Former USSR*

The Survivor Mitzvah Project is a humanitarian effort providing direct financial aid to elderly Holocaust Survivors in remote areas of Eastern Europe and Ukraine. They are in desperate need of food, medicine, suitable shelter, and some loving kindness. Most are sole survivors of their families who were murdered by the Nazis, many are the last Jews in their town or village, some are survivors of the killing fields, some fought with the Russians or as Partisans in the forests of Belarus, and some were slaves in the Gulag long after the war ended. All are elderly and in dire need of help. Alone and isolated, they do not receive WWII reparation funds from Germany.

The genesis of this project lies in a series of paths that fortuitously crossed, creating a meaningful link between people from all over the world. I am a television comedy director by trade and during a hiatus from directing and producing sitcoms I decided to take a brief journey to Eastern Europe in order to find the birthplaces of my grandparents. In Lithuania, I met the brilliant Professor Dovid Katz of Vilnius University whose important expeditions in Eastern Europe seek out the last remaining Shtetl Jews, bringing them aid, studying their Yiddish dialects and documenting their unique life histories on film. He urged me to stop along the way and visit eight elderly, isolated Holocaust survivors living in tiny towns and villages in Belarus and bring them food, medicine, Yiddish newspapers and American dollars. My visit with these elderly survivors was both life-changing and inspiring.



Zane Buzby in Belarus 2001

As soon as I crossed the border, it was as if I had gone back in time 100 years – no cars, only horse-drawn wagons, little slanted huts, no shops or restaurants, only endless fields, ancient apple orchards left fallow and the ghosts of millions.

These elderly survivors, living in small huts, with little or no money for food, heat and needed medications, existed on what food they could grow, mostly potatoes. How long could these people, in their 80s and 90s, continue to dig the earth and face the increasing challenges of illness and old age without any help? It was a question that haunted me.

I returned to Hollywood and the world of comedy but I couldn't get these people out of my mind. What would become of them? How would they last through the harsh winter? Who could they turn to? I was compelled to take action.

With the help of Professor Katz, who continued to discover more and more elderly survivors in Eastern Europe, and his colleague, philanthropist Chic Wolk, The Survivor Mitzvah Project was born and our list of names soon grew from eight, to thirty-five, to one hundred and twenty, and now to well over a thousand Holocaust survivors in Lithuania, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Slovakia, and Latvia. And the list continues to grow.

There are thousands of elderly Holocaust survivors who urgently need aid. These are people for whom the war never really ended. Time is running out. It is our mission to see that these elderly and forgotten people, who have experienced first-hand the horrors of the Holocaust, will not be alone and neglected in their final years. – Zane Buzby

*“Who saves one life, saves the world entire.”*

## S. Chic Wolk

My parents were born in Eastern Europe in shtetls located in Moldava and Ukraine. When privation and pogroms became intolerable they escaped to Chicago where they met and married early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I was raised in a home that valued Yiddishkeit and social justice. Some of those values took root.

In 1988 I learned that Yiddish was being taught at esteemed Oxford University. I was astonished. I applied for and was accepted for a brief refresher course in Yiddish language and culture after a lapse of fifty years. There I met and befriended Professor Dovid Katz, an eminent scholar who had founded the Oxford Center of Yiddish Studies.

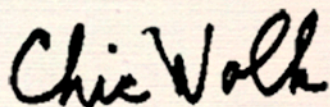
When Professor Katz relocated to Vilnius, which had been the historic center of Yiddishkeit, I assisted in establishing the Vilnius Yiddish Institute within Vilnius University and I co-founded the support group, the Friends of the V.Y.I.

In the course of Professor Katz's fieldwork, he would seek out the remnant of Yiddish speakers still living in remote villages to record their spoken Yiddish and their often horrendous stories of survival. He found that most were living in dire poverty, and often too remote to be aided by the major Jewish charities. When I learned of their plight, I resolved to assist these aged survivors who had endured the unendurable and now lived in loneliness and despair.

The problems of bringing aid to them at first seemed insurmountable until Zane Buzby, one of the Best of the Just, fortuitously came forth and with devotion and dedication surmounted the obstacles. She developed a network of volunteers who made it happen. The funds raised in the United States are safely delivered, together with a few minutes of personal contact, which is often more valued than the money. Someone "out there" found them and cared about them.

The letters of thanks began to arrive. First a trickle, then a cascade, describing miraculous survivals and unbearable losses. With the tireless work of a small band of volunteer translators led by Sonia Kovitz, we are pleased to share these letters with you.

As you read this treasury of memories, remember that it is beshert that we are blessed to be here reading these letters, rather than there, writing them.



Chic Wolk, Founder

ווילנער פראָגראַם אין ייִדיש  
VILNIUS PROGRAM IN YIDDISH

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May 2007

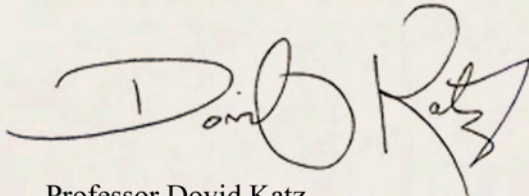
Professor Dovid Katz  
Research Director, Vilnius Yiddish Institute  
Vilnius University, Lithuania

It is a pleasure for me to offer my highest recommendation on behalf of the wonderful work being carried out by the Survivor Mitzvah project to help poor, elderly Jews in Eastern Europe make it through the month.

What the Survivor Mitzvah Project does is to actually send income supplements to these very poor senior citizens. Those who were incarcerated in a ghetto or concentration camp and are "survivors" in the narrower technical sense often get 1600 euros a year compensation from Germany; but the vast majority of elderly Jews are alive due entirely to their escape to Soviet-held territory where many joined the Red Army and continue to be proud of their medals won fighting the Nazis and their allies. These groups do not get that or any other compensation. They returned to their devastated homes where their loved ones were all killed, and stayed on-site for all those decades after the war, right up to the present, now often guarding sites of Jewish historic interest.

The Vilnius Yiddish Institute's own expeditions for Yiddish folklore and dialectology have led us to meet more and more "Mohicans" in smaller towns in Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine and Moldova (Moldavia). And it has warmed my heart, on subsequent visits, to see the joy derived from the little (or more than a little) bit of extra that comes from America each month.

It is hard to find words to explain the happiness that these income supplements bring to the faces and souls of these poor, elderly people who have had such difficult and painful lives. They speak about the Survivor Mitzvah Project as "di malokhim fun Amerike" (the Angels from America).



Professor Dovid Katz  
Research Director, Vilnius Yiddish Institute  
Vilnius University, Lithuania



**Professor Dovid Katz visits Peshke Smolovitch, Belarus**

Dovid Katz is a world-renowned author, scholar and teacher; a Guggenheim fellow and recipient of numerous awards recognizing his contributions to the field of Yiddish language, literature, and culture; founding editor of numerous journals; and founding director of Yiddish Studies at Oxford and the Vilnius Program in Yiddish at Vilnius University in Lithuania.

# The Survivor Mitzvah Project In Action

We devote considerable ingenuity and precautions to ensure the safe delivery of funds in these areas, whether by registered mail or personal contact. Our devoted courier in Belarus is Ludmila, a native Belarussian non-Jewish high school English teacher. She wrote the following dispatches in the course of carrying out the mission of The Survivor Mitzvah Project.

*"I must thank you...that I get this opportunity from you to change the life of these people...to play this role of a kind angel."*

*"When the trip begins, I always encourage myself that "everything will go well." When it comes to an end, I smile inside at myself – how could I have had any doubts about success? On my way back (six hours in a bus), I was thinking of what I will write in a letter to you and came to the conclusion that I must thank you not from all those who are eagerly waiting for me there, but from myself – because I get this opportunity from you to change the life of these people, to support them, to play this role of a 'kind angel.' "*



Ludmila during an SMP humanitarian visit. Belarus 2007

*"When I come to the door, I repeat the name not to mistake it, put the broadest smile on my face and meet the one who opens the door with the warmest words I can imagine, listen to bits of their news, mostly troubles, diseases. I assure them that everything will be better, that God helps them and always thinks of them. I promise to come back, and I smile, smile, smile. Don't you think that psychologically I get lots of strength and positive energy for myself? After such 'trips' I look at the world from a different angle. Actually, I feel much happier. This is what I wanted to thank you for."*

*"General impressions are beyond any possible words. The people I visit don't have enough words to thank you. Some said that now they have an opportunity to live (the situation with the medicine and all the numerous problems is almost unbearable). There were tears in their eyes, some kissed my hands. Of course I tried to convince them that I have nothing to do with all of this, I'm simply a transmitter, but at the same time I am happy to be connected to such a godly deed. Your smiling photo is in a special place behind some glass (usually it's an old-fashioned sideboard) among the closest relatives. I gave almost everybody your address and the names of the families you sent but don't expect letters from all – some are blind, others are immovable, still others don't understand how to do this, etc. I am sending you great thanks from everybody on the list."*

# The Survivor Mitzvah Project

Locations of people helped by The Survivor Mitzvah Project to date



*"Who saves one life, saves the world entire."*

**The Survivor Mitzvah Project**, assisted by Project Manager and Translator Sonia Kovitz, actively corresponds with hundreds of elderly Holocaust survivors who write to us in their native languages. Their letters gradually evolve from simple notifications of having received our aid to deep and meaningful friendships.



I feel privileged to read these letters, usually handwritten in Russian, occasionally entirely in Yiddish, often in a combination. The use of Yiddish, usually spelled in Cyrillic rather than Hebrew letters since Jewish learning was interrupted in childhood for most of these people, is very meaningful. Traditional phrases of good wishes connect those of us Jews whose families left Russia a generation or two ago with Jews whose families stayed, with such unforeseen and devastating consequences.

Especially moving in these letters is the abrupt shift to Yiddish when the writer is overcome by the feeling of terrible loneliness. I am still under the spell of a letter I translated just recently where a woman writes in Russian that she is alone and “no longer needed by anyone” – and her very next words are in Yiddish, thanking us “beloved dear souls for helping her, for having mercy” – *vus ir bot af mir rakbmunes*.

Sometimes a letter is written on a small piece of paper carefully torn from a larger piece so as to use only as much as needed, and filled out to the very edge so as not to waste a bit. Sometimes the handwriting is shaky and weak because of illness, sometimes vital and flowing as if written by someone decades younger than 80, 90 and beyond. In the letter just described, in the closing lines I could see a resilience and energy emerge in her script, showing that writing had helped her feel better.

I often see a gradual shift over time from formality in early letters to increasing spontaneity, intimacy of expression, and sharing of personal history, as the writer realizes we didn’t just “send money and disappear” but that we continue to write, that we keep our promise and our connection.

One woman’s letters were friendly but impersonal for a long time, but suddenly when her granddaughter married and moved away she poured out her heart, then asked us to “forgive her.” It was as if an entirely different person were writing. This writer is a woman who has suffered loss after loss and, with the latest letter, she finally allows herself to reach out and share a side that had always been kept under wraps.

To become a part of these people’s lives, from afar in one sense but very close as well – “near and far” is a phrase they often use – is, as I have said, a privilege.



# The Survivor Mitzvah Project

*A humanitarian effort dedicated to helping elderly and forgotten Holocaust Survivors in Eastern Europe.*

Most are sole survivors of their families who were murdered by the Nazis, many are the last Jews in their town or village, some are survivors of the killing fields, some fought with the Russians or as Partisans in the forests of Belarus, and some were slaves in the Gulag long after the war ended. All are elderly, isolated, alone and in dire need of help.

## **FUNDS ARE URGENTLY NEEDED**

As of 2008, we have a list of hundreds of elderly Jewish Holocaust survivors who are in urgent need of help.

These people do not receive reparation from the German government, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Lithuania joining the European Union, their meager pensions are now either non-existent or so small that they do not lift these people above the poverty level.

Their needs for food, medicine, heat and shelter can be totally met and their dire circumstances relieved through financial aid. This problem is entirely solvable, but time is running out.

**We are currently working with a meager budget and cannot help all of those who are in need every month.**

Any donation, large or small, can make a dramatic impact in the lives of these elderly survivors. The months of harsh winter make the current situation even more urgent.

All donations are tax-deductible.

Make checks payable to The Survivor Mitzvah Project and mail to:

Zane Buzby, Executive Director  
**The Survivor Mitzvah Project**  
2658 Griffith Park Blvd., Suite 299  
Los Angeles, CA 90039  
800-905-6160

Donate Online at

**[www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org)**

If you wish to participate in this project, please contact us.  
We accept all donations, large or small, and  
are seeking grants and other forms of sponsorship for the entire project.



Mina Zalmanovna receiving a donation from the Survivor Mitzvah Project. BELARUS 2005

## **The Survivor Mitzvah Project**

All donations are tax-deductible.

Donate Online at  
**[www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org)**

For more information on how you can participate, please  
email us at [zbuzby@survivormitzvah.org](mailto:zbuzby@survivormitzvah.org) or visit our website [www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org).

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