Emergency Humanitarian Mission to Ukraine

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BY JANE ULMAN

Zane Buzby, co-founder of The Survivor Mitzvah Project, is spearheading a 14-day whirlwind emergency humanitarian mission to central Ukraine in December to bring urgently needed financial aid to more than 70 elderly, impoverished and forgotten Jewish Holocaust survivors.

"Amazingly, these people survived the Holocaust, but I'm not sure they can make it through this winter," said Buzby, a sitcom director and former actress, whose grass-roots nonprofit seeks to provide desperately needed cash — as well as equally critical friendship — to more than 1,000 survivors in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Buzby hopes to raise $100,000 to distribute $1,000 to survivors on this mission. Most are living on pensions of about $80 a month, insufficient to cover even the cost of heating fuel. Buzby said the economic crisis has had a devastating impact on their already precarious existence.

Buzby plans to visit survivors in approximately 25 cities and villages, depending on weather and road conditions. On this mission, ideally the first of four, she is focusing on assisting the oldest and most destitute survivors. She will spend New Year's Eve, for example, in the village of Korsun with Tzali Goisman, 87, a survivor who fought in the Battle of Stalingrad and still has shrapnel in his leg.

Another survivor on her itinerary is Semyon Kroch, 88, who lives in Kolomeyo, and who serves as cantor of his small shul. Kroch, who relies on multiple medications, none of which he can afford, recently fell, seriously injuring himself. He writes, "I am a lonely man with a small pension. I ask God in my prayers to save his people."

Buzby will also film the expedition for The Survivor Mitzvah Project archive, assisted by Noam Osband, a doctoral student in visual anthropology; Robyn Roth, who has worked with the organization for two years; and Luidmila Petrovna, her guide and translator, on a trip to assist survivors in Belarus in 2007.

Survivor Mitzvah Project co-founder Zane Buzby, right, and Luidmila Petrovna, her guide and translator, on a trip to assist survivors in Belarus in 2007.

Ikhil Vigdorovich, who is in his late 80s or early 90s, lives in Uman. He writes, "I fought the Nazis from the first to the last day of the war, total 1,418 days and nights. I lost my arm close to the end of the war." He is desperate to locate his relatives.

According to Buzby, most American Jews assume that the survivors' needs are being adequately addressed, but the fact is that none of The Survivor Mitzvah Project recipients have received funds from the Conference on

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Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, as they don’t meet that organization’s narrow definition of a survivor. Additionally, larger Jewish organizations have cut back aid, leaving survivors with minimal and sporadic non-monetary assistance, if anything.

"Some of these people are 98 years old," Buzby said. "This is our last opportunity to help them."

For more information about The Survivor Mitzvah Project or to donate, call (800) 905-6160 or visit survivormitzvah.org.

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