

East Meadow native helps impoverished Holocaust survivors in Europe

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Zane Buzby with Eva Semyonovna, 85, at her home in Grodno, Belarus. Semyonovna was orphaned during the Holocaust. She is diabetic and lives alone. Buzby's work has made the High Holy Days a more joyful time.

Zane Buzby and her not-for-profit, The Survivor Mitzvah Project, have been preparing for the Jewish High Holy Days since August.

Lengthy preparations — stuffing envelopes with holiday cards and donated funds — have made the holidays a more joyful time for more than 1,500 elderly Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who remained in Eastern Europe after World War II and who now, she said, live in poverty.

The High Holy Day began with the eve of Rosh Hashanah Sept. 13 and concluded with the end of Yom Kippur Wednesday.

“It is an entirely grassroots effort,” said Buzby, a Hofstra University graduate and East Meadow native who went on to a career in Hollywood as an actress and television director. Now it’s her mission to raise funds and attention for these aging remnants of Eastern Europe’s Jewish communities. *“Everyone realizes this is the last generation of Holocaust survivors and we’re the last generation with the honor to help them.”*

Most of the recipients, she said, are in their late 80s or 90s, with insufficient pensions or social services in the small or remote towns in post-Soviet republics where they live. The extended families and thriving Jewish communities that once may have sustained them were destroyed in the Holocaust.

“Since the demise of the Soviet Union, all those infrastructures collapsed, and the situation is horrendous,” she said. *“People in Moldova get \$10 a month for their pensions.”*

While many concentration camp survivors have received at least some reparations, most of the people her organization helps *“are the people who have fallen through the cracks,”* Buzby said. *“They were in labor camps, hidden, partisans in the forest, ghettos, shipped to Asia to work as slave labor in the fields, worked in munitions factories or ran from the mobile killing squads.”* Others fought in the Soviet forces.

Buzby, who lives in Los Angeles, directed hundreds of episodes of television comedies such as “The Golden Girls,” “Newhart,” “Charles in Charge” and “Blossom,” and is now applying her show business skills and contacts to help these survivors.

Star-studded fundraisers in New York and Los Angeles, a website (survivormitzvah.org), CDs and booklets all help raise the funds distributed, by mail or in person, several times each year to its Eastern European recipients. The group has so far raised more than \$3 million and since 2001 reached more than 2,000 survivors.

“We figured out the best way to help them is a \$150-a-month stipend,” sent in lump sums several times a year, with additional help for emergencies or medical care, she said. She added that many get less than that because of her organization’s limited funds. *“Sadly, some are still waiting. We can only help people if enough people donate to help them.”*

Buzby’s charitable work grew out a trip she made in 2001 to Eastern Europe looking for the birthplaces of her grandparents in Lithuania and Belarus. Her journey of personal discovery turned into her personal mission when Dovid Katz, a Brooklyn-born professor of Yiddish working at Vilnius University in Lithuania, asked her to visit some aged Jews still living in those ancestral communities. His work took him to small towns in Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine and Moldova to interview and record Yiddish speakers.



“I thought people had gone to Israel,” Buzby said. *“I had no idea I’d find people living like they lived 100 years ago in little huts and no one helping them. That blew my mind.”*

As she found more of these elderly Jews in need, she started her Survivor Mitzvah Project, establishing it as a 501c3 nonprofit more than six years ago with the help of California philanthropist S. Chic Wolk, who had already been working with her and Katz to assist aged survivors.

Buzby also has collected letters from the recipients, many recounting their experiences in the Holocaust, and filmed and documented their stories with hopes of archiving them. Buzby also records vestiges of lost Jewish life — the remains of synagogues, cemeteries and mass graves — and is working on a documentary.

The group makes sure to send out a big distribution of funds in time to buy food and fuel before the Jewish High Holy Days and the onset of winter, she said, *“to make sure they can have a sweet new year.”*

Her childhood friend, Janet Friedlander of Quogue and Queens, who has helped with fundraising and contributed herself, said she saw it as one way to honor her own late mother. *“In this time when we are supposed to be thinking about what we’ve done in the past year and what we are going to do in the next year, this is a perfect thing to do to help people.”*

But, Buzby said: *“Some of our biggest donors are not even Jewish. They see it as a stand against genocide, intolerance.”*

Harry Spiegel of East Hampton, formerly of Los Angeles, has donated for the past eight years to the charity, regardless of time of year, he said. *“Because it is written, to give charity to help others in need. It repairs the world.”*



A sampling of letters sent by Holocaust survivors to Buzby of The Survivor Mitzvah Project.