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## HELPING THE SURVIVORS SURVIVE

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What TV director Zane Buzby found on a trip to visit the birthplace of her grandparents was as far from glitzy Los Angeles and the world of sitcoms as she could imagine.

In fact, she discovered something no one could imagine: elderly Holocaust survivors in remote areas of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union living in primitive villages, often without needed medicine, heat or sufficient food.

Buzby met eight of them on her first trip, and it changed the direction of her life. The experience led her to found a nonprofit organization called the Survivor Mitzvah Project designed to help the struggling survivors. Now a group of Chicago women are taking the effort local.

Zane Buzby began her career as an actor, appearing in such iconic films as "This Is Spinal Tap" (she was the Rolling Stone reporter) and "Cheech & Chong's Up In Smoke." Eventually she moved from acting to directing and has been at the helm of more than 200 episodes of such shows as "Golden Girls," "Blossom" and "Married ... With Children."

On a brief break from shooting in 2001, Buzby, who is Jewish, took a "roots trip" to see the birthplace of her grandparents in Belarus and Lithuania. In the course of doing research, she met a professor, Dovid Katz, who has worked for years seeking out the last remaining shtetl Jews in Eastern Europe, studying their Yiddish dialects and documenting their life histories on film.

He urged Buzby to visit several and bring along food, newspapers, medications and cash. She agreed.

What she found in the survivors' villages shocked her. "It



Survivor Mitzvah Project founder Zane Buzby with Eva Semyonovna in Kalgina, Belarus.

was as if I had gone back in time 100 years," she wrote on a Survivor Mitzvah website. "There were 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 people were alone and forgotten," she said in a recent phone conversation from her Los Angeles home. "They were alone, ill, living in small villages. They didn't have proper food, heating, medication. They were twisting in the wind with no help." For various reasons, she explains, they do not receive any reparation funds from Germany as other survivors do.

When Buzby got home, "I couldn't get these people out of my mind," she says. "I was think-

ing, what about that woman lying in bed? That guy with no leg? They lived the old way. How were they going to get their firewood chopped?"

She did the best she could to help, sending out 10 and 20 dollar bills wrapped up in paper on which she drew a heart with a Jewish star on it and enclosing a return envelope.

"I sent these off to eight people hoping they got it, not caring if they knew who it was from, just to know that someone cared," she says. "I started to get letters back, small notes in Russian on ripped pieces of notebook paper."

Buzby kept the letters in her car and, she says, "whenever I would pass a refrigerator repair truck - in Los Angeles every repair man is a Russian rocket scientist - I would hail them and

put the letter to the windshield. These people would write unbelievable things."

Among the messages was one that said, "Your letter was like a ray of sunshine in the darkness" and "I can't believe someone who doesn't know me is taking care of me."

The letters "grabbed my heart," Buzby says. At the same time the professor who had given her the names of the original eight survivors was continuing his expeditions into Eastern European countries and finding more.

"He would say, could you add these to the list? I said, what list?" Buzby recounts. "The numbers grew from eight to 80 to 100 to 500 to 700. I was corresponding with all of these people. It took over my life."

In many of the letters she received back, the survivors expressed a wish to meet her. "I looked at the birth dates - 1907, 1910, 1911. I thought, if I don't go over and meet these people now, I never will," she says.

She made another trip and met more survivors.

"I call them the unluckiest generation," she says, noting that the oldest among them lived through the Russian revolution, pogroms and the enforced famines of the 1930s, then the invasion of their countries by the Germans and the Holocaust. Most lost all of their family members.

Those who endured then lived under the harsh Soviet regime, where "it was a crime to be Jewish. They might have had a few good years by Russian stan-

dards, then Chernobyl (nuclear disaster) came to a lot of them and they lost a lot of family members, then perestroika (reforms to the Soviet government). The West thought that was wonderful, but for these people, every penny they ever saved was seized by the banks. They haven't gotten a break until now," she says.

Living in remote villages, they fell through the cracks when the migration of Soviet Jews was taking place.

"I went on the Internet trying to find an organization that was giving financial aid to these people, and there wasn't one. There still isn't," Buzby says.

Back in Los Angeles, she tried to interest donors and organizations. An article in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal helped and brought in an initial \$70,000 to what had now become a non-profit organization, the Survivor Mitzvah Project.

At the same time, Buzby began amassing a video archive so the survivors' stories will not be lost. She has also collected thousands of letters describing how the individuals lived before the war and how they live now.

"The people who fled east into central Asia suffered unspeakable things, and we don't know a lot about them. Whole villages were burned to the ground and all the residents killed," she says.

The organization continued to expand. "It just grew and grew, and now we're helping over 1,500 elderly survivors," she says. These men and women, all in their 80s, 90s or older, live in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Slovakia, Ukraine and parts of Russia.

Buzby continues to travel to the region and meet with the individuals the charity helps. In the last 18 months, she has gone to Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, often forging paths through snow to remote villages.

Sometimes she meets new people and other times checks up on survivors she has met on previous trips.

"It's a great thrill for them to meet us. The world turned its back on these people, and this experience really taught me you can change someone's life by a simple act of kindness," she says.

The survivors agree. "When I go there and interview them I ask, what is the most important thing in life?" she says. "They all say kindness and goodness toward strangers. They are all alive because a simple act of kindness saved their life – someone gave them a coat, someone who could have turned them in didn't. They always want to find someone who is worse off than them so they can help them."

Buzby says her goal with the organization is "to write a more hopeful chapter, one about friendship, kindness and love. Let them know they are not

alone even if all their family was killed. They are being penalized because they survived. There is no support system for them."

She says that in founding the Survivor Mitzvah Project she wanted to get across the idea that "when we honor those who perished, we should honor (these survivors) too. There is always money to build another memorial museum. We should be helping the people who tell these incredible stories. It wasn't easy to be a rescuer (during the Holocaust) but it's so easy to help them now. Just write a check."

**A**s the organization grew, several Chicago women found out about it and decided to work towards starting a local chapter. It will be launched with a private event on Oct. 28, with actors from Steppenwolf Theatre Company and "Chicago Fire" reading survivor stories to an invited group of donors. A public event will follow shortly afterwards.

Jill Cahr of Chicago is among those spearheading the project. She became interested after a trip to Israel for a cousin's bar mitzvah earlier this year, she says.

The Israel trip "was a kind of life-changing Jewish experience for me," she said in a recent phone interview. "I felt like I really belonged there. I was pretty ambivalent beforehand. I came back thinking I'd like to do something Jewish."

Two of the people she traveled with were Holocaust survivors, and hearing their stories was a moving experience, she says. She found out about the Survivor Mitzvah Project and "got really excited about it. I didn't know about the thousands of elderly survivors. I did some research, then called and started talking to Zane. I asked, how can I help?" she says.

She already felt a connection to Holocaust survivors because her husband's family had lost many members. In addition, a cousin's father is a survivor and at family events Cahr had listened to his moving story of how he and his best friend found each other after the war at a displaced persons camp. That story made a lasting impression on her, as did the experience of seeing a tattoo from a concentration camp on the arm of a friend of her grandmother's.

"I didn't know what it was, but I remember this woman saying, I don't like being in crowds anymore," she says. Today, "I feel a connection to being Jewish in a way that matters to me, helping needy people. They have no safety net. I can't fathom it. That seems nonsensical to me."

Cahr, who spent 15 years working for an animal foundation and still volunteers at an animal shelter, has much experience in planning and putting on events. She soon turned for addi-



Hannah from Latvia is one of the Holocaust survivors being helped.

tional help to an acquaintance, Rochelle Baker.

Baker was a natural for the project. "I'm drawn to anything that has anything to do with the Holocaust," the Chicago woman said in a recent phone conversation. The reason: Her father, who died this past January, was a survivor.

"He was in Auschwitz," she says. "He lived 84 years and he lived a brilliant and wonderful life. His life was a miracle. He was the only boy and the sole survivor of five children."

Baker is an event planner and was immediately drawn to the Survivor Mitzvah Project and Cahr's plan to host an event to launch the organization in Chicago.

"We got a bunch of women together. They were all moved by what the charity does and wanted to do something hands-on," Cahr says. "But with so many Jewish charities and so many Holocaust charities, it seemed kind of difficult for a new group to be heard." That's when they decided to host the October salon event, which is not open to the public but will help to launch the organization among Chagoans, Cahr says.

"Most people don't know about this. Once you hear about it, I don't know how you cannot be moved," she says.

Her goal and those of the other women on the committee, she says, is "to raise money, raise awareness, make people remember and think about the fact that there are still people out there who suffered in the Holocaust and they still need our help." These people may not have been in a concentration camp – but the nice thing about this charity is they will help anyone who has been touched by the Holocaust. There is no definition you have to fall under."

Baker says she is helping to

plan the event in memory of her father. "There are at least 2,000 survivors out there, and I feel this is where I want to put my time, effort and money," she says. "I love that this charity provides direct aid to these elderly people. They literally go to the towns and give them arthritis cream, eyeglasses, Jewish stars. I love the fact that (the survivors) want to feel Jewish."

The fact that these men and women represent the last generation of survivors is poignant, she says. "I feel we need to take care of this last generation. I feel an affinity to them; I took care of my father at the end," she says.

In addition, she says, "This program will continue to alert people to the fact that there was a Holocaust, that survivors still exist and they are still trying to make a life for themselves. It's the survivors that keep the memory alive, that this really happened. Mainly we want people to remember."

The aged survivors "lack basic human necessities; it's almost like they are still in a concentration camp," she says.

Cahr and Baker are both looking forward to the October salon and later Chicago-area events to make the organization more widely known to Chagoans.

"It's important to make people aware that this is part of our history, and we should never forget. This is helping to keep survivors alive and also keeping alive in me the memory of my father. I'm honoring him," Baker says.

**B**uzby, meanwhile, continues to tend to the organization and to the 1,500-plus survivors who still need its aid. Letters she receives from some of them, she says, are heartbreaking. For instance, 86-year-old Josif from Kaunas, Lithuania,

wrote in Yiddish that the aid sent "was like Manna that G-d sent to the Jewish people in the Sinai."

Maria from Pinsk, Belarus, wrote, "From your letter I feel warmth. We have the same Jewish blood. When I think I have friends in America, Jewish people who think of me, this is very nice."

Buzby would like more of those friends to be children and has started a new initiative of the Survivor Mitzvah Project, called "I Saved A Life." Each child who participates will be matched to a specific survivor and will raise funds for that survivor through projects the organization suggests or that they create themselves.

The goal is to provide each survivor with \$1,800 a year – less than \$5 a day but, Buzby says, enough to make a life-changing difference.

"This is the last generation of Holocaust survivors and this is the last generation of children that can help them," she says.

"The Survivor Mitzvah Project is about life," Buzby says. "These people want to live. They even write it in their letters. They are going blind because they don't have \$29 for eye drops for glaucoma. They don't have insulin so they're getting their legs amputated (from diabetes). It's not necessary. To get them a cataract operation, or even to get them heat for the winter, it changes their lives forever."

"If everyone helped a little bit, the problem would be solved."

To find out more about the Survivor Mitzvah Project, watch videos of survivors and donate funds, visit [www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org). To get a child involved in the "I Saved A Life" program, call (213) 622-5050 or email [survivormitzvah@gmail.com](mailto:survivormitzvah@gmail.com). To find out more about the new Chicago group, email [jillcahr@gmail.com](mailto:jillcahr@gmail.com).